

The Doncaster Railway – A Strategic Imperative

Address to Forum on **Transit Options for the Doncaster Corridor**

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It gives me great pleasure to be asked to speak about the need for improved public transport opportunities for Doncaster and Manningham.

In 1991, I was asked by the then Minister of Transport, Peter Spyker, to investigate transport options for this area. Following the receipt of many submissions, public meetings and the preparation of technical reports by a variety of experts including Professor Peter Newman, I recommended the construction of a heavy or light rail service from East Doncaster or Shopping town via the Eastern Freeway central reservation, joining the suburban rail system at Clifton Hill. I also proposed that the No 48 North Balwyn Tram be extended from its terminus in High St North Balwyn through to Shoppingtown, and that network connectivity be improved by extending the Camberwell No 72 Tram northwards from Whitehorse Rd through to High St, which would have allowed through running of trams from Doncaster to Camberwell as well as Kew. It is extremely unfortunate that the government of the day declined to implement my recommendations.

The people of Manningham and Doncaster have been significantly disadvantaged by the failure of successive governments to provide adequate public transport to this area, for although Ventura Bus lines do provide extensive and high quality bus services under contract with the State Government, it would be preferable if the trunk connection to the principal public transport system was provided by rail from Doncaster, with the bus services playing the more appropriate role of collecting and distributing passengers throughout the Manningham municipality. And unfortunately because of past inaction, Doncaster citizens must now compete with many other localities in their bid for new rail services, especially those in Rowville, South Morang, Melton and other areas, who have now also articulated strong cases for new train services to their suburbs

I would like to make several strategic points that I believe make a compelling case for the construction.

The following are the key reasons why the East Doncaster railway should be constructed:

- The development of a comprehensive principal public transport network (that is, heavy rail network) accessible to major population centres is a fundamental

strategic responsibility of government. Doncaster is a dynamic centre of population and business activity and the strategic need to connect it to the rail system has long been recognized and has been established by many studies. Such a connection is a long term strategic investment which will provide benefits over many years. There is no strategic case for neglecting this responsibility;

- The citizens of Doncaster and Manningham are entitled to be able to access the jobs, education, leisure and lifestyle opportunities of greater Melbourne without using their cars and for this they require connection to Melbourne's principal public transport network, which is the heavy rail system;
- Bus services do not provide an equivalent level of speed and comfort provided by a modern rail service, and compared with trains they are relatively inefficient, considering that 15 buses are required to move the capacity of a single suburban train, and that at the rate of 6 trains an hour, this would require up to 90 bus drivers compared to 6 train drivers to move the traffic in an hour. Too many buses, too much extra traffic; too much additional emissions! By contrast, a modern metro can operate successfully without drivers at all
- Bus services generally involve poorer environmental performance compared to electric traction; in Canada the federal government is not permitting cities to acquire new diesel buses to run into city centres, although neither the CNG nor hybrid varieties currently in use there have proven completely reliable and in Toronto, where I was last week, the TTC is considering reintroducing electric powered trolley buses to replace these variants and is cancelling its latest order for Hybrids from Daimler. This is not to subtract from the importance of seeking cleaner bus technology, just to note that one of the world's leading transit authorities are currently facing some difficulties in implementing this. In Melbourne, we should have a strategic intent of removing diesel buses from the city centre altogether, not adding to their number, and such a goal is well within our reach. Why don't we have such goals?
- Buses generally do not achieve the desired "modal shift:" from cars that the provision of rail or light rail services gives rise to, except in certain specific circumstances that do not apply here in Doncaster. This is why 126 cities worldwide have introduced new light rail systems in the last 20 years, and why even Curitiba in Brazil, the feted example of bus rapid transit, has committed to a USD 618M , 13.5 km rail system to replace its core bus route. The 126 cities introducing light rail are generally economically dynamic; bus rapid transit and conventional bus systems are the choice of poorer cities. The 126 cities realize that buses are generally not appropriate in dense city centres, despite the critical role they need to play in middle and outer suburbs. We should be deploying every bus we can afford on new smart bus and neighbourhood bus routes in public transport poor outer suburbs, not using them as a substitute for rail on trunk routes to the CBD through the inner suburbs, where population density is likely to grow to meet expected population targets and air quality must be actively protected.

- As well, to be specific, the downstream connectivity provided by our manner of bus operations in Melbourne is not effective. Buses from Doncaster, Latrobe Uni and Northland do not run to any CBD railway station where safe connection can be made with train services, and such interconnections generally require interchanging passengers to walk at least one city block, and to wait in undesirable locations such as the stop beneath the Flinders St viaduct that is the nearest bus stop to Flinders St station. These issues of poor interconnectivity could be resolved with good planning and investment, but up to now they haven't been solved. Indeed they have been worsened in the last six months. Passengers originating their journeys in the CBD are no better served and must wait on crowded footpaths in Lonsdale St unprotected from the elements.
- Doncaster and Manningham have a population of over 120,000 people – larger than Bendigo or Ballarat and comparable with the urban component of Greater Geelong – it is essential that a city of this size be connected seamlessly to the primary public transport system; indeed Manningham is the only municipality of this size in Victoria (and I think New South Wales) not so connected.
- The citizens of Doncaster and Manningham include a high proportion of professionals who make journeys to trip destinations such as the University of Melbourne, the medical precinct, the CBD and financial centres of Melbourne and the St Kilda Rd office precinct. This journey is ideally suited to the design of a new heavy rail service to Doncaster;
- Although the improved bus services being provided to this area under Doncaster Area Rapid Transit are to be welcomed, they do not and will not seamlessly connect the citizens to the primary public transport system, and they provide slower, less comfortable and less secure connections. As a result, public transport patronage in Doncaster will remain lower than in other municipalities of comparable socio-economic classification, and this will keep Doncaster/Manningham's roads needlessly congested. The citizens of Doncaster will continue, unwittingly and unwillingly, to contribute a disproportionate share of traffic congestion to inner Melbourne not only through greater car dependence but also through the buses offered to them as public transport.
- Despite a temporary lull in the escalation of oil prices, it remains the case that residents living in areas not provided with access to the heavy rail network are most exposed to the impact of oil price hikes; are required to devote disproportionate slices of household income to car operating expenses, must generally provide multiple cars – up to 4 per household if there are older teenagers living at home, - must incur the costs of providing a virtual “taxi service” to school age students and younger teenagers, and face comparatively depressed real estate prices as homebuyers increasingly attach a premium to real estate commanding good access to the primary public transport system.

As I have mentioned before, the need to provide rail connection to Doncaster as long been recognized. How should this be accomplished?

The earliest version of the plan was to extend the Kew railway northwards by tunnel from Kew Junction, curving north east to service Doncaster. Such a route is still conceivable, although as Vicroads head office at Kew was constructed on the former Kew station site, this route would require the compulsory acquisition and demolition of VicRoads head office. However the excellent rail access to Xavier, Trinity and Ruyton would make up for this. But let's suppose this version doesn't fly.

A second route had emerged by the time the first section of the Eastern Freeway was constructed. At this point, provision was made for a connection at Clifton Hill to the heavy rail network, with space being provided in the median strip of this section of the freeway. At the time I completed my report on the Doncaster railway in 1991 (entitled *On the Right Track*), I proposed that the line continue by tunneling from this location eastwards, with stations below ground near Shopping Town, near Wetherby Road and near Springvale Rd. The costings I published at that time for this project were verified by the Department of Infrastructure a decade or so later and found to be correct.

More recent proposals are that the western end of the Doncaster Railway should not be connected at Clifton Hill to the Epping Line but instead should continue underground, passing under Fitzroy, Melbourne University and the Royal Melbourne Hospital and medical research precinct. Such an underground railway could potentially connect with the Eddington metro proposals if approved, with Melbourne Central Station and potentially southward beneath Flinders St Station and St Kilda Rd. Such a route would provide outstanding connectivity for Doncaster residents to likely trip destinations. An eastward connection from East Doncaster back to the transit city at Ringwood by tunneling has also been suggested.

Associated with the provision of this heavy rail connection, the resources of Ventura would be applied to providing a much more systematic and comprehensive service within Manningham, including coverage at a more intense level of the eastern section of the municipality. Concurrently the tram extensions especially that of the 48 tram up to Shoppingtown could proceed. The cost of this valuable connection will be modest.

Finally there is the question of how this can be achieved, given the government's lack of action and enthusiasm to date, and in light of the fact that there are a variety of other rail extension proposals on the table. It can be expected that when the government's latest transport strategy is released in December that there will be no commitment in it to this project. The current financial crisis will doubtless be advanced as an added reason to avoid such investment.

However my advice to Doncaster/Manningham, its citizens and council is to persist. The strategic case for the Doncaster railway is strong. Government transport strategies do not endure – they are replaced every two years on average. Council and citizens should continue to underline the strategic imperative. It is possible that some other rail extensions may take precedence, but what can reasonably be asked of government is that the Doncaster line's construction should be scheduled, beginning with the commissioning of a new study into its ideal route and connectivity, where car parking can be provided and how its interface with shopping centres and community assets in Doncaster can be accomplished with good urban design and passenger security.

I would like to conclude by quoting some thoughts regarding rail and light rail's significance from the Vice Chairman of Transport 2000 in UK. He said last year that:-...

light rail "is at the forefront of developing the economy through improving connectivity of business, enhancing transport effectiveness, providing access to education, employment, shopping and leisure...providing social inclusion and equality and protecting the environment by minimizing emissions....The apparent lower cost of Bus Rapid Transit is a false economy especially as cost benefit analyses do not include the softer benefits light rail can bring to the carbon reducing future we are facing".

If 25 cities in the car dependent USA are building such systems; if new commuter rail investment is occurring throughout Europe; in North Africa, in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem; in Hanoi and Edinburgh, how is it that we in Melbourne, with inherited light and heavy rail systems that are the envy of the world, can't manage an extension to the system like the Doncaster line, whose merit is so evident as and which is so clearly demanded by local residents and councils? Why plan to flood the city with more buses as well as cars?

A strategic imperative such as the Doncaster railway should appear in the forward program of government capital expenditure, regardless of whether construction commences in 2011 or 2015. But it shouldn't be allowed to drag much beyond this. It's been on the agenda long enough. You need it too much for more pointless delay to be acceptable. Let the design studies begin now. Don't accept second best – we are not a third world country and we can afford as a community to provide you with a rail service. Thank you and good luck!
