



CAN LOCAL FUNDING SUPPORT A HERITAGE TYPE TRAMWAY SYSTEM?

The Federation of Small Businesses (Yorkshire and Humber) have shown concern about the need to reduce traffic congestion in Leeds. Their suggestion was that local politicians and transport professionals should adopt some lateral thinking to plan a way ahead (1). Some new lateral thinking is obviously needed despite the present lack of support from Westminster.

Britain's five new tram systems, built from 1992, have all demonstrated a sufficient public response to quality transit. When Leeds "torched" its well developed tramway system in 1959, many soon realised that the lower cost system was actually low quality also and consequently this replacement had many faults. They soon began to vote with their feet which resulted in a road spending spree costing many times what transport modernisation would have needed. Many passengers learned for the first time the value of that standing load. Trams can swallow up a large load quickly but with buses on a busy route, a slow entry followed by that dreaded word FULL which meant a wait for the next bus. An experienced passenger would know that seats would quickly have become available even on a bus route and drivers have never been known to go back to collect those unlucky ones still waiting at the previous stop.

A close look at developments on the other side of the "pond" could well be a winner here if our politicians realised that what was scrapped about 50 years ago had the potential to give as good a performance as light rail today. "As of last year, almost 1,500 miles of tramway were either planned or opened in the American cities" (2). Many were actually heritage systems, replica first generation bodies equipped with modern electrical under gear. They have been put back to work on short lengths of track for segregation where possible. Using figures supplied by an American source, a heritage tramway is about two thirds (mile for mile) of the cost of light rail.

Returning to Leeds, many miles of tramway reservations still exist as does one of the modern looking railcars of the 1950's. If the skills are still available at the Crossgates factory in Leeds it can be seen that a heritage tram is feasible at a lower cost. The design could be modified with a low floor articulated middle section added and if all wheels were powered, hills as steep as 10% could be negotiated.

As cost becomes the final arbiter, it should be pointed out that a high passenger appeal will attract funding in its own right. For this reason, care must be exercised when choosing the first part of city to get the initial construction. It is suggested that City Square to St James hospital via Corn Exchange and the bus station could have strong passenger appeal. Although most of this route would be double track, the section along NEW YORK STREET would require special attention. This is about the same length as a narrow street in Mainz (Germany) where a closely spaced interlaced track is used by two busy routes without difficulty. As no point work is involved the operation is silent and works very successfully. A role model for Leeds could be the new tram system in Saarbrücken (Germany), especially so if the first likely extension in Leeds was to Horsforth Station, a recent suggestion by consultants.

REFERENCES

- 1) Regional leaders must rethink policies on transport - YORKSHIRE EVENING POST 21st October 2008.
- 2) John Tagliabus - INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE 10th November 2008.

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