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Christchurch Tramway route extension - SUBMISSION

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission, and for allowing a short extension to the deadline. SPOKES' comments about this proposal are intended to represent the concerns of people who cycle, or who might wish to cycle, in Christchurch, and are grouped under three headings:

1. Safety concerns around tramlines (existing and proposed)
2. Access for people cycling through City Mall
3. Tram / light rail transport in Christchurch

1. Safety concerns around tramlines (existing and proposed)

The existing tram route (Armagh Street – Rolleston Avenue – Worcester Street) has long been a concern for people riding bikes along these streets. There is an unacceptably high risk of people falling off their bikes as they ride across the tramlines. There are several exacerbating factors, and some possible mitigation measures, which are discussed below. The relevance of this to the proposed tram route extension is that if the extension goes ahead, it should be designed to encourage and not endanger people who cycle through the central city. SPOKES believes that the serious problems with the existing tram route must be addressed before any additional tramlines are installed.

Riding across, between or into the existing tramlines (and trying to avoid doing so) presents a considerable hazard for people cycling in central Christchurch. Over the years, SPOKES members have recounted numerous crashes and falls from cyclists skidding on wet tramlines or getting their wheels stuck in the tracks. Most of these crashes have not been officially reported and recorded, because the resulting injuries are usually minor in nature, and because the crash has not involved another vehicle. SPOKES is currently attempting to quantify the extent of tram track bike crashes through an on-line survey, and we will make the results of this available to the Council.

The tram tracks along Armagh Street create the worst hazards for people cycling, for four reasons:

1. The path of the tramlines deviates back and forth from the kerb to the centre of the traffic lane at tram-stops and intersections, creating many points where people must ride across the lines.
2. The Armagh Street roadway accommodates significant numbers of cars (moving and parked), as well as trams and bikes. Cyclists are at greater risk of falling off on the tram tracks while they are also negotiating road space with cars.
3. Armagh Street has on-road marked cycle lanes between Rolleston Ave and Madras St, and is (along with Tuam and Manchester Streets) designated as one of three principal central city cycling routes. Therefore large numbers of cyclists use the street – its western end leads into the Hagley Park “cycling expressway”.
4. The orientation of the cycle lanes in several places seems designed to guide people to ride into the tramlines or across them on a sharp angle, or they are forced to leave the cycle lane and potentially conflict with car traffic.

These exacerbating factors are much reduced with the tram tracks on Rolleston Avenue and Worcester Street: the tramlines are straighter; volumes of car traffic lower; and the roads are not designated as main cycling routes (although they are still much used by cyclists, probably because of the low traffic volumes). The proposed extension looks to include a number of conflict points, especially on Colombo, Manchester and High Streets.

SPOKES believes that the negative impacts – both danger and deterrence – for people cycling alongside the existing tram route should be addressed before any additional tramlines are installed. Mitigation measures along the current route are limited to blue signs at regular intervals, featuring an icon of a person falling from their bike and the warning: ‘Tram Tracks – Cyclists Take Care’. Thus cyclists are left to manage their own risk in a poorly-designed environment. (The signs are also a constant reminder to all of the dangers of cycling, which surely works against the goal of creating a cycle-friendly Christchurch!)

The first priority in improving Christchurch’s tramway is to reduce risk rather than just advertise it. The existing tram route needs a full safety audit, and modifications to provide a reasonable level of service and encouragement for people to cycle in central Christchurch. Given that realigning tramlines would be disruptive and expensive, changes to cycle lanes, general traffic treatments and parking might be recommended instead, including:

- Cycle lanes being realigned away from tram tracks on Armagh Street
- Reducing speed and volume of cars in all areas where trams are present
- Reducing on-street parking in areas with multiple conflicts
- Implementing ‘preferred use’ designs for the central city core area, with priority given to pedestrians, cyclists, public transport (including trams) and private cars, in that order.

Only when the existing tramway is made considerably safer should extensions to the tramway be undertaken. The lessons learned from auditing and improving the existing tramway can then guide the design and installation of new tram routes, and ensure that safety and encouragement for people cycling are given the priority they deserve.

2. Access for people cycling through City Mall

SPOKES notes that a reason the proposed tramway extension is being considered is because 63% of respondents to the City Mall project consultation in 2006 answered

yes to “Do you think the tram should be extended through City Mall?” Unfortunately, the question “Should people be allowed to cycle through City Mall?” was not asked, as Spokes constantly receives suggestions from people to this effect (as Council probably does too).

Changing the City Mall Special Order to allow people to cycle in City Mall would be of far greater benefit than extending the tram route. Local people use cycling as a means of transport far more than the tram, and the goals of an environmentally, socially and economically vibrant central city will be well served by introducing cycles to Cashel and High Streets.

Although we have identified a number of actual and potential conflicts in the preceding section, trams and bikes need not be mutually exclusive. If properly designed for, both could be allowed to use City Mall. SPOKES takes this opportunity to advocate for access for people to cycle through City Mall.

3. Tram / light rail transport in Christchurch

Finally, SPOKES would like to express support for public transport in Christchurch. When designed and implemented well, public transport is a valuable complement to walking and cycling as part of a sustainable transport system. In general, our members are supportive of the concept of a light-rail / modern tram service on major arterial routes across the city, to augment existing bus services, give people more transport choices, and aid the transition away from the finite oil resources that currently power much of our transportation.

Our concern with the current proposal is that it does not bring us any closer to such a service. The existing tramway is quaint, pleasant and somewhat iconic for the central city, and the proposed extension would doubtless share these qualities, but it represents a lost opportunity in terms of useful high-capacity public transport for 21st-century Christchurch.

If Christchurch ratepayers are to invest \$5 million into a tram service, it should be put towards constructing something that will serve the needs of both locals and tourists, be of a long-term benefit for the city, and give us a return on our investment in the form of reduced future roading costs. Instead we are being asked to fund a pleasant circumambulation for visitors, with the returns accruing not to ratepayers but to the tramway company. Surely we deserve better.

SPOKES would appreciate the opportunity to speak to this submission, when submissions are heard.

Matthew Cutler-Welsh
Chairperson

Paul de Spa
Deputy Chairperson

Spokes Canterbury (the former Canterbury Cyclists' Association) is a local cycling advocacy group dedicated to including cycling as an everyday form of transport and in local and regional planning. The group is affiliated with the national Cycling Advocates' Network (CAN) and includes a number of CAN's executive members. Spokes has some 900 members.

Spokes provides significant cycling expertise through its many longstanding advocates, transportation professionals and regular cyclists. The group is represented on Christchurch City Council's central city transport committee, Environment Canterbury's Regional Land Transport Committee and provides regular feedback on various council and Transit New Zealand transportation and planning proposals.