

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone

Melbourne—Tuesday, 30 June 2020

(via videoconference)

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WITNESS

Mr Richard Smithers, Team Leader, Transport Strategy, City of Melbourne.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone. I welcome any members of the public watching via the live broadcast. Hello to you, Mr Smithers.

Mr SMITHERS: Good morning.

The CHAIR: Before I begin, I would just like to read a bit about witness statements. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. However, any comment made outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments, but I ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes so that we can ensure plenty of time for discussion. Can I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise the effect of interference. If you have any technical difficulties at any stage, please disconnect and contact committee staff using the contacts you are provided with. Mr Smithers, I will ask that you please give your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and that you start your presentation.

Mr SMITHERS: Thank you very much, Chairman. My name is Richard Smithers. Chairman and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to present to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into Expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone and other matters. I am the Team Leader of Transport Strategy at the City of Melbourne, and I have worked there for just over 10 years.

I would like to emphasise first that the City of Melbourne's submission to the inquiry represents the views of management of the City of Melbourne, so the submission itself is not endorsed by the council. However, the material in the submission and the comments that I make today are based on adopted council policy, and that is largely represented by the City of Melbourne's *Transport Strategy 2030*. That strategy was adopted by the council in October 2019. It is the outcome of the largest community engagement process undertaken by the City of Melbourne. From April to July of 2018 we published eight discussion papers at intervals of every few weeks, seeking feedback on ideas and transport issues. These were backed by background research by independent experts and other evidence-based reports. More than 18 000 people visited the community engagement website, and we had 1275 submissions via the website survey and another 40 separate submissions. There were 700 000 people who were reached on social media. Then in June of 2019 the council adopted the draft strategy. That went out for further consultation, and we had another 400 survey responses and submissions, which were all analysed in detail. Sixty-one per cent of the comments were in direct support of the draft that we had put out, and 29 per cent of those comments led to specific changes which were adopted by the council in the final strategy in October.

The vision that the strategy outlines includes making Melbourne Australia's premier bicycling city. It has a vision for a safe, accessible and fast public transport system and enhancing Melbourne's walking economy by improving the walking network and giving people more space to walk. It is designed to deliver economic growth, improved sustainability and better access for the community by making the transport system as efficient as possible. It seeks to reduce the level of private vehicle trips into and around the city and to increase the number of trips by walking, bicycle and public transport.

In relation to the specific terms of reference for the inquiry, we think that prior to an expansion of the free tram zone there should be an investigation into the costs and benefits of the current free tram zone and any proposed expansion of the zone. The City of Melbourne's strategy notes the need for significant investment in the public transport network, including new routes, higher frequencies, better interconnections. It is not yet clear as to whether the free tram zone is the best use of public transport funds. Our submission did not address directly removing fares for full-time students or seniors, but we note research from Infrastructure Victoria which

suggests that concessions need to be very well targeted to improve equity and that blanket free fares for these groups may not necessarily achieve this. The City of Melbourne would support a thorough analysis of concession schemes to ensure that the best social equity outcomes are achieved.

The *Transport Strategy* considers there is a significant role for technology to improve the performance of transport networks. In particular in our submission we noted opportunities to improve the efficiency of the traffic signal network through reduced delays, especially in the central city for people walking, riding bikes and on public transport. These are the modes which move the majority of people into the city and the majority of people around the city.

The strategy also supports changes to fares, which would incentivise public transport use during off-peak periods to encourage off-peak travel where there is spare capacity. This is not strictly dynamic pricing, but it would help spread the transport demand into off-peak and shoulder periods for both private vehicle usage and public transport use, and it may save significant public money by avoiding the construction costs associated with new major infrastructure projects which are often required to deal with peak demand, so where that peak demand is high.

The strategy notes this could complement a road pricing scheme. Clearly the performance of on-road public transport is significantly affected by motor vehicle congestion. Giving people the opportunity to reduce their driving costs by travelling at off-peak times, for example, could have a significant positive impact on public transport performance by reducing congestion. In particular, without road pricing reform, the arrival of driverless cars, should this occur, could have serious effects on our road congestion. Again, we agree with Infrastructure Victoria that the optimal approach would be an integrated pricing system for the entire transport network. I hope these comments are helpful to the committee, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

Mr BARTON: Morning, Richard. Richard, can you just expand a little bit more on the work you have done around the technology and pricing structures to motivate people to move outside of the peak periods?

Mr SMITHERS: Well, I guess the City of Melbourne is not an expert analyst of the [Zoom dropout].

The CHAIR: Richard, we have lost you. We cannot hear you for some reason. It was perfect before, when you were giving your presentation, but we have just lost the sound. Can you have another go?

Mr SMITHERS: Hello. I think I am back on.

The CHAIR: You are. Perfect.

Mr SMITHERS: Sorry about that. We have looked at international research and international experience in relation to pricing to optimise the way that people use the network, and our research, I guess, is in the context of an entire transport strategy, so this strategy is holistic and covers a very wide range of transport matters, including where we think new extensions to the network are needed et cetera.

But it seems very clear that the best international experience is that there are opportunities to change the way that the pricing applies in peak and off-peak periods. We learnt on the work that Infrastructure Victoria has done on this, and it appears that there is significant potential in helping people to defer their travel to off-peak times. I think that there is also significant research in relation to road pricing and that in the areas where road pricing has been tried there have been quite a few successes where people have had the opportunity to transfer to a road-pricing scheme. That has in many cases reduced the cost to them of driving. Social equity concerns can be well managed, and then people receive a price signal so that they choose to drive in places which are less congested, they choose to use other modes, they go to different destinations, and they basically get a price signal to reduce the impact that their driving might have on the rest of the network.

We think that there is a long way to go but that essentially, if automation of vehicles continues, we will need some sort of a pricing system to manage what otherwise might be a significant influx of vehicles on the road system, because of course the road system is an uncontrolled system; anyone can drive at any time that they like, essentially.

Mr BARTON: The challenge of course is that they have to have an alternative, and that has got to be public transport. We are not going to get them out of their cars unless we give them something attractive to go to.

Mr SMITHERS: Yes, I would agree that we need continuing improvements to the public system and that there are a large number of ways that we could improve the public transport system, and our strategy goes into those in a fair bit of detail. We talk a bit about orbital services. For example, currently people have to use public transport to come into the central city and go out again when their destination is not one which is in the central city. That of course occupies valuable space on the system, perhaps at peak hour, and it would be much better if the interchange system was more sophisticated. People could avoid coming right into the central city.

I also agree that there are areas of Melbourne where the public transport system falls below what the international assessments would suggest is a reasonable basic service and that buses have the opportunity to fill in gaps in those places; and the city would support a significant investment in and improvement to the bus network.

Mr GEPP: Thanks, Mr Smithers, for your contribution today. I was particularly interested, when I was looking at your submission and your transport strategy, that the City of Melbourne seems to have had a bit of a focus on things such as widening walkways, reducing wait times at traffic lights—you know, removing that general sort of clutter. You say also in your strategy and in your submission that people in the free tram zone, rather than walk, tend to get on the tram and take a short tram trip because it is free.

I am just trying to tease out a little bit more about those strategies that the City of Melbourne have had, such as the widening of walkways et cetera, and how you are seeing those things impact on people's tendency to jump on the tram rather than take a short walk,

Mr SMITHERS: Well, I think the evidence in relation to whether people jump on the tram or not really comes from the tram operators and the fact that since the free tram zone has been in place there have been increases in the amount of time that it takes for those trams to load and unload and so they have moved more slowly through the central city. I think that there is also anecdotal evidence that we have from just talking to people in the city, but the evidence mostly comes from the tram operators.

In relation to the issue of traffic signals et cetera we think there is a significant opportunity to change the way the traffic signals operate. We think that in general reducing the amount of time for which they stay green would improve the performance of the tram network and the movement of pedestrians. If you take a north-south street through the city—for example, if you took King Street—you would find very long traffic signal cycles. So if you arrive at King Street heading towards Southern Cross station, say, heading west, if you just miss the lights as a pedestrian or as a tram—and the tram may have a couple of hundred people in it—then you have got a significant wait. You might wait 120 seconds or something like that before you get to cross the road. So in that wait time you get a larger number of pedestrians building up and then they do not get to move until obviously the green signal comes around.

In many jurisdictions around the world those signal cycle times are being reduced, so that wait time is reduced, and the signals cycle through more quickly, so you get more goes at the green, as it were. That is very good for trams because in the central city it is difficult for trams to run a timetable that is so precise that it can meet green lights—so providing more green opportunities, more windows, if you like, for the trams to move through. That also applies to buses as well as to people riding bikes, and it definitely applies to people walking. We have certainly had situations where a large number of people have gathered on the footpath in locations, such as in Spencer Street, King Street, where there is simply not enough room on the footpath, particularly for those people who are trying to get into the station, for example, in the evening—because it is when they are going into the station that they end up storing on the footpath, which is the City of Melbourne asset. So that is a strong theme in our strategy. We think that it would significantly reduce delays and increase the attractiveness of walking, and of catching trams for that matter.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Mr Smithers, for your presentation and your submission. I have just got one question, really, about what you have just spoken about, which is that increased cycle. I know you are keen for more people to walk rather than necessarily catch the tram or bus network. But people wanting to access public transport in a free scenario is a very, very popular method of getting around, and there is a lot of support for it. Would it necessarily then require an increase in services of the tram network? So if you have got faster

movement of traffic, people will miss a tram more likely at a stop and then they do not really want to be waiting for an extra 20 minutes or whatever it might be for the next tram to come along. Would we see a need to increase those public transport service frequencies?

Mr SMITHERS: Well, I would say we would see that and we would see a number of other impacts as well. The growth scenario on public transport has been very strong over the last several years, and the frequencies in the central city are the best anywhere on the network because you have multiple routes concentrating on single streets in the city. I think another impact of making the tram network very attractive by having a low price is that the stops themselves become very difficult to manage. So we have a number of stops where crowding, even in pre-COVID times, was at the point where the tram operator had to provide security staff to manage that crowding. Certainly there are circumstances in which a passenger can be at one end of a tram stop and unable to get to their tram at the other end of that tram stop simply because the crowd is too thick on that stop. So I think that we certainly need to be aware of the need to keep the trams moving through the central city. So the question arises as to what we will do about those stops, and clearly there are opportunities to build stops like we have in Swanston Street. That of course means a significant change to the way traffic moves in the city as well.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you very much. That answers it perfectly for me, thank you.

Mr TARLAMIS: I am happy to cede my time if someone else has got a question that they want to pursue.

Mr BARTON: I just want to talk about the numbers. There are often numbers being thrown around that we have had this huge growth in people using the free tram zone because it has become free in the last five years, but we have also got to take it in the context, I think, that we have had 500 000 people come into Victoria. We have had an amazing growth. This question of overcrowding, is this an operational question, as opposed to a philosophical one about whether people should get a free tram zone or not? On the overcrowding—and I think I mentioned it at the last hearing—I have certainly lived in the UK and travelled in peak hour in London. I have been on the Metro in Paris and into the main station in Rome. We do not have issues like they have issues. So I think we have got to put it in context, and what are the operational issues, as opposed to a philosophical view?

Mr SMITHERS: Yes, I think the operational questions are very important, and at the moment we have an overground tram system, so it runs subject to movement through the street network. It is not an underground system, which some cities have, which does not have to worry about pedestrians or cars on the street or anything like that. The challenge of addressing those operational issues, however, can be significant. I have heard suggestions, for example, of shuttle trams—so adding shuttle trams which just move through the city—to cope with extra demand. That in itself is not an insignificant thing to deliver—new pieces of track, there has to be capacity on those routes for those trams, and the capacity in the future as further growth occurs may mean that we need that space, those running slots, if you will, for other services. So I am not myself an expert on the operation of trams—I work for a council which has to be involved in all manner of the transport systems, all aspects of the transport system in Melbourne—but I do know that those operational questions can be quite challenging and there may or may not be easy and cost-effective answers.

Mr BARTON: I absolutely support the council's view about more people walking, more people cycling and all those things. Make no mistake—that is absolutely the goal. We have a section of our community, the elderly, those with disabilities, and we must not forget those in this consideration. So that is just a statement.

Mr GEPP: Mr Smithers, just a very quick one: what interaction have you had with the traders in the CBD in and around the free tram zone, if any, and what have been their views on the impact of the free tram zone? You may not have had any conversations with them about a proposed extension, but if so, what have their views been?

Mr SMITHERS: We have not canvassed directly the views of traders in relation to that.

The CHAIR: If there are no other questions, I might just thank you, Mr Smithers, for your contribution. I know it has been very informative, as a member of this committee but also as a resident of the City of Melbourne. So with two hats on, I really appreciate your presentation—very informative. Thank you for coming along today. It has been a pleasure.

Mr SMITHERS: Great. Thank you very much, and good luck in your deliberations.

Witness withdrew.