

THE CASE FOR INNER-SUBURBAN TRAIN STATIONS

Jane Brooks April 1999

Becoming a less car-dependent society

In Adelaide, a car is considered to be a necessity by many people. However, over half the population are too old, too young, too poor, not medically fit enough, or too afraid to drive. These people are, therefore, transport disadvantaged. If we adopt the vision of becoming a less car-dependent society i.e. one which has attractive alternative methods of transport, not only will there be greater social justice in our community, but also our lifestyle will become more sustainable and healthier

Ease traffic congestion

A suburban rail line is a great community asset, because it is a dedicated transport corridor. Trains are separated from road traffic, therefore are not held up in it. Trains do not add to road congestion, except when road traffic is stopped at level crossings. Despite the level crossings, trains actually reduce traffic congestion overall. just one 3000 series rail carriage filled to capacity could mean up to 150 fewer cars on the road!

A recent RAA survey (SA Motor Feb/Mar. 1999) showed that Belair/Unley and Goodwood Roads had unacceptably slow traffic flows at peak periods. If there were several hundred less vehicles on the road, surely that would help to ease the problem!

Train more appealing to a motorist than a bus

The people who either do not have cars or do not drive are already using public transport. Therefore the only way to increase patronage, hence reduce traffic congestion, is to attract new customers from amongst those who never or rarely use public transport. The ease of transit makes rail the mode of public transport most likely to attract people who currently use their cars for all their travel needs.

Adelaide is an extremely car-oriented city, in which people love the convenience of the private car. Attempting to persuade anyone to give up their car would be extremely unpopular. However, persuading them to use it a little less often is not such an impossible task.

Persuading busy people to exercise is difficult too, if nothing less than 30 minutes of sweat-producing vigorous exercise, several times a week, in addition to all their other commitments, is expected of them. However, it is now recognised that exercise is beneficial even in small amounts done more frequently.

People are much more likely to change their lifestyle if the first change recommended is small.

Why not take the same approach to using public transport? Why not aim for thousands of people to begin using the train occasionally?

Make rail system more accessible

If more people have access to a station, it is almost certain that there would be at least some occasions when catching the train would be more convenient for them than taking a car: e.g. for going to the Skyshow. People who become familiar with the railway system through recreational and social use may gradually become aware of other reasons to catch the train instead of driving.

More people within an easy walk to a station

Unfortunately, there are not many suburbs of Adelaide that have access to a rail line, and it would be very difficult and expensive to construct new lines. Therefore, the existing rail system should be accessible to as many people as possible. Not only should closed stations in suburban areas be re-opened, but also new stations should be built to service new development, e.g. at the Belair Line's Eden Hills passing loop.

People living near a suburban line should have a station within reasonable walking distance (a few minutes).

If people are forced to drive to a station because their local station has been closed, or because there is a large distance of several kilometres between stations, they will still be dependent on their car. If the train journey is short compared to the drive, they are likely to stay in their cars! The more people who can leave their cars at home when commuting, the better for the environment. People also get a little exercise during the walk to the station! The more people within walking distance of a station, the better for their health!

Trains most attractive where traffic is worst

It is in the inner suburbs, where the traffic is at its most congested, that the superiority of a rail service really becomes apparent. Even a train stopping at all stations is a much faster and less frustrating means of transport than a car crawling along in amongst the slow traffic. Inner suburbs should be regarded as a major source of potential rail patronage rather than areas to be excised from the rail system by station closures.

If patronage is low in the inner suburbs, passengers to the rail service, the actual service and marketing should be improved.

Residents of inner suburbs are not likely to find train travel attractive if the walk to the station, and the wait between trains, is three or four times as long as the time spent on the train! Ideally, they should not only have access to the service, but have one which is frequent!

A good rail service attracts people into the City

A book of strategies for reducing automobile dependence has been compiled by Australian urban planners Peter Newman, Jeff Kenworthy and Tom Lyons. It includes the statement: "Cities with a strong central area including a major residential component tend to be characterised by efficient and extensive rail systems, reduced parking, and significant areas set aside for pedestrians and other public activities".

The inner suburbs should be regarded as part of the "catchment area" for a strong city, and there should be such good access to a frequent rail service that residents rarely consider taking a car when going to the CBD.

Increase rail "catchment area" with feeder buses

The strategy of creating more bus interchange facilities at major stations will make rail lines useful even to those who do not live particularly close to them. For the people without access to a car, feeder bus services could provide transport to the station. In hilly suburbs it is difficult to walk even a short distance, and most Hills residents would need cars or feeder buses to get to a station safely.

It is silly to have a bus service duplicate a train service to the CBD, but where such duplication occurs, it should be the TRAIN which is kept for servicing the CBD. Buses should be used for feeding passengers to the rail service not as a substitute for a train station.

This strategy could help reduce the numbers of cars and buses needing to enter the CBD, resulting in less traffic congestion and diesel fume emission in the city of Adelaide.

Make more buses available where they are most needed.

It has already been noted that many Adelaide suburbs have no rail service. If closed suburban stations were reopened, buses to the CBD could be routed into those suburbs which are not served by rail lines, or into cross suburban networks which feed into the train stations!

Increase rail patronage

The strategies of increasing access to stations by foot, increasing stations' parking facilities ("Park and Ride"), and having buses feed stations, will make the existing rail system accessible to many more people. All these strategies should be employed if there is a genuine desire to increase rail patronage.

Reverse the negative strategy

The recent strategy employed by decision-making authorities has been to make our Belair Line service less and less accessible. In 1987, the Hills railway service to Bridgewater was axed, with Belair becoming the terminus. In 1995, Clapham, Hawthorn and Millwood stations were closed.

People using those stations were told that it was done because of low patronage and a desire to make the journey slightly quicker. People were told they could use buses to go to the CBD instead. The fact that the train was used a lot for reaching destinations outside the CBD (for which there were no bus services) was completely overlooked!

With some improvements to the track, and better timetabling, we could have retained system accessibility and a reasonable journey time!

A consequence of cutting the number of stations has been to make the line less and less useful; there are fewer destinations available. The less useful it becomes, the harder it will be to justify the cost of maintaining it. Decreasing access to a service speeds up a negative spiral: Restrict access - less patronage restrict service more still - less patronage and so on.

Increase marketing opportunities

Real estate agents should stress proximity to the rail service as a major attraction when selling homes. Ironically, more people are now living near the closed stations due to urban redevelopment, but the stations are still closed. The new residents are contributing their vehicles to the inner suburban road traffic!

Making frequent rail services as accessible to as many people as possible, followed by strong marketing of rail travel, would begin to turn the "spiral" the other way: Increase access - improve service - increase patronage - improve service more - increase patronage and so on. Train travel would become more likely to meet everyone's travel needs at least occasionally!

If rail patronage is low in some suburbs with access to a rail line, why not promote the variety of ways in which people could find the train useful, instead of closing stations and disadvantaging those who were using the train?

Greater variety of train trips possible with more stations available

There are all kinds of ways in which our Belair Line can be used in addition to the regular commute to work- or school. e.g: going to the Mitcham Shopping Centre; visiting the Belair National Park or Wittunga Botanic Gardens; travelling to the Showgrounds; cooling off in the Unley Swimming Pool; and visiting friends and relatives living along the Line.

The more places the train stops at, the more varied the trips can be. If the train stopped more frequently at Keswick, people could explore the Investigator Science Centre and transfer to interstate passenger rail. If trains stopped at Mile End outside peak period, people could get to the new Netball and Athletics facilities. If Millswood station was re-opened, people could go to community events and cultural productions held at "The Orphanage" (now owned by Tabor College). Parents could also take their children, with groups of friends, to "train treat" birthday parties with model steam train rides at S.A.S.M.E.E. Park, Millswood Crescent. If Hawthorn and Clapham were re-opened, there would be more passengers who could do all these things, and be visited by friends.

Greater access to scenic Hills railway

Our Belair Line follows a very scenic Hills route passing through two tunnels. It is the only suburban rail line in Adelaide with tunnels. Our Line should be valued by the whole of the Adelaide metropolitan area as a local attraction. like the Glenelg Tram and the O-Bahn.

Help change the image of public transport

By making our rail system more accessible, and marketing it well, we can become a less car-dependent community, in which. public transport in general is perceived as something that is there for everyone. Even if it is used only for special events, people will gradually become aware that public transport is not merely a form of welfare, therefore a burden on taxpayers.

If it is valued as an asset and used by the whole community, then public transport will also be more likely to meet the mobility needs of those who are reliant on it.

Long term benefits of encouraging rail patronage

There would be additional benefits other than reduced traffic congestion and greater social justice resulting from having the Belair Line more accessible. They include lower road construction and maintenance costs. less land use for car parks, fewer road accidents (fewer people exposed to traffic), reduced air pollution, less greenhouse gas emissions from cars, and less energy use. All these benefits provide more good reasons to retain suburban stations all over our metropolitan rail system. The benefits far outweigh the minute or so of journey time saved by closing a station.

Accepting station closures puts others at risk of station loss

If the permanent exile of some passengers, by station closure, is accepted by those not affected, then an undesirable precedent is set. There always is a station with "the least patronage", ready to be the next victim of the cost-cutting or minute-saving axe..

The "Big Picture ": a transport shift from Road to Rail

As many people as possible should be included in the pool of current and potential rail passengers in order for the Belair Line, and the whole Adelaide rail system, to become well patronised. We are all needed in the Big Picture, to achieve a gradual shift from road transport to rail.

Friends of the Belair Line 38 Malcolm St. Millswood S.A. 5034 Mobile phone: 0417 805 719
