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Mature approach needed for planning Malta's future transport systems

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"As politicians, we need to take a mature approach and not give into political populism when planning future transport systems. We need to ensure that our mobility is sustainable, safe and healthy, not only for us, but also for our future generations."

Minister for Transport and Infrastructure Joe Mizzi said this during his opening speech of the conference on developing urban rail transport 'Environmental Performance and Financing Solutions,' a European event organised by the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union with the support of UNIFE, UITP, EUROCITIES and POLIS.

A good number of key players in urban rail mobility, representatives from national governments and city authorities, urban mobility associations, and the private sector, including both the rail operators and rail suppliers from European countries attended this conference.

The Maltese Government has published a Transport Master Plan for Malta for the next 10 years, a plan that sets out the required sustainable mobility policies, actions and measures that will help achieve practical targets, set by the European Commission for the decarbonisation of our cities by 2030 leading to zero-carbon in our cities by 2050. "Only, last month, here in this same venue, my Government has received the highest level of recognition for its work on producing Malta's first ever National Transport Strategy and Master Plan by European Commissioner for Transport, Violeta Bulc. We were delighted to hear that our Transport Master Plan is now being used by the European Commission, as a model of best practice for other countries to follow," Minister Mizzi said.

"For an urban rail transit system to be feasible in Malta – be it metro, light rail or tramway, it would need to be largely segregated from vehicular traffic; it would need to operate in areas of high demand and it would need to be fully integrated into a multi-modal public and private transport system. In a small and highly urbanised country where space is of a premium, where transport is heavily politicised and where car use is considered as sacrosanct, this is indeed a challenge," Minister Mizzi added.

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During the conference which the Maltese Presidency has been planning with UNIFE for more than a year, Minister Mizzi, referred to the steam railway service that operated between the old city of Mdina and the capital City of Valletta. He said that the Malta railway service had greatly enhanced personal mobility in Malta - cutting down end to end journey times from 3 hours to less than 30 minutes. The steam railway service had operated for almost 50 years between 1883 and 1931, but the growth of motorised travel and cutthroat competition with the omnibuses introduced in the 1920s had resulted in the early termination of railway services in Malta.

Minister Mizzi said that it is patently clear that traffic congestion caused by increased motorisation and higher levels of car dependency is a European-wide problem that we are facing in many of our towns and cities. He said that traffic congestion is a daily occurrence in many of our cities that results in longer and longer journeys to work by car; widespread disruption to the businesses of road hauliers; serious problems for the bus and tram operators and users - where road space is shared with the car.

"To alleviate traffic we have tried to remove the bottlenecks by building new roads and bigger, more complex junctions. But, over the years, the private car has been slowly taking up more and more of our urban liveable space and green areas," Minister Mizzi added. He concluded by saying that the planning of an urban rail system is not simply the drawing of a few lines on a map and then touting ball-park cost figures. It is much deeper than this and involves extensive technical feasibility studies, demand and financial modelling, option testing, step-by-step consultation and a line by line costing.

Speakers from this afternoon session included European Commissioner for Environment Mr Karmenu Vella, President of the European Committee of the Regions Mr Markku Markkula, Vice-President of the European Investment Bank Mr Pim Van Ballekom, Director General of UNIFE Mr Philippe Citroen and the Deputy Director General, DG Environment from the European Commission Dr Joanna Drake.

Philippe Citroën, UNIFE Director General

"The European rail supply industry provides high-performance products and solutions for urban transport with low, or even zero emissions of CO2 and other pollutant gases. UNIFE hopes to see many more exciting urban rail projects in the pipeline also thanks to the funding and financial instruments put in place by the European Commission."

Dorthe Nielsen, Eurocities Policy Director

"In cities, the most environmentally friendly transport solutions are urban rail, public transport, cycling and walking. More EU funding for these sustainable solutions would help cities in their transition towards sustainable mobility. This would also be a catalyst for economic development by improving access to jobs, education and culture. It is vital to improve the liveability of cities."

Karen Vancluysen, Polis Executive Director

"Urban rail can be a crucial component of sustainable and multimodal urban mobility. It has the potential to serve as a backbone for a seamless and comfortable local transport system that is clean and CO2 neutral. However, in order to unlock this potential, Europe needs to support cities and regions by creating optimal investment conditions for local transport infrastructure."

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Alain Flausch, UITP Secretary General

“There is no silver bullet to sound funding for public transport. Next to passenger fares and government support, an array of largely untapped sources exist that need to be exploited to strengthen the robustness and resilience of your transport system.”



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