

From crisis to innovation: the story of Seoul

In 2004 Seoul's public transport system was in crisis. By 2010 it was being described as one of the [best in the world](#). What happened in between is testimony to the role in quality public transport of determined political leadership, an effective public co-ordinating body and an integrated multi-modal approach.

The city's main public transport provision had been, and remains, urban and suburban railways. These had been developed mainly since the 1970s; before that buses were the main form of public transport. By 2005 the rail system was carrying 8.4 million passengers per day—more than twice the daily passenger volumes on the New York subways and the London underground.

However, it was also heavily in debt, a debt carried by the city government. In 2003 the annual operating deficit was \$634 million, and the city was unable to manage the operating deficit as well as make the investments required to cope with increasing congestion, pollution and population growth.

The answer was to develop a co-ordinated bus system, and to plan it so that it complemented the rail network effectively and enabled passengers to move between them easily and with common ticketing. This followed three decades in which the bus sector -- which before the urban railway was built had been the only option -- had been neglected.

The experience has been studied and reported in the most detail by John Pucher *et al* in an [article in the Journal of Public Transportation](#). ("Public Transport Reforms in Seoul: Innovations Motivated by Funding Crisis", John Pucher, Hyungyong Park, Mook Han Kim, Jumin Song, *Journal of Public Transportation*, Vol. 8, No. 5, 2005.). They write:

"For decades, bus services in Seoul were operated by a large number of private firms, with virtually no government control of routes, schedules, or other aspects of service. Only the fares were determined by the Seoul Metropolitan Government, which also provided increasing operating subsidies to cover growing operating

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is a partnership between the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) and Public World, with the support of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Its purpose is to build the capacity of urban transport unions to campaign for quality services and build alliances with passengers and other civil society organisations to promote sustainable transport systems.

That means services that enable everyone to travel safely, comfortably and quickly, and employ enough securely employed, properly trained and fairly rewarded transport workers to achieve that.

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deficits that were causing many firms to go bankrupt or curtail the quality of their services.

“Each bus company operated different routes, with no competition on any particular route. Because there was no coordination among the different bus companies, many routes were highly circuitous, overlapping, and not adequately integrated with metro services and the routes of other bus companies.

“Most of the private bus firms sought only to maximize profits (or minimize losses) while disregarding rider safety and comfort. Thus, an official report of the Seoul Metropolitan Government sharply criticized the private bus companies for encouraging truly outrageous bus driving behavior (Seoul Metropolitan Government 2004).

“To squeeze as many passengers as possible into a bus, bus drivers slammed on their brakes or suddenly and repetitively braked to jolt standing passengers further back into the bus. Bus drivers would recklessly race other buses to pick up passengers waiting at bus stops, but they deliberately avoided picking up elderly or disabled passengers to save time.

“In addition, bus vehicles were old, poorly maintained, and did not meet international standards. Service was dangerous, slow, uncomfortable, and unreliable.”

The city took control by introducing what it calls a “semi-public operation system”. The bus firms are still private, but their routes, schedules and fares are determined by the Seoul Metropolitan Government. The bus firms are paid on the basis of vehicle/km of service instead of passenger trips. This is intended to increase incentives to improve service quality and reduce incentives for speeding, reckless driving, and discriminating against elderly and disabled passengers.

The bus route network was redesigned into four types, with buses colour-coded to help passengers know whether they are express or stopping buses, whether or not they link with the rail services, and so on. A Bus Management System (BMS) using advanced intelligent transport system (ITS) technology was also introduced, and the network of dedicated bus lanes was improved and expanded.

“Most significant, however,” according to Pucher *et al*, “is the development of a true BRT network with dedicated bus median lanes, high-quality median bus stops, real-time information for passengers and system operators, and new, state-of-the-art buses. By February 2005, there were already 36 km BRT services spanning 4 different corridors.”

There were early teething problems, but: “Already by October 2004, almost 90 percent of Seoul residents expressed general satisfaction with the restructured bus services and new fare system. Average bus speeds increased by 33 percent to 100 percent in the BRT corridors. Total bus accidents and injuries on all routes combined (express and local) have fallen by about a third.”

Today Seoul is planning its next generation of improvements, with the development of a light railway transit (LRT) system to complement and link with the rail and bus networks.

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