

Dominion Rd is bending under a 30-year wait

'Dominion Road is bending, under its own weight': the famous first line from the Mutton Birds' 30-year-old hit song.

And for the past three decades, the lack of a definitive plan for mass transit along Dominion Rd has been a constant source of worry and confusion for businesses and landlords alike, holding back any significant investment in the area.

As far back as 2004, Dominion Rd was designated a 24-hour public transport route, meaning council had the legal right to reclaim 1-2 metres of store frontage from shops alongside the road to create a bus or, ironically, a light rail corridor. It also designated some land around Valley and Balmoral Roads for bus stations that were behind Dominion Rd. This plan was subsequently shelved.

In June 2010, Auckland City Council put forward a plan to create a high-quality bus route that would support intensified development. This proposal instantly became very controversial because local shop owners felt strongly that removing the on-street carparking would damage their businesses. This proposal was subsequently abandoned following a



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comment

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petition of more than 5000 signatures organised by local resident Penny Hickey who at that time noted the road had been blighted for 20 years by designation and held back from investment.

By 2012, Auckland Transport had taken over responsibility for the project and in October 2012, AT's Board announced that they had approved a project which would establish bus lanes operating at peak times, retain on-street car parking and establish cycleways on adjacent side streets. However, in 2014 the plug was pulled at the 11th hour because light rail was deemed the new weapon against burgeoning congestion on the road.

Fast forward to 2016, and there was a further iteration of plans consisting of two phases – including establishment of the fully marked bus lanes and relocation of bus shelters. The second phase being a reduced level of redevelopment of the town centres. The bus lanes were implemented, however the town centre redevelopment never eventuated.

Tens of millions of dollars have been spent on planning for Dominion Rd over the last 30 years with not one tangible outcome to show for it – save for a few painted lines masquerading as bus lanes.

Dominion Rd is a much loved and characterful part of our city. This character is in large part due to the diverse mix of businesses lining the street. Increased public transport capacity and efficiency is undoubtedly crucial to the continued development of the city and Dominion Rd in particular. Transportation development to support the city needs to be addressed, and soon.

Dominion Rd businesses welcome options including wholly underground light metro and tunnelled light rail. With these options the construction impact of streets being ripped up and limited access to businesses are largely avoided. But what if light rail was at street level, with Dominion Rd the chosen route? If this option is selected, is it the Government's final choice?

Mass transit must be established by following a sound process to secure the best possible outcome for the community of Auckland. Consideration must be given to each option, and the impact each will have on Dominion Rd's businesses.

If not, we run the risk of losing some of the iconic hallmarks that make Dominion Rd unique and special.

One option that hasn't been widely

considered is trackless trams. They are the best alternative to light rail and emerging as a less expensive, more sustainable option. They combine the best benefits of high-speed trains and autonomous-vehicle technology.

As technology advances, so does the reliability and success of the trams which are in operation in several Chinese cities, with many more planned.

In 2020, a new trackless tram transport system launched in Qatar in preparation for the Soccer World Cup. Perth has federal government support for trackless trams and other Australian states are investigating them as transport solutions.

Trackless trams can provide the same capacity as light rail but, importantly, they cause less disruption. Construction can be undertaken in months, rather than years.

The reduced cost compared with conventional rail options, raises the question of how those savings could be used to make other improvements to Dominion Rd. There is the potential to create quality urban spaces to support increasingly dense development.

Regardless of the option finally chosen, Dominion Rd and Aucklanders do not deserve to wait another 30 years.