



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING AND
ENVIRONMENT**

(Reference: ACTION buses and the sustainable transport plan)

Members:

**MR M GENTLEMAN (The Chair)
MR Z SESELJA (The Deputy Chair)
MS M PORTER**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 15 MAY 2007

**Secretary to the committee:
Dr H Jaireth (Ph: 6205 0137)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the committee office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

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The committee met at 1.59 pm.

COOPER, MR IAN GOLLAN, Representative, ACT Transit Group
ISAACS, MR VICTOR, Co-Convenor, ACT Transit Group

THE CHAIR: Welcome to this hearing of the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment into ACTION and sustainable transport. We have before us this afternoon Mr Ian Cooper and Mr Victor Isaacs from the ACT Transit Group. Before we go to your evidence, gentlemen, I will read to you the privileges card.

The committee has authorised the recording, broadcasting and rebroadcasting of these proceedings in accordance with the rules contained in the resolution agreed by the Assembly on 7 March 2002 concerning the broadcasting of Assembly and committee proceedings. Before the committee commences taking evidence, let me place on the record that all witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to submissions made to the committee in evidence given before it. Parliamentary privilege means special rights and immunities attach to parliament, its members and others, necessary to the discharge of functions of the Assembly without obstruction and without fear of prosecution.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, if the committee accedes to such a request, the committee will take evidence in camera and record that evidence. Should the committee take evidence in this manner, I remind the committee and those present that it is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly. I should add that any decision regarding publication of in camera evidence or confidential submissions will not be taken by the committee without prior reference to the person whose evidence the committee may consider publishing.

Gentlemen, we have an apology from Mr Seselja for this afternoon. He is ill and won't be able to join us, but I understand that Mrs Dunne will come down to listen to your presentation and, hopefully, ask some questions afterwards. I invite you, Mr Cooper or Mr Isaacs, to make an opening statement to the committee.

Mr Cooper: Thank you, chairman. On behalf of the ACT Transit Group, I would like to thank you for the opportunity of addressing your committee. By way of introduction, I believe it is appropriate to explain my background. For the last 43 years I have been employed in the bus transport industry, and for 18 of those years I was employed by ACTION and its predecessor, mostly in the role of manager of policy, planning and development. My colleague Victor Isaacs has a long-time interest in public transport, especially in the social and environmental aspects and standards.

Since the placement of our submission with your committee a number of issues have attracted considerable media attention in recent weeks and I believe it is appropriate to comment just briefly on some of those that have attracted that attention. An ever increasing number of comments have been made in the media, including by our minister, that Canberra was designed for the motor car and, by inference, only for the motor car, that the emphasis had been on the motor car, with no reference to public

transport.

The facts don't support that view that Canberra was designed for the motor car. For a start, Walter Burley Griffin's plan, the original plan for Canberra, included the provision of tram tracks in the medians of the boulevards, like Constitution Avenue, Canberra Avenue and Northbourne Avenue, and it was only really because of the very slow growth of Canberra in those days that trams did not appear. In fact, it was quite a while before there was even a bus service in those very early years. Canberra was quite a small village, with very large distances between the residences and the offices.

NCDC plans of the 1960s made provision for busways or tram tracks—light rail was the in thing at that stage—and again in the median areas of the arterial roads. Provision for those facilities was incorporated in the NCDC plans and subsequently the current ACT territory plan and labelled as the intertown passenger transport route, the IPT. They still appear to this very day, also incorporated in the sustainable transport plan.

Yes, a large part of Canberra was planned, designed and constructed in the time period when the private car dominated the scene; that definitely is a fact. There is no denying that period of time. Despite the construction of a vast network of roads in that time frame, most of which, of course, are traversed by buses, bus commuters were not forgotten in the planning of Canberra and the execution of public works programs in the NCDC era.

There were explicit standards of service specifying, for example, the walking distances to bus stops for a given percentage of residents in individual suburbs, which, of course, were clearly defined: bus route directness ratios. There was quite often a quotation by one of the journalists at the *Canberra Times* many, many years ago that the longest distance between two points was a Canberra bus route. That all changed in 1968, when a totally new network was introduced and for the first time the standards of service were laid down. I think they were developed in late 1967 but implemented in 1968. There were also references to the types of traffic generators that were to be supplied with the bus service.

So, yes, the car dominated the pre-NCDC era in Canberra and very definitely has dominated the post-NCDC era. We have only got to look at some of the recent developments in Gungahlin. Where is the provision for public transport in the town centre of Gungahlin? ACTION really does have a problem in meeting the needs of the new Gungahlin residents.

Those well-documented transport studies of the late 1960s advanced the idea that there was to be a structure of local and intertown routes focused on a series of interchanges in each of the town centres and that would provide an excellent public transport system. That was advanced in the late 1960s, and 40 years later it is still the basis for the structure, and a very good basis for the structure, because the findings of 1967 are as relevant today as they were then.

A temporary bus interchange was created on the side of Melrose Drive at Lyons for the start of a timed transfer system in the Woden Valley, and the permanent Woden interchange was opened in the town centre on 4 December 1972. That was the very

first bus-to-bus interchange in Australia. It was quite a landmark building. I know there are problems there today, but it was certainly a blueprint for the rest of the country, because everywhere throughout Australia planners and transport operators came to Canberra to look at Woden. It had a number of features, which unfortunately at the present time are not in use, for controlling bus movements. But it was a pioneering effort and throughout this country cities have constructed and are continuing to construct bus-to-bus interchanges and bus stations.

I trust that this brief overview has put to rest the notion that Canberra was developed for the car and only the car. Certainly, our group accept the fact that the motor car is the dominant means of passenger transport in this city, and in fact most cities, but we believe that the government and the residents of Canberra will receive very significant environmental, social, health and economic benefits from an improved ACTION service, consistent with the objectives of the ACT sustainable transport plan.

The implementation of the new timetable last December was, in the view of our group, undoubtedly one of the most regressive decisions ever taken by a public transport operator in Australia. At a time when residents were expecting ACTION to continue to develop the bus service in line with increasing patronage levels and also in line with what were ACT government policies at the time, ACTION reduced the level of service, and it was a very substantial reduction as well.

Our transit group recognises that there will always be a need for adjustments to services, both the routes and the timetables. It is just a fact that the demographics of areas change, the structure of the urban area changes. We have only got to see what is happening throughout Canberra at the present time to note that changes are inevitable, and certainly should be made on the basis of adjustments to the demographics and the structure of the city.

Even if the government, though, finds some aspects of the ACTION operation to be fiscally onerous, and we can understand that aspect, we believe it is inequitable that it is the passengers who bear the cost of inappropriate practices—work practices, management practices—and, of course, inadequate resources within management, especially in the area of planning and scheduling. The group advocates the allocation of funds to ACTION to enable it to supply public transport at a base level of every 30 minutes in every suburb on weekdays and more frequently in the peak periods, a standard which had until recently been, in general, the standard for the last 40-odd years in Canberra, and we still believe that that is appropriate. It is a standard that is being progressively adopted throughout Australia. We also recommend that ACTION funding be sufficient to enable the service to meet the requirements of the disability discrimination act and current community expectations, such as air-conditioned buses.

Our submission makes several references to the sustainable transport plan because the group believe that this plan was an excellent practical blueprint for the development of transit in Canberra. Therefore, it was with considerable dismay that the group learned through the media that the plan was to be reviewed, especially so early in the life of the plan. We could understand if it had been in vogue for five or 10 years or so, but it was very, very early in its life.

The ACT government now has an extraordinarily appropriate opportunity to

demonstrate to other governments, especially the federal government, how reforms in urban transport can make a significant contribution to the reduction of greenhouse gases. The development of public transport is an important part of that solution. Since the late 1960s, Canberra has been the showcase for many aspects of urban planning. Let us now show the rest of Australia how public transport can be reformed to reduce greenhouse gases. If Los Angeles and San Diego can do it, so can Canberra. We have got the expertise; we just need the courage.

The transit group notes that the minister's 23 April media release reports that the real-time passenger information project has been shelved. It is appreciated that in the ranking of projects at a time when resources are scarce the implementation of real-time information must be postponed. However, irrespective of this decision, passengers must still be supplied with route information and timetable information at each bus stop. Unfortunately, Canberra is falling well behind many other Australian cities in the display of timetables and route information along the bus routes.

“Move people, not vehicles” we believe should be the slogan espoused by the ACT government, because the unfettered use of the private car is totally unsustainable in 2007 and, as each year goes on, will become increasingly unsustainable, irrespective of what level of planning has been achieved in past decades. The ACT government, we believe, has a responsibility to supply affordable, reliable, frequent, convenient, comfortable and environmentally sensitive public transport to its citizens, as the state and territory governments throughout Australia are currently committed to do. The ACT Transit Group's submission presents in some detail a number of suggestions for the improvement of ACTION services and we commend this submission to the committee. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Cooper. Mr Isaacs, would you like to make any comments additional to those of Mr Cooper?

Mr Isaacs: No; my thoughts are encompassed in Mr Cooper's comments.

THE CHAIR: It is quite a detailed submission. Thank you very much for that. I will begin with some questions for you. You have cited some major planning problems as well as given an account of inefficiency in the system. Your first recommendation suggests that the standards of service be reviewed publicly, perhaps by this committee. That is probably what we are doing at the moment. Apart from what you mentioned in your presentation regarding 30-minute service delivery for buses, what other service standards would you propose?

Mr Cooper: Certainly the directness of travel and access to bus routes in terms of the walking distances which were incorporated in several documents over a period of about 25 years. I must admit that I am not familiar with the current status of that documentation with the ACT government. I believe that the standards of service covering all aspects of the bus service and how the planning was undertaken, things like the minimum number of passengers to be carried before a bus service would be eliminated, were all incorporated in a freedom of information manual back in the late 1980s. What has happened in the last few years I do not know. I don't know whether Victor knows.

Mr Isaacs: I can only add to that that the last major timetable revision prior to the December 2006 changes was, I think, in 2004. In that case, the draft timetables, I recall, were placed on the internet and comments were sought from users and the public. There was an opportunity for community input, and that was in very striking contrast to the December 2006 changes, which were introduced with no consultation and with the appearance of an ad hoc, almost panicked reaction to budgetary pressures. So there was no opportunity in that case to review standards.

THE CHAIR: You have mentioned the sustainable transport plan. Do you think the targets that are in that plan are appropriate? Do you think there need to be changes to those targets?

Mr Cooper: No, on a broad front—I think I'm speaking on behalf of our group—we believe it is an excellent blueprint for the development of the service. It will take time. There are obviously some aspects of the plan which are a considerable challenge for the territory. Speaking from my own point of view here, rather than for the actual group, as to the busway that was proposed for Belconnen—parts of it actually have been built; it is quite amazing that in 1979 the first section of the Belconnen busway was opened and the reservations were made to the west of the town centre and through the area now occupied by the University of Canberra—it is a very, very large project and I would suggest that perhaps an examination of the introduction of bus lanes or bus priority lanes at traffic signals along Haydon Drive may well be an option to be considered as a prelude to any further development.

It is certainly a very bold step to take to have an entirely grade-separated busway from Belconnen to the city and I have some doubts as to whether it really could be justified. But certainly some bus priority measures on Haydon Drive in particular would work wonders. But that's only one aspect of the sustainable transport plan. I think it is an excellent starting point, and obviously over time there will be a need to adjust it. The whole group were a little bit surprised that it was being looked at so early in the life of the plan.

MRS DUNNE: I wish to follow up on that, specifically on the targets set in the sustainable transport plan. Do you see those as a good start, a reasonable start, or do you think that they are things that we should be aiming for in the long run? How do you see the targets?

Mr Cooper: At this point, I believe that they are commendable targets. Because there are just so many unknowns in the world as to the economy, the environment and so on, obviously there will be a need to adjust the targets as other factors come into play. The physical aspect of Canberra's development is changing almost every year and some of those developments—like the developments in the city and in Belconnen and the activity along Haydon Drive, for example—will cause changes to be made. We recognise that change is inevitable, but I believe that those targets are acceptable.

Mr Isaacs: The plan itself recognised that it was a mixture of short-term and medium-term goals. Some of the short-term projects have already been implemented, such as bike racks on buses and some bus priority measures, and that is very commendable. Some of the other aims would, of course, take a much longer time before we would see them being implemented and before the community would reap

the benefits of them. But it is quite alarming when the implementation of all of the remaining objectives just ceases.

MRS DUNNE: Could I ask about bus priority measures?

THE CHAIR: Sure.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you for raising that; it is an important stepping stone towards separated transit lanes and things like that. From your experience, where would you see the most immediate call on work for bus priority areas to be?

Mr Cooper: Northbourne Avenue is undoubtedly the most congested section of roadway now for large parts of the day. I recognise that our minister made a statement—

MRS DUNNE: He has ruled that out, hasn't he?

Mr Cooper: —about Northbourne Avenue just recently; however, we believe that there is scope for the installation of bus priority measures in Northbourne Avenue. It will require some courage to install such measures. There is room in the median strip to install bus lanes or light rail. There is, I believe, a gas pipeline down the centre that they laid a few years ago. In the light of public transport usage, and bearing in mind that it was and still is identified as part of the intertown passenger transport route to Gungahlin, that was perhaps an unfortunate decision, but obviously it can be resolved. There are other issues that you might say are more complex, such as the intersections.

Bus priority—not only in this city, but in almost every city around the world—is targeted as a means of creating an attractive public transport system. It can be bus priority or, in the case of Melbourne, tram priority. But I am aware that bus operators in the area of Northbourne Avenue right through to Flemington Road have had to make adjustments to timetables for quite some years now to account for the ever increasing traffic congestion. Even off peak it is about a 20-minute run from just north of Dickson where the Barton Highway comes in through to Civic. It is not that many years ago that you could easily do that in 10 minutes off peak. Of course, the traffic signal phasing has had to be adjusted to take into account the ever increasing traffic volumes.

Let us face it: Gungahlin has been built on the top of north Canberra—until now with almost no additional road infrastructure to account for 30,000 people, I think, or something like that, living in Gungahlin, most of whom are streaming south. Hopefully the Gungahlin Drive extension will take a bit of traffic off Northbourne Avenue. The last time I appeared in this chamber to address a committee looking at bus priority, some years ago, we urged the Legislative Assembly to take into account bus priority on Gungahlin Drive as well.

MS PORTER: There is no room for that.

Mr Cooper: So there are those areas. Canberra Avenue around the Manuka area is starting to become quite congested, and there are a few intersections in the Woden town centre. Fortunately, again back in the NCDC era, we had bus lanes installed on

Yarra Glen/Adelaide Avenue. Of course, they have become a very successful part of that operation. Another area, which I recognise as somewhat politically delicate, is the airport roadways. Any roadway carrying buses in and around the airport is certainly a congested area. But Northbourne Avenue is obviously the number one target.

Mr Isaacs: Perhaps I could just add that Northbourne Avenue is not only the area which is most in need of bus priority measures but also, ironically, the area where bus priority measures can be most easily implemented. Northbourne Avenue still reflects Burley Griffin's design, with provision for a tramway down the centre. Obviously that is not going to happen, but there is space there; we do not even have to remove many trees. There is plenty of space for a busway in the centre.

For those people concerned about the loss of greenery, even that is not a problem these days, as engineers have developed means of building busways with minimum impact on the environment—with a concrete slip or two concrete slips each way where the bus tyres go, the rest of it remaining greenway. There is an example of that being built at the moment over a lengthy distance in Cambridgeshire in England. If you look at photos of that, you can hardly tell the impact of the busway on the environment. It is overwhelmingly green.

THE CHAIR: I just remind our guests to say their name for Hansard when they are alternating between presentations. I wonder if I could just bring you to resourcing. That was one of your comments in the submission. I wondered whether you think that, if we were to raise fares, that may be another way increasing the resourcing. Do you think that is something we should be looking at?

Mr Cooper: Certainly surveys of passengers and the community at large have consistently over many decades rated fares as being lower in the list of priorities than most other factors, such as convenience, accessing public transport, the frequency of public transport, whether they can get a seat on public transport, whether it is comfortable and convenient and so on. That confirms what a large portion of the population does every day, and that is jump into their car. The car operation is certainly not the cheapest means of accessing their work, shopping or whatever. There is a whole range of reasons why a lot of people—the majority of people—jump into a car.

Interestingly, the surveys have tended to show that public transport fares are not the top priority, even though any increase will obviously attract disquiet in the community. I guess it is a normal human reaction. However, any adjustments must be very carefully thought out. There needs to be a considerable attraction to the passenger to purchase tickets off the vehicle. Even though at one stage ACTION had easily the highest proportion of off-bus ticketing in Australia, some of the other cities have caught up with ACTION now, with smartcards and other advanced electronic ticketing.

As we heard last week from the TWU, unfortunately the ticketing system in ACTION is not working as well as it should; there certainly needs to be an added bonus for passengers to buy the ticket before they get on the bus. There is a need to try and get back to figures of many years ago when I think around about 90 per cent of people—it may not have been quite 90, but it was very high—purchased tickets off the bus.

Bearing in mind that one can travel very long distances in Canberra for what is nationwide a relatively low fare, I would suggest that a fare increase could be entertained. Obviously the government would need to take into account the needs of pensioners and the like, to ensure that anybody in the category of “no alternative” was taken care of.

MS PORTER: Earlier in your presentation you mentioned a standard or something when you said that there used to be a measure. Maybe I misheard you, but I think you said that there used to be a measure about the stage where a bus was running with less than a certain number of people on the bus.

Mr Cooper: Yes.

MS PORTER: You do not recollect what that was?

Mr Cooper: Yes, I do recollect that. There has been a debate as long as I have lived in Canberra—for 37 years—as to the point at which one deletes services at night time. Bus services at night time have been debated ad infinitum; there probably really is not an easy solution. It affects other cities too; it is not something that just affects Canberra.

Back in the 1980s it was decided—and it was incorporated in a document which I think went into the freedom of information manual—that any bus operating in certain hours—I think it was probably after about 8 o’clock at night—had to be carrying four passengers. I am almost certain that that was the case. Yes, it refers to the span of hours. There are several pages in this document but it says that at times of low demand there must be a total of at least four inbound passengers on average per departure in the period prior to 7.00 am on weekdays to justify at least one journey to an interchange. That particular one would probably not need to be looked at now because in recent times a lot of the patronage, even prior to 7.00 am, has increased quite considerably. However, after 7.00 pm at least four passengers per departure on average are required to justify at least one journey from an interchange. Again, that may well be different now: these days we have more tertiary students travelling up to about 8 o’clock, from my own observations. Friday and Saturday nights are different, too; the loadings then are a lot more.

But somewhere one has to draw the line as to whether to operate a bus that regularly carries one person. Unfortunately, from the environmental point of view, some experts have pointed out that that is not the most efficient way of moving one person. Can the community support public transport, notably a bus, that regularly carries one person?

MS PORTER: You said that people choose to spend the money on using their own car, and do that for various reasons. Obviously that could entail paying for parking when they get in here or wherever they are going. If they are going to a town centre, they are more likely to have to pay for parking as well as pay for driving their car. What incentives do you think that we, as the government, could offer in order to make our bus service more economical for us to run?

You are aware that at the moment it is running at quite a substantial loss. That is okay; we have to recognise that public transport is a service to the public, so it is going to cost. We do need to recognise that. But obviously, for all the other reasons that you mentioned—environmental reasons et cetera—we would prefer to have people on the buses. Given the reasons why people drive their cars, what other incentives do you think we can use to get them? What are the reasons why they use their cars? We have got to think about why they use their cars, why they would change to a bus.

Mr Isaacs: Admitting that it is a difficult thing to do, I think that there has to be some attempt to appeal to people's altruism, to their better nature, and make them aware of the environmental advantages of using public transport as against private motoring. I think there has to be an appeal to people's selfish natures. Included in that sort of publicity or advertising campaign there could also be an appeal as to the avoidance of the accident and health problems which arise with private motoring. And, again admitting that it is difficult, I think there has to be an appeal in relation to the social advantages of not continually eating up the city with more and more roadways and car parks. I know that these are difficult concepts, or difficult to get across to the public, but governments have to take these wider views and try and convey them to their constituencies.

The core problem is that the advantages of a public transport service such as ACTION are in many respects very hard to quantify. It is very hard to quantify, for example, the environmental advantages of moving people en masse rather than having people—80 per cent, I think—as sole occupants of cars. But we all know that these advantages exist. It is very hard to total up the costs to the community and the health system arising from traffic accidents, but we all know that they are very substantial. As against these difficult to quantify costs, we have an organisation such as ACTION for which, on an accounting basis, it is very easy to identify a loss.

I am trying to say that we have to try and avoid a narrow accountancy basis. We have to try and avoid looking at a public transport service such as ACTION merely in simple budgetary terms. We have to try and take into account the much wider, albeit more difficult to quantify, advantages of the public transport service.

MRS DUNNE: I think that some of that work was done in the sustainable transport plan when KBR did what was called the public transport feasibility study. There was a lot of work done on the costs in the cost-benefit analysis—the cost of road accidents. As you said, as you increase the size of the city and increase the size of the road network, the road accidents go up. There is the issue of how you can address those things. Some of that work has been done, but often it is difficult to do and difficult to keep up to date.

Mr Isaacs: Yes.

Mr Cooper: Can I just make one comment in addition to what Mr Isaacs has said. One of the major tasks in attracting people to use public transport is the dissemination of information. I have had some recent experiences here—partly successful so far—with people who have previously used their car for all journeys. Whilst ACTION does produce some quite commendable documents, it assumes that a person picking up a timetable knows a fair bit about the bus service. Unfortunately, the majority of

citizens in this city do not have a particularly good knowledge of the overall system and how it works.

ACTION produces a bus map. I am not sure whether everybody in this room is aware of the existence of this map, because it is not well publicised at all. It is a very large map and it has details of every service that ACTION operates. It needs to be referred to in conjunction with the individual timetables. The individual timetables assume that the user knows what to do when they get to a town centre if that bus terminates there; there are no cross-references to other services.

Let me give the committee an example, following the 6 December changes. I live in Scullin and my main bus service is the 313. I do have a couple of other services within easy walking distance, but the 313 could cater for my needs seven days a week and seven nights a week. Now I have six timetables to refer to, to cover the combination of weekend, night time and daytime services and the connecting services at the interchange. One has got to assemble a lot of paper, especially if one is travelling outside the peak period. That does include the 703, which is an Xpresso service. That is one aspect that really does need addressing.

I refer the committee to some of the work that has been done in North America, in particular; they started from scratch after the fuel crisis in 1973. They assumed that nobody knew what to do to catch a bus. They even explained very simple things—for us, anyway. They would have a little picture of the bus and say, “On the front, it says where it is going”, “This is how you work out where it is going”—things like that. They assumed that people did not have any idea of what to do. “This is how you pay the driver.” “This is what you do.” From recent experience, in this city I think we are probably getting to the stage where we have to assume that a lot of people have absolutely no idea how to use the service.

Let us face it: most peak period services are in high demand. Judging from my observations in recent months, if we were to nominate any area of immediate improvement that would cater for increasing demand levels, that would be the Xpresso services—the direct services from outer suburbs into the city; some of them go on to Russell and Barton. That concept is an excellent one and could be further developed to cater for peak-period commuters. But with the off-peak commuters—some travelling off peak for part-time jobs and others travelling for a whole multitude of reasons during the day—the timetables do need quite a bit of work to show the full potential of the system.

THE CHAIR: I think I need to comment there too, Mr Cooper. The bus I have to catch from my place in Calwell to come to the Assembly here is the 315. I can never understand why it has “Spence” on the front of it when I want to go to the city. But it does work very well.

Mr Cooper: Yes.

MRS DUNNE: Because Spence is a very fine suburb, Mr Chair.

THE CHAIR: Indeed. I thank you again for your presentation and your time today.

MRS DUNNE: It is a great destination; you should go there.

THE CHAIR: If members have any further questions, we will get those to you as soon as we can. We will also provide you with a copy of the transcript as soon as we can. We will take a short break.

Meeting adjourned from 2.49 to 3.04 pm.

CANE, MS MAUREEN, Member, Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing
McKENZIE, MR BRUCE, Chair, Transport Subcommittee, Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing
SILVERSTONE, MS BARBARA, Member, Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the Standing Committee on Planning and Environment's inquiry into ACTION buses and the sustainable transport plan. This afternoon we have Dr Elizabeth MacKinlay, chair of the Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing.

MS PORTER: No, she is not here.

THE CHAIR: My apologies; she is not here. We have Mr Bruce McKenzie, convenor of the Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing, and Ms Maureen Cane and Ms Barbara Silverstone, members of the council. Welcome to the committee's inquiry. Before we go ahead I will just read the privileges statement to you.

The committee has authorised the recording, broadcasting and rebroadcasting of these proceedings in accordance with the rules contained in the resolution agreed by the Assembly on 7 March 2002 concerning the broadcasting of Assembly and committee proceedings. Before the committee commences taking evidence, let me place on the record that all witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to submissions made to the committee in evidence given before it. Parliamentary privilege means special rights and immunities attach to parliament, its members and others, necessary to the discharge of functions of the Assembly without obstruction and without fear of prosecution.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, if the committee accedes to such a request, the committee will take evidence in camera and record that evidence. Should the committee take evidence in this manner, I remind the committee and those present that it is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly. I should add that any decision regarding publication of in camera evidence or confidential submissions will not be taken by the committee without prior reference to the person whose evidence the committee may consider publishing.

Who would like to make an opening statement to the committee?

Mr McKenzie: I would, thank you. Firstly, I offer our apologies for Elizabeth MacKinlay; she has been delayed this afternoon.

MRS DUNNE: On the bus?

Mr McKenzie: I won't comment on that. Could I also correct that I am chair of the transport subcommittee of the Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing. With me this afternoon I have Barbara Silverstone, who is a member of the Older Women's Network, and Maureen Cane, who is the Chief Executive Officer of Communities@Work in Tuggeranong. I am the Chief Executive Officer of Goodwin Aged Care Services. So we all have an interest in older persons' issues, and the

transport subcommittee has been formed with the view of progressing the Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing's transport strategic objectives.

Mid last year we commenced the process of undertaking a survey of the transport needs of Canberra's older population. During the period August through to December we distributed as widely as possible a survey which asked people living in the broader community three questions: describe the nature of any transport problem, complaint or issue you may have; how does that problem affect or limit you; and what do you think should or could be done about it? So it was not specifically about ACTION but a lot of the responses came back about ACTION, which is why we would like to relate the results of that survey.

We received over 200 responses and the results were published on the ACT government's older persons' website. The respondents included older Canberrans, transport service providers, advocacy providers and other providers of services to older Canberrans. So whether it was someone providing a HACC service, an aged care package or something to someone in their home, assisting them, they made them aware that we were interested in what issues they may have had.

The target demographic was older people living at home and using a range of transport modes. The key issues with regard to ACTION came under three subheadings: the frequency of the buses, remembering that this survey was conducted prior to the new timetable being introduced initially and then after the timetable was introduced, so it was from the period 1 August to 31 December; the bus routes themselves; and bus shelters. The fourth issue that related to this was the condition of pathways. So we have some findings on each of those four categories which I would like to go through.

Eighty per cent of the respondents indicated that they do catch buses. The issues that they raised with us were that there are 60-minute delays between buses on weekends, causing extensive waiting periods—and this was prior to the implementation of the new timetable—with 40-minute delays on weekdays; there was a lack of bus services in all suburbs at night time, and all of the people identified that it is tiresome and wearying to have to wait for long periods to catch buses. This is exacerbated by the fact that they are outside, exposed to the elements. The impact on our seniors was that all of them found it tiresome and wearying to wait long periods, and that, as I mentioned, they are exposed to the elements during this period when they have to wait.

With the recent cutback in night services, 50 per cent of the respondents expressed difficulties in obtaining a bus at all in the evening to get home from social groups, especially when it required a two-bus trip or an interconnecting bus service. Forty-six per cent of our respondents indicated that the infrequent services discouraged seniors from taking ACTION buses, noting that ACTION is trying to attract senior users to use this service and there have been programs undertaken by the council on the ageing in conjunction with ACTION to try and encourage older people to use the buses, to demonstrate to them how the bus network works, because a lot of them may not have had to catch buses in their younger days, and as they have become older they need to catch a bus and they do not understand how the system works. The survey results indicated that people are saying that it is discouraging them from wanting to catch a bus with the service they are receiving.

Many reported that it is too difficult to maintain their social life or to attend to the basic necessities, such as shopping or attending medical appointments, if it meant obtaining a connecting bus, as it could take all day for a return trip, due to the frequency of buses and the timetables not connecting adequately. This was particularly evident with people reporting problems attending the eye hospital at Symonston and the Canberra Hospital.

We were also informed that seniors' concessional fares are only available outside of peak hours, but that it was not possible to only travel outside of peak hours to attend medical appointments, especially when interconnecting bus routes needed to be factored in. Some respondents also informed us that they needed to compete with school children and people travelling to work on peak-hour buses and that with their advanced levels of frailty it was just too hard to catch peak-hour buses.

With regard to the bus routes, all of the respondents who catch buses indicate that they have problems with the ACTION bus routes. They stated that there are many bus routes that only cover small portions of the suburb that they are servicing and that passengers had to take two buses to travel to a neighbourhood suburb. The current bus schedule requires two buses to get within neighbourhoods. Many seniors need to travel to destinations within their own suburb but are not able to walk that distance. They have no option for transport other than public transport. They find that the bus routes only cover a small portion of their suburb.

Respondents claim a lack of bus services to many suburbs. They advised us that no buses go to Hall or many of the new parts of Gungahlin. Seventeen per cent of respondents expressed concern that there were no ACTION buses to service the airport. Eleven per cent of our respondents reported that train travel is a relatively inexpensive, safe and reliable transport option but that insufficient ACTION buses made train travel exceedingly difficult. Many of our seniors use the train to travel to Sydney, as it is the best mode of transport for them, but they have difficulty in getting to the train station in the first instance.

The impact on seniors is that many seniors have to make long trips on foot to bus stops in the first instance, which is very difficult, especially if they have limited mobility, a walking frame or a wheelchair. People have to spend considerable time travelling minimal distances and their quality of life is affected as a result. This also has an adverse impact on their health, anxiety and perception of the value of ACTION and the value that ACTION places on our older community.

The third main identifier was with regard to bus shelters. The issues identified were that there were no bus shelters in the newer northern suburbs, especially Gungahlin; that there is poor maintenance of bus shelters, bad graffiti and bus shelters falling apart—the word “crumbling” was used—and that bus shelters do exist at low volume, and unused bus stops. The impact upon seniors was that 12 per cent of respondents identified that there are very few bus shelters on many routes. This is of concern as they are outside, exposed to the elements, for long periods of time.

Twenty-three per cent of our respondents identified a lack of bus shelters to protect passengers from the elements. This is a particular concern in newer suburbs, as there

are no established trees to provide shelter or shade. Nine per cent of our respondents expressed concern over the maintenance of bus shelters and provided details, such as graffiti and crumbling structures. They felt that graffiti was quite offensive, and the crumbling structures made them hesitant to use the shelters, which had an impact on their ability to use the ACTION bus service in the first place.

A related matter to this inquiry is the condition of pathways in the suburbs by which people have to get to the bus stops. Fifteen per cent of the total respondents expressed concern over the condition of footpaths and pavements. The issues that they identified were the poor condition of the pathways to and from bus shelters, the poor condition of the waiting platforms at the bus stops, and that not many bus shelters have paved access; people have to walk across uneven grass or rocky ground. For those people with a walking frame that is an impossibility. The impact on seniors is that the condition of footpaths is a crucial issue for some older people, as their motor skills and eyesight have deteriorated and they have difficulty in dealing with any form of challenging terrain. The respondents reported that the poor condition of some of the footpaths made it difficult for them to leave their homes and have a more socially oriented life.

We have made some recommendations in our early stage of the report. The intention is to now investigate these findings and work with the policy areas within government on what it might be possible to do about some of the findings. But initially we will be recommending that the government prioritise its footpath repair program by identifying those suburbs with the highest concentrations of older people and then giving priority to rectifying the unsafe footpaths in areas which lead to more obvious bus stops utilised by older people. This could be near a retirement village or older persons' units, senior clubs et cetera. Equally, we feel that senior clubs and community groups, and organisations such as the council for the ageing, would be able to assist with identifying those areas which should be considered for priority treatment. We feel that is a zero cost impact to government by changing their priority allocation of which actual footpaths should be addressed first.

The second recommendation that MACA would like to make is that we are aware that many seniors may have driven a car all their life and do not understand how the ACTION bus service operates or how to catch a bus. Once they are unable to drive and have no other support network, they are unable to access public transport. Once that happens they very quickly become socially isolated and they do not receive the medical treatments they require. This then leads to major social and health issues for them, which has a significant impact upon the wider community, especially the health system and the need for additional community services to be made available to them. This can also lead to older people feeling despair, having depression, and can necessitate premature admission to residential aged care facilities—all because they could not catch a bus.

MACA is of the opinion that, whilst it might be possible to fix some of the timetable issues identified in our survey, most of the issues are specific to older people and that a more tailored alternative mode of transport for the frail and elderly would be more appropriate. Our present thoughts are that it would be more efficient and provide a higher quality of service to the elderly if some of the resources currently trying to be devoted to the public transport system were provided to the community transport

scheme for the elderly. I have asked Maureen to talk about what the community transport scheme is and how that might be interpreted for application in this environment.

Ms Cane: Community transport in the ACT is run by the six regional community services that operate across the territory. They are in Belconnen, Gungahlin, north side, south side, Woden and Communities@Work, which covers Tuggeranong and Weston Creek. Community transport is part of the home and community care program, which is jointly funded by the commonwealth and the ACT government. ACT Health is the relevant department.

The statistics are, I think, very interest for community transport, and I have the ones up to date, as at the end of June 2006, for the year 2005-06. There were about 83,500 trips that were offered to people who were eligible to be part of the community transport program, around 20 paid drivers at any one time driving people around, and around 100 volunteers also supporting the community transport system, plus of course the management and staff, call centre staff, to run the program.

Eligibility for community transport is that you have to live in the local community, you aren't able to access public transport, and you are a frail older person or a person with a disability. You may be an older person recovering from an illness who has no other means of transport at that point in time, or you may be a wheelchair user but you are able to transfer yourself to and from a car with minimal assistance. So, as you can see, several thousand people in the ACT rely on community transport to help them around, to go to medical and paramedical appointments, to attend social activities, centre-based programs with local groups, and club activities.

These people are unable to use public transport or have no other transport option, due to their medical or physical limitations. Community transport operates from 7.00 am to 7.00 pm, Monday to Friday, with limited availability at the weekend. We also make some use of taxis for some out-of-hours transport and in the case of emergencies that might occur that we can't fill through either the paid drivers or the voluntary drivers.

The main issues with community transport, and this did come up in our survey as well, revolve around the limitations on eligibility, essentially, and also the dependence on volunteers to keep the service viable. The groups who are not eligible for community transport include, among the seniors, those who live in aged care hostels and nursing homes, older people without a disability, except in the sense that they are unable to drive, and among younger people families with limited means who have children and who do find it really difficult to get around the town and may need to get to medical and other appointments.

Also, among the service, which, as you can see, is really very important to thousands of people in the ACT, I think there is a sense somewhat of isolation from the broader public transport approach, and I think we feel that we need maybe to be a bit more imaginative to try to bring together both the public transport system and the community transport system to work together rather more closely in trying to meet the needs of older Canberrans. As the number of Canberrans who are going to be in the older cohorts is going to happen to us quite quickly, I think there are going to be a lot more people in the group that I said was not covered by HACC, and that is older

people without a disability but who nevertheless can no longer drive, for one reason or another, but whatever it may be. That is the information on community transport.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr McKenzie and Ms Cane. Ms Silverstone, do you want to add any comments to that presentation?

Ms Silverstone: The group of women that I represent, a lot of them are in that age group where they can no longer drive and are finding that their mobility decreases considerably as they get older. Our group was an older cohort to start with. The Older Women's Network in Canberra has been going for about 12 years. The impact really has become greater as those women have become older.

It is not completely relevant but, talking about where the buses go, the Griffith library change did have a great impact. People used to be able to drive there, get out and just walk across, whereas now to go to Woden they have got to walk from the bus interchange up to the library, and coming into Civic just isn't an alternative for them.

THE CHAIR: Is that due to parking difficulties?

Ms Silverstone: Parking difficulties. There are some disabled parking spots near Woden library, but they are very few and far between. As I say, a lot of them are becoming unable to drive, so they need to be able to catch a bus and perhaps get off outside the Woden library, which shouldn't be too difficult. That is just an example of the sorts of things that happen when the bus routes are not helping those people.

THE CHAIR: We heard just prior to the break comments on difficulty with understanding the route system. Have your members found that as well? There was talk of having one big map with the route system sitting on that map. I have also seen the internet system, but I am not sure whether your group would be that familiar with using the net and whether that is a priority with your group.

Mr McKenzie: Our survey didn't get into that level of detail but, in working with the Council for the Ageing, they are having a lot of difficulty in trying to educate seniors in how the bus system works, full stop, and it needs to be far simplified to enable them to look at the little piece they want to know, rather than the whole of Canberra.

MS PORTER: You talked, Mr McKenzie, about people waiting for a long time at bus shelters, and sometimes where there isn't a bus shelter. Why are they actually waiting a long time? Is it because the bus is late, or are they anxious that they might miss the bus so they go considerably earlier and stand there?

Mr McKenzie: We don't have the information in the actual survey to that level of detail, but we also held public forums where people came along and it was particularly where they needed interconnecting buses and they didn't know necessarily what time the next bus came, particularly if they had to go to a medical appointment, where they always leave very early to make sure that they are never late. And you don't know necessarily what time you are going to be out, so therefore you are in the hands of whatever is the next bus that comes along. So it would be more than likely, my guesstimate would be, the interconnecting buses where they don't know what the timetable is, because they tend to be quite well planned.

MS PORTER: So it is not necessarily about buses running late, but it could be.

Mr McKenzie: That is possible.

MRS DUNNE: It is possibly people coming out of a doctor's appointment and standing at Strickland Crescent outside John James waiting for the next bus when the previous one had gone just before they got there.

Mr McKenzie: It was also where they decided not to hop on the bus because they were competing with too many other people, and they won't do that. They are too frail, so they will let the bus go and wait for the next bus. If they are full of school kids or people that are getting to work, they are going to say, "I can't compete, so I won't get on."

MS PORTER: You mentioned the eye hospital. I think we have a bus that goes to the eye hospital now.

Mr McKenzie: I think something has happened since our survey was conducted.

MS PORTER: Yes, I think we have a bus direct to the eye hospital now.

Mr McKenzie: But it is the frequency of it. It was an all-day trip, I understood, to go to the eye hospital because of the frequency at which the bus left. If you have to get a connecting bus to get to that bus, it is all day. I think there is only one bus back, or something like that. So, if you get done at 10 o'clock in the morning, you are still waiting.

THE CHAIR: For your travellers, that needs to fit into the time outside peak periods so that they can use their concession card, too.

Mr McKenzie: That's right.

MS PORTER: And so that they don't get on crowded buses.

Mr McKenzie: We also heard evidence of how people cope with the timetable, the impact that has on their life. They tend to have very set routines: "Every week I do this." We had one lady come and talk to us about how the meals on wheels come, and they are pretty vague as to what time they arrive. They might come within plus or minus four hours. Therefore, they had to be home by 11 o'clock in the morning to make sure they did not miss their meals on wheels, which may not turn up till 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Trying to get the public transport system around that forced that lady into thinking that she must go into the peak hour system to get into town to get her pension or whatever so that she was back by 11 o'clock in the morning. There are all sorts of impacts on people's lives through the scheduling of other services as well as using a public transport system where a whole day can be taken to do a very routine task.

MRS DUNNE: Mr McKenzie, are you actually suggesting a departure, in the sense that you are suggesting that it would be better if ACTION gave up providing that

community service to older people and there was a separate service for people with mobility problems, mainly older people?

Mr McKenzie: That's correct, and that is premised on our feeling that there needs to be a more flexible personalised approach, probably not indifferent to the night bus which almost takes you where you need to go. Something like that operating with small buses in the middle of the day, where senior people could ring up and say that they need to go from here to there and it might only be a short distance, but it is not a set route, almost a semi-taxi type of arrangement. We feel that something like that, coordinated through somewhere that they could have a central phone system to ring up and there would be little buses circulating. We do know that it is not time critical in terms of what time of day it comes, as long as they know it will come within an hour, as long as it is not an appointment they are trying to get to, but most of the time it is within their own suburb or an adjacent suburb. It is quite often a social event they might be attending. Certainly with the day care programs that we run and other service providers run, that is basically how it operates: "Will I be picking up Mary today or not?" It is quite a simple process, but it can't be necessarily run to a timetable. We are saying that there needs to be a far more flexible approach which can meet their needs.

It can be a user pays system. I have talked to residents in our villages about whether they would be interested if every Thursday a bus took them into Civic or somewhere else and they are all saying, "We would be on it and we would pay \$6 or whatever it is to go, because we want to do those things." But not something that stops at a bus stop somewhere. It has to go to their houses so that we avoid all these problems about footpaths. They are on foot and they are frail. They can get into and out of buses if their buses are accessible. ACTION has done a very good job in trying to do that. But they need to be able to get to the bus in the first instance. They are quite often travelling quite long distances just to get to where the bus goes. Therefore, they make a choice. It is not a conscious decision; they just say, "I won't be going." We do know that there is normally a downhill run from there as soon as all the services are cut off from them, particularly medical and proper food and nourishment. They might forgo that because it is too difficult and they are then on a downhill run. Economists can cost that out and say it is actually cheaper to fix the transport issue in the first instance.

THE CHAIR: Have you been able to assist them in providing information to the department about footpaths at the bus stops?

Mr McKenzie: No. We are about to start that process now that that survey has finished its analysis. We are working with the secretariat which is in the Department of Health and Community Services and organising meetings with various areas within government to start working through these issues. What we would like to do is to challenge some of the perceptions they might have about the possibilities on what can be done and to give them practical alternatives, which hopefully would be budget neutral, that would provide better outcomes for older people.

THE CHAIR: Thanks very much for your presentation today. If we have further questions, we will get them to you as soon as we can. We will also provide a copy of the transcript to you as soon as it is available. Thanks once again for coming in.

MRS DUNNE: You said that the results of that survey were on your web page.

Mr McKenzie: I am pretty certain that they put a summary of it there without giving people's individual circumstances.

MRS DUNNE: Could I ask that a summary of the stuff that you read before about 90 per cent of people saying X be sent to Hannah?

Mr McKenzie: Could I leave my notes?

MRS DUNNE: That's fine, if they do not have anything incriminating in them.

Mr McKenzie: It is on the public record.

MRS DUNNE: It is nice to have that sort of thing in a tabular form as it is easier to get across it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much.

The committee adjourned at 3.33 pm.