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Submission to Environment Waikato on the 2010 Draft Annual Plan

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We wish to present the group's comments to the council in person

Living Streets Hamilton wishes to address only transport issues on this occasion.

Bus services:

Living Streets would like to congratulate Environment Waikato on the steadily improving bus services, which are very obviously appreciated and being used by Hamilton residents. However we are concerned that further development is being delayed by efforts to minimise rate increases. The public transport system of a city is at the heart of its continuing ability to function, especially as the city grows larger.

Minor increases in expenditure on this vital service now might save a great deal of expense and difficulty later, as evidenced by Auckland's present transport woes.

To be able to get private vehicles off the roads (and Hamilton has one of the highest single-occupancy car uses in the country), it is vital that bus services run frequently and cover the most necessary routes, especially at peak commuting times. We have already had evidence that the existing Orbiter system is being overloaded and that more buses are needed at more frequent intervals. If too many people experience 45-minute delays trying to get to work or school, they will be back in their cars very rapidly.

Please do not undo the good that has already been done by failing to keep up with demand, or by raising fares. The service needs to be cheap, efficient and accessible. We are moving in the right direction, but it is very important to keep development going. As we have stated before, if the service is provided, it will be used.

In order to promote integrated alternative transport, we request that EW installs bicycle racks on the front of buses as soon as possible. This will allow more flexibility in the use of both buses and bicycles and should help to further reduce the numbers of private cars on city streets.

Trains:

The enormous support for the Hamilton to Auckland commuter service cannot be ignored. EW needs to lobby central government heavily to get this service going.

Hamilton City Council has expressed willingness to help; the rolling stock and the tracks are there; we have two stations available (one directly opposite the transport centre in the middle of town); and the knowledge, gained from previous attempts, now exists as to what kind of service is needed to make the system viable.

One argument against the service is that the Hamilton to Auckland line is not electrified. This needs government support and again is something that EW should be lobbying for on behalf of the Waikato area.

A good train service could be of enormous benefit in terms of public safety (we have a very bad road accident history in the Waikato) and in terms of business productivity. Workers travelling to Auckland by train can work or hold meetings on the way, and are spared the considerable stress of driving the highway both ways, usually in one day.

Funding:

Yes, we know times are tough, and that we have a very recalcitrant government with no interest in the construction of anything except state highways. That does not mean that local and regional authorities should roll over and give up when the wellbeing of their area is at stake. We request that EW supports the wishes of the 11,500 signatories of the Waikato trains petition, and begins serious lobbying of central government for the advancement of this project. It should also be placing pressure on central government to reinstate funding for buses, and walking and cycling projects. Active transport modes have a positive impact on health and education costs, and this should be emphasised to government funding agencies by regional authorities.

As far as the Orbiter and other bus services are concerned, we realise that extra buses have to be funded by EW since central government is not helping. We would recommend a rates increase rather than fare increases in order to keep these services viable and growing. The relatively minor increase in rates required is likely to pay off many times over in terms of quality of life in the future.