

Sustainable Transport Plan & ACTION Busses – Submission

This paper discussing the ACT Sustainable Transport Plan and ACTION busses is submitted by the Australian National University Students Association (ANUSA) in conjunction with the ANUSA Environment Department (ANUED).

Sustainable Transport Plan

The ANUSA Students Association, in conjunction with the ANUSA Environment Collective see a number of positive factors in the ACT Sustainable Transport Plan and lament the official dropping of the plan. ANUSA and the ANUED believe that the plan is the best way for the ACT to move into a more sustainable transport system that both caters better for the environment and for student travel needs.

We believe that the current public transport system in the ACT is inadequate for the Canberra populous and see that major changes to the system are essential for the development of a more environmentally sustainable, efficient and equitable system. We believe that more money needs to be put into the ACT transport system, although this may create short-term losses. We see that these initial losses will be re-gained as patronage increases.

Students, Public Transport and the Sustainable Transport Plan

Transport is a major issue for students in terms of being able to access education, work and social aspects of their life. Although, in general Canberra is an easily accessible city, the public transport system in the city makes transport much more difficult for students, especially those in the outer suburbs. Students, in general can be classified as a group who do not have great access to private transport but often require to travel to various different destinations within one day to accommodate study, work and social activities. Therefore, for accessibility within the city to be appropriate for students it is important that a city such as Canberra has a flexible, accommodative and reliable public transport system. ANUSA and the ANUED believe that the public transport system in Canberra does not currently fit these requirements. However, we believe through the implementation of the ACT Sustainable Transport Plan the ACT public transport system could improve to a level where it accommodates students to a reasonable level.

The factors of the sustainable transport plan that ANUSA and the ANUED see to be the most important and would like to see implemented as soon as possible are as follows:

- Increase in bus services, especially after hours: A large proportion of ANU students must work to be able to make a living while studying. Unfortunately for these students this often means working late nights in cafes, restaurants and bars. With the current bus system stopping all

services from the city at 11pm, students are regularly unable to use the bus system, as they will not be able to get home after work. This is why we see that it is essential for bus hours to be extended further into the night, to allow for greater patronage for students.

- Increased density in the city: ANUSA and the ANUED believe that one of the best ways to create more sustainable transport is for an increase in density in the city area, as to allow for students to walk or ride to Uni or work. Although we are seeing this progression being undertaken in the city we believe that the current progression is providing inequitable accommodation that is too expensive for students to live in. ANUSA and the ANUED would like to see a move away from the prohibitively expensive accommodation being constructed in the city and a move to the construction of more affordable accommodation for the city. We see this as an essential requirement the ACT to be able to achieve any possible goals surrounding reducing the need for travel within the ACT. Concurrently, ANUSA and the ANUED see the development of more affordable accommodation within the city as the only way possible to make the Canberra transport system a truly equitable system, with fair travel opportunities for all Canberra citizens
- Busways: ANUSA and the ANUED see that the long travel periods on the current public transport system are one of the major factors regarding the lack of use of the system. With the current way student life is set up, with students having to travel to many different places to either go to school, work or social activities the travel times on public transport is an essential factor for students transport decision. Public transport times in the current system are prohibitably long for many students and we see this to be a major reason for many students not using public transport. ANUSA and the ANUED see the construction of busways as the best way to solve this problem. We believe that not only should busways be constructed in existing areas they should also be placed into planning for all new Canberra areas.
- Increased safety measures, especially in interchanges: ANUSA and the ANUED believe that many students feel unsafe on some ACTION services and in bus interchanges, especially at night. We believe that it is essential for immediate action to be taken to improve the safety on both ACTION busses and in interchanges, with complete overhauls of both the Belconnen and Woden interchanges being required. We see this as not only a way to increase the safety on busses but also as a way to increase bus patronage. We believe that measures such as guards in interchanges, increased lighting, better interchange design and video cameras need to be introduced to increase safety.
- Passenger Information: ANUSA and the ANUED believe that passenger information systems are important for the continued improved of the ACT public transport system. In current situations public transport customers are left stranded at interchanges for sometimes over an hour, without any knowledge about what has happened to their scheduled bus. This can lead to great anger over ACTION services, with customers left looking for other travel options. To solve this problem an increase in customer information is essential. ANUSA and the ANUED understand that busses can be delayed or

cancelled but think it is unacceptable to leave large amounts of customers stranded with no knowledge of what is happening. Therefore, we see that the instalment of real time information systems as well as SMS information systems as an important move to increase the continued improvement of ACTION services.

The environment and public transport

ANUSA and the ANUED see that the improvement of the ACT public transport system is not only essential for increased social equity in Canberra but also for Canberra to be able to improve its environmental standards. With climate change and peak oil now facing big threats it is essential for the Canberra population to move away from its dependence on cars and to a greater public transport system. We believe that the best way for the ACT to achieve acceptable environmental standards in transport is for the immediate implementation of the ACT Sustainable Transport Plan. We see the plan and its targets as being environmentally sound and the best way for Canberra to continue helping the environment through transport changes.

Action Buses

In Canberra, a vast majority of university students rely on Action Buses as our only means of transport. We therefore realise the importance of this opportunity to offer constructive criticism of the system as it currently stands, and hope that the following issues will be considered in the future:

Frequency

Students often work unusual hours outside of class time, and have relatively low incomes. This means that we rely on buses for transport *all* of the time, not just during peak hours like most working professionals. Higher frequency of buses in peak times is completely rational, but we feel that this is currently at the cost of off-peak services. For students, late night services in particular do not come frequently enough for us to get home safely. As late shift workers and social beings, many students are let down by the fact that buses stop entirely after midnight- centrelink incomes do not allow us the luxury of taking taxis and as a consequence, many students are forced into vulnerable situations. Our other major timetable concern is in the Sunday routes- once again about off-peak frequency- because the weekend is the main time when students have to travel to work. All services need to run more frequently, because as general consumers would probably agree, the peak services tend to be crowded and slow anyway.

Timetables

The timetables of routes such as the 900 series are difficult to understand, and on smaller bus stops the timetable signs are either outdated or were never installed. This results in a lot of confusion about the right times and

stops. As people who rely entirely on buses to get to classes and work, many students necessarily stress about missing buses because it directly affects their livelihood. This problem could be alleviated very easily by installing clear timetables at all stops.

Security

Because of the infrequency of late night buses, many students are forced to spend time waiting alone on the streets or in the intertown bus interchanges. Young women in particular do not feel at all safe in these situations because the layout of Belconnen, Woden and Tuggeranong Interchanges are very isolating. All three are removed from shops, police stations, or any highly populated places. In Belconnen there are only two ways in or out – one through a long, dimly lit tunnel into the Belconnen Mall car park (which is completely dark and unsafe after hours) and one up a narrow staircase into an area known for high crime rates. Woden is in a similar situation so it is no wonder that the interchanges are avoided if possible because they are known crime hotspots. Redesigning their layout could improve the safety of many students who have to use them after hours.

Furthermore, the security on buses themselves could be improved. The newer bus models with security cameras and blue security zones are really effective, but unfortunately most of the fleet still comprises of the ill-equipped older orange buses where the driver is powerless to act if anything happens.

Journey Length

As well as being infrequent, many trips take too long because the routes are unnecessarily indirect. Some suburban routes, particularly in the newer, cheaper suburbs, turn a five minute car journey into a half-hour meandering loop. To the frustrated passengers it seems like some services should be two services rather than one. Some examples include route 45 in Dunlop (30 minutes), any 50 series from Gungahlin market place to Belconnen (40 minutes or more) or to the city (30 minutes or more), route 27 between Cooleman Court and Woden Interchange (30 minutes) and the outer Tuggeranong routes. This is particularly irritating for students because these are the cheapest housing areas so therefore have a larger real and potential student demographic. Additionally, with the current off-peak timetables, older inner suburbs are being hit with the same inefficiency (in many cases two routes are being put into one or entire routes e.g. the 31 don't run), making consumers more confused about times and stops they can use.

The frustration students feel about infrequency and indirect routes is compounded by the incompatibility of intertown buses and suburban connections, which is again worse during off-peak times. Because buses inevitably run early or late (e.g. due to overcrowding- having to stop for a long time at every single stop), students have to consciously factor in an extra half hour between when intertown buses arrive at the interchange and when suburban buses leave. Otherwise, there is no guarantee of making the connection. This means that students have to spend more time sitting around waiting for buses in possible dangerous areas, and the journey times are even longer.

A Case Study

In conclusion here is a brief, completely honest case study of my bus experience in the last 24 hours, reflecting most of the concerns that us students have as a whole. I live on campus and don't have the income to run a car, so when I was invited to a family dinner I got out my timetables and started planning. After deciding to catch the last route 40 out of the city, I went to wait at the bus stop only for the bus to drive straight past me- maybe the stop wasn't lit enough for the driver to see me signalling, or maybe the bus was already over-full with professional commuters. In any case I had to wait for the next bus, a 42 (amalgamated 40/41 off-peak route) which turned my quick 10 minute ride into a full half-hour winding through three suburbs before I got to the right stop. I was lucky to have some dinner saved, and had a good time in general despite having 'travelled' (waiting and en route) for an hour. After a brief but leisurely supper I suddenly realised I had already missed the last bus home, which comes at the ridiculously early time of 10.30pm, and as my hosts also don't own a car I had no other option but to encroach on their hospitality and stay the night. In this circumstance I was lucky in that I knew these people well because otherwise (as has happened in my personal experience) I would have been forced to either spend the night in an unfamiliar, vulnerable environment or use all the money I had left for food to catch a taxi home. I had a major test today, and so I planned to get up and get home by about 9.30am to finish revising. It so happens that this is the crossover time for peak and off-peak services, and around Bowman Street (Jamison) the routes actually completely change direction between the 40 and 42. Looking at the timetable, I was completely confused about which side of the road I was supposed to be on, and this wasn't helped by the fact that neither of the two stops I had to chose from have timetables posted on them. With no way of checking I waited tentatively on one side for the 9am 42, along with two school-aged boys. Being so unsure I asked them if the bus had come and they said no, it was due in five minutes- waiting patiently in the cold and rain the bus they were waiting for turned out to be a 40 in the crossover time, going in the wrong direction. Because the 42 comes too infrequently I had to wait in the cold for another hour and then sit soaking in the 42 for another half-hour while it again wound its way through three suburbs before going to the city. I made it to my test on time, but had no time to revise and would have missed uni classes if they were scheduled for today. Coming out of this experience I felt frustrated, helpless, and disempowered.

I think that my experience brings to light the concerns students are making as a whole. We live off very low incomes so cannot afford cars, and many of us don't want cars anyway because we're part of an environmentally conscious generation. Therefore, we're a group that has faith in, and *must* rely on buses as our main form of transport. For a number of factors it is not as reliable as it could be. The buses are not frequent enough, timetables are absent and/or confusing, interchanges and lack of security put students in danger, cutbacks and amalgamations resulting in indirect routes lengthen journey time and because of this, connections are often inadequate.

That is not to say that we don't recognise and appreciate the services that Action currently provides. The fact that you are inviting us to discuss this and are taking action to amend cutbacks to timetables are positive signs. The

introduction of bike racks is a fantastic innovation, particularly for students (we'd like to see an expansion of services offering this in the future). Bus lanes are decreasing peak indigestion, and as always the drivers themselves come across as friendly and professional. Moreover, we hope that as the next generation of leaders, you will take into account the student voice in this submission.