

Midland Metro: The next phase



OPINION: LET THERE BE LIGHT

The Strategic Rail Authority has often talked about light rail as being part of the answer to the problems being experienced in the Midlands. To many, the idea of letting the trams take the pressure off the heavy rail network appears to be quite sound. It's probably one of the reasons that Centro, the West Midlands Passenger Transport Executive, is pressing ahead with the next phase of its Metro network. But, as Peter Plisner reports, it's far from certain that it will ever be delivered in full



PETER PLISNER

THE IDEA OF REPLACING HEAVY RAIL SERVICES WITH LIGHT rail isn't new. Manchester did it some time ago, and it proved to be quite successful. There the trams replaced trains on existing lines. Following on from the experience in the north-west, the SRA's Strategic Plan suggested that it could be tried out elsewhere. In the West Midlands the planners said there were 'opportunities in the region for developing an integrated system of heavy and light rail.' The SRA committed itself to work closely with PTE's, adding: 'Light rail schemes that are more closely integrated with heavy rail development also offer the opportunity to release capacity on the national network.'

The SRA is already working closely with Centro on matters relating to heavy rail development. Last month the two organisations announced a joint study into capacity issues in the West Midlands. The study, called the 'West Midlands Regional Planning Assessment', will involve national and regional transport officials, who will attempt to agree on the

best way forward for the region's ailing railways. Some observers are viewing the latest piece of research as another stalling exercise, to delay further the inevitable conclusion that the area is badly in need of investment. Once again, consultants will be asked to study longer-term rail projects, including proposals for four-tracking between Coventry and Birmingham and controversial plans for a tunnel and new platforms beneath New Street Station. Perhaps more importantly, researchers are also being asked to look at whether the replacement of trains with light rail Metro-type services could take pressure off New Street.

With the SRA now supporting the idea of LRT, particularly in areas where there is congestion on the rail network, Centro has wasted no time in rolling out its plans for further Metro lines right across the West Midlands conurbation. The two extensions to Line One, through Birmingham and to Merry Hill, now known as Phase One, are already subject to Transport and Works Act orders. A public inquiry was



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building and out to Birmingham International Airport. The 'Five W's Route' would run from Wolverhampton, passing through Wednesfield, Willenhall and Walsall before linking up with the existing Line One at Wednesbury. Two smaller routes are being planned to serve the growing Eastside area of Birmingham and a spur to Bartley Green and Quinton.

According to Centro, the identification of the latest clutch of routes follows an initial consultation and a lengthy engineering feasibility study. Environmental and urban design implications are also being examined. However, even before the consultation started, some of the plans are being called into question. The Government has described the plans as unrealistic and one local authority has expressed its concern. Having supported the expansion of the Metro thus far, Birmingham City Council now appears to be having second thoughts about handing its already-busy streets over to the trams. It has requested a full investigation into the impact of street running. Councillors have also asked for research to be carried out to see if the trams can be run in tunnels under the city centre. A recent council report stated: 'It will be difficult to provide surface tramway routes in some parts of the city centre without compromising other transport and environmental requirements, and therefore the possibility of tunnelling is now being looked at.'

While the idea of tunnelling might seem perfectly justified, the requirement now placed on the project could ultimately kill off some of the plans. Tunnelling is much more expensive than running at street level. It also offers less opportunity for stopping to pick up passengers. This would obviously affect the viability of some of the planned routes. Centro is adamant that the current proposals provide value for money, with the required cost benefit ratio of 1:1. However, this is based on street running, not tunnelling under Birmingham. Add that to the equation, and planners might have to go back to the drawing board.

It's all rather worrying for Metro promoters, who appear to have been taken by surprised by the latest developments. However, it's not all bad news. The Government has committed to spending an extra £1 billion in the West Midlands over the next seven years. If difficulties over the next phase of the Metro can be sorted out, that money will come in very handy!

expected to start last this month. However, more recently, Centro has embarked on a major consultation exercise for what is being called Phase Two. It consists of a whole network of lines stretching from Birmingham city centre through areas earmarked for regeneration and along well used commuter corridors all over the city. A further extension from Wolverhampton to Walsall is planned.

Phase Two consists of five new Metro routes valued at almost nine hundred million pounds. The 'Varsity Route' would run from Great Barr to Birmingham city centre. Previous plans to run this line through the city centre and then out to south Birmingham appear to have been dropped for the time being. The second route would run past the new distinctive Selfridges

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