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# **Governments & Communities in Partnership**

From Theory to Practice

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# **Unrefereed Presentation**

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# **Improving local transport outcomes through partnerships and joined up government**

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I live in Brunswick, just 4km from the centre of Melbourne.

Within a couple of hundred metres of my house there is a train station, a tram line, a bus and a bike track. I can walk to my nearest supermarket, the medical centre and sporting facilities. It's easy for me to make the choice not to drive.

But in many rural communities, choosing not to drive is a ridiculous proposition. If you can drive, you do. The only people who don't drive are those that can't.

This is because in many rural communities there is simply no realistic alternative to the car. Or if there are alternative services, they are very limited. Participation in community life can be very difficult.

In this presentation I will present a brief overview of one way in which Government has attempted to tackle transport disadvantage in rural and regional communities, by enabling communities to develop their own innovative solutions. The idea behind the *Transport Connections* program is that community-based partnerships come together to develop innovative approaches using existing transport assets. This presentation will focus on the journey taken by government, and the learnings that we've accumulated along the way. It will also highlight a couple of examples showing how the program has worked in practice.

For those not able to drive, getting around can be a real ordeal. Getting out to medical appointments, to the shops, to employment or simply to visit friends can be very difficult.

Those most likely to be transport disadvantaged are older people, those on low incomes, women, people with a disability, youth, people from non-English speaking backgrounds and indigenous people.

Transport disadvantage affects people everywhere, but it is most prevalent in rural and regional Victoria where population densities are low, and practical alternatives to the car are thin on the ground.

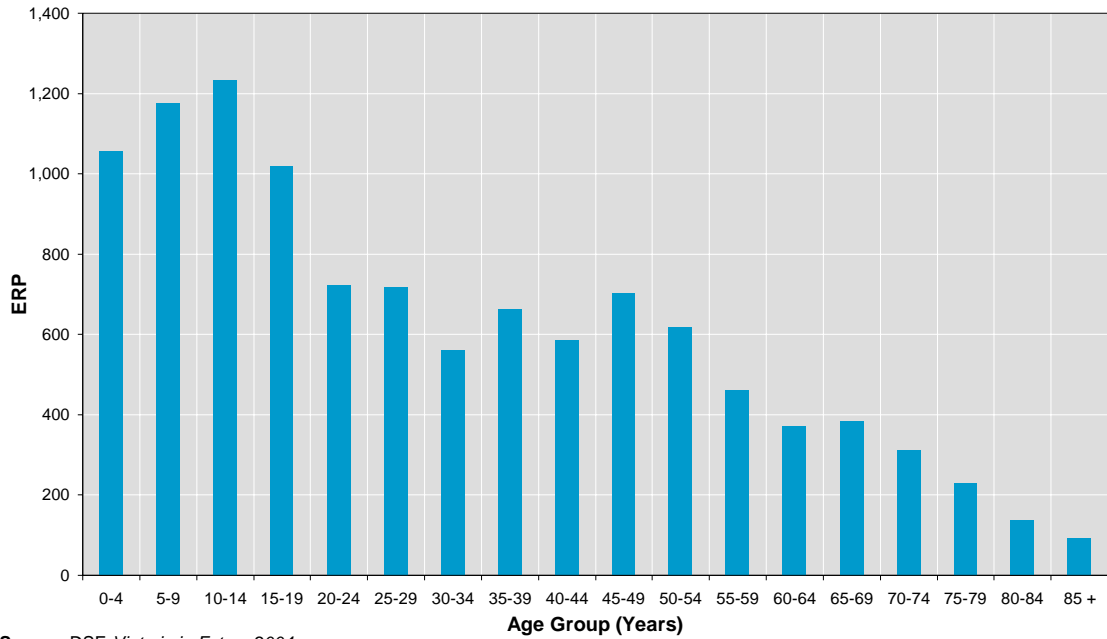
Transport disadvantage will only be exacerbated by changing demographics – ageing rural populations in particular will be a big factor.

The Shire of Buloke in North-western Victoria is a good example. Declining employment in agriculture, and the out-migration of young people is resulting in two very strong trends:

1. A steadily declining population; and

## 2. A rapidly ageing population

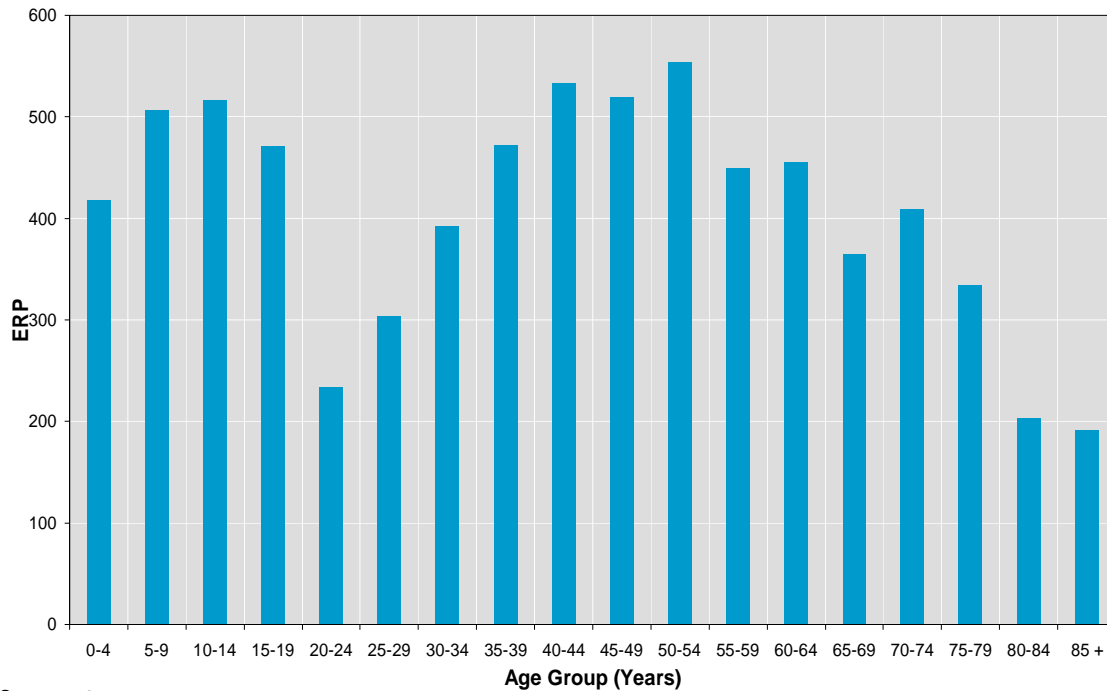
### Age Structure of Buloke (S), 1976



Source: DSE *Victoria in Future 2004*

In 1976, the vast bulk of the population was aged under 50.

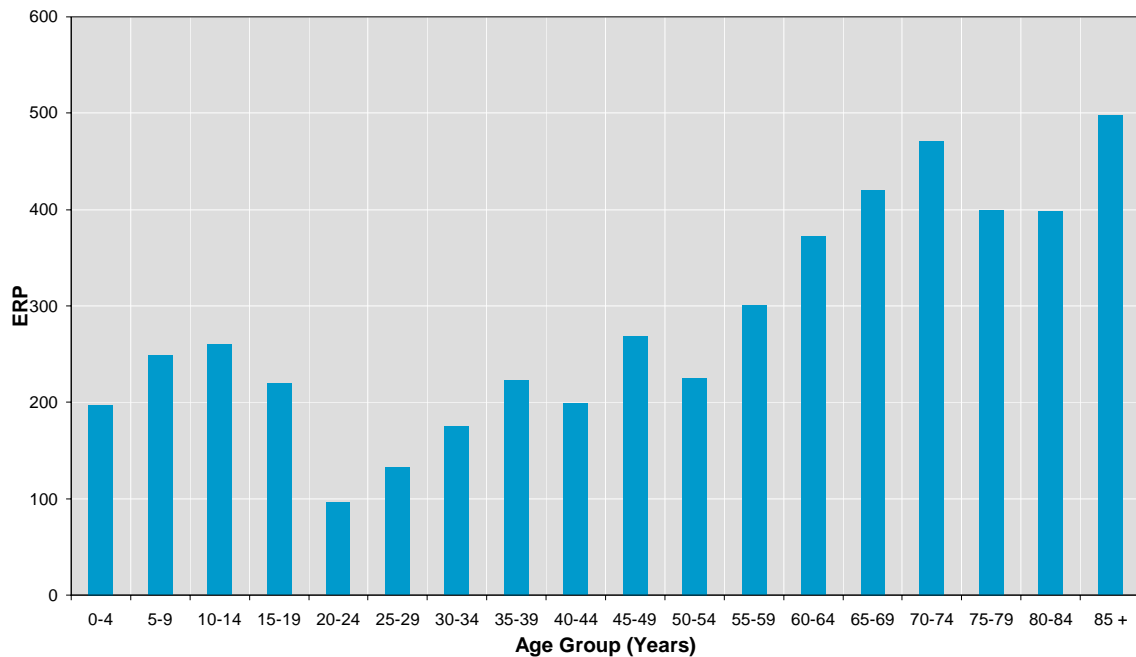
### Age Structure of Buloke (S), 2001



Source: DSE *Victoria in Future 2004*

By 2001, you can see that the bulk of the population are baby boomers, and there are very few people aged in their 20s.

### Age Structure of Buloke (S), 2031



Source: DSE *Victoria in Future 2004*

By 2031, about half of the population will be aged over 60 and a significant portion will be in their 80s or above. The working-aged population will have dwindled.

Across Victoria, it is expected that by 2021, the number of Victorians over the age of 70 will increase by 65% (DPC 2005). This will place huge demands on transport services.

Other trends that are going to exacerbate the problem of transport disadvantage include the migration of baby boomers to coastal areas with poor transport, and increases in petrol prices.

So it is therefore no surprise that rural and regional communities consistently raise transport as a key issue. In particular, they have consistently requested additional resources from government.

But despite significant investment in new public transport, and large numbers of new community buses, government found the issue of transport disadvantage in rural communities was not going away.

Lack of vehicles certainly wasn't the problem. Despite the enormous transport disadvantage faced in many communities, there is for the most part no shortage of vehicles.

By way of example, let's have a look at Gippsland, in Eastern Victoria. It's a very large area, stretching from the outskirts of Melbourne to Victoria's eastern-most tip, and takes in remote mountain communities, the industrial Latrobe valley, and small coastal communities.

It has a recently-upgraded, high-quality train line linking Bairnsdale with Melbourne.

It also has a network of long-distance coach services, as well as numerous town bus services.

However, these public transport services are really only the tip of the iceberg.

Gippsland has 321 publicly-funded school buses, as well as numerous school buses run by private schools. Most of these buses sit idle for much of the day.

Then there is the community transport sector. A recent survey revealed there were 42 buses funded by the Home and Community Care program in Gippsland, as well as a large number of cars. There are numerous other buses and vehicles as well – these range from pub buses, those operated by tourism bodies to volunteer-owned vehicles. Many of these community vehicles are poorly utilised – sometimes as low as 5000km per year – and provide a service only to very narrow client groups.

On top of that, there are 139 taxis in Gippsland, and more than 40 are wheelchair accessible. Taxis are often marginal businesses in rural areas, and are always looking for more work.

The experience in Gippsland is typical of regional Victoria.

The existence of such a vehicle fleet is a fantastic opportunity for government, and for transport disadvantaged communities.

More efficient and innovative use of these vehicles could potentially go a long way towards addressing the problem of transport disadvantage in rural and regional areas.

A few years ago, there began to be a sense in government that we might be able make greater use of existing transport assets in a way that more directly addressed the needs of the community.

However, there were a number of barriers to overcome.

Key among these was the fragmented funding, regulatory and contractual environment within government. Multiple state government departments played a part in regulating and funding services:

- Department of Infrastructure – public transport and taxis, community buses if they have more than 12 seats, and school bus contract management.
- Department of Human Services – community & medical transport (through the Home and Community Care Program).
- Department for Victorian Communities – funding for some community buses, and a policy role for transport disadvantaged people groups.
- Department of Education and Training – school bus policy, and alternative transport for students with special needs.

So a key objective was to get government agencies collaborating together to ensure that our funding, contractual and regulatory arrangements weren't presenting too much of a barrier to innovation. That was no small task (and the effort continues today) but there was a strong commitment from across government to work together on this, and a cross-government approach has featured strongly in everything that followed. More on that later.

But even if government could have joined up seamlessly, it was not in a position to generate innovative local solutions on its own.

For a start it didn't own or control all of the assets.

More importantly, it didn't have the local knowledge that communities possess.

And fundamentally, local innovation is driven by collaboration between key local actors. Collaboration is not something that government could achieve through engineering, contracting or regulation.

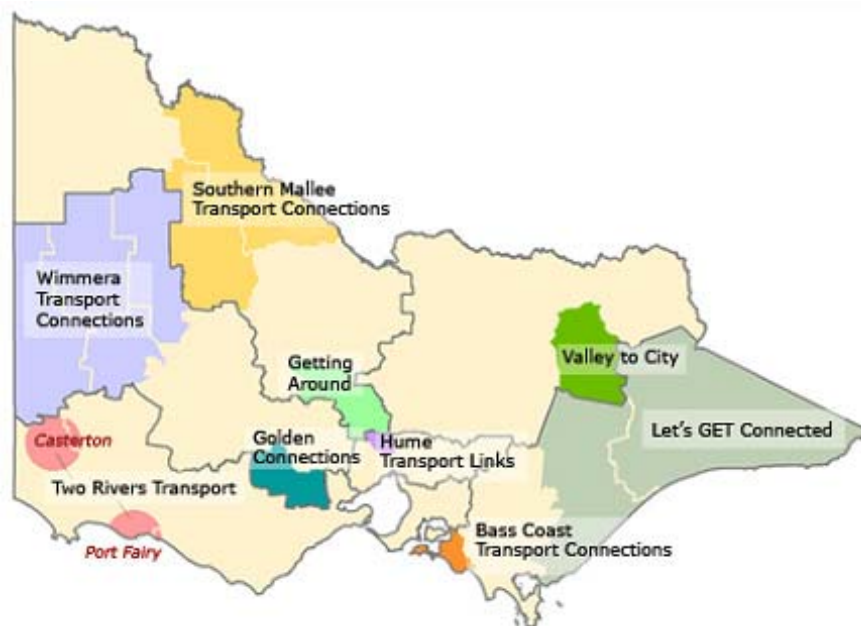
This was a process local communities would have to play a major part in driving.

So in 2003 the Government established the *Transport Connections* pilot program. \$2.1 million was allocated over three years. Nine pilot projects were funded and the idea was that local partnerships would be formed, and that the various local players would work collaboratively to innovate, making good use of existing resources.

Partnerships would be made up of local government, community service agencies, health service providers, public transport providers, community transport providers as well as other groups within the community.

This was a tentative step by government and it was not a substitute for mainstream approaches. It continued to support rural public transport, and it continued to support community transport.

The pilot was an attempt to see whether this approach could achieve results.



The nine projects were spread out across Victoria, and one was on the outer metropolitan fringe.

Typically the partnerships selected an auspice agency to be fund holder, and to be employer. This was local government in some cases. In other cases it was a community health service, volunteer agency or community transport provider. The projects all employed a project coordinator to drive their initiatives.

The past three years have been a significant learning exercise.

The results across the 9 pilots were mixed, but the approach definitely showed a lot of promise.

Common areas of work amongst the pilots have included:

- working closely with the Department of Infrastructure on public transport planning
- facilitating access for the broader community to the school bus network
- facilitating cooperation amongst community transport providers.
- provision of local transport information

A good example of the types of outcomes achieved by the project is based in Sea Lake, a small town in northern Victoria – the Shire of Buloke, actually.

Sea Lake's nearest regional centre is Swan Hill, about 70km away. There was not any public transport between the two centres (although V/Line did connect the two towns via Bendigo – but it took 2 days each way). There was a community bus which operated once a MONTH, available for specific client groups only. Sea Lake has an ageing population, and it was extremely difficult for those who couldn't drive to access medical appointments, fresh food and other services based in Swan Hill.

So the Transport Connections partnership brokered a solution that used existing transport assets with only marginal additional cost.

With a small subsidy from the Department of Infrastructure, a new public transport service was introduced between Sea Lake and Swan Hill (once a week) using a school bus during its down time. It isn't a low floor bus, but the partnership arranged for free electric scooters to be made available for passengers on arrival in Swan Hill.

For those in outlying communities remote from Sea Lake, the partnership worked with the local school, and arranged for those aged 60 and over to have access to school buses every day – travelling with the students into and out of Sea Lake. This is a first for Victoria. Ultimately, we may see this extended to the whole community.

The school bus that serviced the three small communities of Nulawill, Culgoa and Berriwillock had no spare capacity, so the partnership worked with the Sea Lake district hospital, which has a community bus. Again with a small subsidy from the Department of Infrastructure, the hospital runs a service on Thursdays which is open to all and connects these communities with the Sea Lake – Swan Hill bus.

It's only a once a week service, but in an area where once there was essentially no alternatives to the car, this makes a big difference.

Back to Gippsland for another example. More than 5000 trips are made each year from Gippsland to Melbourne to access specialist medical services. Most of these were conducted by volunteer drivers with one patient in each vehicle. It is a very long way to Melbourne from many parts of Gippsland. This placed great demands on the often elderly volunteer drivers, and it meant that community vehicles spent all their

time on the highway instead of doing work locally. It also meant that patients had a 6 week waiting period to access transport.

An absurd situation given the fantastic new train service that had been developed.

So the local Transport Connections partnership worked with the Red Cross and others to come up with a common sense solution. Local community transport now collects people at home and takes them to the nearest train service, where they then have a comfortable ride to Melbourne. In Melbourne they receive assistance from Traveller's Aid and are met by Red Cross volunteers who take them to their appointments before returning to the train.

This frees up community vehicles and volunteers for use locally, and means there is no longer a waiting period for medical travel to Melbourne.

These are just a couple of examples – there are many more. Importantly, these are initiatives that could be readily replicated elsewhere around the state. With 9 partnerships around the state, partnerships are able to draw on the experiences (including successes and failures) of other partnerships elsewhere.

An important element of the program has been the way government has worked closely with the partnerships. Without strong support from across government, success would not have been possible. The need to think outside of program 'boxes' was a key challenge for government officers, because solutions commonly traversed a range of departmental responsibilities.

Centrally too, addressing the regulatory and policy barriers that constrained the development and implementation of innovative local solutions was an important part of the project.

For example, the Government has now provided for increased flexibility of taxi operations in rural areas, by allowing country taxi operators to charge below the metered fare for contract work. This will open up new opportunities for taxi operators and allow them to tender for community transport work, or even to provide public transport services.

From the pilot program we have learnt several lessons:

1. Partnerships need to be broadly-based, and has representatives from across the community.
2. Partnerships need to focus on community engagement – determining the needs of the community, and working closely with the community to develop solutions that will be successful.
3. The involvement of local government is essential, although it need not be the partnership auspice body. In most regional areas, local government is the biggest actor in the area and its participation in the partnership is essential.



4. The partnership's own catchment needs to align with the appropriate transport catchment. Being too small or too big means the partnership can't adequately tackle the transport issues.
5. A mix of short and long term strategies, at both the local and regional level. Quick wins are important – they generate enthusiasm, but the bigger systemic challenges are important too.

Fortuitously perhaps, as the pilot program was coming to an end, the program has found itself at the centre of several convergent policy themes.

Obviously, there is a great alignment between the program emphasis by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development on partnerships. This program demonstrates how:

*Partnerships draw on synergies between local programmes and government initiatives that can enhance their mutual impact. (OECD 2002)*

The Department for Victorian Communities was created in 2002, with an express community strengthening agenda. DVC argues that:

*Successful community strengthening happens when government investments are linked to local knowledge and community decision-making (DVC 2006a)*

Elsewhere it develops this idea further, arguing:

*Strong communities have a sustainable mix of assets and strong governance that maximises the equitable use of those assets...*

*Strong governance is built through connectedness. (DVC 2006b)*

A focus on disadvantaged places is at the heart of the Government's social policy framework, *A Fairer Victoria*. The Government argues strongly that:

*A number of communities across Victoria experience high concentrations of disadvantage. In some areas disadvantage is concentrated even further in particular suburbs, neighbourhoods or small country towns. Strategies to successfully tackle disadvantage in these places will require concerted effort from government, business and the communities themselves. (DPC 2005)*

Worldwide, there has been a strong emphasis on 'joined-up government' which manifests in Victoria as 'Changing the Way Government Works'.

Perhaps it was because the *Transport Connections* program so beautifully captured the synergy between all of these agendas. Or perhaps it was simply because the pilot program so successfully demonstrated the potential of this type of approach.

But earlier this year, as part of its *Meeting Our Transport Challenges* statement, the Government announced a significant expansion of the *Transport Connections* program.

\$18.3 million was allocated over 4 years.

Up to 30 projects will be funded across the state, and it is expected this will enable all rural, regional and metropolitan interface communities in Victoria to benefit from the *Transport Connections* approach.

The expanded program will build on the pilot program, adopting slightly to incorporate some of its lessons. The Department for Victorian Communities will be the program manager, and the Minister for Victorian Communities will be the lead minister.

The funding includes \$4 million for a flexible fund that will provide start up funding for community-initiated projects. The Department of Infrastructure will manage this element of the program.

A strong emphasis on partnerships will be at the heart of the program.

Another strong theme will be a continued focus on cross-government support.

And we'll be putting a strong focus on supporting our project coordinators.

### **Next steps**

We are currently in the program development phase.

We are in the midst of holding 16 workshops throughout Victoria, with the aim of assisting communities to form partnerships and develop project applications.

Rather than a competitive tender model, we are running a facilitated process, ensuring that communities develop applications cooperatively, not in competition. The workshops are a key part of that approach.

### **Conclusion & lessons**

1. Some (perhaps many) types of service delivery do not lend themselves to delivery by government on its own. Governments might possess technical knowledge, but communities possess local knowledge that is in many cases crucial to effective service delivery.
2. Innovation is best driven by diverse groups of stakeholders collaborating together. If innovation is a policy goal, it may be better to foster structures that see governments and communities working in partnership.
3. Strong communities depend on strong networks. *Transport Connections* facilitates more effective and innovative service delivery. But it also results in stronger community networks, and ultimately stronger communities.
4. If government is to be supportive of innovative new approaches driven by the community, then it needs to think outside the program 'box'. Being exclusively program-focussed can unnecessarily stifle innovation, and limits government's capacity to work in partnership with communities.

These are lessons that have broad applicability. But they are difficult, and require a considerable change in how we go about the business of government.

This has been a brief overview of Government's experience with the *Transport Connections* program. It has shown us how government can act as enabler, empowering communities to develop their own local solutions.

Rural communities may never have the same range of transport as Brunswick, but with the Transport Connections program I am confident that communities can work together with government to make real inroads into addressing transport disadvantage.

Thank You

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