

THE TRANSPORT NEEDS OF SYDNEY'S NORTH-WEST SECTOR

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A submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4 of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of New South Wales ("the Committee") by Action for Public Transport (NSW) Inc. ("APT").

This draft document is dated 11 October 2008. It was posted on the APT website on 15 October 2008. The final document will become a formal parliamentary submission when it is submitted to the Committee on 16 October 2008, at which time it will become subject to parliamentary privilege and document confidentiality laws. For parliamentary purposes, it is authorised by the Management Committee of APT.

APT is a member-funded advocacy group representing public transport consumers. All day-to-day labour is voluntary. Our website address is www.aptnsw.org.au

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OVERVIEW

APT is pessimistic about the future of transport in North-West Sydney. History shows that, for at least a decade, the State Government has espoused the rhetoric of a "balanced" transport system, with an emphasis on reducing the rate of growth of private vehicle use and encouraging more use of public transport. The Government's bid has failed. Moreover, we believe the problems lie mostly with the system of government in NSW and in particular, factional forces within political parties, inter-agency rivalry, and the parliamentary process. None of these problems will be fixed easily or quickly, if ever. A cynical public may view this inquiry by politicians as yet another phase of a dysfunctional process.

APT concludes that nothing short of a complete overhaul of the transport planning and implementation processes will bring a balanced, effective, and efficient transport system to the residents, workers and visitors to North-West Sydney.

We take this opportunity to alert the Committee to the fact that "transport", as such, is not necessarily the subject which should be studied, but "access". People need access to services and jobs. Transport is just the means to that end. This is why land-use planning must always be considered as an integral part of transport planning.

We acknowledge our limited experience in moving about the outer reaches of the NWS, and in gaining access to services in the sector.

BACKGROUND

On 29 August 2008 the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4 of the NSW Legislative Council (the "Committee") self-referred that it should inquire into and report on the "integrated transport needs

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of Sydney's North-West Sector" (the "Inquiry"), with four particular Terms of Reference. Those terms covered -

- 1 - The requirements of an integrated transport system, including road, rail and bus links,
- 2 - Funding,
- 3 - The proposed North-West Metro Railway (the "Metro") and its relationship to the cancelled North-West Rail Link (the "Link"), and
- 4 - "any other related matters".

Press advertisements on 10 September 2008 sought public submissions, with a closing date of 17 October 2008. On 26 September 2008, APT received a formal request from the Committee Chair to make a submission, the closing date being by then, three weeks away.

SCOPE OF THE INQUIRY

The Committee uses the terms "integrated" and "North-West Sector" but defines neither. We have assumed the North-West Sector ("NWS") to be that as defined by the NSW Department of Planning (DoP). It encompasses the local government areas of Baulkham Hills, Blacktown, Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury and Penrith. The DoP's so-called "Draft North-West Subregional Strategy" preceded this Inquiry. It was on display for public comment from December 2007 till March 2008. We use the term "so-called" because we were not impressed by any of the DoP's subregional strategies as useful documents in terms of public participation in transportation planning. Our review of the Inner-West Strategy appears here-

<http://www.aptnsw.org.au/cgi-bin/item.cgi?20080904Thu214408.txt>

It contains general comment about the other strategy documents.

APT is at a loss to know the Committee's purpose in conducting this Inquiry, what it expects to achieve, what use its findings might be put to, and what legislative force its findings might have.

THE PARTICULAR TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE INQUIRY-

1 – "REQUIREMENTS FOR AN INTEGRATED TRANSPORT SYSTEM"

Over about the last decade, the State Government has released a number of planning policy documents. They include the Metropolitan Strategy, the Metropolitan Transport Statement, and numerous subregional "strategies". A common theme has been the concept of Sydney as a "City of Cities". We commend this concept, but we believe that, for it to be successful, high speed, rail-based, public transport services will be required, radiating out into the NWS from at least Parramatta and Penrith. Lower capacity trunk public transport services will be required from Blacktown and Hornsby.

APT regrets that there is no consensus in the community, even at professional levels, about the definition of an "integrated" transport system. This is likely to constrain the Committee in refining its deliberations.

We caution the Committee to be alert to submissions advocating one particular mode of public transport over another. In our view, a proper analysis of the various transport tasks to be performed will produce traffic density forecasts which themselves will indicate the appropriate mode to be employed.

For APT's views on light-rail, see –

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2 – "FUNDING"

It is important that the Committee give funding high priority. In fact, if the Committee were able to resolve the funding issues, nothing else would much matter. Public/Private Partnerships (PPPs) are fashionable, but APT is not impressed. Many have not served the public well (MainTrain, Airport Rail line, Cross-City Tunnel, Lane Cove Tunnel...), due, we suspect, to the greater skills and profit-driven motivation in the private sector. Yet with all that expertise, some projects have failed financially, as the Committee would be aware. We are pleased to note an apparent shift in community thinking which attaches less importance to AAA credit ratings and a greater willingness to borrow for public infrastructure projects which can be financed by borrowing, and repaid by future generations of users. We are nevertheless nervous about the possible impact on train travelers should Sydney's current biggest PPP contract, for new trains, fail for some unforeseen reason.

We note that funding, or rather the lack of it, has frustrated all the government's transport plans since the withering of its "Action for Transport 2010" plan, released in 1998. That plan was described in parliament on 25 November 1998 as "fully funded" ! If anything, matters have got worse, with the current collapse of world financial markets and an emergency State "mini-budget" scheduled for November 2008.

APT sees the NSW Treasury as a major hurdle in gaining satisfactory funding arrangements for public transport projects. We understand Treasury has a history of frustrating such projects. The Committee might be well advised to spend significant resources on analysing this perception.

The current bickering between state and federal governments about who should pay for which infrastructure projects is illustrative of the financing hurdles to be overcome. The Committee should address this problem.

3 – "METRO" v "LINK"

We expect the Committee will be overwhelmed with opinions as to which is the preferred rail mode for the Epping to Rouse Hill corridor, and that most will be biased or ill-informed. The detailed route is also likely to be vigorously debated. A former transport minister, the late Peter Cox, famously dismissed such intense discussions as "just lines on maps".

All things considered, APT is of the view that the Epping-Rouse Hill heavy-rail "Link" is the preferred mode. It is cheaper, and can be delivered more quickly than the Metro, but most important of all, it will enable the necessary and desirable frequency of service on the Epping-Chatswood Rail Link (ECRL), which cannot be achieved if the ECRL terminates at Epping.

When considering changes or additions to the rail system, the Committee should be careful to always consider the rail network as a whole. Even the smallest change at one place can have considerable impacts at other places on the network.

4 – "OTHER RELATED MATTERS"

We expect the Committee to give due consideration to the three global issues effecting the future of transport in the NWS – Climate Change, Peak Oil, and the current world financial crisis. We need not remind the Committee that all of them are urgent.

Closer to home, it is our view that Sydney's transport problems can be directly attributed to the failure of the political and parliamentary processes. The Committee, being an integral part of the parliament, is in an ideal position to address this issue.

In our opinion, the following aspects of the parliamentary or political processes need to be addressed by the Committee (examples in brackets) –

a – The temptation for governments to build infrastructure where it is likely to maximise electoral advantage rather than transport efficiency or community benefit. Too many transport projects have been advanced for their populist appeal or their ability to coincide with the election cycle. (Liverpool Tway, deferred opening of Lane Cove Tunnel, "There are no votes in the NW Metro" – Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald, 7.10.08)

b – The community's over-dependence on the media for exposing discrepancies and failures in State Government activities, the Opposition being pre-occupied with attacking individual parliamentarians, and a reluctance to promote ideas or projects where there may be any "losers", which might jeopardise future election. We are concerned that investigative journalism could be swept away overnight by the vested interests of a commercially oriented or politically motivated media. (Sydney Harbour Tunnel, Western Fast Rail, Cross City Tunnel, Lane Cove Tunnel,)

c – Inter-agency rivalry, and failure to mutually support projects with a community benefit, possibly due to the conflicting goals of different agencies ("Silos")

d – The excessive influence of the RTA in transport planning in NSW and its failure to institute real bus priority on low-cost rail alternatives like Tways. Note that all of Sydney's planned motorways have been completed as planned. The only railways built have been the Airport Line and Olympic Park, both with privately owned stations and associated access-charge disincentives for the passenger.

e – Treasury's apparent animosity toward public transport infrastructure and operation

f – The continuing bias toward car dependency in major residential land releases like the Annangrove development.

g – Continuing corruption in RailCorp and in local government

h – The ability of private enterprise investor consortia to influence transport and land-use planning by offering to build and operate infrastructure which is high on profit rather than community benefits, "at no cost" to the community (Sydney Harbour Tunnel, Western Fast Rail)

j - The possible down-side of having members of the Legislative Council, not popularly elected, as Ministers of the Crown

IMPROVE STRATHFIELD-HORNSBY RAIL SERVICES

The half-hourly off-peak frequency of train services between Strathfield and Hornsby is grossly inadequate. It serves the long-established and increasingly important transport interchange at Epping,

along with lesser interchanges with buses at Eastwood and West Ryde. It is hard to imagine that anybody with any degree of transport choice, or who valued their time, would tolerate such extended waiting times for journeys of a few stations. A service frequency of ten minutes on this line is a challenge for providers, but it is desirable, and physically achievable.

Train speeds on both the Northern and Western lines should be increased. It can be done at negligible capital cost. Speeds were reduced following the Waterfall accident, ostensibly for safety reasons. It had more to do with a futile attempt to improve on-time running. Passengers now complain that trains wait in stations for extended periods, having arrived early. Despite massive and expensive track upgrading in the past three decades, train speeds have not been increased to reap the economic benefits.

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