The Challenge for Passenger Transport in Greater Christchurch towards 2061 and Beyond

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In 2006 the population of the greater Christchurch area was around 415,000 people. A medium/high projection for the year 2061 puts the population at a little over 600,000 people and possibly a lot more. The 70,000 people or so now over the age of 60 will more than treble by 2061, to around 190,000. So, there'll be more of us and we'll be older. We'll also be spread across an area of some 1,400 square kilometres, with a dispersed set of origins and destinations for work, shopping, education and leisure. Whilst we can be fairly confident in such population projections, we cannot be so certain about the external drivers that will ultimately determine how and how well, we get around in the future. At the moment we have private cars as the dominant form of transport in our system, but will this always be the case? Certainly, there are many reasons why we should and do strive to exchange some of this dominance of the car for more travel by foot, bike and public transport. However this is primarily in the name of such aims as reducing growth in congestion, improving public health, or reducing the rate at which we have to invest scarce public funds in building more roads. Something that isn't well documented as an aim in our policies and plans at the moment is the growing realisation around the world of impending energy supply and demand issues. This concept popularly known as "peak oil", we are told, is approaching fast. Whilst we are doing the right thing by moving towards a more sustainable land use pattern that will reduce travel distances over time, there will always be a large amount of travel demand in the greater Christchurch area that cannot be met on foot and by bike. This leaves cars and public transport as the main people movers, but how sustainable (in the broadest sense) will they be in a challenging energy environment if they are still reliant on petrol and diesel? How will a larger and older population get around easily and affordably with fuel prices so high?

Some think technology and electric cars will come to our rescue and while it may save those who will be able to afford to buy them, I suspect it will remain too expensive for a long time to come for most people, leaving the majority of us exposed to rising and fluctuating petrol and diesel prices. Some also say significant investment in electricity generation would be needed to support any mass conversion to electric vehicles. Perhaps rather than relying on technology to save the private car, we turn this challenge into an opportunity, and plan now for a high class, grid connected public transport system with the capacity for mass movement of people. Currently in greater Christchurch our public transport system is dominated by a diesel powered fleet of modern, low floor, comfortable and attractive buses; and whilst buses will always play a part in the public transport system (eventually perhaps electric ones or a mix of new technologies), there will come a point in time where the demand along particular growth corridors will outstrip what can be practically and affordably catered for by any form of bus.

These drivers of energy and future demand present somewhat of a conundrum when planning for the future. Do we invest in the lead infrastructure ahead of demand (a supply led approach) so as to develop resilience to future energy shocks, or do we take a demand led approach, riding the peaks and troughs of future energy price volatility and take a reactive approach to developing public transport? In the context of the current economic situation and the transport funding challenges facing government and local authorities, I am sure a long term planned approach is preferable to an ad hoc, unplanned and ultimately economically painful and damaging head in the sand approach.

There is a need to gain acceptance from the community and business that energy is a major challenge to our future lifestyles and prosperity, and that change will happen soon. Once we have that acceptance, we need to use our planning and political processes to determine a planning approach that positions the greater Christchurch transport system on a path towards a resilient future that is capable of meeting people's needs in an affordable way.

The Regional Transport Committee, with political and community representatives, has recently embarked upon just such a process, with a new 30 year transport strategy under development between now and mid-2011. The first step is to define the issues the region's transport system will face over the next thirty years and what people will need from it. Currently the Committee is receiving views from the community and this will be taken into account as work proceeds towards evaluation of strategic options and the development of a draft strategy for public consultation around early 2011. Once finalised the strategy will form the blueprint for all regional and local transport planning that takes place in Canterbury and, subject to national priorities, will be an influential document for transport investment from central government. It is important therefore that a thorough evaluation of future energy challenges and our response to it is captured during its development, so that national, regional and local transport funding can be aligned with the preferred direction.

The Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy also has a role to play. Its vision for a sustainable and vibrant urban form is entirely consistent with a high class public transport system, however it is important that all planning documents pull in the same direction so that our transport system is optimally funded and effectively achieves both transport and urban growth objectives.

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