

Canberra Conversations

Transport for the Canberra Community: thinking together about wise moves

A Canberra Conversation hosted by A Chorus of Women and the ANU Climate Change Institute
Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre, Civic
26 October 2009, 6-9 pm
49 participants

This event was the fourth in a series of conversations organised by A Chorus of Women to give Canberra citizens an opportunity to talk about topics of importance for our future, especially in relation to the changes that are needed to reduce the impact of climate change. The aim of the series is to see how community engagement and wise decision making can be helped by a more open dialogue among citizens, scientists, artists, business people and policy makers.

The conversation was run in collaboration with the ANU Climate Change Institute and we welcomed Professor Will Steffen, Executive Director of the institute as co-host for the event. The three-hour conversation combined information exchange with small group and plenary discussions, as well as songs voicing the social and ethical challenges that these subjects present for our community.

Participants

Participants at the event included a broad cross-section of people involved in setting policies about transport and land-use, providing transport services, or getting about town using various means of transport. A list is attached. Thirteen members of A Chorus of Women provided the voice of citizens in the form of several songs during the conversation.

Introduction — climate change

CHORUS: *We Canberra women know this grief
Our dreams foretell the future nightmare
Clashing laws howl in the wind
River bed dust instead of sweet waters*
From 'The Watchman', words and music by Glenda Cloughley

Professor Will Steffen opened the conversation with a brief summary of the current status of scientific thinking in the lead up to the Copenhagen meeting. He stressed the urgency of the situation and the need to turn things around by 2015 for a 50-50 chance of staying within 2°C warming (above which there would be significant impacts on the Great Barrier Reef, further drying of the land and other serious climate changes). There now seems to be widespread acceptance of the science, but not of the urgency. Hard targets and timetables are difficult to agree on and he is hoping for agreement on common principles first because, without these, there cannot be targets and timetables.

The impact of transport is high; approximately 25% of emissions in Canberra are transport related (15-20% worldwide). So the challenge is to maintain mobility but reduce emissions. But transport raises many issues — not just related to climate change — for example, urban form, liveability, biodiversity and, very importantly, human health. Other emissions, such as particulates, are also important, especially in large car-based cities (eg LA).

European cities tend to have good public transport and it's possible to live without a car. In Canberra, it is too easy to drive and this can increase the risk of obesity and other health problems. The number one complaint at the ANU is parking! Like key species in ecosystems, our transport systems are a key feature in urban landscapes.

Group discussions — what are the problems with the transport systems in Canberra?

Canberra was designed primarily around the use of the private car. This was considered the best way to go 50 years ago, but now that oil production has peaked, climate change is a major issue and roads are getting more and more congested, it is a significant challenge to turn back the clock to achieve a less car-dependent city.

In the first breakout group discussions, participants talked about what transport problems we face in Canberra. Feedback from the groups revealed a variety of perspectives:

- Distance and spread of population.
- The low cost of parking providing more incentive to jump in the car.
- Canberra is a 'car-centric environment'; there is a culture of jumping in the car for both short and long trips rather than walking, taking public transport etc.
- We've moved into the information age without re-examining our lives (eg possibilities of working from home).
- Other cities have managed to change but here there is a lack of will to change because the 'car is the normal thing'.
- Social dynamics, social choices and economics all affect decisions about who will get access to transport.
- Going by car takes a fraction of the time taken by bus so there is little incentive to change.
- There are car registration incentives for green cars in the ACT, but even though emissions per vehicle are reducing over time the number of vehicles is increasing.
- Aviation is the 'the elephant in the room' because the projected large increases in emissions from this source may overshadow gains in other sectors; also, the contribution of international air travel has not been added to local carbon emissions targets because it crosses international boundaries.¹

Overall:

- there was widespread agreement in the room that car-based solutions no longer serve us well given the problems now and in the future
- many people have experienced happily living without a car in another city but find it near impossible to do so here in Canberra.
- change is complex — and it is not an easy matter to turn things around.

¹ Domestic aviation emissions accounted for 6% of total emissions in Australia in 2005 (Garnaut Climate Review Issues Paper No.5, 2008) but passenger numbers at Canberra Airport are increasing and, based on usage predictions, there will be a substantial increase in domestic flights by 2050 and the addition of international flights (Australia Institute Research Paper 50, 2008).

CHORUS: *Let us sing as we travel on the bus with our neighbours
Raise our voices altogether
Let us help our sick world
From 'Green and Clean', words and music by Judith Clingan*

'Roundtable' discussion — who does what?

In this session, we heard from participants in the room who represented the various perspectives of providing and using transport in Canberra.

ACT Government

- Janet Salisbury (facilitator) noted that the ACT government has a raft of transport-related plans (Integrated Transport Framework, Sustainable Transport Plan and others) and that many people may be confused by this because they do not understand the difference between the different plans.
- A participant from the ACT Government explained that the Integrated Transport Framework is concerned with the integration of transport planning with land-use planning and aims to achieve a number of key outcomes, including reduced greenhouse gas emissions, improved access to safe transport options and support for economic activities. The Sustainable Transport Plan focuses on providing more sustainable transport systems that reduce environmental impacts, and promote healthier lifestyles and sustainable use of resources.
- The ACT government is currently revisiting its transport targets for the next decade or so and believe that it is important to set high targets.

Other planning issues:

- Belconnen-Tuggeranong bus trunk route is still very effective.
- Parking fees are an important lever for discouraging car use.
- Higher fuel prices have prompted more people to use buses.

User of public transport

A participant who has not been able to drive a car for over 30 years for medical reasons talked about her experience of using public transport:

- Of all the places she has lived in, Canberra is the most difficult to get around.
- She has a very busy professional life as a musician and music teacher so often has lots of equipment to carry and may have 2-3 meetings in different parts of town, plus teaching, all in one day.
- It is impossible to maintain this sort of schedule if you have to wait 1 hour for a bus.
- For many years she just went by taxi at a cost of about \$100/day on taxis but she can no longer afford to do this and now relies on lifts from friends.
- There is very little public transport at all in very outer suburbs and none beyond suburbs (eg to get to Bungendore or Braidwood).

ACTION buses

- Do not like hearing stories like the one above and wish things were better. But providing bus services is 'a challenge'.

- There is a problem that demand for public transport is quite low and there is a need to use resources efficiently and financially responsible way.
- Sometimes it is cheaper to use taxi coupons instead of putting on a bus service in low-demand areas.
- Customers don't like change and disruption to an existing service makes people very unhappy. So need to move slowly and build on incentives.

Taxis

- Need viability and sustainability so we can't expect a bus in every street. The taxi industry sees itself as a partner of the bus system — part of the public transport system.
- Taxis are not threatened by public transport — in fact the better the public transport system, the better off the taxi service is.
- It would be smart to have taxis do off-peak bus routes.

Community group

- Need to facilitate a 2-way relationship between land-use planning and transport planning. When there is good public transport in an area, people who don't want to drive can live there. Where you can put transport depends on what is there. Hard to put in a train when land is covered with houses, and underground is expensive.

Business

- Good transport systems are essential for business.
- One business commented that when their office moved to the city, more staff started to use public transport or cycling to work. This means that for visiting clients they are relying on more taxi-based trips.

Planning

- Importance of nexus between land use and planning. Burley-Griffin's plan is now not recognisable in Canberra. Peter Newman has done good work in Perth to develop the train system.
- It is important to consider opportunity costs. What is the cost of NOT bringing in a good public transit system?
- Consultation is sometimes not 'transparent' — for example, being asked to comment on some aspects of an issue but not others (eg not having an opportunity to comment on light rail at a consultation on transport).
- What will Canberra's sustainability be like if we remain car based? Need to give people a real alternative. In Hanover, half the city is green space and there is massive public transport use with frequent integration between modes (eg train and bus). Having such a good system creates savings.
- Canberra has some great features to build on. Community workshops run by ACT Government have consistently pointed to the importance of the 'Y-plan' (Belconnen, Tuggeranong etc).

CHORUS: *A culture of respect for Earth and people's on the way
Led by scientists and humanists as well as business leaders
We want local representatives to join the move
For wisdom to prevail in our democracy.
from 'Sing out Wisdom', by Meg Rigby and Glenda Cloughley*

‘Roundtable’ discussion — transport success stories

After a short refreshment break, the second whole-group discussion focused on transport success stories from elsewhere.

- Curitiba in Brazil started a transport master plan about 30 years ago. There were lots of slums and poverty combined with massive urban sprawl. The visionary mayor planned the city around proper public transport with bus rapid transit between employment and residential nodes with smaller bus pickups into the suburbs. Bogota in Colombia also has a similar rapid transit system that has been very successful.
- Stockholm is a city of 1.8 million people (compared to 300,000 in Canberra) and spread out spatially with 1/3 parkland, 1/3 urban pods, and a rail system with three main lines. When rail is put in first, people cluster around it. They built the rail system to maximum capacity – trains as long as possible, as frequent as possible. It has been so successful that public transport is now over-subscribed! A new underground line is now being built.
- A \$2 billion figure has been cited as the cost of a light rail system in Canberra but this figure has been disputed. (For example, Mandurah heavy train line in WA has been cited as costing only \$9 million/km.)
- Some participants stressed the success of light rail in other places. Some participants would like to have more public discussion on this issue.

Group discussions — what are the possible solutions for Canberra?

For the final small group discussions, participants considered possible ways forward for Canberra. Feedback from the groups included the following issues:

- Car technology is changing rapidly and cars will continue to be a strong focal point. Cars allow you to do things you cannot do with public transport. There will always be a place for a ‘personal mobility tool’ of some kind. Roads will still be needed to deliver freight.
- An electric car company is going to roll out electric cars and recharging infrastructure in Canberra within the next couple years few years. (There was much interest in this initiative.)
- ACTION is looking at alternative technologies (such as electric or hybrid) and so are taxis. Cost benefits of hybrids are not clear enough to warrant wholesale changeover to hybrid taxis but electric taxis may be viable in future.
- It is important to consider how isolated and disadvantaged people are catered for — people who can't afford a car in the first place. One option may be to pay into a plan to use a car to reduce capital expenditure.
- People generally have one personal transport option to cater for all purposes (eg everything from holiday camping trips to work commuting) – cooperative strategies for sharing personal transport would allow vehicle use to be matched to purpose (eg community car hire).
- Car-sharing needs to be supported by good public transport and is therefore most viable in high-density city areas. There needs to be ‘coverage services’ to ensure low-density suburbs are also covered by a public transport network.
- ACT government has recently set up a fleet of bicycles for workers to ride to meetings. Other businesses have similar schemes. A firm at the ANU is reconditioning old bikes. More people

are using electric bikes for medium distance trips (eg from Yarralumla to Tuggeranong for work).

- Good cycle lanes (free of parked cars) are important to improve safety for cyclists. Good footpaths, free of parked vehicles and other obstructions, are needed for pedestrians.
- More dedicated bus lanes would decrease journey times, and increased use of transit lanes would provide an incentive for car-pooling.
- Need to integrate the transport plan, spatial plan, economic plan and social plan.

Concluding discussion

A strong message from the conversation was that it was good to be able to have a discussion with such a diverse group of people across all aspects of transport (buses, taxis, cyclists, roads, planning and government etc).

Participants considered what is stopping the implementation of the ideas raised (as there was a lot of agreement about the way forward). A barrier appears to be that roll-out of the alternative transport options is dependent on them being economically viable (ie attractive enough for investment and able to turn a profit). This can be a challenge in a small town and funds may need to be directed to entrepreneurs to pilot new businesses. Wise decision making needs strong leadership with a long-term and bipartisan view (beyond the usual electoral cycle).

But government and business sometimes appear to serve their joint interests, and community groups do not always feel that their interests being represented in the result. There was a strong sense that the community needs to liaise closely with government in forums such as this conversation so that community views and needs are considered alongside business needs to promote the best outcomes.

CHORUS: *We've seen evidence a'plenty of our cavalier approach
Storm Fire Flood Famine
Searing drought Species lost
Build a demonstration town where emissions total none
Show the world that Canberra can enact a visionary plan*
from 'Our Footprints'; words by A Chorus of Women; music by Johanna McBride

For further information of Canberra Conversations and other activities of A Chorus of Women, see www.chorusofwomen.org or email Janet Salisbury on janetsalisbury25@gmail.com.