

Hong Kong opens high-speed rail link with mainland China

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong has opened a new high-speed rail link to inland China that will vastly decrease travel times but also raises concerns about Beijing's creeping influence over the semi-autonomous Chinese region.

Costing upward of \$10 billion and taking more than eight years to build, the system aims to transport more than 80,000 passengers daily between the Asian financial center of 7 million people and the neighboring manufacturing hub of Guangdong province.

The train travels the 16 miles through Hong Kong to Shenzhen across the border in China in just 14 minutes, down from about one hour currently. The through-train to Guangdong's capital of Guangzhou will take just over half an hour, about 90 minutes faster than current service.

Once across the border, passengers can link up with China's sprawling nationwide high-speed rail network serving more than 44 destinations, including Shanghai, Beijing, and the western city of Xi'an.

Passengers will clear Chinese immigration at the line's newly built West Kowloon terminus, the source of major legal



FAST TRACK. A woman waves a British flag outside the Western Kowloon Station during a protest against the opening ceremony of the Hong Kong Express Rail Link in Hong Kong. Hong Kong has opened a new high-speed rail link to inland China that will vastly decrease travel times but also raises concerns about Beijing's creeping influence over the semi-autonomous Chinese region. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

However, Beijing's tight control over the city's politics and a continuing crackdown on politicians calling for greater economy and democratic reforms have spurred worries about an erosion of Hong Kong's remaining autonomy.

The Hong Kong legislature's passage in June of the plan to allow Chinese law to apply at the railway terminus was a significant moment for the opposition, coming four years after mass street protests demanding reforms fizzled out amid Beijing's intransigence. Pro-democracy legislators have been expelled and charges brought against more than 100 protesters.

Supporters of the provision, including the territory's Beijing-backed chief executive Carrie Lam, defended it as promoting speed and convenience.

controversy when it was revealed that mainland Chinese law would apply within roughly one-quarter of the station's area.

Some opposition lawmakers argued the move would be a violation of the Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini-constitution under which it retained its own legal system and civil liberties after reverting from British

to Chinese rule in 1997. That guarantees Hong Kong the right to maintain rights such as freedom of speech and assembly — which are routinely violated on the mainland — until 2047. Legal matters related to defense, foreign affairs, and national security fall under Beijing purview.

Will flying cars take off? Japan's government hopes so

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happy if you land a flying car in your backyard or on your rooftop."

Though the Japanese government has resisted Uber's efforts to offer ride-hailing services in Japan, limiting it to partnerships with taxi companies, it has eagerly embraced the U.S. company's work on EVtol machines.

Uber says it is considering Tokyo as its first launch city for affordable flights via its UberAir service. It says Los Angeles and Dallas, Texas, and locations in Australia, Brazil, France, and India are other possible locations.

Unlike regular airplanes, with their aerodynamic design and two wings, Uber's "Elevate" structures look like small jets with several propellers on top. The company says it plans flight demonstrations as soon as 2020 and a commercial service by 2023.

Uber's vision calls for using heliports on rooftops, but new multi-floored construction similar to parking lots for cars will likely be needed to accommodate EVtol aircraft if the service takes off.

Unmanned drones are legal in Japan, the U.S., and other countries, but there are restrictions on where they can be flown and requirements for getting approval in advance. In Japan, drone flyers can be licensed if they take classes. There is no requirement like drivers licenses for cars.

Flying passengers over populated areas would take a quantum leap in technology, overhauling aviation regulations and air traffic safety controls, along with major efforts both to ensure safety and convince people it's safe.

Uber said at a recent presentation in Tokyo that it envisions a route between the city's two international airports, among others.

"This is not a rich person's toy. This is a mass market solution," said Adam Warmoth, product manager at Uber "Elevate."

Concepts for flying cars vary greatly. Some resemble vehicles with several propellers on top while others look more like a boat with a seat over the propellers.

Mystery around disappearance of Chinese star Fan Bingbing

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a toll on her lucrative sideline as brand ambassador, throwing those companies' plans into disarray. Australian vitamin brand Swisse issued a statement saying it was suspending use of her image and "continuing to monitor the situation and hope that it is resolved in the near future."

British diamond giant De Beers, who signed with Fang just last year, appears to have already moved on: Another actress, Gao Yuanyuan, represented the company at a

recent store opening in the ancient capital of Xi'an. Other firms she endorsed, from duty-free chain King Power to Louis Vuitton and Montblanc are also taking action.

"There's a lot more risk for celebrities in China than in the United States, because the government takes much more of a moral crackdown," said China Market Research's Rein. "So there's a greater risk for celebrities to get in trouble with the law and never be able to get a chance at redemption."

Ebihara, the flying-car chief at the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, says Japan is on board for *Blade Runner* style travel — despite its plentiful, efficient, and well developed public transportation.

Japan's auto and electronics industries have the technology and ability to produce super-light materials that could give the nation an edge in the flying-car business, he said.

Just as the automobile vanquished horse-drawn carriages, moving short-distance transport into the air could in theory bring a sea change in how people live, Ebihara said, pointing to the sky outside the ministry building to stress how empty it was compared to the streets below.

Flying also has the allure of a bird's eye view, the stuff of drone videos increasingly used in filmmaking, tourism promotion, and journalism.

Atsushi Taguchi, a "drone grapher," as specialists in drone video are called, expects test flights can be carried out even if flying cars won't become a reality for years since the basic technology for stable flying already exists with recent advances in sensors, robotics, and digital cameras.

A growing labor shortage in deliveries in Japan is adding to the pressures to realize such technology, though there are risks, said Taguchi, who teaches at the Tokyo film school Digital Hollywood.

The propellers on commercially sold drones today are dangerous, and some of his students have lost fingers with improper flying. The bigger propellers needed for vertical flight would increase the hazards and might need to be covered.

The devices might need parachutes to soften crash landings, or might have to explode into small bits to ensure pieces hitting the ground would be smaller.

"I think one of the biggest hurdles is safety," said Taguchi. "And anything that flies will by definition crash."

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