

Business

London bids to turn disused rail viaduct into its own High Line

'We're hoping to build an amazing park in the sky'

LONDON: London is on track to transform a disused stretch of elevated railway in the heart of the city into a "park in the sky", emulating similar successful schemes in Paris and New York. Local planning officials are poised to give the first section of the Camden Highline named after its famous Manhattan predecessor the formal green light next week.

It follows a half-decade of dogged planning, designing and fundraising by an alliance of residents, businesses, politicians and donors to get the project off the ground. The reimagined 1.2-kilometre (0.75-mile) viaduct will eventually link bustling Camden with the revamped King's Cross district, turning a corridor of overgrown foliage-adjacent to still-active rail lines into a new green space and attraction.

"We're hoping to build an amazing park in the sky," Simon Pitkeathley, who is spearheading the project, told AFP, as he led locals on a regular street-level tour of the planned walkway. "(It's) going to be a pleasant, beautiful environment in which to move between these very vibrant parts of London."

Tourists

Local architects vPPR and James Corner Field Operations, the urban design firm behind New York's acclaimed High Line, drew up the blueprints after beating out competition from dozens of interested companies. The US raised walkway, built on former track on the west side of Manhattan, has become a major destination since opening in 2009 and underwent a recent extension. The forerunner to both is the lauded Promenade Plantee in Paris, which was inaugurated in 1993.

James Corner has promised the Camden project will be a "one-of-a-kind elevated park along the viaduct that speaks to the magical symbiosis of nature, culture, arts and community". The venture has electrified Camden, a vibrant neighbourhood just north of central London best known for its market and nightlife.

"We love the High Line in New York and (we're) very excited that the same company are involved in this one," said resident Charlotte Tansey, checking out the route with her Dalmatian, Ziggy. "There are so many tourists going through Camden every day, it'd be great for them to have a different viewpoint, just like the one in Manhattan."

Celebration

The scheme will differ from its transatlantic namesake given the disused siding's proximity to live rail lines, which will be the other side of thick transparent screens. "They're going to be quite different beasts, not least because we're right next to a real train," said Pitkeathley, noting those involved in the New York endeavour had been "very supportive".

The Camden team has agreed a long-term lease for the Victorian-era viaduct from Network Rail, which owns 20,000 miles of track and 30,000 bridges, tunnels and other structures, as well as stations. The siding on an east-west commuter and freight route has been disused for nearly four decades.

The Highline will incorporate derelict platforms at Camden Road station and a shuttered stairway entrance to it—one of several envisaged entries along the route. Its designers aim to "celebrate" the wild twinning of nature and ageing infrastructure, leaving bridge structures exposed and adding new planting and railway artefacts. Set to be filled with new trees, plants and other vegetation, they also expect it will provide green space to tens of thousands of nearby residents.

Fundraising

The entire walkway will be built in phases and estimated to cost at least £35 million (\$43 million). The first section will start in the shadow of Camden market and could open by 2025. The remaining two parts would likely take an additional minimum of two years, if built concurrently.



LONDON: Chief executive of Camden High Line Simon Pitkeathley guides visitors near the proposed construction land, in Camden, north London. —AFP

But organisers first need to find an initial £14 million. The charity formed to deliver the project has already raised and spent around £1 million and hopes to turbocharge further efforts once formal planning permission is granted.

With the support of Camden Council, London Mayor Sadiq Khan and national politicians including main opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer—who represents the area in parliament —, Pitkeathley insists the money can be found.

He is targeting a combination of high-net-worth

individuals, trusts and foundations, public sector organisations and commercial partners. Fundraisers have already been held with the likes of sculptor Antony Gormley.

Residents along the route, which encompasses several public housing projects, appear enthusiastic. But some said the cost-of-living crisis gripping Britain could hinder efforts. "There is an argument that if you spend millions and millions on building walkways, what else could that be spent on," conceded doctor Naomi Craft, 58. "But I think it's exciting." —AFP

Tunisians rally over worsening economic crisis

TUNIS: Hundreds of Tunisians marched after opponents of President Kais Saied called for protests over a worsening economic crisis. "The people want what you don't want. Down with Saied," chanted the activists, including supporters of the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party. Ennahdha had dominated parliament until Saied launched a dramatic power grab on July 25, 2021, sacking the government and freezing parliament before appointing a new cabinet and ruling by decree.

"The coup has brought us famine and poverty. Yesterday the grocer gave me just one kilo of macaroni and a can of milk," said Nouha, a woman at one protest. "How can I feed my family of 13 people with that?" the 50-year-old housewife lamented.

Saturday's protests were staged in the capital Tunis by two different opposition groups and were held far apart with a heavy police presence to avoid any unrest. They were held against a backdrop of deepening political divisions on the 12th anniversary of the fall of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The biggest opposition force, the National Salvation Front (FSN) which includes Ennahdha, was kept about one kilometre from left-wing party activists gathered in front of the municipal theatre. Another march attended by hundreds of people was led by Abir Moussi of the anti-Islamist opposition Free Destourian Party, in the south of Carthage, where the presidential palace is located.

Tunisians who largely supported Saied's takeover have become increasingly fed up with the economic crisis. The state, which is heavily in debt, has found it difficult to import basic goods, and there are chronic shortages of staples such as coffee, milk and sugar. —AFP

UK economy wins WCup boost but recession looms

LONDON: Britain's economy unexpectedly grew in November as consumers splurged during the World Cup, official data showed Friday, but analysts warned that it remains on course for recession due to the cost-of-living crisis. Despite a series of strikes, gross domestic product grew by a slight 0.1 percent in the month, aided by services, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement.

That confounded expectations for a modest decline as Britain battles decades-high inflation fuelled by runaway energy bills. Yet the economy slowed from a 0.5-percent expansion in October following a drop in September, when many businesses closed for the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II. Britain, like many other nations, is plagued by run-

Ex-Volkswagen boss Carl Hahn dies aged 96

BERLIN: Carl Hahn, who headed the Volkswagen group during the German car giant's heyday in the 1980s, has died, a spokeswoman for the Carl and Marisa Hahn Foundation told AFP on Sunday. Hahn died peacefully at his home in Wolfsburg on Saturday morning aged 96. Die Welt daily reported late Saturday.

As head of VW from 1982 to 1993, Hahn is credited with overseeing sweeping changes that helped catapult the company to international suc-

cess. The group took over Seat and Skoda under his watch and also began expanding into China—now its most important market.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Hahn also took pains to ensure that Volkswagen expanded into East Germany and rebuilt the company's Zwickau plant, which today makes electric cars. "With his sense for opportunities, timing and emerging markets, Hahn laid the foundations for Volkswagen's success," Die Welt said.

Hahn was born in 1926 in Chemnitz into a family of industrialists. He studied economics in Germany, Switzerland and Britain before beginning his career with Fiat in Italy. He first worked at Volkswagen in North America and later completed a stint at tyre company Continental in Hanover before returning to the German group as chief executive. —AFP



Carl Hahn

Paris to hold referendum on e-scooter rental

PARIS: Parisians will be invited to vote on whether to allow electric scooter rental services to continue operating in the city as authorities weigh banning the controversial for-hire vehicles, the capital's mayor has said. The issue is "extremely divisive", mayor Anne Hidalgo told the weekend edition of Le Parisien newspaper, with critics saying riders show only cursory respect for the rules of the road.

They often defy bans on riding on pavements, or park without consideration, while some abandon the scooters in parks or even toss them into the Seine river. Fans meanwhile praise the zippy fleets — totalling 15,000 scooters operated by companies Lime, Dott and Tier — as a fast, non-polluting alternative to cars or crowded public transport.

Hidalgo said Paris residents would be asked "a very simple question" in the referendum planned for April 2: "Do we or don't we continue with free-floating rental scooters?" The mayor said she herself was leaning towards a ban but would "respect Parisians' vote".

A ban would make Paris an exception among major cities. In September, the capital already threatened the three operators with non-renewal of their licences, which expire in March, if they failed to limit reckless riding and other "misuses".

The operators in November came up with a number of suggested improvements, including equipping the scooters with licence plates that would allow

away consumer prices with UK inflation at 10.7 percent — the highest for about 40 years.

World Cup boost

Britons splashed cash while watching the football World Cup, which was held in Qatar and began on November 20. "The economy grew a little in November, with increases in telecommunications and computer programming helping to push the economy forward," said ONS director of economic statistics Darren Morgan.

"Pubs and bars also did well as people went out to watch World Cup games. "This was partially offset by further falls in some manufacturing industries ... as well as falls in transport and postal, partially due to the impact of strikes."

However, the ONS also revealed that the UK economy shrank 0.3 percent in the three months to November compared with the three months to August. "Over the last three months ... the economy still shrank — mainly due to the impact of the extra bank holiday for the funeral of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth in September," Morgan noted.



Electric scooters are seen on display.

easier tracking of riders running a red light, or travelling in pairs on the single-person vehicles — both common violations. But David Belliard, Hidalgo's deputy in charge of urban transport, still said a cost-benefit analysis did not favour the rental schemes.

"They are in the way and they are dangerous," he told AFP, saying he favoured a ban to "pacify

our streets and pavements". There was "too much negative feedback" from citizens about the scooters, he said.

Hidalgo told Le Parisien meanwhile that privately owned scooters, also hugely popular in the capital, were not targeted in the referendum. They are "not a problem", she said. —AFP

The Bank of England and the UK government believe the economy has already entered recession on fallout from sky-high inflation. GDP had already contracted by 0.3 percent in the third quarter, or three months to September.

A fourth-quarter decline would place Britain in a technical recession. Germany's economy, which is also expected to go into a recession this year, avoided a contraction late last year, with data Friday showing it stagnated in the fourth quarter.

'Smells of stagnation'

"On a three-monthly basis, the UK still shrank, and a 0.1-percent gain on a monthly basis smells heavily of stagnation, rather than real growth," warned analyst Sophie Lund-Yates at stockbroker Hargreaves Lansdown.

"The idea that the UK will formally enter a recession soon is still very much a likelihood. "The boost in November could stem from extra spending in the economy in the run up to Christmas, and there's real risk now that consumers are going to tighten their belts." Britain's CBI business lobby remains fearful of

a prolonged downturn, warning that monthly data cannot mask the economy's underlying problems.

Intense cost pressures

"High inflation is severely impacting household budgets and businesses are facing intense cost pressures. As a result, consumer spending and investment plans are weakening," said CBI economist Almesh Paleja.

"The question for the government now is not whether we will fall into recession, but how long and deep the recession will be." Inflation has surged on rocketing energy bills caused by key producer Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as supply constraints following the lifting of COVID lockdowns and Brexit fallout.

The Conservative government of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is currently partially subsidising energy bills in a bid to cushion the impact.

In recent months, however, strikes have multiplied across the economy — including by hospital, railway and postal workers — in protest over pay that has failed to keep pace with runaway prices. —AFP