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Getting Around Transport Hitches

By Roslyn Dundas

The issue of paid parking continues to cause angst, locally and federally, the ACT Government is developing a new Sustainable Transport Plan and now a congestion tax is on the cards. But, to date, these debates have failed to recognise older people, those with disabilities, or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and families on low incomes. These are the people most likely to experience social exclusion through lack of access to transport.

People living on lower incomes are much more likely to find it harder to access transport than people in higher income brackets. It makes it harder to get to a job, school or doctor, to do the grocery shopping or take the kids to sports. There is an established link between lack of transport and unemployment, education drop-out and missing health appointments. The ACT *Human Rights Act* states "everyone has the right to move freely within the ACT". However this right is not a reality for many in the ACT community, in particular those experiencing disadvantage, living on low incomes or with mobility related disabilities.

A key characteristic of Canberra is its low urban density and resultant urban sprawl. Canberra is about 10 times less dense than Sydney and Melbourne and about 40 times less dense than London or Hong Kong. It is spread over a large area, meaning people often must travel long distances to get to work, school or services. So while there is an urgent need to reduce Canberra's dependence on cars, price isn't always the best way to encourage public transport use. Raising parking prices or imposing congestion taxes disproportionately affects those with less capacity to pay. Low income families often live in outer suburbs with poor public transport services. They effectively have no choice but to rely on cars to get to work and school. People in higher socio-economic areas generally have greater access to transport options, and greater capacity to pay.

ACT public transport is actually comparable with that of Sydney, Brisbane, Paris or Amsterdam, when considering the distance travelled per capita. However, the large distances travelled here mean the service is spread very thinly over a large area, making the services on any particular route too irregular. Sustainability goals are only met if a lot of people use public transport. Services designed to meet social inclusion goals, such as access to services for older people, people with disabilities and people on low incomes, must run outside of peak times and to outer suburbs or lower density areas. As a result they often do not efficiently encourage people out of their cars. To truly have an inclusive society, people must have the opportunity to not just see a doctor, and have a job, but make social appointments, be involved in community projects and be heard. There must be weekend, evening and other non-peak services to help people to access a wide range of opportunities.

The ACT Government has provided small buses to regional community services. This welcomed service is in high demand. One organisation provided 3000 trips in the first year of operation, working only 25 hours a week. There was demand for twice as many trips that couldn't be met. The community bus project needs ongoing funding for this vital service to be continued. It requires more support to increase the hours of operation, and for the administrative side of the services, to coordinate bookings and routes.

However, responsibility for transport planning and policy is spread across a range of government agencies such as Territory and Municipal Services, ACT Planning and Land Authority, Disability, Housing and Community Services and ACT Health. This fragmentation means no single department is responsible for improving access to work, learning, healthcare, cultural activities and other services. Unless changes are made, recognising the important role of transport across government service provision, many will continue to be left behind by current transport options.

People without access to transport are unlikely to be able to access support, education, employment and social activities. We need to be more innovative in our approaches to transport and land-use planning, we need to work on being socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable, as well as getting people from A to B as quickly as possible. Congestion taxes and increased parking fees can not be the only solutions. Supporting community buses, developing an integrated approach to transport planning and a responsive public transport system are just some of the ideas that will support the social inclusion of all members of the ACT community, ensure that human rights of all are being protected, promoted and fulfilled while still meeting environmental goals.

Roslyn Dundas is the Director of the ACT Council of Social Service Inc (ACTCOSS), the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage and low-income citizens of the ACT.