



PEOPLES WESTCONNEX INQUIRY

NSW PARLIAMENT, JUBILEE ROOM - Friday 6 May, 10am – 2pm

Session 2: Transport - WestConnex modelling, transport issues and alternatives

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Thank you Jenny. The main justification for WestConnex is that it will solve congestion but we know from experience that it will not. Congestion has been an enduring frustration in cities for centuries. Ancient Rome had congestion, as did medieval London. No one enjoys it but you may be surprised to learn that congestion is the main thing preventing complete gridlock in our cities. I'll explain this apparent paradox.

If you live in a city, you've probably adjusted your travel choices to avoid congestion, often subconsciously. You may have taken a rat run, chosen destination closer to home, departed earlier or later to avoid peak hour or taken public transport. Maybe you decided to live closer to work or near a station. But because most of us take congestion into account to some extent in our everyday travel decisions and when deciding where to live and where to work, we drive less than if we didn't. Peak traffic volumes are therefore much lower than they otherwise would be. As traffic volume grows, the resulting congestion suppresses our collective appetite for driving and complete gridlock is averted. In other words, congestion itself is self-limiting.

Of course, a modern city needs a good road network but Sydney already has an extensive and very high capacity road network by global standards. About thirty percent of our urbanized land area and almost all our public space is asphalt but we can never provide enough capacity to enable everyone to drive wherever and whenever they like in free-flowing traffic as the car adverts and the road lobby promise us. That's a fact of geometry. If a road is widened, the temporary flow improvement simply encourages more people to use it until it becomes congested again. Likewise, when governments invest in public transport and cycling, some drivers switch to these modes but the road space they free up and encourages others to drive more.

Cities with excellent public transport still have congestion. However, such investments do give more of us the freedom to choose not to drive. Congestion doesn't bother you if you're zipping along on a train or filtering past traffic on a cycleway. Because the underlying demand for driving will always far exceed the supply of road space, it needs to be rationed somehow.



Currently, Australian state governments implicitly use congestion to ration the road space. And overseas cities such as Vancouver have an explicit policy of allowing congestion to occur. They argue that rationing road space through congestion is equitable. It affects all drivers the same regardless of wealth but it's increasingly difficult for people on low incomes to find affordable housing close to work or public transport so they may have little

choice but to drive long distances on congested roads. Also, congestion affects those who really need to drive, like tradespeople with heavy tools just as much as those who don't.

Now, there are alternative ways of rationing road space. Most transports would agree that the most efficient method is road pricing where we might pay for urban driving by the kilometre with a discount for off-peak travel. We've been paying for train travel in this way for decades. There are valid equity concerns of course. It's more affordable for wealthier people but this is also true for train fares, petrol and toll roads. The revenue from road pricing can be used to compensate motorists by scrapping fixed registration fees and unfair tolls. One of my colleagues at the University of Sydney worked out that most drivers would actually be better off under such system. An investing surplus revenue in public transport and affordable housing close to jobs and services would give many poorer households the freedom to avoid the large expense of car ownership altogether.

Now road pricing works because it discourages discretionary driving. A plumber whose time is worth fifty dollars an hour should be willing to pay twenty five dollars to drive on uncongested roads if they gain an extra hour of worktime but the person who drives five kilometres to buy a loaf of bread, might just consider to walk to the local shops instead.

Now it takes a visionary government to reform road pricing because that means asking us to pay for something we currently perceive to be free. That said, when London and Stockholm introduced cordon road pricing, it gained majority public support soon afterwards as drivers noticed the benefits immediately. Here in Sydney, the Baird government is about to impose tolls on two roads that's currently free: the M5 East and the M4 with no cash back, by the way. But the purpose of these tolls is not to discourage unnecessary car travel. It is to help to pay for what is essentially a massive expansion of the road freight network: WestConnex. The Government's own modelling shows that traffic on surrounding un-tolled roads will increase significantly as people try to avoid the tolls up to the point where congestion limits sets.

So just to conclude, without any other system of rationing, congestion is the main thing preventing gridlock in Sydney. We can't build our way out of congestion not with public transport and certainly not with more roads. The government could give more people the freedom to choose not to sit in traffic everyday but providing alternative transport options and through smarter land use planning. Of course, that would mean less toll revenue to pay



for their motorways. If they really wanted to eliminate congestion, they would adopt a more efficient system of rationing road space. WestConnex is not the answer. Thank you.