

OPINION

Would the building of an underground railway be feasible?

the country's agenda



Censu Galea, Minister of Transport

The feasibility of any project depends on the amount of money spent to construct the particular project, the amount of money needed as a recurrent expenditure and the amount of turnover that would be expected through the actual daily running of the service provided.

With this in mind, I would try to limit my arguments, about the feasibility or otherwise of the underground railway, around these points. Other points that need to be taken into consideration are related to the question of whether such a railway will cover the whole island or only part of the island.

Whether the network is national or local makes a difference on the expense involved. However, it will also have an effect on the income that could possibly be obtained as a result.

The major expense involved in the provision of such a service is related to the actual construction of the railway. The first item that will have to be taken into consideration is the land involved. We all know what kind of value our land has acquired over the past years. One could not expect an underground railway to pass through the existing road network for the simple reason that railways tend to have the shortest cuts possible, and this implies huge expenses for the expropriation of the land involved.

Stations would have to be built at regular intervals, even though they can never be as close to each other as our bus stops are. This implies further expropriation, or buying of land.

The exorbitant prices that would have to be paid will

be one major consideration to be kept in mind. Besides that, the other major expense that would have to be taken into consideration is related to the actual laying of the railways themselves.

Will the railway lines be single file, double, or single file with lay-byes? Whichever system is used will have an effect on the expenses involved. It will also affect the services that could possibly be offered. This will, in turn, affect the turnover of the whole project.

One thing that may well improve with such a service will involve the punctuality of the service, which we know is very lacking in the current public transport system. However, I doubt whether the present service frequency could possibly be met.

In terms of income, this will depend on the number of passengers that could possibly be carried on such a railway. This number of passengers has a very natural capping. Assuming that the current public transport would continue to exist, that the number of motor vehicles will not drop drastically, and that our population, both local and visiting, will not increase dramatically, then the limits are quite low.

Will there be anyone prepared to pay high (perhaps very high fares by our standards) to use the railway? I very much doubt it.

I have to keep in mind one other point: What type of environmental expense would have to be taken care of while constructing such a railway? What type of environmental damage will have to be sustained once the railway starts operating?

Angelo Xuereb, Chairman, AX Holdings

The feasibility of an underground railway has to be viewed from various aspects, especially its effect on the welfare of our society and also its economic impact on the country. My straightforward answer would be: Yes, it is feasible due to various reasons.

Our country is small and yet we have a major traffic problem. This is mainly due to the inefficient public transport system. One can imagine the traffic chaos which would result in London, Paris, Rome, or any other major capital city in the absence of an efficient public transport system.

Our country has now reached a stage when the government must take a bold decision. We have to look into how it would be best to introduce a completely new public transportation system combining underground railway, elevated railway to certain key areas, a new public bus service and a new concept for taxis.

The subject is vast but I will keep my comments short. I had presented the first concept of an underground link between Gzira, Valletta and Cottonera during 1989, and later, in 1996, I published an improved proposal incorporating the public bus service. This third time, considering that major projects are coming on stream, it is worth considering extending the concept of the railway system further, as can be seen from the proposed

schematic plan (see page 12).

Many are those who have asked me, "but is it feasible?" The answer is simple. Are we considering the amount of liri being exported from our country in order to buy the over 12,000 vehicles which we are importing every year? Are we considering the amount of parts, oil and fuel required annually to use and maintain these vehicles?

Are we considering the millions of liri required for the construction of new traffic junctions, which are becoming a must, and the cost of maintaining our roads? Are we considering the "cost" of priceless lives of some 15 to 20 persons every year apart from the many who become permanently disabled?

Are we considering the pollution emitting from the exhausts and the damage to our health and wellbeing? We do not need sophisticated monitors to verify this. Just take a walk or a ride on a bicycle and you get the answer straightaway.

I have not worked out the figures in answer to the above questions. However, I am sure that the costs amount to a significant number of millions of liri every year (apart from the cost of lives which are unquantifiable). We can then

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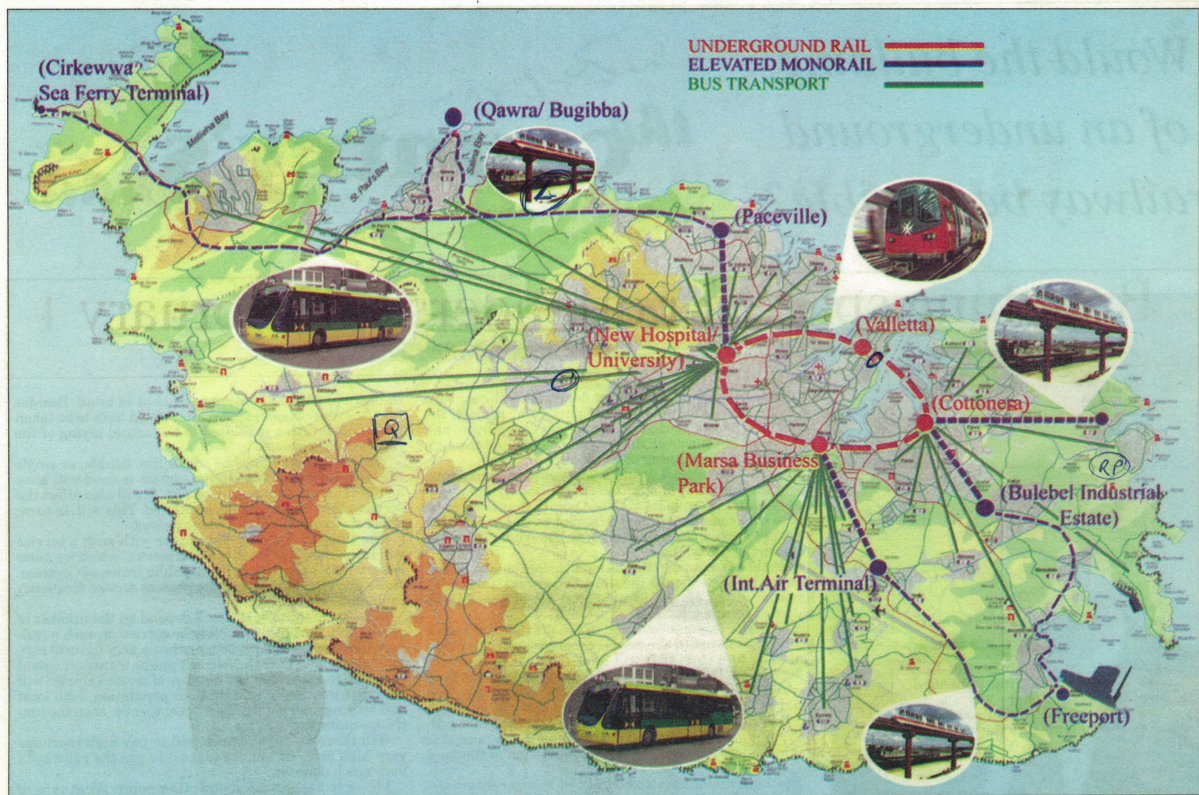
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OPINION



Underground system estimated at Lm100 million

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start to consider where we could have invested all these millions annually. I am pretty sure that, if we had constructed the railway system 10 years ago, by now we would have recouped a major part of the capital cost for the project.

We have to keep in mind that even with a railway system, we would still have to import vehicles, construct new traffic junctions, and maintain our roads, but definitely in smaller quantities and at huge savings.

The total capital cost for the underground system is estimated to be around Lm100 million, but in my opinion this has to be considered as another major infrastructural project and a return on all the investment costs cannot be expected within a couple of years. But from the operational point of view, this project is feasible and could also generate a profit.

I feel confident that by charging around 50 cents per person to cross over from Tal-Qroqq Hospital to the Cottonera within three minutes via a clean and effective transport system, many would opt to use the service and leave the use of their private cars for the weekend or special occasions.

A fast railway system would also contribute to levelling off the different lifestyles found in the north and the south of Malta. We also need to boost the economy in the south and we need to increase tourism to the Cottonera area, which I consider as having tremendous tourism attractions. Unfortunately, the distance and lack of parking facilities encourage tour operators to direct their tourists elsewhere.

The existing public transport system is simply a joke, with all the buses passing from common main roads leading to a bottleneck at Floriana and Valletta. It is also another farce if you need to cross from the north to the south and vice-versa.

As can be seen from the proposed plan, we have to create a holistic approach to be implemented in phases. In the first phase we should create a fast underground railway circling between four main stations on a 24-hour basis, namely Tal-Qroqq Hospital and university, Valletta, Cottonera, and the proposed large Marsa Business Park. In order to reduce the initial capital construction cost of the first phase, one could postpone the Marsa station to a later phase after the Business Park is completed.

The proposed stations would also include car parking areas, since some people could

find it convenient to leave their cars there for the day and use the underground system, consequently avoiding traffic in congested areas, especially Paceville and Valletta.

The second phase would consist of an elevated monorail system (no noise!) to other major areas including Paceville, the Malta International Airport, Bulebel industrial estate, Marsascala and to other locations.

The third phase would be to extend this elevated railway to Cirkewwa, Bugibba/Qawra and the Freeport areas, during the peak hours – naturally always avoiding passing through rural areas and hilly parts as much as possible. These elevated railways could pass over the central part of the main arterial roads.

Simultaneously the public bus service would concentrate in transporting its commuters from their towns or villages directly to the nearest station, without the need to pass through other towns, thus reducing traffic even further. These buses would go around the town or village in order to reduce waiting or walking time and be more effective.

During my term as a mayor, I had introduced a free circular bus service at Naxxar which had always been and still is very pop-

ular. If such a service were to be extended from Naxxar to Tal-Qroqq, it would only increase its current half-hour circular trip by a few minutes.

Concurrently, the taxi service also needs another overhaul. Taxi service could become very popular and effective if the fares were reduced while the number of taxis is increased – similar to taxi systems in major capital cities, but this is an entirely different subject.

In conclusion, the light monorail underground system is technically and economically feasible when considering all factors. Unfortunately we are a nation afraid of change. An awareness and understanding that change generates progress and progress generates wealth is needed.

Such a project could be handled as a joint venture between the public and private sectors, better known as PPP (public private partnership) and I feel confident that some form of assistance, either through soft loans or grants could be possible from the EU especially when considering the environmental impact.

A bold decision is needed if the idea is to be developed further and implemented. It is useless just talking about a problem. We have to talk about solutions and take action!

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