Question on Notice

No. 1636

Asked on Thursday 30 October 2008

MR WETTENHALL ASKED THE MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT, TRADE, EMPLOYMENT AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS (MR MICKEL) —

QUESTION:

(1) Will he outline what analysis his department has carried out on the feasibility of utilising existing rail networks between Gordonvale to Cairns and Cairns to Redlynch and Kuranda for commuter services or conversion to light rail?

(2) Why was a bus-based transit system adopted as the preferred mode of public transport in the Cairns Transit Network?

ANSWER:

I am advised :

The Cairns Transit Network project implements strategies from the *Cairns Integrated Public Transport Plan*, which was endorsed by both state and local government in 2005. The *Cairns Integrated Public Transport Plan* was a joint project of Queensland Transport, Department of Main Roads and Cairns City Council. The strategies in this plan were developed with extensive public consultation over several years.

When developing the *Cairns Integrated Public Transport Plan*, the project team and community reference group considered a range of technologies that could deliver the service levels needed to shift trips to public transport. Key requirements included frequent services (every 5-10 minutes), competitive travel times, cost effectiveness (to keep fares affordable), passenger comfort, system reliability and ease of using public transport.

The project team and community reference group acknowledged the community's stated preference for a rail-based system. However, when objectively considering the benefits and limitations of different technologies, it became clear that a bus-based rapid transit system would deliver better outcomes for the city of Cairns. The reasons for this decision are documented in the *Cairns Integrated Public Transport Plan 2005* and the accompanying Technical Report, which are publicly available documents. However, I would like to take this opportunity to review the key reasons why the state, council and the community reference group endorsed a bus-based rapid transit system for Cairns.

The existing railway line is a single track with few opportunities for overtaking, passing or stabling of trains. As a result, it is essentially fully utilised by existing daily passenger and freight services. To use this line for commuter services would require duplication of the railway line. Even with duplication, the railway line could not provide the service levels required to make public transport an attractive alternative to the private car.

The location of the existing railway line does not match the travel demands in Cairns city. It is distant from residential uses in the southern corridor and does not penetrate north of the Barron River at all. The existing line is therefore unsuitable for servicing large sections of

Cairns city, including the Mount Peter growth area, southern suburbs between Mount Peter and Earlville, western and central Cairns, Smithfield, James Cook University or the Northern Beaches. To deliver the required service levels, new railway lines would need to be extended into these neighbourhoods. Not only would this be more costly than constructing busways, but constructing new railway lines would also have far greater impacts on the community.

Bus-based systems also provide additional benefits. For example, buses can leave the dedicated network to travel on any road, making them inherently more flexible and responsive. This feature allows a "same-seat journey" with local buses picking up in a neighbourhood and then entering the network for a rapid journey to the destination. Research has established that transfers are a major disincentive for public transport and that systems which offer same-seat journeys are more successful.
Because buses can also run off the network, these systems can be built in stages, whereas a rail-based system requires an entire line to be constructed before the first service can run.

The settlement pattern of Cairns would not support high frequency rail services. Research and modelling indicates that the key to achieving greater public transport use is providing services every 5-10 minutes so that no timetable is required. At these frequencies, public transport begins to compete with the private vehicle for convenience. Bus-based systems provide more frequent services than rail-based systems, particularly in small cities or those with dispersed, low-density neighbourhoods such as Cairns. The projected population of Cairns would not support high frequency rail services.

Finally, bus rapid transit is unarguably more cost effective than light rail transit. The costs of construction and operation of bus-based systems is generally half that of rail-based systems – while delivering equal or better service levels for low density populations. By delivering a high quality, high speed public transport system cost effectively, we can keep fares affordable for the travelling public. For this reason, cities around the world are favouring innovative bus rapid transit systems over conventional rail systems. Cities which have recently chosen bus rapid transit include Beijing, Jakarta, San Diego, New York, Las Vegas, Denver, Los Angeles, Miami and Boston.

The Cairns Transit Network is being designed for maximum flexibility to suit a rapidly changing world. The corridor width and geometry will allow conversion to light rail if desired in the long term future. The corridors we are protecting today will be able to accommodate new technologies in the future.