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Inquiry into ACTION Buses  
Standing Committee on Planning & Environment  
ACT Legislative Assembly

Dear Committee,

### **Improving ACTION Service**

The following draws on a letter I sent to Minister Hargreaves (and to others) on 7 March 2007 in response to the December 2006 service cutbacks. These cutbacks are all the more remarkable as they conflict with the ACT Governments Sustainable Transport Plan (STP) aims of significantly increasing ACTION's share of the transport market.

Climate change concerns coupled with Peak Oil (we may already be at or near the maximum production of oil) in fact make the STP targets look too timid and conservative.

Improving the effectiveness of ACTION's service is not just a matter of more frequent buses but also improved route structure, better connections, reliable timekeeping and shorter trip times. Even more, the structure of the city is critical – urban planning and transport provision need to be integrated.

This submission offers some suggestions on improvements, generally working from bigger to smaller issues:

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#### **1. Urban Villages**

The ACT has been designed for the car with dispersed towns and low density suburbs. This structure will always make it difficult for ACTION to provide frequent and rapid services. However, there are also counter trends towards higher density and apartment living in the town centres. Most of this re-development seems to be happening on an ad hoc basis with apartment blocks scattered around and usually isolated from shopping, commercial and other town services. Most residents in these apartments will be obliged to continue to use

their cars to access services.

A more coherent approach is needed to construct 'urban villages' where apartments and services are co-located. This in itself will eliminate the necessity for many trips and will make it easier for ACTION to provide a high frequency service between chains of towns and urban villages. To put this into effect, urban villages should be established and built around stops on busway routes. The busway stops needs to be distinct like railway stations and not merely a signpost on the roadside.

The Draft Amendments 59-61 to the National Capital Plan gives the opportunity to create urban villages around Civic. However, the apartment blocks going up adjacent to the Lakeside Hotel are being built in isolation of each other, there is minimal public space around them and Civic's shops and services are too remote to be readily accessible while there is no effective bus service. The opportunity to create urban villages is being lost!

Our urban planning needs to better exploit public transport.

## **2. Progressive Development of Busways**

Busways offer:

- More reliability and consistent timekeeping through separation from other traffic congestion.
- Frequent service on the trunk routes – no need to know the timetable.
- Faster transit times.
- High visibility like a rail line – it is clear where the busway is going to.

Unfortunately the Belconnen–Civic busway appears to have been pushed onto the never-never list. Rather than go for the big project, it may be best to continue augmenting the present bus lanes and introduce additional segments to bypass bottlenecks as they emerge. Likewise, more use could be made of giving buses priority at traffic lights. In the longer term, transponders could be added to buses so that they preferentially trigger traffic lights.

In particular, when building large road interchanges, bus lanes should be put in to dive through and bypass the potential snarl points – much cheaper to do it in the initial construction phase. This should have been done with the Gungahlin Drive Extension.

Long term, a middling scale project could be implemented to link the pieces together and make a full transit way.

Boarding delays and increasing traffic congestion have resulted in a lengthening of running times of the Intertown route, and timekeeping is far less reliable. The need for a busway is increasing over time.

Of concern to me are DA 59-61 to the National Capital Plan in the Civic area and DA 53 to the Albert Hall precinct. **Unless a busway is established through Civic and down Commonwealth Avenue, the extended running times from the proposed traffic changes will destroy the viability of the ACTION Intertown service.**

## **3. Light Rail?**

Light rail systems have proved more effective than busways in attracting patronage around

the world. However it is hard to see light rail being feasible for the ACTION Intertown – distances are too long and grades are too steep. An expensive heavy rail system would be needed.

A potential light rail route if DA 59-61 goes ahead is from West Basin, through Civic, Constitution Avenue, Barton and terminating at the Kingston Foreshore development. Distances are reasonable with few grades. There are major employment centres on the route and a series of urban villages could be built. Done well, property values increase around the busway and levies on the developers can be used to fund the busway – this is common practice for new light rail/busway developments overseas.

Making the terminus at Kingston Foreshore may bring that development to life – it is looking rather lifeless at present and may become just a dormitory, a waste of such a great site.

#### **4. Memory Timetables**

I have been impressed by the co-ordinated bus and train services in Germany and Switzerland which work extremely well. They have perfected a ‘memory timetable’ which operates widely throughout each country – the service comes by your stop at the same time after each hour (8.15, 9.15 and so on) – or half-hourly or more frequently depending on the route. With their excellent timekeeping, connections are always made at interchanges (even boats and cable cars!) and it is easy to move around the network. This is something I proposed in a letter I sent to the Chief Minister dated 31 July 2006.

Germany and Switzerland both operate their basic timetable on a seven day basis (supplementary peak hour services of course only run Mondays to Fridays). The memory principle and good connections therefore apply throughout the week. As a result, a substantial off-peak and weekend business has developed. A good system builds on itself. For better or worse, our society is evolving to a 24/7 basis and our public transport needs to evolve to match the new pattern. Separate weekend timetables will become archaic.

One benefit of the December timetable changes is the greater use of ‘memory timetable’ principles with buses departing at set times each hour. It does make it much easier working out when to catch the bus – I rarely have to consult a timetable for my local bus now. Of course, the problem is that an hourly service is inadequate and at least a 30 minute frequency is needed on most routes to develop an effective service.

It is best if the ‘memory timetable’ is maintained right through the day as far as possible. There are some ridiculous anomalies. For instance, route 24 departs Woden Interchange exactly on the hour from 9.00am through to 3.00pm when it goes to a half-hourly service but has departures at 3.58pm and 4.58pm. It would be much simpler to round off the time to 4.00pm and 5.00pm respectively (which in fact is when they usually turn up!). These sorts of anomalies appear in other timetables.

As I emphasised in my July letter, for a ‘memory timetable’ to be effective, there need to be good connections at interchanges. These are still often very poor in the new timetable. For example, I travel to Curtin once a month on Sundays so planned to do it by bus. However the 924 was scheduled to arrive at Woden Interchange at 10.41 am and the 32 bus to Curtin (and ultimately Giralang) left at 10.39 am! Brilliant, so I am forced to use my car!

I appreciate constructing timetables is complex and difficult. However, for evening/weekend timetables the obvious strategy is to aim to schedule feeder buses to arrive at interchanges just before an Intertown bus and depart just after the Intertown bus (ideally, both north and southbound services should arrive/depart from the interchanges at the same time). This should be achievable in the vast majority of cases and will also facilitate connections from one feeder bus to another.

Swiss railways and rural buses (and lake ferries and cable cars!) achieve this across the whole country as does Germany in many areas. It can be done!

## **5. Circle Routes**

Hourly services are not good enough, particularly with the present poor connections. The former 40 minute frequency is also hopeless as it results in 'un-memorable timetables' which are a disincentive for casual users. Half-hourly services are therefore desirable and will help develop bus passenger traffic over time.

One way of achieving a twice an hour frequency is by the use of circular routes with hourly clockwise and anti-clockwise services. As this combines two routes, there are no significant extra costs.

My local 23/24 service, Woden-Farrer, operates this way. As well as providing a twice an hour service for most of those on the route, it has built up some useful inter-suburb business eg. from Southlands shopping centre to Isaacs (in fact I have noticed other routes developing inter-suburb business – this appears to be overlooked with ACTION's strong focus on suburb-town commuter services). The service works well as it takes just over half-an-hour for the whole circuit.

A similar service can readily be achieved for the 21/22 west Woden services – in fact the evening/weekend 921/922 service operates this way. It is likely to prove a more useful service than the current separate services and could build up business to the Phillip Trades area.

Weston Creek could also benefit from redesigning routes on a circular basis. At present, only route 26 provides a reasonably direct connection from Woden to Cooleman Court and all the rest are painfully indirect and slow. Woden to Cooleman Court requires and deserves at least twice an hour direct service – one could go via Hindmarsh Drive and the other via Devonport St, Lyons. The rest of their routes could loop around the suburbs and return to Woden.

I am sure other areas would benefit from circular services where a route run time of 30-40 minutes can be achieved. Much longer than that and the concept loses its value.

## **6. Boarding Delays**

ACTION is unique amongst all the bus services I have used in insisting that passengers leave by the front door with the rear door only being used at Interchanges. Thus we have to wait for passengers to get off before we can board and this causes unnecessary delays. I believe this practice was brought in 20 or so years ago as a result of an accident where someone was caught in the rear door as the bus started off. Today's buses have an interlock which prevents buses starting with the rear door open. It is time the practice was reviewed

and the rear door made the main exit.

The Wayfarer ticketing system is effective and convenient to use from a passenger's point of view but is rather slow and this seems to be causing most of the delays. Prior to the introduction of the Wayfarer system, those with pre-purchased tickets (daily, weekly or whatever) could just show their tickets to the driver and boarding was quick and easy. Obviously the drawback is the lack of ridership information and I presume this was one of the main reasons for introducing Wayfarer.

I have seen smartcard contactless tickets used in Europe. They are somewhat quicker than Wayfarer but still involve delays, particularly as it may take a few attempts to read the card by an inexperienced user. The delays could be overcome if a second validating machine is provided for pre-paid tickets. So, unless care is taken, a new ticketing system may not solve the boarding delay problems.

In the meantime, more could be done to minimise the use of on-bus fares – they are the cause of longish delays where the driver has to make change. I tend to use Shopper Off Peak Daily tickets – they cost \$4.10 both for pre-purchase or on-bus. If they were \$4.50 on-bus, I would nearly always pre-purchase. Providing info at bus stops on the cost savings of pre-purchase tickets and where to get them would help, particularly for tourists.

Also, more regular use of platform based validating machines at interchanges would also speed up boarding. They seem to be used only sporadically.

## **7. Improving Bus Stop Information**

Most bus stops display departure times and route numbers – very useful information!

However, all that is shown is the route number and departure time which is pretty meaningless for casual users. For example, a while ago I was trying to catch a bus from Deakin shops to Woden. Stops on either side of the road showed route 83 going to Woden. What was not obvious is that 83 buses departing from the eastern side wend their merry way through Fyshwick, and eventually back through Deakin to get to Woden!

A summary of the route and the approximate running time to each of the listed main stops should be displayed which would help passengers to choose the correct service. Even better, also show a map of the route. This sort of information is common practice for many other bus or transit systems in Australia and overseas.

Hospitals are places that could do with vastly upgraded information. It is quite likely that there will be people temporarily without transport wondering how to travel. A locality map showing bus stops, their services, timetable and fare information should be displayed in the hospital lobby, maybe in the cafes, and at each of the stops.

What I do not want at bus stops is commercial advertising. Few cities tolerate it and from my travels, most cities are trying to clean up their streetscapes. Roadside advertising is absolutely inappropriate in Canberra.

## **8. Parliament House – stop needed out front**

It is a real pain travelling by bus to Parliament House! When it first opened, there were direct services from Civic to the car park underneath the forecourt. These have finished and

the main service now is route 34 from Woden through to Civic and Belconnen (passing the hospitals, ANU and UC). The bus stops are midway down Parliament Drive on the western side (going to Woden) and the eastern side (going to Civic). Workers have direct access into Parliament House but the mere citizen has a long and fairly dreary 400m walk to/from the public entrance, decidedly unpleasant when the weather is inclement as there is no shelter. The alternative service, route 39 now only runs hourly and its stops are a little way down Federation Mall.

Would it be possible to have bus stops out front serving both routes? They would scarcely be noticeable among all the anti-terrorist fortifications that have been scattered around.

As was originally planned, the Intertown services were meant to have been routed close by Parliament House and this should still be pursued in the long terms. Anti-terrorist precautions could be implemented with good design. It really is pathetic to have Parliament House so isolated from the rest of Canberra!

### **9. Greater use of the Canberra Bus Map**

Last year we went travelling to Scotland (including Edinburgh), Spain and Portugal. While we travelled between cities by train, we travelled within the cities we visited by metro and buses. Most cities provided a free public transport map at tourist information centres. These were extremely useful in finding our way round.

The Canberra Bus Map is fairly expensive at \$2.20 and is quite a well kept secret. I think it would be worthwhile doing a mass printing (in perhaps a cheaper and more compact style) and make it available for free at tourist centres, backpacker hostels and major hotels, and charge a nominal \$1 at ACTION ticket agencies. Some tourists do succeed in using ACTION services despite, and more could be persuaded – tourists are useful off peak traffic.

### **10. Route Numbers on the Back of Buses**

It really is helpful to have the route number on the back of buses. There are times when I am unsure if the bus just disappearing down the road is the route I don't want running late or the one I do want running a minute or two early. With a potential hour long wait, I really need to know which it is and whether I should go walk to another stop for another service (or just go home...).

Rear numbers are also useful in educating the public where the bus routes go.

As route numbers and displays are now set up electronically, there is no extra work for the driver, just the extra cost of the number box. This should be fairly trivial in the price of a new bus. Obviously, it is not likely to be worth the cost of retrofitting the existing fleet.

### **11. Spacing of Bus Stops**

In some areas (mostly older Canberra), bus stops are spaced 100m-200m apart, but can be 400m or longer in other places. The more a bus stops, the longer it takes. This has to be traded off against less accessibility with wider spacing.

The Intertown service seems to be somewhat inconsistent. There are two closely spaced stops in west Civic, which is inappropriate for an express service. South of Woden, there are

five stops in the Woden valley and only one in Tuggeranong before the interchange. I would think one of the Phillip trades area stops could be shut (and I am an occasional user of both), and one put in near Wanniasa shops (which would need some bays to be built on Athlon Drive). There is also a stop on the eastern side just south of Beasley St but no matching stop on the western side. It does not do much business and could be removed.

There seems to be inconsistent standards for bus stop spacing and I think these should be more standardised over time at about 300-400m (which seems to be fairly common in European cities). Obviously there will be howls of protest when stops are eliminated – life wasn't meant to be easy!

ACTION provides quite a good service but could be much better with more development and creative ideas. Sustainability issues (climate change and perhaps imminent peak oil) demand that services and usage be improved.

Thank you,

HENRY HATCH