

The Case For Passenger Rail to Browns Plains

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A crisis is looming large for South East Queensland. It is the collective dust cloud of a thousand developers dozers, forming an emerging Mega-Metropolis, and with it a plethora of new roads, stretching from Brisbane to Noosa, Toowoomba and the Gold Coast.

Regularly now we read the quotes of a thousand new immigrants a week; the continuing percentage decline in use of public transport; and the unrestrained growth in motor vehicles. We also hear of the projected 38 per cent rise in transport sector greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 to 2010. These are only some of the projections, which should set the scene in concrete before our eyes.

Our parks and green spaces are targets for new roads and power lines. We're losing our climate-controlling bush land ecosystems, and with them our glorious wildlife and biodiversity. All are presently undergoing death by a thousand cuts.

The perennial problem of traffic congestion, coupled with the recent thought provoking "Our Future" series of newspaper articles, has lifted public support for a single passenger transport (PT) authority, to a record high. A regional land use planning authority, which would integrate sustainability for the myriad separate Council planning schemes, is also vital. Together they would reduce the appetite for new road space, and provide more equal access to services.

Why then, with all of this knowledge, and countless reports, plans and submissions, do we find continuing lethargy amongst our decision makers for new measures which would significantly increase the share of trips by PT. One such glaring example, is the Browns Plains passenger rail proposal.

25 years ago a campaign identified the need to take advantage of the existing Brisbane to Sydney rail corridor, for passenger services. (Refer Courier Mail editorial 12/2/79). The line runs through Brisbane suburbs of Salisbury, Acacia Ridge, Algester, Parkinson, and near the Browns Plains centre, in Logan. It carries one or two freight services, and one "XPT" passenger service, daily to Sydney. Since 1979 more than six government reports have specifically examined PT issues in the Salisbury to Greenbank corridor. Additionally, there have been similar reports prepared for developers. The State Government has also produced the South East Queensland Passenger Transport Study (SEPTS) 1991, and has adopted the Integrated Regional Transport Plan (IRTP) 2001. Brisbane's Transport Plan 2002-2016 also shows the proposed passenger rail line.

In the IRTP, a spur line to Browns Plains is "to be investigated". However even with the obvious advantage of an existing corridor, Qld Rail appears more and more as the sleeping giant. With funding announced recently for the Gold Coast line (\$247m), the suburban network will have to make do with a possibility of only \$153m, barely catch-up funding for a few extra carriages.

The current level of State Government funding is one of the lowest for many years. It seems that expansion and improvement of our suburban network, which is currently under worked and poorly integrated, has indeed stalled.

In contrast, the WA Government is busy with major rail expansion in Perth, including the new service to Mandurah, and extension of the northern suburbs line.

Memories of the 1980s, including my detailed rail submission to then Minister Don Lane, and his television appearance beaming into the camera while striding along a rail track, seem distant indeed for Brisbane.

Despite repeated calls to seriously investigate the rail option, one can sense a prevailing theme of relying on the bus (and road) option. This can be seen in the reports above and, in the wider historical context removal of the Coolangatta rail line and dominance of truck and bus business interests. As motor vehicles, buses may sit more comfortably within the State Government's historical road planning and design policy regime. They may be seen as less of a threat to the long established, well-developed and powerful road industry, than channeling money into passenger rail solutions.

Seen as the cheaper option, buses are apparently being relied upon to satisfy all of the additional demand for PT services in greater Brisbane, including long haul routes. However, unless a dedicated busway is built for the Beaudesert Road corridor, similar to the South East Bus Way, this will be a recipe for continuing decline in the share of PT, a disaster for our children's future.

The Beaudesert Road and Mt Lindsay Highway corridor is the only radial route out of Brisbane, which relies on one mode. All other major routes have a corresponding passenger rail line.

My concern is that we as residents in suburbs adjoining this corridor will be left with buses competing for space on this single road. In the current context, where "commuter" services are provided for the long haul trip from Browns Plains, rather than integrated transit services, the great majority of commuting workers may be considered a captive market. That is, given a choice, most would use a car if available, or a train for long distance every-day travel.

Having used West Logan bus services periodically for around 20 years, I can provide some bus experiences:

- The combined bus rail ticket available during the 1980s, was withdrawn years ago;
- Many are cold and drafty in winter, hot in summer, are rattly and noisy;
- Great clouds of black smoke are emitted whenever the driver hits the accelerator;
- Lighting is poor, external road lighting is better than the three dim lights inside;
- Discrepancies between timetable data from Transinfo, printed copies and bus stop signs have been documented;
- Waiting for missed buses, due to poor inter modal changes as above, then waiting on a cold dark wind-swept interchange for a missed local connection;
- Tyre blow-outs on two occasions at 80km/hr and a smashed window in the space of a couple of months;

- No external bus number displayed at the back of the bus. (So you can see which bus you have missed);
- No “Next Stop” confirmation displayed near the driver;
- Regular jolts and bumps from the numerous roadside grates, and the braking and turns of the bus sometimes resemble the swaying, bucking and lurching deck of a boat;
- Arriving at work feeling as if you’ve worked half a day already. Realizing that it is questionable whether you can keep this up on a long term daily basis;
- Due to timetable complexity, passengers must develop an almost personal relationship with their driver, route, stops, and times;
- Confusion abounds in the often over crowded Myer Centre Bus Station. Including long snaking queues, lack of space, complicated route configurations and platform departures;
- Having negotiated the above, then finding that you are one of at least 18 people standing shoulder to shoulder in the aisle of a bus about to undertake a 40 to 45 minute journey on congested roads, in summer, sometimes with no air conditioning;
- I once nearly ended up in the aisle as the bus negotiated a right turn;
- Available space on a bus is noticeably less than on a train;
- Student tickets are not allowed for local non-school services, and during peak hour times for services to the city; and
- Browns Plains interchange facilities are poor, with most “park and ride” commuters forced to an open-air road side stop.

The drivers should be commended however, as they struggle with their Herculean task of traveling a long distance in a short time, often cheerfully and diligently encouraging people to move to the back of the bus.

The much-vaunted South East Bus Way has not significantly improved the level of service to and from Browns Plains. These services rely mostly on the urban road system and will continue to suffer from the effects of rising congestion. Proposed T2 or T3 lanes can only go so far to alleviate the problems with the current poor level of service provided by buses.

Disability access is sparse. If you use a wheel chair to get to work, options are limited. Cross-town bus services, including those to Garden City are worse, as family experience of the needs of teenagers moving into work and further study, has demonstrated.

It is possible that these bus companies are doing the best they can under difficult circumstances. The current poor situation appears to be a natural business outcome of Queensland Transport’s inadequate operational regime and regulations.

Since 1976, PT’s share of all trips in Brisbane has dropped from 11 per cent to less than 7 per cent. What is the percentage now for greater Brisbane? Is the decline continuing?

In March 2000, the Transport Minister Steve Bredhauer advised that a detailed planning study would be needed for the Browns Plains proposal, and that subject to budget processes, “.... a study could begin in the next two years”. It seems like everyone is waiting for someone else to get things moving.

For Logan and southern Brisbane residents, the real issue is accessibility, that elusive quest for equal access to services. There appears to be an accelerating divide between those lucky enough to live in suburbs nearer the city, and those of us (many of whom have no choice)

living in the middle to outer fringe. With the lack of real choice in trip options, coupled with the claim that in Logan 40 per cent of our population cannot drive, it is simply dumb to spend only crumbs comparatively, on alternatives such as PT, cycling and walking.

The alleged issue of lack of “density” is often conveniently used as an excuse for doing nothing to tackle the issue. Extensive research has shown that Canada’s Toronto, has a similar overall density to most Australian cities. Yet Toronto is a model of successful PT with a significantly higher proportion of trips. It converted to the “single operator” public authority model, and comprehensively plans and provides new PT services. Melbourne, its almost identical twin, chose the “many different operators” model, and like Brisbane, has failed.

Rail, or separate busways, particularly to middle and outer suburbs, are recognized as being the only modes, which will entice a significant number of people out of their cars.

A Browns Plains rail station supported with integrated commercial development would be a plus for local business. It would be a major lynch pin, providing flow-on effects for local PT, cycling and walking, and a sustainable future for the West Logan centre.

An Acacia Ridge station would re-invigorate the existing shopping centre. Grade separation of the level crossing on Beaudesert Road would alleviate current peak hour delays. Two stations at Algester and one at Parkinson are warranted.

Better access to major trip generators including TAFE Colleges, hospitals, the goodwill bridge & QUT to name a few, would be a saviour for countless families.

A new political will is needed to jolt decision makers out of their prevailing mind-set, which seems to favour the “business-as-usual” approach to development.