

**Submission
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THE TRANSPORT NEEDS OF SYDNEY'S NORTH-WEST SECTOR

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Submission by Busways Group Pty Ltd

About Busways

The Busways Group is a large private bus company operating over 600 buses throughout the metropolitan area of Sydney, the Central Coast and the North Coast. We are a primary partner in the Area 1 Management Company, which holds a contract with the NSW Government to provide bus services in 'Region 1'. This Region's boundary is encompassed by Blacktown, Rouse Hill, Pitt Town, Sackville, Kurrajong, Bilpin, Yarramundi, Penrith, Warragamba, Erskine Park and Eastern Creek. Much of the future development in the North-West sector will be within Region 1.

Background

It is without doubt that transport infrastructure in the North-West has significantly lagged the residential development. Only recently has any commitment been shown to these areas through the construction of the Parramatta – Rouse Hill and Blacktown – Rouse Hill bus transitways. Unfortunately, not even these pieces of infrastructure are ideal as they suffer from slow journey times, particularly on the Burns – Blacktown leg where there is no grade separation at any intersections.

The success of the M2 city express services highlights the significant demand along this corridor – in fact, it is so successful that the service has almost reached saturation point in the Sydney CBD, with queues of buses trying to enter and exit the city on a daily basis. The growth of this service has been with very little in the way of dedicated infrastructure – save for the bus lanes on the M2 (between Windsor Road and Beecroft Road only) and the Sydney Harbour Bridge (inbound only) these buses are forced to mix with the thousands of commuter vehicles all trying to reach the same destination.

The relatively recent introduction of Metropolitan Bus System Contracts (MBSC) by the NSW Government through the Ministry of Transport bought a significant change in the way bus services were provided and paid for. Part of this reform included a series of 'strategic corridors' linking the regional centres across Sydney. It has now been over two years since some of these contracts were signed and several of these corridors have been implemented – however, very few have the much lauded 5 to 10 minute peak frequencies and 20 minute off-peak frequencies. Unfortunately, even fewer have the extended operating hours and hardly any meet the weekend servicing criteria. This is all a result of lack of funding from NSW Treasury to 'purchase' the kilometres necessary to make these improvements.

Ideas for the Future

- **Bus Rapid Transit**

Whilst much of the talk for the future of public transport revolves around metro or heavy rail, bus rapid transit is a viable option that is easier to deliver, less costly, and more flexible. The existing transitways and M2 bus lanes could form the beginning of the BRT network, with extensions and improvements added as need dictates and funding is made available. For BRT to be most effective, it needs a largely dedicated roadway with few or no at-grade intersections, a far simpler task than building an underground rail/metro line.

Another factor in favour of BRT is the existence of a large fleet of buses that can instantly start using the network and the fact these buses are also able to use normal suburban streets and carry out a local transport function. In actual fact, BRT can help to increase the utilisation of the existing bus fleet through faster journey times, thus enabling each bus to undertake more trips in the critical peak hours.

Immediate improvements that can be made to form the start of a BRT network include:

1. Eliminate all at-grade intersections on the Parramatta – Rouse Hill and Blacktown – Rouse Hill Tways and introduce traffic signal pre-emption for those intersections which can't be separated
2. Build a dedicated bus roadway linking the Tway at Abbot Road with the existing median M2 bus lanes at Windsor Road
3. Construction of an integrated bus/rail interchange at Epping Station

The initial BRT network would rely on integration with the CityRail network at Epping Station but it is recommended that the future BRT network is extended from the M2 bus lanes at Beecroft Road through to the Sydney CBD. Other ideas for future BRT include the construction of bus roadways that run parallel to all new rail lines (and existing lines where appropriate) to be used for nightride bus services and rail trackwork replacement buses. The provision of such infrastructure may allow for nightride bus services to commence earlier at night due to their cost effective method of operation.

The use of traffic signal pre-emption is successfully demonstrated on the Liverpool – Parramatta Transitway, making it a cost effective method of improving bus travel times when grade separation is technically impossible or extremely costly. Signal pre-emption can be provided in a relatively short time-frame and at a fraction of the cost of large engineering works associated with grade separation.

BRT is a viable and effective way to cater for the public transport needs of a growing area and this has been clearly demonstrated in Brisbane. Their busway system benefits from world-class infrastructure with predominantly dedicated

roadways and high frequency services, which have combined to create significant patronage growth. It has been reported that in the first 6 months of opening, passenger numbers grew by 40% and over the first 3.5 years there was an 88% increase.

Further, by utilising BRT as a less costly alternative to the construction of heavy rail or metro, the government is able to spread the benefit to a larger proportion of the community. For the price of a heavy rail line, several BRT systems can be implemented which could assist in linking the North-West sector to the western suburbs, South-West sector and northern suburbs. The potential to open up easy access to a large range of destinations for a significant number of residents in the Sydney metropolitan area is a much more equitable and far-reaching way to spend precious government funding.

- **Frequency Improvements for Bus Routes**

Even with the signing of the Metropolitan Bus System Contracts (MBSC) there is a great inequity in service provision between areas. Some routes experience high frequencies with extended operating hours whilst a neighbouring suburb can experience much lower frequencies with shorter operating hours. These conditions exist primarily because of historical factors, but the opportunity to address this issue under the MBSC regime has not been taken due to funding limitations imposed by Treasury. There needs to be a significant injection of funding to 'buy' more kilometres to enable this to occur, not just for local services but also strategic corridor routes and the proposed BRT network.

It should be noted that much of the necessary funding needs to be directed to address target time periods. Generally, peak services are adequate but it is the peak shoulders, off-peak and night frequencies that require immediate attention. In most cases, the minimum standards prescribed in the *Service Planning Guidelines* should form the basis for distributing the funding.

- **Reform Rail Operations**

As mentioned in the BRT section, an initial network would rely on interchanging bus passengers to the railway at Epping Station. This transfer location is ideal due to its links with Hornsby, Rhodes, Strathfield, Macquarie, Chatswood, St Leonards and the Sydney CBD. Unfortunately, the current rail system would appear to be unable to cope with such an influx of passengers especially during the peak. Reforms to the operation of the rail system would need to focus on increasing frequency; reducing dwell times at the station; and buying more rolling stock. Without such changes, the foundations behind the initial BRT are flawed and the transfer arrangement between bus and rail at Epping becomes untenable.

- **Consistent Road Pricing Policies**

In order to help regulate and manage road usage, road pricing (or tolls) are a necessary tool. However, the inconsistency across Sydney is of serious concern

and must be addressed to ensure residents of the North-West sector are not carrying too much of the burden. All freeways and motorways should be subject to a toll based upon distance travelled, as is currently the case with the M7. This distance based rate must be consistent on every roadway and the toll on the Harbour Bridge/Tunnel should be eliminated to bring it in line with all other CBD access points. The final component of the road pricing policy should be the withdrawal of the M4 and M5 cashback scheme – this grossly unfair and extremely expensive State government promise is the key to current inconsistency in road pricing.

- **Integrated Ticketing & Fares**

The need for integrated ticketing is paramount to ensure NSW is able to keep pace with other world-class cities. Whilst the benefits of a single ticket to cover all modes of transport can often encourage patronage increases, the other element of integrated fares is even more critical in achieving a cohesive public transport network. It should be possible to calculate the fare for a person's trip from start to finish as one single unit, rather than them being charged a fare for the bus component and a different fare for the train component. By charging a single flag-fall and an overall distance based fare, travel will become cheaper for many and more transparent for all.

- **Interchange Upgrades/Maintenance**

Bus/rail interchanges play a pivotal role in facilitating the seamless transfer between various modes of transport. The NSW Government has spent many millions of dollars upgrading and constructing new interchanges, but there continues to be a noticeable variation in the level of infrastructure that is provided at each, often due to the commercial arrangements which enable their construction. As a minimum, interchanges should have dedicated driver toilets and a meal room, to ensure that are able to function effectively for the bus company as well as the traveling public. These minimum standards would need to be applied to Blacktown Interchange and the soon to be constructed Castle Hill Interchange.

The other aspect of interchange functionality is maintenance. It appears there are a variety of arrangements in place to manage the cleaning and repair of infrastructure which has led to noticeable differences at each interchange. Blacktown Interchange, which is managed by RailCorp has been maintained to the highest standards, with on-going work being done to continually improve this. Mt Druitt however, has had no coordinated maintenance system implemented, and has deteriorated to a state where it is now extensively vandalised and dirty. All interchanges should be maintained and managed by a single authority which is appropriated funded to carry out this work.

Recommendations

To ensure public transport is able to effectively and efficiently serve the current and future residents of the North-West sector, Busways makes the following recommendations;

- Introduce a Bus Rapid Transit system along the Rouse Hill to Parramatta; Rouse Hill to Blacktown; and Rouse Hill to Epping corridors as an immediate way of addressing transport needs of this region and provide funding to significantly improve priority on existing and future strategic corridors;
- Provide additional funding to holders of Metropolitan Bus System Contracts such that they are able to introduce frequency and operational hour improvements to strategic corridors in the first instance and all other routes in a rolling program of upgrades;
- Address current inefficiencies in the operation of the rail network to improve on-time running, frequency and rolling stock utilisation, such that bus/rail transfer becomes a viable transport option;
- Reform road pricing policy to ensure a true user-pays system results, and people from the west and south west are not encouraged to drive at the expense of motorists from the north west;
- Source and implement an integrated ticketing system that also features integrated fares; and
- Adopt a base-level requirement for all new and upgraded interchanges, which also includes a contracted maintenance program with key performance indicators.

Additional Information on BRT

The following link is to a paper prepared by Professor David Hensher, outlining benefits of adopting a BRT network.

<http://www.itls.usyd.edu.au/publications/hensher-2006-sustainable.pdf>