



Transport experts cool on car-pooling plan

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THE State Government is expected to launch a major car-pooling offensive in its November transport plan, arguing that Melbourne's chronic traffic congestion could be permanently reduced to school holiday levels if enough commuters took it up.

But transport academics believe the push will be futile and say that car pooling, while worthwhile, can never match better public transport.

Fiona Macrae, a spokeswoman for Roads Minister Tim Pallas, declined to specify details of the forthcoming policy but said that encouraging car pooling made a lot of sense.

"Currently, the average number of people in a car is 1.1," she told *The Sunday Age*.

"If this increased to just 1.2 people, congestion conditions on our roads would change from 'normal' to 'school holiday' conditions. It would take 90,000 cars off the road."

Ms Macrae admitted that

"the current uptake of car pooling in Melbourne is low" and mostly confined to university campuses and large businesses.

"A number of public web-based car pooling schemes have also commenced operation, covering the wider Melbourne area."

Online kits available on the state and federal governments' TravelSmart webpages already encourage workplaces to promote car pooling among their staff.

Ms Macrae said car poolers could save nine minutes by using the Eastern Freeway transit lane in peak hour, even though 35% of motorists in that lane were, illegally, carrying no passengers.

RACV policy spokesman Peter Daly said while his organisation supported car pooling and had developed intranet software so businesses could encourage it among their staff, it was really only of niche value.

"Public transport is what we really should be pushing. Car pooling fills that niche between public transport and individual

driving," he said.

Mr Daly said car pooling worked best among people who lived and worked close together and who had similar working hours, which is why it was best promoted at a workplace level.

He warned that an increase in car pooling might not necessarily reduce congestion. "You don't want to be taking people off public transport," he said. And it was difficult to promote. "Providing a car-pooling lane, by itself, isn't going to be enough to drive car-pooling behaviour."

Outspoken transport lecturer Paul Mees, now based at RMIT, said car pooling would be "wasting our time and money and energy" and was a poor substitute for better public transport or even cycling and walking.

Since 1976, car pooling had declined steeply as cars became more affordable, said Professor Mees. "It's a very popular thing for people who don't want to address the real problems. It's never worked anywhere.

"Car pooling is like a public transport service that only runs once a day. It's just not flexible or convenient enough for most people."

Melbourne had the lowest rate of car pooling in Australia, he said, "but it's gone through the floor everywhere . . . name one city (in the world) that has managed to get car occupancy rates up. There isn't one."

Bill Russell, a transport academic at Melbourne University, took a kinder view of car pooling, calling it "very worthwhile", but said it would not make much difference.

"It's not something that in any way, shape or form can be a substitute for proper public transport or really deal with congestion or emission issues," Professor Russell said.

Nevertheless, he said Victoria's rate of car pooling was extremely low, so there probably was some room for improvement. And car pooling via workplaces was the best way to do it, he said.

Car pooling etiquette

- Determine the method for reimbursements beforehand.
- Ideally take turns driving to share costs.
- Decide on policies such as smoking, use of the radio and who sits in the front and back.
- Stick to your agreed pick-up time and have rules that everyone in your group is aware of, such as an agreed amount of waiting time.

