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ACT Legislative Assembly
Standing Committee
Enquiry into ACTION Buses

Members of the Committee

Thankyou for giving me the opportunity to comment on ACTION and its services and bus routes.

Firstly let me provide you with some of my background while employed by ACTION.

I joined the then Department of Interior as a bus driver in 1971 where I drove both route and school services through out the suburbs in Canberra.

1978 I was promoted to the supervisory ranks where I monitored the platforms of the City Interchange (London Circuit & East Row) and Woden Interchange. In the mid 1980's I was promoted to the now closed Woden Bus Depot where I became Depot Manager and Area Manager until its closure in the 1990's.

On the closure of Woden Depot I was transferred to the current Tuggeranong Bus Depot where I took up the duties of Manager Operations, South Region. This position took charge of bus operations, bus driver and supervisor movements south of Lake Burley Griffin. I held this position until my retirement in May of 2003.

I have witnessed a lot of changes over this period of time, some to the benefit of community, bus commuters and the organisation and some to the demise.

The public transport system has always been an expensive operation to maintain. This is caused by a number of factors which include staff wages, continual changes to meet standards, initiatives from both Government and outside agencies, public expectations, growing school service commitments and the like.

Quite a number of issues have been addressed in an attempt to reduce these expenses, bus operator (driver) and shift design reform, continual monitoring and adjustment of school services, re-direction of route services in an attempt to capture the travelling public requirements, move from full time to part time and contract drivers, continual adjustments to staffing numbers and the way ACTION did their business in the Corporate Office.

It is my belief that the biggest mistake ACTION has made was to close the Woden Bus Depot. I firmly believe ACT Government Treasury applied sufficient pressure on ACTION to close this depot due to the fact they (Treasury) believed it was unwarranted due to fact there were two larger depot on either the south or the north side of the city. This was the beginning of the demise of ACTION and its services.

What in fact happened, this greatly increased the dead running times and kilometres of buses travelling to start or complete their route or school services in the City and closely surrounding suburbs. The end result being any dollar savings in the closure of Woden Depot was exhausted by the expense of dead running.

The inclusion of driver staff, clerical staff, workshop staff and equipment into both Belconnen and Tuggeranong depots caused them to become very confined and cramped. Staff moral fell to rock bottom, work related compensations claims rose, absenteeism rose, there was a high turn over in staff, this is several reasons why operating costs steeply rose and became difficult to manage.

I may take this opportunity to point out that the concept of ACTION to change their policy of employment of full time (38 hours a week) drivers to part time (20 hours per week) drivers has not achieved the overall desired results. While it might be argued part time drivers are easier to roster to morning and afternoon peak periods the end results are questionable.

The initial concept was to employ a driver on a part time arrangement, this gave ACTION time to properly evaluate his/her performance. After a period of time the driver would then be offered full time driving duties, in short a career path.

In recent time this career path has been evaporated. Drivers find they cannot live on the wages of 20 hours per week without working extensive hours outside normal working hours, thus putting unwanted pressure on home/family life. The result is now a high turn over of drivers, added training and uniform costs per new recruit. In 2002 it cost in excess of \$10,000 to fit out and train a new recruit.

ACTION in the future.

Canberra City is a very unique city compared to other cities throughout Australia. In saying this I mean most household has at least two cars, The ACT has wide a open road network, there are all most no traffic congestion, if there is it is only for a short periods on either end of the working day. Parking is ample and cheap compared to cities like Sydney and Melbourne. The City is spread out providing open spaces and parklands. There are no real high density housing complexes.

The employment is mostly public service, whether that being Commonwealth or local government.

This in its own right is a set back as far as ACTION is concerned as most government vehicles are home garaged, resulting no need for the operator to look for public transport. It is also noted that ample free parking is provided throughout Commonwealth Government boundaries and their agencies.

The private sector is very much similar with a wealth of company, or company sponsored vehicles, again resulting in the operator not relying on public transport.

When ACTION considers its customer base the above mentioned people are certainly not included.

There is not a big heavy industrial industry, three (3) small locations of Hume, Fyshwick and Mitchell. A very small market of public transport users.

Future bus routes and timetable scheduling.

I have always maintained that there must be four (4) types of route services to service our City.

1. **Inter Town.** These are the express services that connect Tuggeranong and Belconnen via the Woden and City Interchanges.
2. **Feeder.** These are the services that feed the inter town services from the southern suburbs of the Tuggeranong Valley, Weston Creek and Northern suburbs of Belconnen.
3. **Cross Town.** These are the services that run via the various interchanges connecting such suburbs as Garran, Deakin, Parliament Triangle, Russell, City, Ainslie and Watson etc.
4. **Outer Suburban Express.** These are the services that operate separate to the core timetable and bus routes that are designed to operate from minor shopping centres, e.g. Cooleman Court, Kippax Centre etc, direct to high employment areas. These services in the main will only operate Monday to Friday AM and PM peak periods.

The inter town route express services, has always been very popular. They are quick and frequent services, and these must be the **core** of the network seven days a week.

Feeder services from the outer suburbs can be quite easily scheduled to connect with the inter town services. It is only difficult, not impossible, for commuters travelling from these areas wishing to connect to cross town services.

It is not always necessary for cross town services to connect with the inter town express services **providing** the inter town services has sufficient frequency.

In a perfect world it would be nice to have all route services arrive and depart a set area, such as an interchange, at the same time. This was achieved some years back with what they call a “memory timetable”. By this I mean buses would arrive at an interchange at 18 and 48 minutes past the hour and depart 20 and 50 minutes past the hour. This method was extremely expensive to operate due to the layover times required to achieve the desired result.

Timetables and scheduling

ACTION has the capabilities of developing a timetable that is adaptable to a seven (7) day network. The core basis of scheduling route services is to commit to a fifteen (15) minute timetable on all inter town express services. It is then possible to connect the feeder services with these inter town on a half hourly or hourly service. Cross town services can then be adjusted to connect with both these services.

As can be observed by the pervious paragraph this core timetable, services can then be added to meet peak time demands or over loading demands such as school/college or end of school/college times.

Outer suburban express services to the town centres or high employment area can be scheduled separately depending on departure/arrival times and commuter demand.

Of course weekend, public holiday and Monday to Friday evening services will have to be adjusted in frequency to meet passenger demand. The main secret is NOT to alter route numbers or route direction during these times otherwise commuter confusion will only escalate resulting in criticism.

School Services. ACTION has always provided the majority of school services within the suburban areas of the City. These have been reasonably easy, but costly, to schedule with cooperation by both the private and public school authorities.

The biggest problem has always been the sheer number of students requiring transport, at the same time, to and from school/colleges. Morning peak is the biggest concern when ACTION is trying to provide resources to cover both school and regular commuter services.

A solution to this problem is to encourage, both the public and private, schools to stagger their school hours. The savings in this exercise is untapped. The reduction for the need of resources could be cut by up to 20% resulting a reduction in over all operating costs. When Manager Operations I did suggest this option at an ACTION/School Principle forum. I wondered at the time whether I could make it out of the forum still alive.

Ticketing System. ACTION some years ago purchased, under contract, a ticketing system from off shore Australia. The purchase contract was in a lot of detail requiring many capabilities. Unfortunately by the time this contract was fulfilled the requirements had changed and the technology had improved.

In a nut shell ACTION ended up with a ticketing system that was out of date, not what they required and extremely expensive to alter or upgrade.

During my time as Manager Operations, I was never confident of the accuracy of passenger numbers it provided, reliability was very low with individual ticket machines mal functioning during normal operation resulting in loss of data and revenue. I am told by ex fellow work colleges that the ticket system has deteriorated to the extent that it requires replacement.

Infrastructure In the latter years ACTION has had no real control over design, colour patters or placement of bus stops, bus shelters and interchange facilities.

It is obvious that some of these designs have been developed to meet the needs of surrounds and other facilities, not the commuter. A prime example of this is the recent design of the bus shelters in Alinga Street, City Interchange. They provide little or no shelter from the environment we all know so well. These areas must be addressed in the future if ACTION is going to encourage commuters to use their services.

These are only a few of the comments I could make. I realise that providing public transport in this City is a very expensive business. There needs to be a lot of public education along with public conceptions and their ability to change.

A more recent ACTION CEO, Mr Guy Thurston, always stated to achieve an improvement in passenger numbers and for ACTION to be viable fuel cost would have to increase, the government of the day had to raise parking fees, reduce parking availability, and encourage the Commonwealth Government to do likewise in the Parliament Triangle and Russell Office complexes.

To sum up, if one wants the best garden and the best view in the street one has to be prepared to pay for it, providing a public transport system is no different.

If you require any further comments or clarification of my comments I can be contacted on (02) 62883797.

Yours truly,



Lester Southwell