

## TUT-POL CASE STUDY

# Seoul: Transportation Reform as Enabler of Urban Regeneration



### Summary

Over the past decade Seoul, one of the world's largest and densest cities, has transformed a dilapidated elevated highway corridor into a popular and world famous public park, reinvigorated and modernized its ailing bus system, and used both changes to spur a dramatic revival of the city's declining commercial core. Demolishing two major elevated expressways, uncovering and restoring the stream they covered, and transforming the area into a linear park helped spur significant investment into the Gangbuk central business district and transformed it into one of the most popular tourist destinations in the city. Rather than replace the demolished expressways, the city instead modernized the bus network by establishing bus priority lanes, replacing the city's aging bus fleet, integrating bus fares with the city's subway system, implementing the world's first prepaid 'smart card' for all surface transportation modes (including taxis as well as bus and rail transit), and allocating fare revenues among the multiple providers on the basis of their contributions to each trip. Combined, these changes helped produce a 13 percent increase in the average number of daily bus and subway passengers between 2003 and 2010 and led to a decrease in the share of trips by private automobiles, which in 2011 carried less than a quarter of all trips within the city. The reforms also dramatically reduced air polluting emissions and the number of bus-related fatalities and injuries in addition to increasing customer satisfaction with bus services, in large part by making buses more efficient, comfortable and convenient, cleaner, and safer. These changes are all the more noteworthy because they came in the face of opposition from an entrenched bus industry, and neighborhood and political interests, the latter including some national-level elected officials and bureaucrats who had spoken on public record against the Cheonggyecheon project, as well as in the aftermath of failed bus reform efforts in previous administrations. Despite the fact that Mayor Myung-bak Lee had

campaigning on a strong economic development and urban livability platform with no mention of bus reform, he nonetheless completed his term having disrupted the status quo by introducing a wide range of interconnected transportation changes in a remarkably short period of time.

**This is a story of a strong-willed mayor, whom many associated with the country's authoritarian past, strategically managing collaboration between different agencies and personnel within government structures to implement a wide-ranging set of interrelated transport reforms and urban transformations. Building on skillful leveraging of stakeholder conflict and public engagement with constituencies more historically aligned with the democratic movement than with his own Conservative Party, Mayor Lee introduced fundamental transportation changes that ultimately helped catapult him to the national presidency.**

### Strategic Actions

**Putting environmental and urban economic development priorities first, with transportation goals initially identified as supplementary.**

MB Lee, amidst increasing voter awareness of and preoccupation with the negative side effects of rapid modernization and economic growth, won by openly and aggressively campaigning for highway demolition and downtown revitalization.

The Lee administration couched efforts at highway demolition, stream restoration, and bus reform in an ambitious vision of a new urban and transport landscape centering on the historic downtown and an alternative approach to urban and economic development prioritizing quality of life for local inhabitants while enhancing the city's global competitiveness.

### **Recasting small-scale and incremental transportation goals in the language of large-scale transformations intended to enhance urban quality of life for all the city's residents.**

The Lee administration, while countering protests from opponents of bus reforms, temporarily deferred project implementation while reframing the issue from a single-corridor NIMBY debate to an overall focus on bus system and urban rejuvenation, effectively bringing more supportive constituencies into the public discussion.

### **Assessing and engaging potential supporters and opponents even before taking a public stand on several key aspects of transportation reform.**

While campaigning for mayor, MB Lee engaged the Seoul Development Institute (SDI), a government-owned think tank that had carried out an assessment of the highway demolition proposal. SDI's researchers, in turn, connected Lee's campaign with the scholars and activists who had been calling for demolishing the road.

### **Structuring both public and private consultations in order to solidify key constituency support for new transport policies.**

Upon commencing construction on the Cheonggyecheon project, the city established the Council of Merchants to facilitate discussions with tens of thousands of small-scale retailers over a course of 17 meetings. When excluded street vendors protested, Lee created a Citizen's Committee on Cheonggye Stream Restoration, where members drawn from local vendor organizations, environmental groups, and academia could analyze master plan proposals. In conjunction with highway demolition, the city government created the 20-member Bus System Reform Citizen Committee to facilitate stakeholder dialogue and consensus.

### **Recruiting and empowering a technical team to package transport knowledge in a politically-savvy manner.**

The Lee administration enlisted expert urban policy and planning researchers at the Seoul Development Institute to translate their research findings into actionable proposals for stream restoration. Then during the implementation phase, academic experts on the Citizen's Committee on Cheonggye Stream Restoration helped defend the project against public challenge, in some cases, by writing editorial columns in prominent newspapers.

## **Tactical Actions**

### **Highlighting successful cases of similar transport reform so as to generate support from planners and in local policy circles.**

Seoul applied lessons from the experiences of Boston's "Big Dig" and Curitiba's BRT—understanding the potentials of simultaneously advancing environmental and economic goals via a single infrastructure project as well as political costs of complex, disruptive, and expensive projects.

### **Linking support of transformative policies to career priorities of key city officials, both bureaucrats and elected office-holders.**

Mayor MB Lee aligned the incentives of local officials with his vision of the Cheonggyecheon project by highlighting electoral advancement opportunities for aspiring city councilors and national assembly members. He also reorganized the transport planning bureaucracy into two streams, leaving day-to-day management to the career bureaucrats while creating a 300-person "Transportation Improvement Task Force," populated by specialist planners, architects, and engineers tasked with reimagining the future of Seoul's bus system in close collaboration with the Seoul Development Institute.

### **Generating quick-to-implement, modest, yet highly visible programmatic wins.**

Mayor MB Lee kicked off his ambitious agenda of highway demolition, urban stream restoration, and bus system overhaul with the relatively easy and swift-to-implement but highly demonstrable task of replacing a complicated traffic interchange in front of Seoul's City Hall with a park.

### **Appeasing opponents with fiscal benefits without risking program viability.**

While city officials offered temporary and permanent relocation spaces to Cheonggyecheon area retailers, they refused to compensate them for additional losses incurred during the construction process (on the basis that the vendors would reap additional business upon project completion) or delay the construction schedule.

### **Establishing public-private partnerships in ways that would generate long-term benefits to both participating firms as well as the consuming public.**

The city partnered with a subsidiary of the JCDecaux Group to cover the cost of bus stations in exchange for 15 years of advertising rights at those stations. It also hired LG to create a new public-private corporation, the Korea Smart Card Company (KSCC), 34.4 percent owned by the city, to develop, install, and run the new payment mechanism on the buses in return for getting a 1.5 percent fee for each transaction.