

SUBMISSION ON THE GREAT WESTERN HIGHWAY TUNNEL EIS  
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## INTRODUCTION

The “Strategic Context” section of the EIS should explore things (of a background nature) that impact the Blackheath-Little Hartley Tunnel, and things that would be impacted by the Tunnel, but fails to address these things adequately.

For one, the Tunnel is one of several megaprojects in NSW (mainly in and around Sydney) having a high priority, while other critical needs become secondary by default, because public funding only goes so far.

These are questions of disparity, in terms of needs, funding and affordability, and of relevance to finding timely solutions to the main economic, social and environmental challenges for roads and transport in NSW.

In that vein, the following sections elaborate on a range of contextual things that warrant consideration in assessing the GWS Tunnel option.

## KEY POINTS

**In NSW, road-based travel outstrips all other means of travel, including in Sydney.**

**Sydney suffers seriously from ever-rising traffic congestion, a product of high car use and of project selection decisions that keep fuelling Sydney-centric growth, while questions of sustainability and of finding timely solutions are being largely overlooked.**

**Worldwide, travel delays per person are lower in smaller than in larger cities.**

**Delays are also lower in cities with more public transport services than in cities of similar size with less public transport. So, a more sustainable future would evolve if:**

- 1. Public transport is widely boosted sooner rather than later, which can be done in Sydney and in other cities by operating the road system more productively with remastered bus networks; and**
- 2. Growth pressure on Sydney is eased, by stimulating more growth in towns and cities across country NSW, including through improved aviation, road and rail schemes.**

## CURRENT POSITION

Massive infrastructure projects continue to be rolled out in Sydney, including motorway and railway tunnels, a second international airport and light-rail lines.

The main effect will be to propel our capital to megacity proportions, shaped by similar infrastructure investment priorities that have Australians already residing much more in very large than in smaller cities by international comparison.

Other than Sydney, NSW cities are relatively small, with some of the biggest (including Newcastle, Wollongong, Central Coast and Blue Mountains) clustered close to Sydney.

In Sydney, public transport has dominated in and around the central business district. But of all the travel throughout Sydney (in person-kilometres), roughly 80% has been by car, 15% public transport, and 5% other modes, including walk and cycle. Across smaller cities, the car share well exceeds 90%.

During the pandemic, the car share has been even higher than normal, public transport's share lower, while total travel volumes have fluctuated.

Working from home, online shopping and other factors have altered travel patterns and raised more questions about the prevailing capital-city centric focus.

Through country NSW, upgrading of the Hume Highway (Sydney-Melbourne) and Pacific Highway (Sydney-Brisbane) are virtually complete following many decades of staged construction.

Similar long-term endeavours along other highways, including the Great Western Highway (Sydney-Bathurst) and the Princes Highway (Sydney-NSW far south coast) are under way.

The inland rail line (Melbourne-Brisbane through NSW) is being built.

However, the four main rail lines out of Sydney into country NSW (and beyond) encounter mountainous terrain and outdated track alignments. Higher speed rail alternatives are at an early stage of consideration.

Twenty-three NSW towns and cities have daily air transport links to Sydney. Four of them have passenger jet services. Some also have interstate flights. As a rule, lower air fares are available on the jet services than on non-jet services.

#### **BOOSTING PUBLIC TRANSPORT WIDELY AND QUICKLY**

Generally, bus service upgrades and walking and cycling get less attention, less priority and much less funding than the major infrastructure programs, and the potential for buses to provide sustainable, whole-of-city road and transport solutions remains largely untapped.

Buses account for less than 1% of all road-vehicle-kilometres travelled, whether measured in Sydney or across the rest of NSW, highlighting a game-changing opportunity, to save road space, increase road productivity, enable many more people to leave their cars behind, and trigger a traffic-shrinking effect.

The Sydney Olympics (albeit short-lived) demonstrated this effect, across greater Sydney.

Sydney focused on getting the best out of its existing road and transport infrastructure. Thousands of buses were hired from other towns and cities, widely boosting public transport and helping to reduce traffic congestion, while more people than ever travelled across Sydney during that time.

Many questioned “Please, can this be done all the time?” It wasn’t.

The point is any city can permanently replicate the traffic-shrinking effect by design, and readily increase public transport capacity at an affordable cost, with a remastered bus network, by comprehensively increasing bus fleets, and then:

- Raising service levels on existing bus routes; and
- Ensuring that all business centres and busy corridors are well served by buses, with high-frequency services; and
- Overlaying cross-city bus routes (crisscrossing the whole urban area), operating on the main road system, with limited-stops, frequent, and interconnected services, to create an easy-to-understand express bus system.

Cross-city buses would help deliver a decentralised, main road-based service layout, with high-quality services, and provide a widely available alternative to using cars so much.

New bus-stops and bus-stopping bays can be built off-lane where practical, to keep through-traffic flowing past the bus-stops.

The traffic-shrinking effect would reduce the need for new bus-only carriageways (other than at bus-stops), or other major infrastructure, while the bus sector, including bus manufacturing, operations, and maintenance, would be invigorated.

New or expanded bus depots would be required. Zero-emission fuelled buses are on the way to being adopted, using energy derived from renewable sources.

**All this is doable and is a positive way to increase road productivity and sustainability, whereas business-as-usual approaches, opting for new Sydney motorways and railways, fail over and over to reverse persistently rising car dependence and traffic congestion (because the main effect of the new infrastructure is to stimulate growth).**

Firstly, the remastered bus strategy warrants further development, to include designing new bus routes, quantifying bus service level upgrades, surveying demand for mode-shifting, estimating costs, modelling traffic-effects, and consultation with industry and community.

Next, project assessment and selection processes need to compare the bus strategy with other major road and transport strategies, on sustainability, value for money, and other economic, social and environmental criteria, and then prioritise funding accordingly.

Prioritising walking and cycling schemes would further improve sustainability.

Once the focus is about optimising road productivity (i.e., getting the most out of the road system first and in choosing surer ways of reducing traffic congestion in the foreseeable future), then major infrastructure options become less imperative.

Sydney could turn its unenviable position on traffic around, taking its Olympic transport success one step further, into the realm of a more liveable city, all the time.

In the Blue Mountains, a remastered bus approach (including quality bus services along the Great Western Highway) can reduce the demand for local car trips. Similarly, better air links and regional coach services from Sydney to Central Western NSW would dampen traffic through the Mountains. And rail could take a bigger share of total freight movements in future when the line over the Mountains is upgraded.

#### STIMULATING GROWTH IN COUNTRY NSW

Remastered bus networks are applicable to other cities too, to get the best from their road systems first and buy time to do costly infrastructure works later, if required.

Getting the most out of road systems (especially greater Sydney's) can achieve net savings in public funding overall, beyond moneys needed to remaster buses.

Such savings can contribute to stimulating regional economic growth, including through widespread country road repair and upgrading, and new rail and air transport schemes, so easing growth pressure on Sydney.

New interurban bus and coach links can enable better connectivity sooner rather than later. So too, new air transport initiatives can play a crucial role, to bring high-quality connectivity sooner, whereas upgrading highways and railways are long-term propositions, even with accelerated funding.

To improve air services, more country airports can be modernised to handle domestic passenger jets, to enable higher volume operations, better economies of scale and lower air fares. Candidate airports may include Albury, Broken Hill, Dubbo, Parkes, Tamworth and Wagga Wagga. (The four centres already served by domestic jets in NSW are Ballina-Byron Bay, Coffs Harbour, Newcastle and Port Macquarie).

As well, options for improving air services to the other centres on the NSW air transport network (Armidale, Bathurst, Cobar, Griffith, Inverell, Narrandera-Leeton, Lord Howe Island, Merimbula, Moree, Moruya, Mudgee, Narrabri and Orange) warrant further consideration.

Also, a high priority should be given to investigating how to provide air services to remote towns without regular flights (including Balranald, Bourke, Hay, Ivanhoe, Walgett and Wilcannia), probably operating to larger country centres if not directly to Sydney.