

Last Bus for Aurora – Public transport bungling will make our model environmental suburb a false dawn.

Bill Russell*

If you take a Sunday drive out along High Street past Epping Plaza, you'll shortly come to signs to a new subdivision called Aurora, on the left of the road on a green rock strewn plain dotted with ancient red gums. It's a nice spot for a drive, and you can get a cappuccino at the Red Gum Cafe at Aurora after you've had a look at the new suburb.

It's worth a look, because it is intended to point the way to what our suburbs will be like in a more sustainable future, where we pay more attention to our environmental footprint – to the energy, water, and fuel we use to go about our everyday lives. The estate conserves and recycles water; there are solar panels on the sails that protect the children's playground, and the houses vie for their energy efficiency rating. Six stars is the go round here, whether it's a McMansion, a trendy terrace, or something more modest you're looking for. Mind you, if your idea of a house is something less than 15 squares, your choice will be rather limited.

It's a pleasant spot. The Plenty corridor has been earmarked for urban development for years, and Aurora is intended by its sponsors, the Government's VicUrban, to show just how a sustainable suburb can be put together. Generally speaking, it works: it looks better, and will be significantly more sustainable than the surrounding new developments where the environment has been an afterthought rather than a guiding principle.

Just now, there is an impressive range of display homes around the Discovery Centre, and finished houses are now being completed along streets with names like Earlybird Drive and Cityview Way. They are comfortable houses that families will enjoy.

Public transport has however been bungled completely. There is a rail corridor from Epping into the centre of the development, and this line should have been up and running as the first residents moved in. Only then could there be any hope that new residents might think twice about that second, third or fourth family car. Instead, the former transport Minister, showing the foresight of Mr McGoo, postponed the line for at least 15 years, which is as close to never as a politician usually admits.

The public transport that is provided is a very limited bus service. At the weekend, the last bus leaves Aurora at 12 noon on Saturday, and on Sunday there's no service at all.

Weekdays there's one an hour during the day. And there are no shops in Aurora except the Red Gum Café, which although it stocks a few basic groceries, has no pretence at being a supermarket.

Adelaide does it much better. If you go to their counterpart suburb, Mawson Lakes, you will find world class recycling that serves not only its 28 wetlands but all its houses and factories as well. The local council sells recycled water to factories cheaper than the water authority can. In the centre of Mawson Lakes there is a large university campus, and flats for students and singles are located above the houses in the town centre. A Technology Park provides 3000 new jobs within walking distance of the centre, and the usual array of new style family homes surrounds it. And of course there's a train 7 days a week, and 15 bus routes including all night buses .The all night buses serving Mawson Lakes are as frequent as those serving Aurora at peak period during the day!

Aurora is a great initiative; it's a pity that Melbourne 2030's promise of better public transport was such a sham. But it's not too late for Governments to learn. What about getting the Aurora and South Morang rail extensions back on the table?

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Attached jpeg photos:

Deserted Aurora bus stop: 2 days till the next bus!

Aurora Bus timetable: plenty of white space.