Growing the Suburbs: Infrastructure and Business Development in Outer Suburban Melbourne.

Submission by BusVic to the Outer Suburban Interface Services and Development Committee of the Victorian Parliament.

November 2011

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary ......................................................................................................................... 3

1. Committee Terms of Reference ............................................................................................... 5

2. Population Pressures ............................................................................................................... 6

3. Social Exclusion Risk ............................................................................................................. 6

4. Housing and Job Access Pressure .......................................................................................... 10

5. Environmental Pressure ....................................................................................................... 13

6. Improving Local Public Transport ......................................................................................... 14
   6.1 Types of Improvements .................................................................................................... 14
   6.2 Bus Service Levels ........................................................................................................... 15
   6.3 MOTC Service Upgrades ................................................................................................. 16

7. Conclusions ............................................................................................................................ 18

References ..................................................................................................................................... 20
Executive Summary

BusVic is the industry association that represents the interests of Victoria’s private bus sector. It appreciates the opportunity to put its views before the Committee. These views concentrate on the vital importance of public transport services being available in outer suburban locations, provided in a timely manner as those areas grow. Given the Committee’s “Interface” orientation, we concentrate on Melbourne’s Interface Council areas in our submission. These areas are home to almost one third of Melbourne’s population and they have typically growth rates that are much higher than the city as a whole, putting pressure on the provision of infrastructure and services.

Access to transport has long been a problem in the Interface Council areas, with poor public transport services, long travel times and difficult access to activities being major concerns. BusVic research shows that these problems accentuate risks of social exclusion. A major concern is the lack of development of transport infrastructure to match the strong population growth. Such concerns will be compounded in coming years, due to:

- continued strong increases in population. Forecasts suggest a 47% increase in the Interface Councils’ population by 2026, with transport-dependent young people a significant proportion of the total population;
- the region is highly dependent on car travel for access. It is likely that fuel prices will increase in the future as the supply of oil reduces. This will put pressure on the affordability of travel in the region in the future, putting household budgets under increased stress; and
- the share of the population aged 65+ in the Interface Councils will almost double by 2026.

There is a very strong case on equity grounds for continuing to improve bus services in outer areas of Melbourne. These areas have relatively higher transport needs than inner/middle suburbs but lower levels of public transport service available. Research by BusVic has shown that improving bus service levels in these areas will produce substantial economic benefits, as well as improving social outcomes.

The major priorities in the Interface Council areas, in relation to improving bus services should be to:

- ensure minimum service level standards are enforced and upgrades to local bus services applied in line with the timing of urban development, rather than lagging behind development. This will help to reduce problems of ‘transport poverty’ and promote social inclusion and well-being. The submission identifies relevant ‘safety net’ service levels;
- ensure proposed bus service improvements recommended for the region as part of the Department of Transport’s Bus Service Reviews are implemented. The submission identifies gaps in this regard;
support implementation of targeted Smart bus improvements, particularly to improve access to jobs and services. The submission has identified a number of priority corridors for improvement in this regard.

Interface Councils need to continue to support improvements to enable physical access to services, including walk access to stops and stations. Councils should also support improvements to information about public transport and also low fares and concession fares to assist those on low incomes and promote more compact settlement patterns, which reduce the need to travel.
1. Committee Terms of Reference

The Committee is required to inquire into, consider and report to Parliament on growing the suburbs: infrastructure and business development outer suburban Melbourne, and in particular to:

a) Identify existing public and private infrastructure provision, including schools, hospitals, commercial and shopping precincts, transport and roads, telecommunications, water and power;
b) Assess the capacity of existing infrastructure to accommodate increased population growth;
c) Investigate options, based on intrastate, interstate and international evidence, which reduce pressures on infrastructure and essential services;
d) Catalogue the skills mix of outer suburban residents to identify those areas with a skills shortage and provide options for skills training and retention, especially as it relates to both younger and semi retired people;
e) Examine the role of small businesses, local councils and community groups (such as Rotary and Lions Clubs) in developing local expertise;
f) Investigate the value of sister city relationships with key trade and innovation markets; and

g) Identify local manufacturing capacity and highlight export development opportunities available for businesses operating in outer suburbs.

BusVic appreciates the opportunity to put its views before the Committee. Those views concentrate on the vital importance of public transport services being available in outer suburban locations, provided in a timely manner as those areas grow. Given the Committee’s “Interface” orientation, we concentrate on Melbourne’s Interface Council areas in our submission.

Our submission draws on a 2011 report prepared by Monash University’s Institute of Transport Studies, co-authored by our policy adviser, Professor John Stanley with Professor Graham Currie and Alexa Delbosc from Monash, for Melbourne’s Interface Councils. That report is entitled Australian Research Council Project on Transport Disadvantage, Social Exclusion and Well Being – Policy Implications for the Interface Councils of Melbourne (Monash ITS 2011). BusVic thanks the Interface Councils for their permission to use parts of that report.

The submission is structured as follows. Section 2 notes some of the population pressures facing outer suburban areas. Section 3 outlines some findings from BusVic research on social exclusion and public transport service provision, which shows the problems facing outer areas are significant and that there are growing service gaps which need to be addressed. Section 4 links housing supply problems back to transport and employment backlogs in outer suburbs. Section 5 links these pressures back to energy use and suggests that outer suburban areas will face increasing pressures as carbon is priced. Section 6 sets out BusVic’s argument supporting minimum bus service levels in outer suburbs to help tackle the set of problems that have been outlined in the preceding sections.
2. Population Pressures

Melbourne’s Interface Councils (the Local Government Areas of Mornington Peninsula, Casey, Cardinia, Yarra Ranges, Nillumbik, Whittlesea, Hume, Melton and Wyndham) had a population of 1.24 million in 2009, some 30.9% of the Metropolitan population. The region has been the focus of recent Melbourne population growth, with over half of all Melbourne’s population growth from 2001 to 2009 occurring in the area. The IC’s population grew twice as fast as Melbourne overall from 2001 to 2006 and about two-thirds faster over the 2006-09 period. A high rate of population growth is typically associated with a large proportion of young people in the population. This is the case for the Interface Council area, where 22.9% of the population was aged less than 15 in 2006, compared to 17.2% for the rest of Melbourne. This age group is a significant market for public transport, which is typically a service whose provision lags population growth (as illustrated in Section 3 of the submission).

Access to transport has long been a problem in the Interface Council areas, with poor public transport services, long travel times and difficult access to activities being major concerns. A major concern has been the lack of development of transport infrastructure to match the strong population growth. Such concerns will be compounded in coming years, due to:

- Continued strong increases in population. Forecasts from DPCD (2009) suggest a 47% increase in the Interface Councils’ population by 2026, with transport-dependent young people a significant proportion of the total population.
- The region is highly dependent on car travel for access. It is likely that fuel prices will increase in the future as the supply of oil reduces. This will put pressure on the affordability of travel in the region in the future.
- The share of the population aged 65+ in the Interface Councils will almost double by 2026.

3. Social Exclusion Risk

A major Australian research study, *Investigating Transport Disadvantage, Social Exclusion and Well-being in Metropolitan, Regional and Rural Victoria*, partly funded by BusVic in partnership with the Interface Councils, has examined transport disadvantage in Melbourne. Five major findings from the research were relevant to the Interface Councils:

1. **Social Exclusion and Well-being are Related to Transport Disadvantage** — Transport disadvantage reduces opportunities to gain income, employment, access to social networks

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1 Australian Research Council Industry Linkage Program Project LP0669046 ‘Investigating Transport Disadvantage, Social Exclusion and Well-being in Metropolitan, Regional and Rural Victoria’, Monash University, in association with the University of Oxford (UK), University of Ulster (UK), Department of Transport, Victoria, the Bus Association of Victoria and the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and the Interface Councils of Melbourne. The principal chief investigator is Prof. G. Currie and the project Research Fellow is Ms Alexa Delbosc. The chief investigators are Prof. T. Richardson, Prof. P. Smyth and Dr. D. Vella-Brodrick. The partner investigators are Prof. J. Hine, Dr. K. Lucas, Mr. J. Stanley, Dr. J. Morris, Mr. R. Kinnear and Dr. J. Stanley.
and participation in activities, increasing the likelihood of social exclusion. Satisfaction with life as a whole (self-reported well-being) is lower for people facing transport disadvantage.

2. Transport Needs are Concentrated on the Urban Fringe - Research found that all major types of transport disadvantage were focussed on urban fringe areas. Here public transport services were significantly less than the inner and middle suburbs of Melbourne yet needs for transport were higher. Figure 1 (courtesy of Professor Graham Currie of Monash University) shows the distribution of major transport need groups throughout Melbourne. The urban fringe comprising the Interface Council areas have high proportions of residents in the high need groups. Figure 2, from Currie and Delbosc (2010), shows that Interface Councils have lower per capita public transport services than almost all other councils of Melbourne. BusVic research (BusVic 2011) suggests that a very high 43% of residential lots developed between 2004 and 2009 are beyond the reach of the current public transport network (that is, more than 400 metres from a bus or tram route or 80 metres from a train station). An estimated 34,000 lots developed over this period are still without public transport within walking distance, with another 21,000 lots expected to have been developed over 2010 and 2011. In total, this suggests that about 160,000 new residents will still be waiting for basic public transport service availability. Suburbs with significant areas beyond the reach of public transport include: Botanic Ridge (Cranbourne South); Burnside Heights; Caroline Springs; Cranbourne; Cranbourne East; Deer Park; Doreen; Epping North; Keysborough; Langwarrin; Point Cook; South Morang; Tarneit; Truganina. Figure 3 shows the distribution of locations in Melbourne where, as at June 2010, there were no or low public transport services and where services fall below prescribed minimum service levels. Most of these gaps are located in Interface Councils, where transport needs are generally high. In contrast to these gaps in public transport services, a survey of 11503 new households by the Oliver Hume Company, from a broad range of estates in Casey, Whittlesea, Melton and Wyndham, found that well over 90% of respondents from 2006 to 2010 thought that proximity to public transport was important or very important.

3. People Who Are Transport Disadvantaged – A number of groups are more likely than others to be transport disadvantaged, including older people, those with disabilities, people on low income, the unemployed, young people, new Australians and cultural minorities. Young people are a particularly concerning group in relation to transport disadvantage in the Interface Council area. Access to jobs and educational activities is a critical part of being able to succeed in life and lower participation rates in work and education were identified for younger people in fringe areas. The high concentration of young people in the Interface Council regions also suggests young people’s travel needs are a large issue for these areas.

2 “Minimum service Level” is a minimum hourly service 6am to 9pm weekdays, 8am to 9pm Saturdays, 9am to 9pm Sundays, and a Saturday timetable on all public holidays except Good Friday and Christmas Day.
Figure 1: Distribution of Categories of Composite Social Need Index Scores

Source: Prof. Graham Currie, Monash University.

Figure 2: Per Capita Public Transport Service Level by LGA (Interface Councils in Upper Case)

Source: Currie and Delbosc 2010
4. **A High Value for Options to Increase Mobility** – The research measured the value of increased trips for those on low and high income. The average value was around $20 for each new trip (Stanley et al. 2011). This value is four times the values used for conventional planning. It suggests the value of transport services provided for those with limited mobility options is being substantially undervalued. BusVic research has shown the value of a minimum hourly bus service in outer suburban Melbourne, seven days a week from 6.00am to 9.00pm, in reducing risks of social exclusion with a mobility origin (Stanley JK 2010).

5. **An Expanded Understanding of Transport Disadvantage** – The research found that the cost of owning and running a car can be a significant financial burden on people with low incomes. This has been termed ‘transport poverty’. It implies an element of financial stress results from having to rely on cars for mobility. The research found this stress was a particular concern as fuel prices were rising. One response to higher fuel prices was to reduce travel and to limit access to activities. This is particularly concerning since it is thought to be the kind of response which might increase the risk social exclusion and have
adverse flow-on impacts on well-being. This type of situation was found to be particularly common in fringe/Interface Council areas.

Low income fringe urban car users are also vulnerable because of their housing choices. Most live in the fringe because of cheaper housing and access to green spaces; this comes at the cost of poor walk and travel accessibility to activities and high costs associated with car use. Low income groups in this situation are particularly vulnerable to increases in fuel prices and high housing interest rates. This problem is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows relative vulnerability of households across Melbourne to high fuel prices and high mortgage interest rates. The most vulnerable groups (the red areas in Figure 4) tend to be concentrated in the Interface Council Areas.

4. Housing and Job Access Pressure

The recent report of the National Housing Supply Council (2010) suggests that Australia has 178,000 more potential home buyers than available properties, with the housing supply shortfall getting larger. There is a shortfall of almost 500,000 dwellings that are both affordable and available for those in the bottom 40% of the income distribution, an important issue of social sustainability. The Henry Tax Review noted that, as at 5th June 2009, there were 418,000 individuals and families paying more than 30% of their income in rent, even after receiving Rent Assistance, the highest number since 2000\(^3\). That Review pointed out that Australia faces challenges in providing sufficient affordable housing. Figure 5 shows the relevant numbers for Victoria, with a growing supply shortfall emerging.

*Figure 4: VAMPIRE Vulnerability Ratings for Melbourne (Dodson and Sipe 2008)*

\(^3\) http://www.taxreview.treasury.gov.au/content/FinalReport
Analysis by National Economics (2010) has drawn attention to the connection between Australia’s current housing affordability problems and the declining transport infrastructure investment share during the last three decades of the 20th century. Over that period, transport infrastructure spending about halved as a proportion of GDP. National Economics suggest that the poor supply side response to Australia’s increasing housing demand is attributable to:

(1) declining relative investment in transport infrastructure, which meant that growing (fringe) suburbs frequently lack high quality transport connections to areas of major employment concentration and to regional and local services, a problem that has been highlighted above; and

(2) poor job generation towards the outer suburbs, with declining manufacturing employment (for example) not being replaced by jobs with a similar natural habitat towards the outer suburbs.4

The low number of jobs in outer suburban (Interface) areas, relative to the size of the local resident labour force, is shown in Figure 6, where the redder locations have the largest relative shortfalls. Under 600 jobs/1000 residents in the labour force is common in Interface Council areas, with lower figures in many places, implying substantial movement out of these areas for

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4 A shortage of private non-superannuation savings for investment in the construction of new dwellings and infrastructure is also an important factor, Australia relying heavily on a growing private debt level to fund increasing consumption since the mid-90s, rather than supporting increasing investment.
employment. Job availability is much higher in inner/middle suburbs, with local job numbers exceeding the size of the resident labour force in total in most locations. It is noteworthy that many jobs in the outer suburban areas are in the manufacturing sector, where the high Australian dollar is putting a squeeze on future growth and employment prospects. With knowledge economy jobs being typically more inner suburban, this structural economic change is of real concern for future job prospects in outer suburban areas.

Figure 6: Jobs/1000 Resident Labour Force: 2006.

Source: Derived from ABS 2006 Census data.

This argument suggests that the long-term solution to our current housing shortages, including affordable housing, should include:

(1) better transport connections, including public transport connections, between population growth areas and employment locations;
(2) an industry policy that includes promoting economic activities that are suited to outer area employment locations (inc. manufacturing); and
(3) increasing the local availability of services. This will better align housing and employment/service locations and help drive the supply stimulus needed to restore equilibrium in housing markets.

The first point is of particular relevance to this submission. Analysis by BusVic (2010a) suggests that four major suburban industrial employment areas are poorly served by public transport:
Derrimut, Laverton North and Altona; Campbellfield, Somerton and Broadmeadows; Braeside and Moorabbin Airport; and, Dandenong South and Hallam. These are all within car commuting catchments for residents of Interface Council areas. Upgrading trunk public transport services between proximate IC areas and these respective industrial zones would improve economic opportunities for IC residents and, following the argument of National Economics (2010), is likely to help improve housing supply (and affordability) in growth areas.

5. **Environmental Pressure**

Transport accounts for 34% of household greenhouse gas emissions and these emissions are increasing as car use and population levels grow. Research by Monash University’s Dr Janet Stanley and Dr Peter Brain of the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research, for the Brotherhood of St Laurence, has shown that average carbon use amongst poor Melbourne households is highest in outer urban areas (Figure 7). This is much influenced by the relatively high reliance on the private car for travel and on the associated long average travel distances. For example, the survey sample from the Australian Research Council project cited in Footnote 1 suggested that the average daily travel distance for an inner Melbourne adult was 23 kms, increasing to 40 kms in outer suburban areas and 56 kms on the peri-urban fringe. As our society is increasingly required to price carbon, poor households in outer urban areas will be placed at increasing risk of social exclusion. This adds to the urgency of ensuring that there are alternative affordable mobility opportunities, such as public transport, walking and cycling. Urban development initiatives that focus on reducing the need to travel (e.g. by increasing the local availability of services in mixed use developments) and make walking and cycling more viable alternatives are an important part of the resolution of this issue. Carbon compensation arrangements for households will also assist reduce the risks of carbon pricing for outer suburban households.
6. Improving Local Public Transport

6.1 Types of Improvements

Most local public transport services in the Interface Councils are route bus services financially supported by the State Government. A major focus of improvements has been increasing the frequency of service, extending hours of operation and providing services seven days a week, to provide people with a viable public transport choice.

Although service level issues are justifiably a major concern for this inquiry, a range of wider improvements should also be mentioned. Improvements in the physical accessibility to public transport vehicles and infrastructure have clear benefits for those with physical impairments and have a clear role in an ageing population. A holistic approach to access is often required including consideration of walk access to stops and stations as well as within vehicles. Walk access paths can of poor quality in Interface Council areas and can also create barriers to access.
Initiatives to improve information quality and distribution clearly play a role in improving access for the community. It is likely that a wider group of residents who don’t presently use public transport will need to use these services into the future.

Fare policies including concession and ticketing measures are also a concern in relation to transport needs. Affordability is a barrier to those on lower incomes, so policies that target lower fares to these groups has a value in addressing needs.

The Interface Councils can themselves play a direct role in addressing walk access improvements and to some extent information initiatives. Local government is close to the community and often runs facilities that can disseminate information such as timetables.

Access, information or fare initiatives have a place in addressing transport needs but play a more secondary role to the general level of service provided. For the Interface Council areas in particular access, information and fare policy initiatives are of no value unless a basic service is provided.

6.2 Bus Service Levels

The Interface Council areas have a substantially lower level of public transport service provision than the rest of Melbourne, as illustrated in Section 3, and parts of the IC lack any service at all. Bus is the primary form of public transport in IC areas, so our discussion focuses on this mode. Figure 8 shows that a far higher proportion of bus services in outer Melbourne (in May 2009) were either not operating seven days a week or were operating at what is called “local 7” service level, which is less than what has come to be regarded as the ‘safety net minimum service level’ (MSL). That safety net MSL is essentially the availability of public transport service within 400 metres of residences, at:

- weekday frequency of at least one hour from 6.00am to 9.00pm start of last run (later finish on Friday evening)
- Saturdays at least hourly from 8.00am to 9.00pm
- Sundays at least hourly from 9.00am to 9.00pm.
Over the past few years, Melbourne has seen a significant upgrade in the quality of its bus services. This results from the State Government’s *Meeting our Transport Challenges* (MOTC) policy and programs. Two particular areas of improvement of relevance for IC areas have been:

1. the rollout of increased SmartBus services, which are mainly orbital trunk services operating at high frequency;
2. upgrading local bus services to achieve the safety net minimum service level, which is sufficient to ensure that most people have the chance to travel for most purposes at most times.

Relative patronage growth (28% cumulatively) over the period since 2005-06 has approximately equalled growth in service kilometres (26%), which is a strong result and is more than double the growth that might be expected from experience observed internationally.

### Local Bus Service Upgrades

Between 2006 and mid 2008, 102 existing bus routes were upgraded to the safety net MSL and a further 15 new routes were introduced. It has been suggested that the strong rate of patronage growth on local bus services is possibly due to the hourly service frequency for seven days a week, across 12-15 hour service spans, resulting in service levels passing a critical
threshold in service quality (Loader and Stanley 2009). Fuel prices and mortgage interest rates were both high a few years ago. Bus patronage (on average), however, declined in outer areas on bus services that did not run seven days a week. It grew strongly on those services that met the safety net MSL standard. These divergent results support the idea that the safety net service standard achieves a critical usage threshold. By implication, completing the roll-out of safety net MSL bus service levels across the IC area can be expected to lead to solid patronage growth.

Since mid-2008, BusVic points out that there have been very few further upgrades of local bus routes to the safety net MSL service standard. Over 140 regular routes did not meet this standard as at July 2010, with 102 (or 35% of all routes) having no Sunday service. **Achieving the safety net MSL should be a major policy focus for government.**

At the same time, government should implement those further bus service upgrades that have been proposed in the recent comprehensive set of Department of Transport Bus Service Reviews but not implemented. Analysis by BusVic (2010b) suggests that the rate of implementation of the recommendations from those reviews for upgrades of service spans, frequency and routing, as they relate to IC areas (and some neighbours), has been as follows:

- Hume/Moreland 31%;
- Banyule/Nillumbik 29%;
- Whittlesea 49%;
- Hobson’s Bay/Wyndham 52%;
- Frankston/Mornington 25%;
- Knox/Maroondah/Yarra Ranges 5%;
- Brimbank/Melton/Hume/Moonee Valley 22%;
- Casey/Cardinia/Greater Dandenong 20%.

These numbers indicate that there is still much to do. Much of the requisite upgrade will involve improving service levels in IC areas, to at least achieve the safety net MSL. BusVic economic research, using the $20 trip value that was cited in Section 2 above, shows that services that meet the MSL will typically be economically warranted (Stanley JK 2010).

**Trunk Bus Service Upgrades**

Trunk (or mass transit) bus service upgrades in Melbourne in recent years have focused on continuing the roll-out of the SmartBus network, together with delivery of the Doncaster Area Rapid Transit (DART) project. A future Bus Rapid Transit service has also been recently been announced for the Mernda corridor.

Most SmartBus services are orbital trunk bus services that operate at 15 minute peak headways and 30 minutes at other times, from 5.00am until midnight. However, the western suburbs are poorly supplied, having just one SmartBus route, and BusVic (2010a) has identified that there are many other corridors in outer Melbourne in which SmartBus service levels would
significantly improve opportunities for public transport travel. In terms of the IC areas, these include:

- an upgraded service connecting Sandringham, Southland, Cheltenham, Dandenong, Fountain Gate and Berwick via Bay Road, Centre Dandenong Rd, Cheltenham Rd, Frawley Rd and Princes Highway, connecting four train lines and several major shopping centres;
- an upgraded service between Frankston and Fountain Gate via Cranbourne and Narre Warren, connecting three train lines and several activity centres;
- a new SmartBus service along the Western Highway and Ballarat Rd, connecting Caroline Springs, Sunshine, Footscray and the Melbourne CBD. This would involve a consolidation of some existing services to provide a simplified high frequency route;
- upgrading route 693 from Ferntree Gully to Oakleigh and Chadstone shopping centre;
- extending route 900 (Caulfield to Rowville via Monash Clayton) to Ferntree Gully.

Funding for expanding the SmartBus network roll-out is due to run out in 2011. Further network improvements will require additional funding, of both service provision and selected bus priority treatments, to help ensure reliable travel times (important in attracting patronage).

In addition to these trunk SmartBus upgrades, two Bus Rapid Transit initiatives in Melbourne’s north are worthy of close attention. These are:

1. an Epping North BRT, from Epping station through Aurora to Craigieburn Rd;
2. from Broadmeadows station to Craigieburn Station, via Aitken Boulevard (in City of Hume).

7. Conclusions

There is a very strong case on equity grounds for continuing to improve bus services in outer areas of Melbourne. These areas have relatively higher transport needs than inner/middle suburbs but lower levels of public transport service available. Research by BusVic has shown that improving bus service levels in these areas will produce substantial economic benefits, as well as improving social outcomes.

The major priorities in the Interface Council areas, in relation to improving bus services should be to:

- ensure minimum service level standards are enforced and upgrades to local bus services applied in line with the timing of urban development, rather than lagging behind development. This will help to reduce problems of ‘transport poverty’ and promote social inclusion and well-being. The submission identifies relevant ‘safety net’ service levels;
• ensure proposed bus service improvements recommended for the region as part of the Department of Transport’s Bus Service Reviews are implemented. The submission identifies gaps in this regard;
• support implementation of targeted Smart bus improvements, particularly to improve access to jobs and services. The submission has identified a number of priority corridors for improvement in this regard.

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References


