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Metropolis

> snapshots from the center of the universe

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What Our Skyline Needs Is Minicars

MICHAEL T. JARVIS

It's still very much in the research-and-development phase, but inventor Doug Malewicki intends to eliminate commuter congestion with his latest brainstorm, the super-fast SkyTran personal transporter system of tiny two-seater vehicles that would take a commuter 100 mph to the station of his choice on aerial monorails. Creative foment is second nature to Malewicki, 65, a former Apollo space program analyst whose résumé includes the Robosaurus monster robot as well as the card game "Nuclear War." Clean high-speed commuting is an obsession for the Irvine resident, whose lightweight 157-mpg "California Commuter" car prototype won him a place in the Guinness World Records book in 1980. Malewicki took a break from pitching SkyTran to potential investors and consulting with Sweden on aerial rapid transit to tell us why it isn't just pie in the sky.

We're going to ask for the nutshell version here.

SkyTran is not a mass transportation system. Mass systems move large groups of people at a time. SkyTran is on-demand. You never wait for a vehicle because they are sitting in line waiting for you. Once boarded, your personal SkyTran vehicle never stops or slows down until you have arrived at your chosen destination. We plan to use guideway support poles along existing streets or existing sidewalks. We'd have hundreds of thousands buzzing along the guideway using automated sensor controls.

Are you promising the automobile addicts of Southern California that they won't have to interact with strangers?

Ninety-nine percent of the time these will be ridden solo, especially for commuting. They only seat two. The guy in the back is a little jammed in, but the guy in front is real comfy. But how often are two people leaving at the same time and going to the same place? It just doesn't happen. So you just grab a solo.

Slowly, very slowly, can you brief us on the technology?

SkyTran relies on revolutionary maglev technology. The vehicle rides on an induced magnetic wave without active electrical input. The magnets generate electricity that gets it accelerating. Once you reach a minimum speed, it rides the magnetic wave. It's 90% efficient. Ten or 20 years ago it couldn't have been done. The computers would have been as big as a table and cost 50 grand. Now they're \$200 and smaller than a laptop. It's Moore's Law. You can do amazing things.



Doug Malewicki with model of his "California Commuter" car and photo of SkyTran vehicle.

What does your idea have over light rail?

Light rail is totally obsolete. It's just hideous. With stops, light rail moves at 15 to 17 mph. We're talking 100 mph. Group transit, you have to let people off and on. That kills your average speed. In the old days there was a guy driving it. Now you have computers. One bidirectional line can move 14,400 people per hour.

Won't electric cars bury the SkyTran concept?

If you could get 200 mpg, it wouldn't do anything for congestion. Cars are too big. The 405 Freeway is a congested mess. But if a mile away we could put the 406 guideway, and another mile away, the 407, and the 408, what's going to happen? You're going to fly.

Do you see SkyTran replacing the car?

You'll end up with one-car families, the fun car, to go places and get groceries. SkyTran is not the thing to go get groceries with. The main thing is to eliminate commuter congestion. If everyone could get between work and home at 100 mph, what does that do for quality of life?

What are the obstacles to making this a reality?

Mostly money. You need a guy with a personality like Gov. Schwarzenegger. If this was his invention, it would already be happening. The politicians are just idiots, I think. I want to grab them by the ear and say, "Sit in a high school class for a semester and learn some math and physics."

Aren't you asking taxpayers to take a huge leap of faith on an unproven idea?

Nope. We want private money. We don't want the government interfering with this. We're going with theme parks. A zero to 300 mph to zero ride would probably be very popular. There won't ever be long lines. We're trying to say, "If you build this ride, you can become the manufacturer of this."