

An integrated public transport master plan

MANY aspects of our day-to-day lives have changed over time. Yet our public transport system has essentially made no progress since the end of the war, unless one includes the removal of the bus conductor! When one analyses the way in which our public buses operate, one immediately realises the inefficiencies in today's services. It has, quite frankly, become a joke!

This inefficiency has contributed to a massive increase in private car ownership. More vehicles on the roads require more capital investment in the country's road infrastructure. Also more capital is exported to other countries for the initial purchase as well as for the delivery of spare parts.

More vehicles have resulted in increased fatalities on the road which lead to other social problems as well as loss of productive time due to traffic jams. Furthermore, one also has to keep in mind that vehicles depreciate within a short time, say 15 to 20 years. All these factors substantially contribute to the huge amount of funds – currently about Lm53 million a year for all vehicles – leaving Malta.

New realities

Fifty years ago, the Valletta and Grand Harbour areas represented the hub of all commercial activity on the island. Thus, having a system with the country's public transport departing from the centre of each village or town and leading to Valletta made sense.

Life at the time was not as hectic as it is today, and people had ample time to stop at every stage en route to Valletta. One also has to admit that in those times there was much less traffic on the road, and possibly, it took less time to reach one's destination!

Times have really changed however and business activity has spread all over the Maltese Islands. Our public transportation now needs to adapt to today's requirements. It has to be efficient, provide for interconnectivity between different transport systems, become more versatile, more accessible and cleaner to offer a reliable service to encourage more commuters to use this service, especially during normal working hours.

It is incredible that in a small country like ours, the taxi service is still so inefficient. We only have 200 taxis to service the whole island. I believe that taxis should play a major role in our transportation system. It is astonishing, in view of the hectic pace of life today, that most of the public bus routes lead to Valletta only, and to go to another town or village, one has to wait again at the Valletta terminus and take another bus to another direction with an increased possibility that one would still not reach the desired destination.

Buses pass only through main roads and stop at one particular terminus in the town or village so one still has to walk further distances to reach one's destination.

Fifty years ago towns and villages in Malta were much smaller, with houses built around the town or village core or along arterial main roads. This has completely changed over the years; our integrated public transport system has to complement today's needs and thus requires a more holistic

approach. Modern efficient integrated systems should incorporate:

- mass monorail transport system with a number of interchange stations;
- circular town bus service;
- Valletta/Floriana circular minibus service;
- an efficient bus service covering the whole country;
- an efficient taxi service;
- ferries and water taxis across the two main harbours;
- minicabs, and
- helicopter, service.

The integrated system approach offers various services which can attract all kinds of commuters, including white-collar worker. The system will encourage office workers to leave their cars at home and avoid getting stuck in traffic.

Monorail system

A modern efficient system should incorporate a fast circular monorail system around the inner and outer harbour areas, which include Valletta, Floriana, Cottonera, Marsa, Hamrun, Pietà, Msida, Gzira, Tal-Qroqq and Sliema.

Ideally this system would be constructed underground and connect towns through tunnels beneath the harbours, but if the initial capital cost is not feasible, an elevated fast monorail is possible. Eventually this service could be extended to incorporate elevated routes to the airport, Paceville and Marsascala areas.

I still believe that such a system could be partly funded by European Union structural funds, since the EU supports most initiatives to improve public transportation.

This monorail system could have four interchange stations along a circular route. These could be located close to strategic areas such as Cottonera/Ghajn Dwieli, close to the Drydocks entrance; Marsa close to the industrial estate and the proposed business park; Valletta beneath the existing bus terminus (this should be the mode of all our main transportation systems) and Tal-Qroqq next to Mater Dei Hospital and the University.

This system could be operated on a 24-hour basis with a variable timetable according to demand. Potentially, this could even be operated automatically, similar to the shuttle service found in airports providing transport between terminals.

Circular town bus service

The village core is not necessarily the centre of the town any more. Having a single terminus is defeating the objective of accessibility, as a commuter would still need to walk for 10 or 15 minutes to reach the nearest bus stop or terminus. Consider a cold and rainy day – the present transportation system would hardly encourage anyone to use it.

It is therefore very important that the public transport system reaches the commuter as close as possible to the place of residence, providing for no more than a five-minute walk to the nearest bus stop.

To achieve this, a circular bus service is required which passes through a well-planned route within each town or village. This same bus would then take the commuter directly to the nearest interchange



by Angelo Xuereb

station, without the need to stop in other towns.

When I was mayor of Naxxar, the local council successfully implemented such a service which took commuters to the town's terminus. This was so successful that it is still in use today. This service proved very beneficial to mothers taking their young children to school, going shopping, going to church as well as transporting children to their evening catechism lessons.

All that is required now is that a similar service be extended to the nearest interchange station and back. For example, the towns and villages located in the north of the island would use the interchange at Tal-Qroqq. The central areas would use the one at Marsa, while the southern areas would use the one at Cottonera. Naturally the monorail would link these interchange stations to the Valletta stations. These are schematically described on the map on pages 52 and 53.

Valletta/Floriana circular minibus service

Valletta and Floriana were not designed to bear the traffic load they have to bear today, so there is an urgent need to introduce a shuttle minibus service, connected to the various car parks in this area as well as to the ferries on the Marsamxett and Grand Harbour sides, the Valletta Waterfront and Fort St Elmo. The idea is to generate business activities around Valletta and Floriana and not just on a few main streets.

Cross-country bus service

To improve efficiency and offer a more holistic transport system, the island would still require two bus routes which would take commuters across the island from north to south and east to west, to cover some remote parts of the island as well.

Taxi service

Our small islands require an efficient taxi service. Apart from offering an efficient service, to tourists, it will go a long way to reduce the chaotic traffic so often seen during the rush hour.

We need more taxis to make them become part of our culture, as we find in other European cities. One should not have to be next to a taxi stand to take a taxi, but we should be able to call a taxi which should arrive within a few minutes.

Taxi operators need to understand that by increasing the number of taxis and by being efficient, their income would grow in the long term.

Practically everyone has a mobile phone now so it would be very easy to take a taxi by just calling an easily memorable telephone number. Malta is no bigger than an average European city, so a taxi service should be able to operate efficiently.

Ferries and water taxis

Malta has one of the most spectacular natural harbours in the world, but very few ferries and water taxis operate in Grand Harbour, or in that of Marsamxett.

We need to have a connection beneath Valletta or Floriana to link these water-based transport services that could be used by locals as a form of public transport as well by tourists for sightseeing without the need to pass through the open sea, outside the harbours. Such a link would create many opportunities for the reintroduction of the services of the boat known as *id-dghajsa tal-pass*.

From a building contractor's point of view, I would say that digging a tunnel in our type of limestone is like cutting a hole in a piece of cheese, and should take no longer than six months to complete. Studies and permits would take much longer to conclude than the physical work itself.

This connection would open up ways for other services such as for

land and sea buses, which are currently being manufactured in Malta for export. This would avoid waiting time for certain activities, during the changeover from the ferry to the land transport.

Minicabs

Way back in October 1989, I had published a master plan for Valletta.

This plan, to mention a few points, had included the need to introduce minivans/cabs for Valletta, the pedestrianisation of certain streets, the park and ride scheme, the ferry shuttles and circular-route bus services.

I am glad to see that after 17 years, some of these ideas have been implemented. The idea of minicabs for Valletta should be extended to other areas such as Floriana, Sliema, Paceville, and possibly Gozo.

These should also be strategically located in large public underground car parks within the interchange stations, thus making them easier to use.

Helicopter service

Gozo requires other forms of transport links. Apart from the Gozo Channel ferry services and the seaplane, Gozo should reintroduce a helicopter service from the airport as well as a new shuttle service from Cirkewwa.

Admittedly, such a service is not always commercially viable. However, when the whole economy of an island totally depends on transport links, as in Gozo's case, the EU surely has structural funds to enhance these services.

These funds would make the helicopter service commercially viable. Gozo is crying out for better sea and air links to strengthen its economy.

Our islands rely heavily on an efficient integrated transportation system which in turn leads to a greatly improved public transport services, less traffic, less waste of productive time, more economic activity, a cleaner environment, fewer traffic fatalities or serious accidents, less money leaving Malta, and naturally will be more in line with today's hectic life and standard of living.

We should move in line with modern, clean systems that would encourage people from all walks of life to use an efficient public transport system. Our country needs and deserves an urgent reform of its transportation.

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