

THE CONVERSATION



‘The 30-minute city’: how do we put the political rhetoric into practice?

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Malcolm Turnbull is known to favour public transport, but he also sees the need to twin the development of higher-density activity centres with rail infrastructure. AAP/Dan Himbrechts

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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has promoted the benefits of a “30-minute city” in explaining his approach to cities and urban transport. The opposition infrastructure spokesman, Anthony Albanese, notes he **talked about this idea** at the National Press Club in 2014.

The reality is that the 30-minute city is hardly a new idea in town planning, but it is good to see political leaders recognising its value and grappling with what it means. It’s likely to bring significant change to how we build our cities.

The urban time travel budget

People across the world, in every city and in all historical cities, have an **average travel time budget of one hour** – around 30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the evening. The historic walking city spread out only 2-4km across, the tram city about 10km and the steam train city about 20km, before the car city went 40-50km out. All were 30-minute cities.

Some people choose to live where they can have a much lower travel time and some choose much longer, especially in far outer suburbs. But the average is around 30 minutes for the journey to work.

Only when a city is becoming dysfunctional does the average start to blow out. Data shows this in Sydney outer areas in recent decades. When this happens people demand faster transit options. The real estate market trend is for people to move into areas where they can

reduce travel times.

The 30-minute city concept has become very useful for town planning as it helps plan more **strategically** for where development should happen or not happen.

Although history suggests there is a strong market for living within the 30-minute city, the politics of land development usually interferes. Land owners on the urban fringe will always be looking to make squillions out of rezoning their land for suburbs rather than rural purposes. And there are always people who are ready to stop any density increases in their neighbourhood as the redevelopment market requires.

Why it is very important to see bipartisan support for the 30-minute city is that Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth are already way out of kilter with this goal. Any city that has sprawled more than 50km will be unable to keep those suburbs within a 30-minute travel time budget – traffic congestion keeps average speeds in most cities below 40km/h. The average morning and evening commute in these four big cities is now more than 30 minutes.

All the strategic plans of these cities are therefore suggesting that redevelopment must be increased and assisted. Infrastructure can help density. As Turnbull says:

If you invest in good transport infrastructure, then density gives greater amenity because there are more things to do, you're closer to work, you're closer to university.

The Tony Abbott era presented cities with very large road projects that would just increase urban sprawl. These projects ultimately would not have reduced travel times as they would not help create redevelopment.

So how do we help our cities achieve 30-minute travel times?

The urban package

Turnbull often refers to three factors that are emerging as the government's urban package: urban rail, urban density and urban land value capture. These are the approaches that can be seen in cities globally.

1) Urban rail

Several speeches have indicated the Turnbull government is agnostic about the modes of transport it favours. Turnbull has said:

Coalition governments have been very reluctant to fund rail, support rail, (they) prefer to support road. My government will support transport infrastructure regardless of its mode. It depends on what makes most sense. And the reality is it will be a mixture of both (road and rail).

What is left of the road package from the Abbott government is being supported. Rural communities will put up their hands for more roads. But Turnbull's overwhelming message (his consistent personal stance for decades) is that he likes new urban rail systems. He wants a fast rail link to Sydney's second airport when it opens.

Before he was prime minister, Turnbull said the Gold Coast Light Rail was his favourite in the world. There was not much doubt he would fund its small extension for the Commonwealth Games. Most significantly, it showed urban rail was back on the federal agenda.

Cities across the country have thus been gearing up to put urban rail back into their priority plans. This is not just an Australian phenomenon; cities worldwide are finding new rail technology helps them create 30-minute cities.

2) Urban density

Turnbull has stressed that rail projects enable density in activity centres across the city. He understands how infrastructure is needed for “an integrated investment that creates amenity, value, liveability, affordability and economic growth” and that “communities need smart, well-designed, walkable density”.

In other words, cities need infrastructure and redevelopment that create activity centres where people can live and work within 30 minutes by foot, cycle, bus, car or train/tram. This is the agenda for all our big cities. It has been a big agenda for all state governments in the past decade: the need for strong urban centres that can compete with other global cities for private capital and jobs.

“Walkable density” ... I think we will hear that many more times. So how do we achieve that?

3) Urban land value capture

We need to find ways to fund urban rail and urban activity centres together. We need transit-oriented development, but so often we get transit without the land development, or density without the transit.

The secret seems to be combining government and business to do both as one package. The private sector is necessary – after all, it does the land development in cities – but the approach globally is now to seek ways to have the private sector build both the land development and the transit.

The new mantra is to fund the integrated agenda through urban land value capture. This makes use of the fact that when urban rail is built it increases land value around stations.

This agenda has yet to be fully explained. As NSW Opposition Leader Luke Foley said:

Our governments need to spell out what ... [they] are doing when they talk about value capture. Walk into any pet store in the nation and the resident budgerigar is squawking on about value capture.

Transforming how cities develop

The CUSP Entrepreneur Rail Model explains the concept and takes it further. It redefines the core players away from transport planners and suggests land-development expertise should lead the exercise of rail building.

This offers a focused approach for urban areas ripe for intensification. The model shows how governments can best capture the value created from higher densities around new rail stations in direct partnership with the rail builders.

Private land development expertise is needed to recognise where the potential exists for significant accessibility-based land value increase. Private bids can therefore create opportunities to **directly fund the railway**. If governments can't enable this process, then you don't get the rail or the land development – they depend on each other.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Infrastructure Transport and Cities has been taking submissions on:

The role of transport connectivity in stimulating infrastructure and economic activity.

Our submission on the Entrepreneur Rail Model prompted two hours of questioning. One questioner said:

Your paper is about the reconceptualisation of the role of government agencies.

He is right.

The committee's questions left little doubt that there is a mood for change in how we build our cities. As Torkel Patterson, from Central Japan Railways Company, said at a recent Sydney rail conference:

It's not transportation, it's transformation that we need.

There is serious debate across Australia about this. Most state governments have little room for more capital spending and are under pressure to provide urban rail.

But the approach that provides money for transport projects at will – treating Treasury like an ATM, as **Turnbull says** – and isn't integrated with the 30-minute city redevelopment agenda, is not what we need in our cities.

If cities want help with urban rail, they will need the private sector to provide much of the funding, with outcomes that create the 30-minute centres we desperately need. They can do this only if the states develop a mechanism that enables redevelopment opportunities, their activity centres, to be the basis of integrated rail and land development. This is not what states have been doing. They must begin now.

If the 30-minute city goal can indeed guide urban rail investment, then we can unlock the necessary dense activity centres. This is the holy grail of town planning. Such a model is used in Japan, so can we make an Australian model work?

Our leaders' speeches on the 30-minute city should be a signal for intense activity by federal, state and local government agencies as well as private sector firms. Government processes and consortia will need to gear up to deliver this emerging agenda.



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