

Legislative Assembly for the ACT
STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT

INQUIRY INTO ACTION BUSES

PERSONAL SUBMISSION

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Basis of submission

This is a personal submission to the inquiry on some broad aspects of the Territory's public transport system. It is not supported by detailed data and/or research because the submission is focussed on the underlying policy and strategic issues.

Summary of submission

My main thesis is that far more integration is required than currently appears to be the case. Roads, parking facilities, the chosen destinations of people travelling in the ACT along with ACTION Buses are all part of the same "system". That is, the means in the ACT of people getting to where they need to go when they need to go by the most suitable means available.

This can cover: getting to and from work; work itself; getting to and from shopping and entertainment; social and community activities; and many others, including – more broadly – urban strategy and planning in Canberra, especially issues such as urban infill policies.

To do all this requires options and alternatives to allow all users to meet their differing requirements most effectively. Along with this it will be very important to convey to ACT taxpayers (and electors) the philosophy, strategy and, most importantly, fundamental information underlying the situation and what the government ultimately decides to do.

The need for information and data

Ready availability and presentation of relevant data and information are critical in the development of improved transport facilities in Canberra. For example, too often calls are made for increased parking in Civic (thus making it harder for ACTION to attract customers) without any appreciation of the *actual* cost of providing individual car-parking spaces in various locations.

In the above particular example this would need to include: a multi-storey car park in the middle of Civic, an "undeveloped" parking lot on the outskirts of the CBD, a regional shopping centre (such as Dickson or Jamison or Erindale Centres) and an ordinary suburban shopping centre (such as Ainslie, Florey or Farrer). Only when the general population has some awareness of the costs of providing parking spaces in particular locations will they start to accept limitations on provision of such spaces in areas where these costs are high.

In like manner, some way of expressing the cost of provision of urban roads needs to be developed, reduced if at all possible to an individual per vehicle or per trip or per person cost

or something like that. Again, the cost of providing more roads and/or widening existing roads can then more readily be appreciated by ACT taxpayers.

Ultimately, some idea of the relationship between urban “density” (eg. dwellings per square kilometre ? or residential adults per square kilometre ?) and the total long term cost (that’s cost of the original capital expressed in “cost-of-loan” terms and annual running costs less revenue) for a basic light rail system needs to be developed. This again is a basic step in assisting taxpayers to understanding the validity (or otherwise !) of government decision-making.

Information like the above (and also maybe a simple presentation of the on-going current costs of running ACTION expressed in terms such as: cost per passenger kilometre or cost per bus kilometre or cost per frequency of urban access to a service) would help in focussing the public transport debate on some realities.

For example, as indicated earlier, it is all too easy at present for people to complain about inadequate parking in Civic if they have no appreciation of the cost providing parking spots in Civic compared to improvements in ACTION’s service or the provision of alternatives like peripheral car parks and frequent free shuttle services.

General ACT transport strategy

I have avoided using the term “public transport” in the above heading as integration of all forms of potential transport – private and public is the main need in the ACT and the context in which key decisions on ACTION’s policies and strategies need to be determined.

In brief, the elements of an effective transport system in the ACT are as follows:

Defining the issue as broadly as possible

Fundamentally transport is an urban access issue and it involves close interaction between: road building and maintenance and funding; provision of private car parking and charging for its use; registration of private motor vehicles; public transport provision and charging; population density predictions, urban infill policies, etc. ALL these things have to be brought together under the same umbrella.

Achieving the above would not be not easy - politically and bureaucratically - but Canberra needs to decide if it really wants a solution or simply wants explain to ourselves what we can’t have one !

It may well mean drastic changes such as making public transport free (under some or all circumstances) which would remove most barriers to access (other than the purely physical) and also avoiding the cost of fare collection, processing, accounting and inspecting. If and when the system become overloaded, then that problem can be faced – that would be the least of Canberra’s public transport worries at present !

The net loss in income for ACTION under such a policy would need to come from such sources as reduced or delayed road construction and/or provision of lower numbers of inner city car parks or higher charges for existing car parking spaces.

Better integration of inter-related services

A better matching between: the location of car parks, their capacity and the pricing structure for their use; the frequency and convenience of general public transport and local shuttle services. For example, a massive car park at, say, Campbell Park (low real estate value) with an every-five-minutes free shuttle bus service into Civic with adequate facilities for handling large shopping bags might make more overall economic sense than more car parking in Civic).

Another strategy might be to have large scale car parking *near* the major town centres but not actually *in* Civic with frequent shuttle buses to the town centres themselves and frequent connections to Civic and other town centres. Sites that have their main use on weekends

(sporting facilities and ovals, etc) might well provide opportunities for such “off-centre” car parking and shuttle services.

Of course integrating moves like the examples put forward above won't be accepted overnight but economic good sense, coupled with political determination and a serious program of genuine public education and information should prove sufficiently effective in the long run.

Other “bus” issues

At the micro level, re-thinking current approaches to bus services from the ground up from an efficiency and customer viewpoint would help immeasurably. For example, innovations from overseas, like having low cost taxis running bus routes (perhaps even free, given the considerable resulting savings !) late at night instead of expensive buses are all going to be part of providing a service that would almost be impossible to ignore.

Moves such as this may not be welcomed by interests such as transport unions but the primacy of the needs of the travelling public must prevail while ensuring that transport workers are not treated unfairly.

If efficiency in rostering bus shifts is an issue – I do not know if this is the case or not (and as an ordinary member of the public there's no way that I would) but I keep hearing rumours of difficulties with “split shifts” and with some drivers spending significant parts of their shifts doing very little because demand is light – then this needs to be faced and dealt with in a rational and effective way rather than leaving it, hoping it will go away.

In conclusion ...

Even if it's not as easy to implement as we might wish, it's not too hard to see a workable starting point in improving the overall effectiveness (and patronage !) of ACTION. It's really fundamentally a question of political will and commitment to say nothing of the need for vision and foresight. And also of integration of planning, implementation and operations beyond union demarcations, bureaucratic fiefdoms and professional bailiwicks !