



Peak-hour drivers give major freeways the flick

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JUST days before the State Government releases its much-anticipated Victorian transport plan, new figures show car numbers on two of the city's biggest freeways are falling.

Roads agency VicRoads has released data that shows the number of cars using the West Gate and Eastern freeways during the morning rush hour have fallen consistently over the past six years.

On an average day in 2008, there were 20,400 cars using the Eastern Freeway in the morning peak, from 6am to 10am.

Six years earlier there were 22,600 cars using the freeway each morning.

Figures for the West Gate show a similar situation.

This year, the West Gate averaged 22,900 cars each morning, while in 2002 an average 24,000 cars used the road.

A VicRoads spokeswoman said the reduction had occurred because the two freeways were too choked to fit any more cars. "Peak traffic times are spreading out to deal with the increase in congestion," VicRoads' Ayllic White said.

Other figures released by VicRoads yesterday showed that if all Melbourne's arterial roads were taken into account, freeway traffic was growing.

But where the Government has made public transport options available, drivers appear to be taking them.

On the Eastern Freeway, bus patronage jumped 11 per cent in the past year, a result of the Brumby Government's boost in express bus services.

And the Department of Transport predicted in April that patronage on overcrowded western suburbs' trains would grow by 9.5 per cent a year.

The freeway figures could cast doubt on Sir Rod Eddington's proposed \$9 billion freeway from Clifton Hill to Footscray.

In April, Sir Rod proposed what would be one of the world's longest road tunnels: an 18-kilometre freeway between the Eastern and the West Gate.

The tunnel would relieve growing pressure, he said, in travelling between the east and west of Melbourne.

But critics say Sir Rod provided little fresh evidence of the need for the road, which a government taskforce rejected in 2003 because of a lack of travel demand.

That taskforce used the government's own transport planners, whereas Sir Rod used traffic consultants Veitch Lister — who were re-employed to work on the Victorian trans-

port plan.

Since the release of the Eddington report, Roads Minister Tim Pallas has warned of a looming congestion crisis between the Eastern and West Gate freeways. He has called for the first stage of the Eddington road project to be built, saying he supports building a freeway to cross the Maribyrnong River.

"Victoria's reliance on the West Gate Bridge into the long term is unsustainable," Mr Pallas said last month.

The head of Melbourne University's transport research centre, Nicholas Low, said people wanted better public transport, not more freeways.

"Tim Pallas wants to build lots of new roads but he is out of step with public opinion, which wants the money spent on better public transport," he said.

Confidential VicRoads data obtained by *The Age* in July showed zero growth in car use on Melbourne's roads over the past year.

Travel analysts say it is likely drivers will return to their cars now that petrol prices have fallen — to about \$1.03 a litre yesterday. In December 1998, petrol was 63.4 cents a litre and rose over the next decade to \$1.71 in June this year.

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