

INQUIRY INTO NEW SOUTH WALES LIGHT RAIL SERVICES

Organisation: Action for Public Transport (NSW) Inc.

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Action for Public Transport (N.S.W.) Inc.

P O Box K606
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Secretary
Public Works Committee
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney 2000

Dear Secretary,

Public Works Committee

Inquiry into light rail services

Submission

Introduction

Action for Public Transport (NSW) Inc. is a transport advocacy group which has been active in Sydney since 1974. We promote the interests of beneficiaries of public transport - passengers and the wider community alike.

There are three light rail systems operating in NSW - the L1 (opened in stages from 1997), Newcastle (opened Feb 2019) and L2/L3 (opened from Dec 2019). They commenced service separately and have different purposes. They generally have different issues. The discussion below will address individual systems separately where appropriate.

Parramatta light rail is under construction. Its first stage is expected to open in 2023.

The discussion section of this submission is organised in sections corresponding to your terms of reference.

Discussion

a. Establishment and procurement, operation and maintenance of LR services

1. Establishment of L1:

When L1 was being planned, it was considered possible that the route might have to be shared with freight trains servicing a destination at Summer Hill. Therefore, the vehicles were designed for heavy rail tracks with wheels specified for those tracks. Also, the vehicles were specified to have very low floors, reducing the amount of height available for robust suspensions. The recent decision to run CSELR vehicles on L1, with their quite different specifications, has brought these matters to the fore.

2. Establishment of Parramatta Light Rail:

We have long been disappointed that stage 1 of the Parramatta service is to end at Carlingford. Extending it to Epping (about 3km, probably in tunnel) would connect it to a large shopping mall and a major heavy rail interchange.

3. Operation of all lines:

A problem with all lines is that some trams are mostly covered in wrap advertising. Although supposedly transparent in daytime, the wrap material hampers vision at night. Worse, when wet, this transparency changes to translucency. Even in daylight, passengers cannot see out through wet windows and must rely on interior indicators or announcements to know when their stop is reached.

4. Operation of L1:

The most striking feature of L1 operation is the appallingly long trip times. For instance, L1 trams take six minutes to travel the 500 metres between Central and the change from street operation to reservation at Ultimo. Compounding that, the route travels around the Pyrmont peninsula when many passengers have no business there. This adds arguably 1300 metres and five stops to their trip. The writer worked for a time at Sydney Fish Market and found that walking to work from Town Hall station was quicker than taking light rail from Central.

Another problem is that there is no stop at Glebe Point Road even though the L1 tracks pass under Glebe Point Road. The existing Glebe and Jubilee Park stops are out of walking range for many Glebe residents.

Until COVID, another issue was lack of passenger-carrying capacity. Some extra vehicles are on order but the fleet could carry more passengers per day if trips were quicker and vehicles could therefore complete more trips each day.

Another issue is the poor connections to the Broadway area because there is no L1 station within convenient walking distance of the Broadway educational precinct. A station at Railway Square (which would be at least four hundred metres walking distance closer to Broadway than any existing light or heavy rail platform) would greatly mitigate that problem.

Another issue is that the service could usefully be expanded yet nothing has been done or even announced to pave the way for expansion.

Amplifying and accelerating L1 services:

- Converting Dulwich Hill station to double-track would remove a capacity constraint at that end of the line.
- Reprogramming the traffic signals at the intersection of Darling Drive and Hay St to give absolute priority to trams would help trams at negligible cost to road traffic.
- An additional CBD terminus could be built under and behind 847 George St adjacent to Railway Square and connected to existing tracks using the Goods Line. Simultaneously, a short new tunnel could be constructed under Harris St, connecting the existing route near the depot with Wentworth Park station. These two works would permit a huge increase in capacity and would speed-up many trips and bring a possibility of extending the line from Pyrmont, perhaps through The Bays towards Balmain. There would also be a benefit to L2/L3 services and many buses by reducing the number of trams in Hay St and hence conflicts at the intersections with George St and Pitt St.

5. Establishment of Newcastle light rail

Our view is that the system had its origins in a desire by developers to displace the railway from the only CBD land not undermined by coal extraction and therefore capable of supporting tall developments. Users of the railway objected but the government responded by giving the

Minister power to close railways (excepting only those around Sydney) without the need for an Act of Parliament. In this case, such an act would not have passed the Legislative Council. Luckily for the developers, the Government won a court ruling that closing a part of a railway without an Act was not illegal, and the Newcastle railway was cut back to Wickham. In justification, the government claimed that trains on the level crossing at Stewart Avenue had been causing unacceptable traffic congestion. Ironically, trams now interrupt road traffic at the same point.

After the railway had been cut back, light rail construction began and eventually light rail services commenced.

6. Operation of Newcastle light rail

We have been told that, pre-COVID, some peak-hour LR vehicles were fully loaded.

An important feature of the Newcastle system is that the vehicles get traction power from batteries which require recharging at every stop. Obviously, this slows the service down. Also, it imposes a constraint on the maximum distance between stops, which cannot be more than can be travelled without recharge. However, if it ever was decided to extend the service beyond Wickham, overhead power could be provided just as it is in Sydney suburbs and probably would be. No doubt the batteries need replacement regularly; we have not seen any figures on what this does to operating costs.

Our observation is that Newcastle LR vehicles have always received appropriate priority from traffic signals.

7. Establishment of L2 and L3, collectively known as CBD and South East Light Rail ("CSELR"):

At an unrecorded date in perhaps 2017 before construction started, the writer attended a meeting in Crown St. The meeting was addressed by Mr Jeff Goodling, then project director for CSELR. Mr Goodling said the project was going to use an innovative form of contracting whereby tenderers for particular contracts were asked how quickly they could complete their work and were then to be given incentive payments if they kept to that schedule. We don't know what went wrong with the contracting but there is overwhelming anecdotal evidence that many worksites were fenced off and idle for weeks or months on end, followed by a desperate rush of 24-hour work that disturbed nearby residents.

The L2 and L3 lines share tracks from Moore Park to Circular Quay. It should have been apparent from the earliest dawning of the project that this would eventually become a constraint on the passenger-carrying capacity of the network. However, that design was approved and constructed.

The CSELR track from Town Hall north to the Circular Quay terminus does not have overhead wiring. Trams used on that line are fitted with special equipment to draw traction power from a third (middle) rail. Safety equipment ensures that the third rail, which is cut into short sections, is only energised when and where a tram is on it.

8. Operation of CSELR:

A particular problem with L3 is that neither of the Kingsford stops is convenient for most of the shops.

L2 and L3 between them are limited to about 7000 passengers per hour in each direction. Until COVID struck, this was becoming an embarrassment which stood to be worsened by planned cutbacks to Eastern Suburbs bus services. However, no announcement has ever been made that expansion of the service is planned. Unless and until capacity is increased, there is little point in suggesting extensions or anything else that might increase peak-hour loadings on CSELR.

Amplifying and accelerating L2/L3 services:

- A significant constraint on L2/L3 capacity would be eased if there was a second CBD terminus. An obvious site for this would be St James railway station which was built with two platforms that were never used and have now been covered over. There are suitable tunnels from these platforms to about Bathurst St. New tunnel would be needed to connect them to L2/L3 in Surry Hills.
- Given adequate capacity, L3 could usefully be extended beyond Kingsford via Banks Avenue and Eastgardens to Matraville and perhaps Malabar.
- A new route connecting Kensington via Green Square to Redfern and possibly beyond towards Sydney University would be a worthwhile addition to CSELR. Not all public transport should be radial; there should be a mesh of radial and circumferential services.

b. The provision of alternative transport services

As noted above, vehicles for L2/L3 have quite different specifications from L1 vehicles. L1 vehicles can never run north of Town Hall because they are not equipped to draw traction power from the third rail. Also, there would be clearance and floor-level issues.

At the time of writing, L1 services are being provided by vehicles built for L2/L3; temporary measures have been taken to accommodate the differences in floor level and width.

c. Any other related matter

Light rail should not be evaluated, much less planned, in isolation. In each city, land-use and all transport should be planned together. In the region served by each NSW light rail line, this inquiry should consider the transport requirements set by land use and whether and how those requirements are met by the various transport services.

- **L1:** This line began as a demonstration project on a disused freight line. Thanks to the casino, it quickly gained adherents even before it was extended past Wentworth Park. By the time it reached Dulwich Hill, it became a useful form of transport around Dulwich Hill, Leichhardt, Lilyfield and Pyrmont. Obviously, its most important interchange point with other forms of transport is Central. It would carry more passengers if it was quicker, better connected and less crowded.
- **L2/L3:** CSELR was intended to replace numerous bus services between the CBD and points in the south-east. Its lack of capacity meant that some peak-hour buses were to continue. Unfortunately, most of the replaced services went further than the light rail so changes between light rail and bus became necessary. Worse, the interchange points often involve long walks and carriageway crossings followed by a highly-variable wait for the connection. Passengers do not appreciate this. **There will not be willing interchange from bus at Randwick unless a setdown-only stop is made on Avoca Street outside the Nelune building. The only reason there isn't a stop is a decree that bus stops have to be at least 400 metres apart.** An awning should shield passengers all the way to the light rail platform.

Ideally, there would be an underground rail service providing rapid travel for longer trips. For instance, the Eastern Suburbs railway could be extended from Bondi Junction to new stations at

PoWH/UNSW, Kingsford and Maroubra. Or the planned Metro West line could be extended from Hunter St generally along Anzac Pde to Maroubra. Or a metro branch could run from Sydenham eastwards. Any of these would help CSELR to focus on what light rail does best. Unfortunately no underground railways seem likely to happen.

- **Newcastle:** The forced change at Wickham is not appreciated by train passengers who have business in the Civic area. That includes students at Newcastle University's city campus. One wonders why the cut could not have been made at Civic rather than Wickham.
- **Parramatta:** It is early days yet but the connection from Parramatta CBD to Westmead Hospital should attract many passengers. Some of them will board at stops on the Carlingford branch. As remarked above, that branch should be extended to Epping. The light rail would help fill the service gaps between the railways in that area.

Conclusion

It is regrettable that the NSW government is pressing ahead with expensive road projects that foster reliance on long-distance car travel. Notable recent examples are Western Harbour Tunnel and Beaches Link. Meanwhile, public transport around Sydney has major needs which are not being addressed, even at a time when the need to reduce energy consumption is becoming crystal clear.

Generally, there is a failure by those in power to recognise that we're building a city and would do well to utilise modern town-planning knowledge. Our leaders seem instead to perceive a number of disconnected projects.

The light rail systems built in NSW so far could all be improved by expansion in appropriate directions. However, no plans have been announced to go beyond the original limits of each system and certainly none has been implemented. The document "Future Transport Strategy 2056" dated 2017 shows no intention to expand light rail services.

Recommendations

- There should be a careful investigation into opportunities for expanding light rail. Corridor protection should follow.
- Advertising on light rail windows and on the transparent panels in doors should be banned.

Hearings: We would be pleased to appear at hearings if desired.

Jim Donovan
Secretary
Action for Public Transport (NSW) Inc.