

Connie Moreland Interviewer: TBLI Conference Student Worker

One of the men behind the success of the Hong Kong public transportation system is Glenn Frommer. During the TBLI conference, Frommer spoke on the topic of Transport-Oriented Development (TOD), the method which allowed Hong Kong to not only pay for their public transit system but also make a profit of \$2 billion in 2012. The idea behind TOD is to develop high-density cities on top of rail stations radiating about 500 meters. Seen from a distance, you could call this model a “string of pearls” in Frommer’s words.

Perhaps what Frommer is most well-known for is being the Father of Sustainability of Hong Kong. In 2001, Frommer wrote the first sustainability report for the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) Corporation, the first released in China. As Head of Corporate Sustainability, Frommer “put in place the ISO 140000 certification for the railway operations and then designed the railway, the maintenance of the railway, and made it so the properties that are allied to the railway.”

When asked if he had a favorite metro in the world, Frommer replied that “Hong Kong’s pretty good.” It’s what he and 90% of the Hong Kong population used on a daily basis. However, there’s always room for improvement and innovation. Frommer is a proponent of implementing more of, and further developing, smart card systems.

“I would like to see a closer integration of all public transport with transit-oriented developments where you have commercial activities centered very much at the train station,” Frommer said. “People are busy, they want to go through train stations and when they do go through train stations the transit business could essentially sell stuff to the passengers. If they had a smart card system developed you could, for example, online order two liters of milk and a baguette and pick them up at the store on your way out of the station.”

Frommer’s currently is a managing partner of the sustainable consultancy ESG Matters where he can focus on what he really enjoys: helping make businesses more sustainable.

“It’s a small consultancy company that I can entertain the kind of work that I really want to do,” Frommer said. “So on the one hand I’m advising pro bono on the other hand I’m advising the international association of public transport in the dealings with UNFCCC, so it’s a full range, a full spectrum of activities.”

As a public transport expert, I was curious to hear Frommer’s thoughts on a recent public transportation idea proposed by Elon Musk, the hyperloop.

Frommer said: “I would like to see how much energy is being used per person per kilometer. There’s money but also energy involved, and we’re not at the state now where energy is so cheap that you shouldn’t be metering it; it’s still going to cost money. I would like to see on all these items coming up what’s the trend with the use of energy to move people from A to B. And I have no idea what it would cost with this system... You need bells and whistles; you need to have safety belting; you need to have fire protection built in. With the costs, it’s not going to be as cheap as you think.”

Finally, I asked Frommer for his advice to young professionals who want to be work on sustainability in business and investing.

Frommer said: “Just do the best you can do and do as many things as you can do...I've tried to keep myself as broad as possible and keep the flexibility open. I have a basic degree in aerospace in airplane mechanics; I learned to be a technician fixing airplanes in secondary school; I'm a qualified rocket scientist, worked for NASA for a while; I studied inner ear surgery and worked on cochlear implants. You can sleep when you get old.”

Being sustainable is also a personal value of Frommer's. He has been a vegetarian for over 40 years

The fact that I am a vegetarian makes me very much aware of the supply chain and the sourcing involved in the food. and for 15 years my wife and i were 90% self-sufficient in everything we ate. We grew it all. Preserved it all. So I know how difficult it is and how much time is involved in it. But it made me keenly aware of the supply side where's the food come from.

Be good at what you do. Be the best you can be. And it doesn't matter what it is.-But each of the times there's been a thread and my wish for everybody that's listening to this interview at some point in their lives they realize the connections throughout their life. why things have happened, when they've happened, and how you could prepare better for the things that will happen. So just do the best you can do and do as many things as you can do. You can sleep when you get old. 4 or 5 hours a night. I read a lot (independent learner). To be as widely read as you can be. Pick things up that you don't agree with and find out why you don't agree with them.