

Tijuana: A New Bus Line's Rough Ride

 [pulitzercenter.org/reporting/tijuana-new-bus-lines-rough-ride](https://www.pulitzercenter.org/reporting/tijuana-new-bus-lines-rough-ride)

9/7/2017



At California's southern edge, US Interstate 5 becomes the Avenida Vía Rápida. A freeway that follows the Tijuana River, it carries the trade [that has turned this city](#) from a dusty, boozy border town into a sprawling industrial hub. As it grew, Tijuana gained roads like the Vía Rápida, but not a centralized public transit system. Instead, local politicians contracted this service to bus and collective taxi operators called *transportistas*.

Their vehicles include used American school buses with worn out shocks; van-sized *taxis de ruta*; "Taxi Libre" sedans with no seatbelts and drivers willing to weave through the Avenida's traffic at 65 miles per hour. Locals love to hate this ad hoc, disorganized public transit system, and I had come to learn about a much-hyped solution.

The [Sistema Integral de Transporte de Tijuana](#), or SITT, opened in November 2016, connecting the border with the city's El Florido neighborhood. Yellow bumps have been installed on the Avenida's right lanes, reserving them for high-speed buses that run between tram-like stations. [Curitiba, Brazil](#) pioneered this transit mode, called bus rapid transit (BRT), in the 1970s. Since then, [cities from Bogotá to Istanbul](#) have used it to move residents at subway speeds for a fraction of the cost.

Mexico's president, Enrique Peña Nieto, promised to build the SITT during his 2012 presidential campaign. The country's federal government and World Bank funded its construction, and [a slick online video](#) had assured viewers that "Tijuana deserves better mobility."

But six months after opening, the SITT was struggling to deliver on that promise.

My nearest station, in the Buena Vista neighborhood, was tucked beneath the sunken Avenida and an on-ramp. During a lull in the traffic, I dashed across the ramp and down a dirt path. Knowing that there had been problems

with its smart-card payment system, I had brought along 14 pesos (about 75 cents) for fare. But there were no turnstiles awaiting my coins. No benches or working lights either. Most of the wall's glass panes lay in shards on the floor.

Within a minute, a flat-fronted taxi de ruta van pulled up alongside the reserved lane and flashed its headlights. Not wanting to meet whoever had left the stop in this sorry state, I climbed aboard.

Loosely regulated transit systems like these are common in the developing world. In Tijuana, they serve interests as diverse as the city itself: vote-seeking politicians, the workers who build America's consumer goods, and the transportistas whose long hours on the streets keep them in Mexico's middle class. Many of these groups, intentionally or not, are working against the SITT.

The planners

Carlo Dalí Gutiérrez has been dealing with Tijuana's problems throughout his career. "My professional trajectory has been in government," he explained, steering his Volkswagen sedan onto the Vía Rápida. After getting a master's degree at Columbia, "I dedicated myself to consulting, and to academia, in government topics, focusing on economic policies, social development, and... also security issues."

In 2013, the youthful, goateed Gutiérrez, who now teaches at a local university, was named Chief of Staff for Tijuana's new mayor, Jorge Astiazarán. "One year later," he recalled, "the mayor asked me to prioritize the SITT."

Driving towards the southern hub, the 35-year-old urban planner explained how the SITT's route had been determined. "This area is one of the demographically densest, fastest growing parts of the city, and also of public transportation use."

A few miles north, Tijuana's red-light district was sustaining the city's seedy reputation, with weed, call girls, and prescription-free Viagra available for US tourists. But the *maquiladoras*, foreign-owned assembly plants, are the local economy's new engines. Tijuana's blend of Third World wages and proximity to US consumers make it ideal for the likes of Panasonic and Sony. While their plants here have drawn decades of criticism from labor and environmental groups, they've proven irresistible to migrants from elsewhere in Mexico. [The city has grown](#) from 150,000 residents in 1960 to 1.4 million in 2014, adding new neighborhoods like tree rings.

The bus companies that serve these *colonias* are usually known by particular dates or paint colors: Azul y Blanco ("Blue and White"), for instance, or 24 de febrero ("February 24th"). There are also the minibuses called *calafias*, confusingly run by one firm called "Calfia" and another called "Calafia."

The city began to contract with these firms in 1957. By 2009, 129 bus routes operated by 11 different companies sprawled across northwest [Baja California](#). In downtown Tijuana, where many of these lines converge and drivers jockey for curb space, it's hard to envision a worse setup. But for the city's government, spreading out transit operations like this has its upsides.

From 1929 until 2000, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI in Spanish) kept Mexico under what [Mario Vargas Llosa called](#) a "perfect dictatorship," with regular elections and opposition parties hiding the PRI's firm grip on power. By spreading out the benefits of public services, the party gave multiple actors—down to bus company owners in Tijuana—a stake in its survival. In 1989, with this patronage system rotten to the core, Tijuana voters became the first in Mexico to vote the PRI out in favor of the reform-minded National Action Party (PAN). But once in power, the *panistas* found it easier to work with the system—and benefit from it.

"The *panista* government," observed Miguel Ángel Avelar Dueñas in his 2012 master's thesis, "granted permission for new routes, and public transportation service became a means of exchange in the political marketplace, rather than a socially oriented [public service](#)."

Drawing bus lines to win the most political support, rather than move the most people, left different neighborhoods and thoroughfares in the hands of different transportistas. In 2012, a Mexican consulting firm found that 48 percent of riders have to make two or more transfers to reach their [destination](#). Conveniently for the transportistas, they have to pay a full fare each time.

As the city kept growing, riders' complaints grew too loud for even the politicians who created this problem to ignore. Other Latin American cities were starting to find success with Bus Rapid Transit, and Tijuana tried to follow suit. In the 2000s, two PAN mayors proposed BRT projects. Both failed amid heavy opposition from [transportistas](#).

Then, the national PRI took up the cause. "This project was visualized in Tijuana for years," Carlo Dalí told me as he drove, "but it was formalized because, in 2012, Enrique Peña Nieto made a campaign promise."

The State of Mexico's governor, seeking to reclaim the presidency for the PRI after a twelve-year absence, [dangled BRT before 40,000 cheering supporters at a local arena](#). "Before you, I'm signing the promises we have here." In a gesture he repeated all over Mexico, he then put his name to an easel with a list of local infrastructure projects he would build if elected. "The first: articulated transport for Tijuana."

Once Peña Nieto won the election, Carlo Dalí continued, the project got federal backing. "It permitted us to obtain, through the National Works Bank, a credit with the World Bank to be able to build the infrastructure, because the local government's resources were limited." The national government [provided 800 million pesos](#)—about \$61 million at the time—for construction.

From a car speeding down the Avenida, it looked like Tijuana had gotten its money's worth. The lanes and stations had been braided with fiber-optic cables and sensors for real-time traffic control. Overhead [towered eight pedestrian bridges](#), enabling riders to cross the avenue and reach stations on the other side. Gutiérrez estimated that the entire project had been Tijuana's single biggest infrastructure investment since its namesake river had been channeled in the 1970s.

As the *ruta troncal* took shape, the transportistas were brought to the negotiating table. "The project was presented to... twelve companies," Gutiérrez told me, "and it was explained to them that this project was a system and that they should see themselves as part of a system, and not as competitors, which is the traditional form."

"Changing paradigms in businesses is very difficult," he went on. "And in a sector like public transportation, it's doubly difficult. So yes, there were many hours and many meetings for negotiating, convincing, of explanation."

Eventually, [ten companies signed on](#) to form an "*empresa de empresas*," or "business of businesses." With the SITT's 23-mile-long *ruta troncal*, or "trunk route" built, they're now paying to operate its cherry-red buses, as well as smaller, light green ones that ply *rutas alimentadoras*, or feeder routes, into neighborhood streets.

Carlo Dalí parked outside a stone wall surrounding the *patios* where these buses park. Once a security guard opened a sliding metal door, we stepped onto a vast, light-tan parking lot. The mid-morning sun glinted off rows of green and red buses. Eighteen new ones for the troncal had just arrived for testing.

He smiled as the vehicles turned and reversed. "When the people see that more new, modern buses are arriving, they'll get enthusiastic," he predicted. They would realize that the SITT "isn't a promise, that it's a project that's being realized."

[picture1.png](#)



Carlo Dalí Gutiérrez on the SITT's patios. Image by Patrick Reilly. Mexico, 2017.

Local media, however, told a different story. The *San Diego Reader* had reported that, “According to *El Sol de Tijuana*, ‘fifteen bus stations (47 were built in *toto*) have been vandalized with four ‘seriously affected.’ Officials estimate the damages already exceed more than one million pesos.” And the previous week, the SITT’s Secretary-General, Arturo “Napo” Aguirre, had estimated in an interview that the SITT was carrying 10,000 people per day. That’s well below the 120,000 it was built for, and not enough to keep it from losing 3 to 4 million pesos each month since February 2017.

Despite these setbacks, Aguirre was glad to discuss the new bus line, rolling up in a chauffeured SUV as Gutiérrez and I chatted on the patios. Out stepped a burly, middle-aged man with slick black hair and skin turned leathery by the Tijuana sun. Napo had started off working as a Calfia driver in 1987, working his way up to management of the firm. Today, it was one of the biggest stakeholders in the SITT’s “empresa de empresas.” Multiple sources estimated its shares at 70 percent.

Experience alone may not have placed him at the helm of the city’s transit reform. In February 2017, local newspaper *Zeta* had reported that “the links of friendship, family, and business” related to the SITT “point to a group of *priistas*, connected with the current state PRI director, Chris López Alvarado.”

One of these *priistas* had been Napo, a former delegate for the La Presa neighborhood under PRI mayor Jorge Astiazarán, and an unsuccessful candidate for city council in 2016. “To ‘El Napo,’” the paper reported, “they turned in the concessions for the ruta troncal’s feeder lines.”

Aguirre made no mention of his political career once we had stepped into a conference room. Instead, he described long, hard years on the streets.

“The experience I have as a transportista,” he said, “is of the typical driver we know, who gets up at four in the morning, hoping that his vehicle starts... that it hasn’t been stolen.”

At most bus and collective taxi firms, drivers have to rent their vehicles and take home whatever’s left. The resulting race to boost profit margins is known as *la guerra del centavo*: the war of the penny. Riders are quick to complain about rude, harried drivers and breakdown-prone buses. But the race for pesos had also taken its toll on Napo.

“It’s not easy... I had lots of broken vehicles, I had lots of fights in the street, I had to fight to have the fuel, I had to fight... to have a salary to take home.” The SITT, he explained with pride, wasn’t just new infrastructure: it was also improving drivers’ situation as a means to improve overall service. “The drivers in these vehicles,” he said, earn “a weekly salary... this improves, in a way, how I give service to these people.”

Problems like the Buena Vista station’s were “a type of learning,” he said. “I believe that in a matter of months—weeks—we’ll already be talking about other things.”

The room we were in was clean but spare, with two folding tables taking up most of the space. This made sense when SITT president Rafael Echegoyén, who had also stepped in, pointed out that Tijuana was trying to build a top-notch transit system with a fraction of the resources available elsewhere.

Jabbing a thumb towards the buses at his back, he said that “these vehicles are of a later generation that they have in San Diego.” And unlike transit agencies north of the border, “we don’t even have a subsidy here.”

“It’s very prone to criticism,” he conceded, “but in this economic mode, they say, ‘Oh wow? How do they do this? To operate, provide a service, without being subsidized?’” And, he added, “we charge less than a dollar.”

For urban planners here, it’s hard to avoid comparing Tijuana with its northern neighbor. Even as the Trump Administration calls for a border wall, millions of dollars are being spent to ease crossings between Tijuana and San Diego. In just the past two years, a new pedestrian entryway and a footbridge connecting Tijuana’s airport to the US have opened; a larger reconfiguration of the San Ysidro Port of Entry, widely believed to be the world’s busiest border crossing, is in the works.

The SITT drops passengers just south of this entrance. Another of its promotional videos [had described](#) Tijuana as part of a “*megaregión*” stretching all the way to Los Angeles. It had also reminded viewers, to a stirring orchestral soundtrack, that “we are the most crossed border in the world.” And as we talked, Aguirre predicted that “when our friends from up there, from the United States, come, they’ll say, ‘Well, the system is very similar, independent of everything else.’”

The passengers

From the SITT’s northernmost stop, Garitá México, a sidewalk leads right into San Ysidro’s massive, cable-stayed gateway. Like others stops in the high-traffic north, it was intact and graffiti-free. But southbound travelers, facing a phalanx of taxis when they walk into Mexico, would never spot the SITT unless they knew where to look.

One rider who did know was José Mendóza. An elderly man with worn-looking eyes, he joined me as I waited for the bus. “I live down here, in Colonia Azteca,” he explained, pointing to a spot near the route’s southern terminal on the station’s schematic map. Getting there from here meant riding the length of the SITT’s ruta troncal, then transferring to a calafia.

A red troncal bus pulled up in a few minutes. Its molded plastic stop buttons, canary-yellow handrails, and Sharpie-free windows would have put any U.S. bus rider at ease. Many drivers paste an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s patron saint, over the windshield. In that spot, this bus had a security camera.

“I’ve been living in Tijuana for more than sixty years,” Mendoza said as we took our seats. “This is the best system I’ve seen.” He spent most of the uneventful 45-minute ride to El Florido singing its praises. “It helps the handicapped, the drivers are really polite, the system’s always clean, so I like it.”

In some ways, Mendoza is the SITT’s ideal customer. He can’t drive due to vision problems, but estimated that he visits San Diego twice a week to visit family. For thousands of *tijuanenses*, Garitá México is the end of the line. [A 2000 study found](#) that only 55 percent of locals can legally cross the border. The past 17 years haven’t made getting that clearance easier.

Another SITT rider, Vanessa Conde de Las Fuentes, has never crossed the border. But she also liked what she had seen on the new line.

The 24-year-old engineering student relies on buses to get between her home in Colonia Ampliación Guaycura, classes at the Tijuana Technological Institute, and other points in the city. We met at the office of the Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental, an environmental group where she volunteers.

Sitting beneath a colorful wall mural, she said that on Calafia's minibuses, "drivers don't respect the student rate, they're very rude, and the units are very dirty." She had been in a few accidents. The SITT, meanwhile, was "a transportation system that has good drivers who are polite, clean units, [one] that has Wi-Fi."

As she went through its benefits, tractor-trailers rumbled up to the *maquiladoras*. Since the 1990s, the Colectivo and other environmental groups [have been pressuring](#) these plants to clean up toxic pollution. Having worked with their employees, Vanessa wasn't sure if the SITT would meet their needs.

"With the minimum wage here, the people prefer to go uncomfortably, rather than pay a slightly higher cost for good service." The SITT charges fourteen pesos for fare, a bit less than many taxis de ruta, but more than the calafias and buses, which usually charge between ten and thirteen pesos. Someone like José Mendoza, who worked for years as a transmission specialist and eventually had his own business, can swallow that difference. But workers on Mexico's eighty-peso daily minimum wage, working long hours for the equivalent of about \$4.50, might not.

"If you have to take [the SITT] twice each day, it's already almost thirty pesos," Anibal Mendez, one of the group's organizers, pointed out. "We're talking about almost half of the daily salary."

[picture2.png](#)



Anibal Mendez, a community organizer for the Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental. Image by Patrick Reilly. Mexico, 2017.

Fares have been a frequent challenge for developing countries' BRT systems. Analyzing the new transit mode's spread, [the World Resources Institute found](#) that "in general, decision makers in our featured cities were tempted to set fares as low as possible for all users, to maximize political buy-in. This left little financial breathing room for planners."

The transportistas running the SITT's "empresa de empresas" may have done the opposite, setting fares too high for Tijuana's poorest riders. Their pesos are still reaching the companies, however, through the less regulated, cheaper, and far more unpleasant calafias and buses. [One recent study](#) found that minimum-wage workers can spend as much as 60 percent of their income on commuting.

"This happens a lot in Mexico," Anibal added. "There are lots of connected themes. We're talking about minimum wage, social justice... the way that the people can have a more dignified life."

The transportistas

Tijuanenses don't just need an affordable bus system, but also an accessible one. The transportistas, for all their flaws, have built a network with far denser coverage than the SITT's current five rutas alimentadoras. And Jorge Alberto Gutiérrez, the city's former director of public transportation, doesn't see the old system meshing with the new one.

"Usually when you start converting," from an old bus system to a new one, he said, "you're converting the affected companies, not the ones who are far away." Calfia, the SITT's biggest stakeholder, "is the largest transit system in Tijuana, but the routes have nothing to do with the SITT routes."

[A map of the entire network](#) shows Calfia's lines splaying across the city's east. The ruta troncal's northern stretch runs closer to other companies' lines. After my first, unsuccessful attempt to ride the SITT, I found it easier to get downtown by hopping on the Azul y Blanco buses that ran by my apartment every few minutes.

"The two companies that were most affected by the SITT are the Verde y Crema that circulate here, the 24 de febrero, which are the orange ones, and also partially the blue and white [owned by Azul y Blanco], and they're not involved in the program. They should be involved." Aguirre had singled out two of those same companies. "It's important that the businesses like Altisa, Azul y Blanco, 24 de febrero...that they integrate in this system," he had said.

One of Azul y Blanco's drivers, Margarito Cruz Gallarno, knows that passengers need easy access to bus routes. "The people, I'm telling you, don't want to walk fifty or twenty meters to get a Calafia or taxi," he explained. He saw the SITT's limited reach not as reason that his employer should get involved, but that it should stay away. "Imagine those terminals there, they're like a kilometer [away], or to cross a bridge, it's almost five hundred meters... It's not well-planned."

At one of the firm's nearby idling spots, it was easy to agree. Buses from Azul y Blanco, Verde y Crema, Calfia, and others rolled past. After several minutes, one of the SITT's rutas alimentadoras turned up.

"Look, it's empty," Emiliano Pacheco pointed out. "Because it doesn't cover good routes. It's not well-planned."

The Mexico City native had a two-way radio in his pocket and a clipboard in his hand, his tools for checking buses in and out of designated stopping points. It's one of several responsibilities he's held in 27 years of driving, managing, and negotiating for Azul y Blanco. The SITT could benefit from his expertise—and a bundling together of the companies' routes—if Azul y Blanco joined the "empresa de empresas."

That's not likely to happen. In November 2016, Pacheco had driven a bus in front of the El Florido terminal and parked, joining hundreds of other drivers [in blockading the SITT's southern station](#). Six months later, his and Margarito's descriptions of the new line ranged from a legitimate business threat, to a badly planned boondoggle, to a criminal conspiracy.

[picture3.png](#)



Emiliano Pacheco at Azul y Blanco's bus storage lot, which was empty at midday. Image by Patrick Reilly. Mexico, 2017.

"The government didn't plan so that it would be a service to the citizenry," Margarito surmised. "Rather, they thought of it as a business for those who are going to manipulate it." Between the government's loan and the SITT's steep losses, he saw it as "a way that the politicians are robbing the money of these companies."

When I ran these suspicions by Vicente Calderón, editor of TijuanaPress.com, he pointed out the bigger picture. "The problem is, you are dealing with different groups that act somehow like gangs. And they protect their own interest." The planners and leaders of the SITT, the longtime local journalist reminded me, "are PRI peons, so when they implemented the SITT, they were treating favorably this particular group. That's one of the main reasons the rest of the transportistas were not pleased."

Pacheco keeps an eye on possible improvements. As we spoke, he pulled out his phone and scrolled through pictures of drivers committing various infractions: driving with the door open, driving too close together, pulling into gas stations with passengers on board. Azul y Blanco or not, he would contact their supervisors. "You can't be working like that," he said. The company's drivers earn salaries rather than paying rent, a common-sense way to prevent *la guerra del centavo*. And in recent years, it's begun replacing its former school buses with purpose-built city vehicles. "We keep on driving just like we did before," he said with pride, "and we're buying new units to

continue, maintaining the current quality of people, and we're going to increase the quantity of users."

The city's government hasn't exactly helped him in this quest. During Margarito's four-hour loop through the city, we jostled with Calfia's minibuses and taxis de ruta. Forged license plates, he told me, have meant increased competition from both types of vehicle in recent years. Newer buses can't run on Tijuana's many unpaved streets. And, when the SITT came along, it took several of Azul y Blanco's drivers with it.

None of this has left Pacheco well-disposed towards the BRT line. "You have your house, I come from outside, and I want to go into your house, you're not going to let me."

One of the transportistas inside the SITT phrased that stance differently: "I eat the cake alone... I don't want to share with you, nor with you, nor with him." Juan Carlos Alvarez was looking out from his massive wooden desk at me, my assistant Rubén, and one of his employees, Oscar.

"Part of the problem," with the SITT, he told us, "was the old transportistas who don't think about the future, like Azul y Blanco, that haven't wanted to enter the ring."

Alvarez directs Calafia—not Calfia—from a shaded, wood-lined office perched over the firm's bus storage lot. His father, who had bought the company in 1976, keeps watch from a black-and-white photo on one wall. So does a poster of Luís Donaldo Colosio, a PRI presidential candidate killed here in 1994.

Like Pacheco, he was eager to discuss the strides his firm was making. Most of the buses in his lot were purpose-built city buses. Calafia was working to make them all wheelchair accessible. And, unlike Azul y Blanco, it had bought into the SITT.

Vicente Calderón, the journalist, had told me that "the empresa de empresas...is just a freaking lie. It's controlled by two main companies, one is the one ruled by Napo, the head of it, seventy percent of the stakes there are his business, twenty has somebody else in cahoots with him, and the rest, we don't even know exactly how many of them" there are.

But Alvarez saw things differently. "It's a dynamic percentage," he said of Calfia's seventy percent stake. "My route hasn't yet gone into operation. The moment that it does, their percentages are going to move."

"Azul y Blanco can enter at the moment it wants," he assured me, "but under the rules of the system."

[picture5.png](#)



Juan Carlos Alvarez in his office. Image by Patrick Reilly. Mexico, 2017.

Regardless of whether the SITT's a fair system designed by impartial technocrats, the latest reward for "PRI peons," or something in between, the ones leading it will be profiting off the old system for quite some time.

In April 2016, [La Jornada de Baja California reported that](#), "the same day that it approved the modifications to the Public Transportation Regulation that give legal support to the ruta troncal, the government of Jorge Astiazarán also sought that the council permit him to grant 759 permissions to five transit firms." Many of the same firms involved with the SITT, including Aguirre's Calfia and Alvarez's Calafia, had won contracts for old-style routes. Some of them will last for 30 years.

That could leave another generation of *tijuanenses* eager to avoid public transit altogether. Even Vanessa, the Chilpancingo volunteer who liked the SITT, told me that she would buy a car if she could. Already, her city has one of the highest car ownership rates in Mexico.

"In Tijuana," Jorge Alberto Gutiérrez had told me, "[the growth rate of the city's around three percent this year, the growth rate for cars is about nine percent...](#) so project that into the future, and you can see Tijuana full of cars, with the same streets, and worse transit." As the city's population nears two million, it's choking on traffic.

Whether it can escape this fate, he continued, depends on the ones who earn their living driving locals around. "You shouldn't see the transportistas as the 'bad hombres,' like Trump says. I agree they're part of the problem. But they're also the main ingredient in the solution."

That solution, however, involves convincing more than just a few transit kingpins. In a city built on the backs of factory workers earning 80 pesos a day, driving a bus or taxi can be the key to a "more dignified life."

One Calfia driver, hunched over his engine, told me that he takes home between 200 and 500 pesos—10 and 27

dollars—after paying his 650-peso daily rent. Behind the wheel of a taxi de ruta, José Luís Cisneros Dávila does even better. He rents his van, a converted ambulance, for 550 pesos each day. After that, he estimates he takes home 300 and 600 pesos, 17 to 34 dollars. “This work pays to live a day decently, to maintain my family,” he said. “In a factory, yes, you maintain your family, but not very well.”

“Here, whether you make more depends on if you work more hours.” he continued, before setting off into a warren of hills and valleys. Hitting the 600-peso mark requires him to drive this route until 10:00pm.

[picture6.png](#)



José Luís Cisneros Dávila at the wheel of his taxi de ruta, a converted ambulance. Image by Patrick Reilly. Mexico, 2017.

Several intermediaries sit between these drivers and the top-level transportistas. One local university professor, who I had hoped could give me a background on the city’s transit system, surprised me by mentioning that he had rented out several taxis while in graduate school. When I asked José Luís to whom he paid his rent, he told me, “He doesn’t work here. He’s with Uber.”

With 10,550 registered transit vehicles here in 2012, countless livelihoods are riding on Tijuana’s rickety old buses. As Carlo Dalí Gutiérrez and I sat in his car outside the patios and talked, he acknowledged that “these transportation businessmen, who have done their activities like this their whole lives, and still aren’t convinced of changing, they’re accustomed to managing their business, their buses, their decisions, their utilities, and not involving anyone else. It’s understandable.”

The SITT's backers often mention another BRT system, [Bogotá's TransMilenio](#), to illustrate the transit mode's potential. It opened in 2000, and now moves 2.4 million riders per day through the Andean capital. But it still has to coexist with about 6,000 privately run buses.

It remains to be seen whether the SITT, [with just five rutas alimentadoras](#) in service as of August 2017, can strike a similar balance. Convincing more riders to climb aboard, and securing the resources and public support needed to expand coverage and boost quality—all while keeping the transportistas happy—may require more involvement from the city's government. Three months after my visit, [Napo announced](#) that the city government would take over security for the SITT's stations, and the city is [investing 14.5 million pesos](#) to repair the vandalized shelters. But criticisms of the SITT as a “[white elephant](#)” continue, as have [complaints from the system's drivers](#) about brutally long schedules.

Yet at El Florido's Terminal Insurgentes, one driver that the SITT's planners pulled aside was planning to stay on. A former tow truck driver, José de Jesús Avila Nuñez had signed on to drive one of the rutas alimentadoras. He was hoping to work his way up to the troncal.

“I live here in Tijuana,” he told me. “I'm going to be in the future, and I can say, ‘You know what? I was part of this program, of this project when it began. I was there.’”

We were sitting in a long, angular structure with glass walls and a brushed aluminum ceiling. Well-maintained, it would have impressed riders in San Diego. Here in the middle of a dusty Tijuana street, facing sun-bleached taco stands and auto-repair shops, it was like a monument to the city's future.

But it also reminded me that this future was still on its way. Black tubes and cables dangled from the ceiling, awaiting monitors that hadn't been installed. The few maps were simple, 8x11 schematics taped to the doors. And there were few riders.