

JONATHAN BRAY



Making the case for transport authorities

Transitioning to a fully empowered transport authority can be difficult, but the case for transitioning is stronger than ever before

“Underneath all the commercial activities of the board, underneath all its engineering and operations, there is the revelation and realisation of something which is in the nature of a work of art ... it is in fact, a conception of a metropolis as a centre of life, of civilisation, more intense, more eager, more vitalising than has ever so far been obtained.”

Frank Pick, the first chief executive of London Transport (December 1935).

► At a recent UITP meeting of mostly European transport authorities it was revealing how much in common many of those attending had. We were in the 80% club (patronage plateauing somewhere in the 80% range of pre-Covid). Our national politicians simultaneously (for climate and cost of living reasons) want better public transport, but (for Covid deficit reasons) also want to reduce financial support. In addition, national governments are increasingly dropping fares cuts initiatives from the sky without having thought through the rationale or how they will be funded. All of which means that budget crunches are coming for many transport authorities with little sense as yet of how they are going to be resolved. The wide-ranging consistency in these immediate challenges was the background for the launch of a new Urban Transport Group/UITP report that makes the case for empowered transport authorities for metropolitan areas as the best vehicle for tackling challenges like these.

A big part of the case for metro area

transport authorities is that they map on to real travel, cultural and economic geographies, at a scale whereby they can develop capacity, expertise, reputation and corporate memory. This allows them to deal with the bad times (like Covid or fiscal squeezes) as well as be ready to move quickly to capitalise in the good times (for example, when there is the political will for traffic restraint or public transport expansion). More widely they are also best placed to make the inevitable trade offs that will need to be made (given finite resources) on service provision and investment without bias to one mode or another or one sub-area or another.

Critically too, although they need to be fiscally responsible, they also have a public interest remit. It's not just about the bottom line - it's also about making the places they serve more prosperous, fairer and greener. All of this also gives them a spur to innovate, which they are too rarely given credit for (in the UK, for example, it's transport authorities who were ahead of the private sector on everything, from low floor buses, to Oyster and zero emission buses).

The job that transport authorities have had has never been easy but the report argues

“Budget crunches are coming for many transport authorities”

that it has now become more complex and difficult than ever. Not so long ago a bus was a bus, a tram was a tram and a bicycle was a bicycle. Now there is both blurring of the edges between the modes (from tram-trains to e-bikes) as well as a growing range of new formats for mobility (such as e-scooters) and new business models for their provision (such as Bolt). At the same time, in fits and starts, vehicles are becoming more connected and autonomous as well as greener and cleaner.

And that's just one dimension to the growing complexity. More widely we live in an urbanising world, putting incredible pressures on those cities which are growing fast in terms of resources, energy, housing and transport. We also live in a warming world where we need to both deal with the consequences and slow down that warming. All of which means that the professional sectors dealing with energy, transport and the built environment can't continue to inhabit separate silos. For example, you can't have electric buses without green energy infrastructure and you can't fully decarbonise transport without decarbonising transport's built estate.

So what are some of the key contemporary challenges that both existing and potential transport authorities are facing in the second decade of the 21st century and how are they doing it? Here's four:

Let's start with where we came in - **funding**. Transport authorities can find ways of blending different and new funding sources because they can earn the trust needed to do so through scale, capacity, capability, and track record. There's a very wide range of mechanisms for doing this which transport authorities round the world are already using. Land value capture and property development is big in South East Asia whilst in the US local taxes on everything from fuel to mansions are widely deployed. There are big tech solutions like road pricing in Gothenburg (used to fund a new cross-city rail link) to more prosaic parking charges in Sydney. Given the squeeze on national budgets from Covid, metro areas are going to need to raise more themselves - and empowered transport authorities are a good vehicle for ensuring the proceeds are wisely spent.

On **climate** there are difficult choices to be made around how to balance spend on reducing carbon emissions with improving climate

“At their best the sum of a transport authority is far more than the parts”



The Montreal Metro reflects and enhances the identity of the place it serves

resilience. At the UITP meeting where the report was launched there was a presentation from Paris on the vast programme of works being carried out to protect public transport from the increasing risks of a major flood, which could take out much of the Metro for an extended period. Transport authorities are in a good place to make the difficult decisions about how much to spend on expanding the network compared with protecting what's already there from climate risks.

On **fairness and social justice**, because of their wider public interest remit, there is an expectation that transport authorities should be pioneering ways of ensuring that both their own organisations and the decisions they make reflect the full diversity of the areas they serve. New York's MTA is one example of a transport authority doing this in practice through its concerted efforts to ensure more of the contracts it lets go to women and minorities-owned businesses (the most successful programme of its kind in the US).

On **new technologies, mobility and business models** the job of transport authorities is to balance consumer benefits with protecting the wider public interest. The classic example of this is where new entrants

flood the market with a new mobility format (such as dockless e-scooter or bike rental offers), which some travellers respond to positively but which can cause wider safety and urban realm issues in relation to use and parking (for example, for disabled people).

Singapore is a good example of how a transport authority can take a sophisticated and agile approach. The Singapore Land Transport Authority's approach to new forms of mobility and business models is to 'turn disruptions into opportunities' by creating a regulatory framework which is flexible and facilitative to allow businesses to thrive. But the LTA is also not afraid to act decisively where necessary, including on requiring data and on clamping down on excesses in the dockless bikes market when operators wouldn't do it themselves.

At their best the sum of a transport authority is far more than the parts. Reflecting the quote from Frank Pick at the start of this article, they can reflect and enhance the identity of the places they serve through being the respected custodians of their design traditions (from the Montreal Metro to London's red double decker buses) and by maintaining a strong and consistent corporate identity. They can also support public art and cultural

events and provide wider civic and commercial leadership in the investment, procurement and organisation decisions they take. In short, they can add to the allure of the places they serve for visitors, investors and residents.

Transitioning to a fully empowered transport authority can be difficult where one doesn't currently exist - as inevitably it will take on powers currently held elsewhere. Without strong political backing a stepping stone approach may be needed, but the case for transitioning is stronger than ever. And as the world becomes more uncertain and the challenges facing urban transport become more complex I hope this collaboration between UITP and UTG can help provide those considering the future governance of their urban transport networks with the arguments and evidence they need to take the next step. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.