

Bushwalking Australia

Comments on Infrastructure Australia Draft Report for Discussion “Active Transport - Walking, Riding and access to Public Transport”

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www.bushwalkingaustralia.org

Role and Interest of Bushwalking Australia

Bushwalking Australia is the peak body for recreational walking in Australia. As well as a desire to maintain existing natural areas for walking, Bushwalking Australia seeks to make Australia an attractive place for all to walk. We want walking to be a practical option for all Australians, and the mode of choice for all journeys of walkable length. This is outlined in our policy "*Towards a Walkable Australia*" to be found on our website ¹.

It should be noted that while our members prefer to experience pristine natural areas through walking, most actually live in towns and cities where walking has been discouraged or rendered impractical through over half a century of urban development.

General

Bushwalking Australia welcomes this report as a long-overdue admission of the importance of walking in addressing major issues facing Australia today. It is perhaps the first document to mention walking in its title in more than 100 years since federation.

Walking has been systematically ignored. In spite of its importance in health, environment, local government, education and as the fundamental mode of transport, all areas of increasing importance in federal policy and funding pressure. The authors are to be congratulated for recognising and documenting this within the context of Australia's large cities and increasing – perhaps even extreme - levels of urbanisation.

While it is an excellent summary of the current situation in Australia and overseas the report does little more than highlight the issues and opportunities that present themselves. Although it provides good (and bad) examples of practice here and overseas, it makes few recommendations for action, and does not explore the areas where the Commonwealth should take the lead.

This is illustrated by perhaps the strongest statement in the document about walking: "*Despite the importance of walking, it is often overlooked as a mode of transport. There is currently no nationally agreed strategy for walking.*"² Though welcome, this is a gross understatement, and itself serves to illustrate how far we need to go. It also implies that nothing can or should be done until there is national agreement. In the Australian context, this of course is the perfect recipe for policy paralysis, and indefinite delay.

In our submission below, we outline a number of specific areas where the Commonwealth has the responsibility and capacity to act, and should do so without delay.

Principle: Measure walking

While we have good statistics on motor vehicles, and increasingly better statistics for public transport and cycling, our data on walking is poor to non-existent. Where data is gathered for walking it is often simply as an afterthought for what we collect for these other activities and modes. As a result, the little information we have is incomplete, poorly connected and often quite inappropriate for walking. ABS does not presently gather meaningful data on walking. While it may

¹ www.bushwalkingaustralia.org/docos/Towards%20a%20Walkable%20Australia.pdf

² Executive Summary P1

not be possible to delve sufficiently deeply into this subject through the main population census, ABS in conjunction with other agencies should conduct smaller scale but more detailed sample surveys into the various aspects of walking.

Action: The ABS should collect meaningful and comprehensive data on walking.

Principle: Identify gaps in the walking network and in policy

The report is also very patchy in its treatment of walking. For instance, under “4.4 The role of local government”, discussion is entirely limited to cycling, and there is no mention of walking at all.

Because walking is treated as incidental to other objectives (as is also the case with the present report) walking is never treated holistically, and there are many gaps in policy and in the walking network itself. As well as measuring where and when people walk, it is perhaps even more important to measure where and when people don’t walk. These are places where walking is unattractive or dangerous. As well as showing us the presence of specific barriers to walking, the absence of walkers usually indicates the failure of other urban and rural policies as well. As the internationally renowned walking expert Dr Rodney Tolley says “*Walkers are the indicator species for the quality of life.*”

Action: The ABS should also collect data on where people don’t walk, and where walking levels appear to be suppressed.

Principle: Recognise the distinct and complementary roles of Walking vis-s-vis other transport modes

While walking, cycling and public transport have many points of similarity and interaction, they are not the same. They have different roles, different needs and may require different solutions.

Walking is complementary to other forms of transport, providing a solution to the difficult and expensive “last-mile” problem. It extends public transport and enables it to reach the population and the destinations it needs to serve. Coupled with good “walkable” urban design, walking enables many needs to be met without resorting to motorised transport at all. Walking a little further (and benefiting from the resulting exercise) enables people to reach more widely spaced destinations. Walking (and cycling) enables people to reach rail and BRT stations that offer fast efficient service, rather than wait for the slower and necessarily less frequent bus services that attempt cover low-demand areas with more route mileage.

Despite their similarities, there are also significant and frequently overlooked differences between walking and cycling. Because of their higher speed and greater range, bicycles can substitute for car travel, and cyclists require miniature roads that parallel other transport modes. By contrast, walkers typically require routes that cross major roads and transport routes. Attempts to provide multi-use (walking and cycling) trails are often unsuccessful because of the speed differentials involved. Conversion of existing walkways and walking trails to multi-use often results in walkers (particularly older ones) being displaced and discouraged.

Walking is the only true form of door-to-door transport, serving a myriad activities and destinations. Whereas other modes require simple linear “line-haul” infrastructure, walkers require a diversity of spaces, routes and experiences that overlap and seamlessly interconnect in ways that constitute a “walkable” environment.

There is currently an Australian Bicycle Council (ABC), but there are no equivalent councils for walking or public transport. There are suggestions that the ABC's role should be expanded to include walking. Our view is that while there are some parallels between walking and cycling, they are not the same, and that a new organisation with a specific focus on walking should be established.

Action: The Commonwealth should set up its own focus for walking, recognising the important and distinctive roles of walking. It should coordinate, encourage and support its many agencies to increase the level of walking in the community.

Principle: Incorporate walking in planning policy

If it appears at all, walking is too often an afterthought in the planning process, to be fitted in when and if conditions allow.

Unlike other forms of transport, walking does not require infrastructure in the way of parking, bus-stops or rail stations. As such walking is too often invisible in the planning process. Other forms of transport and associated infrastructure typically cut across natural walking routes and desire lines (as illustrated in the report by the case of Bull Creek railway station in metropolitan Perth).

Walking is often restricted by otherwise well-meaning and valuable programs such as the road – safety “black-spot” program. Guard-rails are often placed where the footpath should be, forcing walkers onto the carriageway, requiring them to climb over barriers, or forcing them to walk behind barriers with sharp metal edges. As well as physically impeding walkers, they send the message that walkers are not welcome or are deliberately ignored.

Action: Appropriate provision for walking should be a condition of all Commonwealth funded infrastructure projects. A pedestrian impact statement should be required for each project, which should be open to public scrutiny in parallel with or as part of environmental impact statements and other such statements.

Principle: Avoid restricting or undermining walking through tax and other policies

Many other federal policy areas also have the effect of discouraging walking cycling and public transport, even if that is not an explicit intention.

- Commonwealth transport funding for instance is only available for long-distance energy-intensive modes such as those used for interstate travel. Walking is completely ignored.
- Tax policy encourages the use of cars especially company cars, allowing its full cost to be deducted and often creates perverse incentives that encourage excessive car use. Again, walking is ignored.
- The provision of “free” car parking for customers or employees, means that someone else besides the user is paying. That cost is typically absorbed into the cost of doing business, and passed on to the rest of the community. Walking is ignored here also.

Despite recent changes to FBT, numerous loopholes still exist in the tax system that favour the use of private cars, as compared to walking, cycling and public transport.

Action: Review tax and other fiscal policies that continue to favour the use of cars to the detriment of walking and other forms of sustainable transport.

Principle: Recognise the benefits of walking as a key contributor to the nation's health

The report lists many of the benefits of walking (section 3.2), of which over 80% are health benefits. However, the report fails to compare the benefits of walking with the benefits of other health interventions. If it were to do so it would be abundantly evident that walking is by far the most cost-effective policy available to improve the health of the community. This benefit flows directly but unseen and uncoupled to the community without being siphoned off to the "sickness industry".

There are a number of initiatives through the health portfolio that could help realise the benefits of walking.

Action: Provide funding for walking commensurate with the value that walking can contribute to community health.

Principle: Use recreational walking as a means of encouraging walking

There is little doubt that a recent revival in recreational cycling has also led to a revival in regular every-day or commuter cycling. People who once dismissed cycling as impractical, dangerous or simply beyond their physical capacity have rediscovered cycling through recreational rides in pleasant relatively stress-free locations. Having gained confidence and skill on a bike through recreational cycling, graduating to commuter cycling becomes an easy and logical step.

There is every reason to expect walking to undergo a similar renaissance. As with any recreation, walking is an investment in time. Recreational walking is a sensual and social experience, not simply a way to get from A to B. Nevertheless, the ability to combine the transport task with an enjoyable healthy and social experience can be a very efficient use of time.

Bushwalking is often treated as if it were a quite different activity from other forms of walking. Walking and Bushwalking for instance are treated as two separate activities in the "Exercise in Recreation and Sport Survey (ERASS). In reality bushwalking is a continuum between a walk in the local park, and a wilderness adventure. Our own analysis shows that the terms "walking" and "bushwalking" are both used for a large number of recreational and fitness walks that are otherwise indistinguishable. Whether they call their walks "walking" or "bushwalking" seems to depend on the characteristics of their neighbourhood.

There are many reasons why bushwalking has in the past been treated separately from other forms of walking. These reasons could be explored in another paper. Essentially however, these come down to the low status and impracticability of walking within an increasingly hostile urban environment.

Action: Government needs to recognise the value of recreational walking (including bushwalking) as a means of encouraging walking more generally.

Principle: Recognise that walking needs special support as compared to other forms of sport and recreation and other transport modes

Unlike most other modes of transport, and most other sports and forms of physical activity, walking does not have an identifiable industry to support and lobby for it. Its benefits are too diverse for that. Put another way, there are no industries that could legally use share-holders funds to support walking. Perhaps as a consequence of this lack of an industrial base, there are very few if any

government programs available for walking. Some of the programs that should provide explicit and direct support for walking organisations include:

- **Australian Sports Commission** Walking is specifically excluded from any funding because it is not a competitive sport.
- **Australian Taxation Office** Deductible Gift Recipient status is provided only for certain Health and Environmental Organisations that happen to include walking amongst their activities (eg Heart Foundation) It does not include organisations focussed on walking (such as Bushwalking Australia)
- **Australian National Preventive Health Agency** Along with other parts of the health portfolio, ANPHA only provides funds for research and to organisations that operate within the health sector. Organisations focussed on walking have not thus far been funded.

All these policies of government agencies specifically and unfairly discriminate against walking, even though the encouragement and facilitation of walking would be entirely consistent with their objectives and would meet all reasonable cost/benefit requirements.

Action: Remove the various legal and administrative barriers that prevent walking organisations from receiving fair and adequate funding

Principle: Encourage walking to the maximum of people's abilities

While we recognise that not everyone can walk, and some people cannot walk very far, it is true to say that as a society we walk far less than we could or should. Very few people suffer in old age because they walked too far during their lifetime. By contrast, the majority of people who cannot walk either suffered some injury or disability unrelated to walking, or did not walk enough to receive protective benefit from regular walking at critical stages in their lives.

Disability legislation perpetuates the myth that there is a common standard for disability that suits everyone, and that all trails and walkways should be built to that standard. In other words all tracks and trails should be wheelchair accessible. There are of course many disabilities, and attempts to provide a "one size fits all" for all disabilities is both demeaning and wrong.

Rather than focus on disabilities, in itself a negative concept, we feel it would be more appropriate to consider people's abilities in a positive way. The key principle should be that "People should be encouraged to walk to the maximum of their abilities".

One of the unfortunate consequences of our attempts to provide accessibility for the disabled has been the closure of paths and walkways that are only suitable for the able bodied. Similarly, paths have been closed for "safety" or "duty of care" reasons when an ordinary person would be well able to take the necessary precautions.

We fully support providing access for the disabled, by for example making footpaths wheelchair friendly. However this is not a reason to make things harder for able-bodied people. An example would be to force everyone to use a long switch-back ramp, when a flight of stairs would be quicker and simpler for the majority of people.

Action: Government should reframe its approach to disability discrimination to encourage all people to walk to the maximum of their ability. There should be a variety of trail standards to suit the range of abilities within the community.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that there are actions that the Commonwealth could and should take immediately. They simply require small redirection of existing funds and efforts towards aims that are entirely consistent with good policy. They do not in themselves cost additional money. On the contrary they provide substantial savings over both the short and long term.

Guiding Principle: Make walking the obvious choice, especially for short journeys and for access to destinations that require sensitivity to the environment.

Walking is the only transport choice that can provide door-to-door transport in a sustainable way. Attempts to reach destinations any other way requires expensive infrastructure such as roads and car parks that detract from its appearance and ambience. This holds true for attractions whether they are in national parks or the centre of a city.

Action: Government policy should encourage walking at every opportunity.