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In need of Seoul's next transport revolution

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A Ttareungyi station near City Hall, downtown Seoul / Korea Times file

By Nikola Medimorec

Urban development presents challenges, especially when it comes to the question of transport. Seoul isn't any different and the rapid urban development of the city and the country led to the implementation of large, transformative solutions. This development helped to reinvent public transportation multiple times, especially in the 21st century.



In the early 2000s Seoul introduced public transport reform. From that we have the four-colored bus system (it is rumored that yellow buses do indeed operate somewhere), the bus-only median lanes, a semi-public operation system and the integrated fare system allowing free transfers between buses and the subway.

These initiatives improved the service quality of Seoul's public transport immensely and, most importantly, helped to reverse the trend of declining bus trips in Seoul.

Parallel to the public transport reform, the Cheonggye Stream project was implemented, removing a large urban freeway in the center of Seoul and restoring a historic stream to the surface. It kicked off a country-wide transformation of urban streams. The successful example of Cheonggye Stream has made the removal of other flyovers a lot easier, and other Korean cities have realized the use of a semi-public transit system yields high advantages. The Cheonggye Stream project was awarded with a renowned global sustainable transport award and it serves as a positive example of sustainable urban development.






In the 2010s Seoul seemed to rest on its laurels based on the success of the public transport reform, despite various challenges remaining in the transport sector. However, there is a transport policy which does not receive the recognition it deserves: the city-wide public bike-sharing program Ttareungyi.

Launched in 2015, it revolutionized and reinvented urban mobility. There are now over 1,000 bike-sharing stations in the city and the plan is to have 20,000 bicycles by next year. The usage rates are increasing every year, as the bikes enable a greater reach of subway stations. You can see more people riding bicycles than in the years before. In addition, the people riding them are also

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local tourists and many others of any age and gender. In the near future e-bikes will be introduced as well.

And now that the next decade will begin soon, we have to ask ourselves how Seoul's next transport revolution will look. Is it going to be one of the two planned enormous underground transport hubs in downtown Seoul and at Samseong Station? Or are self-driving vehicles using the 5G network going to revolutionize Seoul's traffic? While these major projects and future technologies are nice, I believe the next great reinvention in Seoul needs to be a clean transport revolution.

The city has to act on the climate crisis and severe air pollution. This can be done by reducing the number of kilometers driven by private vehicles while inducing a quick transition to vehicles utilizing clean energy sources. The bus reform in 2004 introduced buses using natural gas which have a far better fuel efficiency and produce less emissions than diesel buses. But now the city should move quickly to procuring zero-emission buses, such as electric and hydrogen buses. The Chinese city Shenzhen replaced by 2018 all of its 17,000 buses with electric-powered vehicles.

Delivery services, often done through motorcycles and smaller trucks, have to be regulated and incentives should aim to establish clean freight delivery. Seoul plans to replace 100,000 motorcycles with electric motorcycles by 2025 which is a good start. In Dutch cities freight companies are using cargo bikes and other alternative types of delivery to reduce emissions and energy use.

Cars with high emission levels should pay for the environmental damage they cause and should be limited from entering Seoul's city center. The planned green transport zone is a great start but must be expanded more widely. The example of London's ultra-low emission zone can be useful.

And most importantly, Seoul, with the support of the national government, has to set a date to phase-out the sales of fossil fuel-powered vehicles. Norway, a frontrunner in electric transport, will have the phase-out in 2025, while the Netherlands and other countries aim for 2030 or later. These policies can be packaged as a clean transport reform and induce a major shift not only improving mobility of Seoul's citizens but also minimizing the negative environmental impacts.

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