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Newman: Time to get off-track

Curtin University

Fremantle Herald, Perth

Return to media item

Newman: Time to get off-track

by STEVE GRANT

TRACKLESS trams such as the one which made its way along Scarborough Beach Road for the first time this week, should be part of the Future of Fremantle discussions says Peter Newman.

The Fremantle resident and professor of sustainability at Curtin University did much of the research leading up to Integrated Transport Solutions Group's purchase of the Shanghai Electric tram which is being trialled in the City of Stirling.

Prof Newman will be giving a talk about trackless trams at St Paul's Anglican Church in Beaconsfield on November 19 at 11.30am, the parish have recently taken the decision to go carbon neutral.

"It's extraordinary after seven years," he said of his research journey finally culminating with one of the trams being unloaded at Fremantle's port back in August.

"Josh Byrne was giving a presentation at the WA Maritime Museum for the Future of Fremantle, and the mayor and other dignitaries were there and Josh suddenly stopped and stared out of the window, telling everyone 'there's our new trackless tram'; and then everyone crowded around the window to see it being unloaded," Prof Newman said.

"Trackless trams will be one of the key features of the Future of Fremantle."

Perth is the only city outside China to have one of Shanghai's Digital-rail Rapid Transport trams, which is guided by magnetic nails embedded in the road and runs on lithium-ion capacitors which take just a few seconds at each station to top up.

WA's new trackless tram is being refuelled by solar-based chargers.

Trackless trams often cop the 'but it's just a bus' gibe, but Prof Newman says Perth's system is a lot more than a bus.

"It's able to go at high speed and looks ahead to analyse the situation, then it transfers the information to its bogeys - that's what they're called because it is a train - about what the road ahead is like and it can adjust."

He says it also feels more like a tram than a bus when you're aboard.

The trams are pretty autonomous, but there is a driver who has the ability to take over the controls at the push of a button if there's trouble ahead.

Autonomous

Prof Newman says the trams could operate in the current road space, but says traffic lights should be programmed to change as they approached to keep them moving swiftly through the city.

He also expects a network of stations to be built for the routes, around which developers could build high-density "walkability" precincts.

"I think it's going to transform our main roads, because people will want to live around those stations," he said.

The South West Group of councils commissioned a "proof of concept" report in 2020 which backed a trackless tram or light rail system between Fremantle and Murdoch, but Prof Newman says he's convinced by the former.

"A lot of local governments are trying to think how to get light rail, because Metronet systems are too expensive, but this is a cheaper option.

"It was developed by a rail company to fill a gap to get across the city to their fast rail, but to built a light rail you have to close a street for five years," he said.

Prof Newman says apart from his talk at St Paul's on November 19, there will also be a trackless tram symposium on November 22 where people will get a chance to have a ride on Stirling's new one.

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• A trackless tram from a Shanghai Electric promo.

• How Stirling council envisages
the Aussie trackless trams looking.