

Opinion Piece

Public transport needs to keep pace with Perth's growth

Perth's public rail system is an example of Western Australian leadership and foresight. It shows that as a community we can be visionary and set the Australian benchmark for transportation best practice.

Yet the current issues of overcrowding on the Joondalup line serves to warn against complacency because, while we deserve to pat ourselves on the back for our successes, as the city grows we cannot afford to rest on our laurels.

The completion of the Joondalup line in 1992 and the subsequent development of the northern suburbs transit system and construction of the new metro rail line to Mandurah in 2007 have seen passenger numbers for rail in Perth at an all time high and well in excess of planning predictions – an outcome which could be considered an unqualified success.

But success will quickly turn to failure if our public transit infrastructure fails to keep pace with growth and it is evident that the Joondalup line is already falling victim to a lack of continuous investment and improvement – less than 20 years after its opening.

The overcrowding of commuter trains and park and ride facilities that are full by 7.30am are all signs that public transit does not start and end with the construction of train lines. As a city we need to be on a path of continuous investment and improvement to keep pace with growth – not wait until our existing systems can no-longer cope with demand.

The population of Perth currently sits at approximately 1.66 million and public transit infrastructure which was developed when our population was about 1.2 million is already straining under the weight. What will happen in 2050 when it is anticipated that our population will reach 3.5 million?

2050 might seem like a long way off, but in planning terms it is not.

Both the Joondalup and Mandurah rail lines were about 6 to 10 years in planning and construction – approximately 20 years in total delivery. The development of an adequate transit system to meet the needs of a further doubling of our population can only be expected to take longer again, meaning that we need to start now.

Delivery of such a system will require both improvement of our existing transit and very substantial investment in new infrastructure - high quality light rail which can provide the orbital links to complement our existing radial systems. The benefits of light rail are well documented, it can integrate seamlessly into existing urban areas, it is flexible, cost effective and environmentally friendly, and in cities that have implemented new systems or upgraded existing facilities, people are flocking to it.

In December 2010 Premier Barnett announced that a light rail system is in the planning stages and this is great news.

The 20 year public transport strategy now needs to be released for public comment so that we can be sure that the investment in public transport that any growing city needs will be made. When growing pains are experienced by voters without solutions in sight they pay for political blood.

Good public transit, particularly rail, is something that Perth's population has demonstrated time and time again that they want and will use in numbers that far outweigh conservative predictions.

Community pressure was instrumental in saving our railway system in the 1980s following the 1979 closure of the Perth to Fremantle line. Public pressure was instrumental in leading to its subsequent expansion of rail lines into the northern suburbs. The state government of the day paid the ultimate price for failure to listen to calls for high quality rail provision and elections around Australia, and the polls have been won and lost on public transport issues.

The Perth community expect and will continue to demand improvements to public transit and the only way to keep pace with growth is to plan with foresight and invest in the future by making sure our existing rail services are future proof *and* plan for new light rail.

The time to invest in Perth's future is now. With political will and clever investment strategies, Perth can keep its place as a leader in providing public transit.

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Committee for Perth, a member funded think tank focused on the Perth of the future.

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