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FirstGroup boss Moir Lockhead says a magnetic levitation train could be viable for Scotland.
Picture: Ian Rutherford

We can beat the bullet - train chief

ALASTAIR DALTON TRANSPORT CORRESPONDENT

- First ScotRail boss sees 300 mph maglev train as a transport solution
- The magnetic levitation train can reach speeds of 311mph
- An Edinburgh and Glasgow link is estimated to cost £1.8bn plus cost of land

Key quote "Whatever the preferred solution, it will provide a genuine increase in rail capacity as well as shrinking the distance between our major cities." - Moir Lockhead

Story in full A HIGH-SPEED train which would harness the power of magnetism to hurtle passengers from Edinburgh to Glasgow in 12 minutes could be built alongside the M8, the head of Britain's largest transport firm said.

Moir Lockhead, the chief executive of FirstGroup, said a 300mph magnetic levitation - or maglev - must be considered along with conventional "bullet trains" for the next generation of high-speed rail projects in Britain. Mr Lockhead, whose Aberdeen-based firm runs First ScotRail, said Scotland and the rest of the UK was in the unique position of being able to leapfrog current train technology and go for the maglev option.

A maglev link between Edinburgh and Glasgow is estimated by UK Ultraspeed, the promoters of a Glasgow-London line, to cost £1.8 billion plus the cost of the land required. A conventional bullet train, along the lines of the French TGV, would cost £1.5-4 billion.

Maglev would run on a separate guideway and might not serve city centres because of the extra cost, while bullet trains could run on existing rail lines that would enable better interchange with other trains. However, maglev could reach 311mph (500kmh) compared to 220mph (350kmh) for bullet trains.

Rail industry leaders backing bullet trains, including former Virgin Trains chief executive Chris Green, formed a lobby group, Greengauge21, in January, partly to counter the proponents of maglev, who claim to have the ear of Tony Blair, the Prime Minister.

Rod Eddington, the former chief executive of British Airways, has been commissioned by the government to study such future transport projects and is due to report this year.

Mr Lockheed told a conference in Glasgow yesterday: "We have a unique opportunity to study both options and evaluate the benefits and costs of each. "Whatever the preferred solution, it will provide a genuine increase in rail capacity as well as shrinking the distance between our major cities.

"Edinburgh to Glasgow in 12 minutes might be attractive."

Mr Lockheed said the line could follow the M8 rather than a separate route to minimise the extra land required, especially as the motorway runs close to Glasgow city centre.

UK Ultraspeed proposes a London-Glasgow line that would skirt round Edinburgh, with an interchange at Millerhill, on its south-east edge, and also serve Edinburgh airport. But Mr Lockheed said a centre-to-centre line between Edinburgh and Glasgow should not be ruled out. The maglev guideway could be elevated up to 65ft to minimise the land required.

The FirstGroup chief became a fan of maglev after visiting the only operating system in the world, which links Shanghai to its airport in China. It runs at 267mph over a 19-mile route that opened in 2003.

The transport chief said at the time: "Seeing really is believing with this revolutionary technology. I didn't believe a surface railway could travel at 500kmh without wheels until I travelled on the maglev.

"The UK does not have a European-style high-speed network and so is in an almost unique position to leapfrog ahead. We are well placed to look 20-30 years ahead and ask 'is this the technology for us?'"

Maglev uses technology that was another British transport breakthrough - like tilting trains - which was perfected abroad.

Trains float on, and are propelled by, their guideway's powerful magnetic field. A variable electric current would provide propulsion and braking. Professor Eric Laithwaite, of Imperial College London, demonstrated its potential in the 1950s and the world's first passenger-carrying maglev linked Birmingham airport with a nearby rail station in 1984. It was scrapped ten years ago because of unreliability.

Critics have urged caution because of maglev's limited use to date and several planned schemes in Germany have been scrapped because of their cost.

Dr Iain Docherty, a transport expert at Glasgow University, has said: "Britain would bear a lot of the risk to be the first to adopt it on a large scale." A high-speed rail report by the Institution of Civil Engineers last year noted: "As a technology, maglev is still in its infancy, and only viable if trains are not needed to also run on the existing steel rail network."

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