

# ***Blue Mountains Sustainable Transport Alliance***

C/o Mid Mountains Neighbourhood Centre,  
9 New St (PO Box 117), Lawson 2783

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24th February, 2009

The Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Rural & Regional Affairs and Transport  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
[rrat.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:rrat.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Secretary,

**RE: Inquiry into the investment of Commonwealth and State funds in public passenger transport infrastructure and services**

As you may be aware, the Blue Mountains Sustainable Transport Alliance consists of individuals and transport groups (including commuter groups, bicycle groups, local community and transport organizations and climate action groups) who are interested in supporting initiatives that assist the Blue Mountains to have more sustainable, socially just transport. The Alliance is supported by the Mid Mountains Neighbourhood Centre.

Thank you very much for your invitation to provide a written submission to the above inquiry. We welcome the opportunity to have input into this very important issue and look forward to the inquiry ensuring that both State and Commonwealth Governments develop integrated planning processes to improve public transport and other forms of sustainable transport in all parts of Australia.

Please find below our response to individual terms of reference of the inquiry:-

**(a) An audit of the state of public passenger transport in Australia;**

- We would like to alert you to the lack of frequency of trains & bus services in the Blue Mountains. Regional areas such as ours are given lower priority based on size of population. But this forces regional areas to rely more heavily on cars. Currently trains run on an hourly basis generally, but we believe to provide an effective & more utilized train service, frequency should be at least every half hour up and down the mountains most of the day. In addition, there is a lack of Saturday evening trains going down the Mountains (towards Sydney), and there is a general lack of trains west of Katoomba. Population has increased west of Katoomba in the last 10 years as people search for affordable housing. This has not been taken into account when timetables are assembled and train services are inadequate for Blue Mountains residents at Medlow Bath, Blackheath, Mt Victoria and Bell.

- For Blue Mountains commuters to Sydney, there is also the difficulty of reaching suburban work places via the public transport system. If you do not work at places that are on the Blue Mountains train line, it is extremely difficult to traverse across Sydney suburbs to reach your destination. This acts as a significant disincentive for people to use the public transport system.
- We also believe that better coordination of information between bus and train services on timetables in the Blue Mountains would enable commuters to make connections successfully.

**(b) Current and historical levels of public investment in private vehicle and public passenger transport services and infrastructure;**

- We believe there is a clear imbalance in relation to this issue. Both tiers of government need to urgently re-examine this issue, especially given our need to immediately redress our green-house gas emissions.
- Any process of redressing the balance also needs to include infrastructure for pedestrians and bicycle users. For example, in the Blue Mountains, whilst the Federal Government is spending \$100 million dollars to widen the Great Western Highway through the Mountains, it is devoting a mere \$100,000 to cycling – or 0.1% of what is being spent on roads.
- It should also include re-examining DA requirements such as its current over-emphasis on car parking spaces in town centres, and re-examining the State Rail Authority's under-emphasis on car parking spaces at railway stations (a classic example of this is at Katoomba).
- Future levels of public investment in private vehicle services should explore more innovative and sustainable options such as establishing formalised carpooling and carsharing opportunities.

**(c) An assessment of the benefits of public passenger transport, including integration with bicycle and pedestrian initiatives;**

Some of the benefits of public transport and other sustainable transport options include:-

- Significant benefits in reducing green house gases at a crucial time in our history,
- In the medium term, there could be significant cost savings in terms of road maintenance,
- Less congestion, both in large cities and in regional areas (eg. at major intersections in the Blue Mountains).
- Quicker transit through the Blue Mountains and other areas, if more bike paths and pedestrian paths and bridges are provided.
- Less accidents (and fatalities) on major thoroughfares. In the Blue Mountains this is an issue of particular concern, where major accidents have frequently caused highway blockages for many hours. In a significant number of accidents, fatalities have also occurred.
- Significant benefits to building a healthy nation, particularly in terms of children, who are our future. As a nation, we need to change our entrenched patterns of how we commute from driving the car to walking, cycling and/or getting public transport.
- Significant benefits specifically in reducing obesity in our children and population generally.

- Significant benefits to community building for families, walking, cycling together – a shared family experience. The concept of ‘school walking trains’ (neighbourhood children walking to and from school together supervised by adults) is a great way to build the communities we live in.
- Significant benefits in reducing road rage and improving the mental health of our nation.

We also believe that a significant opportunity exists to build eco-friendly tourism in areas such as the Blue Mountains National Park World Heritage Area, the benefits of which would be far reaching, particularly in the current downturn in the economy with losses of employment in regional areas. Eco-tourism could be significantly promoted with an emphasis on public transport, trains and buses with bicycle-friendly amenities (such as bike racks & bike paths), appealing to the steadily increasing number of environmentally aware travelers. The development of a Blue Mountains Rail Trail, the promotion of Mountain Bike trails, government or private sponsorship of Bike share/Rent systems in general public areas and at tourist accommodation facilities in Mountain towns all would significantly increase interest in the Blue Mountains as an exciting tourist destination.

**(d) Measures by which the Commonwealth Government could facilitate improvement in public passenger transport services and infrastructure;**

- Increase usage of buses and trains by increasing frequency of services in areas such as Blue Mountains. It is important also to explore ways to assist local private bus companies to expand their services. Significant improvements could be made to our current system, for example, by providing small local buses that run out from larger centres at frequent intervals.
- Significantly increase incentives to enable substantially more freight onto rail.
- Increased passenger and freight usage would then improve revenue streams to support public transport operators in addition to meeting sustainability objectives.
- Using the current economic situation to invest in our future transport infrastructure needs. We are delighted to see that the current Economic Stimulus Package now includes 200 million for Bike Paths across Australia and we believe this a great start to investing in sustainable transport in Australia.

**(e) Options for Commonwealth funding for public passenger transport services and infrastructure;**

- The provision of funds to improve rail passenger transport in the Mountains (as above).
- Develop renewable alternatives to fossil fuel powered trains and public buses.
- Provide significantly increased funding to local councils for shared pathways (pedestrian and bicycle pathways) across all areas. Specifically in the Blue Mountains to provide significant funding to support the Blue Mountains implementation (and expansion) of its Bike Plan 2020 – adopted by Council in January 2009.

- Exploring ways of subsidising public transport fares to ensure that there are clear incentives for people to use the public transport system rather than cars. Recent fare increases act as a clear disincentive to getting people out of their cars and onto public transport.
- Provide recurrent funding for innovative Community Transport programs such as the SmartLink Transport project currently being developed. One such organisation in the Blue Mountains is Great Community Transport, which has been leading the way in developing services which focus on better utilizing current community buses and organising flexible transport for isolated families, frail aged, people with disabilities and carers.
- Provision of regional trains that cater better to the needs of people using wheelchairs, prams and bicycles. Eg. Lifts to platforms, designated space for wheelchairs, prams and bicycles on regional trains and better facilities such as bike racks at train stations and other public transport outlets.
- Providing funding for innovative pilot projects eg. Bicycle borrowing system at local train and bus stations.

**(f) The role of Commonwealth Government legislation, taxation, subsidies, policies and other mechanisms that either discourage or encourage public passenger transport;**

- The Blue Mountains Sustainable Transport Alliance has been corresponding for the past two years with the current and previous Commonwealth Government to ensure that it implements the concept of providing tax deductibility of periodically paid public transport fares for those commuting to and from their places of work. We urge you to put this issue high on your agenda for future action as it would address the following:-
  - The provision of meaningful incentives to utilize public transport rather than private vehicles,
  - Lessened instances of traffic grid lock,
  - Less air pollution / green-house gas emissions,
  - Improved revenue streams to public transport operators, thus allowing for improved quality/quantity of public transport fleets,
  - Financial assistance to those caught in the ‘mortgage belt squeeze’,
  - Reduction in the equity gap between those who receive salary packages including car and car allowances, and those who do not get this benefit.
- In particular, the usual response from Australian Tax Office (ATO) representatives (viz. the Treasurer’s response to Hon. Bob Debus of 24 June 2008) that such expenses “must be incurred as part of the operations by which the taxpayer earns income” and that deductibility “would create pressure for deductibility for a range of other private expenses” should be countered & addressed by way of the preamble/justification for any relevant legislation specifically basing the rationale for such legislation on the points made above. We also believe that the eligibility criteria should restrict claims to minimum weekly or even monthly periodical fare tickets, in order to rationalise & facilitate taxpayer record keeping and ATO auditing functions. Finally, arguments (previously mounted by the former Treasurer) which held that any resulting taxpayer benefits would be so delayed (that is, until ATO tax assessments have been issued after the end of the financial year) as to not be perceived as real benefits should be

discounted as entirely spurious: in the real world, there are so few allowable taxable income deductions allowed for the average regular wages employee, that this entirely justifiable “window of opportunity” would be seen as being exactly that, and utilised accordingly.

- We also believe that the Fringe Benefits Tax, as it applies to company/fleet vehicles, should be amended such that it doesn't provide such an unfair fiscal advantage to those who choose to use such vehicles over and above “public transport” options. To this end, we note the content of a recent NSW government paper: “NSW Ministry of Transport – Tax Incentives for Public Transport Users”, produced by Ernst & Young (August 2006).
- We note that an early attempt to raise the issue of tax deductibility of working commuters' public transport expenses was initiated by the then NSW Deputy Premier and Minister for Transport, John Watkins, in a News Release dated 18 July 2007, captioned “Minister calls for tax breaks for commuters”, as a direct result of the Australian Rail Summit held in Sydney at that time. The affirmative position of the “State Labor Governments' position” in this regard was acknowledged by the state Member for Blue Mountains, Phil Koperberg, in a letter to a constituent dated 20 August 2007.

**(g) Best practice international examples of public passenger transport services and infrastructure.**

- Regarding international public transport incentive programs, please see pp 22 – 26 in NSW government paper: “NSW Ministry of Transport – Tax Incentives for Public Transport Users”, produced by Ernst & Young (August 2006).
- We understand that in Zurich, intercity trains contain carriages set aside for bicycles. This could be well utilized in larger centres such as Sydney. It also is relevant in the weekends for an increasing cycling tourist industry in the Blue Mountains, as discussed above.
- We recommend that this particular term of reference should be expanded to include other innovative sustainable transport options. For example, a number of North American cities have bike racks on buses and closer to home, bike racks are found on some Canberra buses. This could well be expanded across Australia. In Berkley California, Bikestations provide a valuable service. Cyclists can drop their bikes here and have them serviced during the day, as well as just leave them safely parked. There are many examples of innovative schemes which Australia could certainly benefit from exploring.

Yours sincerely,

Louise Sutcliffe

On behalf of the Blue Mountains Sustainable Transport Alliance

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## **Blue Mountains Sustainable Transport Alliance** **Statement Endorsement**

We are community, environment and transport groups and individuals working together to promote more flexible, equitable, sustainable and socially just transport in the Blue Mountains.

Living in the Blue Mountains, we all know transport is such a crucial issue. With 27 villages strung out along the mountains we often have long distances to travel to get to the places we need or want to go. Now with Global Warming and Peak Oil impacting on us we have to reduce our reliance on cars. We need more sustainable options: Walking paths, cycleways, better public transport and community transport.

### **We want a real choice of how to get around.**

#### **The Key Issues in the mountains we are lobbying for are:**

1. An off-road Shared or Slow Transport Path from Mt Victoria to Emu Plains
2. Safe walking and cycling paths in all villages
3. Safe and continuous cycling lane for the whole of the Great Western Highway
4. Trains at least every half hour up and down the mountains most of the day
5. At least one wheelchair accessible railway station in all parts of the mountains
6. More space on trains and buses for wheelchairs, prams and bikes
7. Regular bus services throughout the mountains most of the day
8. Expanded funding for Community Transport
9. Continuing funding for Smartlink, which organizes flexible transport for isolated families, frail aged, people with disabilities and carers
10. Car Share, Carpooling and Bike Share options.

The above statement has been endorsed by the following groups and individuals in the Blue Mountains:-

Blue Mountains Conservation Society	Christine Laurence, Ecophoto	Anne-Maree Morris
Katoomba High School	Kate Lisyak	Diane Mould
Mid Mountains Neighbourhood Centre	Colin Aqmiger	Jasmine Payget
Connect Child and Family Services	Carol Hubbers	Laurie Strathdee
Lower Mountains Family Support Service	John Baker	Louise Sutcliffe
Blackheath Climate Action Now	Anthony Brown	Mick Wahlin
Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre	Liz Bryden	Paul Payten
Katoomba Neighbourhood Centre	Steven Ridd	Clive
Katoomba North Public School	Patrick Tatam	Gail Herbert
Seraphim Blueprint	David Loong	Erst Carmichael
ACMMR	Raymond Kennedy	Colin Steele
Slow Food Blue Mountains	Ross Young	Frank van Zanten
Cittaslow, Katoomba, Blue Mountains	Nigel Bell	Tom Papas
Blue Mountains Designers Group (BMDG)	Ian Lett	Helen Coltman
Springwood Highway Crossers	Susan Ambler	Footbeat Festival
Blue Mtns Commuters Association	Steven Ridd	Ed McKenzie
Dawn Williamson, Clinical Lead, Child & Family Health Services (WAHS)	Michael Burlace	John James

Updated: 23<sup>th</sup> February, 2009