

The East Gippsland *Let's GET Connected* Project (A)

A RuralAccess worker was told of an elderly man who lost his eyesight from a preventable cause simply because, due to his isolation, he could not access the necessary monitoring and treatment.

Leave the few large urban centres of the Australian state of Victoria, and transport quickly assumes an importance not appreciated by most city dwellers. For the elderly and those with disabilities, transport is a constant concern. Living even modest distances from larger towns can mean a life of greatly curtailed mobility, restricted access to essential services, and reduced social interaction.

Workers in the Victorian government's RuralAccess program were all too aware of the impact of isolation on rural areas. In June 2002, the local RuralAccess officer in the sprawling Wellington Shire¹ of Gippsland, 200 kilometres east of Melbourne, organised a transport forum which brought together more than 70 people interested in reducing the region's transport limitations. The success of the forum initiated further work on a collaborative approach to improve transport options in the region. By September, terms of reference for the Wellington Rural Transport Partnership had been agreed.

As the partnership was taking shape, in Spring Street Melbourne the state government was also thinking of ways to improve regional transport through grassroots action.

This case was written by David Lansley, Australia and New Zealand School of Government, for Professor John Alford as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation.

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¹ Shire is the term used in Victoria for a rural local government area.

Early in 2003 the government called for proposals to expand the range of local transport options across the state. Through the Transport Connections Project (TCP), \$2.1 million² was made available for distribution among the successful proposals. In Gippsland, the government's initiative was well received. An attraction of the TCP was that it was a whole of government approach that seemed able to reduce the existing fragmented delivery of state government transport services. More generally, any state government assistance to reduce the isolation of people in the Wellington Shire seemed worth pursuing.

Gippsland's transport problems

Gippsland is the south-east part of the state of Victoria stretching from the eastern edge of Melbourne to the New South Wales border. It is a diverse region of rural production, tourism and power generation, with a few large towns (13,000 - 20,000 inhabitants) concentrated in the Latrobe Valley, and dispersed villages of a few hundred people or less. The shires of Wellington and East Gippsland are two of the three largest municipalities in the state and cover a total area of 32,000 square kilometres (17 percent of the land area of Victoria) with a population of approximately 82,000 people.³

Both councils were aware of transport limitations in their regions well before the Victorian government initiated the TCP. In its 1996 *Issues Paper*, the East Gippsland Shire Council stated that

“Transport and communications was the third major area where the need for improvements was strongly felt - especially in the more remote areas of the Shire, where the current standard of major access roads is not only an inconvenience to the local residents but an impediment to tourism and other development.”

Limited infrastructure was not the only source of transport problems. A report produced for the Wellington Council found the region faced a “triple whammy of ageing” – the general ageing of the population accentuated by younger people leaving and older people moving in.⁴ As well, the population had been declining since the early 1990s. An ageing population meant that over time, an increasing number of people would need alternatives to the private car.

But the report also found that utilisation of public transport in the shire was low because of shortcomings in the key determinants of usage – frequency, quality of service, access (walk-wait times), timeliness and price. Poor usage levels meant that public transport users were concentrated among the young, the old and the most socially disadvantaged. A concern was that transport policy would end up concentrating on these groups rather than on developing transport alternatives for a wider section of the population.

The East Gippsland Shire faced similar but more extreme problems. Analysis done for the Shire Council found that the shire's population had a relatively high proportion of

² All amounts in Australian dollars.

³ Victoria's population at June 2005 was 5,022,000.

⁴ *Wellington Population Analysis: Issues and Discussion Paper*

people aged 65 plus (18.3 percent compared to 12.6 percent for Victoria as a whole), that the population was unevenly distributed, and that population growth had slowed steadily (to just 0.1 percent a year 1996-2001). Census data for 2001 showed that East Gippsland had very low personal and household incomes, with 59.0 percent in the lowest category of individual income (\$0-399 per week), compared to 47.2 percent for Victoria as a whole.⁵ These and other variables combined to give the East Gippsland Shire a low (poor) Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage Index rating⁶, and relatively high scores on the Accessibility/Remoteness Index for Australia, indicating “moderately to significantly” restricted access to goods, services and social interaction. Accessibility in East Gippsland was considerably worse than for the rest of Gippsland.

Both councils had explored ways of reducing their transport disadvantage prior to the TCP. As a project officer with the East Gippsland Shire Council observed, “People working in the RuralAccess program had already done a lot of work on transport problems by the time the Transport Connections Project was announced in 2003.” In September 1997, a report produced for the East Gippsland Shire Council on behalf of 15 regional organisations made 19 recommendations for improvements in road, freight, and public transport services and infrastructure in various parts of the shire.⁷ These ranged from improvements to the road network (within the shire, to other parts of the state, and to New South Wales and the ACT), through to reinstating a passenger train service to the main regional centre of Bairnsdale, expanding the bus network to include small-scale on-demand services, and developing a fast train service linking eastern Gippsland to Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney.

All together now: the Wellington and East Gippsland Shires’ TCP proposal

Following the call for proposals for funding under the TCP, the Wellington Regional Transport Partnership set to work on a submission to reduce transport disadvantage in rural eastern Gippsland. From the outset it was realised that worthwhile improvements could only be achieved through greater collaboration among local government, community and other organisations. Transport problems in eastern Gippsland were multi-faceted and involved a diverse range of interests. Bringing stakeholders together early was thus a high priority. As well, collaboration with the neighbouring East Gippsland Shire Council was identified as a way of increasing the chances of securing TCP funding. A single submission from both councils, while ambitious, seemed a better strategy than two separate submissions, both of which were unlikely to be successful.

A meeting of rural access and health project officers from the two councils was arranged. At the meeting it was agreed to develop a joint pilot project with six main objectives:

- develop a clearer understanding of community transport needs;
- engage with local communities and key stakeholders and develop strong partnerships;

⁵ Shearwater Associates *Community Profile East Gippsland Shire* (May 2004) p.28

⁶ 971, compared to 988 for all of Gippsland, 1000 for Australia as a whole and 1016 for Victoria

⁷ *East Gippsland Planning and Development Strategy 1997-2010*

- develop an evidence base about access and mobility needs;
- facilitate the development of a range of projects;
- develop integrated action research; and
- develop good governance.

The application was refined in conjunction with the East Gippsland Shire Council Rural Access Project Officer and Community Planner. Prior to the completion of the joint proposal, an East Gippsland Transport Partnership was formed. If the proposal succeeded in attracting funding, a steering committee with members from both Transport Partnerships would be created to run what was to become known as the *Let's GET Connected Gippsland East Transport Project (GET)*.

Challenges

At first, the prospects seemed good for improving regional transport through a more cooperative approach in the area covered by the two councils. The East Gippsland Council explicitly aimed to build stronger communities “through collaboration, facilitation, advocacy and leadership”. In the Wellington Shire, the Department of Human Services oversaw the Primary Care Partnership, a voluntary alliance of 32 health and community agencies, and RuralAccess, a program to assist people with disabilities in rural communities. Transport was seen as an essential element in community strengthening, particularly through its role in linking Gippsland residents with health services. For both councils, GET was viewed as a way of using a collaborative approach to improve transport services. As Wellington Council stated, the GET project was “about working together with local communities and transport operators to co-ordinate and make the best possible use of existing transport resources”.

The central role of collaboration was made clear in the submission for TCP funding:

“The development of partnerships and sharing of resources is a crucial element in any attempt to address transport disadvantage. This initiative aims to assist older people, young people, people on low incomes and people with a disability who face particular transport challenges. Given the opportunity, these communities have the ability to work cooperatively to find creative solutions, despite the challenges that East Gippsland and Wellington face.”

However, to achieve the necessary level of collaboration, a successful TCP proposal would have to deal with a number of challenges. The diversity of the region's transport problems meant a wide range of interests would need to be actively involved. Successful collaboration in other areas could not be assumed to flow into transport. Getting transport stakeholders to work together would require building on the spirit of cooperation evident in the previous year's transport forum.

As the transport requirements of the Wellington and East Gippsland Shires were explored, it became clear that the problem was not vehicles but transport *services*. The region turned out to be “transport-rich when it comes to assets, but services-poor.” For example, a town of 2000 people had 13 buses of various sorts, but the community lacked adequate bus services. In another case, volunteers were getting up at 3am to drive a single patient to Melbourne for medical services, and then driving them back the same day, not only placing a substantial burden on the volunteers but also

exposing them to significant road safety risks. Over the years, state governments in Victoria had been willing to contribute to the purchase of vehicles, but had been reluctant to set out conditions for their use. What was needed was a way to ensure the full range of the community's transport assets was better utilised.

Through research and resource mapping it soon became obvious that one of the most underutilised assets was school buses. How to extract greater value from them became high priority. In the East Gippsland shire there were around 60 school buses, and another 50 or so in Wellington. Approximately 90 percent of these buses were used only for morning and afternoon school runs. At the time, commercial bus owners frequently took a rigid and restrictive view of their school bus contracts. Contracts with bus companies were administered by the Department of Infrastructure (the state government department responsible for provision of much of the public transport capital equipment and infrastructure), and typically ran for 10 years, after which time the operator owned the bus.

Contractors were also paid annually to provide the service. As the contracts were very lucrative, there was little incentive to use school buses more intensively. They were used for route or town services only in a very few larger communities such as Sale, and contractors received an additional subsidy to do this. Discussions with commercial operators revealed that their main concern seemed to be how to increase the profitability of their businesses. To further complicate matters, some school principals determined bus policy for their schools, and issues of duty of care and insurance were often used as reasons to prevent the wider community using school buses.⁸ When it came to extracting greater value from the region's school bus fleet, many of those directly involved were risk-averse.

One option to increase utilisation of these public assets was to identify more accommodating operators who could create a precedent for new ways to use school buses. The more flexible use of school buses in Sale, and the widespread use of public transport by students in Melbourne was evidence that a less restrictive approach was viable. But how the case was presented to those cautious of wider community use of school buses was likely to be important.

Another possibility for improved transport services was better utilisation of freight transport assets. Australia Post ran mail and parcel services across Gippsland. If they were able to carry people on freight runs, then the range of transport services would be increased. However, as all Australia Post services were contracted out, success would depend on the willingness of individual contractors to be flexible. The Buchan *BusnFreight* model⁹ showed that freight and passengers could mix. But while the Buchan model appeared to have potential to be applied elsewhere, it was still quite regulated, and freight rather than passengers was the profitable part of the service.

⁸ School bus contracts are being reviewed between 2008 and 2010, and this may provide an opportunity to require contractors to use school buses more intensively.

⁹ Buchan *BusnFreight* is a passenger and freight service developed following a survey of residents in Buchan and surrounding areas about their transport requirements. Using a mini-bus and trailer, the service allows residents to be picked up at various points to travel to the regional centre of Bairnsdale, or to use the freight facility to bring groceries and other goods to their door for a small charge.

Increased utilisation of taxis offered a further source of improved transport services, but taxis in rural areas faced a range of impediments to more flexible use. Licence fees were based on more intensive metropolitan usage, and while there were some lower cost special purpose licenses for particular trips (such as to Phillip Island for the major tourist attraction of the “Penguin Parade”) there was scope to extend this option. More importantly, fares were set as a minimum charge per kilometre, which made round trips in rural areas unaffordable for many people. For example, at the time, various round trips between towns in East Gippsland and Bairnsdale ran into the hundreds of dollars.¹⁰ Negotiated fares offered scope for greater utilisation of rural taxis for longer journeys. Reworking existing subsidies for maxi-taxis, and a more flexible use of taxis outside their permitted zone were other options worth examining.

As work on the proposal progressed, it was becoming clear that a successful GET pilot project would require improved co-operation not only at the local level but with and between the four state government departments overseeing the TCP – the Departments of Infrastructure (DoI), Human Services (DHS), Victorian Communities (DVC) and Education and Training (DET).¹¹ There existed considerable regulatory barriers between better utilising assets on the ground in Gippsland and gaining approval in Melbourne. An initial challenge would be how to convince DoI to focus less on patronage levels and more on community requirements. More generally, those directly grappling with transport limitations in Gippsland believed the state government needed to be convinced of the benefits of improving transport connections within rural regions and communities rather than focusing on transporting people to Melbourne.

Conclusion

For the GET proposal to be successful, different approaches needed to be explored to solve two main problems. On the ground in Gippsland, those who owned or (more or less) controlled public transport assets, had to be brought together in cooperative ways that would release greater public value from those assets. Some 200 kilometres away in Melbourne, decision-makers spread across four government departments needed to be made aware that the lack of transport policy coordination was significantly restricting transport options for rural communities not only in Gippsland, but throughout Victoria.

¹⁰ For example, at the time a 72km round trip between Lakes Entrance and Bairnsdale cost \$110.

¹¹ All TCP departments had offices in Gippsland – DoI in Traralgon, DHS in Traralgon, Sale, Leongatha, Bairnsdale, Morwell and Warragul; DVC in Traralgon; and DET in Moe.

Appendix: The Transport Connections Program

The Victorian Government and transport

Transport achieved a high political profile in Victoria under the Bracks state government (1999-2007). Increased spending on transport was a prominent feature of a range of major policy statements including

- *Growing Victoria Together* (November 2001), which stressed the importance of fast and reliable transport in fostering economic growth and linking communities.
- The updated version of *Growing Victoria Together* (March 2005), which further emphasised the importance of transport.
- *A Fairer Victoria* (April 2005), a \$788 million program aimed at supporting disadvantaged communities and individuals. Improving transport services was identified as an important element in reducing disadvantage and building stronger communities.
- *Moving Forward: Making Provincial Victoria the Best Place to Live, Work and Invest* (November 2005), a range of policy initiatives including new bus services and connections with rail services.
- *Meeting Our Transport Challenges* (May 2006) which contained \$10.47 billion of spending on transport, including \$510 million of spending on public transport for provincial Victoria.

A major reason for this emphasis on transport is demographic change. Two trends are of particular significance – an ageing population, and changing population densities in regional Victoria. As has been well documented, the average age of the Victorian and Australian populations is rising as the baby boom generation ages and medical advances extend life. Simultaneously, some non-metropolitan regions are declining while others, often but not always near the coast, are expanding.

The combined effects of an older population, rural decline, and the sea change/tree change¹² move from Melbourne have important implications for the provision of transport services. Reliance on private motor vehicles is high in areas outside the capital city and the largest regional centres. Indeed, it is often the only option. As the population living outside metropolitan areas ages, and the number of people in some regions increases, there will be a growing number of people unable or unwilling to drive themselves, and hence a growing number of people dependent on some form of public transport. At the same time, small and ageing populations in declining remote areas face increasingly restricted transport options. And young people, those on low incomes, indigenous people, and those from non-English speaking backgrounds typically are less likely to have access to private motor vehicles. Consequently, a sizeable and growing number of people face the prospect of major constraints on their mobility and hence their ability to utilise important health and other services, and simply to connect with others.

¹² Seachange/treeshift describes Australians' motivation to leave cities to live near the coast or in rural areas.

The Transport Connections Program

The Transport Connections pilot program (TCP) was developed as one of a series of policy responses to the problem of limited transport options. TCP focused on the mobility and transport access needs of individuals and communities in rural and regional Victoria.

From the outset, the TCP emphasised communication and cooperation. The government stated its central objective for the program as “improve[ing] access and mobility for people in rural and regional Victoria by

- making better use of existing transport resources through new and coordinated approaches
- facilitating dialogue between the community, transport providers and local businesses to develop tailored transport solutions
- strengthening links between the community and public transport sectors”

At the state government level, four departments were directly involved in transport policy.

- Department of Infrastructure (DoI) – responsible for public transport, taxis, buses with more than 12 seats, and managing school bus contracts.
- Department of Human Services (DHS) – community and medical transport
- Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) – funding for some community transport and development of transport for disadvantaged groups
- Department of Education and Training (DET) – school bus policy and transport for students with particular needs

Management of the TCP was to be by a joint steering committee with representatives from each of these departments. DHS was initially the lead agency. At the individual project level, partnerships of local interest groups were to be managed by one or more paid coordinators. Others in the partnership represented their particular agencies (such as local government, transport companies, or community health).