

From the Kitchen

13 January 2010



The trains in Metroville were all painted bright yellow with green ends. They had comfortable orange seats and doors that hissed when they opened and closed. But they were mostly empty. Metrovillians preferred to ride in their roaring cars to go to work and to go shopping and to take their children to school.

Over the years Metroville grew from a very large town to a small city and then to a very large city. As it grew, more and more people drove more and more cars and eventually the roads were so crowded that every journey took four times as long as it used to. Metrovillians complained to the city government, which built beautiful freeways in response.

Expensive consultants suggested that the city government should do something to convince people to use the yellow trains with their comfortable orange seats and reassuringly hissing doors. Almost everyone laughed at the idea of trying to get Metrovillians to give up their roaring cars. However, a few thought it worthwhile. Then, because someone in the city government thought the real problem was that no-one in the government really knew how to run a train system, it was decided to sell the whole system to private enterprise. Many companies were interested and the system was sold by auction to Disconnect. Disconnect had never owned a train system, but they had owned a string of model train and hobby shops.

Advertisements appeared on TV, radio and billboards, extolling the virtues of going to work on Disconnect trains: reading the paper, talking with other people, reading a book, daydreaming, getting some extra sleep. At first, Metrovillians were reluctant to change, but then a few did and they liked it. They told their friends and colleagues and soon the trains were crowded.

Passengers complained about the overcrowding to the city government, which complained to Disconnect. The company removed most of the beautiful orange seats and advertised that there was now much more space in the carriages. They also ordered more trains but, when these were delivered, the wheels were the wrong shape and they couldn't be used.

When petrol became much more expensive and as it also became cool to show concern for the environment, more and more Metrovillians became train users. Despite most of the seats having been removed, the trains again became uncomfortably crowded.

The Metroville government decided that, perhaps, another company would be better at operating the trains. They gave the system to a foreign company because it was called Metrotrain. The fact that it had operated trains before was an advantage, even though it had never been able to get its trains to run according to a timetable.

Everyone in Metroville was excited about the change, especially when all the trains were painted a pale blue with wavy green stripes; along with images of comfortable orange seats painted at intervals along the inside of the carriages.

Metrotrain convinced the Metroville government that taxpayers should carry the cost of changing the wheels on the 'new' trains that had been sitting in storage. The refitted new trains helped alleviate the worst of the crowding and Metrotrain asked its customers what they would most like to see changed to improve the service. Metrovillians opted for the return of the beautiful orange seats. The seats went in and the resultant sardine conditions led to half the seats being removed again.

Metrotrain still had problems with trains not running on time. They sought to solve this by painting all the trains bright red with stylised blue and orange flames at the front, to give an appearance of greater speed.

Metrotrain was not making any profit and, according to its contract, the city government was obliged to pay it millions of dollars. It then became clear, when accurate accounting was introduced, that many travellers were not buying tickets. It was suggested by expensive consultants that staff be employed at stations, but this was considered by the city government to be too expensive. A new set of expensive consultants suggested that a new, 'smart' ticketing system be introduced. Metrotrain and the city government considered this a wonderful idea. When the new system was finally installed and ready to use, it had cost hundreds of millions of dollars, forced prospective passengers to transfer five percent of their weekly wages to the system, overcharged them when they travelled and frequently locked everyone out of one or other station at random.

Most Metrovillians have returned to driving their cars. The city government has bought the train system back from Metrotrain and painted the trains bright yellow with green ends. The roads are choked but it is easy to find a comfortable seat on a train – if you can buy a ticket.