

Urban Mobility

4. ARA Submission to Senate Inquiry - Executive Summary

4.1 Executive Summary

Rail as a public transport provider

Specifically rail transport offers tremendous benefits to society as a highly capable, people-moving transport mode. This derives from a number of aspects including:

- rail is an integral and very significant part of the whole urban passenger transport solution;
- dedicated rail track in a protected corridor takes less urban land-space and is safer – allowing more compact and safer cities;
- rail's speed and reliability owing to dedicated rail corridor;
- rail is the lowest emission mode of motorised transport – minimal urban air and noise pollution and greenhouse gas emissions;
- rail readily accommodates human-powered wheeled vehicles e.g. push chairs, wheelchairs, bicycles;
- rail is highly efficient for transporting at peak demands – journey to work and special events;
- rail's efficient use of oil and land;
- rail's accessibility and social inclusion;
- rail is highly suited to underpin new transit-oriented developments; and
- public transport, particularly rail passenger transport, enabling people to be active travellers – walking or cycling to railway station/interchange; road traffic congestion is reduced.

Australia has failed to capitalise on rail's potential

Rail has been hamstrung by decades of poor planning and massive underfunding and governments are at last waking up to the massive need to fix public transport.

The community requires fully integrated passenger services that optimise mobility for all modes incorporating rail, bus, pedestrian, cycle and urban ferry options, in a seamless mix of transport modes. Rail is an integral and very significant part of the whole urban passenger transport solution.

Public urban and regional / interstate passenger operations have been funded primarily by State Governments since rail was introduced into Australia in the mid 1850s.

However, the unfortunate legacy of this is typified by what we see today in most cities namely outdated stations, platforms, tracks, signalling systems and trains which mean the networks are incapable of handling the significant increases in passenger numbers in recent years especially in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

How did this come about?

This situation has derived principally from public transport infrastructure being managed by the States which have focused infrastructure funding on road systems for both passenger and freight movement. A major source of this funding has been the Commonwealth. Further, the States, driven by elections, have focussed on the shorter term whereas major infrastructure needs much longer terms, perhaps 30 to 40 years.

Australia as a whole (with exceptions such as WA) has lacked the capacity to plan in the long term for major infrastructure particularly its urban needs, including major urban growth.

Issues around urban transport planning have been identified in a number of previous national parliamentary reports that have not been acted upon. Some also have numerous elements relevant to urban rail that have not been addressed.

The ARA submission to this latest Senate Inquiry has drawn attention to three previous national parliamentary reports in particular that identified that the Commonwealth's governance and funding of the transport sector needs to change by incorporating sustainability, with its inter-connected dimensions for economy, society and ecological. http://www.ara.net.au/site/urban_mobility.php

Together, they show that continuation of 'business-as-usual' is no longer supportable on the evidence of failing transport in cities, spatial division of cities that mirror social and health disadvantage, degrading environmental quality with costly damage to health.

Re-orientation is a strong theme through these previous public inquiries and the ARA has recommended that the issues around urban transport planning evidenced in these previous national parliamentary reports be acted upon as part of the Senate Inquiry's deliberations.

How do we go forward?

There have been good separate initiatives targeting freight transport infrastructure issues (such as the Commonwealth AusLink program) but none of these has funded public transport.

This situation has its origins in the governance structure for managing urban passenger infrastructure in Australia. Each urban rail system is managed by a State government which under the pressures of other funding priorities has generally (WA is an example where this is less of an effect) led to underfunding over the long run. States have not been able or willing to set aside strategic funding for the long term.

All of this is explicable in the federal political context but there can be no excuse – what must occur is long term planning, and linked funding which is set apart. Given the need to act on climate change, it is no longer appropriate for Australia to manage its public transport needs through a politically charged process.

The community demands to be given public passenger services that will meet demands and perform to world best practice standards, as well as reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The good news is that investment in rail infrastructure has been recognised as a priority for national infrastructure funding – support is needed to ensure that funds are allocated and responsibly.

A National Transport Planning Authority and Transport Infrastructure Fund

'it is clear that government at all levels including the Australian government, needs to provide greater investment in new public transport infrastructure, in order to expand current transport systems and ensure that existing infrastructure and public transport is utilised effectively and efficiently to mitigate effects on climate change'. (Infrastructure Australia 2008)

What is needed now is a planning and funding framework that will transcend the old boundaries of state's jurisdictions and move towards a truly national structure of planning and funding. ARA envisages a structure which incorporates two fundamental components being a national transport planning capacity and a national funding structure.

ARA has recommended establishing a new National Transport Planning Authority (NTPA) accountable to COAG.

Its brief would be to develop a National Strategic Transport Plan and to guide the effective disbursement of government funds to meet transport infrastructure needs in the long term (30 to 40 years). These funds would be held and managed by a proposed Transport Infrastructure Fund which would be funded jointly by the Commonwealth and States, and would disburse funds according to the National Plan, on behalf of COAG. Funds would be targeted towards optimising the public transport mix in cities and major arterial roads. The role of the Building Australia Fund could be augmented to accommodate long term funding for transport infrastructure and service delivery.

NTPA would work with States and Territories to integrate planning and investment cycles for infrastructure and town planning, with a clear focus on the national benefit to be derived from optimal development of transport in cities and major arterial transport links. Its brief is clearly passenger and freight movement by land.

NTPA membership would include high level representation from all jurisdictions including the Commonwealth, Infrastructure Australia, the proposed Transport Infrastructure Fund and the National Transport Commission and it would be advised by Industry and key stakeholder representatives.

