

Public Transport Users Association

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## **Smartbus on Route 700 – the PTUA position**

### **Background**

#### **History of Smartbus and the PTUA's stance**

The Smartbus programme was proposed in 1998 and introduced as a pilot program in 2002 along Blackburn and Springvale Roads in Melbourne's east. Smartbus was planned to include the use of a GPS-based tracking system and the installation of electronic signs at bus stops to provide real-time information about the arrival of the next bus, at a total cost of \$15 million.

However, conspicuously absent from the Smartbus plan was any improvement to service frequencies. Buses would continue to run only every two hours along Springvale Road on Saturday afternoons and not at all on Sundays and evenings. As such the only purpose of the electronic signs would have been to tell passengers that they faced a wait of up to 36 hours for the next bus, and that they should call a cab!

Because it did not deliver the most important improvements desired by passengers, namely extended operating hours and more frequent services, the PTUA opposed the Smartbus project. The Association argued that the Smartbus funds should have been reallocated to provide service improvements on a larger number of routes.

When these issues were debated publicly, some moderate improvements, particularly to evening and weekend services, were incorporated. Thanks to the frequency improvements advocated by the PTUA, the revised Smartbus has enjoyed a degree of success, with patronage increases of around 20% reported.

The current Route 700 proposals appear to heed the PTUA's belief that increased service frequency is crucial to attracting passengers. The capital budget is smaller, and the proposal includes significant improvements to service frequencies. As a result of this, Smartbus has evolved to have a different meaning to the original concept. Therefore, the PTUA now supports the revised Smartbus programme. However, we believe the concept can be further improved, with a greater emphasis on service frequency, bus priority and interchange with other services.

#### **Description of Route 700**

Route 700 runs north-south through Melbourne's eastern suburbs from Box Hill to Mordialloc. It mostly runs along Warrigal Road. The route connects with four rail lines, three tram services, the Route 703 Smartbus along Centre Road, as well as other (mostly infrequent) local bus services.

Route 700 is also the major public transport route serving Chadstone Shopping Centre. Chadstone is already the largest regional shopping centre in Greater Melbourne, and an expansion of Chadstone by some 40% is currently being proposed<sup>1</sup>.

Because it is not possible to co-ordinate timetables at the numerous interchange points along the route, frequent services are imperative if the route is to attract passengers.

## **Suggested improvements**

### **Frequency & hours of operation**

The current service levels on route 700, 'good' by Melbourne standards, are not attractive to 'choice' passengers (that is, passengers with a car available), particularly in the evenings and on Sundays.

The service levels proposed by the Department ("Smartbus standards") are significantly improved. However they remain short of the levels that attract choice passengers and promote transfers between different routes. This is again particularly the case on Sundays, where the DOI's proposed 30 minute service frequency does not allow quick and reliable interchange<sup>2</sup>. The potential for increased Sunday patronage on Route 700 is clear when it is realised that Sunday is arguably the busiest trading day at Chadstone shopping centre, with visitors often reporting difficulties in finding parking. We contend that the poor proposed Sunday services is a throwback to pre-Sunday trading days, and that there is no logical reason today why Sunday services should be inferior to those provided on Saturdays.

Given the importance of Route 700, both on its own and as a major component of a network covering Melbourne's east, we therefore propose further service improvements at an estimated additional cost of \$500,000 per annum (see table). It is likely that much, if not all of this cost would be recouped through increased patronage (see below).

At an absolute minimum, 15 minute services should be provided in evenings and on Sundays during the times Chadstone and other shopping centres are open (Thursday to Saturday evenings and Sunday 10am – 5pm). The additional cost of this compromise position would be somewhat lower.

### **Route simplification**

Route 700 is already a reasonably direct, comprehensible route compared with many other bus routes in Melbourne. However, the route can and should be further simplified. This will make it easier for passengers to understand as well as helping to speed up buses. Possible modifications to the route include:

- Adjusting the northern end of the route to run from Box Hill via Elgar and Canterbury Roads to Warrigal Rd. This removes a long deviation around Surrey Hills. It is understood that the DoI has proposed adjustments to an alternative route to

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the proposed expansion of Chadstone increases parking by less than 20%. If the number of visitors to Chadstone increases in proportion to retail floorspace, which seems a reasonable assumption, this means that finding parking at Chadstone may become increasingly difficult at busy times. This will be an obvious incentive for Chadstone customers to consider public transport, provided it exists.

<sup>2</sup> The corresponding train services typically run every 20 minutes, meaning that even limited connections cannot be timetabled for

compensate for this. Although this may inconvenience a small number of passengers using the existing service, it is our view that the benefit to other passengers and potential passengers from a faster, more direct service outweighs the disadvantages.

- Simplifying the route at the southern end to place the main terminal at Mentone station. The need for the bus to proceed to Mordialloc is not certain, as connecting train services are available at Mentone. However, the service to Mentone Parade should be maintained to service the schools in the area. The benefits and disadvantages of removing the service from Beach Road to have it return to Mentone station via Como Parade or simply continue north along Warrigal Road should be further considered.

We do **not** support removing the deviation to Chadstone along Middle Road. Chadstone is an extremely important trip generator and justifies diverting the service from Warrigal Road.

Some of these possible adjustments to the route are understood to have already been considered by the DoI.

### **Priority**

The PTUA believes that the most effective use of capital funds for bus services is bus priority. This might include measures such as exclusive bus lanes on parts of Warrigal Road and Middle Road into Chadstone, queue-jumping lanes at intersections, and priority at traffic lights<sup>3</sup>. It is important to recognise that a bus may carry in excess of fifty passengers while cars typically carry the driver only.

These measures, together with simplification of the route as outlined above should bring travel times from their present 160-180 minutes return (including waiting at termini) to 120 minutes return.

### **Passenger Information**

The PTUA does not support the introduction of real-time 'next bus in X minutes' signs at bus stops (though they may be appropriate for major interchanges). Electronic signs are expensive and divert funds from more worthwhile service frequency and priority measures.

Rather, it is proposed that information provision be limited to the relatively low-tech measure of installing a printed timetable and route map at each bus stop, as is currently done for tram stops. This, along with the provision of a frequent and reliable service people can trust, makes electronic signs unnecessary.

### **Potential patronage growth**

On the original Smartbus routes, patronage increased by 20% (and could reasonably be expected to improve further over time). The PTUA believes that Route 700 should outperform this benchmark and achieve patronage growth closer to 50% for a number of reasons, including:

- The route serves a number of major traffic generators, including Box Hill, Holmesglen TAFE, Chadstone shopping centre, and the Oakleigh district centre.
- Unlike the service levels provided on the earlier Smartbus routes, the proposed frequencies are, for the most part, at a level that can be expected to attract some 'choice' passengers (that is, passengers with a car available) and to facilitate some

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<sup>3</sup> Although the hardware for bus priority was installed as part of the Smartbus pilot, present Vicroads practice gives buses priority only when they are running late.

interchange between services. However, the PTUA proposes further improvement particularly on Sundays.

- The route connects with a number of other routes offering relatively good service, and will therefore benefit from transferring passengers to a greater extent than the earlier Smartbus services – provided frequencies are high enough and stops spatially close enough to make this attractive<sup>4</sup>.

Although precise details of current revenue are not available and patronage growth cannot be predicted with certainty, it seems reasonable to anticipate additional fare revenue between \$400,000 and \$1 million<sup>5</sup> as a result of increased patronage – nearer the lower figure for the DoI proposed service levels and the higher for the PTUA’s. This suggests that the improved services provide the community with value for money as well as significant social and environmental benefits and that providing service improvements that, while substantial, fall short of the level required to attract choice passengers and provide convenient service to passengers who must transfer may be a false economy.

## Conclusion

The PTUA supports the extension of the revised Smartbus program, with its stronger emphasis on service quality, to bus Route 700. We consider that this route is a key component of the transport network in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, and has huge patronage potential. To exploit this to the fullest, we support services more frequent than the DoI is proposing along with priority and route improvements. We contend that the marginal costs are small compared to the increased patronage on this and intersecting routes that frequent services would generate.

## Comparison of current and proposed service levels

	Current	Proposed (DoI)	Proposed (PTUA)
Weekday Peak	10 – 20 minutes	10 – 15 minutes	10 minutes
Weekday Daytime	20 minutes	15 minutes	10 minutes
Weekday Evening	60 minutes	30 minutes	15 minutes
Saturday	20-60 minutes	15-30 minutes	15 minutes
Sunday	70 minutes	30 minutes	15 minutes
Estimated Cost (p.a)	\$3 million	\$4 million	\$4.5 million

<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon is called the “network effect”. In summary, where public transport services offer only a 20 or 30 minute frequency, passengers do not transfer between services and so a route can serve only those trips that both begin and end on the route. With higher frequencies (as well as other integration measures), transfers become attractive and so a route can serve trips to destinations not only on the same route, but on any route that the route connects with. This concept is the key to improving the financial performance of public transport. The absolute minimum service level for the network effect to manifest itself is 15 minutes, with 10 minutes being preferable.

<sup>5</sup> This is based on the current number of trips and likely additional patronage as well as the average fare collected per trip in Melbourne. Unfortunately, more specific information about this route appears to be treated as confidential by the operator and the DoI.