

Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage Inquiry into Sustainable Cities

Associate Professor Ian Gray
Centre for Rural Social Research
Charles Sturt University
Wagga Wagga NSW 2678

Professor Geoffrey Lawrence
School of Social Science
The University of Queensland
Brisbane QLD 4072

The concept of the sustainable city cannot 'stand alone' from the wider issues of sustainable spaces. In other words, sustainable cities should be understood in the context of the relationships between metropolitan cities and regional settlement in Australia. The Australian population is becoming increasingly concentrated within the major cities. Inland regions suffering continuing decline in population and quality of life in most situations. At the same time, rapid growth is bringing problems to some urban areas. We believe that the sustainable cities will be those which grow in a synergistic relationship with regional areas: towns and cities. This will ensure that the regions have a place in the future prosperity of Australia – something that is, according to most of the statistics, becoming an urban-only phenomenon.

Regional communities are heavily dependent on the metropolitan cities. This is most obvious when remote residents have to travel for higher education or specialist medical services. Aboriginal people, the young and the elderly are particularly disadvantaged when 'user pays' and other criteria are advanced as a reason to limit services. The dependency relationship is much broader than that of service provision, however. Regional people are frequently reminded that government and business-decision making is largely urban-based. We frequently hear of a 'rural-urban' divide in Australia. At the same time there is mutuality in the relationship. Our metropolitan cities have grown on a basis provided by commerce created by regional industries. Along another dimension, regional settlements have provided a kind of safety valve for excessive urban growth. This is manifest in the migration of poor people to small towns where the cost of living is much lower. Recently, the high cost of city housing has made regional living more attractive to a wider range of income groups. In many ways our largest cities and smallest towns are becoming more interdependent. This means that transport between them should be made efficient and sustainable to promote a greater balance between urban and regional Australia.

Alongside concern for our cities and regional areas, there is a broad consensus that land transport in Australia should be placed on a more sustainable footing in the context of wider social, economic and environmental concerns, which include urban growth pains. This is reflected in the Commonwealth Government's AusLink process. It means that we should seek ways of increasing the environmental efficiency (in the broadest sense) of transportation, which necessarily involves developing public

transportation. Consideration of the possibilities for developing public transportation again brings forth the relationship between transport and regional development.

There is evidence available, particularly from Europe and Japan, that efficient public transport can have beneficial regional development and decentralisation effects. Governments and their instrumentalities elsewhere (such as Canada's VIA Rail) are investing in extra-urban passenger rail. The Queensland and Victorian Governments have implicitly recognised regional development possibilities and environmental benefits with their investment in regional fast rail infrastructure and services. Western Australia has also pursued such developments. Some States, notably New South Wales, have done very little for regional rail services and the Commonwealth is showing little direct interest despite privatisations and the formation of the Australian Rail Track Corporation. The current viability problem for the less developed passenger rail services should not surprise anyone. Australian governments have now had several, and very likely their last, attempts to consider the development of 'very fast train' services. Several options remain for the development of passenger and freight rail services which while themselves being environmentally and economically sustainable, will help to balance urban and regional growth (see Railway Technical Society of Australia at <http://www.rtsa.com.au/>). In our view, the inquiry should consider making very strong recommendations which recognise the current importance, and future imperative, of embracing urban-regional transportation issues.