



Report 03.210
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Committee Passenger Transport
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Trolley Bus Services Beyond 2004

1. Purpose

To agree that negotiation of a further contract for trolley bus services in Wellington City be initiated as long as the cost of replacement trolley buses remains equivalent to that of diesel buses and the cost of maintaining the overhead wiring systems for a five year period is similar to the existing maintenance costs.

2. Background

2.1 Five Years Ago

Trolley bus services in Wellington have been facing an uncertain future because the current fleet of trolley buses is reaching the end of its operational and economic life. The current contract for trolley bus services ends on 31 January 2005.

Five years ago, in 1998, the Council faced a similar scenario. To reach a resolution the annual plan of that year sought submissions on the future of trolley buses and Pinnacle Research were commissioned to report on the views of Wellington CBD business as they were significant contributors to the service costs through rates and also the key beneficiaries in some cases of the zero emissions and low noise outputs of trolley buses. Both these exercises demonstrated the preference of the general community and CBD businesses for trolley buses.

The Council, back in 1998, resolved to continue with trolley bus services for a further five years, noting that technological changes over that time might make the options for replacing the trolley bus fleet clearer.

2.2 Present day

The arrival of the prototype rebuilt trolley bus (viewed by some Councillors on 20 March) is the culmination of over twelve months of hard work. It was clear to some of us that the purchase of new European trolley buses as replacements for the current Wellington buses was financially beyond us all. A minimum

figure of \$1m per bus from Europe meant that it was going to be particularly problematic to justify the contribution of trolley buses on environmental grounds even though trolley buses tend to have a much greater operational life, up to 30 years, than diesel buses at 15 to 20 years.

Stagecoach Wellington proposed that an existing trolley bus be cannibalised and rebuilt to modern day standard. This is the work that has taken almost a year to achieve. It should be noted that the Council has made no financial contribution to this experimental project. All the prototype costs have fallen on Stagecoach.

Effectively the parts of the prototype that are visible are new but that which is hidden, primarily the electric motor and associated other operational elements are recycled.

Stagecoach have indicated informally that the prototype needs a two or three month trial before final assessment. The expected production cost of further “new” trolley buses will be similar to that of a comparable new diesel bus, and the operational life expectancy should be 15 to 20 years.

3. Comment

Trolley buses are a Wellington “icon”. A decision that would exclude trolley buses needs debate, community consultation and underpinning research of the economic, social and environmental costs and benefits of alternatives.

The Council clearly has a primary focus on regional sustainability and should lean towards future options that support that objective unless the cost of doing so is unreasonable.

Assuming that the production cost of the “new” locally produced trolley buses are on a par with new diesel buses then the financial difference relates to the ongoing cost of the overhead wiring. This wiring system is owned by the Wellington Cable Car Company Ltd, a company of Wellington City Council. Up to now the Cable Car Company has maintained the overhead wiring system on the basis that it may cease to be requested from 31 January 2005. We have yet to determine with the Cable Car Company how and at what cost the overhead can be retained for a further 15 to 20 years. Meetings are currently being held with the Wellington Cable Car Company Ltd to pursue this issue.

4. Communication

A media release from the Chairperson will be made noting that the question of the future of trolley buses in Wellington has been greatly assisted by the delivery of the Stagecoach funded prototype low floor “new” bus.

5. Recommendation

1. That the Committee note:

- (a) that the rebuilt trolley bus production costs are expected to be similar to that of a new diesel bus*

(b) that the future annual cost of the overhead wiring system has yet to be determined.

2. That discussions with Stagecoach Wellington on the likely costs of a further five year trolley bus contract, be commenced.

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