

# SYDNEY'S TRANSPORT ILLS ARE A NATIONAL LESSON

THE EXPLOSION OF SYDNEY'S POPULATION TO MORE THAN 7.5 MILLION PEOPLE BY 2050 DEMANDS NEW THINKING AND NEW TRANSPORT PROJECTS, OR IT COULD CONSTRAIN AUSTRALIA'S PROSPERITY, WARNS **BRENDAN LYON**.

■ Sydney is Australia's economic engine room. It accounts for nearly a quarter of gross national product, worth more than \$281 billion to the national economy each year. It also houses one in every four Australians – while western Sydney houses one in 10 – and its population is still growing.

It is no secret that Sydney's mobility and functionality is under serious pressure. A regrettable lack of integrated, joined up, long-term planning and a disappointing recent history of variable, changing investment priorities has left New South Wales facing serious urban and freight network congestion.

New South Wales' commitment to deliver a considered, integrated and long-term transport blueprint was a positive development, but it was scrapped (along with the CBD Metro), in favour of a much more modest capital works program released earlier in February.

It is clear that this program is insufficient to meet Sydney's needs.

A common feature of the transport debate has been to point to a particular mode as a 'silver bullet' solution. But the complexity and scale of the transport task in Sydney means that there is no single solution; Sydney must instead look at how road and rail transport can better interface as part of a single, complex and integrated transport network.

## PUBLIC TRANSPORT WOES

The rail network continues to be plagued by poor performance, operational shortfalls and a lack of investment in new and enhanced connections to serve major growth corridors and link existing rail lines.

Faster rail connections between regional centres and Sydney need to be part of the long-term transport mix.

But it is suburban rail which requires the most urgent attention. The Government has recently announced the procurement of a southwest rail link, but the northwest link, while announced, is not anticipated to commence construction before 2017 and will not be operable until after 2025 on current time frames.

Many existing rail corridors already operate well above capacity in peak. A fundamental overhaul of the network's operation, coupled with significant, sustained investment in new rolling stock and infrastructure are urgent priorities.

In spite of the very regrettable axing of

the CBD Metro project, metro rail must form part of Sydney's future transport mix. The development of a metro system would deliver a new, decentralised mass transit network predicated on customer service, frequency and passenger needs; rather than on limited network capacity and legacy system weaknesses.

While light rail has a role to play, it is important to remember that last century's trams did not share Sydney's limited road space with the number of motor vehicles present today. Light rail's application and role outside of the inner city is limited.

For the most part, Sydney's bus network functions relatively efficiently and effectively. Nevertheless, major stumbling blocks remain, partially through the lag time in bus procurement and the inability of manufacturers to meet demand.

Another key consideration is the lack of effective bus priority measures on roads. Buses also require access to the road estate, adding to congestion in peak periods.

Sydney's ferry network is grossly underutilised and the network has a critical future role to play in servicing the harbour suburbs. The harbour has significant spare capacity for new services and routes, as well as major service quality improvements.

Done well, franchising public transport services could drive service quality and operational improvements. Global and domestic experience has shown the potential to drive better services, at better value for money to both taxpayers and commuters, through a competitive services market.

## ON THE ROADS AGAIN

Sydney enjoys the most advanced motorway network of any city in the nation. But in many places the orbital operates well above optimal capacity; and the road network continues to be hampered by a series of 'missing links'. The completion of major 'ghost motorways', like the F3-M2 connection, M4 East and the F6 would integrate inter-regional traffic and freight and enhance the performance of the entire road network.

The private sector will play a major role in the financing and delivery of the next suite of motorway projects. The use of public-private partnerships and a user pays tolling system has been critical to the delivery of Sydney's existing motorway network. An important consideration for policymakers is the role that tolls can and

should play in ensuring optimal efficiency on the road network. The introduction of time of day tolling on the Harbour Bridge and Tunnel has been a welcome experiment in the use of price signals to manage congestion and alter driver behaviour. A rigorous consideration is warranted of how the orbital network could be more efficient, if tolls were used to guarantee a level of service and provide clear price signals reflecting cost of use, rather than merely to repay the construction costs of the infrastructure.

## INTEGRATED GROWTH PLANNING

Recent modelling by Infrastructure Partnerships Australia and by the Commonwealth Treasury each predict that Australia's population will grow to more than 35 million people by 2050. Some 90 per cent of this growth will need to be accommodated within Australia's existing urban fabric.

Australia needs to learn from Sydney's current challenges and move to long-term, integrated transport planning. With concerted effort, better planning will deliver a clearer national pipeline of infrastructure priorities, benefiting policymakers, the private sector and commuters.

There is no feasible way that taxpayers can finance and deliver the required projects alone in the timeframe required. The states must therefore robustly engage with the Commonwealth Government – backed by long-term, integrated strategic infrastructure plans which include rigorous analysis of the scope, scale, costs and benefits of proposed projects. Governments need to identify new ways to harness the investment and innovation of the private sector – and drive new funding for publicly funded projects.

If projected growth occurs without substantial, sustained, integrated and complementary transport infrastructure development, then Australia risks dramatic impacts on its future productivity.

But we do not need to put out the 'closed' sign just yet. Australia's two largest cities are consistently ranked amongst the ten most liveable cities in the world – the challenge is to retain these enviable characteristics, while adjusting to change.

Growth will inevitably change the fabric of Australia's cities. But if we can get the planning right, we can ensure that this is change for the better, which enhances the liveability and improves mobility in our major cities.

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