

Anthony Doesburg: Personal transit fans see savings down the line

By Anthony Doesburg

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Backers say innovative system would be cheaper than rail for Auckland.



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An artist's impression of the Mister system, one version of personal rapid transit. Photo / Mark Thomas, Right Hemisphere

Auckland's new mayor has backers of an alternative public transport system hopeful of getting a hearing.

According to Will Wilson, an advocate of personal rapid transit (PRT), Len Brown's push for new rail lines to the airport, North Shore and in the central city is a great opportunity.

Even more so is Prime Minister John Key's quick hosing down of the idea that the Government would write a cheque for Brown's trains.

If that sounds contradictory, it's not to Wilson, an Auckland investment adviser to iwi. If money's not forthcoming for rail, he says, that increases the chances of the much-cheaper PRT getting a look in.

"We need a PRT study now," says Wilson, before cash is thrown at rail services. PRT studies have been done elsewhere, just not in New Zealand.

PRT systems come in various flavours – the trouble being that most exist only on paper. The basic idea is of small, driverless vehicles that carry as few as five or up to 20 people along or suspended from a track.

The electrically-driven cars or pods run on demand and the lightweight tracks can be built above existing roadways and attached to existing structures for a fraction of the cost of road or rail.

Ed Anderson, a retired professor of engineering in Minneapolis, has been pushing PRT for 40 years. In all that time, just one example has been built, for shuttling students around West Virginia University in Morgantown, which it has been doing reliably – 16,000 rides a day – since 1975.

"People ask me, if it's such a good idea, why has it taken so long," says Anderson, 83, who runs PRT International, to whom Wilson consults. Anderson says a better question is how has PRT stayed alive. "The Nixon White House was very interested in PRT," Anderson says, which was a spur for the Morgantown project. But he says by the mid-1970s US federal interest had been killed off by rail company lobbying.

"We don't have money to bribe officials and the only thing we can argue is that it's a good idea." The West Virginia system is finally about to get company, with London's Heathrow Airport in final testing of a system. But another long-planned PRT project, at the futuristic Abu Dhabi city Masdar, has reportedly been scaled back, to make way for electric cars.

PRT's perennial problem is that no one wants to be the guinea pig. Wilson has done the rounds of local body and central government politicians before, putting the case for PRT to former North Shore mayor

George Wood – a newly-elected Auckland councillor – and former Prime Minister Helen Clark.

"Everybody said 'great idea', but nobody wanted to be first," Wilson says. He suspects iwi would take the same view.

That's despite claims that a PRT system could be built for about a twentieth of rail's cost, or a quarter of the price of light rail, for the same passenger capacity.

Leigh Auton, chief executive of Manukau City, who starts a consulting career in just over a week when the Auckland Super City becomes a reality, cautions on costings, saying detailed business plans are essential. And, having been in the thick of public transport planning for more than a decade, Auton reminds PRT enthusiasts Auckland is fully committed to rail.

"Within that context there's no reason why the city wouldn't look at other options, – but not as a substitute for heavy rail."

Auton also warns that the look of an aerial PRT system would not go down well with Aucklanders. "I'd put a hundred bucks on the table that there'd be one hell of a reaction."

None of which will deter PRT's backers. A couple of months ago in this column, when Polish engineer and former Auckland resident Ollie Mikosza offered the city royalty-free rights to use his Mister PRT design, readers rallied to the cause.

Mark Thomas, whose Auckland company Right Hemisphere develops visualisation software, volunteered to create high-quality images of the Mister system for free. The cityscape of tracks and pods Thomas has produced, if brought to life, suggest Auton's \$100 may not be safe.

Other readers expressed the hope that Mister would be given a chance.

Gaia Mikosza, Auckland-based Mister business development manager, and Ollie's daughter, says the system has already withstood – on paper, at least – the scrutiny of European Union officials, who granted the venture €6 million. She says Auckland officials owe it to ratepayers to at least consider PRT.

In the US, Ed Anderson is feeling more optimistic than ever about PRT's prospects, with recent positive noises coming from transport officials in New York and San Jose, where he will be attending a pod car conference next week. He sends this message to Auckland's new mayor: "He needs to take a serious look at PRT."

Rail Savings

Personal rapid transit advocates believe their alternative would cost a fraction of the amounts suggested for Auckland mayor Len Brown's big three rail projects:

- * Central city tunnel. Forecast cost: \$1–\$1.5 billion.
- * City-airport link: \$471 million – \$1.45 billion.
- * City-Albany line (including cross-harbour tunnel): \$1.6–\$1.8 billion, potentially much more.

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