

Infra Dig – Metrolink: a monumental stinker?

Angus Leslie Melville

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Dublin’s metro system has long been mooted as an essential piece of infrastructure to promote greater mobility around Ireland’s capital... but it has also been the source of immense frustration for the infrastructure community.

In its last incarnation, it was rolled out as Dublin Metro North PPP only to fall prey to the Global Financial Crisis after years in procurement and 2 bidders still at the table, having each racked up around €10 million in bid costs.

Now it’s back with a new name – Metrolink PPP – and political motivation is ramping up to get the light rail project sufficiently advanced to ensure its future delivery no matter which political party is in leadership.

This week’s Infra Dig podcast sees IJGlobal editorial director Angus Leslie Melville talk to Mike Flynn of Michael Flynn Associates, turning the spotlight on Dublin’s long-anticipated metro system and taking a look at the wider light rail scene.

Mike runs a consultancy involved primarily in light rail projects and led one of the bid teams on the original Dublin Metro North PPP. He is also a former head of international consulting at Transport for London (TfL) has been described as an “itinerant builder of railways”... particularly tramways and metros.



He has been involved in projects across Continental Europe, the Middle East, Asia Pacific with a particular focus on Australia, as well as North and South America. Mike has also been involved in almost all of the UK’s tramways and metros in some way shape or form.

In this latest Infra Dig podcast, Mike runs through the scope of the original project before contrasting it with “Son of Metro North” – Metrolink – which has a lower price tag (down from €5 billion to today’s €3 billion project) due to the public side taking on board much of the tunnelling work.

Dublin Metro North was scrapped in 2011 – though it was largely shelved in 2009 – as the Irish government struggled to keep its economy afloat in the troubling GFC years.

It has always been envisaged as a mass transit solution to connect St Stephen’s Green in the centre of the capital to Dublin Airport, and out to Swords beyond that.

As to what went wrong with the original financing, Mike puts it succinctly: “The 2008 financial crisis.”

Mike says: “The project was fine. The procurement was longer than I think anyone would have liked – ideally – particularly the gaining of planning permission. The permission to construct was done at the same time as the bidding process which was less than ideal because we weren’t exactly clear on what we were bidding on because the planning authorities can add requirements into the project that would then have to be priced.

“But that was really a very minor thing. The problem with the project, eventually, was that the Irish government effectively became bankrupt during the Global Financial Crisis and so the debt was unbankable.

“That caused them initially to delay the project and then, eventually – after a change in government – the project was technically suspended, but it was ended in all but name.”

One of the missed opportunities of the initial procurement process was that the new government scrapped the project instead of mothballing it so that it could be revived at a later date, rather than starting from scratch.

Sadly, this was not the case... and so we are now faced with the same project (with a marginally different scope) bearing a new name and preparing to receive bids... again.

“We tried to convince them (the Irish government) to simply just suspend the project and not cancel it completely, which would have enabled them to pick up with the 2 bidders who were still left in the project, and then have a BAFO and then complete the project... rather than gong back to the beginning with a new procurement process which will add another couple of years to any future project,” says Mike.

To hear more about the Dublin mass transit scene and learn about the wider light rail environment, tune in to the latest Infra Dig podcast...



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