

Background Information for a Workshop on Transport and Mobility Issues in Tennant Creek

Background

Transport has been a long term issue in Tennant Creek with many organisations and clients experiencing the impact of a lack of transport options within the town. This project was established to explore new and creative opportunities for the coordination of existing vehicles and resources which could form a part of a community transport system for Tennant Creek.

The project was funded by agencies from Tennant Creek, NTCOSS, The NT Department of Infrastructure Planning and Environment and the Myer Foundation.

This workshop is an opportunity to revisit the key issues around transport and mobility in the region and to examine some possible ways of improving the way things work.

David Denmark will describe some concepts that could be useful but the main reason for the workshops is to provide local agencies with the opportunity to have input into the design of a Tennant Creek Community Transport Model.

Mobility Issues for residents

All of the issues described in this summary were identified by staff of local agencies, local groups and local people.

Mobility issues for residents can be divided into three major categories:

- within the town;
- within the region (mainly to and from Tennant Creek); and
- long distance travel.

In addition there are some other related issues that affect people's mobility or the delivery of transport services.

Existing transport services

Formal transport services in the region consist of the following:

- A single taxi in Tennant Creek township.
- A limited weekly air service which links Epenarra and Canteen Creek with Tennant Creek. This service operates on Wednesdays and costs \$80. Passengers get just over 3 hours in Tennant Creek between arriving and leaving again.
- There are a number of transport services between Tennant Creek and Alice Springs including the nightly Greyhound service, the Central Bush Bus daytime express services and the Bush Bus Route flexible service. Fares range from \$135 - \$155 each way.
- There is also a rail service but this is not commonly used. Fares from Tennant Creek to Alice Springs vary from \$120 - \$240 each way.
- Transport northwards from Tennant Creek consists of the nightly Greyhound Bus to Darwin and the Bush Bus express to and from Elliott. The latter service costs \$95 one-way between Elliott and Tennant Creek.

- There is also a three day a week air service to Darwin which is relatively expensive at almost \$700 each way.
- A Greyhound bus travels between Tennant Creek and Mount Isa (and onwards to Townsville) four days a week. This costs approximately \$165 one-way. The return journey connects with the Greyhound service to Alice Springs.
- There used to be a community transport service however it stopped operating when the funding expired.

Issues within the town

- The only public transport is a single taxi.
- Some people consider the taxi fares to be expensive.
- The taxi does not operate late at night.
- On occasions the taxi may be used to transport people to and from regional communities during which time the town is left with no taxi service.
- Apart from times when the taxi might be available, there is no transport to meet the train, long distance buses or air services.
- Walking is not an option particularly for people attending medical appointments (there is a large renal unit at the hospital), older people who are becoming frail and people returning from the Food Barn with shopping bags. Walking is a very much less attractive option in the hot summer months.
- There can be overuse of cars in the Aboriginal community which puts stress on the car owners.
- There appears to be a constant pressure on agencies to provide transport even if it is not their main purpose.
- Demand for transport to health facilities is outstripping supply. The demand is likely to increase substantially in the future. There are significant health and economic costs to both patients and agencies in terms of people not attending appointments.
- While there is some limited cooperation between agencies, in terms of sharing buses when they are off the road for maintenance or repair, there are no formal joint services or attempts at service coordination.

Regional mobility issues

- A number of our interviewees thought that the most pressing mobility issue facing the region is transport between remote communities and Tennant Creek.
- People travel constantly between regional and remote communities and Tennant Creek for a variety of reasons. It was suggested to us that the population of Tennant Creek will typically grow by 400-500 at weekends.
- There are few formal transport options for people in regional communities wanting to get to Tennant Creek. Those that do exist mainly run north-south along the Stuart Highway with one bus route serving Ali-Curung which is well patronised. The bus service from Tennant Creek to Elliott has been subsidised by the NT Government for two years but the subsidy may not be permanent.
- Transport to regional communities (where it exists) is also expensive. Some bus companies allow passengers to use CentrePay to purchase their tickets, however this can lead to the accrual of substantial debts which people may have difficulty

paying off.

- People who do not live in Tennant Creek have to get to the Barkly Highway to use the Mt Isa Greyhound service.
- The taxi will serve communities near to the highway but this is expensive.
- Clinic Ambulances are used to transport patients to Tennant Creek for appointments but the vehicle is not really designed for the carriage of passengers.
- Any future bus service to remote communities is going to be very expensive, not only because of the distances and times involved (travel is much slower on dirt roads and tracks) but also because of the higher cost of keeping vehicles roadworthy.
- There are no other road transport services in the region, even to substantial communities such as Epenarra or Canteen Creek.
- The air service between Canteen Creek/Epenarra and Tennant Creek (the Mail Plane) is restricted to once a week and has limited seating capacity.
- The cost of using private vehicles in remote communities is much higher than in other centres. Some unregistered vehicles are used on the back tracks to avoid trouble with the law which further reduces their useful life.
- People from remote communities often get stuck in Tennant Creek for days or weeks. Those who get stuck may have no petrol to get home, their vehicle may have broken down, they may have spent all of their money or do not have access to a transport service.

Long distance transport

- The most common long distance destination, Alice Springs, which is the main business, government and population centre in Central Australia, is 500 kilometres away and there is no air service between the two towns.
- Many people travel to Alice for medical appointments. Some of this transport is funded through the Patient Assistance Travel Scheme which is administered by an office at the Tennant Creek Hospital. There is also no birthing centre in Tennant Creek so women have to travel to Alice Springs to have their babies.
- People also travel to Alice for Court appearances and to visit friends or relatives in prison.
- A number of agencies told us that staff regularly go to Alice but that there is no formal way of sharing vehicles and the driving task.
- Bus services can be expensive for families or those who need to take carers with them. Transport to Alice Springs for a family of four may cost around \$1,000. Accommodation in Alice Springs is also limited for those on a tight budget.
- Most concerns about long distance services centre around there being no transport to meet the Greyhound services. These arrive in town between 1 and 2 a.m. and leave again at about 3 a.m. We were informed that the walk to the bus terminal can be threatening and dangerous in the dark. This problem is compounded by the fact that there is no seating, toilets or access to food or refreshments at the terminal.
- There is also no transport to the railway station which is 5 kilometres out of town.

Related issues

Stuck in town

- One of the most pressing problems in Tennant Creek, according to our interviewees, is that of a shortage of housing. This is a chronic problem with waiting lists of two years for public housing and six months for a private rental.
- The presence of visitors from regional communities creates further stresses and strains on already severely overcrowded households and may lead to other social problems. A number of interviewees noted the high number of people on the streets at night and suggested that many of these will be from out of town with nowhere to stay.
- A transport service or range of transport options that assist people to return to their communities would be of some assistance in addressing the most acute overcrowding problem, that of visitors. A return to country scheme operates in Alice Springs through the Social Services Department of Tangentyere Council.

Communication

- A major problem in terms of organising and scheduling transport is the lack of a postal delivery service in town.
- Communication with patients is a particular problem for both the Anyinginyi Clinic and the Hospital. In both cases staff call at patients' houses to let them know when they are due to come in or arrive without notice to collect them hoping that they are ready and prepared to go with the transport service.
- The lack of a mail service results in a much less efficient transport service than it would otherwise be the case.

Information and coordination

- We found a significant amount of mistaken information and lack of knowledge about transport services in the town amongst our interviewees.
- Most people have a general idea about available transport services but there is no one point people can go to in order to obtain the information they require or to make a successful booking. Some transport options, such as the train, were generally dismissed out of hand by interviewees, partly because of a lack of knowledge about fares and operating times.
- The provision of information may also be only the first step in making more use of the transport resources in town. A wide range of agencies own and operate minibuses, some of which are only used at certain times of day or days of the week. The second step may be engender cooperation between agencies, perhaps the health agencies in the first instance.

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