

## **TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE LAND TRANSPORT**

### **Wellington, Nov 22-24 2004**

#### **Conference Report**

##### *The Conference*

“Roading” is the New Zealand term for the provision and management of roads. This conference was their premier roading conference of the year. The theme was “towards sustainable land transport”, but this was only so that the conference could have a theme. It might as well have been towards mud-wrestling for all the difference it would have made. The Conference was organised by the NZ Institute of Highway Technology, who did a splendid job.

##### *The Attendance*

The attendance was predominantly local, with just over three dozen overseas attendees out of the 470-odd people registered. There were thirteen Australians, twelve Lithuanians (!) and a small number of assorted others (Brits, North Americans etc) registered. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the roles of the 431 New Zealanders attending.

National Government Organisations	107
Regional Government Organisations	31
Local Government	84
Subtotal: Public Sector	222
Private Sector (roading)	112
Private sector (sustainable transport)	9
Private sector (not known)	88
Subtotal: Private Sector	209
All NZ	431
Other	38

Table 1: Employment of New Zealand Conference Delegates

##### *Presentation*

I presented a paper co-written with Philip Laird on “Transport, Environment and Health” – giving the NCTR’s recommendations for Australian policy. Philip was presenting another paper in a session in another room at the same time and was only able to appear at the last minute and sit in on this presentation. It was in a session with two New Zealand women presenting details of local work (eg the Waste Management Strategy) and academic Tord Kjellstrom from ANU, and there were few questions on my paper - perhaps because it did not deal with NZ issues.

I noticed that I was the only speaker at the whole conference to raise the issue of oil depletion.

### *Keynote addresses*

The NZ transport minister, Pete Hodgson, opened the conference and reminded it of recent changes in NZ. Transfund and the Land Transport Safety Authority were about to be merged into a new body to be called Land Transport New Zealand, and new legislation (the Land Transport Management Act) said all the right things – transport plans will be assessed on how they assist economic development AND assist personal safety and security AND improve access and mobility AND protect and promote public health AND ensure environmental sustainability - and ensured that if roading contractors wanted access to public funds they would have to conform to these objectives whether they liked to or not.

Over the three days of the conference, six other “keynote speakers” were given the benefit of plenary sessions and hence large audiences.

Professor Pete Gordon, an economist from the University of Southern California, assured us that the more prosperous a society we became, the more the conditions for sustainability developed. He favoured flexible institutions and market forces. Exchange promoted wealth, trust and free institutions in a “virtuous cycle”. He said what you would expect an American economic rationalist to say.

Professor Bill Clarke, a NZ demographer now at the University of California, pointed out that world population will not continue to grow indefinitely. In 40-50 years time it will probably start shrinking (albeit from a global base about 2 billion - 33% - higher than today) and we will then have to deal with a world with an ageing population and a growing scarcity of labour.

Professor Sharon Beder of the University of Wollongong demonstrated the amount of PR spin that is being applied by the automotive industry, particularly in the promotion of 4-wheel-drives (SUV's in the US).

David Begg, Chairman of the UK's Commission for Integrated Transport, gave an entertaining address in which he suggested that pricing should be the main tool to move towards sustainable transport. He reminded the conference that professional advisers are not under the same pressure as the politicians they advise.

Brian Souter, the founder of the Stagecoach Group, also entertained while making the serious point that entrepreneurs like him required integrity, consistency and supportive strategies from the governments with which they deal – otherwise the risk of investment in innovation would be too great to be considered.

Finally Hal Kassoff, from Parsons Brinkerhoff in Washington, assured everyone that “sustainable highways” was not an oxymoron and under the right circumstances you CAN build your way out of congestion.

### *Other proceedings*

With a large number of papers to be presented, the organisers had marshalled the non-keynote papers into four parallel sessions. Therefore with the best will in the world noone could hope to hear more than a quarter of these papers presented. A CD containing all papers was distributed on registration but access to a computer with a CD drive would have been needed to look at them while the conference was in progress.

Comments/individuals that stood out:

- The interpretation of sustainability offered by Chris Olsen, the CEO of Roothing New Zealand, was a new one on me - (if roading contractors haven't got enough staff to handle all the work we want them to do, then roading isn't sustainable) – and he was reminded at question time that “roading” in NZ also included railways!
- A character called David Wilmott presented views on sustainability that could be characterized as ultra-conservative and he lost no opportunity to challenge subsequent speakers whose views differed from his.
- Experienced NZ consultant Malcolm Douglass pleaded for better management of the road network (which echoes the NCTR's similar recommendation).
- The final paper in the Town Hall was given by Hugh Chapman, a kiwi who was promoting a GRT system called SkyCabs - very similar in principle to the Australian Austrans and the British Ultra. From the very positive spin he put on the idea it was likely that he hadn't got very far in developing it yet.

### *Networking*

The value of networking was somewhat reduced (for an Australian interested in transport sustainability) by most attendees being New Zealanders mainly concerned about roads. Nevertheless some useful contacts were made among NZ planning and cycling professionals.

### *The venue*

The Conference was held in the “Michael Fowler Centre”, a world-class purpose-built conference centre, with some sessions being held in rooms in the next-door Wellington Town Hall.

Wellington itself is a transport planner's paradise, being a compact city with its airport, trolley-bus system, bus networks, cable car, commuter and long-distance rail lines and maritime activity on the waterfront all in close proximity. However there is little doubt that the car is still king.

Some anti-bypass demonstrators chose to converge on the conference centre with placards and megaphones to disrupt the closing proceedings but due to general lack of interest in the last paper of the last day few delegates remained to witness the ensuing scuffles with the Centre's security staff.

### *Conclusions*

Sustainable transport still seemed an elusive concept after talking about it for three days.

I seem to remember someone asserting that transit accounted for 3% of trips in New Zealand, but I cannot find in any of the papers<sup>1</sup> any report of current mode shares. If this is so, the emphasis on roads at the conference was quite understandable but it was disappointing that walking and cycling did not get more attention and that quantitative data on travel behaviour was generally lacking.

And for a conference supposedly about land transport sustainability, it was surprising that fuel futures were not on anyone's agenda. I would have thought that it deserved a keynote address – something like Lyn Martin's paper at ATRF if not Bruce Robinson's.

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<sup>1</sup> Not true. The following data was in a paper by Tim Hughes and Craig Gordon of the Land Transport Safety Authority (I did not attend its presentation). The data are estimates of national travel for 1997/98. The mode shares (of trips) are as reported by Hughes & Gordon: the trip durations are calculated by me from their data. Note that I consider taxis to be private vehicles operating on a "hire-and-reward" basis, not public transport.

	% of trips	Av trip time (mins)
Vehicle driver	50.1%	14.2
Vehicle passenger – private	26.2%	15.1
Vehicle passenger – taxi	0.5%	13.1
All private vehicles	76.8%	
Walk	18.7%	11.2
Bicycle	1.8%	14.0
All private unmotorised	20.5%	
Bus	2.2%	26.7
Other	0.5%	34.0
All motorized public transport	2.7%	