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Train operator has to get rail back on track

IN MATTERS OF public transport, perception is synonymous with reality. Travellers need to know that, if they leave the car at home and take the bus or train, they will not regret the decision. A single bad experience can frighten them back behind the wheel and out on to Auckland's congested roads.

Sadly, the city's rail commuters have had a fistful of recent bad experiences that might cause them to reconsider the wisdom of taking the train. A carriage caught fire in February; signals failed on several days in May and June — once stretching the travelling time between the city and Waitakere to an unbearable three hours; also in May, two passengers fainted when potentially toxic fumes from a malfunctioning airconditioning unit filled a carriage.

When the Lions played Auckland, 700 fans arrived at the park 10 minutes after the start of the game because the trains were late — even though extra demand had been predictable for more than a year.

Not all of these extraordinary events were the fault of the rail operator — the signals are the responsibility of Railways Corporation subsidiary (J)ntack. But the fact that the trains persistently run late and that some services do not run at all is enough to fatally undermine the confidence of the travelling public.

Making matters worse is the decision by Land Transport New Zealand, which holds the purse-strings for the revival of public transport in the Queen City, to withhold the money that had been promised for an upgrade of the rail infrastructure. To free up more cash for roads, LTNZ wants to delay the vital

double-tracking of the western line along with improvements to the trouble-prone signalling system, carriages and stations.

It's hard to imagine a more idiotic approach to spending priorities. As Joel Cayford, the chairman of the Auckland Land Transport Committee, has pointed out, improvements to the rail network offer huge returns on investment. The rail corridors are in place and working — after a fashion. To delay improvements that would almost quintuple their carrying capacity looks remarkably like lunacy.

That said, those improvements would be medium-term at best. Connex faces a critical challenge right now. It must do the job it promised to do, before train travel becomes cemented in Aucklanders' imaginations as a (literal) waste of time.

The Britomart Station is two years old this month. It celebrated its first birthday last year with the news that patronage had doubled, but later events betrayed whatever hope that might have encouraged.

French-owned Connex took over management of the train fleet last August on the back of a dismal performance in Britain and an excellent track record in Australia.

It agreed to ensure that 85 per cent of trains ran on time (which is, perversely, defined as being no more than five minutes late) but in April and May it managed a miserable 50 per cent — down from the 65 per cent being achieved when it arrived.

For a specialist operator contracted to nurse Auckland's rail system back to life and promising high reliability, that is an appalling record. The time for excuses is over.

STRAIGHT THINKING

Mayor Harvey is starting to see the light

The problems with rail go too deep to solve – Waitakere's mayor should cut his losses and run

Owen McShane

Waitakere City's Mayor Bob Harvey is losing patience with rail. His council has delivered the stations and done more than its share to boost ridership.

But the service has failed to deliver and he fears a generation of riders has been lost forever. He blames Connex, the operator of the trains, for these failures. However, the problems with rail go much deeper than that. The mayor should cut his losses and run.

In England, the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), has recommended converting the whole of the rail system to roads. It argues that rail is an obsolete technology that is now totally uneconomic in every aspect of its operation.

Rail should be allowed to disappear – except for historic lines for tourists – and the rail beds converted to pavement to carry buses and trucks. Buses and trucks could take over all the functions of rail for about a quarter the cost, while using 20% less fuel, requiring 25-33% less land, and reducing the accident rate.

carriages are custom built and the capital cost per seat is many times the cost of mass produced buses. Also, the rails, switching and signalling have no parallel in motorway operations.

Steel wheels don't grip rails nearly as well as rubber grips the road – which means trains take four times longer to stop. Rail is an inflexible mode of operation, offering no possibility of serving local destinations beyond terminals. Very high point loads between wheel and rail lead to high maintenance costs and demand a meticulously laid and maintained track. No private organisation would build a new rail network today because the numbers would never stack up. Governments continue to maintain rail only because governments are prepared to cook the books.

Energy use per passenger is little different between cars and rail, while modern buses and aircraft use less energy than both per passenger-mile. The next generation of cars will easily outperform rail in use of fossil fuel. Mayor Harvey drives a hybrid so he should know.

The IEA estimates it would cost about \$US2.2b to convert the UK rail system into a new network of truck/bus routes, and the annual return on this investment would be

a handsome 18%.

Passengers are learning that modern cars and buses – like modern aircraft – are incredibly reliable while the inherent fragility of rail becomes more obvious by the day. The English are used to being stranded because of "leaves on the line" or the "wrong sort of snow" – not to mention the suicide delays. Trains are 19th century technology, and while they were a miracle of their time, their time has long passed. They are following the route of the slide-rule and the typewriter.

Mayor Harvey is finding that these truths apply here in New Zealand as well. In a report to Waitakere council he decries "an intolerably chaotic and, I believe, disastrous continuation of what the long suffering rail commuters have had to bear in the west."

He wants Connex to deliver the goods or, if they cannot, to let the council know. He says "We are adults and can accept the truth when it's told to us but we can't continue buying into the contradictions and nonsense these rail operators have continued to deliver to our citizens."

Asking Connex to admit to this particular truth is like asking turkeys to vote for an early Christmas. He should seek advice from independent

ent experts like the IEA.

Rail has had its day, except for the few long-haul routes in the US, where two-mile-long trains carry single payloads of grain or logs over huge distances.

Bus, truck and car technology is improving every day, and a new wave of technology is just around the corner as most of the existing mechanical systems surrounding the engine itself are about to be replaced by more reliable and more efficient electronic systems.

Our own government should convert all existing inter-city rail lines to truck-only roads. Given long, unbroken, flat routes, the long-haul trucks would leave the standard roads in droves.

The capacity and safety of the standard roads would increase dramatically. Everyone would win. Mayor Harvey's transport centre would serve cheap, reliable, efficient buses rather than chaotic, unreliable and expensive trains.

Mayor Harvey is a great communicator and visionary and his enthusiasms are catching. It's time for him to trust his instincts, embrace the future and get the rail monkey off his city's back. The rest of the country would soon follow and we would all be in his debt.

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