

Canberra's transport system

Introduction

- 9.1 Transport is an essential element of successful regional, urban and city planning. With the social and economic priorities driving action to address climate change and improve the long-term sustainability of communities, the spotlight is firmly on transport as a major contributor to carbon emissions.
- 9.2 The Y-Plan has formed the basis for planning and development of Canberra since its publication in 1970. Through the Y-Plan Canberra was designed on a transport system, which facilitated rapid mobility using cars as the primary mode of transport. This approach was firmly reflected in the National Capital Plan (NCP), which guides the fundamental structure of Canberra today.
- 9.3 Despite the aspirations of the plan to facilitate rapid and easy mobility by car, population growth, changing demographics and lifestyle choices have placed enormous pressure on our road transport system.
- 9.4 These pressures are being felt in communities all around Australia where increasing population densities test the boundaries of existing road infrastructure.
- 9.5 At the same time, traditional approaches to transport and planning are being challenged and tested in the new paradigm of climate change.
- 9.6 This confluence of events has brought to a head the urgent need for significant attention to be paid to the issue of transport sustainability. This is as true for Canberra as it is everywhere else. Only here, these problems have been exacerbated in part by the current dual planning system.

- 9.7 The committee believes that the updating of the planning system in the national capital as proposed in Chapter 11 offers a unique and timely opportunity to apply visionary thinking to the future transport plans for the national capital to ensure that Canberra is a leader in addressing climate change through holistic, innovative transport planning.
- 9.8 This chapter analyses the current situation and recommends a way forward.

Background

- 9.9 Canberra's road transport system consists of its road network, public transport and car parking facilities. The 'efficiency of the road system depends, not only on the physical provision of infrastructure, but also on the system and the physical fabric of the city.'¹
- 9.10 This chapter outlines a range of social, environmental and economic concerns about the current and future transport needs of Canberra. These needs take into consideration the relative responsibilities of the Commonwealth and ACT Governments in relation to public transport, reliance on private vehicles and the provision of parking. In addition, concerns about the impact that commercial and residential development is having on future transport planning and options for reform are discussed.
- 9.11 The committee notes that the National Capital Authority (NCA) has not had an active involvement in transport and traffic planning except in the Parliamentary Triangle, where it is has the sole jurisdiction for planning. This observation was made by a traffic engineer:

The most important role of the NCA is one that seems to have been forgotten in the past decade - namely the safeguarding of the National Capital against the unwanted effects of congestion that come with continuing population growth. The National Capital Development Commission gave special attention to finding ways of planning Canberra's metropolitan growth so as to give some protection to its formal central area from the traffic and parking problems [and consequent chaos of unforeseen responses] that are the unhappy lot of most cities.²

1 National Capital Authority, 2008, *Consolidated National Capital Plan*, Part 1, NCA, Canberra, p. 104.

2 Mr Ian Morrison, *Submission 12*, p. 1.

Canberra's national and arterial road networks

- 9.12 Canberra's national and arterial road networks are identified in the 'General Policy Plan', part of the NCP. The NCP states that the 'National Road System' supports the role of Canberra as the nation's capital by:
- providing the principal means of access between the National Capital and the State Capitals, and between Canberra and the major national highways;
 - being designed for symbolic, formal or National Capital purposes;
 - being roads whose principal purpose is to provide access to National Capital facilities and vantage points within the Territory or, being roads located on land declared as National Land under the Act.³
- 9.13 Roads that support across town traffic are categorised as 'arterial roads' or parkways. The arterial roads support Canberra's 'urban structure'⁴
- 9.14 The NCP acknowledges that the 'interaction between land use activities and transport is important. The disposition and size of the centres for major employment and other uses places different demands and stresses on the transport system and the physical fabric of the city.'⁵
- 9.15 The NCP also states that in addition to the transport and planning considerations of function and symbolism, the transport system should 'support the urban design, environmental, heritage and land use requirements of the corridor in which they are located.'⁶
- 9.16 The committee notes that in addition to the NCP being very dated in relation to transport, it is also completely out of date with regard to a range of contemporary issues that guide city and urban planning in the twenty-first century, such as environmental sustainability, climate change, water restriction, rising fuel costs, safety, healthy lifestyles, urban amenity, and 'creative communities'. These modern priorities in planning and design are addressed further in Chapter 11.

3 National Capital Authority, 2008, *Consolidated National Capital Plan*, Part 1, NCA, Canberra, p. 104.

4 National Capital Authority, 2008, *Consolidated National Capital Plan*, Part 1, NCA, Canberra, p. 104.

5 National Capital Authority, 2008, *Consolidated National Capital Plan*, Part 1, NCA, Canberra, p. 104.

6 National Capital Authority, 2008, *Consolidated National Capital Plan*, Part 1, NCA, Canberra, p. 104.

The impact of new town centres on transport networks

- 9.17 Developments at the Canberra International Airport (the Airport) and the proposed development of Molonglo are having an impact on the structure of Canberra and influencing the flow of traffic across Canberra. Developments at the airport have already begun to shift Canberra's original 'Y' shape plan to resemble more of an 'X' shape (as visible in *Figure iv*). The issues about the changes to the Y-Plan are addressed in the context of the Molonglo development and development in the Central National Area. The concerns about the impact that development at the Airport is having on the metropolitan structure of Canberra are addressed in Chapter 8.
- 9.18 Engineers Australia explain how the Y-Plan aided the efficiency of Canberra's transport system and enabled a convenient, high capacity, high frequency transport system:
- ...the public transport system of the general plan concept and the Y plan actually had a linear public transport system. That enabled a high-capacity, very high-frequency convenient public transport system. By dispersing the employment centres – like out to the airport and out to Molonglo – you suddenly go from a linear system to something that goes in all directions.⁷
- 9.19 Using the example of the proposed development of Molonglo, Engineers Australia stated that future developments should take into account the impact such development could have on the existing transport system and planning framework. With this foresight, future possible congestion on particular roads could then be discussed and addressed before becoming problematic.⁸
- 9.20 The committee notes the impact that Canberra's structure has on public transport, namely that the lower density of population in each town centre is the driving force behind an unsustainable public transport system.⁹
- 9.21 The Canberra Business Council and the Walter Burley Griffin Society also highlighted the inefficiencies of the current transport system, the unsustainable nature of Canberra's public transport system and the reliance on private vehicle use.¹⁰ Mr Ed Wensing commented 'that the critical element that is missing in our sustainability is a decent public

7 Engineers Australia, Mr Tom Brimson, *Transcript T4*, pp. 13-14.

8 Engineers Australia, Mr Tom Brimson, *Transcript T4*, p. 13.

9 National Capital Authority, Ms Annabelle Pegrum, *Transcript T5*, p. 44.

10 Canberra Business Council, Ms Christine Faulks, *Transcript T2*, p. 42; Walter Burley Griffin Society, Mr Brett Odgers, *Transcript T1*, p. 10.

transport system and better balanced employment between the employment nodes.’¹¹

- 9.22 The Walter Burley Griffin Society commented on the impact on the transport system that development in the Central National Area would have in relation to the *Griffin Legacy* Amendments. The Walter Burley Griffin Society stated:

In relation to the *Griffin Legacy* amendments, they represent a very considerable concentration of employment and new, high-density residential development in the centre of Canberra. The problem for the ACT is that it has inherited a plan from the NCDC which is predicated upon separate centres across the territory. That plan, as it was modelled in the sixties and seventies, was based upon analyses of traffic movements and of retail markets. Therefore, the centres policy of the NCDC required a balanced approach to all of the centres of this city. The concentration of a totally new centre in the symbolic lands of Canberra throws out that balance. However, it is in the interest of the ACT government to agree to something which is to their short-term benefit because it will suddenly increase the value of territory land that is associated with the *Griffin Legacy* amendments, even though these amendments work against the longer strategy of the plan for the city overall. This creates the problems of traffic congestion which we can experience everyday now in the centre of Canberra. It is a city of 340,000 people and should have no traffic congestion. The two governments and their two planning agencies are working against each other and against the longer-term interests of the city itself and of the nation.¹²

- 9.23 The committee, in Chapter 4, has expressed the view that in order not to exacerbate transport congestion the funding for Constitution Avenue should be reinstated.

Transport system planning responsibility

- 9.24 The ACT Government is responsible for part of the planning of arterial roads and receives some compensation for transport planning from the Commonwealth Government through the Commonwealth Grants Commission. By way of explanation, the NCA stated:

11 Mr Ed Wensing, *Transcript T3*, p. 54.

12 Walter Burley Griffin Society, Professor James Weirick, *Transcript T1*, p. 11.

We are moving more to an X plan now where you have significant distances to cover for arterial roads and where you have a population that has not reached the projected levels that we are anticipating for the towns – which, from memory, was something like 100,000 per town. I do not think any of them have reached that, which means that you do not have a level of population that creates a sustainable financial model to drive public transport.

That is part of the strategic plan for Canberra – this concept of towns and town centres. Moves like the urbanisation of some of the central areas and, say, Molonglo Valley, are starting to address that. But I think, other than that, that is the sort of primary level of the National Capital Plan. The detail of where the bus lanes go and how the roads work, the traffic markings and the traffic assessments, unless they are national roads, remain the province of the territory. I think the issue of transport and arterial roads would go to: what is the inheritance that the ACT government has of administering those on behalf of the Commonwealth, and is there a cost impost? I think I am right in saying, for example, that part of the Grants Commission provides for the fact that ACT roads are wider than roads in other areas, so that there is some funding to the territory for that, but transportation, public transport which goes to population and scale, is a significant issue.¹³

- 9.25 The ACT Government commented that the Commonwealth Grants Commission advised that the Commonwealth Government should directly fund any costs associated with the planning of Canberra as the national capital, which included the public transport system and road network system. The ACT Government explained:

The Grants Commission, in its 2004 review, considered other cost imposts of the urban form of Canberra. The relative inefficiencies of the ACTION public transport system due to low density development, as well as additional parks, land management costs and extensive road network to service the low density suburbs, were all considered by the Grants Commission. However, the Grants Commission was of the opinion that these measures should be funded directly from the Commonwealth rather than forming part of the Grants Commission funding distribution model.¹⁴

- 9.26 The ACT Government outlined that it has developed the 'Canberra Sustainable Transport Plan', the principles of which are included in the
-

13 National Capital Authority, Ms Annabelle Pegrum, *Transcript T5*, p. 44.

14 ACT Government, Mr Andrew Cappie-Wood, *Transcript T5*, p. 28.

Canberra Spatial Plan. In its plans, the ACT Government has advised that it has addressed transport planning in the context of incorporating a climate change strategy into its planning documents and the implications this has for land use, transport and funding of associated infrastructure. The ACT Government stated:

There is obviously a lot more that sits behind simply saying 'integrated land use and transport planning'. The ACT government is a signatory to the National Charter of Integrated Land Use and Transport Planning, which contains 11 principles of good practice in land use and transport planning. Many of those are reflected in the development of the Canberra Spatial Plan and the Canberra Sustainable Transport Plan, which is a companion document to the Canberra Spatial Plan. That is still at a very high level. It ultimately comes down to the application of policy or the development of policy and its application. There is always going to be an issue around any government's ability to fund that type of infrastructure.¹⁵

- 9.27 The committee acknowledges the challenge to implement forward thinking policy given the limited capacity to invest in the infrastructure necessary to affect positive change. The ACT Government also stated:

More importantly, since the Canberra Spatial Plan was prepared, the ACT government has adopted the *Weathering the Change: the ACT climate change strategy*, which introduces a whole new meaning to both land use and transport planning in the sense of the impact of those activities on climate change, both in mitigation and adaptation. Increasingly, both in the ACT and nationally, all planning agencies and transport agencies have to work collaboratively to identify spatial planning arrangements that reduce the impact of land use and transport on climate change.¹⁶

- 9.28 The committee believes this is a critical point and endorses the ACT Government's point regarding the dramatic increase in the need for collaboration portfolios within government if the modern challenge of climate change is to be addressed.
- 9.29 This collaboration must extend across the territory and federal spheres of government and for the ACT, across the border to NSW and the broader region.
- 9.30 Finally, the committee notes this increased necessity to collaborate at both policy and program level requires additional resources.

15 ACT Government, Mr Neil Savery, *Transcript T2*, p. 25.

16 ACT Government, Mr Neil Savery, *Transcript T2*, p. 25.

Cycling and walking

9.31 The committee heard some evidence of pedestrian and cycle access having poor outcomes in the Central National Area. While these issues were not central to the discussion, the committee believes they illustrate how the basic principles of a sustainable, liveable city require careful and ongoing attention.

9.32 The first example relates to pedestrian management on Northbourne Avenue. This is an important point because this major avenue divides Civic in half, inhibiting pedestrian flows through the city.

Professor Patrick Troy stated:

The planning ambition is to encourage more people to walk yet the traffic management cycle on Northbourne Avenue takes two 'cycles' of the lights for pedestrians to cross which is a serious discouragement and that such small businesses that do operate in the west of Civic do so 'disconnected' from the economic life of the [Civic] centre.¹⁷

9.33 The committee believes that while the planning authorities are not directly responsible for traffic lights, this is a useful insight to the relationship and collaboration necessary between planning and function.

9.34 The next example is from the ACT Cross Country Club, a member of the Lake Users Group. This Club conducts both road and cross country distance racing in the ACT and region. The Club holds three major events every year aimed at attracting interstate runners coming to compete and stay in Canberra.

The Central Basin is Canberra's 'Hyde Park or Central Park' yet it is not possible to walk, run or cycle around the area after dark due to the lack of good lighting and maintained paths. The lake has been in place for 40 years and to get onto or off of Kings Avenue Bridge when undertaking a lap of the Central Basin; one must cross the very busy Bowen Drive. Why a footbridge has never been put in place in this area is beyond belief.¹⁸

9.35 Further to this, the committee notes that a growing proportion of weekends are host to charity walks and runs involving families and children around the central basin and that the approximate 4km distance is ideal for a lunchtime walk or jog for employees in Civic, Russell and the Parliamentary triangle. The same point is relevant for cyclists.

17 Professor Patrick Troy, *Submission 80*, p. 3.

18 Mr Ken Eynon, *Submission 88*, p. 1.

- 9.36 The community use of this popular walk and running track has been recognised by the NCA as they have invested in the southern lake foreshore extensively over recent times. The committee believes that continuous safe access and egress around the Central basin is highly desirable.
- 9.37 The committee believes that both of these examples serve to illustrate that good planning involves an understanding of how people move around in public space. Many stakeholders are involved, and community groups, such as members of the Lake Users Group, often have the sharpest insight into the practical necessities for safe amenity and deserve to have a voice in the planning system.

Public transport and parking

- 9.38 Parking is increasingly becoming an issue as private car use increases. There is a trade off between using urban space for other purposes such as open space or replacing it with car parks to cater for the increasing use of private vehicles. This has the impact of changing the landscape and the nature of the national capital as well contributing to the creation of traffic congestion and increasing pollution levels.
- 9.39 The Canberra Business Council places the blame for the continued need for car parking on an inefficient public transport system, albeit acknowledging the cause is the large distances between town centres. The Canberra Business Council stated:
- There is no efficient public transport system in the ACT. We are a very spread-out city and we are reliant on cars. If you drive across the bridge, you will see a whole area right down to the lake that is going to be converted into tarmac, with parking meters for parking. That does not really sit well with the national capital, but the reality is that it is a city planned around cars and we now have climate change on top of that. There needs to be a substantial investment, I would say, from the Australian government as well as the ACT government into addressing those issues.¹⁹
- 9.40 The growing pressures on parking are symptomatic of the design legacy of Canberra and the transport inefficiencies that arise. Inevitably these pressures elicit a response. For example, this committee conducted an inquiry into pay parking in the Parliamentary Triangle. Currently there is no pay parking in the Parliamentary Triangle.

19 Canberra Business Council, Ms Christine Faulks, *Transcript T2*, p. 42.

- 9.41 Dr John Gray also commented on the ACT Government's decision with the support of the NCA to provide parking adjacent to Commonwealth Avenue and the impact this has on the landscape in the Central National Area:

Today and every working day of the week hundreds of cars are being parked on a piece of public open space, which is quite extraordinary. Obviously the ACT government is looking after the interests of its electorate. I think that Acton Park and the other foreshores merit much stronger protection than that. I submit that public parking is a use of public open space that is just unacceptable.²⁰

- 9.42 The committee notes with regret that the undeveloped land adjacent to West Basin and Commonwealth Avenue has been required for parking.

- 9.43 The ACT Government advised that it was absorbing all the economic, social and environmental costs associated with parking and stated:

...the NCA choose to adopt ACT government policy when it comes to parking ratios within commercial buildings. I understand that there is also a diminishing ratio of car parking spaces per square metre, in line with policy to address climate change. To me, that is a direct cost shift onto the ACT government, because associated with the NCA choosing to adopt ACT policies there is an impact on public transport infrastructure in the ACT by default or by implication. Is there any recognition of that, either in Commonwealth grants or in any special recompense for that cost shift from the Commonwealth to the ACT government?²¹

- 9.44 The committee is concerned about some costs relating to public transport that are borne by the ACT Government which is not compensated through the Commonwealth Grants Commission. The committee notes that the relative inefficiencies of the public transport system exist because of design features determined by the Commonwealth.

- 9.45 The committee is also concerned about some costs relating to parking that are borne by the ACT Government which is not compensated through the Commonwealth Grants Commission. The committee commends the NCA's choice to apply ACT Government parking ratios to the areas under its jurisdiction. This may increase reliance on the public transport system because the ACT parking ratios for these buildings reduce over time as part of their climate change policy.

20 Dr John Gray, *Transcript T5*, p. 72.

21 ACT Government, Mr Neil Savery, *Transcript T2*, pp. 25-26.

Options for reform

- 9.46 The ACT Government suggested that 'transport' should be incorporated into the NCP. This suggestion formed part of a recommendation that the Metropolitan Canberra Policy Plan be updated and brought into line with sustainability principles.²²
- 9.47 The Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) believed that the Metropolitan Canberra Policy Plan needs to be brought into line to better address NCP principles and further include transport planning.²³ Further, RAIA advocated that a transport plan should be developed with consideration to sustainability.²⁴
- 9.48 Engineers Australia advocated that there was no strategic approach to the transport implications of planning in relation to developments around the Airport and in Molonglo. Engineers Australia believed that the ACT Government should employ transport planners responsible for drafting, monitoring and revising a transport plan which includes all facets of Canberra's transport system. The need for specific transport planners and a transport plan would ensure that as the city grows the impact on transport is also progressively addressed.²⁵
- 9.49 Engineers Australia also advocated that the transport plan should be incorporated into the NCP.²⁶

Conclusions

- 9.50 Transport, traffic and parking have emerged as a major problem in Canberra over the years. The committee is concerned that the current dysfunction in the ACT affects transport in the wider region.
- 9.51 The committee also makes the observation that while the ACT Government invested in the development of the Canberra Sustainable Transport Plan, this plan has been criticised for not being comprehensive enough.
- 9.52 The committee notes the out-of-date approach to transport in the NCP. Leaving aside the question of policy priority, the committee recognises

22 ACT Government, Mr Andrew Cappie-Wood, *Transcript T2*, p. 4.

23 Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Mr Alec Tzannes, *Transcript T1*, p. 70.

24 Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Mr Alec Tzannes, *Transcript T1*, p. 80.

25 Engineers Australia, Mr Daverin, *Transcript T4*, p. 13.

26 Engineers Australia, Mr Daverin, *Transcript T4*, p. 13.

that neither planning authority currently holds the necessary combination of powers and resources to resolve the problem. The committee supports the view that this weakness could be ameliorated through a new, joint Commonwealth and ACT 'Sustainable Transport Plan'.

- 9.53 A joint Commonwealth and ACT Sustainable Transport Plan would address the broader range of transport issues that draw in climate change, reduction of emissions, public transport, safe cycling for both recreational activities and commuters, safe pedestrian access, traffic and parking.
- 9.54 The Sustainable Transport Plan should be incorporated into the NCP and Territory Plan and permeate all stages of planning.
- 9.55 The Sustainable Transport Plan would also serve to outline specific Commonwealth Government and ACT Government responsibilities in terms of road: funding, maintenance and policy planning.
- 9.56 The committee has been advised that there are no ongoing transport planners employed by either the NCA or the ACT Planning and Land Authority. This ought to be urgently rectified.
- 9.57 The committee notes the current administrative arrangements in both the ACT and the Commonwealth have many contributing elements of a successful transport policy in different portfolios to that of planning. This indicates that any attempt to formulate a Sustainable Transport Plan must begin with a whole-of government approach. Climate change, health (active life styles) and transport/ traffic are obvious stakeholders and where much of the policy expertise to guide policy development is likely to reside.
- 9.58 The committee believes that for the Sustainable Transport Plan to be effective it should remain a whole-of -government working policy document, which takes into consideration all new major commercial and residential developments.
- 9.59 The committee advocates that discussion between the Commonwealth and ACT governments should also be informed at the appropriate stages with community consultation.
- 9.60 The committee acknowledges that the ACT Government carries the financial burden of providing public transport and parking directly attributable to Commonwealth policies, as a result of legacy decisions or determined and/or applied by the NCA now, which are not recognised and compensated by the Commonwealth Grants Commission. As such, the committee urges exploration by the Commonwealth for fairer compensation for the ACT Government on the broad range of transport infrastructure, public transport, parking and cycling amenity.

- 9.61 The committee notes the Canberra Business Council and the Conservation Council of the South East Region initiative to jointly promote a light rail system as necessary infrastructure for Canberra's future and notes the ACT Government's support for this proposal to Infrastructure Australia.
- 9.62 The committee believes that light rail ought to be thoroughly investigated in the sustainable transport strategy.

Recommendation 13

- 9.63 **That the Commonwealth and the ACT Government prepare a joint Sustainable Transport Plan which is recognised in both the National Capital Plan and the Territory Plan.**