SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT – HOW DO WE GET THERE?

The ACT now has a Planning Strategy for its future land use and transport development - the Canberra Spatial Plan together with the Sustainable Transport Plan - under the new Planning and Development Act 2007 which came into effect on 31 March 2008.

The Sustainable Transport Plan sets the reasonably ambitious target of increasing journey to work trips by walking, cycling and public transport from about 13% of total trips in 2001 to 30% in 2026. To achieve this, work trips by public transport need to rise from about 7% of total trips to 16% over the 25 year period.

The Sustainable Transport Plan states that a “corridor transit system”, operating on a fully or partly dedicated right-of-way serving all core trunk routes, is justified for Canberra. It recommends building on the existing bus-based system, as this would be easier and cheaper to develop than light rail, but notes that: “the busway system should be designed to facilitate possible future technologies, including light rail and personal rapid transit systems.” The busways also need to have those aspects of light rail that are most appealing to customers, such as fixed direct routes, real-time information and attractive stations.

The busways would be a combination of exclusive bus roadways, exclusive bus lanes, transit lanes and buses sharing with cars with bus priority measures at traffic signals and intersections. The Sustainable Transport Plan identifies a range of “specific short-term priorities” to, as quickly as possible, implement major components of this system and provide a real alternative to a significant proportion of those commuters using ever more expensive private car transport.

The Sustainable Transport Plan estimates the benefits of achieving the Plan’s target to be $800 to $900 million over 25 years, in present value terms. The estimated costs of the Plan initiatives total $300 to $400 million over 25 years, giving a benefit to cost ratio of between 2.0 and 3.0. Benefits (compared to continuing current trends) include increased public safety through reduced accidents, improved equity of access to transport, reduced travel time and congestion, lower per capita road construction and maintenance costs, reduced vehicle operating costs, decreased greenhouse gas emissions, reduced noise and air pollution and reduced use of non-renewable energy.

Despite these social, economic and environmental benefits, the ACT Government appears to have lost interest in the Sustainable Transport Plan since the former Minister for Planning, Simon Corbell, was removed and the responsibility for transport planning moved from the ACT Planning and Land Authority to the new Department of Territory and Municipal Services. The Government has proposed a number of measures this year to try and bring customers back to public transport following the disastrous cuts to the system in 2006, but these do not appear to represent commitment to implement the Sustainable Transport Plan.
Perhaps there is a need for some exciting ‘signature’ projects to reinspire interest in the Sustainable Transport Plan, to engage the private sector in the development of the network and involve the Commonwealth Government in the provision of strategic transport infrastructure. These projects would demonstrate the benefits of integrating transport and land use planning, in contrast to ad-hoc development such as the airport precinct and the resultant traffic chaos in that area.

The Sustainable Transport Plan recommends intensification of urban development along the Trunk Public Transport Routes in order to support the proposed busways, but does not indicate how this is to be achieved. Presumably in most cases this will rely on higher density redevelopment, such as already occurring in North Canberra. This process is however relatively slow, piecemeal, painful to affected communities (and developers) and does not seem capable of making a significant contribution to major new transport infrastructure.

A preferable option way may be for the Government to auction leases over development ‘nodes’ along the Trunk Public Transport Routes, comprising mainly Government land and some ‘air rights’ above main avenues. Development of these nodes would be high density residential, with associated commercial and community facilities and the developer to provide the busway station and other infrastructure as required. Sites would need to be of sufficient size to offset infrastructure investment costs and be in locations likely to be attractive to the market. Residential development in such locations would be highly accessible to public transport and would minimise the need for use of private vehicles by residents.

Possible development ‘nodes’ could include:

- Adelaide Avenue west of Novar Street Yarralumla;
- Yarra Glen at Curtin and north of Woden Town Centre;
- Northbourne Avenue at Antill Street, Dickson;
- Flemington Road Gungahlin;
- Wentworth Avenue Kingston (ideally part of the future Eastlakes sustainable development project);
- Canberra Avenue, East Fyshwick (possibly integrated with a future interstate railway station).

Private sector development of the ‘nodes’ should relieve stress on the ACT Government’s budget and enable much quicker implementation of key elements of the busway system. There would still of course be a major role for governments in providing the network. Sustainable transport plans throughout the world require the injection of national government funding to implement, so the ACT Government should be promoting its Sustainable Transport Plan to the Federal Government to seek major infrastructure funding.
Another ‘signature’ project, which might be a specific candidate for Federal Government funding, would be a tourist-oriented transit system in the central National area, linking Civic Centre, the airport and the railway station with the main National Capital attractions.

Without such projects, and the involvement of the private sector and the Federal Government, there seems little prospect of the ACT meeting the targets in its Sustainable Transport Plan. As Canberra’s centenary fast approaches the spotlight will be on the National Capital to demonstrate that it can provide viable models for sustainable living.

Richard Johnston
ACT Division President
Planning Institute of Australia

11 National Circuit Barton ACT