

Report Card on Clean Air
Clean Air Forum 2001
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I must say I am impressed by the seniority of people who are attending this Forum and the commitment of time of the Director Generals of major Government agencies that are regulating or not regulating, as the case may be, our air future.

With millions of people in the Sydney-Wollongong-Newcastle region affected by air pollution and escalating health, traffic congestion and other costs – it is time to review *Action for Air*. Released in March 1998, it was described as an ‘air quality blueprint’. The Premier, Bob Carr said ‘My Government has declared war on air pollution – this is the plan to make NSW the world leader in air quality management’.

Excessive use of cars; dirty industry; new public transport; use of cleaner fuels; and stricter emission controls – were all targeted. While some gains have been made in previous years through the introduction of lead-free petrol, the growth in car traffic and the increasing use of diesel vehicles is not only countering the gains but increasing the amount of toxic particulate pollutants in the air.

Total Environment Centre (TEC) was part of the official launch for *Action for Air*. We had been working with the Clean Air 2000 Taskforce to highlight the air pollution crisis and participated in intensive negotiations with Government to establish key air quality and traffic reduction targets.

We welcomed the plan, but warned that effective implementation was the key test. We promised the TEC would be an active watchdog.

Our review of *Action for Air* had three objectives – 1: to assess progress against targets; 2: to evaluate new information and 3: to suggest improved targets and programs. In sum there are a few advances but with the most crucial programs, performance is poor.

The Review

The first thing to notice about *Action for Air* is that it is a "25 year plan". If anything would indicate the scale and magnitude of the challenge it's the term "25 years", accumulating over quite a lot of electoral terms. It is intended to improve the air of the greater metropolitan area of Sydney, the Illawarra and the Lower Hunter and it does provide a framework - it certainly is comprehensive. But it is a plan that will last a generation, and it is a plan that acknowledges that the people who are breathing air in the lead up to the end of the 25 year term will still be breathing dirty air.

It is a plan for a future generation. As much can be lost in the translation of plan to reality, with bureaucratic and Treasury hurdles, TEC undertook to conduct a comprehensive review of the State Government's implementation of *Action for Air* objectives.

Latest information reveals that Sydney continues to suffer from major air quality problems. Both National Environment Protection Measure (NEPM) and World Health Organisation (WHO) goals for ozone (the major indicator for smog) are exceeded, with alarming levels recorded last summer. Fine particle pollution remains a problem in winter and summer.

Diesel vehicles make a disproportionate contribution to emissions of fine particles and NO_x. Despite accounting for only 15% of vehicle kilometres travelled (VKT) in Sydney, diesel vehicles

produce up to 80% of total suspended particulate (TSP) emissions from vehicles (EPA, 1998a). Inhalation of fine particles (those under 10µm or less in diameter, referred to as PM₁₀) has been closely associated with health effects. These include increased mortality from cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, increased hospital admissions for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and heart disease, reduced lung function in asthmatic children and increased respiratory symptoms in school children. Research indicates that particles with a diameter of 2.5µm or less (PM_{2.5}) are particularly serious as they can penetrate deep into the lungs. Some studies indicate that these particles are most closely associated with health effects.

The disproportionate contribution of diesel vehicle to fine particle and NO_x emissions is set to increase in the future. In 1995 diesel vehicles comprised 8.3% of the national vehicle fleet. This is expected to grow to at least 15% by 2015. Distance travelled by the Australian diesel fleet is expected to increase 134% nationally and at least 146% in metropolitan areas so that in 2015 diesels will constitute 22% of total of VKT (NEPC, 2000). So, that's another reason to keep *Action for Air* under review.

Millions of people are exposed to the pollution, causing a range of respiratory problems and increased mortality. It is a major public health scandal that so many people are breathing dirty air.

While a 25 year plan cannot be expected to achieve its goals in 3 years, nor will it attain longer term objectives if the foundations are not firmly in place. Poor air quality results over recent years, particularly for ozone, indicate that *Action for Air* faces very significant challenges.

Foundation policies have not been implemented. Two areas in particular stand out – continuing rapid growth in VKT and poor progress in implementing *Action for Air* commitments to improve public transport. Continuing rapid growth in car use is also undermining the benefits of cleaner vehicles and fuels.

It is not enough to say –‘we are holding the line on air pollution’ – (and we would dispute this particularly in view of the growth in diesel emissions which presents a whole new set of toxic air pollutants) – the fact is that *Action for Air* was more than just holding the line, it was about recognising that we have major problems that must be reversed.

Air pollution has consistently been a top concern for the community. It is a major public health and environmental issue fundamental to the achievement of a clean and green city.

A major strategy of *Action for Air* aims to provide better public transport. This is the key to achieving VKT targets set out in *Action for Air*. VKT continues to outstrip population growth. This is largely a result of inadequate public transport and an emphasis on road building.

This approach is out of step with public opinion. A 1999 study by the Warren Centre (Glazebrook, 2001) revealed that 71% of Sydney residents surveyed favoured improved public transport over building more toll roads as the solution to traffic congestion. Of those surveyed, 73% believed there was not enough investment in Sydney's public transport, compared with 52% who believed there was insufficient investment in roads. Only 14% support more investment in roads at the expense of public transport, while 70% would support increasing spending on public transport at the expense of the road budget.

Perhaps this is a challenge to the political myths that we have in our society. A Government that spends more on public transport, and admits that it diverts those funds from the road budget, would, I suggest, be very popular.

We are discussing the results of our Review with key unions, and the Australian Services Union, NSW Teachers Federation and NSW Nurses Association in particular have asked us to convey their support for its recommendations.

One other area that the Government has overtly failed to perform on is a request we made six months ago that the EPA obtains more power over carbon dioxide emissions from industry as part

of a way of implementing our Kyoto protocol undertakings. It is pretty amazing that there is little regulatory control on one of the biggest polluters in quantity terms and one of the biggest in global climate concern that we have.

The reason we need a major overhaul of *Action for Air* can be clearly seen when you look at the National Environment Protection Measure goals and, as when Lisa [Corbyn] put up her slide, it said, "for the current health goals accepted by the NEPM that in 10 years time there will be one day's exceedance per year." Now I don't think anybody in this room thinks we are anywhere near confident enough about achieving the NEPM objectives let alone some of the tougher ozone objectives that were in *Action for Air*. So, we need to do a lot more.

We have a number of key recommendations. But I have to say right at the beginning that the critical mass for achieving NEPM or *Action for Air* objectives is a massive increase in public transport. We can have all these other strategies. We can have cleaner cars and cleaner fuels. We can have better data and better modelling and various other arrangements. But unless the urban fabric of Sydney is addressed then it will keep generating air shed problems, no matter what technological solutions might come along.

It is clear that a major overhaul of *Action for Air* is needed to improve progress in meeting commitments and reaching air quality goals.

Key Recommendations

- Bring forward capital works on major public transport initiatives to increase capacity and service levels, for example, Parramatta to Chatswood, Strathfield to Hurstville and north-west Sydney rail links; and turn around loop at Bondi Junction. It is our strong belief that construction on at least these projects should begin by 2005. This puts public transport and air pollution well and truly on the agenda for the 2003 State Election.
- Promote increased use of rail for freight transport. This should include a program to dramatically improve tracks and signalling.
- Finalise Performance Assessment Regime (PAR) to improve private bus company service standards.
- Improve CBD public transport by constructing CBD light rail extension prior to cross city tunnel. Complete feasibility study of extension to Ashfield.
- Promote light rail as transport in other parts of Sydney including Bay Light Express proposal. Prevent sale of UNSW land which would block development of the system.
- We want the actual cost of the tollways properly recognised, not only in terms of the money people are paying at the tolls but the fact that the air emissions from these facilities are not being factored into the cost by the failure to install electrostatic precipitators to filter emissions from the M5 East tunnel, for example, and probably the Lane Cove Tunnel and the Cross City Tunnel. The fact is that the dirt that people will be breathing from these tunnels - their loss of health - is in financial terms a subsidy to car travel.
- Introduce integrated ticketing to make public transport easier to use. Extend concessions for Government buses to private buses.
- Finalise metropolitan parking strategy. Remove parking space levy exemptions for retail shopping centres.
- Introduce an inspection and maintenance program for in-service vehicles. Immediately call for tenders and select sites for the network of privately run testing facilities. Provide a clear timetable for the commissioning of these facilities and expansion to lower Hunter and

Wollongong. Fast track development and implementation of an inspection and maintenance program for in-service diesel vehicles.

- Press Commonwealth and State Governments to implement Euro 2 and 3 standards for new vehicle emissions and fuel, ahead of current slow timetable.
- Continue support for Western Sydney Natural Gas Vehicle Project. Promote increased use of CNG vehicles by Local Government and private bus companies. Provide funding and assistance for development of more CNG refuelling infrastructure.
- Use some funding from recently announced \$5M enhancement to the Cleaner Production Program to introduce pollution reduction programs for businesses identified as having potential for reactive organic compound (ROC) emission reductions.
- Include metropolitan Sydney in areas to be immediately included in \$6M Clean Air Fund program to assist owners of old woodheaters to upgrade to cleaner technology. This scheme should be modelled on the program formerly operated by Armidale Council.
- There should be continued implementation of the Energy Smart Homes Program run by SEDA so that more councils progress to full implementation. It is a very staggered process and only a minority of councils have actually signed up to the full implementation stage. A lot are at the middle way, but that does not get you very far.

All of these things will inevitably cost a lot of money. But that just reflects the way the funding priorities - both private and public investment - have established an unsustainable city that is causing serious air pollution. Unless we address a quantum change in those funding priorities then the outcomes for Australia's biggest and only international city will not be good. Sydney is a very wealthy city, and we should be able to do that in the twenty first century.

In the lead up to the Forum the Government did make some key announcements. Two in particular stand out. The first was the proposed SEPP on Integrating Land Use and Transport. This is, of course, directed at the urban fabric of Sydney and changing the nature of Sydney so that its ecological footprint is far more benign. Its concept is good but its detail is unfortunate because of the thresholds to which the particular SEPP will apply. It applies to such a high threshold of development that very few of the developments that local councils and neighbourhoods see in front of them will actually be impacted on by this new SEPP. So while this public exhibition process is undergone we need to change those thresholds so that the good principals that are in that SEPP actually do apply to much more of the developments that occur in Sydney.

The second major announcement that the Premier just made was the issue of stamp duty. Now the fact is that no matter how clean or dirty the cars we have on Sydney streets, we will still have traffic congestion. But the importance of his announcement is that it is the first clear use of taxation policy to encourage better environmental outcomes. And that was a very significant breakthrough for Sydney to make. If the GST had been adjusted to be more of an environmentally informed tax regime then we would have even better signals going out to the economy about the types of things that should be done to improve the environment.

But as I said, it is the key problem of getting to our critical mass of public transport funding. Sydney is a big city with serious drivers inside it that produce bad air quality and bad transport efficiency. We need those massive changes in the coming years in Government and private expenditure to massively increase public transport.

The results of our Review of *Action for Air* do not augur well for the air we breathe. The investments we make today will take time to have effect and will determine the quality of the air in the next two decades. Efforts should be redoubled. We will have only one chance to give the millions of present and future residents in the region a clean air future.