

Draft Transport Master Plan response

1 Introduction

The draft NSW Long Term Transport Master Plan presents a wealth of evidence about transport trends and needs for Greater Sydney, but looks unambitious with respect to the role of rail.

This response addresses the potential for rail to have a more transformative impact in three areas:

- Accelerating the move to a polycentric Greater Sydney;
- Benefiting more from three-tier operation and a second harbour crossing; and
- Limiting the capacity needed on motorways.

Some specific comments on rail and references to content in the State Infrastructure Strategy (First Things First) are also included.

2 Polycentricity

The concept of polycentricity for Greater Sydney is supported in the Draft Plan, but seemingly only as a trend to which transport development needs to respond. To paraphrase pages 171/172, a likely trend towards spill-over non-essential CBD businesses and activities seeking more cost effective locations provides an opportunity for economic centres located closer to where people live to be expanded. The Draft Plan also reports that western Sydney residents want to work closer to home; consistent with the finding that time-related factors are the central priority for transport customers, but delivered in a different way from making it easier to reach the central east region of Greater Sydney.

With western Sydney having 46% of Greater Sydney's residents, but only 28% of the employment, and all of Greater Sydney commutes covering 16% of trips but 28% of distance (or twice the distance for the average of all other trip purposes) the potential to reduce the corresponding transport impacts and to provide a more liveable community looks immense, particularly as much of the commute is at peak periods. Based on the above figures, employment growth in western Sydney would need to not just keep pace with workforce growth, but to exceed it by a considerable margin to maximise the potential benefits.

A recent Commercial Leasing supplement in the Sydney Morning Herald (September 19, 2012 page 11) described Smart Work Centres able to accommodate multiple organisations in one building, but noted the lack of non CBD transport nodes in most Australian cities as a barrier to their implementation. Despite Parramatta in particular being potentially further advantaged by its geographically central location, having room for expansion and offering clustering with extensive retail outlets and services, better connectivity for commuting and business to business travel with more of eastern Greater Sydney would be needed for this potential to be realised.

Unfortunately, the current NWRL plans no longer make provision for a direct Parramatta to Chatswood rail service via Epping, and there is no mention of rail, or any other form of Mass Transit, connections from Hurstville into the Western and South Western parts of the rail network, limiting the attraction of Parramatta (and Liverpool) as an alternative work site for many residents. Linkage with the Castle Hill area is also deficient. The reason for this lack of interest in rail here seems to be low patronage levels based on current trends.

The above suggests a Catch 22 situation, with the growth of western Sydney economic centres being held back by the lack of good quality transport, and this lack not being a real concern due to growth trends of the centres. Accordingly there could be merit in taking a transformative approach whereby more growth in such centres, higher public transport patronage to those centres, and greater community benefits are achieved. Priority for rail investment in such cross regional services may then be considered higher than for the NWRL, which is preserving existing radial travel patterns by replacing a deficient bus based Mass Transit service along the M2 Motorway and other major roads.

3 Three-tier operation and a second harbour crossing

Much of the case for a second harbour crossing is based on the substantial difficulties, and doubts about the feasibility, of achieving significantly more rail capacity over the bridge by converting to tier 1 operation. These include the long period of disruption and the capacity limitations that would be imposed by train length, platform width and some of the approach alignments even after extensive station modifications are made to improve egress. However, building a second crossing will result in low utilisation of the additional capacity for many years, making a second crossing a small benefit - high cost proposition. The train numbers for the NWRL disguise the situation as they seem to have been inflated to give a similar number of seats as a double deck service, which is contrary to the efficiency claims under the three-tier principles. Additionally, many NWRL users are not expected to travel beyond North Sydney.

Considering the above, the pressure from Infrastructure NSW to try harder with the existing route is understandable. An alternative approach is to look for additional patronage, with a rail link from North Sydney to Manly Vale or Brookvale, to link with an improved street based public transport network for the Peninsula area, being an obvious contender. As well as achieving better utilisation for the two rail harbour crossings, other proposed works, such as the proposed CBD and Military Rd bus tunnels, would be avoided.

An 8-10 km Peninsula rail link, serving the Military Rd corridor, clearly fits all the criteria of a tier 1 railway and would be operated accordingly. With regard to the NWRL, double deck tier 2 operation once a second crossing is in place would mean fewer trains being needed, a limited time penalty from dwell time and acceleration differences due to the 3km average station spacing, and accommodating a Parramatta-Chatswood shuttle to support polycentricity.

The almost apologetic need for an eventual second crossing in the Draft Plan is reflected on the south side where least cost considerations may be behind the choice of the Hurstville and Bankstown services for conversion to tier 1 operation. The State Infrastructure Strategy has already presented an argument for converting the Strathfield service that integrates with land redevelopment proposals and conforms well to the three-tier principles. Additionally there is merit in converting the airport service if additional patronage, particularly during peak periods, is to be sought.

Converting all four routes to tier 1 operation would require a second Sydney CBD path, with conversion of the present Eastern Suburbs Line (and the loss of some tier 2 capacity into the Sydney CBD) being the most obvious contender.

4 Motorway capacity

While the WestConnex proposal from Infrastructure NSW will provide useful limited-access road connectivity for essential freight and services not transferrable to rail, the capacity intended is clearly more than needed for these users alone. The rationalisation offered is an expectation that car use in Greater Sydney will continue to increase, despite current flatlining and some implied government endeavours to the contrary. It is reasonable to suspect that being able to reduce the government's financial contribution could be an important factor, considering that toll revenue can go up with capacity but costs will increase by a lesser amount, however this violates the principle that economic evaluation should be independent, and ahead of, financing considerations.

To be more objective, much of the car preference is really about the convenience value proposition that cars offer. Pressure on household budgets, lower prospects for economic growth (held back by energy costs, debt overhang and natural disasters) and a proliferation of distractive mobile devices that can be safely operated while riding public transport suggest an ongoing weakening of this expectation. It seems perverse to unnecessarily stimulate car use under these circumstances.

There is no single alternative to this excess capacity, but a contribution from several sources. These include the transformative approach to polycentricity noted above, better public transport coverage from the Illawarra, East Hills and Bankstown Lines to areas such as the Randwick health and education precincts (integrating with improvements along the Anzac Parade corridor to the Sydney CBD), more appropriate airport rail fares, and a network effect boost to rail patronage from the Peninsula rail link noted above. There could also be cost savings from adopting lower speed limits on some sections of WestConnex, considering there would be less need for a time advantage to attract car usage.

A realignment of the F6-M5 connection further west, such as by adopting a route near Heathcote Rd, could also be considered. This would mirror-image the orientation of the F3-M2 proposal by aiming more towards the M7 and consequently helping to limit the growth in car use to busy centres.

5 Rail

The impacts of three key characteristics; capacity increments, costs and funding that can be seen as disadvantaging rail, are covered in this section.

5.1 Capacity

Rail capacity comes in large steps, while demand growth is more incremental, implying a significant degree of underutilisation for an extended period. This is more of an issue for new routes, or out-of-corridor (including underground) expansion of existing routes. One approach is to make lower capacity public transport improvements on an interim basis to delay rail expansion, but there are limitations to this approach. For example, a road based solution may be of inadequate quality while the infrastructure for a segregated solution may have a short life before rail is needed.

The limitations arise because of a conundrum; that the patronage to support rail may only be present if rail is built. Providing cross regional rail links to support polycentricity may therefore be necessary at an early stage, rather than waiting for patronage to (or fail to) develop, particularly as there can be through working benefits when building onto an existing system. Early provision would also lead to more users being presented with the attraction of an all-rail alternative to travelling to the Sydney CBD.

The NWRL corridor bus service looks to be an exception to the above due to a combination of bus lanes and heavy general traffic congestion, despite service quality issues, but it may also have contributed to making Parramatta a relatively less attractive place for CBD style employment.

5.2 Costs

Sydney has a legacy of high rail costs and poor cost recovery. High operating costs have been acknowledged by IPART with its fare determination process based on government support for a share of economic costs and all of the excess. Although capital costs are anecdotally high, this seems more to do with an inefficient planning processes rather than actual contracts.

While labour costs are an obvious operating target, and the three-tier principles are a response to that, part of the problem is due to community expectations. CityRail performs a presently essential medium to long haul radial task during peak periods, with network characteristics and even the shaping of Greater Sydney tending to have been optimised for this task. This makes the network much less useful at other times when the travel task is more dispersed, leaving CityRail with a very peaky, and uneconomic, patronage profile.

A move to more of a meshed rail network in support of polycentricity, implying shorter average peak commutes and better off-peak utilisation from broader coverage, should also contribute to a narrowing of the gap between fare revenue and operating costs.

5.3 Funding

Rail can also be at a disadvantage due to the lack of revenue sources outside fares. Despite significant benefits from rail to the wider community being recognised, there are no mechanisms in place for corresponding off-budget payments from appropriate beneficiaries. Further, using government payments to support rail operations on behalf of the wider community can lack accountability, with leakages to rent seeking and/or political interest.

The government's undertaking to only place tolls on road improvements effectively forgoes revenue from an existing beneficiary group, namely motorists, such as has been suggested under a congestion charging scheme that is a substitute for fixed registration costs. This undertaking also forgoes a potentially useful behavioural tool to influence modal choice.

6 Constraints

The Draft Master Plan admirably recognises (on page 26) the need to make choices that do not severely constrain the options of future generations. However the proposals adopted from Sydney's Rail Future seem to do just that.

On the north side, not allowing the NWRL to be operated by tier 2 double deck trains after a (tier 1) second harbour crossing is completed means needing to run additional trains to meet seating expectations and blocking a Parramatta-Chatswood shuttle (Parramatta-Epping would be much less effective and no longer warrant heavy rail) with only a minor improvement in running times due to the 3km average station spacing on the NWRL. The future westward extension may be similarly more suited to tier 2 double deck trains due to seating expectations.

On the south side, choosing to convert the Bankstown and Hurstville lines (the choice seemingly influenced by cost) to tier 1 would limit other conversion possibilities. This is because all four inner area lines merit conversion to support both land use changes and inner area bus-to-rail transfers to help unclutter the Sydney CBD, and the Bankstown and Hurstville lines are more naturally aligned with an Erskineville connection to the ESR. The Strathfield tier 1 service could also be usefully extended further west through Olympic Park, as per the WestMetro proposal.

It should be noted that converting all four inner area lines, and the consequent conversion of the ESR as well, would reduce the number of tier 2 pathways available to accommodate growth in outer suburban patronage to the Sydney CBD. However lower growth for this patronage, and higher growth for inner area lines, would be consistent with the aims of polycentricity and also present housing market preferences.

The cross regional rail services also seem more suited to tier 1, in that express running would not be involved and many users would be changing from a tier 2 radial service. Where sharing of existing network capacity with radial services is involved, the consequent combination of tier 1 and tier 2 services over some track sections should not be an issue as long as there is spare capacity.

7 Summary

Neither the Draft Plan nor the State Infrastructure Strategy acknowledge the high cost (in both economic and triple bottom line terms) of Greater Sydney's current structure, with its long commutes and high car dependence, and that prioritising the current transport infrastructure backlog can serve to reinforce this high cost structure. What's needed instead is a better balance between backlog and transformative investment, despite political pressure that tends to favour the former.

A more ambitious approach to rail presents an opportunity to not only reshape Greater Sydney into a more prosperous, liveable and sustainable polycentric metropolis with less car dependence, but also to contribute towards putting rail into a stronger financial position. As such it makes the NWRL and the tier 1 conversion announcements from Sydney's Rail Future look more imposed upon, rather than derived from, the evidence presented in the Draft Plan.

This writer's particular ideas about future rail opportunities for Greater Sydney are contained in two previously submitted documents; CBD Rail Relief in Presentation Format (October 2010) and Sydney's Constrained Rail Future (August 2012).

There have also been two recent presentations in Sydney that link rail infrastructure and city transformation. The first, by Sir David Higgins, Chief Executive of Network Rail UK on 8 October 2012 covered the London Olympics and the ongoing legacy for Stratford (East London) as an accessible new centre. The second, by Pierre Mansat, Deputy Lord Mayor of Paris on 25 October 2012 covered the future evolution of Greater Paris into a well connected polycentric metropolis. In each case, new rail infrastructure is a key ingredient.