

## **Statement by Gold Coast City Council**

### **Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee Inquiry into Public Transport**

#### **Background**

With a population just under 500,000 people, Gold Coast City is Australia's sixth largest city, and Gold Coast Council is Australia's second largest local authority. The City's population continues to grow at 3% to 4% per annum. In addition, there is a minimum of some 70,000+ overnight visitors in the city at any time.

Mobility in Gold Coast City is based almost wholly on the private motor car. Overall, car ownership is very high, although in parts of the city along the coastal corridor, typically 15% to 23% of permanent resident households do not have a car available to them. There is an extensive modern road system across the city, provided by the Queensland Government (about 400 km of State Controlled roads) and Council (in excess of 4,000 km of local roads).

The provision of public transport in Queensland is generally a State responsibility. In Gold Coast City, public transport services, provided by a sole State-contracted private bus company and by the Queensland Railways railway line from Brisbane to Robina, account for only about 3% to 4% of daily travel. There is an extensive system of Council-provided cycleways and footpaths, catering mainly for shorter-length trips.

Gold Coast City faces the highly inter-related problems of very rapid population growth, increasing traffic congestion, heavy reliance on private vehicles for mobility, the lack of a suburban rail system (which typically would be found in any city of this size, usually resulting from a previous time before there was widespread car ownership and use), a lack of all types of infrastructure (including social infrastructure) and a lack of financial resources to meet the myriad demands of a growing community, which also faces some particular issues such as climate change, environmental impacts, potential energy shortages and a global financial crisis

Road congestion is growing, and many parts of the road system are under pressure. There are physical, financial and environmental limits to the amount of additional capacity that can be provided in the road system, particularly in the most highly developed parts of the city.

Council's City Transport Plan, developed by Council in conjunction with the relevant State agencies, envisages that public transport use in Gold Coast City, as a proportion of all trips taken, will need to grow to 7% by 2011 and 15% by 2031. This implies massive patronage growth from about 37,000 passengers each day in 1995, to about 300,000 passengers each day in 2031.

Council is firmly of the view that the public transport system should provide for a significantly greater amount of the City's travel needs, that the public transport system needs to be expanded and improved if the City is to avoid an unacceptable transport situation, and that Council will work with the Queensland Government to ensure that this can be achieved.

Council is also of the view that its public transport partnership with the Queensland Government is essential if the city is to continue to grow, if residents and visitors are to have the benefits of a comprehensive public transport system, and if the environmental and social benefits that can accrue from public transport are to be obtained. Council's public transport partnership with the Queensland Government comes with a very significant cost to Council, making Gold Coast City Council almost unique in Queensland (and probably within Australia) as a local government funding public transport infrastructure and services.

Consistent with this partnership approach, Council is progressing a range of initiatives aimed at improving public transport in the City. Details of these are as follows -

### **Gold Coast Rapid Transit Project**

The GCRT is a partnership project being planned and implemented by the Queensland Government and Gold Coast City Council. It will provide a high capacity, fast, efficient, comfortable and environmentally sustainable public transport service in a corridor initially from Griffith University to Broadbeach, with extensions north and south to Helensvale and Burleigh Heads, to cater for major public transport needs in this corridor. The project is planned to be operational by late 2012, and it will serve an array of major land uses and destinations, in the most densely developed part of Gold Coast City.

A Concept Design and Impact Management Plan (CDIMP) and a Business Case have been completed for the project. The Queensland Government has endorsed the route and the choice of light rail as the mode. There has been extensive community consultation about the project, including very detailed involvement with local residents, community groups, business groups and other interested parties. There is widespread industry interest in potential involvement with the delivery of the project.

The project will be developed by the Queensland Government as the lead agency, with strong support, including direct funding, from Gold Coast City Council. Detailed submissions have been made to Infrastructure Australia,

seeking Commonwealth funding towards the cost of the project. Gold Coast City Council has resolved to provide an initial \$120m to the project, with a further \$30m available for the extensions listed above. Under the State's Value for Money Framework, there may also be an opportunity for the private sector to join in the design, construction, operation and funding of the project - this is a matter for the State to decide.

The GCRT is planned to commence operations between Griffith University and Broadbeach late in 2012. The full development of the system to Coolangatta (including to the Gold Coast Airport) and to other major centres such as Robina is likely to take many years.

The GCRT is projected to increase overall public transport use in Gold Coast City to about 7% in 2012, and to 10.5% by 2026. Any further increases beyond this will need further significant investments in light rail (or other forms of public transport infrastructure) and services.

### **Other Public Transport issues facing Council.**

GCCC has been working for the past five years in a growing partnership with the State Government to improve the bus-based public transport services in the city. This partnership is unique among Queensland Councils outside of Brisbane. The scheme provides direct financial assistance to the State, to pay for the provision of improved bus services throughout the City.

Council currently provides about \$5m per annum in a direct financial payment to the State for additional bus routes and additional services. This is about 10% of the total gross cost of providing the bus service on the Gold Coast. This initiative ensures at least a basic minimum standard of bus service, seven days a week, across all developed residential and commercial areas of the city. As noted above, Council also will be a major financial contributor to the costs of providing the Gold Coast Light Rail system, to be developed in the period from now to 2012.

In a rapidly growing city, public transport services need to be provided to emerging communities from the very early stages of development. This helps to overcome any sense of isolation, as well as showing to residents that there are viable alternatives to the private car for many journeys. Bus services also need to operate seven days a week, and outside peak periods, to provide travel options for journeys other than the journey-to-work.

Prior to Council's financial involvement, bus services on the Gold Coast were of varying quality, ranging from a 24/7 high frequency service along most of the coastal strip, to infrequent weekday services, to no service at all in many suburban areas.

GCCC also operates a Council Cab service, to provide a form of low-cost door-to-door public transport service to local supermarket shopping centres, for elderly (60+) and disabled residents. The fare is \$2 each way, and travel

is provided through the use of shared taxis. The cost of the Council Cab service not recovered through the fares is about \$100,000 per annum, and this is funded by Council.

Council is also investigating how other forms of tailored public transport may be able to increase public transport use, perhaps through the provision of a Dial-a-Bus type service. A trial is being developed for consideration in the 2009-10 budget, in conjunction with the State government.

### **Gold Coast Railway Extension**

Council has always supported initiatives aimed at the further staged extension of the Gold Coast Railway south from Robina. The railway provides an important public transport function, primarily for trips between the Gold Coast and Brisbane, but over the future years, it is expected that it will provide an increasingly important link for public transport trips contained wholly within Gold Coast City.

As the development and funding of the Railway is considered by Council to be a matter for the State (and potentially the Commonwealth), Council will leave the issue for the State to raise with the Committee.

### **Funding of Public Transport Initiatives**

Funding to provide services to the community is always a major issue for local governments, especially where there are major growth pressures. In an effort to provide more funding for transport, and to meet some of the transport needs that were previously unfunded and unmet, Council introduced a Transport Levy in 2004-05, commencing at \$15 per rateable property. By 2008-09, the Levy had risen to \$79 per property, with an additional component included in the commercial differential rate. This currently raises about \$22m per year, and it funds about 20% of Council's overall transport expenditures.

To meet the cost of Council's contribution to the proposed Light Rail system, and the growing cost of some of Council's other transport initiatives, Council will need to increase its debt levels and use potentially increased Levy revenues to meet the resulting Interest & Redemption costs.

### **Commonwealth Funding of Public Transport in Gold Coast**

Gold Coast City Council has made many calls for greater Commonwealth involvement, including funding, to assist with the development of the City. Since the end of the Better Cities Program in the mid-1990s, there has been essentially no Commonwealth funding directed to public transport initiatives in this City. The hugely successful Beenleigh to Robina railway line was part-funded by the Commonwealth's Better Cities Program. Since then, it has

spurred and guided the development of major urban growth in the corridor. This growth continues to occur, and the Railway provides an essential major public transport facility linking the Gold Coast to Brisbane.

The previous Commonwealth Government provided \$650,000 to assist with early planning and investigation for the Light Rail project, but the major need now is for capital funding to support the implementation of the public transport infrastructure the City lacks. As noted above, the Queensland Government has sought Commonwealth funding from Infrastructure Australia, to join with Council and the State in the implementation of the Light Rail project.

At a time when other development projects are stalling, as Council experiences a significant decline in development applications and infrastructure charge revenues, as unemployment rises, and congestion is increasing, the Gold Coast Light Rail is ready to proceed. It has community support, business support, Council support and State support; it is ready to proceed.

## **The Gold Coast and the Committee's Terms of Reference**

### ***TOR 1. An audit of the state of public passenger transport in Australia***

In summary, public transport services in the Gold Coast are generally very basic. They provide for only a very small proportion of trips, and are mostly bus-based. This is probably the main consequence of the facts described in TOR 2 below.

### ***TOR 2. Current and historical levels of public investment in private vehicle and public passenger transport services and infrastructure***

Apart from the development of the Gold Coast Railway, there has been little public investment in fixed infrastructure for public transport in Gold Coast City. In recent times, there has been the development of some relatively short lengths of Bus Lanes (funded by the Queensland Government) and improved passenger waiting and interchange facilities (funded by Gold Coast City Council).

However the most important aspect of this for the Gold Coast is Council's commitment to a very major investment in public transport (light rail) infrastructure of up to \$150m over the next five to six years, and Council's ongoing commitment to subsidise public transport (bus) operations within Gold Coast City. Council is currently spending about \$5m per annum for this purpose and has committed to maintain this. It is likely that this expenditure could further increase in future, subject to annual budgetary considerations.

***TOR 3. An assessment of the benefits of public passenger transport, including integration with bicycle and pedestrian initiatives***

The benefits of greater use of public transport are evidenced through increased mobility, reduced traffic and parking demands, reduced environmental emissions, a more compact and cohesive urban form and improved local environments. The proposed Gold Coast Light Rail provides the opportunity to make a quantum leap improvement in public transport services, and to achieve major other benefits for the community.

Council has taken some planning and cycle path capital works actions, and is considering a range of operational initiatives that would serve to better integrate walking, cycling and public transport use into a more seamless transport option. These could potentially include end-of-trip facilities, additional bridge linkages, a cycle hire scheme and the carriage of bicycles on public transport services outside of peak periods.

***TOR 4. Measures by which the Commonwealth Government could facilitate improvement in public passenger transport services and infrastructure***

Within Gold Coast City, the main need is for additional funding to assist with the scope and timeliness of major investments for the implementation of projects such as the Gold Coast Light Rail and the future extension of the Gold Coast Railway to Coolangatta.

Gold Coast City Council has taken a significant role in public transport funding and would welcome Commonwealth involvement.

***TOR 5. The role of Commonwealth Government legislation, taxation, subsidies, policies and other mechanisms that either discourage or encourage public passenger transport***

Council is of the view that there is an important role for the Commonwealth through engagement with local governments, particularly those larger local governments that have a wider perspective and provide for a larger range of responsibilities. It is considered that there would be numerous Commonwealth objectives that could be advanced through a closer relationship with local governments, and through the funding of specific programs and initiatives at the local level.

***TOR 6. Best practice international examples of public passenger transport services and infrastructure***

The Gold Coast Light Rail is proposed to be similar in many respects to modern European light rail systems, in similar sized cities such as Strasbourg and Montpellier in France. These are recognised to be world-class public transport systems, highly successful and catalytic in their beneficial impact on those cities.

Because of the unique distribution of land uses in Gold Coast City, the spread of urban centres, the large tourist population (many without cars) and the associated patterns of travel that result, the Business Case for the Light Rail has highlighted the very efficient nature of the Light Rail system and its likely strong patronage growth in the coming years. It is expected that the Gold Coast Light Rail will be of national and international interest, as an exemplar for other cities.