

THE METROPOLITAN STRATEGY FOR SYDNEY – REVIEW OF TRANSPORT ISSUES

Introduction

On December 4 2005 the NSW Government finally released its “Metropolitan Strategy” for Sydney. The stated aims of this strategy are :

- the enhancement of liveability;
- strengthening economic competitiveness;
- ensuring fairness;
- the protection of the environment; and
- the improvement of governance.

To this end there are seven elements to the Strategy, covering:

- the economy and employment;
- centres and corridors;
- housing;
- transport;
- the environment and resources;
- parks and public spaces; and
- governance and implementation.

It is curious that, when initially releasing the strategy, the government website stated that there were seven components to it, and listed six of them. The missing one was transport – was this just a typo or a more Freudian blunder?

Nevertheless the transport component contains the following elements, each with sub-strategies to back them up:

- Improve transport between Sydney’s centres
- Improve the existing transport system
- Influence travel choices to encourage more sustainable transport
- Improve transport decision-making: planning, evaluation and funding
- Ensure sufficient port capacity is available to serve Sydney
- Improve efficiency of all types of freight movement in Sydney
- Connect the regions and economic gateways within the Greater Metropolitan Region
- Minimise the adverse impacts from freight movement

A Cautious Welcome

Clearly managing the growth of a city of the size and vitality of Sydney presents many challenges. The growth cannot be stopped and, if allowed to happen unconstrained, could

threaten the very vitality that has attracted it. A strategy for managing this growth is vital and there are many good things in the Metropolitan Strategy. For this reason, and despite the criticism below, the strategy should be welcomed.

It is nevertheless a little disappointing that after the strategy taking so long to emerge, it is so vague, especially on the issue of infrastructure, and especially transport infrastructure. Or perhaps it is that the strategy lacks an action plan at the moment to implement it – who is going to do what by when, and how much will it cost? The lead times for many of the ideas in the strategy to be implemented are not short. It is in the nature of such action plans that they always slip, but the absence of such aspiration in the first place seems to invite stagnation of the strategy.

It seems that changes of personnel at both bureaucratic and political levels have been allowed to slow down the development of the strategy, while demographic processes and all the other challenges have raged on regardless. A particular issue that has arisen while the strategy has been under development has been that of peak oil (see later) - an issue that the strategy pays little heed to.

Review of transport actions

Improve transport between Sydney's centres

This seems mainly to consist of building the NW/SW Rail Link, and implementing the “Strategic bus routes” of the 2004 Inquiry into Bus Services in NSW (the Unsworth Review). The City of Cities concept is only loosely supported by this, and the issue of reallocating road space from private to public transport is not discussed (see below).

Improve the existing transport system

This seems mainly to consist of completing infrastructure projects now under construction, implementing the “Rail Clearways” scheme, rolling out the TCard, continuing interchange upgrades and improving operational management. The last seems to apply mainly to the railways, as the Government has little influence over the management of the private bus sector which serves much of Sydney. The potential of the TCard for introducing more integration to the public transport system is being hampered by restricting its initial roll-out to reproducing electronically the existing mixture of ticket types and charging structures.

Influence travel choices to encourage more sustainable transport

This seems mainly to consist of improving local pedestrian and cycling conditions, developing and implementing a metropolitan parking policy and continuing Voluntary Travel Behaviour Change programs (“Travelsmart”). It is notable that the Government does not feel the need to mount a (possibly unpopular) public awareness campaign, except in the context of specifically targeted “Travelsmart” individuals – such a lack would probably severely inhibit the chances of introducing a metropolitan parking policy

if sustainable transport is to be encouraged by this means. And the actions of Railcorp and RTA in currently planning permanently to narrow the cycleway over the Harbour Bridge – already barely adequate, and the busiest cycleway in Sydney – seem quite incompatible with this strategic desire.

Improve transport decision-making: planning, evaluation and funding

This seems mainly to consist of doing the same as before, but hoping it will be more effective in future.

Ensure sufficient port capacity is available to serve Sydney

This seems to consist of the expansion of Port Botany, the transfer of some import functions from Port Jackson to Port Waratah or Port Kembla, and getting rail to carry as high a proportion of port-related freight as possible. There seems to be little distinction made between imports and exports, and by implication at least the expansion of Sydney's "port capacity" is to increase imports. This element of the strategy is therefore tied closely to the acceptance of globalization (as are the freight forecasts behind the Federal Government's AusLink investment program). See below.

Improve efficiency of all types of freight movement in Sydney

This consists of the development of strategies for freight types other than Port Botany containers – intermodal freight, construction materials, bulk fuel, imported vehicles – and the upgrading of the freight rail network. These are welcome steps.

Connect the regions and economic gateways within the Greater Metropolitan Region

This seems mainly to consist of investigating the further expansion of the road system within Sydney to accommodate the anticipated volumes of road freight (possibilities include the M4 Eastern Extension, the M2-F3 connection, widening of the M5, widening of the F3, linkage of the F3 to the M7 and NW Sydney), the enhancement of rail freight movement between Sydney and Newcastle, and planning to increase interstate and regional freight movement by rail. This will require much greater understanding of and data about the freight market than currently exists in the public sector.

Minimise the adverse impacts from freight movement

This seems mainly to consist of the protection of potential rail freight corridors in Western Sydney, and the "development of strategies" (as yet undefined) to reduce the air impact of road freight and the noise impact of rail freight movement in Sydney, along with moves to increase the amount of freight in all markets carried by rail. See above comment. The link between freight transport and urban prosperity does not seem to be considered – transport planning in an export-dominated location like Newcastle, for instance, is very different from that in an import-dominated location like Sydney.

City of Cities Concept

The strategy is based on the “City of Cities” concept, in which Sydney is expected to develop as a network of cities rather than as a single CBD-dominated structure. This was foreseen by the Warren Centre in 2003, whose three-year investigation of “Sustainable Transport in Sustainable Cities” took Sydney as a case study and culminated in a report entitled “Towards a City of Cities”. In this it was probably influenced by the then Director-General of Planning, Sue Halliday.

When this report was publicly presented to the Government in 2003, the Transport Minister of the day reacted by saying, more or less, “Thank you, I’ll put it on the shelf with all the other reports” and the Planning Minister of the day followed by saying, more or less, “the planning is quite under control, thank you very much.” Now, two and a half years on, neither of these gentlemen are still in office and we have a metropolitan strategy published under the title of “A City of Cities”.

It is notable that the Warren Centre saw that a land use plan alone, or a transport plan alone, would not be sufficient. The Centre advocated integrated action on six fronts:

- engaging the community;
- monitoring and reporting on transport performance;
- optimising the performance of what we have;
- modifying the shape of the city;
- introducing better planning, pricing, funding, new technology and infrastructure;
- and
- lowering barriers to change.

The Metropolitan Strategy does address the third and fourth of these points, and to a degree the fifth, but is largely silent on the others. (There is a section on "Measuring performance", page 20 of the Introduction, but it is not focused on transport)

The Strategy seems limited to the Sydney Metropolitan Area, despite it carefully defining a region known as the Greater Metropolitan Area, from Port Stephens to Nowra, Separate strategies for the non-Sydney part of the GMA will be developed, based on the regional cities of Newcastle, Wollongong and Gosford on the Central Coast. The strategy is ambiguous about whether its scope includes Gosford – in some respects it does, in others it doesn’t. It is asserted that the main global centres in Sydney are the CBD and North Sydney, with the centres of Parramatta, Penrith and Liverpool expected to form the nuclei of separate emerging cities in the west.

It may come as a surprise to many residents of Northern Sydney that North Sydney is a separate place from Sydney CBD and is the centre to which they should relate. This assertion is not substantiated by any analysis. It is certainly true that Sydney’s geography has placed North Sydney at the point where road, rail and bus transport corridors converge before crossing the Harbour. If North Sydney really is the focus of the North

Shore, why do so many buses from the Northern Beaches and the Epping Road corridors use the Warringah Freeway to access the city and do not even stop in North Sydney?

An equally unsubstantiated assertion would be that North Sydney is not seen as a separate city from Sydney but as the most northern of the CBD precincts (an idea which the Appendix describing “Global Sydney” seems to support), and that once beyond the immediate hinterland of the centre that a more central location like Chatswood (or perhaps even Hornsby, which is as peripheral as North Sydney is), would be a more natural centre for the Northern Sydney city region.

North Sydney has had the advantage of being blessed by past transport infrastructure investment – road and rail – in ways that Chatswood or other centres never have, and in the absence of any significant new infrastructure commitments in the strategy to support the “City of Cities” concept North Sydney will remain the biggest employment centre, if not the most dominant centre, in the region.

The regional centres of Penrith, Liverpool and Parramatta are designated as the nuclei for separate cities in Western Sydney. The strategy does contain measures to spread out Sydney’s sporting resources through Western Sydney, but not other educational and cultural resources (which are heavily concentrated around the CBD) to this region.

Take university education as an example: Penrith and Parramatta both share subject-specific campuses of the University of Western Sydney, as does Liverpool if the campus at Macarthur (a long way from Liverpool) is included. Meanwhile, central Sydney has UNSW, Sydney University and UTS, while Northern Sydney has Macquarie University.

Sporting facilities are perhaps more evenly distributed, but even so it is easier to get by public transport to the former Olympic Stadium at Homebush from the City for special events there than it is from nearby Parramatta.

Transport Infrastructure

The major transport infrastructure element of the strategy, previously announced, was the so-called NW/SW Rail Link. This would allow trains to run from Leppington in the south west, to the City via the East Hills Line, and then out to Rouse Hill in the north west.

It would be useful to distinguish between the trains and rails when talking about a new rail link. Much of the rail infrastructure, including stations, that the new line would use are already in place or (the Epping to Chatswood line) are under construction now. The new elements are an extension from Glenfield to Leppington in the south west, and extension from Cheltenham to Rouse Hill in the north west and a new line through the city between St Leonards and Redfern. Clearly the most expensive part of this will be the central portion through the CBD.

The logic of this is not very compatible with the “City of Cities” concept. The south west growth area is closest to Liverpool, yet we are providing trains to take south western

workers towards the CBD without ever going near Liverpool. The north west growth area is closest to Parramatta, yet we are providing trains to take north western workers towards the CBD without ever going near Parramatta (and thereby reducing the effectiveness of the NW Transitway, which does connect the NW with Parramatta). And much of the \$8 billion that is being quoted as the cost of a new “SW/NW Rail Link” will be spent on building a route for the additional trains from these areas to run through the CBD. This is very much the “Dominant City Centre” concept, which has always been advantageous for rail transport of the sort that CityRail exists to provide.

If we are serious about the City of Cities concept then we should be providing transport infrastructure to support it, or at least not providing transport infrastructure that undermines it. This would imply very fast and frequent express trains between city centres, and the catchment area of each city connected to its centre by appropriate collective or independent transport. This would have to include a metropolitan parking strategy, to discourage the inappropriate use of cars for travel to city centres without unduly penalizing those individual centres that already try and do this (by diverting drivers elsewhere).

The “strategy” mentions other transport infrastructure schemes which are under construction, such as the M7, the Lane Cove Tunnel, and the Cross-City Tunnel, but the connection with the central theme of the “City of Cities” seems tenuous.

Of the eight components of the transport strategy, four deal with freight. The attention devoted to freight is a new phenomenon and a welcome one.

With a Sydney-centric view of freight movement, this sector appears to be dominated by road transport to the detriment of urban amenity. That our prosperity depends to a degree on a competitive freight sector is not considered – an attitude that would not be encountered in Newcastle (for instance) and one that is largely incompatible with the Federal Government’s *AusLink* program of investment,

For the metropolitan strategy, “freight” seems to be equated largely with containerized traffic from Port Botany – possibly because this is the only market so far studied in detail. It is dominated by imports – although the same number of containers have to leave these shores as arrive, about one third are empty when they leave. Thus moves to increase rail’s share of Port Botany’s containerized traffic are mainly about changing the method of distribution of imports from overseas. There is more to freight movement – or more generally, movement of goods and services – than this. (Facilitation of exports, manufacturing processes, construction, waste management, urban maintenance, emergency services etc).

In general the transport component of the metropolitan strategy fails to project thought into the future, and as a result it offers “more of the same”. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way it addresses (or rather doesn’t address) the issue of energy futures for transport, which is now discussed specifically.

Peak Oil

Transport infrastructure provided today will have a life of a hundred years or more, but long before then our transport will be facing a very different world. The world will not run out of oil, but it is clear that the age of cheap and plentiful oil will soon be over. The issue is not whether this will happen but when. Many commentators think we are entering the age of transition already, and even the most wildly optimistic estimates give us no more than thirty years to adjust. While views differ and reliable data does not exist, the most common estimate is that the peak of global oil production is only a couple of years away, and then we will find that oil (and hence refined products, like petrol) is becoming more expensive, harder to obtain both financially and physically, and technological developments that these factors may encourage will probably cause the world to consume its remaining finite stock of oil even faster than it would otherwise.

Clearly there are major implications for the world economy in this. By focusing on Sydney's urban transport (a heavily oil-dependent sector), several predictable consequences can be foreseen well within the timespan covered by the Metropolitan Strategy (which contains nothing to address them).

The outer suburbs of Sydney are the most car-dependent, and soon the development of public transport, pedestrian and bicycle networks in these areas will be seen as the only alternative to the rising costs and difficulties of using independent fossil-fuelled vehicles (cars). Priorities will change and discretionary use of private vehicles for personal transport will be seen as a less essential use of relatively scarce and expensive petrol and diesel than, say, the distribution of food by commercial vehicles.

There is an abundance of material on the coming energy crisis for transport and it is disappointing that the Metropolitan Strategy has nothing to say on the subject. This silence aids promotion of belief in popular myths about transport energy – for instance that hydrogen, renewable energy or nuclear power will save the day. None of these will work, and of all the modes aviation (and hence the tourist industry, with which it is closely linked) will be the worst hit by an oil crisis. For land transport, we can expect to see a higher proportion of low-energy vehicles in the urban fleet and greater reliance on public transport, especially if powered by electricity (which means, in the short term, heavy and light rail for collective transport, electric – or hybrid - cars and bicycles for independent transport). The Metropolitan Strategy does not give any idea what sort of vehicles it expects to be moving Sydney's residents, goods and services in future. The implication that Sydney will be more reliant on a good bus network (following the Unsworth Inquiry into Bus Services in the State) is strong – but what will power the buses?

The implications affect more than the transport sector, but the outer areas of Sydney will have justification to complain of negligence if the transport issues at least are not addressed. The growth areas are being designed to minimise car dependence, and new dwellings in established areas are being limited to new areas with good accessibility (eg

Mt Druitt, Prairiewood, Sutherland). There are already about two million people living in established parts of outer Sydney. What about them?

In the “environment and resources” section of the Strategy, the Government commits to finalizing the Energy White Paper. A draft version of this was released in November 2004 and heavily criticized by the Transport Panel for being all about stationary electricity production and not considering transport’s need for portable energy at all. Transport is reckoned by ABARE to account for about 44% of “final energy” consumption in NSW, both now and in 20 year’s time.

Aviation

Even more than urban road transport, aviation will be adversely affected by Peak Oil because there is no feasible alternative to jet fuel in sight for aircraft. The Metro Strategy is silent on the future of Sydney’s airports, even though this is a major urban planning issue, with long lead times for development, and one which will affect Sydney’s future prosperity in fundamental ways. An unfortunate legacy of our constitutional arrangements is to have left a planning vacuum for aviation, where federal and state agencies and the private sector can all assume that whoever should be doing something about the future of Sydney Airport, it isn’t them.

With the heavy dependence of aviation on fossil fuel, the heavy dependence of some industry sectors (eg tourism) on aviation, and the long distances involved in intrastate, interstate and international travel from Sydney, Peak Oil and the possible need for and location of a second Sydney Airport within the timeframe of the strategy raise significant questions on which the State Government provides no guidance.

Conclusions

The Metropolitan Strategy has its good points. Even though it may be a case of “too little, too late”, it does articulate several major decisions – for instance the notion that 70% of all new dwellings should be built in established areas, but not everywhere in such areas – and provides a framework for current Government initiatives.

Much of the transport strategy consists of things that the agencies are already doing. These are mostly welcome actions, but should not divert attention from the need to do them faster and to do additional complementary things.

An action plan to accompany the strategy is needed, particularly in the area of transport infrastructure where the lead times are long and the resulting infrastructure long-lasting. The absence of such a plan, specifying who needs to do what by when and for how much, seems to promote inactivity by the State’s planners.

The peaking of global oil supply within a few years will probably change the ground rules for many things, including urban transport, drastically. The strategy should at least address this as a contingency if not as an inevitability.

Most of the elements of the Metro Strategy would be appropriate to mitigate the effects of Peak Oil, but they will not be effective in time. Thus the main criticism of the Metro Strategy is not that it does the wrong things (with the possible exception of the NW/SW Rail Link being incompatible with the “City of Cities” concept), but that it does not do the right things with enough urgency.