

● AGRA METRO

Train to Taj Mahal given green light

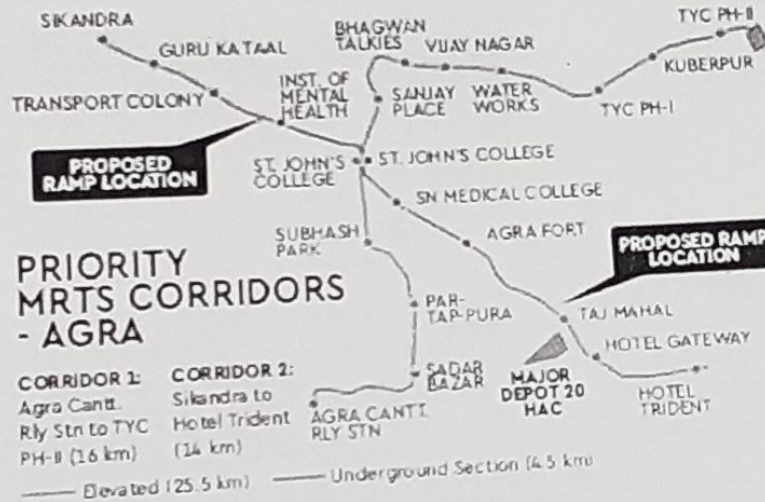
Scheduled to be ready by 2024, the Agra Metro will be welcomed by the city's residents and tourists alike

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AGRA, A CITY known the world over for the Taj Mahal, the monument of eternal love, is in for a makeover. Come 2024, it would be able to boast a world-class public transport system, providing respite from traffic congestion not only to its residents but also the almost 2 crore tourists who descend on it from all parts of the world every year.

It was last month that the Union Cabinet gave the green light for the Agra Metro Rail project, which is estimated to cost ₹8,415.63 crore and take five years to execute (March, 2024 is the scheduled timeline). According to the detailed project report (DPR) approved by the Cabinet, the project comprises two corridors which would pass through the heart of the city, connecting prominent tourist spots like the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort and Sikandra as well as important places like ISBT, Raja Ki Mandi railway station, medical college, Agra Cantt railway station, and the Collectorate.

Says Kumar Keshav, managing director of the Lucknow Metro Rail Corporation, the nodal agency for the project, "while Corri-



dor 1 (14 km) would run from Sikandra to Taj East Gate, Corridor 2 (15.4 km) would extend from Agra Cantt to Kalindi Vihar. Corridor 1 would have 6 elevated and 7 underground stations. Corridor 2 would be completely elevated, having 14 stations".

While the Union and state governments would each provide 20% equity, amounting to ₹1466.26 crore, for the project, the rest of the money would be raised through bilateral or multilateral loans. Talks with prospective lenders are going to begin soon, Keshav says—the UP government cleared the decks for the project when it allocated ₹175 crore under the head in its Budget in February this year.

The Agra Metro project was necessitated

by the rapid growth in size and population that the city has witnessed in recent decades. The third most populous city of Uttar Pradesh, Agra's population grew from 5.9 lakh in 1971 to 15.9 lakh in 2011—it is estimated to be 24 lakh at present. In terms of size, the Agra Development Authority's geographical area expanded from 61.8 sq km in 1971 to 520.2 sq km in 2008.

Being a part of the Golden Triangle tourist circuit along with Delhi and Jaipur and home to three UNESCO world heritage sites—the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri—Agra draws vast numbers of tourists, both domestic and international, every year. While getting to see a monument like the Taj is a dream come true for visitors, traversing

Agra's congested streets can often be a nightmare. The lack of a modern and efficient means of public transport is thus felt alike by the city's residents and tourists, who have to reckon with traffic congestion, pollution, parking woes, and accidents.

Keshav accepts it would be a challenge to get a project of such scale executed in the congested and densely populated city, especially since stress is being laid on the beauty of its monuments not being impacted. "Our design team is working to ensure that the Metro project does not tarnish the Taj Mahal in any way," he says, adding that work on both the corridors would run simultaneously and are expected to be complete at around the same time.

