

Submission for the P&E Inquiry into ACTION Buses

I have been using the ACTION bus network as my primary mode of transport in Canberra for over a decade. It is in my capacity as a patron, as well as a citizen committed to the improvement of public transport, that I make this submission.

How well ACTION meets the needs of different segments of the community while recognising its role as a mass transport provider.

For the disabled, elderly and poorer sections of the community, the ACTION buses are a necessity, not just a lifestyle choice. I patronise the buses because of an injury and I can confidently say that the present system is inadequate, largely because of timetabling problems. There are simply too few buses in the middle part of the day, after hours and on weekends. One bus an hour is totally insufficient. There is also the added problem that buses from the Civic interchange are leaving the interchange earlier than indicated in the timetable. This is a recent problem and adds to the difficulty of making connections across the city. We just need more buses which leave their terminuses on time.

Nor are the peak hour services adequate for commuters. Often the buses during morning peak hour are standing room only. Such unpleasant conditions discourages patronage.

The only aspect of the ACTION network which works adequately is the inter-town express service which has a rolling timetable and is as fast as one can drive. With these services, if a bus is a little late or early, it does not matter so much. There will always be another one in a couple of minutes. The frequency of the buses is the key to the success of these services, which are well patronised. If the buses are frequent and fast people will use them.

How ACTION compares with other bus transport operators in Australian jurisdictions

I am very familiar with Cityrail in Sydney, which services the Sydney metropolitan area and which according to a recent study, is one of the worst rail services in the world. I should like to make the point that the 'real time' screens at the stations which show when the next train will be arriving have done nothing to encourage patronage. I know that in Canberra it has been suggested that ACTION should install these screens at interchanges. In my opinion this will be extremely expensive for very little benefit, as the Sydney experience has shown. People will use the buses if they are frequent and fast, not because of expensive high-tech devices at the interchanges.

ACTION's services in the context of the sustainable transport plan with particular reference to:

The appropriateness of the plan and especially targets;

The Sustainable Transport Plan is full of all the right rhetoric about the importance of public transport, but it is completely empty of meaningful substance. For example, I draw

the Committee's attention to figure 1 on page 4. Here we have a nice flow chart and fancy graphics, showing how all the goals and 'community benefits' connect. All this means absolutely nothing if the government will not make an increased financial commitment to the ACTION network. We need more buses, more frequently. That is the only thing that will make a difference to a sustainable public transport system in Canberra. One of the 'actions' cited in figure 1 is 'improved transport technology'. It is not better technology that we need, it is *more buses more frequently*.

The government's insistence that the ACTION service be self-funding or nearly self-funding makes a mockery of the entire sustainable transport plan. The ACTION service needs to be seen as a service to the entire Canberra community, an old fashioned public service for the public good. It cannot be self-funded or make a profit if it is to work effectively. A serious financial commitment to running *more buses* is the only thing that can make public transport sustainable.

In respect of the targets I draw the Committee's attention to figure 21 on page 31. Again, nice graphics. None of the 'factors for improving public transport' are meaningful unless *more buses* are put on the roads. 'Advanced technologies' are expensive for little gain. 'Rail-like stations' will do nothing if the timetable is not improved. We need *more buses, not more technology and more roads*.

Principles and key priorities for future service planning.

I would like to reiterate the main point of this submission. The key priority for ACTION should be to put *more buses on the road*. We know that this works to improve patronage. The inter-town express service is the only part of the ACTION service which works efficiently. It does so not because of special bus lanes or high technology or because of glamorous interchanges. It works because of the rolling timetable. Frequency of buses encourages people to catch the buses. The ACTION network is now in crisis because of the timetable cutbacks. The key priority has to be to restore the timetable. Of course this is expensive, but if the government is serious about public transport and preserving the clean air and manageable traffic conditions in Canberra, the timetable has to be good enough to induce people to choose the bus over their car. Cutting back the timetable is no way to make public transport sustainable.

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16 May 2007