Ditch expensive light rail and push for trackless trams: advocates

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An expensive and inflexible extension to Canberra's light rail network should be abandoned in favour of improved bus services and a possible "trackless tram", a new discussion paper written by community advocates has said.

"Bus rapid transit (BRT) is the obvious solution for rapid public transport on the stage 2B route. It offers cheaper, faster, more frequent and more adaptable transport than light rail," the paper said.

"BRT requires fewer transfers between bus and/or light rail services, costs half as much, can be built more quickly, is twice as cost-effective, and will be at least ten minutes faster than light rail stage 2."

The paper's recommendations for the ACT include calls to:

- evaluate adopting a trackless tram system to replace light rail;
- cancel existing contracts and abandon work on light rail stage 2B;
- speed up replacing the bus fleet with electric vehicles;
- expand the number of transit lanes; and,
- seek funding Commonwealth funding for a trackless tram trial.

The paper called on the Commonwealth government to reject "claimed wider benefits" of light rail stage 2B unless the ACT "identifies and fully justifies" those benefits, and launch a public inquiry into funding for stage 2B.

"The paper concludes that light rail stage 2B should not proceed. It finds that, in comparison with alternative solutions, light rail stage 2B will be slower, less flexible in its routing, have greater environmental impacts, be far more expensive and will impose a substantial financial burden on all Canberrans for many decades to come," the paper said.

"Alternative solutions will provide our city with an affordable public transport network that will better meet the needs of Canberrans."

Trackless trams have been touted as a cheaper solution to improve public transport networks. The technology has been trialled in Perth's City of Stirling, which has a $3.3 million trackless tram on loan from a manufacturer but no state government support, according to reports in *The West Australian*.

Transport Minister Chris Steel has previously dismissed the technology, saying there was no good example of how it was working to effectively replace light rail and it would not offer significant savings over light rail.

The paper criticised the ACT government for ignoring 2012 advice that a bus rapid transit system between Gungahlin and the city would have been “better” than light rail, based on cost-benefit analyses.

The paper was written by Leon Arundell, John Bell, Kent Fitch, Russ Morison, Mike Quirk and Anthony Senti.

The discussion paper was sharply critical of the ACT government’s refusal to release details about the cost of light rail stage 2B, which is planned to link Commonwealth Park and the Woden town centre.

The government this month committed to releasing an indicative timeline for the Woden extension before the October 19 election.

The Canberra Liberals have vowed to cancel stage 2B if they win the election.

The opposition on Thursday said the discussion paper painted a very bleak picture of ACT public transport if light rail went ahead.

“The current rapid bus between Civic and Woden takes just 15 minutes which will increase to over 30 minutes on the tram and the report highlights the significant benefits of bus rapid transit compared to the tram,” opposition transport spokesman Mark Parton said.

Public Transport Association of Canberra chair Ryan Hemsley said the report was a “mish-mash of mistruths and half-baked proposals”.

“Its key claims lack solid evidence. The report fails to engage seriously with the question of how Canberra manages its transport needs now and into the future,” Mr Hemsley said.

“We can’t rely on unproven technology or waste money on trying it out - we need solutions we can implement today. PTCBR welcomes robust debate about transport in Canberra but we insist that this debate must be based on facts and reality.”

Stage 2A - which will extend the line from the Alinga Street terminus to Commonwealth Park - will cost $577 million and is expected to carry its first passengers in January 2028. The contract price does not include the now $81 million cost of raising London Circuit.

Mr Steel told the Assembly the government had been up front and transparent with the public about the cost of building the city’s light rail network.

“We’ve done that in an unparalleled way. Other state governments haven’t done that for their projects, but we have. I have continuously said that we would publish light rail costs and time frames once contracts were signed and procurement was finalised to ensure the territory was in the best position to achieve value for money,” Mr Steel said on February 8.

The community advocates’ discussion paper points to Auditor-General reports that have criticised previous business cases for light rail.

“Locking the ACT in to a light rail public transport system at any price is a major mistake and has already contributed to the ACT losing its AAA credit rating,” the paper claimed.

S&P Global warned growing expenses and infrastructure spending were delaying territory budget repair after the pandemic when it downgraded the ACT credit rating to AA+ in September 2023.

Light rail stage 1, which was completed in 2019, cost $675 million to build, $108 million less than expected in the business case.

The project was delivered under a public-private partnership model, which means the ACT government will make an availability payment to Capital Metro for the life of the contract to cover construction and operation costs.

At the end of the contract in 2038 - currently worth $1.3 billion - the government will own the system.

The availability payment for this financial year is $59.5 million, equivalent to about 0.7 per cent of annual ACT government expenditure. The availability payment is expected to peak at $79 million in 2032-33.

But the discussion paper warns the costs of expanding the light rail network are likely to blow out.

“Throughout the light rail project, Canberrans have been and continue to be misled by reported headline figures which do not fully reflect the full costs,” the paper said, which pointed to the 33 per cent increase in the cost of the raising London Circuit that had grown from $60 million to more than $80 million.

The paper also warned of the heritage and environment impact of a light rail expansion, saying the first stage - a line between Gungahlin town centre and the city centre - reduced the “bush capital” image of Northbourne Avenue to a “tramway of poles, wires, scrawny brittle gums, grasses and concrete - one that now resembles another unattractive suburban tram line”.

Mr Arundell, one of the paper’s authors, is a retired federal public servant, former Pedal Power ACT executive officer and North Canberra Community Council chair. Mr Bell was deputy secretary of the federal Industry Department and has worked for the OECD and as a consultant.

Mr Fitch has more than four decades’ experience as a computer programmer. Mr Quirk, a town planner, worked for the National Capital Development Commission, the Commonwealth body tasked with Canberra’s administration before self-government, and later the ACT government.

Mr Senti, a tax consultant, has worked across the public and private sector, and was chairman of the Combined Residents Action Association.