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A sustainable Sydney needs bikes and trams

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Around the world, smart cities are remaking themselves. They are investing in sustainable public transport and creating pedestrian-friendly environments, reducing their greenhouse emissions, cleaning the air, and providing places for people to meet and congregate.

Professor Peter Newman, one of Australia's most eminent urban thinkers, said at a recent CityTalk that traffic congestion and rising petrol costs make creating more space in cities for pedestrians an economic necessity.

If the City of Sydney Council had its way, an integrated transport plan would properly mesh light and heavy rail with ferries and buses, and do much more for pedestrians and cyclists.

Improving transport, streets and the public realm is not simply about aesthetics or congeniality, nor is it driven solely by the economic costs of congestion or the health costs of respiratory diseases. Those matter, but above all, it is about creating a more sustainable future for our city, which helps our state, our nation, and, ultimately, our planet. The financial crisis has grabbed headlines from climate change, but the two are interlinked.

I would like to see part of the massive economic stimulus packages around the world directed to developing green infrastructure, laying the foundation for a restructuring of the economy to allow for a low-carbon future. Cities are critical to this shift. More than half the world's population lives and works in cities, which are the major source of greenhouse gas emissions. They are where we must make the biggest and most urgent changes.

In Sydney, we need to ease car and bus congestion by improving public transport. In the city centre in particular, we need to move workers and residents more quickly, cleanly and efficiently.

The State Government's plans for the Sydney metro provide an opportunity to move on some of the council's Sustainable Sydney 2030 vision projects. It gives us a prize chance to convert George Street to an open mall.

We have heard from the respected Danish planner, Jan Gehl, about how this bus-clogged artery could be transformed into a brilliant spine from Railway Square to Circular Quay, dedicated to pedestrians, cyclists and light rail. Cyclists are important. For short trips, cycleways provide people with an alternative to cars and public transport. Council research found 75 per cent of people who cycle irregularly would bike more often if there were more dedicated cycle routes. The City of Sydney is spending \$70 million over the next four years on cycleways and, with surrounding councils, has identified a potential network of 245 kilometres of bike lanes.

Many major cities including New York, Amsterdam, Melbourne, and London are building cycleways, but most Sydney councils do not have the money to do it properly.

For longer trips, Sydney's bus and rail networks may have efficiently moved commuters to the CBD in the past, but they have not kept up. If Sydney is to become more productive and sustainable, the city centre must be easily negotiable. That means better open spaces for pedestrians and an integrated public transport system.

Sydney needs an integrated light-rail system. At least 50 reports tell us this is the case, and we know a light-rail loop around the CBD is feasible. Once approved, it could be running within 18 months. It would halve peak-hour travelling time between Central

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Station and Circular Quay, from an average 30 minutes by bus to 14 minutes by light rail. It would relieve the chronic crowding at Town Hall Station and on buses, and would bridge the missing link between the existing line from Lilyfield.

Light rail should be integral to the development of Green Square, the largest urban redevelopment in Australia, where bus services are already overcrowded. Providing new housing without adequate public transport is not a mistake we should repeat in the 21st century.

From a sustainability perspective, it makes more sense to open up new inner-city renewal areas, rather than expand car-dependent outer suburbs without public transport. New inner-city residents still need efficient public transport, and a light-rail loop to Green Square would be cheaper than extending heavy rail or metro lines to outer suburbs - although Sydney needs both, to plan responsibly for future needs.

The council has committed \$13.5 million to assist with the infrastructure needed to expand light rail, but it has neither the money nor the power to do it alone. The majority of funding needs to come from the state or federal governments, or more probably, both, and the council has made a submission to the Federal Government to extend the existing light rail through the inner city and to Green Square.

It's not a matter of the city versus the suburbs; the suburbs also desperately need and deserve better public transport. But improving inner-Sydney transport should be a national priority, as without it, we will limit the productivity, sustainability, and liveability of Australia's most significant economic asset, our city.

Clover Moore is the Lord Mayor of Sydney.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/a-sustainable-sydney-needs-bikes-and-trams-20090416-a8ns.html>