

19 February 2014

Public Infrastructure Inquiry
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2, Collins Street East
Melbourne Vic 8003

I refer to a policy concept for easing traffic congestion and increasing public transport capacity in large cities, as outlined in the attached submission.

Although routinely overlooked, the concept is relevant to the Inquiry's terms of reference, especially on "ways to improve decision-making and implementation processes to facilitate a reduction in the cost of public infrastructure projects". Above all, the submission illustrates why decision-making processes for major new urban transport infrastructure should consider the concept when assessing public needs and project options.

The concept is mainly about boosting the bus sector comprehensively, which in turn can improve the efficiency of urban road infrastructure networks, and address system wide road and public transport issues.

I am happy to provide further information, answer any questions arising and appear at the Inquiry's hearings if requested.

Yours sincerely

John Morandini

Roads and Transport Policy in Australian Cities

Submitted to Public Infrastructure Inquiry – February 2014

The economic performance and competitiveness of Australia's cities, especially Sydney, is affected by worsening traffic congestion and public transport shortfalls, and doubt about how these issues can be resolved.

In Sydney's case, car ownership is around 2.6 million vehicles, while the road system chokes up with only a small portion of that whole car fleet actually operating.

Projects like Sydney's WestConnex motorway and the North West rail link can contribute, but only in a limited way. They are more about supporting urban renewal and development around selected corridors than fixing transport metro-wide, and cannot overcome the effects of car dependency generally across the metropolis. This anomaly is echoed across Australia's other principal cities too.

It would take many more new transport infrastructure corridors to be implemented quickly, to turn around the prevailing transport issues. But such a strategy is unaffordable and therefore unable to really solve the 'too little too late' dilemma that large sprawling cities try to deal with decade after decade.

However there is a workable concept that can resolve metro-wide traffic congestion in a foreseeable timeframe and at a cost to taxpayers comparable to building one major new motorway or rail link corridor in each city.

The concept is about increasing mass transit capacity by creating a quality bus service network right across middle and outer areas, so expanding public transports' reach with widely available, reasonably priced, high frequency, limited stop operations from early morning well into the evenings.

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Currently, buses account for less than 1% of traffic (vehicle-kilometres) on Australia's urban roads, which is insufficient to turn around traffic congestion.

But thousands of extra buses would do the job. It would work by attracting a portion of travellers to the new bus systems and by freeing up enough road space to accommodate the bus operations. For example, a 5% reduction in car travel should succeed in making the difference and could be achieved within a decade of commencing concept implementation. (A similar approach worked wonders during the Sydney 2000 Olympics and provides a full scale demonstration of a variant of this concept.)

The concept also includes greater resourcing of the feeder modes metro-wide, including more cycling, walking and car parking facilities to serve suburban centres, and localised light rail or rapid bus transit initiatives in higher density places (like Parramatta and Liverpool in Sydney's case). It warrants consideration in the decision-making processes for major new urban road and transport projects to be implemented within the coming 20 years.

At this stage, concept development and planning are the keys to success, and would include defining operational concepts, involving stakeholders and quantifying the effects on passenger demand, traffic congestion and employment generation.

Those steps would underpin public consultations, feasibility assessments and other processes which, all told, can take years to finalise in advance of project commencement. In any case, current obligations mean that there is up to a decade of 'waiting time' before the next major projects can be committed to and actually started.

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Additional commitments to major new urban corridors, whether road or rail infrastructure, are likely to negate the opportunity to solve metro-wide road and transport issues within a 20 year timeframe.

Cities would benefit by shifting from new transport corridors as the predominant focus, to an affordable position aimed more at better utilising the vast pool of existing infrastructure (and at easing overall traffic congestion and expanding public transit services metro-wide).

That would enable Australian cities to address their transport issues sooner rather than later and show leadership for other global cities to follow, just as Sydney did with the transport arrangements for the 2000 Olympics.

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References:

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