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BACK TO THE FUTURE - WOODEN SEATS RETURN

Malcolm Bulpitt reports on the people's choice in Basel



ABOVE: BVB Siemens 'Combino' Tram at Basel SBB.
Photo: Bremgarten

RIGHT: BLT Stadler 'Tango' tram at Ettingen.
Photo: Bryan Stone

Earlier this year BVB (the municipal tram operator owned by Canton Basel Stadt) had a trial going-on in one of its current vehicles comparing both the normal upholstered 'padded' seats and ergonomically shaped moulded plywood seats. Over a period this vehicle was scheduled to operate over all the city routes and at certain times the tram was manned by staff undertaking a survey of passengers preferences for the seating planned for the current order of 80 new units from Bombardier. Other public consultation also took place. The local daily newspaper pre-empted the result of the exercise on April 1st with a leg-pull regarding a split between 'white-collar' (preferring the wooden) and 'blue-collar' (preferring the fabric) travellers but, as they probably guessed, within their spoof there was an element of truth. The full results of the consultation exercise showed that there was an overwhelming preference for the wood over the padded fabric. It was expected that wood might have been chosen by some sections of the community, as the local paper guessed, but the massive vote in favour of wooden seats came as a surprise. The figures were 58.5% for wood, 27.5% for fabric and 14.0% who had no preference. Reasons given by those who chose to comment were basically around hygiene and comfort in hot weather, whilst many also commented that they preferred the wooden seat as it was more eco-friendly because of its use of renewable resources. It should be remembered that located in the Rhein valley with a continental climate Basel can get very hot (30c+) and humid for long periods in the summer. The Swiss also have a much higher awareness of ecological issues than is the case in the



UK. The BVB is apparently to go-along with the result, its spokesman noting that *"We asked the experts, our customers."*. Most trips on the BVB are reasonably short with few exceeding 15-minutes and many travellers actually prefer to stand for short hops. The longer distance tram services in the area, one runs into France and trips of 30-minutes are common, are operated by BLT (owned by Canton Basel Land which surrounds the Swiss side of the city) although they share the track infrastructure in the central city. The BLT is currently in the process of receiving a new fleet of Stadler 'Tango' vehicles with padded fabric seats. In years to come it will be interesting on the sections where they run together to see if some passengers vote with their feet (bottoms?) and chose the 'comfort' of the yellow BLT vehicles as against the 'ergonomics' of the green BVB ones. One wonders how this exercise would have gone down in Manchester, Sheffield, or any other British location with trams. Would their customers have voted for wooden seats even if they were modern, comfortable, moulded plywood types rather than the slatted wood that earlier generations of trams had? 