

The "Fare-Free" Alternative.

This is a proposal for improving public transport in the ACT that will result in a dramatic increase in public transport usage. It will also demonstrate to the world that the ACT is a leader in environmentally responsible transport solutions.

The bottom-line cost to the ACT government would be minimal over ten years. There will be some up-front capital cost for additional ACTION buses to cope with increased patronage and possibly some redeployment costs for redundant ACTION staff. These up-front capital costs would be insignificant compared with the capital cost of a light-rail service between Gungahlin and Civic and/or other major planned road improvements. ACTION's operating subsidy may need a small increase. However, the bottom-line for the ACT community would be a real saving.

Only 20% of ACTION's gross revenue comes from fares (see ACTION's 2004/05 Annual Report) and a substantial proportion of this 20% is spent collecting the fares. I therefore propose that **the payment of all bus fares be eliminated**, making public transport "fare-free" for users. Economic rationalists argue this will result in "overuse" but the advantages of my proposal include:

1. Bus services will operate faster point-to-point and will be on time, because stops (dwell time) would be only momentary (with no fare collection) and all bus doors can open for both entry and exit at every stop. This has been demonstrated in places like Geneva, where fares are neither collected nor tickets validated onboard their buses.
2. Safety will improve once the bus driver is not distracted by collecting fares and can give undivided attention to the external traffic situation.
3. Drivers can be physically isolated from the passengers, making bus driving a safer and more attractive occupation, particularly at night. With no cash on board there would be no motive for robbery.
4. ACTION staffing flexibility and efficiency will improve once drivers can change-over at any point on the network - once again because they are not carrying cash.
5. ACT residents could no longer argue that driving to work costs about the same as catching the bus. Many families would not need a second car, a huge community saving.
6. There would be substantial ACTION operating economies once they get rid of all tickets, student passes, expensive ticket validation machines, ticket inspectors, sales outlet commissions, most of ACTION's accounting staff, armoured car services, lost time for cash counting and reconciliation, etc. As a result, the ACT government's current subsidy to ACTION should be sufficient to operate the new "free" service at the present patronage level.
7. Increased patronage would eliminate the need to build more capacity into our road network for at least ten years. These savings would pay for the larger ACTION bus fleet and retraining of surplus staff to accommodate the increase in passengers.
8. There would be no need to build new public car parking for about ten years.
9. Commercial and other vehicles would be less delayed by traffic congestion, reducing their operating costs.
10. Future bus driver recruits would not need to be trained to handle cash and need not be paid a premium pay rate for this task. This simplified workload would attract more applicants for bus driver jobs.

11. On trunk routes, the resulting high frequency of buses would make timetables unnecessary, a strategy which has been found in Toronto to greatly increase patronage. The reduced cost of timetables and their associated staffing would be another saving. On trunk routes buses could turn short, jump stops and other flexibility measures.
12. Overall vehicle accident and injury rates would decrease, reducing insurance rates, a saving to everyone.
13. Running the buses on CNG instead of diesel is already a recommendation of the ACT Greenhouse Strategy, and now many more people will travel on this low environmental impact fuel.
14. The overall reduction in vehicle exhaust pollution would assist our compliance with the Kyoto Convention and also alleviate the smog problem in Tuggeranong valley.
15. Increase public transport usage will improve the social fabric of Canberra.

Opposition may be expected from petrol companies, motor manufacturers (particularly those who don't make buses), tyre makers, road builders and other lobby groups with a vested interest in increasing our reliance on our cars.

Some taxpayers may argue they are being forced to pay for something they don't use, however, if they still must use a car, they will benefit from the lowered road traffic congestion.

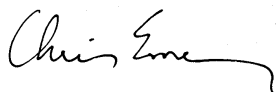
Overuse could be adjusted by making peak-hour bus stops at least half a kilometre apart, with closer spaced, intervening off-peak stops to facilitate access by those with a disability. More bus lanes would be easy to implement once we have lowered congestion. Both of these measures would further speed up peak-hour services.

Light-rail is very expensive to install and too inflexible for a place like Canberra. It cannot provide express peak-hour services and if a light-rail vehicle breaks down, it blocks the track. It really needs its own right-of-way to work successfully. We already have a road infrastructure well suited to buses. A light-rail between Gungahlin and Civic would need either a massive annual operating subsidy or high fares, as exemplified by the privatised light-rail service in inner Sydney, operating in a much higher population density than Canberra.

This is a great opportunity for Canberra to show the world what can be done in a homogeneous planned environment, with a well-educated population, happy to try such an exciting experiment. Canberra would certainly attract world media and professional transport experts' attention.

Remember how successful "free" public transport was for the Sydney Olympics!

Sincerely,



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