

'A line in the sand' – Taskforce pre-feasibility report summary

The Vision

Connecting people - creating great places - building our local economy

The need – why change? As one of the fastest growing regions in Australia and Queensland's third largest urban area, the Sunshine Coast needs to plan for a future that protects its lifestyle and environment. For every three residents we have now, there will be two more by 2031. We also want our tourist industry to grow as well, bringing more people to visit the region.

More people means more transport demand, and with 86 per cent of trips currently made by private car and only 3.6 per cent on public transport, managing growth means planning for new forms of transport.

The temptation is to simply keep building more roads, developing housing at the urban fringe, and placing more stress on our environment. In a growing region, heavy car reliance leaves us vulnerable to increased congestion, reduced urban amenity, rising fuel prices, climate change and the increasing mobility needs of an ageing population.

If we are to achieve our vision of Australia's most sustainable region, we must reduce the need to rely on car transport, improve public transport and encourage walking and cycling. This will support vibrant, diverse urban development focussed on people, invigorate business and create great urban places to suit people, not traffic. Council adopted its sustainable Transport Strategy in 2011 to develop a framework for changing course.

As part of this approach, a modern rapid transit system, such as light rail, could be a 'game changer' to help reshape our region as it grows. A Taskforce of industry and community representatives was convened by Sunshine Coast Council in February 2012 to investigate this opportunity. It was supported by an expert professional team.

The Taskforce concluded a major rapid transit project has broader potential than merely as a means of moving people: it is both a catalyst for economic growth and social benefit; and a flagship transport option that protects our relaxed way of life and benefits the whole Sunshine Coast. If supported by visionary policy such as strategic urban consolidation, it would provide more diverse lifestyle opportunities and protect natural habitat by reducing road based urban sprawl. It is capable of spearheading behavioural change where local travellers rely more on public transport and less on their cars; reinvigorating business development; and linking vital work, health, tourism and education hubs.

In forming its conclusions, the Taskforce took on board community input made through an interactive online hub, sunshinecoastlightrail2020.com.au.

A key challenge is to understand the link between a new rapid transit system and the economy. How it could act as a catalyst for sustainable economic growth and diversification by encouraging development in the right places and protecting valuable farm land and natural habitat. It is also to bring the Sunshine Coast community on the journey. To clearly communicate: the impact of a 'do nothing' approach; the need for change; and the 'why light rail' on the Sunshine Coast.

Why act now? A new rapid transit system would form the backbone of the region's public transport for the next century. It will take time to plan and implement and is not the easiest option. The easiest and cheapest option is to do nothing. But a 'do nothing' decision will come at a cost within two decades: the population will increase, grow older and less mobile; opportunities will be lost to plan and develop precincts; road congestion, urban sprawl and our carbon footprint will grow even further; business centres will be congested and disconnected; parked cars will enjoy the best views and tourists will find getting around difficult.

We should not wait to experience the impacts of elevated freeways, high traffic volumes and excessive car parks before acting. We need to create the future vision we want on the Sunshine Coast and campaign for it: with the community; the government; and private enterprise. **We need to start now and commit to the changes we want...to draw "a line in the sand"**.

What are the options?

There is a range of public transport options to move people around the Sunshine Coast. The pre-feasibility phase included six technology options: CoastConnect bus infrastructure improvements; Bus Rapid Transit; Light Rail at-grade; Elevated Light Rail; Monorail; and Hybrid Light Rail with some partially elevated sections. The reference case established by the Taskforce is Light Rail at-grade.

Where these options would go, the key markets and projected patronage were all questions considered by the Taskforce in conjunction with current and future land use planning. Six corridors were assessed and preliminary work clearly indicates the preferred location and staging is from Maroochydore to Caloundra via the new hospital precinct (Corridor 1). This is where the majority of future attractors are planned, and where there are the greatest opportunities to improve the urban amenity by reducing traffic and parking conflicts.

However the benefits would not be localised. The new rapid transit system would become a flagship for delivery of improvements to bus and rail public transport across the whole region. It would be supported by an improved bus network including a new type of frequent, direct bus service connecting all the region's major movement corridors to the rapid transit service. There would also be park and ride opportunities for people travelling from the rural communities to the coast to access the rapid transit and avoid the possibility of congestion and shortage of parking in the busy parts of the region.

The light rail system would be for local travel, within the urban parts of the region. It would connect with the future regional link known locally as CAMCOS at several locations. The two projects are complimentary, not competing. The light rail project aims to avoid the need for major urban freeways to be built locally, and the CAMCOS project would avoid the need to continually upgrade the Bruce Highway to cater for growth of trips between Queensland's first and third cities.

What are the expected costs?

The report includes high level construction cost estimates in Corridor 1, ranging from \$1,570 million to \$3,580 million. These costs would need to be shared by all three levels of government, as in the case of the Gold Coast Rapid Transit project currently under construction. There would also be opportunities to incorporate some private sector financing.

To justify such a large investment there has to be significant and quantifiable economic and community value with sustainable environmental and social benefits. A rapid economic

appraisal on the project revealed **Light Rail at-grade** and the **Light Rail Hybrid** with some partially elevated sections to increase operating speeds are projects worth pursuing. Both would deliver significant value to the Sunshine Coast and achieve a robust Benefit Cost Ratio. They are also likely to produce significant economic impacts and deliver positive social benefits. A case could also be made for the **Bus Rapid Transit** option with a positive BCR under all scenarios and good economic outcomes however, it was not considered to deliver strong social impacts when compared to light rail. A similar Bus Rapid Transit option was also recently ruled out in the detailed Gold Coast feasibility assessment, as it was not able to satisfy high patronage demand requirements.

The way forward... The next step recommended by the Taskforce is to proceed to Phase 2, a full business case, involving about two years of investigations at a total cost of about \$4 million. This would test the potential benefits in detail and allow for more comprehensive public consultation. The Commonwealth Government recently committed \$500,000 to the development of a full Business Case in Phase 2. Following completion of the Business Case, the local, state and commonwealth governments will then need to decide on if and how to proceed to delivery.

While the expected benefits of an improved rapid transit system such as light rail are forecast to exceed the capital and on-going implementation costs, the initial investment required is significant. Several strategies could positively influence affordability: Project staging to spread the call for funds; Private Public Partnership (PPP); utilising money otherwise intended for road investments that are obviated by the project; and other funding sources such as Land Uplift Capture (LUC) and advertising. To bring the community on the journey, a communications strategy needs to be implemented alongside the technical and business case studies building on dialogue already established and explaining the consequences of not acting.

Taskforce recommendations:

A new rapid transit system, such as light rail, is a “game changing” project with the potential to transform the future of the Sunshine Coast. The Taskforce recommends Council endorse the next step toward the Sunshine Coast Light Rail 2020 vision by proceeding to Phase 2, full feasibility and business case. The options to be considered should include:

- 1. The reference case; light rail at-grade;***
- 2. A hybrid option for light rail with some sections elevated; and***
- 3. Possibly a bus rapid transit option if it has the potential to meet longer term patronage requirements.***