

Submission

To the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment

Inquiry: Action Buses

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Introduction

In submitting this brief submission, I wish to draw attention to some concerns at the levels of the day to day operations of the ACTION service; the linkages of the service to other transport modes; and longer term planning for sustainable transport in the ACT.

Day to day operations

The recent changes have made the ACTION bus system largely non-viable for our family, living in Curtin. Not only are the services too infrequent for single trips, the infrequency of return journeys makes simple trips to town or university into major, time-consuming exercises. This has forced us into a much greater reliance on motor vehicles. The pattern of use of cars as against buses changes dramatically for this household after a few frustrating attempts to work with the new timetable. I think it is generally agreed that the new timetable is a disaster.

Having observed closely the transport arrangements in Geneva, a city with almost exactly the same population as Canberra and a comparable standard of living (and where people consistently choose public transport rather than their cars for moving around the urban area), and also Darwin which has quite a good bus service although for a smaller population, it seems to me the following criteria must apply to a new timetable (listed in order of importance):

- 1 frequency
- 2 reliability
- 3 price
- 4 comfort

The key is frequency. But reliability and good PR is also important. It is essential that the service has sufficient capacity to cope with breakdowns – there is nothing worse than cancelled services, with customers left at bus stops not knowing what is going on. Once a service loses customers because of unreliability it is hard to win them back.

As far as frequency, any interval between buses of more than 30 minutes is not viable – and the service should be aiming at 20 minute intervals as the norm.

In terms of the meeting community needs, it is time to move past seeing public transport as a welfare service and with some mass commuting in peak hours. It needs to be seen as a *comprehensive* service, meeting equity needs, mass transport, and general transport in non peak hours and at night and weekends.

Linkages

There is a failure to adequately and imaginatively link ACTION services to other modes:

1. At Canberra rail station: Buses should meet trains. The train should, when approaching Canberra, advise over the loud speaker system of the availability of the bus. The buses should either pull up right at the station, or there should be good signage.
2. At Jolimont, there is no information or signage to link arriving passengers with the ACTION bus service.
3. Why not have a public bus service from the airport?

Longer term planning

The public transport system must explicitly be a central element of the green-house gas reduction strategy of the ACT. Anything less would represent environmental irresponsibility of a high order. I am sure that the expectation of the Canberra community is for leadership from the ACT Government on emissions reduction and that public transport is seen as a key to achieving this outcome.

Amongst other things, as well as moving people from the present almost total reliance on cars, this means moving ACTION buses to less polluting fuels, viz natural gas or electricity through trolley systems (part of the Geneva mix). As well, it is long overdue to start serious planning for light rail/tram links between the major town centres. For a city of Canberra's size and projected growth this should be seen as an essential part of the public transport mix.

There is also a need to look at more imaginative and efficient service delivery. In particular, the involvement of drivers in fare collection at all should be phased out (again as in Geneva). Indeed ticket validation should take place at the stop not in the bus wherever possible. Some additional expenditure on compliance by having more teams of Inspectors would have far less costs than drivers' time spent in collecting fares, and even in waiting for validation of tickets on board. It really is time to get serious and modern in the provision of public transport.

Lastly, there is a need to improve train services – it is essential that Canberrans be able to return travel to Sydney every day, and that services be faster and more comfortable. The Canberra station should be developed into a transport hub, both for Canberra and the surrounding region, linking trains with buses. The rail service should have services that travel via the Sydney airport providing for that option for international travellers.

Eventually, we should be looking at linking the rail service to the main line at Yass or similar, and having a fast train service between Sydney Canberra and Melbourne. The savings in emissions from reducing the current reliance on the plane for short trips would potentially be significant.

Summary

The first priority is to get ACTION back on a viable basis by having a frequent and reliable service so that customers such as this family can start travelling from suburbs such as Curtin to, in our case, the city and Woden by bus as the norm.

However there are significant wider issues in regard to public transport infrastructure and service delivery that need to be given urgent consideration and early implementation if we are to move this city on to a modern and sustainable basis.

Yours faithfully

Greg Marks
8/05/2007