

Diesel trains railroaded as council chooses electrification

ANGELA NORTON, SPIKE MOUNTJOY and ELIZABETH ALLAN
discuss the inevitable death of diesel trains and the future of
electrified rail in Auckland.

"The exciting novelty of the motorcar has worn off, and we are becoming aware of its problems." – Government's chief urban planner, 1947.

Auckland's transport development has been dominated by road construction, and until recently councils were determined to keep investing in motorways.

But Richard Simpson, an Auckland city councillor and chairman of the Transport and Urban Linkages Committee, says continuing to build the infrastructure just for rubber and fossil fuels is "beyond the realms of sanity".

Auckland has very little area where it can grow because it is bound by coastlines and must go around the volcanoes, Simpson says.

"So we've got to look at the land efficiency of the modes [of transport] we use.

"One train line is one lane of the motorway, so trains are a no-brainer because they're land efficient."

Simpson says a train system is about "snapping Auckland out of its love affair with the private car".

But the only way the council will succeed in getting people to give up their cars is to provide a viable option that is attractive and affordable.

For Simpson, the key word is efficiency and at the centre of his vision for Auckland is "multi-modal transport hubs" where each train station would be a gateway to other modes of transport – buses, bikes, taxis and ferries.

"We are now planning for Auckland to be meshed by these hubs with a few super-hubs like Britomart.

"An electrified rail network will be the backbone of this system," he says.

A simultaneous goal for the establishment of this network is the development of an integrated ticketing system with "smart cards".

People would use the same card for all modes of transport.

The cards would "lubricate" the multi-modal hubs, leading to greater efficiency.

Simpson says the cards could be recharged via a website or direct credit and could eventually be used to buy other things such as concert tickets – an example is Hong Kong's highly successful Octopus Card.

Cities such as Melbourne and London also have successful multi-purpose card schemes.

This is not the first futuristic public transport plan for Auckland City. In 1923 an underground city-to-

Morningside line, with a stop near the town hall, was proposed but not built.

Ambitious plans for an urban Auckland rail network resurfaced again in the 1940s.

In 1946 the Ministry of Works produced a detailed and legally-binding plan for electrification, which included a link from the central station to meet the western line in Mt Albert.

There were also plans for a line con-

necting they were too costly.

Changes to the political landscape sunk both the 1946 and the 1973 plans.

Chris Harris, an Auckland transport historian, says a growing awareness of climate change and shrinking room for expansion mean the rail plans have a better chance of success this time around.

"The mythology that there's loads of room for expansion is not really true," he says.

near the Wellesley St intersection with Queen St and one near Karangahape Rd."

In a recent study, ARTA estimated Auckland's rail network could hold up to 19 million passenger journeys each year – six times the current usage – following the completion of a core network upgrade that includes station upgrades and western line duplication. If the CBD underground loop is built and changes are made to the Britomart complex, with increased services and longer trains, the rail system capacity could grow to more than 50 million passenger journeys per year.

An Auckland Rapid Transit Strategy Study published in 2005 suggested that a CBD loop tunnel would be possible within the next 15 to 30 years.

The 2005 study estimates the CBD underground would require an investment of at least \$500 million.

It concluded that the construction of the underground would require electrification of the rail network.

Simpson's vision also included electrification and he gives several reasons why it is so important.

Firstly, diesel trains need special air ventilation if they run underground.

Britomart serves diesel trains and had vents built at some cost, but anything bigger than Britomart is prob-

lematic.

It is better to have the whole tunnel underground than to have vents, he says.

"It's the way everyone else has gone. Britomart is an anachronism."

Secondly, diesel is a fossil fuel that will one day run out. It also pollutes the air when burnt.

Simpson says electric trains will not pollute the environment and the electricity needed to run them can be gained from renewable resources such as hydro, solar and tidal power.

Thirdly, the proposed line between Britomart and Mt Eden station would have to go uphill, and electric trains can accelerate and cope better with steepness than diesel trains.

The diesel trains Auckland is currently using are about 40 years old and some were rescued from places such as Botswana, he says.

"It is not possible to convert diesel trains to electric but we could buy second-hand trains if the budget was really tight.

"But if we're serious about having a world class system we shouldn't be scraping the bottom of the barrel," he says.



ABANDONED: The diesel trains at Britomart may soon be sidelined in favour of electrified rail

"An electrified rail network will be the backbone of the system."

necting Avondale and Southdown. The tracks were never laid.

The plans were part of a major state development drive with new public transport designed to service new state housing.

By 1953 suggestions that government plans were hampering private development contributed to the 1946 plans being canned.

The focus of transport funding shifted to the National Roads Fund and the development of motorways.

Urban rail came back on the agenda in the late 1960s when Auckland City Mayor Sir Dove-

Myer Robinson pushed the development of the Auckland Rapid Transport project.

"Robbie's Rapid Rail", as it became known, included radial feeders and an urban loop similar to earlier plans.

In 1973 the then Labour government agreed to fund electrification between Auckland and Papakura; and an underground rail loop from downtown through the central city to Newmarket.

This plan included an underground station where Britomart is now.

A National government then came to power and canned the plans in 1976, say-

Agreement on future public transport plans could be strengthened by a recent "strategic alignment" project between Auckland City Council, Auckland Regional Council and the government.

Sharon Hunter, spokesperson for the Auckland Regional Transport Authority (ARTA), says a strong commitment from the Labour government to fixing Auckland's public transport woes could make the difference.

"If only they'd gone ahead with Sir Dove-Myer Robinson's plan," says Hunter.

The electrification of Auckland rail would pave the way for a loop tunnel under the central business district (CBD) linking Britomart to the western line.

If this is built it opens up the possibility of extending a tunnel to the North Shore.

In a 2005 ARTA report on local rail transport the board endorsed investigations to confirm the feasibility of a CBD tunnel.

The report included a vision for 2030: "The Auckland central business district will be serviced by an underground tunnel that connects through the Britomart station and includes two new stations – one

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