

Melbourne must invest intelligently in new rail facilities

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At last Melbourne looks likely to get some serious upgrading of its rail network. With the release of the government's latest transport plan only weeks away, hopes of a serious upgrade to Melbourne's rail network are high, and it's about time. Melbourne's traffic is steadily worsening.

In recent years governments from both major parties have invested billions in freeway development, but have been slow to dip hands in pockets when rail enhancement has been needed.

This has left us in a double bind. The high investment in freeways has made it more attractive for people to build lifestyles around long commutes by car, but during rush hours the freeways haven't coped well. Traffic has been funnelled into various choke points and bottlenecks. Travel times in rush hour are subsequently high, as are motorists' frustrations.

On the other hand, the chronic neglect of the rail network has denied commuters the alternative they need. The situation has reached a point of urgency, with millions needing to be spent on better signalling and computer control systems, on third tracks on key trunk lines like those to Ringwood and Dandenong, and on links to finger-like extensions to suburbia that have developed in the past 20 years. The extra track on the Dandenong line is particularly important because of the booming population beyond Dandenong, and the crowded and slow service possible on the existing double track.

There are valid calls for rail extensions and enhancements right around Melbourne. In the west to serve new areas of Wyndham and Melton; in the north to cater for Craigieburn, Aurora and South Morang; in the east for Doncaster and Rowville, and the southeast to enhance rail beyond Dandenong, and to serve the Mornington Peninsula.

More is needed than can possibly be done in the short term, leading some critics to advocate doing nothing. But to do nothing would be catastrophic for a city that prides itself on being one of the most liveable cities in the world. Significant rail investment is vital.

To know where to start it is important to understand the basics of how public transport systems work in big cities. They need to link busy places of work, education and leisure with each other, and with places where people live. In Melbourne we have a mixed record in understanding this principle.

The car-obsessed sixties and seventies were the worst period for ignoring rail's role. Huge new establishments and public drawcards were surrounded by large car parks, with rail access ignored. Buses were supposed to provide for anyone who couldn't drive.

Waverley Park, Monash University and Chadstone Shopping Centre are prime examples. To attend a major game of football at Waverley was a nightmare for public transport users. Years after it was built the bus park turned into a dangerous sea of mud, and the journey by bus and train was horrendous.

Monash University's Clayton campus is still difficult to access by public transport. Passengers face an extended journey, with an unpleasant time waster as they change at Huntingdale, where the bus stop is overshadowed by a large road bridge and passengers must cross a busy road and access the station by a dank and dark subway. At night, especially, it's a threatening place.

More recently we've done better. Telstra Dome is outside Southern Cross Station. Monash University has placed some emphasis on developing its Caulfield campus, which has immediate rail access in three directions. And we have seen the development of big new shopping centres such as QV and Melbourne Central around loop stations. These are positive developments, which will make it easier for people to reduce their car trips.

Now that there is some consensus on the importance of upgrading rail transport, decisions on where to put the scarce dollars available should respect some key objectives.

If the aim is to reduce overall levels of traffic congestion in the city, then we need to move more people quicker. The East Doncaster line is attractive from this point of view. It would relieve the Eastern Freeway, which will be affected as the Scoresby connects. An East Doncaster train would also relieve congestion at the inner end of the Eastern Freeway.

Putting third tracks to Dandenong and Ringwood would also meet this objective, as would improving access to the city by the Northern group of lines, (Upfield, Watergardens, Melton and Craigieburn) and upgrading computer and signalling systems to enable existing infrastructure to work harder while remaining safe. A staged program to reduce level crossings is also necessary

From a social justice point of view, there is a strong case to provide rail extensions to some of the outer suburbs where household incomes are lower and the impact of excessive car dependence will be magnified as petrol prices rise. Such areas include the public transport-poor outer northern and western suburbs, with an extension of rail services north from Epping to South Morang

and Aurora, electrification to Melton and better services for areas in Wyndham being important projects.

Some say that these investments can't be afforded. They can. A staged program is needed based on clear priorities. There is always money for new roads but our lack of rail investment can't be allowed to continue.

When the government's transport statement comes out in a few weeks time, the likely inclusions will be signalling improvements, a third track to Dandenong, and the South Morang extension. Each of these projects has substantial merit but none greatly help the inner suburban congestion problems as much as a Doncaster line would. It is a start, however, that is sorely needed.

What we need is intelligent decision making, resulting in new rail services that will deliver the levels of service and congestion benefits we need as a community. We users also need to be consulted and to be able to influence the way things are done.