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The Secretary
Standing Committee on Planning & Environment
Legislative Assembly of the ACT
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[by email]

	A.C.T. LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE OFFICE
SUBMISSION NUMBER	60
DATE AUTH'D FOR PUBLICATION	

18th May 2007.

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to Inquiry into ACTION buses

I am writing in response to the Committee's call for submissions. Unfortunately, as we are a week away from the end of semester I have not had sufficient time to prepare a detailed submission, but I would be happy to elaborate on this one should the Committee so desire.

Although currently an outsider, I am a former resident of Canberra and a frequent visitor. I also maintain a keen interest in Canberra's planning in my professional capacity: I use Canberra as a case study in my metropolitan planning and transport planning courses here at Melbourne University.

Background: Is Canberra's urban form to blame for poor public transport?

Canberra was planned as a car city, but its planners deliberately left open the possibility of a change of transport direction, should one become necessary. The main reason for the adoption of the famous 'Y-Plan' four decades ago (apart from the fact that there was something of a vogue among planning theorists for linear cities) was that a number of National Capital Development Commission staff, notably the Chief Planner Peter Harrison, wanted to construct an urban form that would make it possible to build and economically operate a rapid transit system as well as, or even (this was mainly suggested by later observers such as Professors Hugh Stretton and Peter Self) instead of, the freeway system.

Much of the debate about urban form and transport has been narrowly focussed on population density, but the balance of research shows that land use at the trip destination is more important than land use at the residential trip origin. The kind of urban form that best suits public transport is one which clusters major trip attractors into centres, and arranges those centres in a linear pattern linked by rapid transit. It is important that these centres contain retailing and community uses as well as employment, because the journey to work only accounts for around 20% of trips, but also to provide off-peak passenger flows. Such a pattern enables bus services linking

homes with the local town centre to double as feeders to the rapid transit system connecting the centres, which maximises loadings.

While the Y-Plan can be criticised (indeed, I have criticised it myself), its most significant contribution to transport sustainability has been the adoption of just this urban layout. The result is that employment and major retailing in Canberra are actually more closely aligned with the (non-existent) rapid transit system than is the case in larger cities like Melbourne, Sydney and Perth, which have rail systems. The result is that, as commentators like Stretton and Self have noted, a relatively painless transition to more balanced transport patterns would be possible. It is ironic that other, larger overseas cities which already have rapid transit systems, notably Vancouver, have adopted planning policies based on the same urban form principles as the Y-Plan, although more recently, and with less effect on land use patterns.

So why is Canberra dominated by cars?

Most of the defects in the process and content of the NCDC's final update of the Y-Plan, the 1984 *Metropolitan Canberra* strategy, stemmed from a refusal by the Commission to even contemplate, let alone evaluate, the kind of shift in transport policy foreshadowed by Stretton, Self et al. Unfortunately, while many of the positive features of the Y-Plan have subsequently been watered down, Canberra's transport planners have persisted with this one.

This is despite the fact that:

- Transport is more important as a source of greenhouse emissions in the ACT than in any other territory or state
- Canberrans use cars dramatically more than the national average
- use of public transport for travel to work has declined more rapidly over the 1991-2001 period than anywhere else in Australia: Canberra now has the lowest mode split of any of the capitals, whereas in 1991 it outperformed Perth and Hobart
- as long ago as 1977, the NCDC was given advice by consultants that a dramatic shift to public transport was achievable, but the NCDC and its successors ignored this advice.

The 2004 *Sustainable Transport Plan for the ACT*, like the NCDC's plans before it, fails as an example of integrated transport/land-use planning, because it does ^{not} take account of the fact that speeding up travel encourages dispersal, and speeding up car travel encourages car-oriented dispersal. By comparison, serious urban transport plans that take sustainability and integrated planning seriously face up to the fact that one can't have one's cake and eat it too. Thus, for example, Vancouver's Livable Region Plan says:

Congestion is usually considered an evil; however, allowing congestion to deteriorate for single-occupant vehicles is a practical method of promoting transit and carpools... For instance, buses/carpools in HOV [high occupancy vehicle] lanes will gain an edge since the relative time saved by escaping lineups will be greater.

The Vancouver plan rejected proposals for new freeways and high-speed commuter rail lines for this reason, but also because it would exacerbate sprawl and undermine

self-containment. Unfortunately, and in contrast to places like Vancouver, the *Sustainable Transport Plan* sets out targets for increasing the share of travel carried by public transport (and walking and cycling), but does not set out a serious, credible suite of policies to achieve the desired shift in travel patterns. It continues in practice to emphasise speeding up car travel, and most relevantly to this inquiry, contains no credible proposals for remedying the deficiencies of public transport.

What is best-practice public transport?

Until about two years ago, there were no manuals or guidebooks that succinctly set out the necessary ingredients of a first-rate public transport system that can viably compete with the car. As a result, political leaders in most Australian cities have been forced to rely on advice from firms of road engineering consultants, who generally did not believe in public transport or have sufficient expertise to advise on how to lift its performance.

Fortunately, a consortium of British and Scandinavian municipalities has teamed up with the local regional administration of the EU to remedy this deficiency. The result is the 2005 report series titled *Development of principles and strategies for introducing High quality public Transport in medium sized cities and regions*, or HiTrans for short (see www.hitrans.org). The definition of ‘medium-sized’ is 100,000 to 500,000 residents, so the findings are especially applicable to Canberra.¹ The project has produced five excellent ‘best practice’ guides covering various aspects of public transport, the most relevant for current purposes being *Best Practice Guide 2: Public transport – planning the networks*.

The key concept behind the HiTrans guide is the ‘network effect’ (see section 3.2), in which an integrated network of frequent services linked by easy transfers is used to provide mobility across a dispersed urban region. The key ingredients of the network effect are:

- a single agency in charge of planning the entire network
- high frequencies on all services across the network, in off-peak periods as well as peak periods
- a simple, easy-to-understand route structure that remains stable throughout the day and week
- reliance on transfers for flexibility to minimise the number of routes and allow direct services (thus saving costs and permitting high frequencies)
- high-quality transfer facilities and coordinated timetables and fares.

How does ACTION measure up?

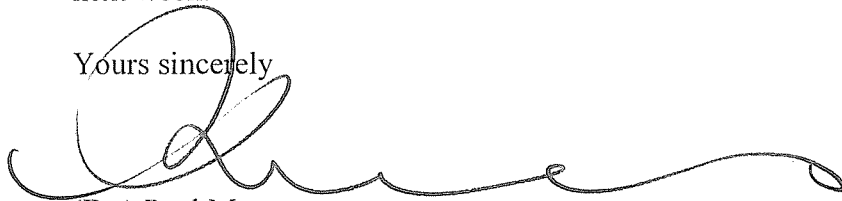
I do not believe ACTION should be comparing itself primarily to bus operators in other Australian cities, many of which (notably my own home of Melbourne) provide extremely poor services. The appropriate comparison should be with international best practice, of which the HiTrans guide provides an excellent summary.

¹ I should make a disclosure here. Although I was not part of the project, the Best Practice Guide for network planning was based largely on my 2000 book *A Very Public Solution: Transport in the Dispersed City*.

Apart from the first requirement (a single agency) and integrated fares, ACTION fails all the relevant tests: indeed the trend has been in the precise opposite direction to that indicated by best practice. For example, the HiTrans guide recommends a stable pattern of public transport routes throughout the day and week to aid passenger comprehension, but ACTION now operates three separate networks at peak, off-peak and evening/weekend periods. While HiTrans recommends high frequencies across the network throughout the day, ACTION provides poor frequencies on most routes even at peak periods, and then severely cuts these in off-peak periods.

The current approach to service planning and provision in Canberra therefore require a radical rethink if the targets in the *Sustainable Transport Plan* are to be met, and if the ACT is to take its responsibilities regarding global warming seriously. As indicated above, owing to pressure of time I have only sketched briefly the direction of change needed, but would be happy to elaborate once classes finish at the end of next week.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Mees', with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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