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SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE EXTENT AND NATURE OF DISADVANTAGE AND INEQUITY IN RURAL AND REGIONAL VICTORIA

The Significance of Transport Disadvantage in Rural and Regional Victoria

As the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development notes, “transport is consistently rated by rural and regional communities as one of the most significant barriers to accessing services, employment and social networks”.¹

A study by the Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services of Australia notes that a key factor in overcoming disadvantage is “improving transport options to enable people to travel to jobs and access vital education, health and human services.”²

The British Government’s Social Exclusion Unit affirms that “problems with transport provision and the location of services can reinforce social exclusion. They prevent people from accessing key local services or activities, such as jobs, learning, healthcare, food shopping or leisure. Problems can vary by type of area (for example urban or rural) and for different groups of people, such as disabled people, older people or families with children.”³

The Social Exclusion Unit classifies a service or activity as accessible if it can be reached “at reasonable cost, in reasonable time and with reasonable ease”.⁴ Although the report is not explicitly about the role of public transport in reducing social exclusion, it is dominated by the problems and solutions relating to transport; high costs, dispersed destinations, and infrequent or unreliable public transport services.

The Nature of Transport Disadvantage

Arising from the above, it is clear that in rural and regional Victoria, where public transport provision is uniformly inadequate, many people are significantly disadvantaged.

Increasing car use has allowed many people greater opportunity for travel. However one in ten households in rural and regional Victoria does not have a car, for reasons that include cost, disability and choice. Even in cases where a family does have a car, it is often not available to every person, due to it being needed for a specific task, more often than not a journey to work. People in low-income households depend primarily on walking to get around, but because of the distances that can be involved in the subject area, buses, lifts from family and friends, or taxis are required for many activities. Cycling makes up only a small proportion of their journeys.

¹ Transport Connection Fact Sheet: <http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au>

² Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia, *Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia*, February 2007, Summary, p. 3

³ Social Exclusion Unit, Cabinet Office (U.K.), *Making the Connections*, 2007, p.1
http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/context.aspx

⁴ *ibid.*, quoted in Solomon & Titheridge, *Setting accessibility standards for social inclusion: some obstacle*, UTSG London, 2009, p. 2A1.2 <http://eprints.ucl.ac.uk/15212/1/15212.pdf>

As mentioned, regional public transport in Victoria is mostly very poor. Although there are fairly good point-to-point trunk rail services between Melbourne and the regional centres of Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo and the Latrobe Valley, there are woeful levels of service almost everywhere else. For the vast majority of people in rural and regional Victoria, buses are the basis of public transport provision, and even in localities that retain a trunk rail service, public transport access to those services can only be by bus.

Good Public Transport Can Overcome Transport Disadvantage

Public transport has the greatest impact on the welfare of a community when it is able to "fill in" for car trips. This means that cheaper travel is available for some trips, and it may mean that families reap the benefits of owning fewer cars per household.

As well as being able to overcome disadvantage, public transport has other benefits. In particular, it can be used to provide services for tourists in regional areas, and this means that more resources can be spent on public transport than would be justified if public transport's sole purpose was to help relieve disadvantage.

A distinction needs to be made between public transport in regional cities, which serves destinations within a city's urban area, and that of public transport in rural areas, which is largely focused on travel between towns.

Within major regional centres, if public transport is to approach a usable quality, it must be no different from the standard required in the Melbourne metropolitan area. This means that there should be at least some services running every 10-15 minutes during the daytime. No regional cities in Victoria come anywhere near that, but in the regional city of Christchurch, New Zealand, for example, frequencies of that standard are common. It might also be noted that when Geelong, Bendigo and Ballarat had tram services, they often ran that frequently.

When it comes to public transport in rural areas, the most important and frequently-visited destination for rural residents is their nearest regional city. Victorian rural public transport has often been viewed as a way of getting people to and from Melbourne, but, while that is an important role, it must not dominate planning. A positive development recently is that, on some of its routes, V/Line has begun to introduce extra services that allow people in small towns to arrive in their nearest regional centre before 9am and leave after 5pm.

The next step is to fill in some of the service gaps. This would mean running services in the middle of the day, to allow half-day shopping trips to regional centres. Note that many taxpayer-funded buses currently sit idle during the day. The subsequent step in improving service quality should be to run services at regular intervals (every hour or every two hours) on busier parts of the rural network.

For example, in Switzerland bus and train services run every hour between the morning and late evening. This means that an integrated public transport network exists across almost the entire country. Departure times are easy to remember because the timetable repeats every hour, and having regular interval services throughout the day make it relatively easy for people to choose to arrive and depart at times that are convenient for them. The repeating timetables also mean that connections can be planned between buses and trains, and between buses and buses, which also repeat every hour. It is these planned connections that enable a proper network to be created.

Hourly services may only be justified on major corridors between Victoria's larger cities and in densely populated semi-rural areas. However, a network of services every two hours could be planned on the same principles, and depart at the same time past every odd or even hour.

Better Organisation Is Fundamental To Reform

The problem of inadequate and disconnected public transport services in rural and regional Victoria must be tackled in a deliberate and organised way. To properly coordinate the bus networks in regional cities, regional transport planning authorities should be set up, having an appropriate budget, and responsibilities for service planning and supervision, along the lines that the PTUA has recently advocated for Geelong.⁵

The deficiency in the planning and coordination of public transport services in rural Victoria is exemplified by the two needlessly separate and parallel bus systems which currently operate. One system is the responsibility of V/Line and the other is run by the Department of Transport.

The bus routes and timetables controlled by V/Line are specifically organised to connect with trains. The actual running of the bus services is contracted to private bus companies, on the condition the buses all have a common and readily-identifiable V/Line brand. In addition, all V/Line bus services are included in a timetable in which train and bus services feature more or less equally. This gives the bus services a good degree of "visibility", and emphasises the generally unified nature of the system.

A complete contrast is provided by the bus services organised by the DoT. They are also contracted out to private operators but, unlike V/Line buses, there is no unified branding and no common timetable. The local publicity for these services seems to be left to the often-inadequate resources of the numerous small individual operators. So these services are relatively invisible, and their frequent under-utilisation is a waste of resources.

The V/Line system at least provides an exemplar of how the public transport system should be organised throughout rural areas of the state. With the exception of major regional cities with their own operating bodies, all rural and regional buses should be controlled by a State-wide operating authority, and organised, timetabled and branded as a single, unified system.

Another recent example of the current lack of unity in non-metropolitan transport planning is the Transport Connections program, an initiative by the State government to try to tackle the dearth of usable public transport outside Melbourne. The Transport Connections program operates in 32 sites in Victoria, under a variety of names, covering all rural and regional municipalities. It "provides funding to set up working groups, employ a co-ordinator and develop a range of transport initiatives"⁶.

Even though the program seems to be basically aimed at increasing public transport provision, it is an initiative of the Department of Planning and Community Development, with input from, variously, the Department of Transport, the Department of Human Services, and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. With 32 separate co-ordinators working largely in isolation from each other, wasteful duplication and lack of harmonization of their efforts is inevitable. This would be avoided if all public transport services were planned, co-ordinated and supervised by a dedicated public transport authority. "Stop gap" approaches to providing additional services such as Transport Connections are no substitute for proper network planning.

Conclusion

Increasing the frequency of Victoria's public transport services is the fundamental way to lessen the disadvantage of people without easy access to cars, and as a practical way for other residents to reduce their cost of living. Furthermore, better public transport services can improve tourist access to rural and regional areas and strengthen local economies. The

⁵ PTUA Geelong Branch. *A regional public transport authority for Greater Geelong*, 2008. <http://www.ptua.org.au/geelong-branch/>

⁶ *Creating local transport solution*. <http://www.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>

decision to improve service frequency and quality requires significant funding commitment from government, but does not require an open cheque book.

If rural and regional public transport services are to be upgraded efficiently and effectively, transport planning based on best international practice is vital. Institutional reform is required to ensure that transport services are planned with the objective of meeting country Victoria's needs. It should also ensure that all available transport services are uniformly branded and visible; and that connections between services work to create a true network. In particular, an innovative and effective transport agency will be required to plan networks and connections, as rural Victoria moves towards consistent hourly or two-hourly services.

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