
Riders question logic of trolley buses

By Magda Ibrahim

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Are environmental benefits negated by malfunctions and public discomfort?

At a time when many cities in North America have abandoned the trolley bus system, Vancouver's transit provider, TransLink, has bucked the trend and invested \$273 million in buying a brand new fleet of 228 trolley buses, the first batch of which hit the roads in the summer of 2006.

The electricity-powered buses are deemed to be far greener and quieter than those using diesel engines, but despite their sleek, modern look, they still seem to be plagued with problems. The sight of a bus ground to a halt at an intersection, with its poles detached from the overhead wires, holding up traffic in all directions, is an all too familiar one.

With just two cities left in Canada with a trolley system (Edmonton is the other), questions are being raised over whether TransLink's investment was really worth it, or if the system, whose wires were first installed in 1948, are simply outdated and need to be brought down.

David Drucker, an online advocate for an improved transit system in Vancouver, says his main concern is that the new trolleys appear to have the same flaws as the old ones.

"It's nice to see the investment, and they're obviously being well used, but \$273 million is a lot of money, and I'd have expected the system to be vastly improved with that," says Drucker. "The overhead lines themselves are not really bad, but it's quite a shame that the bus poles lose their connection to them so often. Not a week goes by that I don't see some driver trudging out with their temporary orange uniform to coax the poles back into their overhead tracks.

"A design that keeps the poles more connected might help the situation, or, at the very least, clear directions and warnings to drivers of the most precarious places - if they don't know already."

Drucker adds that he is not impressed with the seating in the new

trolleys; they have 30 seats - eight fewer than the old ones - but can hold an extra 12 people in total because of increased standing room. The pull-down seats at the front of the bus have proved to be a struggle for older people.

Since they were introduced to Vancouver transit riders, the buses, which are manufactured by New Flyer Industries of Winnipeg, have come under fire for various faults. In January, 39 of them were taken off the roads after some drivers reported a temporary loss of power steering at intersections.

One TransLink driver, who did not wish to be named for this story, told WE that he has had numerous complaints from passengers, and he has his own niggling concerns about the buses. "A lot of passengers don't like them, and some feel there's nothing for them to hold onto in the front part of the bus," he says. "They're fairly difficult for the drivers to drive because they've got a lot of small problems which need to be changed.

"Every time you buy something brand new you'll find problems, but I don't think these trolleys will hold up as well as the old trolleys; they've already got rattles on them after 25,000 kilometres. I do think the trolleys are a good idea, but I think TransLink could've done more research before going with these ones."

The 600-volt wires have their own issues. On August 20, the whole downtown trolley circuit was knocked out for two hours when an overhead wire came down at Seymour and Smithe Streets, forcing TransLink to put diesel buses out on the streets as replacements. In the meantime, buses stacked up along Seymour Street, with passengers getting off and walking to their destinations. Police redirected pedestrians away from Seymour because of the danger posed by the fallen wire.

According to TransLink spokesperson Drew Snider, the breakdown happened at about 6:45 p.m. and the trolleys were back in service by just before 8:30 p.m. He adds that this is not uncommon, and such problems are usually caused by vehicles like large trucks catching the wires.

The trolley bus network may have a number of problems, but its green credentials mean that Vancouver could well have the last laugh in the sustainability race.

Snider says one of the environmental benefits of the new trolleys arose from the fact that when TransLink bought the buses with a loan guaranteed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, it was required to use the money saved from the lower-than-normal interest rate to invest in 'green' electricity generation, like waterfalls and wind farms.

The trolleys don't produce emissions, unlike their diesel cousins, but use electricity provided by BC Hydro. That electricity comes from hydroelectric power, produced in some 30 stations in the Columbia and Peace rivers, and is generally considered to be greener than power from, for example, a coal-fired plant.

Professor Lawrence Frank has researched urban transport in the city through his post as Bombardier Chair in Sustainable Transport at the University of British Columbia.

"One of the benefits associated with the trolleys is the lack of emissions, and if the energy used comes from hydro-electric power, then they're much more sustainable," says Prof. Frank. "Admittedly the wires aren't particularly aesthetic, but I would gather it was a cost-effective decision for TransLink because there's a concentrated population in the city, and that's where trolleys work very well.

"Adding buses to the fleet is critical here because they're operating at crush load; a lot of times they're packed, which is very unusual, because a lot of North American cities have empty buses."

Only seven trolley-bus systems are still left in North America, including the two in Canada. Vancouver's is the second largest after San Francisco.

But even though the trolleys themselves may look thoroughly modern, the overhead lines look antiquated, particularly against the backdrop of newly-built towers in the downtown core. But that may simply be the aesthetic toll Vancouverites have to pay for the knowledge they're taking an emissions-free ride.

"I think the downsides are negligible, and I speak as a transit user and someone who does ride the trolleys," says Margaret Mahan, executive director at registered charity BEST (Better Environmentally Sound Transportation). "The new trolleys do have some design questions; they're really designed for people to stand and they're not as user-friendly as the old buses. But [at a time] of seeking greater efficiency, that might be the price we have to pay."

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