

11 October 2006

Hon. Dr Michael Cullen
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

Dear Dr Cullen

Re: North Wellington Public Transport Study

In the House on 14 September 2006, during question time, Hon Peter Dunne asked a question about the Johnsonville rail corridor. The following exchange was reported:

Hon Peter Dunne: Can the Minister confirm ONTRACK's view that it strongly favours the retention of the rail service as being consistent with the National Rail Strategy and achievable at a cost of just \$5 million for upgrading the line, as opposed to conversion to a guided busway at a cost of up to \$115 million and at least 2 years with no service while the conversion is undertaken, even before any buses are bought; will the Government therefore point out to the Wellington City Council the sheer folly of its proposal to convert the Johnsonville line into a busway?

Hon Dr MICHAEL CULLEN: I am advised that ONTRACK strongly supports the retention of the line, and considers that the line should continue to be operated and further developed as a rail line. Neither ONTRACK nor the Government has received any proposal to convert the Johnsonville line into a busway. We would certainly not support that.

Hon Peter Dunne: Will the Minister give an assurance that in the event the councils do decide to proceed with that conversion, the \$115 million minimum cost of conversion to a busway would not be borne by taxpayers but would be a charge against the Wellington City Council, for it to then have to justify to its ratepayers?

Hon Dr MICHAEL CULLEN: As I have said, we have received no proposal. If we did receive a proposal with that sort of cost, I doubt very much that we would want to give it very serious consideration at all. I see no reason why the taxpayer should fund such a conversion.

As a result of the comments in the House, we are seeking clarification of whether the Government's preferred position is to retain rail on the Johnsonville Line. We have attached background information on the study for you to note.

Yours sincerely

Kerry Prendergast
Mayor, Wellington City

Ian Buchanan
Chair, Greater Wellington Regional Council

cc Hon Annette King

Background Information on the North Wellington Public Transport Study

The Study was prompted by the Land Transport New Zealand decision in November 2004 to provide funding for re-investment in rail. One of the conditions of that decision was that the Rail Business Case, including the Johnsonville and Melling lines, be reviewed within three years.

Wellington City Council and Greater Wellington Regional Council agreed to conduct the review jointly, with funding from LTNZ. It was also decided to widen the Study to include all the suburbs currently or potentially serviced by the rail corridor including Churton Park, Grenada Village, Woodridge, and Newlands. It was decided that the study would be conducted with an open mind as to the potential transport solutions (including mode).

The Study commenced in November last year by asking the people of the Northern suburbs about their transport issues and needs. This first phase of consultation netted just over 500 submissions (a high level of interest which compares very favourably with other similar studies). The main issues identified were frequency of buses, the reliability of bus and train services, the route of the services, the need for new trains, and the rundown state of trains.

Consultants then developed four transport scenarios, each of which could potentially meet the needs of submitters. In brief, these were:

Enhanced Rail: using new or refurbished units to provide a 13 or 10 minute rail service during the morning peak.

Bus on street: replacing the rail service with buses (providing a 3 – 5 minute frequency during the morning peak) and converting the rail corridor to a walking and cycling track.

Busway: converting the rail corridor to a one-way peak direction busway, providing a 3-5 minute frequency during the peak.

Light rail: converting the rail corridor to light rail and extending it through the city to Courtenay place, providing a 10 minute peak frequency on the Johnsonville line and 3 minutes on the CBD section.

These scenarios were not new, having previously been considered during a 1993 study. All scenarios assumed that bus services in the suburbs would be progressively improved as funds became available and demand dictated.

The four scenarios were put out for public consultation in June this year, and the level of public interest was even higher than before with 1606 submissions being received. Many submissions supported more than one scenario with 589 submitters supporting upgrading the railway, 68 supporting buses on the street with walking and cycling, 981 supporting the busway and 456 supporting light rail. Of the submissions supporting the busway, 858 were made on a form distributed by the Bus and Coach Association. Although the campaign run by the Bus and Coach Association clearly influenced the consultation outcome, it should be noted that Tranz Metro also conducted a campaign of its own involving distribution of a brochure which offered to provide advice to submitters on how to fill out the response form.

The four scenarios are currently being analysed to determine a preferred option. The criteria for analysis include the potential to grow public transport, cost, affordability, the contribution of each to the urban form of the city, and sustainability. The figure of \$115m for the busway quoted by Hon. Peter Dunne did not derive from the Study, but was based on work undertaken by Toll New Zealand. The Study will provide comparable cost estimates for the four options.

The scenario evaluation phase of the study is being finalised, and the indications are that none of the scenarios provides a substantive improvement on the base case set out in Greater Wellington Regional Council's Long Term Council Community Plan.