

Opinion Piece: Issued Thursday 27 October 2011

Public support crucial to government's public transport strategy

They were the front page pictures that perfectly captured the frustrating reality for the tens of thousands of Perth commuters who catch the train into the city every morning. The two pictures, taken on the Midland and Joondalup lines, showed jam-packed commuters standing shoulder to shoulder with barely any room to move. It wasn't even 8 o'clock.

The bad news is that Perth's train squeeze will get worse. The Public Transport Authority has revealed that peak hour trains on the Joondalup, Mandurah and Midland lines will be operating at almost full capacity by 2016.

With an eye on providing a solution, the Barnett Government released its draft Public Transport Plan for Perth 2031 earlier this year. The draft plan identifies light rail as part of Perth's public transport future, a move the Committee for Perth congratulates.

For almost 60 years trams were a way of life in Perth and linked the city with a number of inner suburbs, especially on the north side of the Swan River. We believe that it is time for Perth to follow many other cities in the UK, Europe, Asia and the USA by taking an integrated transport approach where heavy rail, light rail and bus all have a role to play in reducing our reliance on cars.

Light rail has proven and well document benefits that far outweigh other public transport options.

Light rail gets people out of cars and creates new public transport users. It's is flexible and efficient because it has the ability to combine the benefits of on-street accessibility but is faster and more reliable than buses.

But it is not just a vehicle for moving people, it is a transportation mode that transforms the physical form of the city and revitalise underdeveloped or rundown areas.

Investment in light rail networks stimulates investment and has been demonstrated to reduce vacancy rates, increase residential property values and increase the profitability of businesses located along its route.

In Portland USA, there was \$3.5 billion worth of investment within two blocks of its streetcar route. There were more than 10,200 new housing units built and 5.4 million square feet of office, institutional, retail and hotel constructed within two blocks of their light rail. Just as importantly, developers are building new residential buildings with significantly lower parking ratios than anywhere else in the region.

Similar positive results have been achieved in Manchester, Bordeaux and Dallas. Businesses located near the Dallas Area Rapid Transit light rail starter line experienced a jump of nearly 33% in retail sales in one year, compared to just 3% elsewhere in the city.

Experience nationally and internationally shows that the planning and delivery of light rail is not easy, its up-front costs are high and it can take up to ten years from planning to delivery.

To date, the State Government has not confirmed how Perth's future light rail will be funded and this must be addressed as a priority if it is to be delivered before the city's public transport needs become acute.

The provision of efficient public transport is an essential public service and, while funding may require new approaches, such as contributions from owners and developers along the route, it will also require increased allocation of State Government funds, something which is clearly already needed to get our existing system up to scratch.

Similarly international experience indicates that light rail success hinges on co-operation and collaboration between State Government departments, local authorities, institutions, organisations, developers and most importantly the residents and businesses along the route.

The development of light rail can be a long and difficult process and the community must be on board early so that they support the physical changes it will bring and are willing to tolerate any temporary inconveniences.

As the front page pictures perfectly illustrated, Perth has a history of underestimating its demand for public transport and that is why our new public transport systems are jam-packed much sooner than anticipated.

Without public support, projects of this magnitude can get bogged down.

That is why the community needs to get involved in shaping the future of Perth's public transport network now. It needs to be fast, comfortable, efficient, accessible and environmentally friendly. It must help local economies to grow and provide urban regeneration.

The answer is light rail, the question is how long do you want to wait for it?

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