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18 May 2007

**Submission to the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment
– Action Bus Services Inquiry**

Dear Mr Gentleman and Committee Members

The Gungahlin Community Council appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the Committee's inquiry into the services offered by Action. We have received many complaints from residents about the changes to services before last Christmas. For Action and the ACT Government to seek budget efficiencies through service reduction was pure folly, and precisely the opposite of what should have happened. The traffic congestion on major commuter routes immediately became much worse (before the Glenloch Interchange was closed), a situation that has remained to this day, indicating many people lost faith in the bus service – a major challenge to recover lost ground.

However the timing of this inquiry is unfortunate. It is overlapping with the community consultation period for the draft Territory Plan – one of the most important consultation processes from the ACT Government in recent years. As such, please note that the demands on the volunteers of the Gungahlin Community Council has been severely stretched over recent months, and this submission is therefore limited in its depth and scope compared to that which we would have wished to contribute given better timing.

Transport in general, and public transport in particular, are very important to the people of Gungahlin and surrounds. Unlike the other 'satellite cities' of Canberra except for Tuggeranong, Gungahlin was not started with an employment base from day one. Despite 15 years of development now, a population now of more than 30,000 out of a design population of around 100,000, and a design employment base of some 23,000 jobs, we remain a dormitory township. **Almost all of us have to commute out every day**, and most via some of the most choked transport routes in Canberra. **But if the arterial routes into the city are choked now, that is nothing compared to what things will be like when we have 100,000 people here!**

Fares and costs of operation

We note that the ACT Government's Sustainable Transport Plan quotes a **benefit to cost ratio of 2.0 to 3.0**. This equates to, for the total cost of implementing the plan's action of around \$400 million, a benefit returned to the community of between \$800 million and \$1.2 billion through such things as deferred roadworks costs, lower vehicle operation costs, lost time, reduced environmental damage, etc.



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Recognising that money spent on public transport is an investment rather than a cost to the community is something that has always been hard to reconcile when the transport portfolio is split across different departments and ministerial portfolios. This is why there is now a real opportunity with the total transport equation now under the one roof with TAMS for the transport budget to be considered holistically, and for **public transport to receive due recognition as an important tool for deferring other major infrastructure construction, maintenance, and upgrade costs.**

This leads us to a key point we wish you to consider. In looking at the total benefit-cost equation, it may be that a case is found to actually **reduce bus fares**, and therefore encourage a far greater patronage. The current fares actually serve as a discouragement given that they are not significantly lower on a daily basis (return fare) than the cost of car parking. We recognise that there are additional costs with commuting by car, but the reality is that most people only consider the up-front costs of parking, with other costs offset by greater convenience and comfort.

The ACT Government should consider other ticketing options that encourage bus patronage, get people accustomed to bus usage, and avoid major traffic problems. The Queensland Government and Brisbane City Council combine to provide free train and bus travel to Lang Park for major events on display of a ticket. This could be easily implemented for football matches and other major events at Canberra Stadium.

Another very popular service in Brisbane is the free Downtown Shuttle. These two coaches run full time in opposing directions during weekdays in a loop around the CBD. Such a **free service in Canberra looping between Civic, Russell, and Barton would likely be very successful**, and deliver lunch-time shoppers from the parliamentary triangle into the CBD.

Comfort

Comfort brings us to another great disincentive to use the Action buses. The aging fleet is quite uncomfortable for passengers. It is impossible for two reasonable sized adults to sit side by side on the seats – one ends up hanging partially off the end of the seat. Then there is the lack of adequate climate control – in a town where temperatures during commute times seasonally vary between minus 10 and 40-plus. **The phase-out of the old fleet needs to be accelerated as a matter of great urgency.** In the meantime, Action should recognise that the discomfort from using the old buses is magnified over longer routes. **Any route over 15 minutes should receive the newer buses.**

Attention should also be given to adequate shelter and comfort at bus stops. We understand that the ACT Government has entered into an agreement with a commercial operator/advertiser to provide modern bus shelters. We request that you **ensure an adequate proportion of these new bus shelters comes to Gungahlin** – where bus shelters are indeed a very rare sight outside the town centre.

Conversely, some of the older areas of Canberra have bus stops absurdly close together. Along Knox Street Watson for instance, there are four stops within 500 metres. The existing routes and positioning of stops should be reviewed for untapped efficiency improvements.



Park and Rides

There is an almost complete absence of ‘park and rides’ in Canberra. Yet there are many sports complexes and other facilities with vast carparks lying empty throughout the working week. There is a great opportunity for the ACT Government to rapidly establish park and ride locations across Canberra by harnessing these underutilised carparks. For Gungahlin residents commuting into the city, 80% of the commute time is the last few kilometres from EPIC in. Yet EPIC has massive carparking lying empty except on a few weekends each year.

We propose that **the Belconnen bus depot is relocated to an area adjacent to EPIC or nearby at Mitchell**, with the relocation costs more than offset by the sale of valuable land in Belconnen, and a new employment base created for Gungahlin. The new depot would be ideally positioned to service **a large park and ride at EPIC that provided free car parking, lighting and security cameras**. Express services would just run between EPIC and the City – ideally every five minutes during peak periods. As express services, these buses would avoid the outer lane of Northbourne Avenue where a ‘conga line’ of nose-to-tail buses travelling slowly down the road is a frequent and farcical sight.

We recognise that at this point, passengers are most reluctant to change services. Ideally, people would become accustomed to the reliable express service over time, and less resistant to the idea of changing services. This would allow Action to use services that just operate as suburban ‘collectors’, and then drop people at the nearest park and ride, to change to an express service for the remainder of the trip. This would then allow Northbourne to avoid the conga line, because only the express services and local collectors would be travelling down it, as opposed to the current situation where virtually every north-side service converges on Northbourne.

On a smaller scale, bicycle lockers should be installed at key bus stops throughout ACT. These lockers should also be able to accommodate a bicycle with a child seat fitted.

Service information

The Action website is difficult and time-consuming to navigate. One must first go to the map to determine a route then go (manually) to another page to view the schedule for that route number. Action should look at the joint Queensland Government – Brisbane City Council website www.translink.com.au and particularly at how the Journey Planner functions for how to present schedule information on a website.

Light Rail and Flemington Road

During the Public Transport consultations held during 2002–03, there was strong support for engaging a suitably qualified organisation to explore the possible options for establishing a light rail network linking all districts of the ACT and Queanbeyan. The scope of this project should have included a complete breakdown of costings for each district and options for sourcing funds or entering into private/government construction and operation of the network. Current ACT Government consideration of light rail is based on unsubstantiated costings that are estimated to be inflated by 300%.



For Gungahlin, commitment to light rail (or another quality mass transport option) will encourage people to the area who are in a position where the second car may be a convenience they can do without. It may also encourage organisations planning to establish or relocate employment opportunities, to look at Gungahlin as an area with stability, endorsement, modern infrastructure, and long-term vision.

Over the past five years, land along Flemington Road (in Mitchell, Harrison and Gungahlin) has been sold without a commitment to light rail. The opportunity to encourage suitable development and link betterment taxes to development focused around light rail boarding stations has been partly lost; but some development along the Flemington Road corridor could be held back until the light rail option is comprehensively considered.

There is a desperate need to ensure that land sales or road and intersection construction does not take away the option of providing a light rail corridor along Flemington Road or any other suitable corridor identified for light rail, throughout the ACT.

Other new technologies are also an option, but the longer the delays in making a commitment to a quality mass public transport solution, the less money will be recouped from additional land revenue to help pay for it. At this time, indications are that a large proportion of the cost to build the light rail link from Civic to Gungahlin could be recouped from additional land revenue and betterment taxes received from the sale of land adjacent to the light rail boarding stations.

An alternative route to the city

Minister Hargreaves has been a vocal opponent of using the corridor that was preserved down the centre of Northbourne Avenue (between the trees) for mass transport options, as was always the original plan. In the absence of an adequate Northbourne Avenue solution, an alternative route into the city must be established. The Monash/Wolseley Drives corridor has always been gazetted, but construction of a full road bypass would be likely to meet major community rejection.

An option would be to establish an express bus service from Gungahlin, via Flemington Road, Phillip Avenue, along the Monash/Wolseley Drive corridor and into Ainslie Avenue – a cost effective and environmentally attractive option. This could be a **bus-only single lane road**, from Kellaway Street Hackett to Limestone Avenue, **limited to peak periods only, with one-way flow** to the city in the mornings, and reversed in the afternoons. It could be developed in such a way as to allow it to be adapted to complement future light rail or other mass public transport options.

The Gungahlin Community Council also supports the construction of dedicated busways on other selected routes. The common but deluded and wrong catchcry we so often hear that “Canberra was designed for cars and buses will never work” must be rebuffed the only way it can – through providing an alternative that people want to use. To continue to plan for just cars is not sustainable in the short term let alone the long term.

A service between Gungahlin and Brindabella Park



At the Gungahlin Community Council meeting of 11 April this year, Minister Hargreaves was asked about a bus service from Gungahlin down Horse Park Drive and Majura Road to the airport precinct, mainly to service the growing number of workers at Brindabella Park. Minister Hargreaves replied that no-one had asked for such a service.

We decided to test the community feeling towards such a service, via a poll on the GCC website. In the short period that poll was available, we received 70 submissions as well as several emails (see attachment) and comments on the related Majura Road bus route article on our website www.gcc.asn.au, which itself received 250 hits. The results of the poll are below, and are overwhelmingly in support of a Majura Road bus route – at least during peak periods. We request consideration of this new services to help alleviate the chronic traffic problems currently experienced on the “Majura Road parking lot”.

Minister Hargreaves says no-one wants a bus service to the airport down Majura Road. Would you use it?		
Occasionally	39	56.50%
Every weekday	27	39.10%
No - I don't work out there	3	4.30%
No - I'd rather drive	1	1.40%

Intertown services

The Action Intertown bus service should be extended to Gungahlin as a matter of urgency. This high frequency bus service links Belconnen, City, Woden, and Tuggeranong Town Centres. The failure to extend the service to Gungahlin disadvantages the district, especially since there is very little employment in Gungahlin and a road network that makes it hard to access areas of employment during peak hours.

Background

The Gungahlin Community Council Inc. is an incorporated, not for profit, community-based association operating within the Gungahlin region of the Australian Capital Territory.

The district represented by the Council covers an area in the north to northwest of the Territory between the ACT/NSW border and the Barton Highway, Federal Highway/Northbourne Avenue to the South and East.

The objective of the council as defined in its constitution is:

- To preserve and improve the social, cultural, economic and environmental well being of Gungahlin and the Gungahlin Community.

To achieve these objectives the Council undertakes to:



- consult with members of the Gungahlin community
- represent the Gungahlin community, and lobby authorities on the community's behalf
- provide a non-political environment where members of the community can express their aspirations, concerns and suggestions
- provide a public forum where members of the community can obtain information, support and opportunities to network with others
- advise, support and assist any organisation with compatible objectives to those that have been adopted by the Council
- liaise with members of the public, legislators, officials and community representatives
- to provide appropriate information and opinions on matters relevant to the Gungahlin community.

Thank you for your consideration of these proposals.

Regards,

Alan Kerlin
President – Gungahlin Community Council