

Light rail in the time of austerity

Examining the UK's Parliamentary Light Rail Inquiry, lower-cost options are the solution to a myriad of social and economic issues, argues James Harkins of Light Rail (UK).

The funding climate for major urban public transportation projects looks bleak. Great Britain's major political parties are bidding to be the biggest cutters after the UK General Election later this year and with health, defence and education being safeguarded – in the short-term at least – transport is a soft option for cuts. New tramway systems in particular are seen as a luxury.

At last year's Parliamentary light rail inquiry, *Light Rail and City Regions: a 21st Century Mode of Transport*, several witnesses were asked why new light rail developments in Britain cost at least twice as much as similar schemes on the continent. With a target cost in France of EUR14m/km, in Germany under EUR10m/km, why is it that the proposed lines two and three in Nottingham are budgeted at GBP28m (EUR24m)/km? As the Americans say: do the math.

The environmental and traffic arguments have not lessened. The EU Air Quality Directive is due to be enforced in Britain in 2012, and there is no chance of the date being put back – again. Every city in Britain continues to fail to meet the healthy air standard of the Directive. Last year, the Irish Government was fined EUR800m for failure to satisfy the EU Clean Water Directive and the British Government is facing a series of unlimited fines for its failure to successfully address not just CO₂ levels, but

also the unacceptably high quantities of PM10 and NO₂ pollution. Most of this air pollution comes from motor vehicle traffic and put very simplistically, the money paid out through these impending fines could build a lot of new tramways....

Trams open up new markets

Light rail is now well-proven to attract a modal shift away from car trips, which buses do not, and themselves exacerbate the pollution issue. Perhaps the Cambridgeshire Guided Busway will prove everyone wrong, except that it is now over a year late in opening – and maybe two years late by the time the full route length is open – and the cost has more than doubled from the initial project estimates. An electric tramway, built using proven off-the-shelf components, could have been built for less. Again a couple of witnesses at the Light Rail Inquiry did offer lower cost ways in which tramways could be provided.

Recently I had the chance to looking at one of these options – the *City Class* tram from Tram Power. Previously I had seen it running in Birkenhead and Blackpool and now completely rebuilt, it stands fair comparison with any of the major car builders. I also had a chance to try the touchscreen control system. As just one lower-cost option, I would recommend anyone to see it in the 'flesh'. See also

Below: Cambridgeshire's troubled guided busway project is months behind schedule and significantly over budget. An 'off-the-shelf' tramway system could have been built for less argues James Harkins. Neil Pulling





“The heavy fines the UK Government faces for its failure to address air pollution issues would pay for a lot of new tramways...”

Tram Power’s plan for a GBP100m tramway project for the UK city of Preston (News page 87).

Every city and large town in Britain can easily justify a tramway on the basis of the congestion and pollution reductions alone. Using affordable technologies developed by British companies – also including the innovative hydrogen-powered, fully carbon-neutral Ultra Light Rail project for Cheltenham and Gloucester examined in TAUT 860, August 2009 – can make this achievable.

Bus operators are themselves facing a difficult time. Peak oil is now here, diesel will get more expensive, the alternatives of bio-fuels are not yet mainstream enough and will be more expensive while the technologies are refined further. Bus drivers are also difficult to recruit and retain. ‘Tramification’ is one way in which bus operators can address both the energy and staff issues, while at the same time opening up a new market for local public transport; short car trips not attracted by a modal shift to buses.

Light rail’s long-lasting legacy

The UK Government forecasts growing urban car traffic and attracting some of these drivers to new tram lines will reverse over 50 years of continuous bus patronage decline. Starting with a low-cost single line would be a safe option. This then gives a basis for adding further lines and expanding systems as funds become available, new settlements and industrial and retail areas spring up and technologies become more affordable.

Creating a light rail network suddenly becomes practical

Above: Nottingham’s tramway is testament to how a well-managed and well thought out light rail system can transform a UK city – both economically and socially. Bombardier *Incentro* 209 is pictured here passing Market Street on 26 September 2009. Howard Pulling



Above right: Tram Power’s British-built lightweight *City Class* light rail unit offers a practical, lower-cost, alternative to the mass-market manufacturers. Professor Lewis Lesley/Tram Power

and a long lasting urban asset, as most continental tramways demonstrate. The civic pride a new tramway brings with it is also another unquantifiable benefit that in real terms brings social cohesion to run-down communities. In view of the austerity facing us, this may be the only way to establish new tramways, especially if coupled with appropriate tram-train applications.

All we need is the vision and courage to build now, to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, create cleaner air for future generations and reduce traffic congestion to make our towns and cities civilised and more attractive places to live and work. TAUT

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