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Public transport growth - why are we surprised?

For more than ten years growth in passenger boardings on Perth's public transport system have outstripped government forecasts. In June, the West Australian again reported that both transport advocates and government officials were 'surprised' at higher than forecast growth rates in 2012-2013, with annual patronage on track to surge past 150 million for the first time.

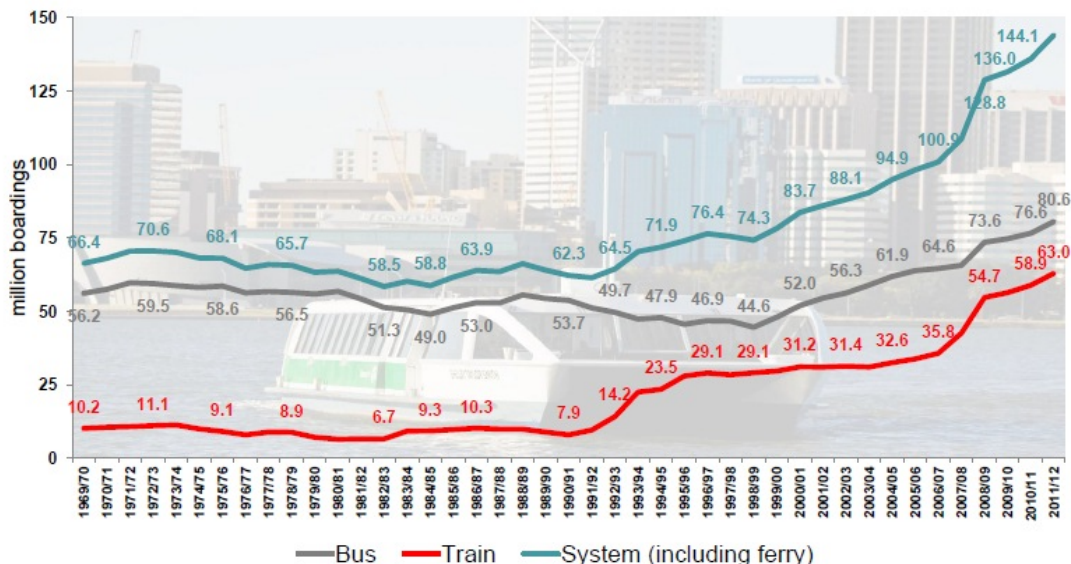
This means that annual growth has again exceeded the 3.85% per annum growth rate predicted in the State Government's 2011 Draft Public Transport Strategy.

The most obvious reason for this is that the Draft Public Transport Strategy was prepared using out of date and extremely conservative population growth forecasts - a problem which has now been recognised by the State Government and which it is working to rectify, with the release of an updated strategy.

Yet, given Perth's history of high public transport patronage growth, it is difficult to ascertain why our forecasts for the future continue to take a conservative approach to future public transport use, and therefore why we continue to be surprised by strong patronage growth.

Presenting at the Committee for Perth's November Perth In Focus event, Mark Burgess from the Public Transport Authority and Craig Woodridge of the Department of Transport, provided an overview of transit growth in Perth since the 1970's. It showed that total public transport boardings in the Perth region have been on the rise since the early 1990s, with a period of particularly strong growth over the past five years, coinciding with the most recent economic and population boom in the region.

Transperth Total Boardings



Source:
Burgess M, Woodridge C (2012)
Perth In Focus – Perth Public
Transport, Committee for Perth
www.committeeforperth.com.au

We know that Perth has a history of underestimating patronage on Perth's passenger rail lines. Patronage on both the northern suburbs and south-west lines has far exceeded expectations and infrastructure struggled to cope with demand within a short period after opening. This appears to be due to both underestimating demand as well as higher than expected population growth.

According to Minister for Transport, Troy Buswell, higher than expected patronage growth can be accounted for by both population growth, and through the delivery of a quality reliable service.

"It is no secret that Perth's population has been the driving force behind an increase in public transport patronage over the last five years" he said "I am also a strong believer that the quality and reliability of our system means that more people are moving away from cars and onto public transport".

This view is, the Minister added, supported by a survey from the respected (and independent) national pollster Canstar Blue. The survey, which was published just a few months ago declared Transperth's train services the best in the nation".

This is good news, however it is also evident that beyond simply population growth and quality of service is another major driver for the transportation shift – congestion.

Strongly related to population growth, the growth in Perth's congestion and commuter travel times over the past five years has been staggering.

The 2012 RAC Business Wise/CCI Congestion Survey revealed that 84% of business respondents believe that congestion is having a negative impact on their business. Sixty per cent (60%) of respondents said that congestion had added at least ten hours per week to their time on the road and one in five respondents said that their workers were now spending more than 50 hours additional time on the road compared to just twelve months prior.

Also in 2012 research by SatNav producers Tom Tom reported Perth to be the second most congested city in Australasia – behind Sydney.

Congestion is also predicted to increase. Figures outlined by Mark Burgess and Craig Woodridge suggest that the annual cost of avoidable congestion currently sits at about \$1.5 billion and this is expected to rise to \$2.1 billion by 2020 – close to \$1 billion per annum.

The annual cost of avoidable urban congestion in Perth is expected to be \$2.1 billion by 2020

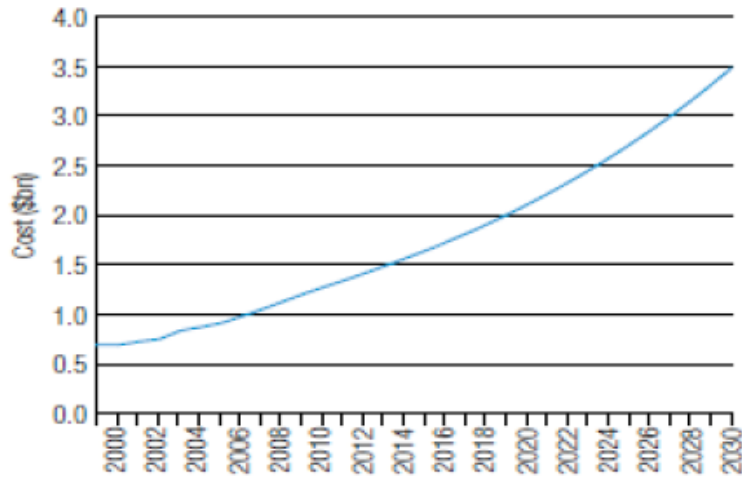


Figure 1: Projected estimates of social costs of congestion for Perth metropolitan area, 2000 to 2030

Source:
Burgess M, Woodridge C (2012)
Perth In Focus – Perth Public
Transport, Committee for Perth
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Together this suggests that congestion, driven by population growth, has been a major driver of the ongoing shift to public transport. It is also clear that congestion is not likely to ease and, if the region's population continues to grow, and the public transport system can keep pace, continued high rates of passenger growth could continue.

On a more positive front there is also a less tangible, but palpable, sense that Perth's people are perhaps more partial to public transport, and less wedded to their cars, than previously thought.

The State Government has begun to recognise that higher public transport growth rates could be here to stay, at last in the short term and Minister Buswell has advised that they expect that patronage on trains and buses will grow by about 5% over the next twelve months alone, with a lot of this extra demand falling in peak periods.

This is reflected in the boost in spending on public transport announced in the recent State Budget including \$432 million over the next four years for the \$1.9 billion MAX light rail service and \$174 million over the next four years for the \$2 billion airport rail link.

According to the Minister, “The Government is fully aware of the growth in demand for public transport services and that’s why we have committed to a vast range of projects and initiatives aimed at future proofing our system”.

“We have invested \$240 million to extend the rail line to Butler – a project which will see about 2000 passengers move through the station on the very day it is opened. Another \$330 million has gone toward sinking the Fremantle Rail Line through the city as part of the transformational Perth City Link project. We will also start work on sinking the Wellington Street bus station from next year – with the new station set to cater for demand for the next 30 years”.

“The growth in patronage also validates this Government’s decision to invest \$243 million on 66 new rail cars. The first of the new rail cars is set to arrive on our system later this year ultimately allowing more passengers to travel on our trains. This investment represents a massive 28% increase in the size of Transperth’s railcar fleet, from 234 to 300 railcars. There is no question that an investment of this magnitude will have a positive impact on the travelling public”.

“The Government has also progressively grown the Transperth bus network to a point that now exceeds an additional 6 million service kilometres per year. By 2016, bus service kilometres will have increased by 15 million additional service kilometres annually, representing an increase of 30%”.

Ultimately, however it is evident that limiting future surprises is about planning and investing ahead of growth, which means predicting it before it arrives.

We are hopeful that new, revised population forecasts should see key documents like the final Public Transport Network Plan, expected to be released in coming months, better equipped to stand the test of time.

Committee for Perth Action on Public Transport

The Committee for Perth has, since its establishment, played an active role in advocating for the development of a long term integrated public transport network for the Perth region that includes all modes of transport to ensure efficient movement throughout the region as well as to facilitate transit-oriented development.

The Committee believes that light rail is fundamental to achieving a fully integrated network and has played an active role in promoting light rail for Perth and progressing its planning by leading an alliance group of key stakeholders to drive the case for light rail.

This resulted in the provision of integrated light rail in the government’s Draft 20 Year Public Transport Plan for Perth 2031.

The Committee has also been active in identifying the best mechanisms to deliver light rail in the Perth region and has undertaken extensive international research into both existing and planned light rail systems and produced a report outlining the various venture capital funding mechanisms that could be considered in relation to developing light rail in Perth.

A full overview of the Committee’s research and advocacy activities can be found on our website.

The Committee for Perth remains committed to the delivery of an integrated transportation system for Perth and will continue to carefully monitor and report on the progress of new public transport initiatives as well as research, facilitate discussion and advocate for improved integration between our land use and transport planning systems with a goal of increasing opportunities for high quality, infill, transit-oriented development.



Our work is fully funded by our members and foundation partners who we acknowledge. A complete list of current members is available at www.committeeforperth.com.au

