

Light rail to Woden: which way should it run?

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With the territory election confirming the construction of Canberra's light rail, focus is already shifting to feasibility planning and detailed design development of the Stage 2 line from City to Woden. Where should it run? Adelaide Avenue and Yarra Glen, or perhaps a route that provides better connectivity with existing residential areas, workplaces, and schools?

On a prima facie examination, many may assume that the second stage route should replace and replicate the existing Blue Rapid express bus route along Adelaide Avenue with its small number of intermediate stops. This route is principally established for, and is admirably well-suited to those commuters who desire and need rapid journeys from Tuggeranong and Woden to the City and return.

There is wide acceptance in cities around the globe, however, that contemporary, best-practice transport planning is most effective when integrated with land use planning, and increased value is captured through the uplift of land-use zoning on land immediately adjacent to, or within a short walking distance of a transit corridor.

This was a key insight of Canberra Urban and Regional Futures' (University of Canberra) Working Paper 5 – "Light rail transit and residential density in mid-size cities" (2015) - which established that "the review of the case study cities has highlighted that there must be an integrated approach to land use planning and light rail implementation as part of a holistic urban planning and urban transformation process".



Stage 2 of light rail to Woden: a possible route

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The barriers for an Adelaide Avenue route are the perceived lengthy walking distances and the absence of suitable vacant land for future residential, commercial and retail development adjacent to that route.

Is there an alternative route that connects the City and Woden through where many in the southside community already live, work and attend school?

The map shows one possible alternative route from the City to Woden. Starting at the Alinga Street terminus of the first stage line from Gungahlin it travels across Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, around and behind Old Parliament House; and up Federation Mall to the front of the Parliament House forecourt. From there the light rail line could travel around the House, along Melbourne Avenue, Stonehaven Crescent and Hopetoun Circuit to Deakin shops. Then, along MacGregor Street, Strickland Crescent and Kent Street to Hughes shops, followed by a left turn into Kitchener Street and around to the Canberra Hospital. After crossing Yamba Drive into Ainsworth Street the line could skirt around the boundary of Woden Cemetery adjacent to Bootle Place, Cavanough Street and Easty Street and continue via Callam Street to the Woden Town Centre and an integrated connection to the proposed new Woden Bus Interchange.

That route would pass by – or be located very close to – several schools: Canberra Girls Grammar School (senior and junior), Alfred Deakin High School, the Woden School, Hughes Primary School and Canberra College; and the substantial workplaces and community facilities along the route would include Parliament House, Calvary John James Hospital, the national associations, consultancies and service providers in West Deakin and the Canberra Hospital.

As a city-shaping strategy, the second stage has been envisioned as reinforcing a substantial north-south transport spine. The map also shows (dotted) the start of other possible subsequent connecting stages of a citywide network: Woden to Southlands Mawson, the start of a route to Tuggeranong; West Deakin to new Yarralumla (Yarralumla Brickworks development), the start of a route along Cotter Road to Molonglo; Constitution Avenue, the start of routes to the airport and Barton/Kingston; and University Avenue, the start of a route to Belconnen via the ANU.

As always, there are many unresolved issues at this stage of a design process; on any project of this size several iterations of alternative models must be considered, rejected and reworked before the project requirements are clearly and fully understood and accepted by all its stakeholders.

The issue of how the light rail route crosses Commonwealth Avenue Bridge has already been publicly raised to counter popular acceptance of the second stage. Other design challenges will include whether the line will cross City Hill or circumnavigate it via London Circuit, how it will provide close and direct access to Parliament House, the extent of wire-free line in national areas sought by the NCA, how much on-road light-rail-running will be accepted by Canberra motorists, how gradients will affect line construction and operation, and how "squeeze-points" at intersections and along tight boundaries can be re-engineered to provide adequate space for rail alignment, amongst many other currently unclear conditions and considerations.

But my principal purpose is to open the discussion with the communities adjacent to the second stage to discuss the options.

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