

Submission: Northern Suburbs Rapid Bus Project

1. Overview

COTA Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed Northern Suburbs Rapid Bus Project.

COTA Tasmania is the peak body representing the interests of older Tasmanians. We support initiatives that improve access to reliable, affordable and accessible public transport, particularly where they help people remain connected to health services, shops, community facilities, social activities and family.

The consultation is seeking feedback on local impacts, route connections, proposed station locations, station features and the factors that would make rapid bus useful to passengers travelling across Greater Hobart and the northern suburbs, including the twelve potential station locations under consideration.

These are all issues that are particularly important for older people and people with disability.

2. About COTA Tasmania

COTA Tasmania is the peak body representing the interests of older Tasmanians.

For more than 60 years, COTA has worked to advance the rights, wellbeing and participation of older people through policy, advocacy, information, education and community engagement.

3. Comments

3.1 Age-friendly design should be built in from the outset

For older Tasmanians, the success of a rapid bus service will depend not only on travel time and frequency, but on whether the whole journey is safe, accessible and easy to navigate.

Based on the current plans, buses will operate in dedicated lanes on main roads, reducing interaction with general traffic. COTA considers this an important measure to support more reliable journey times and ongoing accessibility, particularly for passengers who may find unexpected delays, congestion or disrupted connections difficult to manage.

COTA is pleased to see that the consultation and planning process is considering a range of accessibility and passenger-experience issues. We encourage these to remain core design requirements as the project develops, including:

- reliable and well-timed connections between rapid bus services and local routes, with interchange design that minimises walking distances and waiting times, particularly for people with reduced mobility;
- conveniently located stations that provide practical access to shops, health services, community facilities and connecting public transport;
- safe, level and well-lit pedestrian access, including appropriate crossings and sufficient crossing times;
- seating and weather protection at stations, recognising that some older people cannot stand for long periods;
- clear, large and easy-to-read signage and passenger information;
- step-free access and sufficient space for mobility aids, wheelchairs and other assistive equipment;
- attention to personal safety, particularly at night and in quieter locations; and
- access to toilets nearby where possible, particularly at major interchange locations.

3.2 “Rapid” must not mean less accessible

COTA supports faster and more reliable public transport, but cautions against achieving this by substantially increasing the distance people must walk to reach a service.

For many older passengers, convenience and certainty matter as much as journey speed: a faster service is of limited benefit if it requires a long walk, an uncertain interchange or a lengthy wait for a connecting service.

Older people, people with disability and those with reduced mobility may be unable to walk significant distances to fewer, more widely spaced stations. This is particularly important in suburbs where topography, road design and distance from the proposed corridor may make even relatively short walking distances difficult.

The success of the rapid bus service will depend on effective “first and last kilometre” connections, including local bus services and accessible pedestrian links.

The rapid bus network should therefore be designed in conjunction with local and connecting services so that people who cannot walk long distances are not disadvantaged.

COTA also encourages consideration of service frequency throughout the day, not only during traditional commuter peaks. Older passengers often travel for appointments, shopping and social participation at different times, and a genuinely useful service needs to be reliable across the day.

3.3 Information must remain available offline

Transport information, timetable changes and disruption notices should be available through non-digital as well as digital channels.

COTA notes that the Government has already moved away from printed timetables at many existing bus stops. While digital information can provide timely updates, this change can disadvantage people who are not confident using digital technology, do not have access to a smartphone, or face connectivity or disability-related barriers.

The current plans indicate that real-time information displays may be provided at bus shelters. COTA considers this a positive step, as it would provide passengers with accessible and up-to-date information at the point of travel without requiring them to use a personal digital device.

Combined with the proposed service frequencies of approximately every 10 minutes on some routes and 30 minutes on others, real-time information has the potential to improve certainty and make services easier to use, particularly for older passengers who value reliability and clear information when planning their journey.

COTA nevertheless recommends that printed and telephone information options continue to be available, particularly for people planning journeys before they reach a stop or interchange.

3.4 Consultation with older people

COTA welcomes the availability of paper surveys, in-person displays and assistance for people who need help participating in the consultation. We encourage the project team to actively seek feedback from older residents, people with disability, carers, retirement village residents, community transport users and people who currently do not use public transport because existing services do not meet their needs.

Local councils covering the twelve potential sites should be specifically engaged as the project develops.

They know and understand the needs of their communities as well as having deep knowledge of the roads and infrastructure needs required to enable a successful project transition.

4. Conclusion

The Northern Suburbs Rapid Bus Project has the potential to improve independence, mobility and social connection for many older Tasmanians across the Northern Suburbs of Hobart.

COTA supports the project progressing, provided accessibility and age-friendly design are treated as core infrastructure requirements from the outset rather than addressed later as additional features.

A rapid bus service will be most successful if it works not only for regular commuters, but also for people whose mobility, confidence or access needs currently make public transport more difficult to use. Designing for those passengers from the outset will broaden the usefulness of the service and help make public transport a realistic option for more older Tasmanians.

We encourage Building Tasmania to continue this dialogue with community members and stakeholders as the project moves into detailed design and, subject to funding, implementation from 2027.