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I wish to make a submission to the ACT Government inquiry into ACTION buses. My comments are predominantly based on Routes 30 and 31 from Giralang and Kaleen to Woden via Civic and Barton as this is the route I use most often. However, from speaking to other people I know that my comments apply more widely across the network.

The committee is seeking views particularly on:

- how well ACTION meets the needs of different segments of the community while recognising its role as a mass transport provider;
- how ACTION compares with other bus transport operators in Australian jurisdictions;
- ACTION’s services in the context of the sustainable transport plan with particular reference to:
  - the appropriateness of the plan and especially targets;
  - progress towards implementation;
  - measures needed to ensure targets are met; and
  - principles and key priorities for future service planning.

### **How well is ACTION meeting the needs of different segments of the community?**

There are many different segments of the community. I will comment on three segments.

(i) Commuters travelling to and from work at peak hours.

The routes during peak hours are generally fairly direct and given that most commuters are probably travelling several kilometres between home and work, the fares are reasonable. However, the service is not likely to attract more commuters because services are infrequent (a 30-minute frequency in peak hours is not acceptable), the peak period is too short (the last route 30 from Barton to Kaleen leaves Barton at 5.53 p.m.) and most buses are packed to the doors. Even if more people wished to use the buses, they could not physically fit on the peak hour buses.

(ii) Retired, unemployed or other people who do not need or want to travel at peak times.

The off-peak services are too infrequent (usually hourly) and are too indirect. Route 32 (a combination of routes 30, 31 and 47) which operates during the day is an extremely roundabout way of getting to the city as it heads away from the city for 10 minutes, wandering around Kaleen and Giralang before finally heading back to the city. And if one has to connect with another route in the city, the journey times can be absurdly long. This service is not satisfactory for people who are disabled or frail and who have no other means of transport.

(iii) School students

Most schools seem to get a bus service but buses are frequently packed, to the extent that they may be unsafe.

### **How ACTION compares with other bus transport operators**

I have limited knowledge of other bus systems in Australia but I note the recent comments by several public transport experts who suggest that Canberra's bus service is the worst of all the capital cities in Australia.

### **ACTION's services in the context of the sustainable transport plan**

#### Goals

The goals in the ACT Sustainable Transport Plan that relate to the bus system (goals 2.15 – 2.23) are commendable but they have little practical value as they do not include target dates or details as to how they will be implemented. If they are to be achieved, the government will have to make a financial commitment although some of them (e.g. construction of dedicated bus lanes along major routes, priority traffic signals) could be achieved fairly quickly without huge cost.

Unfortunately the government is unwilling even to maintain current funding for the bus system. In fact, it is cutting funding, leading to reduced services, overcrowding, indirect and infrequent services and unreliability. Instead of moving towards the achievement of the goals in the ACT Sustainable Transport Plan, the government's actions are leading to the exact opposite. As a consequence, the Plan now appears to be largely irrelevant.

The outcomes in the Plan (reduced greenhouse gas emissions, pollution and energy use, reduced accidents, reduced user costs, reduced travel time, more transport options and equity in transport) are also commendable but require a commitment by the Government.

#### Targets

The Sustainable Transport Plan has a target of increasing public transport journeys to work from 6.7% in 2001 to 9% in 2011 to 16% in 2026. The plan recognises that this is an ambitious target that "will require significant commitment and resources."

#### Achievement of targets

The Plan notes ten features that are required for improved public transport patronage. The ten features are listed below with my comments.

##### *1. Competitive time travel*

The bus service is slow, especially in peak hours, due to congestion on Northbourne Avenue. The buses get caught in the car traffic and, unlike cars which often take short cuts through the suburbs, the bus must remain on Northbourne Avenue. Not only is the service slow, but it is also frequently more than 10 minutes late by the time it gets to

Civic. I can ride a bicycle from Kaleen to Barton in 40 minutes but the bus at peak hours often takes an hour or more.

A simple solution would be to provide a bus lane along the centre of Northbourne Avenue which is perfectly designed for it. The bus lane could later be converted to a light rail route. This solution is proposed in the Plan but no action is being taken to implement it.

Routes 30 and 31 only operate in peak hours. At other times and at weekends the two routes are combined into one route – route 32. Route 32 (a combination of routes 30, 31 and 47) which operates during the day and at weekends is an extremely roundabout way of getting to the city as it heads away from the city for 10 minutes, wandering around Kaleen and Giralang before finally heading back to the city.

## *2. High service frequency*

Route 30 operates at a 30-minute frequency during peak hours, with the last service leaving Barton at 5.53 p.m. The off-peak route 32 operates hourly. This is completely unsatisfactory and certainly cannot be described as a high service frequency.

There are no direct buses from Civic to Federation Square for most of the day. Federation Square is a popular tourist attraction and also a significant source of employment. This is confusing and time-consuming for tourists who are not familiar with the Canberra bus system. This level of service is not satisfactory.

## *3. Simple route structure*

The peak hour services (routes 30 and 31) are fairly simple to follow. But route 32 is thoroughly confusing, even for a regular bus traveller. To catch a bus to Civic before 7.30 a.m. I must catch it from the western side of Maribyrnong Avenue. Between 7.30 and 9.00 it leaves from the eastern side. Between 9.00 and 3.00 it leaves from the western side. Then it leaves from the eastern side before moving back to the western side after 6.00. No-one could call this a “simple route structure”.

## *4. Simple fare structure*

The flat fare structure is simple, although expensive for short trips.

## *5. Low operating cost*

I cannot comment on the operating costs of the Canberra bus service. However, with the term “triple-line accounting” being used these days I suggest that we should be looking at more than just financial costs. The environmental benefits of efficient public transport should be recognised when comparing the costs of public transport and private transport.

## *6. Integration with other transport modes*

Public transport usage to Civic could be increased if parking was encouraged at places like Southwell Park and Dickson with a frequent bus service to Civic.

### *7. Passenger information*

The website used to list services to popular destinations. These were removed from the website in December when the new timetables were introduced and have not been replaced.

### *8. Quality vehicles*

I have no complaints about the quality of the vehicles.

### *9. Advanced technologies*

While buses using dedicated bus lanes are efficient, they are not advanced technology. If we are serious about reducing greenhouse gas emissions, we should be looking at more efficient technologies such as light rail.

### *10. Rail-like stations*

The bus stop I use in Maribyrnong Avenue does not even have a bus shelter. There are usually at least six people waiting for each service in the morning so some form of shelter seems justified. I would like to see basic shelters at suburban stops before money is spent on “rail-like stations”.

The government says it wants to increase the percentage of people using buses to get to work. It is simply not possible for any more people from Kaleen and Giralang to catch the bus to work as they will not be able to fit onto the buses.

## **Other comments**

### *Comfort*

The Sustainable Transport Plan fails to mention that passengers do not like to have to stand for the entire journey, or worse, to be left standing at bus stops because the bus is full. The peak hour route 30 buses are always packed, with people standing in the aisles. People are sometimes left standing at bus stops in Northbourne Avenue in the mornings because there is no room for them on the bus. It is not acceptable to claim that there are other routes serving Northbourne Avenue, as many of them do not go to Russell and Barton.

### *Reliability*

The Plan does not mention reliability. Too often, buses fail to arrive at all and when they do run they are frequently late. For example, the 8.12 a.m. from Kaleen is due in Civic at 8.50 but often does not arrive until after 9.00 and the 8.26 from Kaleen, which is timetabled to take 50 minutes to get to Barton, often takes over an hour. The northbound route 30 buses in the afternoon are also up to 10 minutes late by the time they leave Barton.

### *Management*

I suggest that a dedicated authority should be reinstated to run ACTION, with senior managers selected on the basis of their expertise in public transport. I do not wish to

denigrate the efforts of the senior public servants who have managed ACTION since the abolition of the Board, but they appear to have little expertise in managing a bus service. Further, as far as I am aware there have already been two managers in the few months since the abolition of ACTION Board. Such rapid changes in management add to the inefficiency of the current management model.

### *Conclusion*

Improvements to the bus service cannot be implemented by ACTION alone. It is difficult or impossible for ACTION to maintain or improve services when the government reduces funding. For example, late running is not likely to be fixed until the government provides funding for a long-overdue bus lane down Northbourne Avenue.

The emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, and the associated climate change, are the biggest challenges facing us. Transport is a major contributor to greenhouse gases. But if the ACT government and ACTION are serious about getting people out of cars and onto more environmentally sound methods of transport they have to provide a service that is direct, reasonably frequent and does not leave people standing in the aisles or stranded at bus stops.

Since writing this submission, I have become aware that there are to be some improvements to routes 30 and 31. However, the proposed improvements do not appear to make any difference to peak hour or weekend services. I conclude that the comments I have made are still relevant.