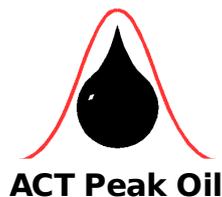


Submission from ACT Peak Oil on
East Lake Urban Renewal
and
Development at Molonglo and North
Weston



Edited by Alex Pollard
Convenor,
ACT Peak Oil
<http://act-peakoil.org>
Email: alex-po@trevbus.org

Land Use Planning
Planning Service Branch
ACT Planning and Land Authority
GPO Box 1908
Canberra ACT 2601
Email:
actpla.feedback@act.gov.au
Molonglo@act.gov.au

Introduction

ACT Peak Oil was formed in early 2005 by Canberrans concerned about the implications of Peak Oil, the imminent global peak and irreversible decline of world oil production. This critical issue is garnering increasing attention in the public sphere and will gain in importance to rival Climate Change.

For a fuller discussion of Peak Oil, its implications and our response, we recommend our submission to the recent Senate oil inquiry (Pollard, 2006).

Urban planning after Peak Oil

ACT Peak Oil is concerned that urban planning in the ACT is deeply flawed.

The problem is pretty fundamental: No part of the ACT Government has formally acknowledged the threat of Peak Oil in the formulation of policy. A Google search for "peak oil" within the site "act.gov.au" reveals no public document from planning bodies mentioning "Peak Oil". It is clear however from various submissions and Hansard entries that Peak Oil is an issue of concern to many, including the former planning minister Mr Corbell.

Peak Oil is not just one of many factors that should be taken into account – it is one of the key factors. It is being overlooked and instead problems such as traffic congestion dominate planning processes (a problem that will diminish markedly with high fuel prices). Peak Oil represents a massive and sudden change, and soon.

The peak of world oil production will be a once-off event, but it will impact us tremendously. Indeed, it may already be upon us. The time at which production peaks will be an inflexion point. Prices are likely to escalate dramatically and continually. It will not facilitate a gradual market-based transition. This is because we require one or two decades to adjust our infrastructure and behaviour to cope with fuel scarcity (Hirsch, 2005). The price signals however will only reach us as the crisis hits – and that could be a mere matter of months from now.

At the time prices escalate dramatically we need to be thinking about what infrastructure we want in 20 years. If the planning bodies are thinking in terms of brief price spikes and gradual price escalation, they will not see the need to create transport options that are not reliant on fossil fuels. We risk wasting hundreds of millions of dollars and many years in committing to an urban form that will make coping with Peak Oil much harder.

The ACT Government already has an expensive inheritance in maintaining Canberra's very extensive road system. Not just will fuel be scarcer, but also bitumen which is required for road maintenance. Maintenance costs are likely to increase greatly.

Carbon emissions from fossil-fuel based transport also contribute to Climate Change. Configuring any new urban development for car-dependence is unacceptable.

Urban form

The preliminary assessment for Molonglo and North Weston refers to medium density housing, however no high density housing is envisaged (Molonglo development, p227). High density housing provides greater scope for making a new development more "walkable" and facilitates use of public transport.

Setting up any new development as a "dormitory suburb" without significant local employment opportunities is inadvisable in a post-peak scenario. The risk is that not too many years from now working families will prefer to live where they can be closer to their jobs. Falling land values and social isolation on the urban fringe could follow. Professor Peter Newman recommends a minimum density of 35 residents and jobs per hectare to dramatically reduce car dependence and establish the critical mass for a sustainable public transport system (Newman, 2005).

Providing "opportunities to reduce car dependency" (Molonglo development, p24) is not a strong enough statement. Quantitative assessment should be carried out to determine whether plans for Molonglo will dramatically reduce car dependency.

The East Lake Urab Renewal seems more in tune with a post-peak scenario though possibly quite unintentionally.

Rail

Electrified light rail has a number of advantages of roads. It can be powered from renewable resources. It runs on narrow rails, requiring a much-reduced maintenance effort. There is far less energy loss from rail than for tyres running on roads. For these reasons it needs serious evaluation. Light rail should be considered for all new developments such as Molonglo, North Weston and East Lake, as initial stages of a light rail system to connect major employment and town centres. All previous arguments that light rail is not economic or that Canberra is too “spread-out” are irrelevant since they were made without reference to Peak Oil. The question needs to be asked: with very high and increasing fuel prices, what alternatives to light rail will be economic? Will bicycles, walking, buses and telecommuting even be sufficient?

The East Lake proposal gives welcome consideration to interstate rail:

Planning for East Lake should consider the long-term of rail operations in the ACT, particularly in relation to land requirements, patronage, operations and the quality of heavy rail services.

(East Lake Draft Planning Report, p26)

Contrary to widely-held preconceptions, rail will provide an increasingly vital component of urban and long-distance transport networks as oil supplies dwindle. Ignoring Peak Oil will lead to a profoundly flawed planning process in which only current but not future land use requirements, patronage and service quality are considered.

Competitive Planning

Without a non fossil-fuel-based transport system it is likely that both Canberra and Queanbeyan will equally suffer from Peak Oil. Indeed, parts of the ACT are some distance further from employment centres than Queanbeyan and could become quite undesirable places to live.

Presently the ACT Government is feeling competition from land releases around Queanbeyan. While ACT Peak Oil believes that urban development cannot continue indefinitely given limits such as water supply, we would suggest that the ACT Government should consider a forward-looking option for attracting development.

We propose that the ACT differentiate itself by planning and building an integrated electrified transport system. The ACT can call upon resources more easily than nearby development jurisdictions and would be aided in seeking funds by its status as the National Capital – the Commonwealth may decide that complete dependence on buses does not benefit the National Capital.

Recommendation:

The imminent and profoundly disruptive arrival of both Peak Oil and Climate Change should be explicitly acknowledged in preparing transport and planning policy for the ACT.

References

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