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## **GETTING BILL ON THE BUS : THE POLITICS OF INCLUSIVE DESIGN**

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### **Summary**

This paper briefly explores the opportunities of community consultation and advocacy and reports on the nature of the political arena which emerges when consultation and advocacy seek implementation of stated government policy. First, the paper addresses the context of Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland and the surrounding city authorities, the role of providers of public transport and the many proposals for improvements in public transport from the users perspective. The range of potential user needs is then considered from a broad interest definition. Some examples of needs being met are then examined to demonstrate that inclusive design is essential to getting Bill onto the bus. However, attaining acceptance for inclusive design is intensely political. Individual interest groups seek responses for their needs, competing with each other for political successes. This can be overcome by multiple layers of advocacy to ensure the ultimate design process accepts and then provides for the diverse needs. Advocacy for inclusive design requires identification of the varying needs in order to identify the common needs and thus reduce the need to provide special facilities.

The Public Transport Alliance was formed in South East Queensland, Australia in order to establish and develop links between various interests which over previous years had participated in a variety of forms of community consultation in relation to provision of improved transport planning and in particular, public transport. The founding members were primarily concerned that despite continued involvement in community consultation and advocacy activities by environment and social justice groups, planning proposals failed to meet their expectations of the potential being offered by the proposals.

Analysis of the effort needed by the groups to undertake these activities demonstrated that in most if not all cases, their efforts were severely hampered by lack of resources : both time and money. Further examination demonstrated conclusively that many different groups were undertaking similar projects often at the same time. The necessary quality and concise argument required was diluted by the need for the various groups to develop an understanding of the issues and the complexities involved in the very short time available for consultation. Responding to an ongoing programme of consultation and of making submissions reduced the capacity for effective advocacy.

These circumstances led to an assessment and reconsideration of the problem. The groups provide local community involvement and opportunity for responses with membership based, constituted bodies operating with varying degrees of formality with regular meetings, activities and projects. If these activities were effectively operating at a local level but not attaining their goals, linking their activities was clearly needed to reduce duplication. However as with all groups, such links inevitably increase the workload and potentially reduce the specificity of the local group. An approach which linked and supported local groups without reducing their specificity was needed.

This paper explains the chosen approach, provides examples of the outcomes sought and provides a review of the process and its potential.

## **The setting**

Brisbane, the state capital of Queensland, is located in the south east corner of the state, an area with rapidly growing population primarily resulting from population migration from other parts of Australia. Brisbane (population 700000) has a single local authority, Brisbane City Council (BCC) with its own bus fleet of some 600 buses. Surrounding Brisbane are various much smaller local authorities with privately operated bus fleets. The South East Queensland region (SEQ) is served by an electrified heavy rail system with 6 carriage trains operating at minimum frequencies of 15 minutes on the inner lines and generally at 30 minutes frequency on outer urban lines. In addition, regional commuter services extend some 170km north, 60km west and 70 km south to regional centres including the Gold Coast City with a population of around 300000.

Transport is governed and regulated at state level by the Department of Transport (QDoT) which is responsible for transport planning and management while the road system is constructed and managed by the Department of Main Roads. The primary operational requirements for public transport are regulated by QDoT.

These requirements are met by negotiated contracts which stipulate levels of service e.g. that 90% of houses in urban areas are served by buses within 400m walking distance.

With a rapidly growing population, the SEQ region had several major planning and growth studies including the Integrated Regional Transport Plan (IRTP). The IRTP contains both infrastructure and service level improvements and follows extensive consultation ; a major region wide survey questionnaire, reference groups and invited community submissions. This process identified high levels of interest and participation both in the IRTP and in improved transport planning and provision in SEQ. The IRTP is currently being implemented. Individual projects and the overall scope involve various, ongoing processes of consultation. Groups now expect their needs to be met.

The challenge is therefore to successfully influence two very large transport authorities.

As the various projects are implemented, design and review during consultation require more detail and the more detailed needs of the various potential users and other interests emerge. For projects with temporal and budget commitments, emergence of unmet, new or previously unconsidered needs at this late stage makes explicit the many difficulties of including new, changing, unforeseen or underestimated needs.

## **Interests or interest groups**

Any public transport system can be designed and located so most if not all people in typical urban areas can use it. Networks of small bus-like vehicles can cover local areas at regular and frequent intervals and sufficiently close for ease of access. With easy interchange, co-ordinated tickets and timetables, local 'feeders' can provide access to all local facilities as well as to major non-local services by combinations of buses, light rail and trains. Regional coverage can therefore be provided by provision of local 'feeders' in urban areas along non-local routes.

Design needs of such a network comprise both infrastructure and levels of service e.g. adequate frequency. Requirements for infrastructure are regulated to ensure minimum service levels for some interest groups although the resulting provision is often far from satisfactory operationally. Some examples include lifts requiring wheelchair users to reverse out or with difficult controls. Others include long, poorly lit, minimum width and distant ramps while grand stairs take pride of place in architectural or urban design.

These are likely outcomes of regulatory responses to single issue advocacy when the providers are unaware of the operational needs of the users, when the variety and number of potential beneficiaries is not assessed and in particular, when the benefits to all users of the improved facilities are not assessed. In assessing priorities, designers are required to prioritise and where necessary, to minimize within limits.

Larger, straight through lifts (ie with doors opposite) with multiple controls or the provision of an urban design and public space architecture of grand ramps with secondary stairs if necessary illustrate how simple is the provision of such facilities. Often costing only a little more, the reality is that by making provision of accessible ramps and lifts 'normal', more people can use the facilities. Stairs only add extra cost if they are considered necessary in addition to the ramp.

Accordingly, to ensure urban spaces, buildings and transport infrastructure respond to user needs, the Public Transport Alliance (PTA) aims to represent interests, identify and subsequently assist definition of users needs. The PTA seeks to identify all potential users, identify their needs with or for them, identify the common needs and then to promote provision for those needs as 'normal'. This is essential for designers. In this way, local groups and their peak bodies maintain their specific and very knowledgeable interests while the PTA seeks to establish and reinforce their common interests.

## **Broadly defined interests**

Representation of common interests therefore requires integration of the various groups needs. It makes no sense to represent the interests separately in seeking resolution through informed design. Various user needs are identified by operational space and operating conditions rather than by regulation. The user interests are pedestrians, cyclists and those with mobility but with access disabilities. Not surprisingly this includes most people. It is this combination which makes the necessary spatial and operational requirements explicit.

In needs terms, all these groups need access to local areas including the local bus. Adequate provision can reduce conflict between them. Local footpaths designed for those with disabilities will encourage walking and cycling. Wider paths or provision for cyclists on the adjoining road will allow at least the option of expecting or requiring fast cyclists to use roads. Requiring cyclists to observe a speedlimit or give priority to others on the footpath provides an operational constraint with the possibility of exclusion by regulation if conflict continues. Adequate width is essential for operation of these different modes. Clearance for wheelchairs to pass comfortably is inadequate for cyclists to pass and thus wider paths are needed.

Similarly, bikepaths attract pedestrians and where suitable, those with disabilities. Accordingly, rather than being designed only for high speed cyclists, greater widths will allow more operational space, flatter grades and better access for those with disabilities and pedestrians as well as for cyclists.

Local and major route buses can also be designed for increased accessibility. All buses can be designed and operated to suit users needs by requiring adequate access for those with disabilities and much improved access for others. Local buses can operate at lower speeds for general safety reasons while reducing the need for high levels of restraint or stress for those with a disability.

Trains, trams and light rail provide very high comfort levels but often are the most difficult to get onto. Provision for access including lifts, ramps, floor level access, specific locations inside the carriages and on-board facilities such as accessible toilets can easily be provided. In addition, station facilities also provide an essential and recognisable location for non-users in need of accessible facilities.

While identifying a complete list of interests is both impractical and unnecessary for the PTA, the interests represented include the young, the aged, those with specific access disabilities,

those with children or assisting or minding others, those carrying goods such as suitcases or shopping, and those with temporary injury or disability. In addition to carers and minders, family and friends are also represented due to the constraints imposed on them. Other groups identified include those with economic hardships, locational difficulties and those with various wheeled devices including shopping carts, walking frames, wheelchairs, other similar devices and cyclists.

With this broad definition of interests supported by local specific groups, design provisions, service levels and operational constraints and needs can be identified. Numbers of users is not a useful guide. Provisions must meet the needs of the interests whether one or many. Failure to address needs means conflict or exclusion by design.

Application of broad interests to identification of needs allows designs to much better fit the needs. Buses, trains and trams can provide at-floor access and adequate space for wheeled devices with priority to those with disabilities. To cross roads and rail tracks, crossings designed for wheeled devices and pedestrians provide increased security, safety and convenience compared with underpasses and overpasses and at decreased cost.

## **Political dimensions**

Representation of multiple interests can be challenged in particular by questioning the source, identification and authentication of identified needs. PTA is part of a network which works cooperatively both in sharing advisory roles and in developing policy and needs analysis. PTA does not purport to represent interest groups. Rather it seeks to encourage and identify common needs of multiple groups by providing support, well researched case studies and scenarios of possible outcomes.

Dominant groups have not gained their dominance easily and are rarely inclined to put their dominance at risk. PTA therefore aims to identify the interests at the margins and to link these to others and to the more dominant groups to make explicit the needs of the linked common interests while assisting identification of those with specific needs.

In many cases, public misperception provides the biggest political difficulty. Viewing the various interests as small and separate allows a public perception that the needs cannot be affordably met. These views can be successfully countered by demonstrating that the needs of most users will be better met if the needs of those currently unmet are addressed. Identified collective needs provide the opportunity for and the expectation of better and inclusive design.

## **Conclusions**

Rather than individual groups competing for political successes, alliances of like or similar interests provide a strong and effective support for the individual groups by promoting common needs thus allowing the specific interest groups to further their advocacy and concentrate on their own specific needs.

Groups such as the PTA by seeking to represent the interests of most people, provide an advocacy with far reaching impacts on urban and infrastructure design. As illustrated by examples in this paper, seemingly almost insurmountable difficulties become almost normal. The insurmountable stair has become an accessible ramp.

Among the likely outcomes, ramps will replace stairs as the grand urban design gesture and Bill will be able to get onto the bus ... any bus.

[The presentation will be accompanied by a slide presentation including examples from Perth WA]

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**Integration or specialisation?**

**Community consultation and advocacy**

**Intensely political processes**

**Winners and losers?**

**Interest groups or interests?**

**Interest groups ... alliances or competitors?**

**Broadly defined interests**

**Working together?**

**Benefits of inclusive design**

**Political dimensions**

**Dominances or alliances**

**Inclusive design by integration**

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**Introduction and setting**

**Political processes**

**Winners and losers?**

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**Benefits of inclusive design**

**Conclusion:  
Inclusive design by integration**