

Public transport reform takes shape

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A section of the proposed public transport network map which bus drivers yesterday likened to the London Underground. See full map at http://videos3.timesofmalta.com/tomcdn/20081205--large-Malta_Day_service.png.

The number of buses will be halved and hubs in different localities will take the bulk of buses away from the disorderly Valletta bus terminus, according to proposals to overhaul the public transport system.

The idea is that not all buses will start and end up in Valletta but will be shared among nodes to be set up in Paola, Marsa, Rabat, Mosta Technopark, Birkirkara, Mater Dei Hospital, Luxol and Bugibba.

The plans were presented by Manuel Delia, head of the Transport Ministry's secretariat, who explained the proposals in detail during a national conference on public transport reform held yesterday at the Eden Century's Cinema 16 in St Julians.

The conference brought to an end the first part of public consultation on the reform which has been going on since July.

One of the suggestions is to introduce a number of park-and-ride systems that will run for some 17 hours a day, as well as a night service running all week to various localities and not just to and from Paceville as is the situation at the moment.

There will be mainline routes running every 10 to 30 minutes, "cross-line" routes operating from the new nodes and "feeder-line" routes which will serve small communities and run every 30 minutes. Bus drivers will work eight-hour shifts including breaks and real-time information will be available for commuters.

The government is proposing that the present 508 buses be reduced to 270, with buses of various sizes and engines that are Euro III compliant, as well as electric and low-floor buses.

Mr Delia said the proposals were based on the complaints usually aired about the present system: No connection between neighbouring villages; a lack of proper information and of punctuality; inefficient bus ticketing; impolite drivers; and buses that are old, grimy and polluting.

The patronage of 65 million passenger trips a year in the 1970s dropped to 32 million in recent years. Moreover, the present system did not take into account the urban development that had taken place over the years.

At one point the meeting became rowdy when a slide with a few pictures of modern buses that will replace the old orange buses appeared on screen.

The bus drivers started shouting at the top of their voices that they were the only ones who knew what being a public transport operator really meant.

"You have no experience in public transport," a red-faced bus driver yelled, to loud applause from his colleagues.

One operator said being a bus driver was a difficult job and all his family had to pitch in. His 13-year-old son cleaned the inside of his father's bus after he finished his homework while his 20-year-old son washed the bus from the outside.

Transport Minister Austin Gatt explained that the reform's final aim was geared to benefit commuters and the country, since changes introduced in recent years have always excluded the participation of commuters.

He added that the proposals were "not cast in stone" and the government was prepared to fine-tune them.

Malta, he said, had a higher number of cars per capita than the EU and Japan, and just slightly lower than the US. He said 16 per cent of household spending was being directed towards transport.

An efficient public transport system was fundamental to the country's economic and social success, he insisted, adding that estimates showed that 71 per cent of trips in Malta were made with private cars.

On the subject of taxis, Dr Gatt said there were 200 licenced taxis in Malta and 50 in Gozo. The reform had to be carried out and EU rules applied - 2009 was the year of change to a truly cheaper alternative to the private car.

During question time, several drivers complained that the new network was based on the wrong data, taking into account the whole population, not the patronage.

They compared the design of the new routes to the London underground which, they insisted, did not make sense in the local scenario. One charged that the intention of the reform was to destroy their livelihood.

A representative of the National Commission for People with Disabilities spoke on the need for accessibility. Ironically, the woman had to speak from the very back of Cinema 16 because it was not accessible for wheelchair-bound people.

Closing the debate, Dr Gatt said the government understood drivers' concerns but the reform was necessary. He reiterated the promise that drivers who lost their jobs as a result of the reform would be duly compensated.

"Today's system does not work. Now it has to change and improve the quality of the service," he said.

Consultant David Simmons, from the Halcrow Group, also intervened with a presentation on the potential of introducing a tram service in Malta. He suggested the introduction of trams on two routes: between Valletta and Sliema, and one between Valletta, Birkirkara and Ta' Qali.

The 14 trams on these routes, he said, would operate between 6 a.m. and midnight with journeys of 15 minutes for the first route and 21 minutes for the second.

The investment in this service would need to be hefty at between €205 and €325 million to set it up and around €7.2 million a year for maintenance and operating costs.

However, Dr Gatt said that during the reform discussions, it emerged that a tram and metro system were not viable. To be feasible, the metro needed 50,000 passengers every hour, impossible for a country the size of Malta. A tram system would need a huge investment and 5,000 passengers a day to sustain.

Comments

Michael Collins (2 days, 22 hours ago)

An unsafe practice by bus drivers that I have observed is using a mobile phone while driving. Once when I rang the bell, the driver was apparently so engrossed on his mobile he drove past the stop and I had a long walk.

Nigel Lawrence (3 days, 11 hours ago)

Give the tramway an EXCLUSIVE lane, so it does NOT get stuck in the traffic jams, and watch the system take off!

Phil Gee (3 days, 15 hours ago)

There are proposals for altering bus services on Gozo too - more details can be found on the following webpage: <https://secure2.gov.mt/mitc/page.aspx?pageid=156&index=1>

Ray Jones (4 days, 6 hours ago)

No mention of improvements to bus services in Gozo then? It would be nice just to be able to return from Victoria in the evening - or even to be able to get a public hire taxi in the evening.

A Cutajar (4 days, 15 hours ago)

@ L Bonnici & all 'metro' sceptics:

Why say (with no background studies to back this claim) that having an underground system in Malta is not viable? Palma de Mallorca did just that and this is a Mediterranean ISLAND that we're talking about where its population and geological setup compare to Malta's. It is also a peripheral region compared to the rest of Spain. Neuchatel & Zurich (Switzerland) and Perugia are certainly not flat terrain nor 1 million+ cities! (<http://mic-ro.com/metro/metrocit.html?city=Perugia>).

And who said that Malta needs a metro system extended beyond Mosta/Victoria lines? A reviewed public transport network could complement metro routes. And one does not need to plan a complicated network: a line or two beneath the most urbanised localities would be given priority.

Trams are more complicated to fit within our irregularly designed road network. Besides tunnelling is already happening in Malta: just avoid to intersect Enemalta's power station links, water galleries & other utility structures. Priority could be given to links between the Airport terminal's and Marsa and perhaps in the medium/long term between Smartcity and Marsa, Marsa and Mosta and Marsa and Pembroke. Feasibility would be generated through the local population AND the 1.3 million+/yr tourists.

Wilfred L Camilleri (4 days, 20 hours ago)

An underground system is not realistic for Malta. Taking into account that the whole system would have to be dug out of rock the expense would never be recovered. Look at Toronto with a population of over three million. Toronto added another section to its subway system in 2002. It cost the city just under \$1 billion and took eight years to build. That is for five stations along 5.5 kilometres (3.4 miles) of subway. And mind you, most of that wasn't through bedrock as it would have to be in Malta. Where would Malta get the billions needed to build an underground? People are complaining about high taxes now. Imagine what would happen to taxes if the government had to borrow 1 billion euros to build a subway!!

Zap Branagan (4 days, 21 hours ago)

1. Does Minister Gatt use the public transport? Or any elected official?
2. In the summer heat, a 3-minute walk to the bus-stop can leave one sweating. Who in their right mind would prefer to do this, then take a non-air conditioned bus, and then still have to walk to get to their destination, over hopping in the car just outside the door?

3. As long as the bus ticket inspectors are part of the bus union, there will be no adherence to rules. Many times I've watched driver and inspector act as best pals, smoking together and having a laugh at the front of the bus, damaging passengers' health and endangering them with dangerous driving.

4. There is currently no easy way to complain about a driver's behaviour, although the ticket does contain the numbers from the reg-plate. But what is the driver's ID-number? Where is the freephone hotline complaint number? Why doesn't the ADT respond to complaints?

5. All bus numbers must be converted to high-visibility numbers. A lot of busses have impossible-to-read numbers, and they don't drive by slowly.

6. Why not display destination and via, e.g. Valletta via Birkikara.

Josef Grech (4 days, 21 hours ago)

During today's conference both Mr. Delia's explanation and the presentation given afterwards by both Harklow's representatives shows that in actual fact the failure the Ministry attributes to the present Public transport operators is in fact to be endorsed to the Government entity that regulates the operation. It is evident that where the ADT decided to go commercial, it was finally the commuter that suffered. Few people know that the Public Transport Association has got no right to place information on bus stops! Reason? Because their replacement was considered commercial, thus no place for schedule information but enough room for advertisements. Undoubtedly, the lack of information altogether with the terrible state of infrastructure when it comes to termini is not to be blamed on Public Transport Operators, as all our operation is ruled or better oppressed by a Government entity that repeatedly blames operators for the lack of improvement when in actual facts we are neither motivated nor given the adequate tools to improve our services.

John Azzopardi (4 days, 21 hours ago)

The demise of the light train and tram networks from Malta was a strategically wrong decision. Unfortunately, the infrastructure for the light rail network is now no longer available. Bus service alone will never be a good mass transport solution. Light rail or monorail are the answer

Philip Mamo (4 days, 23 hours ago)

I personally believe that investing in an efficient underground/metro service should be an alternative. For years we have heard the same outcry regarding transport reformation but without any positive results. I personally believe that this is the type of public transport reformation our country requires to adopt.

lewis sammut (4 days, 23 hours ago)

the bus drivers in malta should be sent to school and get educated first. and learn some manners, some they look scary to talk to they should not work long hours eight hour is long enough. it is hard to face the public longer than that

L. Bonnici (5 days ago)

An underground/metro will never be feasible in Malta... Apart from the high number of commuters which need to use it to make it feasible, one has to consider the topography and geology of the Maltese Islands. Whereas in London and Paris (and almost everywhere there is a metro system) land is relatively flat, in Malta the topography (shape of the land) is very complex... especially north of the Victoria Lines and around the Harbour areas which are some of the deepest natural harbours! Also to construct a metro system one needs to foot an enormous bill!!

The tramway is still in its study phase... but it looks more realistic to Malta. It doesn't include major changes in street infrastructure and is emission free... so that's another point in favour of it! The tramway is also a great means to help in the regeneration of run down areas...

Kevin Zammit (5 days, 1 hour ago)

Taking only peak week days $5,000 \times 5 \times 52 = 1.3$ million, thats 1/30 of present levels and 1/60th of 70s levels. Hardly an argument against trams!

Wilfred L Camilleri (5 days, 1 hour ago)

Buses and related equipment should not be owned and maintained by bus drivers. The buses should be owned by a transportation authority with sole responsibility for buying, maintaining and cleaning the buses, hiring and training drivers, and managing the transportation system. Having bus drivers responsible for owning and maintaining buses is utter nonsense. This whole plan will not work if bus drivers are also the owners. Bus drivers should be employees of a transportation authority and should receive a salary based on hours worked like any other employed person.

a mifsud (5 days, 2 hours ago)

it's great to read about the possible reforms. However there are 2 parts of this article which distract from the main story. One is the lady talking about more wheelchair accessibility, from the back of the cinema. How embarrassing must this have been, but also it highlights the lack of facilities for wheelchairs in many other areas in Malta. Second was the presentation by the gentleman from Halcrow regarding the possibility of a trams. But Minister Gatt said there was no way this was going to happen. So why was the poor man allowed to go through with his useless presentation? Was he told beforehand that his proposal was going to be rejected? Or was he just used by the government.....put him up there, let him make his fancy presentation, and then the government says no, because we're so strong and powerful?

M.Degiorgio (5 days, 3 hours ago)

@IGalea

Yes I do for the basic reason that investing is not spending, especially when the cost is a fragment of what it would cost compared to the millions announced for a tram or subway. Besides this, making more efficient a system is not only for the benefit of the drivers but the whole Maltese population, I think it is something obvious and I am surprised that you do not seem to understand this.

As for the "rape of more land" you mention, well the article's suggestion for a tram way is from Valletta to Sliema, Birkirkara and Ta'Qali, I do not think it will be obligatory to encroach on virgin land, this could be studied and done in an environmental friendly way.

lesley micallef (5 days, 3 hours ago)

Ensure that the new buses/new public transport systems have air condition installed and that the drivers ACTUALLY TURN IT ON then I will be first in the queue and leave my car at home when I commute!

J Mercieca (5 days, 4 hours ago)

Trams are definitely the way forward; busways can be used elsewhere on the network to ease the movement of buses, but on the routes mentioned, there should be more than enough traffic to support a tram, which are more efficient in the longer term than having a lot of buses (lower running costs, and better speeds).

wrt the metro/underground - maybe its a bit too early; with such a rate of car ownership. it will not attract enough demand in the next generation or so, to a population group so used to having a car. However, I do see it working at a future date, especially on a circular route though the main towns outside Valletta (i.e. Mosta, Birkirkara, Qormi, Paola and the Three cities), connecting tramways around a network centered on the capital.

Igalea (5 days, 4 hours ago)

M.Degiorgio - So do you expect the Maltese citizens to approve the spending of God only knows how many millions and continue to rape the environment by destroying more land to make BUS WAYS for the bus owners to enjoy and benefit from?

Tell it to the marines degiorgio.

Matthew Borg ardona (5 days, 5 hours ago)

@ The Transport Ministry's secretariat

Could someone at the transport ministry read what M.Degiorgio has written below? It seems like a plausible and sensible alternative to trams on the two proposed tramway routes.

Joseph Micallef (5 days, 5 hours ago)

The French town of Rennes has population of 210,000 i.e half that of Malta , but still has a metro which handles a daily ridership of 110,000 (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rennes_Metro). So why is it not feasible for Malta?

For the system to be effective it must be able to transport large numbers of people rapidly. I would expect this to mean that the main lines would have to service the stages every 3 minutes during rush hour and the total waiting time when changing lines should not exceed 10 minutes.

adrian galea (5 days, 5 hours ago)

Only the bus drivers know anything about public transport...right, i got it now why it is still so shambolic.

Of course routes need to be tailored to where the population is rather than where the current patronage is. Its the only way to maximise your market and and bring in new patronage.

These bus drivers, and they are not representative of all bus drivers, should realise that shouting, hurling abuse and generally behaviing like a prat only shows them up rather than wins over any support.

I have one suggestion for them. If they really want to safeguard their livelihood..then listen to the customer and treat them properly.

D.Borg (5 days, 5 hours ago)

Euro 3 compliant is not exactly the latest technology with Euro 5 being adopted in the EU in the coming months...

M.Degiorgio (5 days, 6 hours ago)

One answer to Metro subways or Tramways are BUS WAYS! Bus ways are exactly the same as Tramways, specially built road lanes instead of rails, with extra long buses instead of trams, physically inaccessible to cars except where crossings are necessary (They are not to be compared or confused with bus lanes), However, they are much much cheaper to build and run. Examples of this can be found in Nantes north west of France. In this wonderful city of Nantes where Tramways are very highly considered and used, Bus ways have now taken over some areas in the south of the city due to a realistic much cheaper building and running cost. At the time this was decided on a sort of regretted second choice in comparison to a Tramway. Today it has proved that it was a very pertinent choice and shows good management, the routes are continuously and heavily used and appreciated by the people, a complete and unexpected success. Maybe something for the government to look into!

J Azzopardi (5 days, 6 hours ago)

The plans seem to be a good start. However, will there be a direct service between the different hubs? One without stops in between, so that people traversing through different zones will have less travel time.

Carmelo Aquilina (5 days, 6 hours ago)

If the bus drivers are the only ones who know about public transport then why is the service so shoddy and they tolerate colleagues who behave so unprofessionally ?

philip pace (5 days, 6 hours ago)

Though I don't normally agree with Dr.Gatt attitude regarding the phrase 'taking the bull by the horns', I have to agree with the reported proposals.

I would like to know from where one can find a copy of these proposed reforms as it would be very beneficial for **THOSE WHO USE THE PUBLIC TO KNOW EXACTLY THESE REFORMS** and also I would strongly suggest to the same Minister to send these reforms to every household in Malta and Gozo and each person can send in his views/opinion/proposal up till to well defined time frame. Say one/two months.

It is only then that the public would know what is really happening.

The Minister must introduce a board/committee/group made up from people who use the Public Buses constantly as they can monitor the progress of the new reform.

It is no use appointing persons who a) Do not use the Public Transport and b) Sit and plan in their comfortable offices and have no idea on how the public transport works.

It is how the English say 'horses for the courses'!

If the Minister needs my help, I can give it as I have been using this service all of my life!

Gordon J Grech (5 days, 6 hours ago)

Where is Gozo? Here public transport is nearly non-existent. The same operators have to do the routes, tourist privates, other privates and school transport.

L. Bonnici (5 days, 6 hours ago)

I was at this conference yesterday morning and was really disgusted by the behaviour of all bus drivers. They came into the conference to stop and inhibit reform discussion....

This reform is really needed. You wouldn't see any bus driver with his shirt open or with bad manners anywhere in the UK (even in the remotest of places)! Why can't we have the same service as abroad? I know we might have to pay more as public transport users, but I'm willing to pay that extra bit for a faster, safer and better trip.

However, I also believe that unless the government does something to get people from behind their driver's seat and puts them into busses, the new reform will never take place. Accidentally this is what the government tried to do during the last budget. Singapore had the same measures we tried to introduce for decades now, but since we're living in a banana republic voters count more than measures taken... I only hope the government has the guts to move on with the reform and not give in to the pressure defending the status-quo....

Victor Fiorini (5 days, 7 hours ago)

"The bus drivers started shouting at the top of their voices that they were the only ones who knew what being a public transport operator really meant."

May I add that commuters are the only ones who know how crappy public transport is at the moment!
