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To: Infrastructure Victoria – Bus Reform team,

Introduction

The Metropolitan Transport Forum (MTF) is a transport interest group for Melbourne metropolitan local governments. The MTF has been established for over 25 years and has a membership of 26 (of the 31) metropolitan councils, and meets regularly to discuss transport topics of interest and relevance to local governments and their communities. The MTF also acts to liaise between local and state governments, and advocates on behalf of member councils on key transport issues of metropolitan significance. The MTF works closely with the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV).

The MTF informs, researches and debates transport issues with metropolitan local governments throughout the year. Our strategic plan identifies three main areas of attention within the Victorian transport planning agenda:

- Active – to achieve more funding for cycling infrastructure and projects that improve rider safety;
- Buses – to increase patronage on buses; and
- Choice – to provide alternatives to private cars for the wider Melbourne community to move around Melbourne for recreation, employment and education.

In recent years we have held well attended seminars on the challenges and opportunities facing the bus sector in metropolitan Melbourne with senior speakers from the Department of Transport, academia and industry.

MTF welcomes opportunity to provide a submission.

General comments

The MTF is of the view that Melbourne, which will soon become Australia's largest city, should have a world class public transport system. This system should service the greatest number of community members as possible, and the emphasis should be on delivering a service that is equitable, as well as accessible, and that such a system would deliver social as well as economic benefits to the entire state.

As Melbourne grows, so should the public transport system, and as much of the growth is in outer areas, the network must continue to expand, not only in surface coverage, but it must also be fit for purpose in temporal coverage. In modern Australia, this means 7 days a week, and from 6 am to 11pm. Failure to reflect the changes in Australian lifestyles, when designing or modifying the services provided, dooms Melburnians to be car dependent, and fails to consider the social objection of inclusion of more community members in work and education opportunities, which should not be dependent on car ownership.

The MTF welcomes the "Get on Board" discussion paper which provides a comprehensive review of academic and government work undertaken on the metropolitan bus sector over the last 15 years. This detailed literature review is a valuable reference tool for people interested in the bus service/system in metropolitan Melbourne.

The following submission aims to respond to the questions posed in the paper, but also draw some broader conclusions about how this discussion could proceed.

Many bus passengers would in fact have no choice, having no car/licence, or access to a car/driver. Buses provide the only affordable transport mode for many Melburnians.

The paper touches on the impact of Covid on transport choice; the pandemic is an important lens to consider public transport. It is considered that the lack of recovery of public transport patronage numbers reflects the changes in work practice with many people now able to work from home. The focus of the existing transport system on the CBD is demonstrated as many of these office based roles have now shifted to tolerate a hybrid work attendance framework, allowing many workers to work from home. It does not necessarily reflect the attractiveness of the public transport system. Changes in patronage numbers on the bus network however are more likely reflect the attractiveness of that mode as it is less CBD oriented than the other modes.

The discussion for non peak trips does not seem to reflect the different reasons for travel during weekend periods ie more trips are made for recreation and social purposes than employment. The service span discussion considers early and late extensions of timetables, but does not consider non peak frequency.

MTF encourages Infrastructure Victoria to think beyond the private car/bus dichotomy when developing your recommendations.

Infrastructure Planning in Victoria

Infrastructure Victoria (IV) is described as “an independent statutory authority providing advice to government on Victoria's current and future infrastructure needs”. Previous documents developed by IV include the Victorian infrastructure Plan 2021, in which the honourable Tim Pallas, Treasurer, stated that the plan “sets out the investments to build an inclusive, resilient and competitive Victorian economy.”

The “Get on Board” document describes its objective as to “progress the conversation, inform future policy directions and build on previous research on bus reform”. It is in the spirit of this objective that the following comments are made, particularly the policy aspect of the paper, and future work which will follow this “conversation”.

While policy is usually about the “*what*” and “*why*”, IV is also strongly encouraged to consider the “*when*” of its recommendations. As “Get on Board” identifies, Melbourne has not been without policy recommendations in the bus space for decades, but these recommendations have more often than not, not been implemented, or have only partially been implemented. Where road, train, and even arguably tram services, have been improved, the bus network has been largely left to languish in a format that was created in the last century.

There is limited value in advising the government to build infrastructure unless it also recommends a commitment to providing the wherewithal to operate and maintain that Infrastructure into the coming decades. The policy framework, including the financial philosophies which have and will become part of delivering the outcomes should also be reviewed and amended to deliver “the economic, social and environmental outcomes critical to Victoria’s continued prosperity” stated as the intent of the Victorian infrastructure Plan 2021.

While infrastructure would suggest a focus on capital elements of a budget program, it must be acknowledged that any capital investment must be supported by operational and maintenance aspects, and that this is where the challenges in this review really lie.

Further, many capital works projects appear to be conceived of as solving a single mode problem/bottleneck – and if you are lucky, some other minor elements reflecting other modes are added on as a nod to the TIA. From a policy perspective it appears that much more could be done to address transport challenges facing Melbourne, and that a truly integrated approach to planning transport in Melbourne remains to be designed, let alone delivered.

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remains to be designed, let alone delivered.*

It is considered that any review of the bus service must strongly focus on the operation and maintenance aspects of the system.

By not considering the underlying economic and ideological practices which have been hard baked

It is considered that any review of the bus service must strongly focus on the operation and maintenance aspects of the system, ahead of capital investment.

into the existing service framework, any review will not be comprehensive, and is unlikely to address the root causes of the challenges which have been identified.

The challenges

Challenge 1: Buses are rarely a competitive travel option:

The comment could be made by many potential users: “You can’t complain about the service – there is none”. MTF agrees that wait times are too long for many passengers, especially during non peak travel periods.

“You can’t complain about the service – there is none”

The MTF agrees that reliability and congestion are important in trip mode choice. However it is noted that trip time reliability issues affect all travel modes, and this rationale is used to justify many road projects.

The MTF agrees that the coverage metric as a sole guide to service quality is inadequate. As described later in this submission it is considered that additional metrics should be used.

Challenge 2: Victorian communities can get better value from the bus network

This challenge could be reworded to “the metrics used to plan public transport network should be replaced to reflect a broader range of criteria”.

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The MTF considers that service targets should be the starting point of any review. This would allow improved tracking of delivery of outcomes against expenditure.

A mix of targets should be considered such as:

- number of passengers carried;
- efficiency;
- directness;
- service frequency;

- service period;
- comparison between service frequency between peak and shoulder and peak and off peak and weekday and weekend;
- comparisons of service speed to private vehicle speeds

The MTF agrees that prioritisation should be given to service improvements (including creation of new services) to communities of highest need.

However, the comment that low patronage routes appear to be in areas with high car ownership appears to miss the point that residents of these areas are forced to have high car ownership due to the poor level of service available to them. Analysis of these routes should be more nuanced to reflect the service frequency as well as the passenger boardings. Any review of network efficiency should not mix cause with effect.

The MTF also agrees that many of the fundamental priorities identified in the bus service reviews remain.

Challenge 3: The existing bus network is contributing to a major equity problem, especially for outer and growth areas of Melbourne

This challenge could be reworded to “the public transport network does not deliver equitable transport across Melbourne”. This is especially true in growth areas.

“The public transport network does not deliver equitable transport across Melbourne”.

The proposed minimum span of hours is supported – however it should be 7 days per week. Trip time considerations should endeavour to consider door to door travel, not just time on the bus route. This would better reflect the socio economic needs of people employed in the service sector, who cannot work from home, and are often amongst those most in need of transport choice.

For people in professional roles, another outcome of the covid work from home experiences is the increased opportunity to spend time with family; long and unreliable trip times discourage the use of bus services when private cars will yield greater recreational time for family or other social connections.

Challenge 4: Customers find using the bus difficult and complex

There is no positive culture around buses in Melbourne.

This challenge perhaps misses the point in terms of community perception. The issues are much more about quality of service, not ease of use. However, DDA compatibility is appalling at the majority of bus stops (before you even try to cross the road to get to the stop).

Poor access to bus stops deters use of bus services for many potential passengers, not just those who have a disability, or travelling with young children, or are no longer confident dodging moving traffic due to age or other circumstance.

The MTF agrees that real time passenger information systems will improve the culture of buses. We also agree that interchanges between modes must be designed to improve the experience for users. Put bus routes maps in prominent location on buses, at least near door. Major destinations and interchange locations should be clearly shown.

Proposed MTF policy framework

An excellent bus service would:

- be frequent; direct; well connected; and operate to support employment, education and recreation needs;*
 - reduce the need for a large proportion of the population to resort to private transport;*
 - be readily adaptable to changes in demographics;*
 - be comfortable;*
 - pre-empt developments, and be in place before “critical mass” metrics were satisfied*
 - be accessible;*
 - be measured in the budget savings it delivered against infrastructure projects for private cars that were deferred or never built; and*
 - have low environmental impacts – noise and emissions*
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Part 3 – Opportunities

Possible range of reform opportunities

The paper proposes a long list of potential reform opportunities. The MTF supports these concepts, and would be pleased to assist in the consultation process which it is imagined would form the basis of a final prioritisation of these opportunities.

It is strongly recommended that local communities might be invited to select an opportunity to pilot.

It would be extremely disappointing if the outcome of this process was another list of worthwhile and valuable proposals which are never implemented.

Questions posed in Discussion paper

The discussion paper has posed several broad questions, seeking feedback on the paper and the opportunities to improve buses in Melbourne. This genuine interest in feedback is greatly welcomed.

Our feedback is likewise broad, rather than specific; it is considered that localised implementation will draw out specific considerations not already explored in the discussion paper.

Are the other large reform opportunities that we can identify to improve buses in Melbourne?

The MTF considers that the major reform opportunity facing the bus network is to *actually commence* a reform process. The MTF is of the view that a number of smaller trial/pilot projects should be considered rather than a single “block buster” project. A program of smaller projects would demonstrate opportunities of high quality collaboration and engagement with local communities, and could be followed by articulated roll out of successful improvements.

Do we think there are any constraints in implementing of any of the reform opportunities that we have identified?

Local government well understands the challenge of implementing change programs, and is well versed in the steps involved in delivering new services. The major constraint is considered to be a “no errors tolerated” mind set. It is considered that a program that accounts for feedback, and is prepared to respond to the feedback is vital to successful change management.

Some reversals or setbacks should be expected as part of a genuine reform process.

Has IV identified the major problems or challenges with the metropolitan bus network?

Has IV missed anything?

The structural elements of the contracts which underpin the public transport network could be more strongly interrogated, especially if the objective is to create a well-integrated public transport network for the greatest number of passengers.

An example to consider is the NSW contract model where secure funding is provided for a ten year period.

What are the barriers to addressing the challenges that IV has identified?

As described above, the MTF considers the greatest challenge to be to be prepared to commence reforms, and to respond to feedback as new ideas are trialled. The MTF is of the view that the community will forgive missteps in the pursuit of a better system.

What can be done to address these challenges?

Local government is committed to reflecting community views, and deeply understands consultation and change implementation projects. It is strongly encouraged that implementation be undertaken in partnership with local government.

What reforms are likely to have the greatest influence in delivering economic, environmental or social benefits for Melburnians?

The MTF considers that equity, accessibility, and engagement are the keys to the creation of a world class public transport system, which includes the bus network. Creation of a system based on these principles will result in a well-used, efficient, and effective transport network.

Evidence

Can we provide any evidence that would help IV better understand the network challenges?

Can we provide any evidence to help quantify the benefits and inform IV's assessment of future bus reform options?

The MTF welcomes an evidence-based approach to problem solving, but notes that such an approach might struggle to identify local examples when there has been no reform for many years. Rather, the MTF proposes that innovation be considered, and that the data and feedback is used to measure the success of pilots/trials.

Conclusion

Reform to the Melbourne bus network is long overdue. This discussion paper is considered to be a valuable resource, drawing together over 15 years worth of work. However, it does not provide a sense of urgency to drive a much-needed commitment to new practice, pilots and trials.

The MTF strongly recommends the challenges addressed by Infrastructure Victoria be reframed in this piece of work to review the bus service in its entirety, and not to simply tweak the existing service design.

It would be extremely disappointing if the outcome of this process was another list of worthwhile and valuable proposals which are never implemented. The MTF strongly recommends that a new approach be taken to implement any proposed reforms: one that includes genuine engagement and active feedback of small pilot projects, which are allowed the possibility of setbacks.

Lastly, the MTF strongly urges that the design and implementation of reforms to the bus network be undertaken in open partnership with local government.

MTF representatives would be most pleased to discuss further, please contact myself, Chair Cr Jonathon Marsden at jmarsden@hobsonsabay.vic.gov.au or the MTF Executive Officer, Jane Waldock, mtf@mtf.org.au or 0428 369 048

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jonathon Marsden', written in a cursive style.

Cr Jonathon Marsden, Chair, Metropolitan Transport Forum
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