

BIC Column June 2012

I normally start this column with a little commentary about the goings on in Parliament over the last month. The aim is to provide readers with a “view from Canberra”, but the events of the last month have been so unedifying that I would need a shower afterwards.

To depart from the usual I am going to focus on Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), which is in essence a mass transit system that uses buses and existing roadway infrastructure.

BRT comes in many shapes and forms from separated right of way lanes and signalling which creates a light rail on wheels to light signalling systems and partial road use priority to improve the travelling speed of buses ahead of other road users.

What is common to all types is that BRT is the “little train that could”.

BRT can deliver high speed mass transit at a fraction of the cost of light and heavy rail systems. BRT systems on average cost about a third of light rail systems.

BRT can deliver significant patronage increases along routes where it is employed. This was seen in Australia through the O-Bahn and Busways systems.

BRT can use existing road infrastructure or be built with a view to future capacity expansion. A BRT system can provide a quick fix solution or can be built with a capacity to retrofit light rail in the future when public transport, as a result of the effectiveness of BRT, has become part of the culture in an area.

BRT can integrate seamlessly and flexibly into the rest of the bus network. Vehicles can be moved off the BRT system to where they are needed to cope with sudden increases in demand and services can be shifted on to alternate routes in the event of traffic disruption.

BRT can provide solutions to address demand on specific corridors and provide a solution for a whole urban public transport system.

We have one of the best examples of a BRT system in the world right on our doorstep in the Brisbane Busways system. The Brisbane Busways system attracted a 56 per cent growth in patronage in the areas it serviced with more than a quarter of them being people who previously drove.

This represents a 14 per cent modal shift from cars to public transport and the figures tell us you only need a five per cent modal shift on a corridor to reduce traffic flow during peak times to school holiday levels.

BRT is effective, flexible, fast and comfortable, but the key battle BRT faces is in the hearts and minds of the public and through them their elected representatives, the people who control the purse strings.

There is a tendency in public transport infrastructure decision making to favour the romanticism of rail over the practicality of BRT, but in the current economic climate romance comes at too high a price. This is the time where the best bang for buck should be the priority of all governments.

While the Commonwealth Government's investment into the Gold Coast Light Rail represents an unprecedented and welcome investment in public transport, we have cause to wonder now, when the money is tight, what else could have been achieved with the spend on this project.

Through our lobbying and marketing the BIC has ensured BRT is on the radar of all governments.

Recently we have seen the announcement of a BRT system for Cairns, work commence on the construction of the North East Busway in Brisbane and the ACT Government is making moves towards the development of a BRT system in Canberra.

The BIC aims to capitalise on this momentum by running a BRT study tour of the US and Canada this year. Our attendees will include key decision makers from government.

After the tour we will present a report to all governments that will examine the BRT Systems visited during the study tour and identify a best practice model for implementing BRT systems in major cities and regional centres around Australia. The BRT model is an excellent fit for the old country town design of Australia's regional centres.

The BIC National Conference in October will feature a report back from the BRT Study Tour with one of our guest speakers for the Conference from the American Public Transportation Association. It will be a fun, informative and exciting session about what the future might hold for BRT in our cities and towns.

The Conference will run from Sunday 28 to Wednesday 31 October, registrations will open in July. Mark your diaries.