**SCMP Article**

**Tram debate shines light on congestion**

I am often impressed at how the mainstream and especially social media can make a big story out of something minor.

A former civil servant involved in planning recently put forward a proposal to the Town Planning Board to scrap tram services through Central. I do not know the intentions of the individual who made the submission. But it sounds like something that could have disappeared without trace.

Instead, it attracted considerable attention in the press, and it went viral online.

Several things struck me about this.

First of all, there were conspiracy theories. One claimed that the government had arranged the proposal in order to distract attention from the problems over lead in water in certain housing estates and schools. Another suggested that developers were behind the idea. Both reflect the distrust and suspicion that exist in parts of the community.

More broadly, the proposal was seen as an attack on heritage. With the old Tung Tak pawn shop in Wan Chai in the news at the same time, it is not surprising that people were sensitive about this. The trams are icons of Hong Kong and, for many of us, part of our childhood memories. People have an emotional attachment to them that you would never find with, say, buses.

The rise in awareness of heritage - especially among the young - goes back to the demolition of the Star Ferry and Queen's piers a little under 10 years ago. It is an important development. It shows that many young people have new ideas about the balance between quality of life and development. It has expanded civil society and activism. And it has highlighted the sense of local identity among the younger generation. These are all things our political leaders must think about.

However, to see the proposal to scrap the trams as primarily about heritage seems to me to be missing the point. The former official behind the plan certainly disliked the idea that we should preserve trams as icons - except in a museum. But his thinking, so far as I could tell, was almost entirely about traffic.

If the media and online debate had ignored this angle, it would be easy to dismiss it. The conspiracy theories were a bit wild, and the protests from the heritage supporters were exaggerated and overlooked the real subject of the proposal.

Fortunately, many commentators did address the proposal as a suggestion about transport and planning. And I think the great debate over this plan has done us all a favour as a result.

The proposal claims that trams waste space, and we could reduce traffic congestion if they were scrapped. If this were true, it would be worth considering. The traffic situation in Central, and basic conditions like air quality and "walkability" in the district, are getting very serious.

For years, officials have put this problem aside. But on Des Voeux Road alone, several sites are currently being redeveloped. Bigger office towers will further reduce air flow and increase pedestrian traffic. At some point, we will have to make some changes.

The discussion in the media and on the internet - and among some politicians - largely saw the trams not as a problem, but, if anything, a solution. Even a transport official made it clear that not only is the tram important and affordable, but it is irreplaceable.

The real problem, many people recognise, is the vehicular traffic in Central (and this probably goes for other districts). Passenger cars go round in circles - I have contributed to this problem myself - or park illegally, using up valuable space. Delivery vans and trucks are constantly coming and going.

There are ways out of this. We could provide drop-off and pick-up points on the reclaimed area to the north and bar cars from the core area of Central during office hours. We could ban goods deliveries from the area during daytime. Some people would probably oppose such measures, but many more would enjoy a much nicer walkable environment.

The trams proposal has got a lot more people thinking about such ideas.