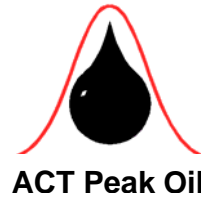


Submission from ACT Peak Oil
to the ACT Assembly
Standing Committee on Planning and Environment
Inquiry into ACTION Buses



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Introduction

ACT Peak Oil was formed in early 2005 by Canberrans concerned about the implications of Peak Oil, the imminent global peak and irreversible decline of world oil production. This critical issue is garnering increasing attention in the public sphere and will gain in importance to rival Climate Change.

For a fuller discussion of Peak Oil, its implications and our response, we recommend our submission to the recent Senate oil inquiry (Pollard, 2006).

This submission will address one point in the terms of reference:

Inquire into and investigate the services provided by ACTION buses, specifically:

....

- providing guidance on principles and key priorities for future service planning.

Guidance for future service planning

ACT Peak Oil is concerned that transport planning in the ACT is deeply flawed.

The problem is pretty fundamental: No part of the ACT Government has formally acknowledged the threat of Peak Oil in the formulation of policy. A Google search for “peak oil” within the site “act.gov.au” reveals no public document from planning bodies mentioning “Peak Oil”. It is clear however from various submissions and Hansard entries that Peak Oil is an issue of concern to many, including the former planning minister Mr Corbell.

Peak Oil is not just one of many factors that should be taken into account; it is one of the key factors. Not just is it being overlooked, but it represents a massive and sudden change. The peak of world oil production will be a once-off event, but it will impact us tremendously. Indeed, it may already be upon us. The time at which production peaks

will be an inflexion point. Prices are likely to escalate dramatically and continually. It will not facilitate a gradual market-based transition. This is because we require one or two decades to adjust our infrastructure and behaviour to cope with fuel scarcity (Hirsch, 2003). The price signals however will only reach us as the crisis hits – and that could be a mere matter of months from now.

At the time prices escalate dramatically we need to be thinking about what infrastructure we want in 20 years. If the planning bodies are thinking in terms of brief price spikes and gradual price escalation, they will not see the need to create transport options that are not reliant on fossil fuels. We risk wasting hundreds of millions of dollars and many years in propping up an unsustainable transport system.

Not just will fuel be scarcer, but also bitumen which is required for road maintenance. The ACT Government already has an expensive inheritance in maintaining Canberra's very extensive road system. The costs are likely to increase greatly.

Rail

Electrified light rail has a number of advantages of roads. It can be powered from renewable resources. It runs on narrow rails, requiring a much-reduced maintenance effort. There is far less energy loss from rail than for tyres running on roads. For these reasons it needs serious evaluation. All previous arguments that it is not economic or that Canberra is too "spread-out" are probably irrelevant since they were made without reference to Peak Oil. The question needs to be asked, with very high and increasing fuel prices, what alternatives to light rail would be economic? Will bicycles, walking, buses and telecommuting be sufficient?

Competitive Planning

Without a non fossil-fuel-based transport system it is likely that both Canberra and Queanbeyan will equally suffer from Peak Oil. Indeed, parts of the ACT are some distance further from employment centres than Queanbeyan and could become quite undesirable places to live.

Presently the ACT Government is feeling competition from land releases around Queanbeyan. While ACT Peak Oil believes that urban development cannot continue indefinitely given limits such as water supply, we would suggest that the ACT Government should consider a forward-looking option for attracting development.

We propose that the ACT differentiate itself by planning and building an integrated electrified transport system. The ACT can call upon resources more easily than nearby development jurisdictions and would be aided in seeking funds by its status as the National Capital – the Commonwealth may decide that complete dependence on buses does not benefit the National Capital.

Recommendation:

The imminent and profoundly disruptive arrival of Peak Oil should be explicitly acknowledged in preparing transport and planning policy for the ACT.

References

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