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Public Transport in Auckland

making wrong decisions for the wrong reasons.

Auckland has a long tradition of making wrong decisions about public transport and several recent announcements indicate we are maintaining this tradition.

Auckland is not entering new or unknown territory. A multitude of cities overseas have explored diverse transport options and have much to teach us.

How well do our leaders' notions about public transport stack up?

Does Integrated Ticketing Need Central Control?

The ARC claims we need centralised control of public transport so we can have integrated ticketing. This is a total red herring. If it were true world travellers would depend on a single world-wide bank to use their credit cards in cash machines. They don't.

Aucklanders do need an intelligent Smart-Card which can interrogate any "card-reader" in any vehicle connected into the system. If the ARC controls all the "public transport" their integrated ticketing will be limited to operators under its control.

What about taxis, water taxis, or shuttles? And what about new modes of transport not even operating yet, such as SkyCabs? Do we really believe that a monopoly provider will be an enthusiastic innovator?

Monopolies Abuse Their Powers.

Where such monopoly providers exist they have used their power to protect their bad investments. For example, many US cities that have recently invested heavily in rail have watched their public transport network lose overall market share. This is because the monopoly providers have closed down competitive bus routes to try and boost ridership on their loss-making trains. Everyone is worse off.

Some commentators assume our bus system must be bad because it is a "Thatcherite" model. Italian researcher Francesco Ramella disagrees. He finds the UK's "Thatcherite" public transport is more efficient and effective than those of Germany, France and Italy.

The UK systems are also less frequently held to ransom by industrial inaction. Dispersed ownership disperses union power.

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The Key Role of Public Transport.

The key role of public transport is to serve those who cannot drive their own vehicle because they are too young, too old, too poor, or are handicapped. Taxis and shuttles play a major part in this role and yet are excluded from the “public transport” debate. Taxis presently carry more passengers per year than the train system ever will. Yet the transport planners intend to ban taxis from using Grafton Bridge bus lanes even though a major public hospital is a major generator of taxi trips.

What happens when someone dies of a heart attack in a gridlocked taxi?

Auckland “Region” is a Statistical Outrider.

We are often told that Auckland has poor public transport use compared to cities like Adelaide or similar cities. But these comparisons compare the Auckland Region with the Adelaide Metropolitan Area. We must compare apples with apples. Half of Auckland’s Region barely has any roads – let alone buses.

A metropolitan area needs a population density of 8,000 people per square mile to make rail viable. Hong Kong has a population of 6,475,000 at a density of 76,200 per square mile. Auckland has a population of 1,250,000 living at a density of 5,500 per square mile. That’s why we can’t we have a rail system like Hong Kong.

Making Bus Lanes Even Better.

Auckland commuter-bus performance is one of the best in the world and the North Shore bus lane will soon make it even better. But a Northern Bus Lane carrying buses every 15 minutes is a massive under-use of expensive infrastructure. The buses only need an empty “cocoon” in front to gain their “travel-time” advantage. Lisbon is trialing “intermittent bus lanes” in which traffic lights control access for other vehicles so that they can trail behind the buses until another bus enters the lane. Such an extra “intermittent lane” could significantly reduce congestion on the Harbour Bridge.

Fossil Fuels

There are many good reasons to reduce our dependence on Middle Eastern Oil.

Take your pick.

But whatever the reason, if we want to reduce our use of oil we should move people out of public transport and into private cars. No, I have not written this the wrong way round.

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Modern cars use less energy per passenger-km than buses or trains. Back in the seventies it was the other way round – but not now. This energy efficiency gap grows wider by the day. In the US a Honda Insight uses 1,326 British Thermal Units (btu)/vehicle mile, the average car uses 3,549 btu/ passenger mile, while the average Transit Bus uses 4,160 btu per passenger mile. The best way to reduce transport energy consumption is to encourage people to use smaller and more efficient cars. The energy benefit will apply to all trips in the region. Commuter trips are a tiny percentage of vehicle trips and should be the last of our “energy” concerns.

Electrification

Electrifying rail will make no difference. The electricity has to be generated somehow and must be from a reliable source. (Early morning wind is NOT reliable.) Some argue that quiet electrified trains will encourage people to live near railway stations. However, rail freight would remain diesel powered and has to be separated from electrified passenger carriages. The last time I looked the operators proposed to run the passenger trains by day and the freight service by night.

“Station neighbours” will have quieter days – but noisier nights.

Conclusion

Surely it’s time to recognize that cars are the most efficient and effective form of transport ever devised and we motorists are not addle-pated “addicts”.

We just make sensible choices.

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