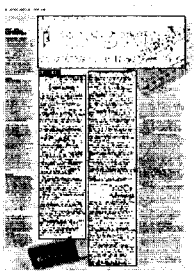

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Transport

A better-connected city

By **SUSHI DAS**

IF MELBOURNE 2030 provided a road map for the city's transport future, then five years into the journey we already appear to be lost.

The trouble is that the map no longer matches the landscape.

Melbourne has changed faster than most Australian cities. In the past five years it has experienced its biggest surge in population since the 1960s, putting massive strain on a 19th century public transport system, now creaking under 21st century patronage pressures. To add to woes, traffic jams are strangling the city.

With Melbourne's sprawl into areas where trams and trains are unknown, it's hardly surprising that most people remain deeply in love with their cars. With 500,000 more cars on Victorian roads than 10 years ago, there is every indication that people will remain captive to the automobile.

When Daimler, in 1901, forecast that the world market for cars would never exceed a million because only a tiny portion of the working class could be educated as chauffers, it surely underestimated the freedom that personal mobility could bring.

The seemingly unstoppable popularity of the car poses one of the biggest nightmares for the State Government. In 2002, when it released Melbourne 2030 — a 30-year blueprint to contain urban sprawl and improve transport links — it acknowledged that congestion and environmental damage meant growing car use was unsustainable.

So the plan sought to improve the reach and reliability of the public transport network, particularly in outer suburbs, to encourage more people to switch to using trams, trains and buses. It also promised new arterial roads in outer suburbs — an investment deemed necessary to meet future freight and car needs.

Melbourne 2030 offered few costing details and many motherhood statements. Nonetheless, it was embraced by many as a sensible, sustainable and realistic vision of the future, and there was considerable attention paid to what the Government called its 20/2020 target: increasing the overall share of trips made by public transport from 9% in 2002 to 20% by 2020.

Since then, additional transport reports have tumbled forth, all providing an extra piece of Melbourne's transport jigsaw. The last one, produced by businessman Sir Rod Eddington, effectively drove a stake through the heart of the government's much-lauded 20/2020 target. His $18 billion plan predicted that public transport's share of trips would remain at 9% by 2031.

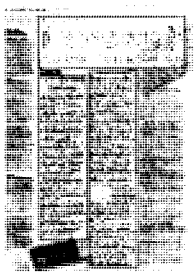
Eddington's plan to link Melbourne's east and west, principally by building an 18-kilometre road tunnel connecting the Eastern freeway with the western suburbs, and a $7 billion rail tunnel linking Footscray to Caulfield, has divided planning and transport experts.

The Government is considering the plan and no decisions have been made. But what the Government has promised Melbourne is a $10.5 billion road and rail upgrade over 10 years — the details of which are contained in its 2006 glossy publication Meeting Our Transport Challenges.

This year the Government will produce an audit of the first five years of Melbourne 2030. In an initial assessment report last year, it professed: "It is not possible to provide quantitative measures to assess the effectiveness of all Melbourne 2030 policies and initiatives." The audit was not intended to include fundamental changes to the blueprint's principles and directions, it said.

While the directions may not be under threat, the principles certainly appear to be. Car ownership and congestion are rising. Public transport in inner and middle suburbs is overcrowded, often late and disconnected. In many outer suburbs, trams and trains are non-existent, and while bus services have improved in recent years, they are frequently overcrowded and slow. Frustration is rife and there is growing concern among transport experts that environmental issues and petrol price rises are galloping ahead, leaving Melbourne 2030 looking more a pipe dream than a workable plan.

Essentially there are three issues that dominate pessimism: that anxiety over climate change makes further road building a flawed strategy; that an urban growth



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boundary to contain Melbourne's sprawl is not the best platfrom from which to create better transport links; and that a holistic integrated plan to manage the metropolitan transport network is nowhere to be seen.

"We just have to say: no more road building," says Melbourne University transport expert Nick Low. "Every new link of freeway has always been justified by relieving congestion. Congestion is not the primary problem for the transport system, the problem is growing greenhouse emissions ... congestion actually helps limit cars."

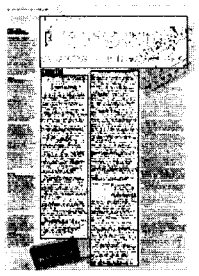
Most cars are being bought by people living in Melbourne's rapidly growing outer fringe where public transport is poorest. In the 12 highest-growth municipalities on the city's boundaries, 241,549 cars have been bought since 1996, compared to just 80,171 cars in the 12 inner-most council areas.

Federal Government analysis shows transport is responsible for 17% of Victoria's total greenhouse gas emissions. These emission will rise, given that by 2031, 90% of journeys in Melbourne are expected to be made by car.

A Department of Premier and Cabinet report last year gives an insight into the Government's thinking on car use and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It is more confident that clean fuel will be developed than it is of changing people's behaviour (to either buy fewer cars or switch to public transport). For those who want fewer roads, this report is likely to disappoint.

Associate Professor Low says just as pressing as practical transport problems is the need to tackle an ideological issue: the Government's attempt to "solve transport problems with land use solutions".

Increased density, argues Low, is generally unpopular, and fitting transport around designated "activity centres" is unlikely to be as successful as fitting "the



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public transport system to the existing urban form".

Monash University's professor of public transport, Graham Currie, believes Melbourne 2030 was a step in the right direction, but raises similar concerns. All Western low-density cities are trying to manage urban sprawl, car dependence and the flow-on environmental impacts through "densification", he says. But Australian cities are unique because of a traditional affection for the quarter-acre block.

"(Australia) is not a country that's used to telling people they have to densify ... Australians like to have the McMansion on the fringes of the city. That has all meant that it's very hard to get some traction with densification."

Author and urban historian Graeme Davison says the objectives of *Melbourne 2030* are sound but pressing environmental concerns mean it's time to take stock. "If we're finding that the plan is not producing what we expected then we have to go back and ask whether there's something wrong with the plan or something wrong with the assumptions on which it was built," he says.

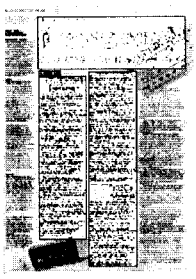
High-density cities generally have higher public transport use, but that's a function of history, he says. In Melbourne's case, to try to "retrofit public transport and connect it with residential patterns" is difficult and prohibitively expensive.

"The Government, under pressure from an immediate housing crisis, has moved away from the containment principle within Melbourne 2030 ... If you're going to let that happen, for goodness sake don't compound the problem by not providing decent transport," he says.

But Melbourne is a city run by developers and the road lobby and so the abandonment of containment principles was inevitable, says Dr Paul Mees, a Melbourne University transport expert. Few are willing to openly agree with such a bald statement but doubts remain in academic circles over whether Melbourne's transport problems have yet been nailed.

What we need, says Nick Low is a "metropolitan consciousness" evident in cities such as Vancouver where all modes of transport are seamlessly integrated and overseen by strong central management. "Nobody is strongly in control of the direction of metropolitan Melbourne," he says. "We lack a metropolitan consciousness." What's required, he says, is a broad review of the public transport system "to get the thing seen as a whole network for the whole metropolis".

But is that possible in a city where the entire public transport network is privatised and fragmented in the hands of multiple franchisees? Theoretically, yes, says Low. Currently, the transport system is managed by contracts that involve private companies planning, managing and delivering their share of public transport. He says a more effective system would be one where a strong central agency, involving government, planned routes and timetables and private companies were then brought in to run the service.



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HOW THE LANDSCAPE HAS CHANGED

TRANPORT TARGET

THE PROMISE In 2002, 9% of all motorised trips were made by public transport. Melbourne 2030 restated the government's aim to increase this share to 20% by 2020 – a level of public transport use last seen in the 1970s.

THE REALITY It is now widely considered that the Government's target is unlikely to be achieved. In the latest proposal to government to better link Melbourne's east and west, public transport's share of motorised trips is tipped to stay about 9% by 2031.

CARS

THE PROMISE Melbourne 2030 acknowledged growth in car use was unsustainable, but that investment in the road system was necessary to meet future freight and personal mobility needs. It promised to finish building EastLink and provide arterial roads in outer suburbs.

THE REALITY EastLink has been completed. There are 500,000 more cars on Victorian roads than 10 years ago, with most being bought by people living in Melbourne's rapidly growing outer fringe. Transport is responsible for 16.9% of Victoria's total greenhouse gas emissions.

TRAMS AND TRAINS

THE PROMISE To make public transport more attractive, trains and trams would be upgraded to expand coverage, improve reliability and punctuality and make them safer and more amenable. Melbourne 2030 aimed to build on existing train and tram services.

THE REALITY Patronage has increased by 30% in the past three years. But the impact is showing. Since 2001, 10% fewer trains run on time and a sevenfold increase in trains considered to be overloaded. Demand on rail is expected to outstrip capacity within 10 years.

BUSES

THE PROMISE improve bus services throughout the metropolitan area and create new cross-town services. These would be better integrated with trains and trams. Modern techniques for bus operations would be evaluated.

THE REALITY Patronage has increased by 7.4% in the past year. And some services have been extended. But buses do not provide speedy travel and there is overcrowding on some peak-hour services. Melbourne's growing west is still poorly served.

CYCLING AND WALKING

THE PROMISE Cycling and walking were recognised as having the potential to reduce the growth of motorised travel and improve health. Pedestrian and cycling routes would be improved.

THE REALITY Just 2% of people use a bicycle daily. Cycling is more popular now with 18,000 daily journeys to work made by bike in 2006, up from 12,000 in 2001.