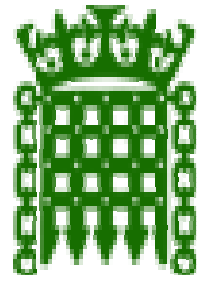


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Advocates of Sydney's George Street light rail can take lessons from the Gold Coast



Surfers wait to board the Gold Coast light rail this week. Photo: Glenn Hunt

We have heard it all before here in the UK how wrong they are
A before and after comparison

Light rail is "too disruptive." The city's transport needs "could be accommodated much more cheaply by buses." The tram line would remove too many car parking spots "necessary for the vitality of business."
No – we are not talking about Sydney.

But you can rest assured that almost every argument about Sydney's new light rail line has been made before, and not too far away. The above comments are from Lex Bell, a councillor from Surfers Paradise who was one of the most vociferous critics of the tram line built on the Gold Coast between 2010 and 2013.

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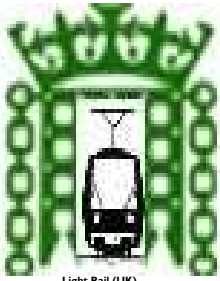
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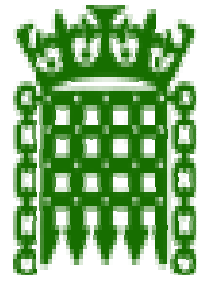


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Bell attempted legal challenges to that project, which, at 13 kilometres, is about the length of the planned Sydney line between Circular Quay and Randwick and Kingsford.

He organised rallies in opposition, where meter maids chained themselves to palm trees in defence of parking spots. And he won a spot on council based on his campaign.

But now the rail line has been running for about a year, along a strip just back from the beach, what does the Gold Coast think of it?

"There is probably more favourable comment about it now that it is there than unfavourable," says Bell. "But there are still mixed feelings."

Between October and April 2018, people who work, live and travel between Circular Quay and Sydney's eastern suburbs will experience the heavy brunt of construction on Sydney's new tram line. Traffic lanes will be closed. Shop fronts will be difficult to access. If the Gold Coast experience is anything to go by, some businesses will go under and commuter travel times will increase.

But even staunch critics like Bell acknowledge that, now it is built, people are riding the line. "It has been a little more helpful than I had expected," he says.

About 20,000 passengers a day use it, well above forecasts. The line recently recorded its five millionth passenger. It has even taken cars off the road – about 5 per cent on Gold Coast City Council's count.

And the boosters are gushing. "There was a bit of trepidation and emphasis on the pain that was happening," says Miles Roper, the acting chief executive of Gold Coast Tourism. "But the response now is very positive."

"It's just overwhelmingly liked," says Anthony Albanese, who as Transport Minister in the former Labour government, allocated \$365 million to the \$1.6 billion line.

"It's just transformed the Gold Coast, particularly for a tourist destination when people don't have cars. It is just such an easy way to get around, and it looks good."

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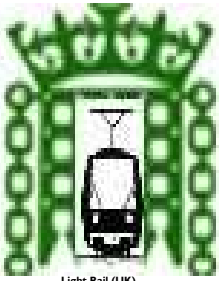
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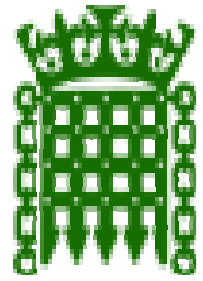


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The Gold Coast light rail route.

The Sydney and Eastern Suburbs light rail route.



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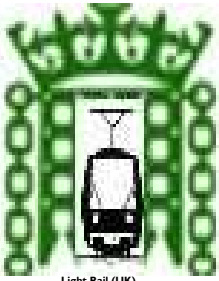
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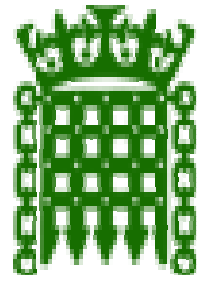


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So what advice do the people who built the line on the Gold Coast, which even critics argue should now be extended, have for those who would do similar things in Sydney?

"Be upfront about the pain"

"Don't sugar coat it," says Phil Mumford, the chief executive of GoldLinQ, the consortium responsible for designing, building and operating the line, known as G:Link.

"You've got to go out there and you've got to be able to tell the truth and be able to back yourself," says Mumford. "When you say to someone you are going to be constructing there for three months, make sure it is three months, don't let it blow out to six."

Last month, the NSW government started to tell businesses, residents and workers along the route of Sydney's new light rail line what they are likely to experience.

The consortium contracted to build the line will attempt to do it in blocks. Construction will be broken into 31 stages between September 1, 2015, when work starts in Moore Park, and April 30, 2018, when work is due to finish in Surry Hills.

Transport Minister Andrew Constance is promising to "over-communicate" with businesses and commuters. He says that should the consortium, known as ALTRAC, exceed the length of time it is slated to build in any of those 31 zones, heavy penalties will be issued.

Even so, some observers are sceptical about the NSW government's ability to be genuinely open about what it plans to do.

"They went out of their way to inform people on the Gold Coast," says Greg Sutherland, a tram expert and an enthusiastic supporter of the Sydney plan.

"But there's been a less than perfect public information campaign so far about the CSELR [CBD and South East Light Rail] project."

Keep on digging

Before the government disclosed the cost of Sydney's new tram line would blow out from \$1.6 billion to \$2.1 billion, Fairfax Media revealed Transport for NSW's own scrutineers had little confidence in the government's ability to manage one of the most difficult parts of light rail construction.

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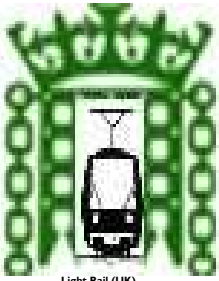
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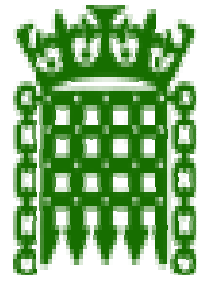


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That is, to negotiate with utilities companies such as AGL and Telstra about moving service lines from under busy and old streets such as George Street.

Mumford says this is an especially difficult part of any major civil work.

"That's incredibly hard, they [utilities] want to gold plate their environment, that's what their interests are, competing with our interests," says Mumford.

The key is to make sure you know what you are going to do, before you hit the ground.

"Gas particularly is really hard for transport and main roads," says Simon Cook, an executive at Translink, the Queensland government's transport arm.

"If you get that bit wrong, a section that might only have been out for a few weeks will be out for months and months. And that's when you cause the trouble."

Mumford says: "When you think you've done enough potholing, well go and do some more."

One of the unusual aspects of the Gold Coast light rail line is that it was paid for by all three levels of government – federal, state and council.

"It wouldn't have happened without Commonwealth government funding," says Albanese.

Cook says the importance of the joint funding went beyond the financial support; it provided public relations ballast.

"This showed it wasn't just some hair-brained idea of the mayor or whoever was premier at the time," he says.

Just as construction started, however, the political consensus started to fracture as a new mayor and premier took over, more sceptical about the line.

According to Jason Ward, the stakeholder director at GoldLinQ, these upheavals made it more difficult to prosecute the case for the project.

"We had quite a political mess, for us, we just struggled to understand where we were at politically and who our project champions were," says Ward.

"And my view is we didn't have a project champion at that time. We were right at the critical point of starting construction, where we needed the community to come along on the journey."

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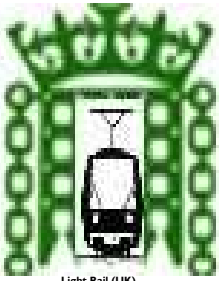
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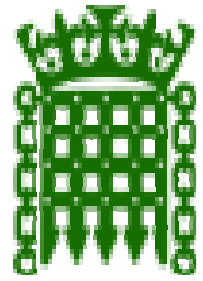


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In Sydney, Lord Mayor, Clover Moore remains an energetic supporter of the line, and both Sydney City Council and Randwick City Council are contributing funding.

Premier Mike Baird, meanwhile, signalled this week the government's determination to ride out the difficult construction period.

"All of these projects will cause disruption, they will cause inconvenience," said Baird. "But we have to take the long term view."

But the political consensus that had existed at the state level has broken down. After supporting the project at the March election, Labour leader Luke Foley now says the light rail line will lead to "decades of worsening CBD congestion" even after it is built.

Mix in with the buses

The benefits of the Gold Coast line have extended well beyond the tram line, with a 22 per cent increase in the number of public transport trips across the Gold Coast on all modes – buses and trams. This has happened, says Cook, because light rail has allowed the reorganisation of buses.

"We've changed the bus network quite dramatically to feed into the tram at each end, and that improves your overall public transport on the coast, using this as the spine," he says.

More frequent buses now run to light rail stops, where passengers can change to the tram.

Daniel Bennett, the urban design leader for contractors Arup and Hassell who worked on Sydney light rail, says the tram's relationship with bus services provides the biggest opportunity and also the biggest challenge of the project.

"I'm a Five Dock boy, so I'm used to catching buses," says Bennett of the inner-west Sydney suburb ill-served by rail.

"And every year I could see them get slower and slower. George Street is just at absolute capacity, maxed out, so you've got to have this new thing that's going to displace those buses," he says.

He says the key will be making sure that it is easy for people to change off buses onto frequent, quick and easy trams: "What we've got to get right is the interchanges with buses – it has to be simple."

Courtesy of :

Jacob Saulwick
Sydney Morning Herald
New South Wales
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