

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL INQUIRY INTO INTEGRATED TRANSPORT OPTIONS

Having maintained an ongoing interest in Tasmanian transport, and particularly suburban transport, for over 50 years I would like to submit the following thoughts concerning the above named subject.

It is pertinent to consider the fact that Hobart had a well-integrated suburban system operating for many decades up until the 1960s. This comprised an extensive tramway serving all suburbs from Sandy Bay to Glenorchy, West Hobart to North Hobart via the Hobart rail way station and the city to Cascades and Dynnyrne. Some tram routes were subsequently converted to trolley bus operation but maintained the general route areas previously covered by trams.

In addition, the Tasmanian Government Railways (TGR) served all northern suburbs including Brighton and New Norfolk with a frequent fast rail connection while the Eastern shore was connected with the city by a frequent ferry service.

Outlying towns were served by a combination of private bus operators who provided services equating to local demand.

This system seemed to work remarkably well with very little crossover between the various operators. The principal exception to this would have been the suburban services provided by the TGR between Hobart and Glenorchy. However, as the train route initially passed through the industrial area of Hobart many of their passengers would have originated from this, including the zinc works operated by EZ.

A significant decline in the quality of services offered appears to have begun from the time of the formation of the Metropolitan Transport Trust (MTT) now operating as Metro. The MTT's original charter precluded it from operating beyond seven miles from the city centre which would have maintained the status quo. Obvious need to have this arrangement changed arose from the ever expanding suburban sprawl which saw Hobart increase its area considerably.

Unfortunately, over a period of time, successive Labor governments progressively dismantled this integrated transport beginning with the tramway system between 1957 and 1960, the Bellerive ferry service in 1963 and, after reducing a number of suburban rail services in 1962 closed the entire system in 1974. At the same time the Evening Service each way between Hobart and Launceston and the Parattah rail service were also cancelled. Only after public protest was the Parattah service reinstated albeit on a once per fortnight timetable and this ceased with the abolition of the Tasman Limited in 1978. This service, in turn, had been reduced from six days per week to three prior to abandonment. Thus, rail services could be claimed to have been eliminated through a steady elimination of trains until the point was reached where nobody's needs were catered for. It is also significant that the Bellerive ferry service was also incrementally reduced and MTT buses allowed to gradually take over.

In the intervening period from 1974 vehicular traffic has substantially increased and by effectively only using buses for public transport travel times are now considerably longer than they were in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, a peak hour suburban passenger train stopping at all stations would take only 42 minutes to travel from Hobart to Bridgewater. Today it is not possible to get as far as Claremont in the same time. Little wonder, therefore, commuters choose to drive cars.

Increased congestion on the Brooker and Tasman Highways together with the Southern Outlet combined with the ever increasing suburban sprawl will only result in more cars, longer travel times and a rise in road rage behaviours. It makes no sense to continually add more bus routes all destined for the city when the travel time is inordinately slow. Projected urban development on the Eastern shore will exacerbate bottlenecks on the Tasman Bridge and the Southern Outlet will also struggle to cope with expanding population in the South.

The connection between the eastern and western shore of Hobart could very easily be improved by utilising frequent and fast ferry services. To his credit the operator of the Hobart Water Taxi provides a limited commuter service which is obviously compromised by the relatively high fares that are necessary. This service receives no subsidy or incentive to operate. The introduction of high speed ferries would seem an expensive option but compared with the life and operating cost of buses would not be excessive over a 15 – 20 year period. Floating pontoons could be installed at a reasonable cost and there would be no impediment to servicing Eastern shore suburbs including South Arm and Opossum Bay as well as Kingston. Metro buses should not be competing against such services but should feed from outlying areas to the respective ferry pick up point. Money currently poured in to Metro services could feasibly be reduced and channelled in to ferry and light rail services. It seems inconsistent for the current government to be advocating that any services operated other than by bus should be undertaken at the expense of private enterprise when all other State governments in Australia are subsidising all forms of public transport.

Current Metro services are often inconvenient due to lack of frequency in off peak periods and the irrational logic of combining more than one route. This results in buses meandering through several suburbs rather than taking a more direct route which culminates in longer travel times and a subsequent disincentive to utilise such services. Bus services were altered by Metro with a new “improved” service introduced in 2009 with a promise that the new timetables would be reviewed after three months. The public was invited to make comment about these services in the interim. The area in which I live (Bellerive Bluff) saw almost every through bus to Camelot Park eliminated and replaced with an off peak hourly service running a loop from the Rosny Park bus mall to Bellerive Bluff and return with no service at all on weekends or public holidays. The timetable ceases after the 2.09pm Rosny Park departure and, in any event, it is not possible to travel to the city without changing buses in the mall, invariably leading to having to wait for a connection often with undesirable and badly behaved louts loitering in the mall. The only through buses consist of two very early in the morning travelling to the city and two returning in the evening, which are not even listed on the timetables displayed in the Bluff area. Incidentally, the area around Alexandra Esplanade saw a total abolition of bus services. The net result of these changes has been most Bellerive Bluff buses running empty and with a maximum of two or three passengers in the best case.

I provided comment to Metro three years ago suggesting a better coordination of these services and was informed that the review was taking place over a three month period. To date there has been no change at all and buses continue to run without passengers. I understand that this dysfunctional type of service also exists on other Metro routes.

Rail services have an obvious advantage in that they follow a discrete route and passengers know that running times and stops are consistent. It is significant that Sydney and Adelaide have followed Melbourne's example and are now considerably strengthening light rail services. Perth is another brilliant example where suburban rail services previously curtailed and, in some cases abandoned, have now been modernised and expanded to become one of the most efficient suburban transport services in Australia. Brisbane also can boast a first class suburban rail service enabling easy access to the whole city. It is significant that the Brisbane and Perth systems operate on the same gauge (3' 6") as Tasmania. I understand that the TGR seriously considered replacing rail cars in the mid 60s that were then up to 30 years old but were denied funding by the government of the day. Even at that time suburban loadings were on the verge of rising and it can now be clearly seen what a short sighted decision was taken by the government at the time. Much of Hobart's northern suburbs traffic problems would have been averted if that equipment had been updated. At the time of closure of Hobart suburban rail services in December 1974 the broad acre housing development at Bridgewater was being developed and passenger rail loadings were already increasing as a result.

It is very disappointing that the recent study in to light rail was dismissed so conveniently in the guise of being too expensive for the projected number of passengers likely to use it. Data considered in that study has now been shown to have been flawed and, although the proposal is to be reconsidered, I hold little hope of anything eventuating with the government seemingly so tied to road services. I would urge the adoption of a light rail service which could easily be extended to terminate in the city area around Franklin Square. Time and time again it has been clearly demonstrated that fast, comfortable and efficient public transport works in other Australian cities. Sydney is a classic example of where the weakest link in public transport is the bus service which has to compete with other road users.

It is not good practice to continually extend highway systems and public car parks which invariably seem to be a "band aid" solution as these measures only encourage people to use private vehicles. I would suggest that the system of registering private motor vehicles be changed so that users pay according to the distances travelled and that active discouragement be incurred against unnecessary use of single vehicles in peak periods with the driver as the sole occupant. Other cities in Australia do not encourage the use of private vehicles in the CBD. People in general appear to have a perception that they should not have to walk anywhere and expect transport services to pass their front door or that they are able to park very close to their place of employment. I believe there could well be a valid correlation between the continuing rise in obesity and the disinclination to use public transport based on the expectations of people at large. Fifty to sixty years ago people accepted that they should walk some distance to catch public transport and so got at least some exercise.

Summary

I would suggest that unless some hard decisions are made now urban transport will continue to appeal to only a relatively small proportion of the population. Solely allocating public funding to road transport is not effective because cars are more comfortable than buses and if travelling over the same roads with the same limitations people will always choose this option.

Serious consideration should be given to reinstating light rail services and an expanded commuter ferry service. Where existing facilities exist, operators should be subsidised to provide a service with a corresponding reduction in Metro funding. Roche Bros, for example, have publicly indicated their willingness to provide river services with appropriate backing. Buses, in peak periods, should not provide through services in competition with other means of transport but should provide a feeder service to centralised points for coordinated ongoing travel. A large part of the former TGR suburban decline was attributable to the government allowing buses to run parallel services through the outer northern suburbs. The construction of pontoons and passenger facilities should be a responsibility of government for both rail and water transport.

It is apparent that decisions in the past have been made on an ad hoc basis with little regard to providing any cohesive passenger service in Hobart. Before any public money is expended on suburban transport a clear plan should be formulated allowing a coordinated and integrated approach to providing such services. It is vital that the existing rail corridor be maintained, once TasRail cease running trains in to Hobart, as removal of this link would virtually condemn Hobart to never having a passenger rail service again. In the longer term spur lines should be run from the existing main line to encompass a broader coverage of northern suburbs similar to what has been accomplished in both Melbourne and Perth.

Motorists should be actively discouraged from clogging the streets in the city, particularly in peak hours and this can be achieved through significantly increasing all day parking fees and basing vehicle registration costs on a user pays principle.

Buses obviously have a role to play in the provision of suburban services and I would suggest they would be far better utilised if confined to off peak services and run on direct routes rather than trying to service several suburbs on the journey from city to final destination. Feeder services for rail and ferry should be implemented where possible as this would result in faster travel times and remove some traffic from the roads. Expenditure on public roads in the Hobart area should be constrained in as much as public transport is also entitled to a fair share of the tax payer funds. It is obvious that governments are fearful of a polling backlash if they do not pander to motoring demands but the provision of superb public transport systems throughout Europe does not appear to have caused any such problems.

Hobart probably had one of the best suburban transport systems in Australia years ago and, considering the small population it shows how progressive our fore fathers were. It could now be said Hobart has the worst capital city system in the country.

Patchwork solutions are not the answer and we should be prepared to expend significant monies now to ensure we can provide the transport we will require in the future. One thing is very clear; development of a sound transport base will never be cheaper than now and delaying the inevitable will only cause exacerbated problems and expense for future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my thoughts.

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