ITEM 7 – RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD - NEW GENERATION TRANSPORT


COUNCILLOR WAKEFIELD: Can I move the minutes in terms of the notice and reserve my right to speak to the end. Thank you, Lord Mayor.

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Harper.

COUNCILLOR G HARPER: I formally second, Lord Mayor.

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Bentley.

COUNCILLOR J BENTLEY: Thank you, Lord Mayor. I would like to oppose the recommendation made in this report and in opposing the motion I do want to make it clear that I am not opposed to a new generation transport system. I am in favour of a modern, emission free, congestion busting public transport system for Leeds. I understand how we have got where we have got. Over the last 20 to 30 years when it comes to public transport we have justifiably seen ourselves as being overlooked by successive Governments in favour of other major cities and our economy and growth prospects were suffering. When we could not get the Supertram, we were offered the bus and we understandably jumped on it.

Contrary to a lot of the information that has been put out, the Department for Transport did not specify or insist on a trolleybus, merely an appropriate bus-based system. It was the proposers, Metro and Leeds City Council, who have locked themselves into a trolleybus system.

There are many aspects of the scheme that we could agree with. I am not convinced, however, that the spur up to Holt Park is needed or wanted and there are many road closures which I think are unnecessary. However, I accept that some of those issues are still negotiable.

There are two main sticking points. They are the environmental impact and the choice of technology and these are two sides of the same coin. If we choose the right technology we can reduce the environmental impact.

The route of the scheme is going to be cluttered with unsightly overhead wires, with poles and gantries to support them, and in order to achieve this clutter, over 400 mature trees are going to be cut down with all the consequences that entails on Streetscene, Public Health, local amenity, wildlife, etc. If we had a bus technology that did away with the need for overhead wires it would reduce the impact on the environment significantly and, despite what Metro says, that technology is available; hybrid buses, electric buses, hydrogen cell buses, all running on public transport systems across the country as we speak.
Why commit ourselves for years and years to come to an outdated technology the implementation of which is going to seriously damage our environment for generations?

I am a great admirer of the work of Councillor Wakefield and our Chief Executive Tom Riordan on the Commission for the Future of Local Government and in that report they talk about a great Liberal concept of civic enterprise. In this city we have a modern bus manufacturer on our doorstep, we have respected academics in transport studies and engineering in our universities and we have a forward looking, progressive Council. Why do we not harness the power of those resources and commit that we will ensure that Leeds has the leading edge wireless bus technology that is worthy of our great city? That indeed would be civic enterprise. Thank you, Lord Mayor. (Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Richard Lewis.

COUNCILLOR R LEWIS: Thank you, Lord Mayor. I want to address Councillor Bentley’s points in total but I was a bit surprised when I attended a meeting in this building with mainly representatives of the Headingley community where we had this discussion about NGT, that we had a former transport operator here who used to run wagons in the city and he took your approach of saying we should adopt technology that has not been proven, does not exist yet or exists in a prototype version. I thought well, Stuart, I am sure that when you used to buy wagons for your firm you did not buy technology that does not really exist and nobody has tried out because that is very, very dangerous.

I was talking to one expert on trams – and there are a lot of tram fanatics out there – and one thing he said was that actually over 60 years of running trams in Leeds they had not quite got some of that technology right, so in 60 years of not quite getting some of the bits right, so you think that within a couple of years we will be able to roll out electric buses that will run on one of the heaviest, hardest routes in the city. You still do not address the whole issue of how do you segregate traffic, which is actually a huge part of this scheme. I will let my colleagues come back to that.

The key thing to this actual motion is actually regeneration is what NGT can bring to this city. If you look at where the route runs, it runs through New Dock to the Tetley’s site, out to South Leeds. There is huge potential there for bringing jobs and impetus to the economy. It also runs out on Headingley Lane out to what I have described in some ways as the deprived communities out of the top of the line where they need access to jobs. There is a huge amount of regeneration potential in this scheme that people tend to forget about when they are talking about the down sides.

The other big issue is obviously congestion. Congestion is a huge issue for the city and it is a particularly big issue day in, day out on Headingley Lane. We have traffic moving at six miles per hour on average at peak time on Headingley Lane. We must do something about this. If we take Jonathan’s approach we will do nothing. It is not about doing nothing for six months or two years, it is about doing nothing for a decade, or perhaps two decades.
It is often easy to take that kind of way out, listening to the very vociferous people who say “No, no, no”, to everything. Sometimes in this place you have got to have a big idea and you have got to have a bit of vision and that is what sometimes is lacking in some of our colleagues.

The other thing that it brings is the huge benefit, this is the start of a network. I am sure people will get up later and talk about how Leeds has slipped behind. Even Liz Green this morning was talking about how Leeds has slipped behind other cities in its transport network. We have to make a start and it is not just about Belle Isle, it is not just about Holt Park – it is about the whole city and it is about the whole of West Yorkshire. Thank you, Lord Mayor. (Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Leadley.

COUNCILLOR LEADLEY: My Lord Mayor, this is an important matter on which there must be a free vote across all parties. I recall being in a minority of one in opposition to Supertram, which was the parent of NGT. That grew to two, then to five or six or eight. Eventually Supertram fell but not before it had wasted about £40m of public money, which should have been spent far more wisely either within the public transport field or elsewhere.

In reality before Supertram failed in 2005 opposition amongst Councillors was more widespread than it appeared to be and other unbelievers were prevailed upon to maintain a façade of solidarity, sometimes inaccurately described as all party support.

Morley Borough Independents are by no means against public investment, even if it is of little or no benefit to Morley, so long as it is of real public benefit somewhere. In various statements, including letters and articles in newspapers, I supported Kirkstall Forge and Appleby Bridge Railway Stations and the new southern entrance to Leeds Railway Station, all of which now have funding. We supported the Leeds Arena and the City Centre Flood Defence Project, because they promised a worthwhile return on public investment.

We will object to any investment which appears to be unwise and especially to anything which carries the risk of us being caught in a Barnsley trap in which we would have to pay for someone else’s white elephant.

Judging by the recent lively debate in the YEP, NGT seems to have few real world friends. Opposition varies from manic transport anoraks who want trams, underground railways, overground railways and so on, to more normal folk who simply believe that building it would create a lot of upset and incur a lot of expense for little or no benefit.

Last week’s City Plans Panel all day session showed that many of the questions surrounding the project simply have not been answered. The supporting document provided by the trolleybus’s promoters had many pages marked “To be updated” or simply left completely blank because no worthwhile information lay to hand. It is claimed that NGT will create jobs but there is an unresolved problem on Hunslet Road at Pym Street affecting the Hunslet Fisheries chip shop and the industrial estate behind it.
Access would become so restricted because of junction closures made for the benefit of NGT that long established businesses are likely to have to close or to relocate. Straightforward solutions suggested by owners and tenants of various properties seem to have been rejected by NGT”s promoters in a rather intransigent manner. Problems like this should have been resolved before now. Hunslet Road was part of the original South Leeds Supertram route over 20 years ago.

Leeds City Council and Metro have pledged millions which they do not have in agreeing to underwrite the risks of NGT, particularly to cover overspends. How can organisations which fundamentally have no money and whose budgets are to be reduced further agree to this? Housing, Education, Social Care and Public Health must have priority over a project which will have been overtaken by rapidly advancing technology in ordinary buses long before it can be open to passengers. Thank you, Lord Mayor. (Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Finnigan.

COUNCILLOR FINNIGAN: After that eloquent presentation I have barely anything left to say, but that has never stopped me saying it anyway.

We do believe that Supertram was a fundamental waste of money and that we are approaching with NGT a similar money pit where we go in with the best intentions but we end up pushing lots and lots of cash down a large and deep pit and getting very little back. Fundamentally, we need a rethink of how public transport works. We have said this consistently over the years, that what is required is a re-regulation of the buses. Subsequent Governments have failed to actually grasp that particular nettle. If you do want public transport to start playing a bigger role, if you do want to try and deal with congestion then you need to make sure that the buses run in a regulated way.

The only place where the bus uptake is increasing is down in London; they have got a regulated bus system. We think that is what is required at this particular point. It does not need new technology, new ideas, a money pit which means that ultimately we pay a lot of money which could go on other things, whether that is affordable housing or whatever, wasting all of that money instead of focusing on an easier and better and more appropriate way to deal with these problems. Thank you, Lord Mayor. (Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Blackburn.

COUNCILLOR D BLACKBURN: Thank you, Lord Mayor. Fifteen years ago when I first got elected to Council we had a debate like this, and it sounded very much like this. Names change but basically the issues are the same. What we are now dealing with is the son of Supertram, NGT.

Over the years, while my Party has supported the principle of having a tram route, or even the principle of some kind of sustainable trolleybus system, we have always argued that the Council and Metro have got the route wrong. In fact, in my view if we had not continued with this obsession of the A660 and instead had gone on the Leeds West system – and I do know Members on that side who actually agree with me...
COUNCILLOR J McKENNA: It will come to West Leeds, so don’t worry.

COUNCILLOR D BLACKBURN: Not in my lifetime – connected with the south of the city, we would be enjoying the use of a tram system like Manchester today and not talking about the potential of a trolleybus.

The crux of the problem that my Party and I have had all along is that the route at the centre of Headingley is not sustainable, will not deliver and is a poor use of resources, worries that have been borne out by advice I have received from two internationally regarded experts in the field of public transport who happen to be members of my Party. You recall that on 15 July 2009 I moved an amendment to a motion on the NGT calling for a 21st Century public transport system for the whole of Leeds. That made reference to the principle of a sustainable trolleybus system. That amendment was accepted and received unanimous support.

I am afraid today, almost four years later, I do not think we are going to have that same unanimity. The fact is that what is on offer is not sustainable and does not deal with the problems that the majority of the city has with a third rate public transport system. Some may say “Ah, yes, we are pursuing a Quality Bus contract”, something I entirely support but where are the guarantees that this is going to happen? The fact is when we talk about the A660 section we are talking about proposals that seem to be unloved by the residents on the route and are looked on as being a plain (inaudible) by those of us who live in areas dogged with an unregulated duopoly of public transport.

In saying that, we are very supportive of the southern section of the route and feel that if this was to fall because of the Council’s and Metro’s obsession with running something through Headingley, it would be sad, but we think that the negatives resulting from the northern half of the route outweigh the undoubted positives of the southern route.

I would love to stand here and speak in support of a system that was beneficial, modern but on the current route I cannot do that. As most of you will know in my previous time as Leader of the Green Group...

THE LORD MAYOR: David, your three minutes passed very quickly – can you sum up very quickly?

COUNCILLOR D BLACKBURN: ...I went on a number of visits to London on all party delegations and we met with Alistair Darling down at Metro. I personally am willing to do this again but I cannot support the motion. (Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor James Lewis.

COUNCILLOR J LEWIS: Thank you, Lord Mayor. I think Councillor Blackburn’s timing on that speech resembled some of the buses that operate in Leeds by the number of minutes he came over when he should have done.
I think in supporting the motion and supporting moving forward the New Generation Transport, I find myself, although a number of Members have spoken very much against the scheme, a lot of the contents of their speech they mentioned things that I fully agree with. I fully agree with sorting the buses out, I fully agree with looking at working with all modern manufacturers. I have been to meet Optare myself about how we can get more advanced and cleaner and greener technology in the 1,200 buses that run round West Yorkshire. I think that is absolutely crucial. I think we need to look very, very carefully at how we integrate – not just saying we have got a line of NGT which we are proposing and that is the only transport scheme we are going to do in Leeds and once we have got that in that will be great, we are sorted for the next 20 years. I think it would be a great mistake to do that and I think we need to look at the broader picture about it.

What I do think is really important to remember, though, in supporting NGT, is actually what we are talking about here. We are talking about a scheme that has park and ride – again something that many Members of this Council have brought up in the past. We are talking about a scheme that includes segregating public transport out of the traffic so there are reliable and swifter journey times – again, something I know many Members of Council have supported. It involves modifying junctions to let the traffic flow freely, and that is all traffic – cyclists, cars, public transport, pedestrians; again, something I know Members think. We are talking about using transport investment to provide access to employment and access to education opportunities. We know those are going to change in Leeds over the next 20 years. That is something that NGT does, that is something this Council would do.

All things this Council have supported, and I do raise a wry smile when I hear some of the voices around the Council Chamber. David was honest, as he always is. He supported, when he was part of the administration, this scheme. Now he is in Opposition he has chosen to take the more reckless view of opposing it. This is not a scheme that has floated down from somewhere; it is a scheme that has been to this Council Chamber time and time again and received support from around the Council Chamber. I think the most important thing about this scheme is we have a scheme where 20% of bus passengers in Leeds at the moment will be on modern, clean, reliable and publicly owned public transport, something that even re-regulation of the buses would not achieve. The bus companies would still make a lot of money out of re-regulated buses, even though they do it in a different way.

People talk about a money pit without substantiating that. What we have got is a system that will own as a city and we will put money back into the city once we have invested in it. Of course we have got more to do, of course, we need to look at more extensions, of course we need to look where we go yet but we have to start somewhere. I think we have shown this political administration is prepared to show leadership, prepared to show we are going to get things done, prepared to show that we are going to end this 20, 30, 40 years of talking about investing in public transport and I move that we support New Generation Transport and support the motion. (Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Carter.
COUNCILLOR A CARTER: Thank you, my Lord Mayor. Listening to what has been said so far I cannot help but think there is an element of political expediency in what we have been listening to. The only people who have been consistent in their arguments against some form of rapid transit system over the years are the Morley Boroughs. However, I have yet to hear them offer an alternative to their opposition and it is the easiest thing in the world to say it is a waste of money and we should have something else if you do not actually volunteer what that something else might be. Actually to sit there and to say a Quality Bus contract will solve it all, I am afraid you are living in cloud cuckoo land.

Let us be very clear about this, and I made it very clear at the Executive Board, this is not my preferred system of a rapid transit system for this city. My preferred system was the Supertram project that we pursued over 20-odd years with I do not know how many Governments and how many different Ministers - Mick Lyons will probably tell you. That technology was tried, proven and tested and other cities in this country and in Europe are now busily extending that system.

To be frank about it, the A660 was always going to be a problem and it is on record going back now for certainly the 30 years of this debate that on this side we have always said the A660 was a problem. Indeed, we suggested the route going west, but the simple fact of the matter is we are now where we are and I am sorry if we go back to the Government with something else, we are going back for another 20-odd years delay and the decision we have to make here is how we properly recognise the real concerns of the residents on the A660 and do as much as we can to solve those issues. I am sorry here, James and Richard, we have not done anywhere near enough.

At the end of the day this is the system we have got. If we do not want it, we will wait another 30 years for another solution and the city cannot wait that long. (Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Anderson.

COUNCILLOR ANDERSON: Lord Mayor I have, as everybody I think knows, problems with this. I attended Plans Panel the other day and to say that the Planning Department – because having spoken to some Planning Officers afterwards – were surprised at what they heard that day is an understatement. The Holt Park leg going around the doctor’s surgery and around the Kids Academy just does not make sense. The Weetwood Lane/Otley Road junction was news to Planning Department, they did not even know that that was coming forward and the argument over whose fault, whether it was Highways who were at fault or whether somebody else was at fault was just unseemly.

The junction of Otley Road and Otley Old Road is just an accident waiting to happen unless Highways Officer rethink it. The Lawnswood roundabout again is an accident and a problem waiting to happen. No thought has been given as to what the impact is going to be on new housing that is going to be built up along the A660 corridor. There is going to be potential reductions in bus services and no-one has yet come forward with any alternative to me as to how we can try and improve that particular point.
There are too many unknowns – the technology, officers cannot tell us at this stage what technology they are actually going to be using, so that is why you do get people like me saying what about hybrid, what about electric, what about hydrogen cell.

The business case. When I ask for clarity on the business case I keep being told, “It is just finalised and we will get it to you whenever it is concluded, Councillor Anderson.” When I ask what passenger number is all of this based on, they cannot tell me exactly what is happening their either. What is the pricing mechanism going to be? They cannot tell me that either.

There are community concerns all the way down the route, so that is why I am concerned. The consultation has been poor – not in terms of the number of meetings that have taken place, can I make that clear. I am not complaining about the number of meetings that have taken place. What I am complaining about is the quality of that consultation and the quality of the literature.

I do think that there will be increased car congestion because someone has got to lose out as a result of this. If you are putting something else down the corridor, something has to give and it is not going to be the cyclists, it is not going to be the buses so it can only be problems with car congestion.

The consultation is still going on, we have got meetings in my ward next week, so how come we are making this decision today? Would it not have been better to complete one before the other?

Probably more important to me, the Environmental Impact Assessment. I have not seen that – I have asked for it but nobody can actually give it to me.

Finally, we do need to sell the other complementary measures that are being introduced in the public transport network as well. They are not being sold alongside it so that people can see what is happening and I think that falls on – if anybody wants to accept responsibility, fine, I am not going to start going in and naming names but I do think we need to start selling the benefits of the wider public sector improvements that are going to be coming along. Thank you, Lord Mayor. (Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR: Councillor Wakefield to sum up.

COUNCILLOR WAKEFIELD: Thank you, Lord Mayor. I have to disagree a little bit with Councillor Anderson on consultation because last week I think Planning had an eight hour meeting over the NGT and I want to thank colleagues for the time spent, I think six hours on north-west and two hours on the south in really opening up discussions and taking on concerns.

I would also like to thank people like Richard Lewis and James Lewis who have been key Members of twelve meetings so far out in the community listening to people’s concern. In actual fact I think they have made a difference and improving things. Barry, this thing comes back again, consultation and, if you remember, it actually goes to public inquiry, so the consultation is still not complete.
I have never known any other issue that has taken so much time in terms of people listening to a big scheme like this. Frankly, I think the credibility of this Council is here before us. For over 20 years all major parties have argued passionately about public investment – all major party Leaders, as Councillor Carter said, have been down to successive Governments, successive Ministers to argue for investment. Sometimes I think people would be happy if we said we do not want it. What that would make us is the laughing stock of Europe and that is why many cities are really ahead of us in public transport.

In fact, I am sorry that Councillor Ryk Downes has been muzzled on this debate, because he has been one of the leaders of this and very good too. I will quote you – I am told you are not talking seriously, Ryk, on this. As you said, “Comprehensive research accepted by the Department of Transport shows the NGT trolleybus network is expected up to 4,000 new jobs and 160m users” and you passionately argued for that.

Richard is absolutely right, this is a regeneration scheme and, yes, there are problems with the technology and other things but we should not forget it will have a major impact. Personally I know many of us would like to see it in East Leeds because that would have made a massive impact; Aire Valley, that would have had a massive impact; West Leeds, all of them would have major impact.

I think, colleagues, it really is about saying this is a start, let’s get on with it, let’s show a bit of vision, let’s show a bit of ambition to tackle congestion, to tackle road safety which is notorious now, Barry, and to tackle something that we are all desperate to do and that is improve our economic performance in this city alone to create jobs and to make sure that we get investment.

Yes, a long way to go but I really think we have to keep hold tight for the credibility of this Council and the credibility of our leadership. Thank you, Lord Mayor. (Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR: I would like to call for the NGT vote.

COUNCILLOR G HARPER: I call for a recorded vote, please.

COUNCILLOR NASH: I second, my Lord Mayor.

(A recorded vote was held)

THE LORD MAYOR: We have the result. There are 92 Members present, the “Yes” vote is 68, five people abstained and those against 19. The recommendation is CARRIED.