



TRANSPORT

The State Government says it has consulted the community widely in preparing its transport plan for Melbourne, but critics suspect it of engaging in a mere public relations exercise before pressing ahead with the same strategy it has had all along.

Rumblings on the party line

By **CLAY LUCAS**

STEP out the front door of Lucy Liga's West Footscray home and there's a fine view of rusty old train lines running out to Sunshine. It's a quiet scene; an occasional train toots its horn before pulling up at West Footscray station.

One day soon, if the Brumby Government follows a \$9 billion recommendation from businessman and international transport expert Sir Rod Eddington, 72,000 cars a day will roar past on a new six-lane freeway to run alongside the rail line.

The section of railway outside the Ligas' home is identified in the Eddington report as a potential route for the proposed freeway, which has been suggested along with \$11 billion worth of other transport projects. The Government's response to Eddington, dubbed the *Victorian Transport Plan*, is due in November.

Premier John Brumby, who nominates transport as his Government's biggest challenge, says there has been widespread "consultation" over that plan.

Try telling that to Lucy Liga. "It's an absolute joke," she says bitterly. The high school teacher and mother of three was not politically involved before the freeway proposal came along. But now Liga is so angry at what she says is "a Clayton's consultation" by Spring Street, she has formed a residents group. It holds its first public meeting on Monday night.

"There has been no honest consultation out here," says Liga. "People haven't got any clue what's being planned. I read the papers, I read what comes through my mail and, honestly, there has been nothing. I live right opposite where a six-lane elevated freeway will go.

"I have looked into the research the Department of Transport has done, and it tells me nothing about what could happen right in front of my house — and this Government is saying it is 'consulting widely'. It is just unbelievable."

Try telling that to John Brumby. *The Age* did last month, and was met with incredulity. "You're entitled to your question, but I couldn't have thought there could be a more open process."

That process came to a close at Telstra Dome yesterday, when Brumby hosted a transport summit, the final stage of an operation his media officers maintain has been about "letting thousands of Victorians have their say".

The consultation process, Brumby said, was to find out what Victorians wanted from their transport network, ahead of the release of a 30-year transport plan in November — this Government's fourth transport strategy since 2004.

Brumby also points to a three-hour online Q&A session in which Eddington and his team answered email queries, phone polling in the suburbs, invitation-only local transport workshops held by Labor MPs, and eight transport forums in the suburbs and regional centres, also invitation-only.

It was unclear what people had to do to get on the invitation list to the forums — hundreds of western suburbs residents complained they had not even heard they were on. *The Age* gatecrashed one in Footscray last month, and was allowed to stay. "Everything is on the table," participants were told. Public Transport Minister Lynne Kosky spoke about the transport challenges ahead. Attendees were divided into groups and debated set topics: social change, freight, public transport, planning. Each group wrote down, on big sheets of butcher's paper, its "transport ideas for Victoria", and handed them to the forum convener.

Their contributions, the convener said, were important because they would all feed into the Government's transport blueprint.

But, critics ask, what impact will their opinions have on the outcome — coming less than 12 weeks before it is signed off? Was this just a public relations exercise, after which the Government will simply push ahead with its own plan?



Melbourne University transport academic John Stone suspects as much. Part of Stone's PhD on transport focused on "community consultation" — what Victoria has seen over the past few weeks is, he says, nothing of the kind. Stone has spent a lot of time looking at transport in Vancouver, Canada. In 1992 in the harbourside city it took an average 70 minutes to get to and from work each day, official statistics show. By 2005, the average commute had fallen to 67 minutes.

It's a small drop, but important when compared with Toronto, where daily commute times skyrocketed, from 68 to 79 minutes. Vancouver was the only Canadian city where travel times fell. It was also the only city that stopped building freeways, poured money into public transport and increased urban density.

Vancouver did things differently to Melbourne: it asked its citizens what they wanted and listened hard to the replies.

Its 30-year transport plan, set in 1993 and known as *Transport 2021*, was preceded by four years of debate: thousands were involved in public meetings, open debates and discussions that fed into the regional government's final document.

At the end of the process, *Transport 2021* was presented to the people, with the logic behind it laid out in plain, simple language, so that all could see the thinking behind it. It is still a working document.

In Vancouver, which has 2.2 million resi-

dents compared with Melbourne's 3.6 million, and an average 17 residents per hectare compared with Melbourne's 16, 26% of journeys to work are now undertaken on public transport, bicycle or by foot. In Melbourne it is 19%.

Stone says Vancouver's transport planning has succeeded because it arose from genuine and open consultation with the community. "The Government worked through different scenarios and tested them — publicly. Because it was an open process, there had to be a much greater level of internal logic than we have in something like *Melbourne 2030*."

The *Melbourne 2030* planning blueprint was launched in 2002 to manage a predicted population growth of 1 million by 2030. It had a stated aim of increasing public transport's share of trips from 9% to 20% by 2020. But it had no transport plan to say how this would be achieved. No one could say, or easily see, how that 20% target had even been included.

"You can't get away with something that doesn't make any logical sense if you are seriously talking to the public about it," says Stone.

Brumby says his Government has now talked enough to the public about the forthcoming transport statement, which is set to propose a tollway from at least Footscray to CityLink, and new rail lines from Sunshine



Railroaded: West Footscray resident Lucy Liga says the Government's claims that it has listened to residents are a joke.

PICTURE: JASON SOUTH



to the CBD. A special cabinet transport sub-committee has been formed to produce the statement. It includes Brumby, Kosky, Roads Minister Tim Pallas, Planning Minister Justin Madden and Environment Minister Gavin Jennings.

The RACV, freight companies, train and tram operators and some academics will give presentations to the committee. Since April, a small team of transport experts who usually work in the Transport Department have been moved to Spring Street to work in the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The team's confidential work — many of their colleagues don't know what is being planned — is guided by Brumby's senior policy officers.

Listening to citizens, it is a messy business. It's the opposite to controlling the message. GRAEME HODGE, Monash University

Despite repeated requests by *The Age*, basic questions about this group's work — which consultants are working on the plan? How much is being spent on it? Which staff working on it also work on the Eddington plan? — were answered only in generalities. The cost of the new report was yet to be determined, the Government said.

After documents from the cabinet sub-committee proposing bike racks on buses were leaked to *The Age* last month (the leak is being investigated by Deloitte), the transport group came under pressure to stay silent, a source says.

And even when the group's work is released, no one outside their office will know why some projects have been selected and others ignored.

Professor Graeme Hodge, director of Monash University's Centre for Regulatory Studies and a former Cain government ministry of transport official, worries about this sort of confidentiality because it allows vested interests easier influence.

The drive for big-ticket transport projects — rail tunnels, tollways — is more about being seen to be doing something than fixing the transport chaos, he says: "Any government believes a skyline with cranes on it is the sign of a good economy."

Questioned about transport problems, Brumby regularly points to the big projects — the \$1.4 billion West Gate-Monash Freeway widening, the Geelong Road, or the

(now partially abandoned) triplication of rail lines to Dandenong.

Brumby said this week that all transport options for Melbourne were "on the table".

Why then, asks Hodge, aren't costed options being presented?

Instead, he says, Victorians get what he calls a *Big Brother* TV show approach. "The Government goes away, does confidential studies, comes back and says 'Which Big Ideas don't you like?' That model of transport planning is bereft of professionalism."

The Government needs better processes to plan for its citizens, he says, and to set up open and formalised processes for listening to them. The risk, Hodge says, is that they might say things a government doesn't want to hear.

"Listening to citizens, it is a messy business. It's the opposite to controlling the message, and John Brumby wants to be seen as Action Man," says Hodge. "But if you are dealing with transport, the deals that are made ought to involve consultation, not just symbolism."

The Government this week released *Your Say*, a report that detailed the community's 2300 submissions in response to Eddington's transport scheme, and noted the other transport forums.

No indication has been given as to what weight — if any — these submissions and forums will have in deciding the priorities of the *Victorian Transport Plan*.

There is widespread disagreement about whether Melbourne needs the projects proposed by Eddington. Some, including Brumby, say Melbourne's rail network is at capacity. Others, including RMIT academic Paul Mees, say the train system is merely inefficient and we could save billions by running it better instead of digging tunnels.

The Government has refused to be drawn on this debate, saying instead that it will present its completed plan in November.

It is hard to see how the confidentiality surrounding the *Victorian Transport Plan* will help Melbourne tackle the impact of climate change, soaring population growth and peak oil on transport.

Take, for example, transport modelling used in Eddington's strategy to show that a \$9 billion road tunnel linking the Eastern Freeway to the Western Ring Road is needed. Data were supplied by transport modelling firm Veitch Lister. No one knows why Veitch Lister was hired (or, indeed, why it was rehired to work on November's response) or what data backed up its complex projections for future car movements from Melbourne's west to east.



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Melbourne University's transport research centre head, Nick Low, says this is not good enough. "The Government is relying on the outcome of this modelling to make decisions about spending billions of dollar of public money. And yet there is no public access to the modelling, it's all commercial in confidence," he says. "You can't claim to be an open government unless you allow this sort of underlying logic to be examined by others."

Transport headaches are not new for this Government. *Planning for the Future*, its first planning document in May 2000, promised "an integrated transport plan". Almost 10 years later, no such plan exists. Nor does a freight and logistics strategy. Both are promised in November.

The Government did, in 2002, produce *Melbourne 2030*. The scheme confirmed Melbourne's urban growth boundary, set in the 1970s by the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works, and nominated 105 "activity centres" where development would be focused. But these activity centres were not based on public transport hubs, despite the pro-public transport rhetoric. Chadstone Shopping Centre, for instance, was an activity centre, while Hawthorn's Glenferrie Road shopping centre was not.

There is an inconsistency inherent in the Government's approach, says John Stone. *Melbourne 2030* doesn't acknowledge the contradiction between building major roads to move people around — thus enabling further sprawl — and the hope for a more compact city.

"You can never have both."

Clay Lucas is transport reporter.