

Park and Ride – exploding the myth

Revised Feb 2005

Colchester Cycling Campaign is concerned about plans for large scale park-and-ride (P&R) schemes in Colchester.

While P&R is portrayed as the "traditional step" to efficient and green traffic management, there are misconceptions and disadvantages which need to be understood by decision-makers and the man in the street.

Two main questions need to be asked:

- **Will P&R reduce traffic or stabilise traffic growth in Colchester?**
- **Will it support the town centre?**

Other questions are:

- **Will P&R increase traffic in the countryside? Will it help bus services generally?**
- **Will it be financially efficient — or depend on a huge council tax subsidy?**
- **Can it grow and be financially efficient?**
- **Will its image send the right message to those already using alternative transport, ie walkers and existing bus users?**
- **Is it truly environmentally friendly?**
- **Who is it aimed at? Commuters or shoppers/tourists?**
- **What is the viability of the Colchester proposals?**

This is CCC's response in detail:

- **Will P&R reduce or stabilise traffic growth in Colchester?**

Park and ride will not reduce the amount of traffic; in fact it will hardly dent the rate of traffic growth in the urban area.

Back-of-a-cigarette-packet sums will show that a P&R operation, working at maximum capacity, will remove three times the number of cars as the spaces it provides. Put into perspective, a 300-space P&R in Colchester would take 900 cars from our roads daily - or less than two per cent of the daytime traffic on Cymbeline Way and Ipswich Road.

So what happens to the space created by the traffic removed? It has been accepted since the late 1990s that "more roads usually equal more traffic" (sometimes known as "the M25 effect"). Unless further measures are taken, such as a congestion charge, the space created would be quickly taken up by other cars. Within a short time, congestion will be back to the same levels and heading higher.

- **Will P&R support the town centre?**

If drivers who use P&R in other towns are to be believed, P&R will help Colchester town centre. However, that must be put into perspective:

:: how many people would have come to Colchester anyway?

:: what is the effect on neighbouring small towns, such as Witham, Halstead, Manningtree, Harwich, Clacton, Frinton and Brightlingsea? Each sale in Colchester means less trade for them, meaning they offer less choice and decline further in their ability to compete and/or maintain the number of shoppers.

:: The town centre's main competitors are the major supermarkets (Asda, Tesco and Sainsbury) as well as other "retail park" stores. There is no doubt that town centres are at a disadvantage, but will P&R address it satisfactorily? Would it be better to make retail parks charge for parking? Would it help to have traditional-style "mini town centres" which would reduce the need to travel?

Interestingly, some councils have funded P&R terminals by selling or leasing part of the site for more retail stores; in terms of supporting a town centre, this is self-defeating!

- **Will P&R increase traffic in the countryside? Will it help bus services generally?**

P&R will reduce the viability and potential of "whole route" services from both rural areas and urban areas near to the P&R site. Essex County Council is already looking to spend £4 million on changes to Cymbeline Way to help P&R. Undoubtedly it is also spending other money on supporting bus services. However, P&R is being given priority over other bus schemes in Colchester, meaning that P&R users will speed into town on near-new buses while those on regular bus services will continue to suffer irregular and infrequent services, with older vehicles and buses stuck in jams all over town. Cymbeline Way, set to have the best bus lane in town, currently has few if any bus services using it.

- **Will P&R be financially efficient — or depend on a huge council tax subsidy?**

Virtually no P&R operation in the UK is in the black, with the possible exception of Oxford. All the others operate with large subsidies paid for by the council tax payer. We need to look closely at what we will get for that money (both set-up and operation), and whether it could be better used for other schemes. Such schemes could include:

:: Free or subsidised "rail and ride" buses from North Station to the town centre

:: Shop discounts for those with valid bus and train tickets

:: A poster campaign similar to the Christmas one which boosted late-night and Sunday trade, to include the London Tube.

This would draw positive attention to Colchester and help it towards its aim of being "greenest and cleanest".

Drawing car-borne shoppers from Ipswich, Braintree, Norwich and Chelmsford is robbing Peter to pay Paul – and helping to ruin the quality of life for all.

- **Can P&R grow and still be financially efficient?**

P&R can grow, but the problems it creates and the cost will grow with it. Some towns are finding that their P&R is at saturation point, and that their second or third P&R terminus is testing the whole scheme's financial viability.

- **Is it truly environmentally friendly?**

No - for the reasons given above, and for the fact that it encourages mobility (desire to travel) over accessibility (ease of using local services).

- **Who is it aimed at? Commuters or shoppers/tourists?**

The worst congestion undoubtedly occurs in the rush hour; while it would be logical for P&R to be used to relieve this congestion, it would not be economical. A P&R site must have buses running throughout the day to ensure people can get to and from town when they want. There is no financial sense in packing a P&R site with commuters' cars from 8am to 5.30pm. For P&R to achieve its main aim of supporting the town centre, it should be aimed at shoppers/tourists, but these motorists are generally using the roads when they are comparatively free-running.

- **What is the viability of the Colchester proposals?**

Of the two sites being considered, Cuckoo Farm has the edge over Stanway on practicality. Back-of-a-fag-packet calculations again: Stanway is four miles from Colchester town centre; Five buses would be needed, 7am to 6.30pm, to maintain a ten-minute frequency.

The first Ipswich park-and-ride was forecast to lose £1.5 million in its first five years, but this quickly fell behind budget and charges had to be increased.

The Colchester bill for park-and-ride could be horrendous: £4 million is set to be spent on Cymbeline Way but the success of the P&R function will still be dependent on a free-moving A12. All this money is being spent to draw fewer than 900 cars a day off town centre roads in just one corridor.

- **Conclusion**

Park and ride should not go ahead in isolation - to do so would be a negligent and inappropriate use of taxpayers' money. The only way that P&R can work, and be a success, is as part of a countywide scheme for reducing traffic in towns by congestion charging.

Competing whole-route bus services should also enjoy an equal subsidy and publicity, with more bus priority schemes within the town.

Essex County Council should set as its primary aim the need to end people's "daily dependency" on the car.