

Public Transport for People: A Wish List for the Year 2005

When we consider how to improve public transport - and, sadly, we always seem to find a need to improve it because it is never 'good enough'- we tend to focus on the technology and timetables and neglect other aspects.

I want to look at some of those other aspects and, in an urban ecological way, consider the total impact of public transport and how it can be improved so that it works better, not only for the people who have to use it, or choose to use it, but for everyone else too.

What do I want? - Public transport that works for people.

When do I want it? - Now! But I'll settle for a 5 year wait in the interest of at least appearing to be reasonable.

There is a good chance that most of us will agree with the speakers at this forum today. No-one seems to be seriously convinced that a public service is best provided by profit-driven private enterprise except those wedded to economic reductionist ideologies; anyone who has ever been confused or misled by a bus timetable will appreciate the need for good information about transport services; urban light rail is making a comeback all over the planet so maybe there is a chance that Adelaide will join in sometime in the next millennium; and goodness knows we need a public transport system that the public find useful enough to use! I believe that my colleagues on the platform today know how to achieve all these things - and I know that the chances of them happening in a hurry is slim. But they have to happen.

There is a weird sense in the South Australian community that public transport users are a different species from normal people who get around in cars. Now, of course, there are those of us who do both, but there are a lot of people who almost never use public transport. Is this because they are truly different from those who do? Is it an economic thing? Some strange snobbery?

I. I wish to Make a Confession

I have a confession to make. I am a 24 hours a day environmentalist. I give huge chunks of my time to advocating ecologically responsible action. I teach subjects in-the University of South Australia, like Urban Ecology and Ecological Architecture that explain why cars and fossil fuelishness are the epitome of what is not sustainable. But I like cars and I hardly ever use public transport. I walk a lot and cycle a lot but hardly ever use public transport. I often think about why that is and keep coming back to the same reasons:

- It doesn't go where I want to go
- If it does go where I want to go the travel time is too long
- It's not particularly comfortable
- It's not particularly cheap
- I get headaches reading on a bus

I have lived in places and visited places where the public transport has gone where and when I needed to extremely at a reasonable price. I enjoyed using it. I love commuting on trains because I can relax and read. I any hate commuting in a car - even though I can choose my own music and blast it out, or listen to ABC radio, without upsetting anyone. Car travel puts one into an environment that is amazingly unproductive and even the intellectual stimulation of talk-back radio gets wearying after a while. You can read in a train, or daydream, or even talk to people, but there aren't many trains in Adelaide. In a city with some of the world's highest urban speed limits, the way that buses have to be driven to keep up with the traffic ensures that buses are not relaxing.

2. I wish I understood the Ticketing System!

Buying a ticket to use public transport shouldn't require arcane knowledge and pockets permanently, full of loose change - Bring back conductors on the trains and buses! Make life easier for the average citizen and maybe create some additional. employment into the bargain.

3. I wish for an End to Death, Discourtesy & Moving Targets

What else do I want to see by 2005?

Well of course I want to see cheaper tickets, faster travel times, more comfort and convenience. But I also want to see driver education for courteous behaviour. Not for the public transport workers but for motorists.

Adelaide drivers are really not very courteous. In fact they can be downright belligerent and aggressive. Motorists seem to be in constant state of seething semi-rage, ready to boil over at moment. For this curious motorised beast, the average pedestrian seems to be nothing more than a moving target. And every public transport user is also a pedestrian.

How many of you have had to run across a road for fear of being run over? How many of you have read those letters in the paper that complain about pedestrians slowing cars down at intersections? Car dominance has reached the level of a pathology. We might pause for a moment to remember that more people are killed by cars than all the world's wars put together. Richard Register, who founded Urban Ecology in the US, talks about 'car wars'. Good public transport should be able to reduce the carnage of the car age. Economic reductionists might consider how much money would be saved by reducing the number and extent of car accidents.

A major first step in improving all transport options should be a blanket reduction of the urban speed limit. But this metropolis is so addicted to speed that one local neighbourhood was up in arms recently claiming that reducing the speed limit from 60kph to 40kph would increase pollution! If you get hit by a car travelling at 40kph it can damage you and you'll probably recover completely, but at 60kph it is very likely to kill you. This is a scientific fact. Apart from the fact that modern motor vehicles run quite efficiently at 40 kph, I defy anyone to tell me that serious injury and death doesn't constitute one of the worst kinds of defilement of our environment and our bodies. I think that there is some serious pollution in our thinking when people associate faster poisonous guided missiles with improved air quality.

4. I wish to Walk

The heart of our capital city is designed as a square mile, near-as-dammit, and a reasonably healthy human can walk a mile in 15 to 20 minutes fairly readily. If you can walk across the City of Adelaide in 20 minutes put your hand up! You really have to risk life and limb to cross the streets in the middle of Adelaide. Anyone feeling a little infirm can understand something of the fears that must plague the very young, the elderly and the differently abled when they want to do something as simple as crossing the road. How many of you can cross a road before the little figure starts flashing?

Adelaide is especially pedestrian unfriendly. Traffic engineers have worked so hard for so many years to minimise the travel time of vehicles crossing Adelaide that now normal, civilised, pedestrian movement is just not possible in our city. Pedestrians have been impediments to their efforts to make machines move as fast as possible within the law. The end result is the antithesis of a convivial city. Adelaide should be one of the world's great pedestrian environments, but it is one of the very worst and most dangerous. Our current International Intern, Jessica Builen, points out it in her (unpublished) letter to the Advertiser of 8 July 1999:

When I first arrived in Adelaide from America, I was appalled at how short " green walk lights were-at many streets, too short to actually cross the street! Even in the US, the proverbial 'Land of the Automobile', pedestrians have the tight of way and are given a sufficient time to cross the street safely.'

I've seen cars speed up when a pedestrian walks onto the roadway, haven't you?

You will have noticed how aggressive some bicycle riders have become. I think that's because they are playing the same road game as motorists, they are reacting to the 'survival of the quickest' attitude that our road system encourages and have become perpetrators, as well as victims, of the bowling alley mindset that marks the death tracks of our city streets.

Great pedestrian environments go hand-in-hand with great public transport. You can't have one without the other. No matter how much we improve the quality of our transport fleet, if the roads support fast moving cars they are dangerous. Because the general vehicle speeds are 60kph or more, any public transport vehicle sharing that road has to try and move with the traffic. That means more rapid acceleration and deceleration, more discomfort for passengers, more fuel consumption, and more danger from passing vehicles every time a bus stops.

5. I wish traffic planners would Stop Pulling Out Stops

Bus stops are integral to the provision of good public transport. For most passengers, numerous stops are preferable to fewer because it provides greater choice and flexibility in destinations. But fewer stops are preferable for traffic planners because vehicle speed is the measure of success (traffic planners are to planning what economic reductionists are to financial management). I would like to suggest that rapid, comfortable movement for passenger vehicles that stop often is less to do with high travel speeds and more to do with safe roads, and well planned routes and timetables.

Buses don't run very often outside business hours and they all seem to disappear on weekends. This tells even the most casual observer that you shouldn't expect to use public transport much other than for going to work or school. How limited a view is that?

A few years ago I might have mused that if we had a transport minister who knew how to drive a bus it would be a very good thing, if a little unlikely, and now we do. I applaud Minister Laidlaw's determination to try and understand public transport from a driver's perspective and I am sure it must temper her views in a positive way, but the provision of good public transport is not simply about buses and drivers and passengers. It is about whole systems planning for an urban ecology. That means land-use planning must be linked to transport planning must be linked to urban design must be linked to education must be linked to energy management must be linked to the total experience of travel.

We need to see structural changes in the very way we shape our city if we are ever going to see a really good public transport system - something like what I have just outlined above - but I don't see any evidence that our planners and policy makers are really prepared to do what is necessary to achieve it. Both shades of business-as-usual government made half-hearted (or was it hardhearted?) stabs at strategic plans for the development of metropolitan Adelaide and they both failed to do anything other than accommodate sprawl. Only the green and gold of politics demonstrate any systemic grasp of what real urban planning might entail such as stopping, and then reversing urban sprawl.

6. I wish to see lumps in Pancake City

Adelaide is not especially well served by public transport and there's no use pretending it is. If you look for reasons why, you'll find them in the pancake shape of the city and in the culture that a colonial-industrial culture has brought to it.

It is a culture developed since the advent of cheap fossil energy. It uses machines to do nearly everything so that almost all human relationships are mediated through mechanisms - you expect to use a machine to get to the deli, the school, work or places of leisure and entertainment. It is a culture that glorifies technology and speed and treats the living landscape as little more than a scenic backdrop for the 'real' stuff of human affairs.

This culture has resulted in a form of urban development that places people and their homes in sprawling, spreading suburbs where few facilities are within walking distance and those without their own cars become second class citizens, unable to do the most ordinary things of daily life without dependency on public transport.

Yes, these people should have better access to better transport, but it is difficult and expensive to provide a regular, frequent service with numerous convenient stops if your population is spread as thinly as it is in metropolitan Adelaide (see diagram).

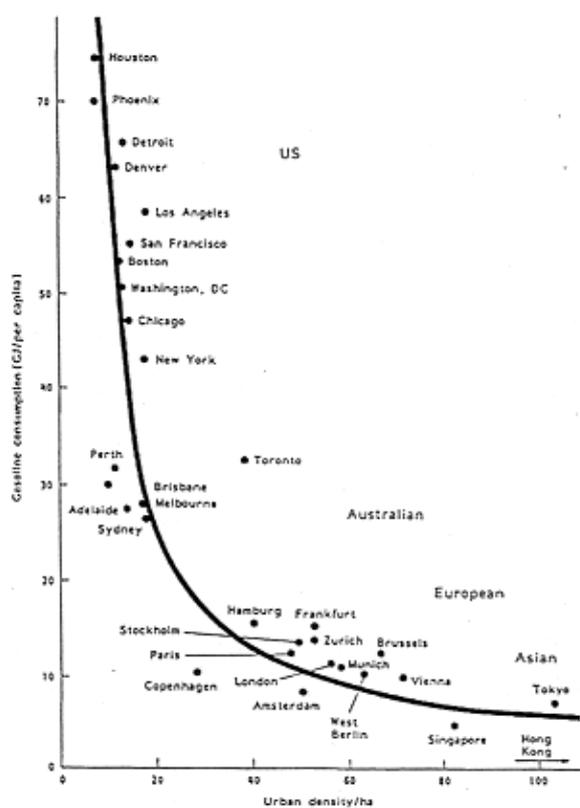


Figure 1. Urban density and gasoline consumption in 31 cities of the developed world, 1980. Source: Newman and Kenworthy, *op cit*, reference 3.

Source: Peter Newman, "Greenhouse, Oil and Cities," *Futures*, May 1991, p. 342.

The long-term solution has to be what Richard Register refers to as 'access by proximity'; ie. the quickest way to get from A to S is to build A next to B. The idea of 'walkable' cities springs from such observations. Before cheap oil and mass-produced machinery, there was no choice but to make walkable cities. Europe and Asia have many cities with this core of traditional walkability which is reflected in their overall energy use (see the world famous studies by Australian academics Peter Newman and Jeff Kenworthy) but also, arguably, in their stronger sense of community and social vibrancy.

We are thus presented with the idea that better public transport is served by having more houses and facilities closer together. This would achieve financial and energy economies but is, one is led to believe, anathema to the average suburban Australian. Unfortunately, most of the efforts we have seen to increase density in our suburbs have not produced the kind of aesthetic or social consequences that make densification attractive.

7. I wish to see the Belair Line upgraded

And medium-rise, mixed-use development encouraged close to railway stations. Instead of closing down and selling off station properties, they should become the core sites of urban redevelopment projects that accentuate all the healthy, resource conserving, community building features of walkable cities. These are the lumps I would like to see begin to rise in Pancake City.

Urban Ecology Australia has long been committed to proving that denser, more urban, lifestyles can be both resource and energy conserving and attractive, appropriate places in which to raise children and develop community. Our efforts to promote the Halifax EcoCity Project have been all about this idea, and the shortly-to-commence 'Christie Walk' project will demonstrate the ecocity concept in microcosm.

8. I wish there was a really good Metropolitan Planning Authority

Good public transport can only exist as part of an integrated land use system. Such a system requires an appropriate and competent planning authority that can work well with the 'big picture'. Unfortunately, Adelaide doesn't even have a metropolitan planning body. I am yet to be convinced that the State Government is an appropriate body to coordinate development of the metropolitan area, even if Adelaide is a de facto 'city state'.

9. I wish there was more Community Enterprise

Public service seems to be a dirty word in this era of economic reductionism. Private enterprise is all too often about being profit driven at the expense of anything else. I would like to propose that community enterprise might offer at least a partial solution to the problem of providing economically viable, but socially responsible and appropriate public transport services. Community enterprise is what you get when a local community shares the risks and costs of providing a service or product. It does what government seems to be increasingly unable to do, and what private enterprise is patently failing to do.

The Bendigo Bank is showing us some of the enormous potential of this 'third way' for economic development allied to social relevance in the financial sector. Wirranendi Inc, the non-profit developer entity created by Urban Ecology Australia to undertake the Whitmore Square EcoCity Project, is an example of community enterprise in the construction sector. I am certain that a transport service owned by a local community or neighbourhood would provide that service just where and when it was needed. Community enterprise is, by definition, inherently small enough to be responsive, and large enough to provide economic viability.

10. I wish they'd stop digging Megabuck Holes

Urban Ecology Australia is part of a global movement against automobile dependency and our hundreds of volunteers have, over many years, evolved designs and proposals for transit-oriented, pedestrian dominated, ecological city development. But the madness of the car culture reaches deeply into the present day South Australian psyche. So much so that, given the historic opportunity to work with an active community and create a world leading ecological development using walkable city principles in the heart of the capital city, the City Council have, instead, directed their chosen developers to build along new business-as-usual bitumen roads aimed straight at the walls of an adjacent school.

Where there could have been a subterranean carpark to free the ground level for a totally pedestrian environment, a publicly funded, megabuck hole is being filled in with clean earth!

11. I wish for an end to Dull Grey Grids (and a change in the Spirit of the Crows)

Sadly, our capital city is in the thrall of those who believe in the dull grey, bitumen grid school of urban design and our Capital City Council seems determined to display that curious Crows spirit which insists on snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Maybe it's not too late. Maybe this People for Public Transport forum will be the wake up call that finally gets through to the closetted ears of our politicians. Maybe it's not their fault, and they are victims of consistently poor advice but I don't care what the reasons are any more, I think it is simply time that the community voice was properly heard because what I hear coming from the broad spectrum that is the community sector, is very different from what is being delivered by government and business-as-usual.

Jane Brooks, Spokesperson for Friends of the Belair Line, has made the point in her 'Case for Inner-Suburban Train Stations' that more car-dependent society is a less equitable society because it denies the social justice of equal opportunity for travel to that majority of the population who are *"too old, too young, too poor, not medically fit enough, or too afraid to drive."* Car-based city design and infrastructure provision is inherently unjust.

12. Wishing for the Moon

And finally, why 2005? Because it's an achievable date for this wish list - if we really wanted to see it achieved. There were less than ten years between President Kennedy's decision to reach the moon and its achievement; 30 years later, surely we could hope for a few modest achievements within a 5 year span that don't require leaving the gravity well of Earth? Or is the gravity well of politics much stronger than that? Oh. What did I do to reconcile my mutual dissatisfaction with both cars and the present state of public transport? I moved into the city. I think it's called 'walking your talk'.

Thank you.

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