

[Draft Opinion Piece]

THE BLACK HOLE THAT IS CANBERRA'S LIGHT RAIL

By M.R. Flint, Smart Canberra Transport

How sad it is for the residents of Canberra to be staring into the 'black hole' that is light rail, a bottomless money pit that will suck in vast amounts of taxpayer funds, at great and unsustainable opportunity cost and cause serious disruption to the social fabric of our city. Additionally, it will concentrate and monopolise development funds to the detriment, distortion and disruption of a balanced and equitable development of Canberra as a whole.

It is even sadder to think that we can blame this folly on the imperative for the Labor Party to retain office, having been born out of political expediency after the 2012 election and sustained by the ideology of a political minority. Execution of Stage 1 (Gungahlin-Civic), now under way, was a primary condition of Green support.

To counter the light rail euphoria by the Government and its supporters, it may be sobering for them to know that the real through-life cost of the of Stage 1 will be a minimum of \$1.53 billion. Over the 20-year operating period, the average annual cost (including Service Payments to contractors) will be a minimum of \$76 million, being an effective cost of \$12 for each of the projected maximum of 6.3 million passengers per annum, on this one 12 km link. By comparison, the cost of ACTION in 2016-17 was \$155 million for a patronage of 18 million, ie \$8.6 per passenger, for a city-wide network.

Stage 2 (Civic-Woden), which as yet is nothing more than a 2016 election promise to voters south of the lake, would have a through-life cost of \$3.0 billion to \$3.7 billion, based on the Government's own estimate for construction alone of \$1.3 billion to \$1.6 billion. Over the 20-year operating period, the average annual cost would be about \$150 million to \$185 million, being an effective cost of \$25 to \$31 for each of the estimated six million passengers per annum. Hands up those who think light rail is a bargain!

After some four futile years of trying to convince Canberrans that Stage 1 has anywhere near a positive Benefit to Cost Ratio, the Government no longer pretends that light rail is an economic proposition but, rather, says that it "... *would look beyond simple benefit cost ratio modelling in making its investment decision and will take into account matters such as its overall vision for Canberra, community sentiment, urban benefits and other factors.*" In other words, this Government does not care how much light rail will cost. Ideology trumps both common sense and good city administration.

In its submission last June to the JSCNCET, the ACT Government epitomised its case through oft-stated claims of the benefits of light rail, in particular that "*Light rail will have a transformational effect in Canberra ... and providing efficient, environmentally responsible public transport.*" Close scrutiny of these claims show that they are primarily ideological, of very doubtful validity, offer maximum benefits to developers and fellow travellers but minimal benefits Canberran taxpayers who have to foot the bill.

Despite very high rises in rates and utility costs over the past five or so years (well above the prevailing Cost Price Index), the ACT Government can barely keep its administrative head above water now, in provision of community services. So, how does it expect that the billions of dollars it plans to sink into light rail will serve Canberrans any better? Given that the Government hasn't even started to pay for Stage 1 yet, it is certain that rates, taxes and or debt will need to rise further and substantially just to hold the unacceptable status quo of community services. Every Canberran should demand of the Government what substance there is to its claims for light rail, given its questionable administrative scorecard to date. The Government has a serious case to answer to Canberra taxpayers.

As to the suitability and desirability of light rail, it is clearly a far inferior solution than that offered by the future, rail-less technology of Bus Rapid Transit vehicles. Trams are a totally inflexible and obsolescent technology, very limited in coverage for the travelling public, only half the seating capacity of buses, disruptive of traffic flows, no better at reducing traffic congestion and pollution than BRT, already compromising the ACTION bus network and very disruptive of major arteries. It is intended to densify development of corridors yet ignores the fact that BRT could achieve the same development objectives at a fraction of the cost.

The future of public transport for smart cities of the future, like Canberra, does not lie with obsolescent trams but with the rapidly developing world of autonomous, electric vehicles, as part of an integrated transport network, enabled by digital technologies, 5G (and future generation) communications, and artificial

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intelligence. Modern electric, smart buses can meet all of the criteria put forth to justify the use of trams, including the vaunted 'urban transformation'.

A particularly damning consequence of the Government's profligacy is that the huge investment planned for trams will prevent adequate investment in the ACTION bus network and condemn it forever to its current capability of about eight per cent commuter patronage. While the network can be expected to keep pace with population growth, there would be minimal if any increase in the level of patronage. Imagine the comprehensive, effective and efficient BRT network that could be created with the billions of dollars slated for trams.

Canberra is a unique city-state in the world. For its population and demographics, light rail is unnecessary, far too expensive, unaffordable, a dead weight on the creation a more effective and efficient ACTION network and very disruptive to the development of balanced infrastructure throughout all of Canberra that would benefit all Canberrans, not just a few.

If this Government continues this folly, the unacceptable burden of light rail will haunt generations of Canberran taxpayers well into the future. Hopefully, even the most naive of tram enthusiasts will in the next few years come to realise how they've been duped by a government focused more on maintaining power than serving the best interests of the community. But the damage could well be irreversible.

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