

Lothian Buses – protest against merger with Tram company

Prior to the Council meeting on 14th October there was a sizeable group of Lothian Buses employees gathered outside to protest against the proposed merger of Lothian Buses with the Tram Project into one company to be known as TEL. Here is what some of the protestors had to say:-

“I want to retire in a job in a very old age and they are taking that away from me. The drivers have done a bit of calculating and in four years time there will be no more Lothian Buses. I am certainly not driving for another company. I picked this company because it is the best one in the UK. We carry thousands of people on buses. If the buses were not here then people would use cars. It is only one tram line! Why put down our company for one tram line?”

“We are concerned about Lothian Buses being used to subsidise the tram system. I am a bus driver and I think there is a possibility if the trams go belly-up that Lothian Buses could be sold which could have drastic effects on the service in Edinburgh and the Lothians. When they first talked about introducing trams they said it would only provide a service to 8% of the Edinburgh population, and now they are talking about running the tram only from Haymarket to the Airport and the percentage is even less. We have a good service to and from the Airport as it is. We are working as a company to drive down emissions. There are talks about introducing hybrid buses too. Personally, I think that not only jobs but the service to the travelling public in Edinburgh and the Lothians is at risk. We have been vocal before but not to such an extent as this. The Union are involved but this is a worker led protest.

Everyone who is here is either off-shift or on a day off.”

“I work in the depot and I am here today because the buses are already profitable and it is a good company. We have been voted the best bus company in Great Britain in the last couple of years, and we think that in the future the trams are just going to drag the buses down. No-one I have ever spoken to think the trams are a good idea. They said that they were going to bring the tram in on budget and now that seems untrue. There are millions of pounds being paid out. How are you going to make two companies work when one takes profit out of the other? In the past they took the trams out of Edinburgh because they caused congestion. Now they are bringing them back and it will cause more congestion. Edinburgh city is unique with its historic buildings. It is impossible to make any new roads. We have to work with what we have. The roads are small to start with I think that what we really need is more Park and Ride with a fast efficient bus service. Trams cannot cope with that. Buses are these days much more environmentally friendly. We have buses with low emissions.”

“We are here basically to fight against the trams which if the trams amalgamate with the buses, the people who will suffer will be the Edinburgh public. We have the best bus service in the UK outwith London. The Edinburgh people do not want that. It will be less buses and will be less jobs. It’s going to affect everybody. Environmental issues? – I don’t know enough to comment about that. I can’t comment on whether I might lose my job. I am here to protest about what might go ahead. If you have a good service then you can’t mend what does not need fixed.”

As part of the response to the Tram Update Report a deputation from Lothian Buses was heard. The fear is that it will be detrimental to Lothian Buses to merge with the tram company. Here is what the Chairman of the Lothian Buses Unite Union,

Rob Fraser, had to say:-

*The staff at Lothian Buses are proud to work for one of the UK's best bus services and we are extremely concerned by the proposal to merge Lothian Buses with **tie** and Edinburgh Trams into a single public transport body TEL.*

We urge councillors to support Lothian Buses and its staff and thus ensure all can look forward to a strong future serving the travel needs of all the city's passengers; and not to plunder the company, and sacrifice its staff service and passengers for more money for the tram.

We also ask the council to give Lothian Buses back the right to have a Chairman who speaks only for Lothian Buses.

*With all due respect to David Mackay he faces a massive conflict as Chair of Lothian Buses and **tie** and TEL. This has been clearly demonstrated by the secrecy and lack of transparency exercised with the Board Management and employees of Lothian Buses.*

Lothian Buses provides a service to over 300,000 passengers every day. That is an essential service to this city.

There's a wise old saying: if it ain't broke don't fix it. The staff, management and resources of Lothian Buses need to be left alone to continue to provide the best bus service in the UK and not diverted into trying to prop up the tram project.

Jane Saren served on the board of Lothian Buses for 6 years until June 2009 as a non-executive Director. She said:-

"Rab kindly invited me to accompany him here to support the concerns of Lothian Buses staff – concerns shared by its passengers and the citizens of Edinburgh – about the prospects for our bus company if you accept the Tram update report on your agenda today.

I say our bus company because although I recognise that you own the majority shareholding in Lothian Buses plc I, – and I think everyone talking part in today's Save our Buses and Stop the Merger demonstration – regard Lothian Buses as a community asset which belongs to all the citizens of Edinburgh.

An asset which you hold in trust for us and for future generations of residents in our city.

Our clear message today is:- “Do not gamble with the future of Lothian Buses in order to raise more money to spend on building a tramline and on subsidising the tram operating losses.”

How reliable are the estimates of construction costs you've received in previous reports?

How do you know the predicted operating losses will last for only 3 years?

If the figures for future bus and tram passenger numbers in the Refreshed Business Case are robust why are you not allowed to see them?

Why have they been kept secret even from the Board of Directors of Lothian Buses

These predictions are not commercially confidential – such estimates were included and made public in all previous versions of the Tram Business Case. We fear the predictions are unrealistically high and will not stand up to scrutiny.

Industry insiders who know the detail of the tram project are firmly of the view that the true scale of likely tram operating losses is such that they will cripple Lothian Buses' finances and leave it no alternative to implementing substantial fare rises, service cuts and job losses.

In June this Council asked for a refreshed Business Case

including detailed capital and revenue implications of all the options currently being investigated by tie. You have not received that detail and therefore cannot agree to recommendation e)

We urge Councillors to reject the principle floated in paragraph 2.38 of borrowing financed by either TEL or Lothian Buses in order to raise money for tram construction.

And we urge you to instruct tie to release the Refreshed Business Case for full and open scrutiny so that credible and soundly-evidenced decisions can be taken on the future of the tram project in the interests of all the citizens of Edinburgh and of protecting our locally-owned bus company.

Fraser went on to claim during questioning by councillors after the ten minute deputation that 50 of Lothian Buses' fleet came off the road last year as a result of the roadworks. Now that there is a move afoot to reduce the tram project to a single line Fraser also claimed that the number of passengers would also fall. He said:-"We get all our information from newspapers – nowhere else. We keep saying we are the best bus service in the UK – that is a fact – but it could be destroyed by propping up the tram line. Think about what you are doing!"

Asked to confirm that the Board of Lothian Buses had not seen any of the detailed figures on which the tram project modelling is based, Jane Saren agreed and said:-"Yes ,that is the information that we have. I have been informed by executive directors in the company that they have provided figures, and these figures have been used in the modelling process, but then not reported back to them. There is a governance issue here. You are standing in between us and the citizens to ensure that decisions are made on a properly evidenced business case."

Transport Convenor, Councillor, Gordon Mackenzie, is of course

the elected member responsible for this hot potato. His first point was to assure everyone that:-“We all want to protect Lothian Buses.”

It is a confusing issue. On the one hand during the debate it was claimed that there is no decision yet on the merger of buses and the trams. On the other there is a clear message that the Council want to do so and may always have intended to do so.

So were the Lothian Buses employees yesterday protesting against something which is already a fait accompli?