

Light rail and reality

By Tony Smale

Isn't it just the way of things? You wait 60 years for a light rail transit system to reappear on your streets, then two come along at once!

Down here in the south-east corner of Hampshire, the plans to link Fareham and Gosport with Portsmouth by means of a cross-harbour tram tunnel are progressing well.

An advertisement was recently placed in the European Journal inviting firms to bid for contracts to build and operate the system.

Railfuture's Wessex branch presented evidence at the public inquiry in 1998, and was delighted when Transport and Works Act powers were eventually granted after a frustrating delay of over two years.

Although the scheme was conceived as early as 1992, it will be 2005 or 2006 before the tramway is open for business.

In the meantime, a private company, Carr West, appeared on the scene with a quick-fix plan for a showpiece transport system running the length of Portsmouth, from Cosham in the north to Southsea front.

For this, they have coined the grandiose title: VLRS – Variable Level Rail System.

To everyone else, it's a mono-rail.

In January this year, the VLRS

team took to the road with their second round of public consultation meetings, unveiling displays at various venues around the city. I felt duty-bound to call in and evaluate this alternative "rail future".

Now, I have to say that the design has progressed apace since their original attempts at conceptual art two years ago.

At that time, I recall submitting comments to the effect that this was "a fairground ride masquerading as public transport".

That was manifestly the case when the video footage accompanying the presentation showed a smiling oriental lady standing on a treetop-level platform, unhooking a length of red rope to allow entry to a Disney-esque capsule.

Visions of two-hundred inebriated Pompey fans cascading on to the streets below flashed before my eyes.

The latest presentation shows that VLRS is looking less like a kiddies' ride and very much more like the Docklands Light Railway, or possibly an airport people-mover.

Gone is the red rope, thank God, to be replaced by platform-edge doors such as you find on the Jubilee Line extension.

Gone too are the slender metal columns that would have

enabled an errant motorist to bring the entire structure crashing to the ground.

It's now a ferro-concrete affair with all the charm of the Chiswick Flyover – regrettably harder to sell to the hostile homeowners whose bedroom windows it will pass.

When I quizzed the company's representative I was assured that, yes, it would be fully accessible in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995.

That means a costly lift at each of the 12 stations.

My second question arose from an inspection of the detailed street plans.

There were clearly going to be intermediate turn-back loops and a spur into a workshop area, implying that it will be possible to switch trains between tracks.

Each train, remember, has the cross-section of an inverted letter "U", is supported by rubber-tyred wheelsets and is guided by horizontal wheels acting on the outer edges of a broad trackway.

A monorail with pointwork? "How is it done?" I asked.

The gentleman in the suit didn't know exactly, but was confident that the boffins have an answer to the problem.

Solve it they must, if VLRS is to be a serious urban transit

system. By now, the hapless representative was being harangued by an angry group from Southsea Common, so I had to leave with my question about evacuation from a failed vehicle unanswered.

Environmental impact assessment? – I didn't dare ask!

A fellow visitor from Railtrack managed to find out that the proposed structure will cross the existing high-level railway between Town and Harbour stations on a skew bridge with pilings into the railway embankment.

That should consume most of the £60m which Carr West claim the whole monorail will cost.

Let's be fair for a moment.

The company is to be roundly applauded for taking a fresh look at the complexities of planting a modern transit system into a crowded urban landscape.

Judge for yourself by looking at their website: www.vlrs.co.uk

Unfortunately, the designers face years of frustration and disappointment as the planning, environmental and safety regulations of the twenty-first century bite into the promised timescales and budgets.

Built without subsidy? Running by 2004? Impressive, but unlikely!

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necks by installing more flexible track layouts and extra platforms, such as Peterborough and Hitchin, could reap significant benefits in the short term.

If traffic growth and reduced overcrowding targets are to be achieved, major new infrastructure will be essential to provide extra capacity both in London and the regions.

There are some hints in the Strategic Plan that a few visionary minds may address these issues. The lack of input from the SRA and rail operators into the Government's multi-modal studies is dispiriting, particularly as valuable rail corridors such as Cambridge-St Ives may as a result be converted to busways.

Government must urgently address the need for developing local and regional rail schemes that can achieve up to 20% modal switch. Effective, quality, reliable rail services can accomplish this better than bus or other modes. In the south east, Government has made no initiatives to develop the Hastings local metro concept. Despite chucking out a road proposal, it seems unwilling to promote a simple and inexpensive rail alternative, which

Strategic plan

upgrades existing routes with a couple of new stations. There is a dearth of local schemes that can add capacity and promote modal switch as well as a notable lack of proposals for electrification. Is electrification off the agenda completely, apart from the two South Central projects?

Two schemes that were included in the Railtrack's 2000 Network Management Statement – Bidston to Prenton in Merseyside and Walsall to Rugeley and Aldridge in the West Midlands – are now missing.

We must press at least for infill schemes and extensions to existing local networks. The strategic plan should be read alongside the Strategic Agenda published last year by Sir Alastair Morton, but effectively it is a repackaged Railtrack 2000 NMS without the wish lists.

The French are now on their fourth TGV route and fifth RER line in Paris. We have just one short high speed line under construction and half an RER route

(Thameslink 1989) in London! Alas we seem to produce more plans, studies and consultants' reports per mile of line actually built than any other country on earth. Let's try and catch up a bit.

SRA chairman Richard Bowker has reiterated that his aim is to get the best out of the existing rail network which has become heavily congested at critical points. He believes the SRA should take a more effective lead.

He has already created a "virtual board" of key players from the various rail agencies and companies to target problems in the Geat Western area. Another is being created for the West Coast main line.

But major engineering schemes for the long-term – not enough to satisfy Railfuture – are also listed in the strategic plan.

By the time you read this we hope to have more analysis of the plan on the Railfuture website.

■ Additional input from Richard Pout.