

Lessons for Sydney from Olympic Transport

Mark Diesendorf

email: mark@sustainabilitycentre.com.au

Sydney during the Olympics has been a better city to live and travel around in. There are fewer cars on the roads, the air is cleaner, and trains and public buses are running at all hours of the day and night. In central Sydney, we now enjoy wide footpaths and outdoor places where people may congregate and stroll without being exposed to the fumes, noise and physical dangers of motor vehicles.

So far, despite a few buses becoming lost or hijacked, public transport has performed remarkably well. Hundreds of thousands of people have been transported to and from Olympic venues daily. Many of us Sydney-siders are still travelling to work by public transport in reasonable travel times, provided that we avoid the peak periods.

There can be no doubt that the best way of moving large numbers of people between major destinations is by rail. We are fortunate that decades of under-funding has not quite decimated Sydney's rail network. But, as many rail commuters are aware, antiquated equipment and inadequate maintenance had already pushed the system to its limits before the Olympics.

Much credit for Olympic transport must go to those who insisted that there would be very few parking places at the venues and that the cost of public transport for spectators would be included in the tickets to the events. No doubt the champions of this strategy had to struggle against the now discredited conventional wisdom that the principal means of transport in the cities of today must be by private car. However, the folly of that approach was demonstrated by the minority who attempted to drive to some of the minor venues and became stuck in local traffic jams of their own creation.

It must be recognised that part of the improved urban environment during the Olympics has resulted from many Sydney-siders being on holidays. To maintain a similar environment after the Games, we have to discourage unnecessary car use in areas that are (or could be) served well by public transport, walking and cycling, and insist that the State and Local Governments rapidly improve the infrastructure for these healthier modes of transport.

Additional funding is essential for maintaining and upgrading Sydney's railways. The State Government could obtain this by removing *de facto* subsidies to aluminium smelting, implementing mass-distance charges on heavy trucks travelling in populous areas, and increasing taxes on car parking in central Sydney and the sub-centres that are well served by public transport.

Although transit lanes are now clearly marked in a strong earthy colour, they are not adequately enforced. After the Games, new transit lanes should be created on major bus routes and controlled with video-cameras. Outside the city centre and sub-centres, most transit lanes could revert to peak periods only, to assist small businesses along main roads.

In theory, a network of arterial bicycle routes was created to the main Olympic venues. However, in practice, these were identical with the crowded transit lanes and most were much too dangerous for cyclists. After the Games, the construction of safe routes should proceed rapidly, by advancing the implementation of Sydney's Bikeplan 2010 to 2005.

Inner Sydney and the sub-centres at Parramatta and Chatswood need local light rail networks to carry passengers over medium distances at ground level. Light rail emits less local air pollution, has greater passenger capacity and faster loading, and occupies narrower lanes than buses. In the centre and sub-centres, light rail should have its own transit lanes and should replace buses, rather than compete with them. This means that interchanges between light rail and buses should be moved to edges of the centre and sub-centres.

Without delay, the existing light rail line should be extended from Central to Circular Quay and from Lilyfield to Leichhardt, carrying out construction in short stages to give minimum disruption to local traders. In addition, new light rail lines should be built rapidly on densely travelled routes such as Oxford St, Anzac Pde, Broadway, City Rd, King St Newtown and Parramatta Rd.

Sydney badly needs integrated ticketing and fares for public transport, so that passengers are charged according to distance travelled (except in the central area where a flat fare is appropriate) and are not charged extra for transfers between modes or between publicly and privately operated services. This could be implemented by means of extensions to the existing travel pass system.

In the low-density outer suburbs, the State Government deserves credit for beginning a program of busway construction. This will be more effective if the busways and existing private bus services are required to integrate better with railways and with each other. Indeed, reform of the private bus system is long overdue. With integrated timetabling and better services, both the community and operators would benefit.

The Olympics have given us a glimpse of a better city. So, let's follow the example of our fine athletes, and do the necessary groundwork for successful performance.

An edited version of this article was published under the title 'Public transport a winner, and should remain so', in *Sydney Morning Herald* of 4 October 2000.