

Community stakeholder perspectives on air quality

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4.5 out of 10—Review of *Action for Air* for the 2004 Clean Air Forum

Action for Air is the NSW Government's 25-year plan to improve air quality in the Greater Metropolitan Region (GMR) of Sydney, the Illawarra and the Lower Hunter. Launched in 1998 it provides a framework for measures to be implemented by a number of government agencies.

In the lead up to the 2001 Clean Air Forum the Total Environment Centre (TEC) conducted a comprehensive review of progress in implementing *Action for Air*. The review concluded that *Action for Air* faced very significant challenges with poor air quality results, particularly for ozone, a continuing problem.

Of particular concern was the failure to implement foundation policies in *Action for Air*. Two areas in particular stand out—continuing rapid growth in vehicle kilometres travelled (VKT) and poor progress in implementing *Action for Air* commitments to improve public transport, local air quality and greenhouse emissions.

TEC assessed progress in implementing *Action for Air* at 4/10 and concluded that a major overhaul of *Action for Air* was needed to improve progress in meeting commitments and reaching air quality goals.

In the lead up to the 2004 Clean Air Forum TEC has again undertaken a review of the implementation of *Action for Air*. Rather than seeking to replicate the work of the 2001 review this review has focussed on areas where changes have occurred since the last Clean Air Forum. In particular we have sought to highlight any areas where performance has improved or declined.

Objective 1: Integrate air quality goals and urban transport planning

A major development since the last forum is the NSW Government's Metropolitan Planning Strategy. A key objective of the strategy is to ensure that transport planning is integrated with land use planning. Since the last forum the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources was created to better integrate

transport and planning while the Minister for Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources has a key role in transport infrastructure decisions. These arrangements are relatively new and as yet untested.

A major concern is the virtually unchanged pattern in VKT figures and continued road building as indicated by the construction of the Western Orbital.

Objective 2: Provide more and better transport choices

Significant progress has been achieved toward improving bus services with the opening of the Liverpool to Parramatta Transitway (T-Way), progress toward the North-West T-way, reform to private bus contract arrangements under the Unsworth review process and moves toward equalisation of private and government bus fares.

Announcement of developer levies to fund public transport infrastructure in urban release areas is also a welcome step forward for clean air and better public transport.

Against these positive steps is the dismal performance in relation to rail services. While construction of the Bondi Junction turnaround loop will provide a significant increase in the capacity of the Illawarra line and the rail clearways project will also improve services throughout the network, elsewhere the picture is far from encouraging with the abandonment of the Parramatta to Epping section of the Parramatta to Chatswood rail link, and no discernible progress to development of other badly needed rail links. Poor reliability and on time running coupled with cuts to off-peak services are also providing commuters with little incentive to choose public transport over the private car.

CityRail's own performance data indicates that on 1 November 2004, 0% of peak hour trains ran on time. (http://www.cityrail.info/aboutus/our_performance/perform_1.jsp)

In August 2004, Transport Services Minister Michael Costa, said those experiencing delays on the train system can "buy a car". Mr Costa has made clear his belief

that a car is a viable alternative to public transport. “The Minister said you can buy a car very cheaply,” a spokesperson for Mr Costa said. “Even allowing for depreciation, it makes it very competitive.” This statement will make the public question the government’s commitment to public transport.

The spokesperson said that while the frequency of services had been cut to free up drivers for peak-hour rosters, extra carriages had been added to weekend trains to accommodate the crowds. The spokesperson also said, “People need to remember the rail network cannot be all things to all people ... It’s designed to move a large number of people in small amounts of time when demand is greatest. People do have other options.” (Sydney’s *Inner West Courier*, 17 August 2004).

Given that most complaints are for peak hour services, when the system must perform, it is ludicrous to suggest replacing train trips with a car trip.

Objective 3: Make, cars, trucks and buses cleaner

Good progress has been made in relation to vehicle emission and fuel standards with the implementation of national emissions standards under the Commonwealth *Motor Vehicle Standards Act 1989* and the *Fuel Quality Standards Act 2000*.

Of particular concern however, is the decision by NSW State Transit to end its commitment to purchase CNG buses. State Transit will return to purchasing diesel engines as they are now marginally cheaper to run due to Federal changes in fuel excise.

This is a significant step backwards which—in the first stage of its implementation—is likely to cost the community at least \$4.4 million in health costs from particulate matter alone, with oxides of nitrogen costing an additional \$1.3 million.

Continued failure to undertake phase 2 of the inspection and maintenance program for in-service vehicles allows 371 tonnes of pollution to enter Sydney’s air every day.

Finally, the Government has continued its failure to implement higher stamp duties for the more polluting, fuel-inefficient vehicles.

Objective 4: Promote cleaner business

There is relatively little change to report in relation to this objective with most initiatives having been implemented prior to the last Clean Air Forum. We are not aware of cleaner production having been mainstreamed. Boutique projects will not suffice and we should be mobilising the planning approval and pollution licensing process.

Objective 5: Promote cleaner homes

The major change in this area has been the introduction in July 2004 of *BASIX—the Building Sustainability Index*. BASIX is a web-based planning tool for assessing the performance of new homes against a range of sustainability indices: landscape, stormwater, water, thermal comfort and energy.

The first stage of BASIX is focussed on reducing water and energy use. New residential development in nominated local government areas must be designed and built to use 40% less drinking-quality water and produce 25% less greenhouse gas emissions (40% by 2006) than average NSW homes of the same type. This is a positive step forward in designing sustainable, energy-efficient homes.

Objective 6: Manage the impact of open burning

There is relatively little change to report in relation to this objective with most initiatives having been implemented prior to the last Clean Air Forum.

Objective 7: Monitor, report and review air quality

In October 2004 it was revealed DEC monitoring stations at Earlwood and George Street in the CBD have been closed. The station at Earlwood was crucial for monitoring pollution from the M5 East tunnel stack.

Pollutant monitoring has also stopped at Rozelle, St Marys, Newcastle and Illawarra. In 2004, the metropolitan air quality network dropped its sampling levels from 1500 to 450.

Closure of stations and cutbacks on monitoring significantly compromises the collection of long-term scientific data sets, and the capacity of the DEC to monitor and improve air quality. It may also limit their capacity to bring about a successful prosecution due to limited evidence.

Daily reports of the Regional Pollution Index (RPI) are still available on the DEC NSW website. The RPI is issued twice daily. The morning report at 9:30 am covers the period from 3 pm the previous afternoon to 6 am that morning. The afternoon report at 4 pm covers the period 6 am to 3 pm.

Conclusion

While there have been improvements in some areas, continued high VKT and poor performance in relation to rail services and infrastructure is continuing to limit the success of *Action for Air*. Major investment in new infrastructure and improved services is urgently required.

The full TEC report on its Review of *Action for Air* for the 2004 Clean Air Forum can be found on www.tec.org.au—under ‘Clean Air Campaign’.