

THE TRANSPORT NEEDS OF SYDNEY'S NORTH-WEST SECTOR

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Date received: 15/10/2008

General Purpose Standing Committee No 4

Inquiry into Transport Needs of Sydney's North-West Sector

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Public Transport in Castle Hill

The State electorate of Castle Hill (formerly The Hills) has suffered more than any other from the Carr/Iemma/Rees Government's prevarication over public transport over the past 10 years.

In 1998 the Government's Action for Transport Plan promised a two-station rail link to Castle Hill by 2010, with a four-station optional extension to Rouse Hill (then in the electorate) to be delivered by 2014. This latter option subsequently became part of the substantive proposal, with the result that the projected cost of the rail link blew out from \$600 million to more than \$2.5 billion. However, this is still substantially less than the \$12 billion North-West Metro which the Government announced earlier this year. Over the space of a decade there has been a 2000 per cent increase in the cost of moving people from north-west Sydney to the City, which is clearly a major reason for the Rees Government's reluctance to commit to the Metro. Lines on maps are cheap; tunnelling isn't, and we are still to see as much as a single sleeper of any new rail line laid.

The Action for Transport Plan also committed to completing the Parramatta-Epping link, and this is still needed, for a range of reasons outlined below. This line would be an extension of the single-track Carlingford line, which currently terminates in the only railway station in Baulkham Hills Shire. This line has the worst services of any line in the CityRail network, so poor that many people choose to drive to Epping to catch the train or, worse still, to drive to work even though they live only a short distance from Carlingford station.

It shouldn't be this way. In 1994 the Fahey Government promised to convert the Carlingford line into a two-track Parramatta-Epping link. Not only was this promise reiterated by the Carr Government in 1998; the line was to be extended to Chatswood. However, costs blew out and the Government is now building only the Epping-Chatswood line – for double the original cost of building the entire Parramatta-Chatswood line.

Compounding the problem, when it introduced its new timetable in 2005 the Government decimated services on the Carlingford line, cutting the number of direct services to the City to one a day (there are no direct return services). Passengers catching anything other than the 7.00am weekday train must change at Clyde.

As a result, patronage on the line has fallen, reinforcing the Government's decision not to build the Epping-Parramatta line, despite the fact that it would provide significant strategic advantages to the CityRail network.

So the public transport rich are getting richer, while the public transport poor are getting poorer and the population of North-West Sydney continues to grow. And the fact that the services are so far is reflected in the statistics. According to the State Parliamentary Library, in 2001 Baulkham Hills and The Hills (as Castle Hill used to be called) ranked 48th and 49th in the State (out of 93 seats) for public transport usage by commuters at around 13 per cent.¹ However, all but two of the seats ranked below the two Hills seats (Smithfield and Pittwater) were rural and regional seats. Significantly, The Hills also had the highest proportion of households owning two or more cars (69.5 per cent), followed by Hawkesbury (66.4 per cent)

¹ D,Arney, Mark: NSW State Electoral Districts ranked by 2001 Census Characteristics, Background Paper No 1/2003, State Parliamentary Library, p. 121.

and Baulkham Hills (66.2 per cent). The Federal seat of Mitchell, which overlaps these three State seats, has the highest level of car ownership in Australia.

For the last 14 years the solution has been buses. The Fahey Government introduced the Hills-City Express Bus Service, originally run by Westbus (now Hillsbus) along Victoria Road. When the M2 opened in 1997, the service was re-routed along the (then) new expressway. It is the fastest growing public transport service in NSW, carrying more than 12,000 passengers a day into the city and with a growth rate of more than 20 per cent.

The Iemma Government also built a bus T-way along Old Windsor Road from Rouse Hill to Parramatta, via Westmead Hospital, which is proving to be something of a white elephant. A second T-way was supposed to be built from Blacktown to Castle Hill, but it never got beyond Old Windsor Road. Castle Hill missed out again.

Fast-growing population

The case for a dedicated rail link to the Hills is well made out in the Government's own Environmental Assessment and Concept Plan for the North-West Rail Link. It says 18 per cent of Sydney's anticipated residential growth is expected to occur in the area, with the population expanding to 475,000 by 2031 (240,000 in Baulkham Hills Shire, up 40,000 from today). Only seven per cent of total household trips a day are by public transport, the lowest proportion in Sydney. Not only is the level of car ownership the highest in the State, the distance travelled by motor vehicle per household is 27km a day, compared with 11 km in Eastern Sydney. Clearly, there is a high potential to get people out of their cars and onto public transport.

Buses can't meet demand

As noted earlier, Hillsbus' City Express Bus is the fastest growing public transport service in the State, increasing passenger numbers by more than 20 per cent a year. The growth rate would be even higher if the Government were to match bus numbers to demand. In April 2006 Hillsbus asked for 20 buses; the Government gave them seven, and the company has been playing catch-up ever since.

The exponential growth of this service clearly illustrates the pent-up demand for public transport in the Hills district. But buses are not the long-term solution to the North-West's transport needs. For starters, they can't carry as many people. An efficient bus rapid transit system operating at one-minute headways can carry a maximum of 4500 people an hour; heavy rail three to four times this number² and a Metro system, potentially eight to 10.³ The bus journey can be lengthy and extremely uncomfortable for passengers who can't get a seat. The trip from QVB to Castle Hill notionally takes 60 minutes during peak, but often exceeds 80 minutes, largely because of bumper-to-bumper traffic along the M2 between Epping Road and Becroft Road.

² GHD suggests 14,000 an hour for heavy rail in its Preferred Project Report on the North-West Rail Link, 2007, p.29.

³ The TIDC claims some Metro systems are capable of carrying 60,000 passengers an hour, while CityRail lines are limited to about 30,000. See Sydneylink The Future of Sydney's Transport, p.6.

Travel times would be significantly reduced if buses had priority all or most of the way into the City (there are bus lanes, but they stop at Beecroft Road, Epping). In 2002 I lobbied the Government to have the breakdown lanes on the M2 turned into peak-hour bus lanes. I was told by the then Parliamentary Secretary for Roads, Tony Stewart, that it wasn't possible because the breakdown lanes were 'an integral component of the road safety system of the Motorway' and there were 20-odd cyclists a day who commuted along the M2. Subsequently the Government allowed Transurban to convert the westbound breakdown lane to a general traffic lane and forced the cyclists off the M2 back onto general roads. This arrangement makes the extension of bus priority east of the Epping tunnel extremely problematic.

Because of the Government's reluctance to give Hillsbus the number of buses it needs, often the buses are full when they reach the Oakes Road, Carlingford, bus station, the last pick-up point before the City. A perennial complaint from my constituents is that they have to watch three or four full buses go by before they can climb aboard. So frustrating has this been many people have gone back to using their cars.

Carlingford Services Worst in Sydney

The Carlingford line has the worst services in Sydney. Because of this, passenger numbers were falling even as they rose across the rest of Sydney. Figures obtained under FOI show a drop of 22 per cent in the number of tickets bought at Carlingford over the five years to 2006. Commuters are choosing to drive to Epping or Eastwood to catch the train, primarily because of the trip home. All passengers travelling from the City to Carlingford have to change at Clyde. Clyde is a station in the middle of an industrial suburb. Not only doesn't it have lifts (it takes 20 minutes to change platforms using the inclinator provided, which has to be operated by station staff), at night the station is almost deserted. It's all too easy to miss your connection, which necessitates a wait of up to an hour. Women in particular do not feel safe in this environment; so much so that constituents I have spoken to have chosen to catch a cab rather than sit round on the empty platform.

The major reason CityRail won't run direct services along the Carlingford line is that most of the platforms are only four carriages long, and CityRail doesn't want four-car trains occupying a slot in the system during peak-hour. So apart from the 7.00am to Central, the only train on the line is a three-car shuttle service (down from four cars since June 2008) between Carlingford and Clyde which runs every 30-40 minutes during peak hour and every hour out of peak. It takes 14 minutes to make a one-way trip. The Government proposes to build a new passing loop at Rydalmere in 2010 which would allow trains to run every 15 minutes. If at the same time the platforms were lengthened to accommodate six-car trains (Rosehill is already long enough), the service would be significantly improved.

Inadequate as the services are, Carlingford railway station is a transport node and so, to comply with the Government's higher density edict, Baulkham Hills Shire Council has rezoned the area between Pennant Hills Road and Post Office Street for flats. It is currently considering an amendment to its Local Environmental Plan that would allow a further 5000 people to be accommodated in this area, mainly in flats up to 18-storeys in height. It is my view that this proposal must be deferred, at least until the Government completes the passing loop and lengthens the platforms to allow direct services to the City.

The completion of the Epping-Parramatta link would provide a vastly superior solution to public transport needs in this part of Sydney. And it would have major strategic benefits for the whole Sydney system, including:

- Relieving congestion on the main western line.
- Providing direct access to Macquarie Park for people living in Penrith and the Blue Mountains.
- Providing additional trains for the Epping-Chatswood line and the Northern Line, which is facing significant cuts in frequency once the Parramatta-Chatswood line opens next year.

Metro or Heavy Rail?

Over the last 10 years the Government has waxed and waned in its support for the North-West Rail Link. Several times the line has been scrapped or deferred, only to be resurrected again because of public pressure. The fact is, the North-West must have better public transport. It is essential if we are to get people out of their cars, reduce traffic congestion in Sydney and reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

The original 1998 plan, as mentioned above, was to build a two-station line from Epping to Castle Hill by 2010 with the possibility of extending it to Rouse Hill by 2014. Not only has work not started on building that line (making its completion by the original date impossible), the Government has now scrapped heavy rail in favour of a Metro.

I believe the original plan for a heavy rail link outlined in Action for Transport was superior to the Metro for the following reasons:

Cost. At \$12 billion, the Metro would be prohibitively expensive to build. A heavy rail link to Rouse Hill could be completed for well under \$3 billion if the section from Norwest to Rouse Hill were to run above ground, as recommended by GHD⁴. This area is, as GHD notes, largely undeveloped at the moment. It makes very little sense to put a railway in a tunnel in a greenfields site 40 km from the centre of the city. Carl Scully's decision to put the Epping-Chatswood line under rather than over the Lane Cove River cost hundreds of millions of dollars and meant the proposed station at UTS Lindfield had to be scrapped. We shouldn't be cutting corners in building infrastructure in our city, but equally we don't have enough money to saddle major infrastructure projects with unnecessary costs. A dollar wasted is a dollar not available for another project somewhere else in NSW.

Comfort. People will not want to stand for a 45-50 minute train trip from Rouse Hill to St James.

Integration. The Metro is a whole new system which doesn't integrate with the existing CityRail network at all. That means passengers wanting to travel, for example, to North Sydney or Macquarie Park will have to change to a CityRail train at Epping, putting a further barrier in the way of people using public transport. There are no plans currently for a major intermodal connection at Epping, which would obviously be needed.

Better Staging. The Metro is proposed to be constructed in two stages: one, from St James to Epping; the other, from Epping to Rouse Hill. It would be all too easy for the Government to

⁴ Op cit., p. 27.

build the line from St James first, then find it has run out of money and fail to build the most needed section to Rouse Hill – indeed, before his departure, the previous Premier had indicated that the Government would, indeed, build the St James-Epping section first.

The heavy rail line, on the other hand, would only service North-West Sydney, so by definition would have to be constructed so as to benefit Sydney's most transport-deprived area.

Some years ago the Government was talking about staging the project by building it to the Hills Centre first (the major construction site for the railway) and to Rouse Hill Town Centre second.

I would recommend that the project be staged as follows: Stage One, to Norwest Business Park; Stage Two, to Rouse Hill. This would divide it into bite-sized chunks and make it more likely it is built.

Norwest barely rates a mention in the Environmental Assessment for the North-West Rail Link, yet it is extremely important for the following reasons.

a) It is a major employment centre in its own right. There are currently 25,000 jobs located in Norwest, many of them high-tech, with a further 15,000 projected over the next six to eight years. Major companies headquartered here include Woolworths, Resmed, Cathay Pacific, Optus Singtel and Wyeth Australia.

b) As a result, Norwest can provide backloading for the trains, which is important for a terminal line. This will greatly improve the economics of the line.

c) Lack of public transport is a major constraint on Norwest's growth. The Hills Business Chamber reports a number of companies have recently decided to locate elsewhere because of this. A railway line would reverse this trend.

While the Government suggests Metros can carry twice as many passengers an hour as heavy rail⁵, it won't quantify exactly how many the North-West Metro might take. GHD suggests heavy rail would be able to carry up to 14,000 passengers at five-minute headways, a figure which seems conservative.

What Should the Government Do?

Short-term

1. Commit to building the North-West Rail Link.
2. Acquire a land corridor through the Balmoral Road Release area between Norwest and Rouse Hill.
3. Give Hillsbus more buses and improve bus priority on the City Express route wherever possible (including through West Pennant Hills Valley).
4. Install lifts at Clyde station.

⁵ Transport Infrastructure Development Corporation, SydneyLink, The Future of Sydney's Transport, p. 6.

Medium-term

1. Build the passing loop on the Carlingford line and extend the station platforms.
2. Provide direct train services to the City and return during peak hour.
3. Build Stage One of the North-West Rail Link to Norwest Business Park

Long-term

1. Complete the Epping-Parramatta link.
2. Extend the North-West Rail Link to Rouse Hill Regional Centre.

This plan is both affordable and deliverable and would make a major difference to Sydney's transport network, as well as to public transport in the Hills.

October 2008