

The Brumby Government's transport blueprint has been labelled a PR exercise — filled with empty promises — to soothe frustrated commuters. **Clay Lucas** reports.

"It's part of the plan," says a 30-second, Department of Transport ad that made its debut on Melbourne television in July. The ad, which features a series of traffic jams and busy construction images, shows viewers that, despite the many delays on our roads and rail tracks, the State Government has a plan.

"With many initiatives already under way, the signs of an improving transport system can now be seen," it says.

Try telling that to the thousands of motorists stuck on Melbourne's freeways last week, in some of the worst traffic gridlock in recent memory; drivers on some freeways waited for up to an hour for roads to clear.

Or the thousands of train passengers, stranded by scores of morning rush-hour cancellations.

All part of what plan? The \$1 million ad campaign attracted some attention at the time, attacked by the Opposition as excessive spending. But, as the lavish launch of the *Victorian Transport Plan* last Monday now makes clear, that modest transport ad

was just the start of the campaign.

The transport projects outlined in the plan will cost \$38 billion between now and 2021. Given this Government's past performance on delivering transport plans, however, completion isn't assured. Its 2006 plan *Meeting Our Transport Challenges* has had just 2 per cent of its projects completed, according to an analysis in October by the Property Council.

The latest plan's key promises — all of them dependent on federal funding — include a \$4 billion-plus rail line to connect Werribee to Southern Cross Station, a new \$3 billion inner-west road to link Geelong Road to Dynon Road, and the Footscray to Domain rail tunnel.

A controversial road tunnel, proposed by Sir Rod Eddington, from the Eastern Freeway to CityLink was left out, but the \$750 million Frankston bypass road and the controversial north-east "missing link" — a \$6 billion freeway joining Greensborough to Bulleen — was included.

But the new plan will hit travellers with a "transport tax" of 5 per cent on fares from 2012 and again in 2013,

raising \$500 million to help finance key projects.

To promote the plan, the Brumby Government will spend \$2 million more on ads.

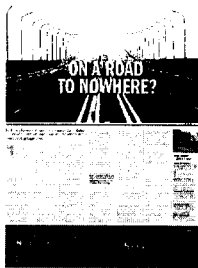
Documents obtained by *The Age* under Freedom of Information, show the background to the "It's part of the plan" ads. Briefing notes reveal just how concerned, last December, the Government was about swelling anger in the community about transport gridlock.

A research briefing paper to Howard Ronaldson, then head of the department of infrastructure (now the Department of Transport), warned that the masses were growing furious about delays.

But there was a way to calm them, the briefing note said: tell them there was a plan.

Research paid for by the Government found that people did not link delays from construction with being part of a strategy. "People stated they would be more likely to accept delays if they had clear information about why the disruptions were occurring," the briefing note says.





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And so \$1 million of taxpayers money would be spent to convince angry commuters that something was being done.

Monash University's senior politics lecturer Nick Economou says that while the transport plan could be good politics, much of it was empty promises.

"The sort of money that Brumby is talking about would mean that the Commonwealth would have to shell out an enormous amount to Victoria — and that is unlikely to happen," he says.

At least \$13 billion of the \$38 billion plan is predicated on federal funding. But the Rudd Government's Building Australia Fund, originally to hold \$20 billion, now holds only \$12.6 billion because of the global economic downturn. Of that, \$4.7 billion has been earmarked for the national broadband network — leaving \$7.9 billion to be divided among all of the states for general infrastructure.

Add it up, and the *Victorian Transport Plan* starts to sound all too familiar, Economou says.

"You keep promising to extend the rail line to South Morang (this Government started promising it in 1999 and in last week's plan promised it again) and you never actually do. The sales pitch from Brumby is just re-badging (old transport projects) and pie in the sky stuff," he says.

But it is likely to be enough to calm some angry drivers and commuters, he says. "At least it looks and sounds like a plan."

Economou says if transport can be nullified for the Premier as an issue as a result of the plan, it will help bullet-proof the Government until well after the 2010 election.

"The Brumby Government is travelling along quite nicely because it is seen as a can-do, achieving Government so far," he says. "The shipping channel has been dredged without a ripple of protest from anyone but a few Blue Wedgers. The desalination plant is getting built. And their road building program is going ahead with barely a ripple of dissent."

But anger is still mounting in the community, says Melbourne University's transport research centre chief Nick Low, because the public wants a real strategy to fix the problems — not just a grab-bag of promises and re-announcements.

But not all are critics.

Monash University historian Graeme Davison, who has written extensively about Melbourne's love affair with the car, says he has been

surprised the new transport plan gives as much as it does to public transport.

People stated they would be more likely to accept delays if they had clear information about why the disruptions were occurring.

"It's clearly an attempt at some form of balance, because it tilts the balance more towards public transport than any previous plan," says Davison, whose 2004 book *Car Wars* detailed the victory of the car in Melbourne.

He praises the idea of extending the regional rail line to Geelong so that it goes through growing areas of suburbia around Caroline Springs and Tarneit.

He is less keen on the "extravagant" \$4.5 billion rail tunnel from Footscray to the Domain — "all it does at present is to relieve a bit of congestion at the centre" — but respects that it marks a shift in thinking within the Government.

But many of the city's transport obsessed are sick of this Government's transport promises. The Public Transport Users Association is one, describing the transport plan as nothing more than a way of getting people off buses, trains and trams and into cars.

The plan, presented by the Government as "sustainable", promises 122 kilometres of new roadways, and 36 kilometres of new rail track through new areas.

"No ordinary person was asking for diverting Geelong trains through Tarneit, or a second set of rail tunnels under the CBD. But they were asking for suburban rail extensions to Rowville and Doncaster and Melton and the airport, more trains to the western and eastern suburbs, and for buses every 10 minutes," says PTUA secretary Tony Morton.

Melbourne could have it all for far less than \$38 billion, he says.

"There will be nothing for the family in (suburban Melbourne) that has no useable bus service to the railway station," says Morton. "(That family) faces a one-kilometre walk if they do manage to park their car there, and basically can't have a life unless they drive everywhere."

Cheap, simple alternatives to multibillion-dollar rail and road tunnels are needed instead of expensive tunnelling proposals, Morton says.

"They need to build South Morang for \$60 million, not \$650 million," he says. "The balance (should be spent) completing the rest of the suburban rail network. They need to run buses the same way they run trams. And they need to actually co-ordinate the network so it takes you from anywhere to anywhere without falling in a heap at every transfer point."

The president of the Planning Institute, Jason Black, says the problem with the transport plan is that it acts as if a new land-use strategy, *Melbourne @ 5 Million* released four days before the transport plan, did not even exist.

"The transport plan and the land use plan are not connected," Black told a forum at Melbourne University last week. "The notion of sustainability relies on these plans being aligned, integrated, and they just aren't."

If Melbourne's suburbs and its transport services are not planned together "greenhouse gas emissions will never drop, we will never see a shift away from providing 'a missing link' somewhere in the road network — which seems to be a constant in Melbourne — and we will never see a shift away from the reliance on (cars) over public transport", Black says.

For other planning experts, the problem with the *Victorian Transport Plan* is far more profound.

RMIT transport and planning academic Paul Mees says it is "a pretend plan" that puts forward a list of public transport projects the Government has little chance of delivering.

"You can tell that from the fact that, two years ago we couldn't run any more trains on the train system unless there was a third track on the Dandenong line," he says.

Meeting Our Transport Challenges in 2006 promised a third rail track running from Caulfield to Dandenong. That project has since been abandoned.

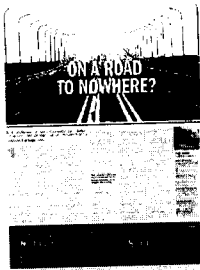
But several new "mega" transport projects — most of which have a delivery timetable between 2017 and 2021 — have now been announced.

"You can say anything you want," says Mees, "and it's not that as a politician you actually have a direct intention not to deliver it — it's just that you know you won't be there when the time comes."

Mees often compares Melbourne's poor performance on delivering new public transport infrastructure with that of Zurich — renowned around the world for its ruthless efficiency.

"If you go to the Zurich (transport agency's) website, there you will find





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their capital works plan for 2011 to 2014, which was released in July this year. All of it will happen.

"This (Victoria's) transport plan," says Mees, "it is just media-release issuing as a substitute for real planning."

THE BEST LAID PLANS ...

Monday, December 8

■ Premier John Brumby, Roads Minister Tim Pallas and Public Transport Minister Lynne Kosky launch the much-anticipated \$38 billion *Victorian Transport Plan*.

■ The fourth transport plan since 2002, the Opposition deride it as "too little, too late".

Tuesday, December 9

■ A truck crash on the West Gate, combined with roadworks as part of the \$1.4 billion widening of the M1 freeway, reduces inbound traffic to a trickle.

■ 12 morning rush-hour trains are cancelled, leaving thousands stranded.

Wednesday, December 10

■ 13 morning rush-hour trains are cancelled; it emerges a key cause of the high number of cancellations is a dispute over pay between Connex and its staff.

■ Lynne Kosky says it is a matter for Connex and the rail workers' union.

Thursday, December 11

■ A motorcyclist is killed after he hits the back of a van; police close lanes on the Monash Freeway from about 6.30am-9am, causing gridlock.

■ Connex cancels 19 trains.

Friday, December 12

■ Connex cancels another 29 trains, but the dispute over a 3 per cent Christmas bonus for staff is resolved.

