

LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY

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Private toll roads are a fundamentally flawed concept

Traffic volumes on private toll roads that are lower than forecast ('Lawsuits pile up in Oz for toll road forecasts' *LTT* 08 Aug) and Phil Goodwin's latest column (*LTT* 05 Sep) are bad news for the private companies that paid for the roads, and maybe also for the consultants who made the forecasts, who are now being sued by those companies. But, from everyone else's point of view, less traffic than predicted is thoroughly good news: less pollution, less carbon dioxide, fewer casualties, less mode switch away from sustainable transport. Even the government bodies promoting the toll roads have (inconsistently) aspirations for limiting the growth of traffic. This was the case when I was in New South Wales back in the 1990s when private toll roads were being advocated.

In terms of the desired transport trends towards low carbon transport, the incentives to invest in roads are perverse, because the private interests are only attracted and successfully served with increased traffic, and they will kick up a fuss if traffic turns out to be less than expected, as the current lawsuits demonstrate.

On a related aspect, it seems in this country that new local roads (such as bypasses or relief roads) that are entirely funded by the private sector can escape the scrutiny and appraisal process that applies to roads funded from the public purse. An example is a new 'bypass' in Howden, East Riding of Yorkshire, which is being paid for by the developers of an urban extension north of the town. Should the absence of public money mean that there is no need to investigate the costs and benefits, or to compare the scheme with any alternative designs or alignments? In my view, a scheme that has an impact on traffic and travel patterns and other aspects of public life should be subjected to public scrutiny, regardless of where the money comes from.

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