PUBLIC TRANSPORT USERS ASSOCIATION

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State budget: Steady as she goes

The Victorian Government's 2021-22 budget reflects its cautious approach to post-COVID economic recovery but is building steadily on its previous commitments for public transport and rail freight.

New commitments in the budget are a healthy reassertion of the need to compensate for the lack of investment in public transport infrastructure and services in the decades prior to 2010.

New expenditure on public and active transport initiatives totals $2.9 billion in this budget, accompanied by $741 million in new expenditure on initiatives supporting roads and private car travel. This, however, comes on top of prior spending that on the whole has favoured roads over public transport.

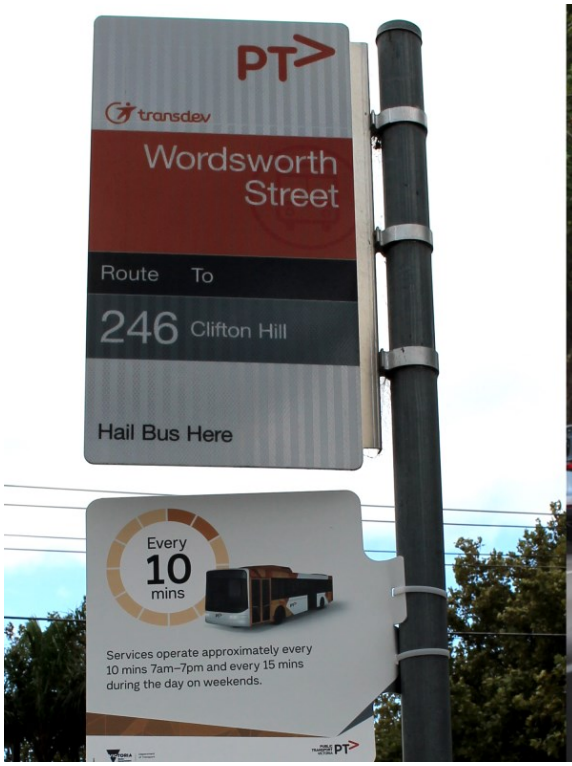
The largest single item of new transport expenditure is the purchase of new "X'Trapolis 2.0" suburban trains, which is budgeted at around $1 billion but with few details regarding timelines, a concern given the delays in the earlier Evolution (HCMT) train order.

Other initiatives include a programme of improvements and increased maintenance on the regional train network, improvements to tram infrastructure including additional separation from cars, new work at Caulfield station to speed up trains and improve interchange with Metro Tunnel services, and a catalogue of minor bus service improvements, including in Clyde, Tarneit, Yarra Ranges and Fishermans Bend.

The government is to be commended for including new bus routes in growth areas and investing in the sustainability of the suburban bus network. At the same time, it's only hinting at the kind of reform that's needed in order to support new home-based travel patterns in Melbourne's suburbs post COVID.

Notably, the entire package of bus improvements amounts to an extra $15 million a year. That's less than what is typically spent expanding one railway station car park catering for a fraction of the patronage.

Overall the government is building on its solid infrastructure credentials in this budget. But we also look forward to seeing a more transformative approach to bus and tram services in particular, as new post-COVID travel patterns become permanent.



Why ignoring the timetable might be good for passengers

If you've ever been on a bus that sat waiting at a time point for its scheduled departure time, a new Department of Transport trial might be of interest.

Since March, route 246 has been testing 'rapid running'. This means that during frequent times (when buses are every 10 minutes) buses will depart from the terminus on time, but then not stop and wait for the schedule along the length of the route.

Instead of using printed timetables, passengers are encouraged to use real-time information on their mobile phone via the PTV or other apps, and of course the high frequency means waiting times don't normally exceed 10 minutes.

The immediate benefit to passengers is a faster ride once on the bus.

Longer term benefits include that authorities may be able to run additional services without needing extra funding.

We're also told it can ease the case for on-road priority, as any measures taken to speed up buses are certain to be useful, rather than simply resulting in even longer waits at time points.

So far the feedback on route 246 from local passengers has been mostly positive, in part because the route punctuality is normally so poor due to traffic that the timetables were rarely accurate!

DOT are looking at expanding the trial to other routes, including testing the concept with slightly less frequent routes running at a 15 minute frequency.

PTUA has been consulted on the trial. While we agree that a 10 minute service can work well with this arrangement, we're not sure if 15 minutes is frequent enough. There are also concerns about passengers without smartphones. That said, we are keen to see what the trial finds.

Since Tram Tracker was introduced more than a decade ago, many tram users have switched to using real-time information instead of timetables.

The provision of real-time information for buses and trains has followed, but some passengers still unaware of it.

Whether 'rapid running' ends up on more routes or not, better promotion of real-time information would make a lot of sense.

And certainly on routes with 10 minute services, 'rapid running' seems to have a lot of merit.

And of course, Victoria's public transport network could do with a lot more routes running every 10 minutes.

The dawn of road charging

May 2021 also saw the passage through Parliament of the Victorian government's 2.5 cents per kilometre charge on electric vehicles (EVs).

Many commentators have derided this as a discriminatory 'EV tax'; but if one takes a long view, this is the likely first step towards a universal explicit road charging scheme that will ultimately replace the Federal excise and GST on fuel when (as seems inevitable) the motor vehicle fleet transitions to largely electric power.

Based on average car fuel efficiency as calculated by the Bureau of Statistics, these existing charges equate to a 'shadow road user charge' around 5 to 6 cents per kilometre for cars with internal combustion engines (ICE).

As a compensating measure to respond to concerns that a road user charge acts as a disincentive to purchasing EVs in a market still saturated with ICE vehicles, the government will also provide a $3000 direct subsidy for the purchase of EVs below the 'luxury' price threshold of $68,740. At the present time, there seem to be nine EV models on sale in Australia under this threshold.

Taking into account the existing $100 rego discount for electric vehicles alongside the new subsidy and road user charge, the overall effect will be cost-neutral for an EV buyer who owns the vehicle for 15 years and drives 12,000km each year.

(EV buyers in Victoria are thus arguably better off now than those in NSW, many of whom pay a surcharge of between $166 and $250 on their annual registration due to NSW's weight-based charging system and the additional weight of EV batteries.)

According to the influential principle that one should tax the things one wants to see less of, and subsidise those one wants to see more of, there is something to be said for a policy of rewarding the purchase of EVs in preference to ICE vehicles while charging for vehicle kilometres.

But the really big incentives in this direction are likely to require inter-governmental cooperation on vehicle emission standards and Federal tax reform.

Meanwhile, it's a reminder that even the greenest car is still a car – and that urban transport can't rely on electric cars. More efficient modes, including walking, cycling and public transport, are the real solution.

Contact the PTUA

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PTUA email lists and archived newsletters online: ptua.org.au/members/resources

PTUA members can obtain cheap yearly Myki Passes – see ptua.org.au/members/offers

PTUA member meetings

Geelong and Ballarat branch meetings are currently paused.

Other meetings as advertised in member emails and on our web site: ptua.org.au/members/meetings

Committee

Newsletter

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Our thanks to Margaret Pullar and the dedicated mailout team.

Social media

You can follow us on social media to stay up to date with public transport issues in Melbourne and around Victoria.

Twitter: @ptua
Facebook: fb.com/ptua.vic
Instagram: ptua.vic
LinkedIn: linkedin.com/company/ptua

Trackless trams: are they the answer?

With only one line in revenue service, people can make huge claims about how great (and especially how cheap) trackless trams are, and it's hard to sort fact from fiction – but going back to first principles can give some insights.

Vehicle price

It is surprisingly hard to find a firsthand quote for a trackless tram; Committee for Geelong has quoted $3-4 million, compared with $10 million plus for an E Class tram, but it's not clear where that figure comes from (and in any case, a 2018 order came to $8.3m per E Class tram).

This doesn't pass the sniff test – it seems unlikely they'd be so much cheaper than such a fundamentally similar product. Even if the bogies are cheaper, the body is basically the same, and big heavy batteries are more expensive than pantographs.

Right now there is only one manufacturer of trackless trams, with limited economies of scale, and proprietary tech preventing competition; an internal review by Transport for NSW raised this as a key concern. CRRC may be willing to let the first order go cheap just to get their foot in the door, but the competitive forces at play suggest that they'd be about as expensive as a conventional tram.

On a per-vehicle basis, a bus will always be much cheaper than either of them. A new battery electric bus costs around $800,000 – they may have less than half the passenger capacity of a tram, but you can buy about ten buses for the cost of one tram.

Infrastructure costs

Trackless trams are often sold on low infrastructure costs – instead of needing steel rails, they can use existing roads, with a bit of paint for the guidance system.

However, the technology has only been shown to work on brand-new, high-quality, freshly-painted road surfaces, and most of Australia's suburban roads are old and fragmented and unable to carry significant loads of weight sustainably.

Most roads and bridges for trackless trams would need to be completely resurfaced and/or rebuilt before being repainted. This might be cheaper than installing steel rails, but it certainly isn't as simple as slapping on a coat of paint.

Then there's maintenance. When you double the weight on a vehicle's axle it does sixteen times as much damage – and trackless trams are much, much heavier than buses. So a road that carries trackless trams not only needs to be re-engineered for heavier loads in the first place, it's also going to need more costly maintenance on an ongoing basis. Steel rails are much more resilient and capable of handling big loads like this.

Another common claim is that trackless trams are punctual and don't get stuck in traffic. If you give them their own dedicated lane, they certainly would be fast and punctual – but if you give conventional trams or buses their own dedicated lanes, they are equally fast and punctual.

Operational costs

Trackless tram would be very energy-inefficient; there's much more weight to lug around than a conventional bus, and there's considerably more friction with rubber tyres on tarmac than steel wheels on steel rails. But the biggest marginal cost of running public transport services is the driver's wages.

Trackless trams have quite a lot of automation involved in their

normal running, but they still have a steering wheel and you still need to pay a human to sit behind it, and be ready to intervene if necessary – a skilled job that will probably attract the same wages as a conventional tram driver.

The annual base rate for a bus driver in Victoria is around $62,000 while for a tram driver it's about $72,000, so it's cheaper to run one bus than one tram. However, buses are slightly under half the capacity of trams, so if you need to run at least two buses for every tram to cope with this, you need to pay twice as many drivers. That said, if you're planning to run a useful and attractive service every 10 minutes regardless of demand, this requires exactly as many buses as trams.

Conclusion

So which is the best option? It mostly depends on how much capacity you need.

Despite the claims, a trackless tram is probably not going to be dramatically quicker or cheaper to set up in the first place. You might make some small savings initially, but these will be offset by higher maintenance costs pretty quickly. So in a high-demand situation, a conventional tram is the way to go.

In a lower-demand situation, service frequency is determined by fundamentals of providing a useful service - which means you'd be running the vehicles at the same frequency regardless of whether they're buses or trams.

This eliminates the tram's advantage in operational costs, and accentuates the bus's advantage in vehicle costs, so for the amount of money a basic, infrequent trackless tram network would cost, you could get a world-class high-frequency electric bus network that would attract people out of their cars.

Ultimately, governments shouldn't be seduced by these unproven claims; they should focus on doing the basics well.

Pic: CRRC Zhuzhou Institute

Geelong branch: CBD bus stop debate continues; rail projects progress

It is 15 months since our last Branch meeting and our venue is still not available. Members have suggested a few other possible locations, but none are as convenient, accessible or cheap as the one we've been using.

Online meetings aren't a viable alternative, because some of our most regular attendees would not be able to participate. Despite that, emails to those who can receive them keep members in the Loop.

Our seemingly endless campaign to keep the main city bus stops in Moorabool Street stretches on.

Despite years of consultations, costing a great deal of money, the official plan for bus routes through the CBD is languishing, due to opposition by a few city councillors and bureaucrats.

We are reassured that the state government and the Department of Transport seem to be firm that the central stops won't be dispersed. However, we wait wearily and warily for a positive conclusion to the sorry saga.

The second platform at Waurn Ponds station is well under construction, along with the loop line that will serve it. It was disappointing to be told by Rail Projects Victoria that the new platform will only accommodate 6-car trains, the same as the existing platform.

The expanded car park is already finished but, of course, if cars are the main way people get to a station, there will never be enough parking.

A new bus route running via Waurn Ponds station was inaugurated last year, although with an unattractive 40-minute frequency. The adjacent Armstrong Creek development urgently needs the state government to finance more of the planned bus routes through the area.

It's clear that the project to bring 'fast rail' to Geelong will not really do that. The announced 50-minute Melbourne -Geelong journey time will be only a few minutes faster than many trains now, and there has been no mention of proposed stopping patterns.

It seems that the project's real benefit will be to free up some train paths on the Regional Rail Link from Deer Park West to Sunshine.

Without the provision of Melbourne Metro 2 - the rail tunnel from Newport to Clifton Hill via Parkville - Geelong trains on the Werribee route must surely suffer from the well-remembered bottleneck between Newport and Footscray before 2015.

PTUA to speak at Vic Transport Infrastructure Conference

PTUA's advocacy activity is wide-ranging – participating in everything from media commentary to street rallies to boardroom meetings with government and industry.

For many years the PTUA has participated in the annual Victorian Transport Infrastructure Conference, contributing to presentations and panels on the transport challenges facing the state. In 2021 the PTUA is pleased to act as a media partner with the Conference as it returns for its 12th year.

With Victoria's Big Build amounting to $80 billion in infrastructure spending by the Victorian Government, the sector forms a major piece of the State's COVID recovery puzzle. These projects are set to boost employment and bolster industry confidence, but ultimately should be judged on their success in improving the way we move people and goods in Victoria.

The Victorian Transport Infrastructure Conference covers everything from rail projects to port expansions and roads, and is a chance for PTUA to advocate for better public transport outcomes with industry and government.

This year's conference on 4th and 5th of August at MCEC will include two full days of keynote presentations, panel discussions and networking sessions with hundreds and industry experts.

Guest speakers include Jacinta Allan, Minister for Transport Infrastructure and the Suburban Rail Loop, who will speak on the progress made over the year, and Jonathan Spear, CEO of Infrastructure Victoria, discussing the complex idea of network pricing and the potential solutions to the problem areas in Melbourne's transport network.

On the regional front, Mark Havryluk from Rail Projects Victoria will share the details of the $1.75 billion Regional Rail Revival Program. With a Melbourne perspective, Damian Brizzi from Rail Projects Victoria will delve into the Metro Tunnel Project and provide insights into the city's biggest rail project in 50 years.

Also featuring is a panel discussion featuring Marion Terrill of Grattan Institute, Professor Majid Sarvi of University of Melbourne, Rachel Dapiran of Victorian Planning Authority and independent transport planner William McDougall. They will explore the complex yet essential process of prioritising infrastructure projects based on costs, environmental feasibility, economic value and impact on the community.

Other panel discussions and presentations will include representatives of the Level Crossing Removal Project, Melbourne Airport Rail Link, Major Road Projects Victoria and ARTC.

PTUA President Dr Tony Morton will be presenting on how public transport can be made relevant and attractive for everyone in the post-COVID era.

For more information on the Conference please visit vicinfrastructure.com.au

12th Victorian Transport Infrastructure Conference: 4-5 August 2021

Improving safety in our cities

Safety for passengers remains an important issue on the public transport network.

She's A Crowd is working to help make cities safer to move around for women and marginalised genders. If you identify as a woman or gender diverse, chances are at some point in your life you or someone you know will be harassed or assaulted on public transport or during a transport journey.

She's A Crowd uses contributors' stories to make our cities safer for women, girls, and non-binary people and you can help. Share your transport story safely and anonymously at shesacrowd.com and it will be transformed into data to inform change and help end gender-based violence.

shesacrowd.com

Ballarat branch: focus on level crossings

At the Melbourne end of the Ballarat line, designs for the three level crossings in the Deer Park area have been announced, and early works have commenced.

Fitzgerald Rd has a road-over design, with a sweeping curve through what is currently a nature reserve. Existing connectivity is maintained, although the transition from one shared-use path to another is slower and more complex than it should be.

The road-under design for Robinsons Rd also maintains connectivity, and should ensure walkers and cyclists heading north-south still have a safe, separated pathway.

Mount Derrimut Rd will have a rail-over design, with a new elevated Deer Park Station. This will improve station access from the southwest – currently people need to walk all the way past the station and backtrack – but while the more centrally-located entrances both north and south should help with this, the draft designs show a very odd pattern of footpaths to lead passengers there.

Some paths go off in random directions nobody's likely to use, while other paths that would be useful are conspicuously absent – hopefully these can be changed for the final design, otherwise we might see a lot of dusty desire lines carved through the grass in a few years' time – as has happened at the recently constructed Clayton station (*see photo below*).

It's also disappointing that, as part of this larger project, there wasn't any provision for people to cross the rail corridor between Mount Derrimut Rd and Robinsons Rd.

Some locals will have a long diversion, and a longer section of 'skyrail' would have made the corridor much more permeable. Definitely a missed opportunity.

Lydiard Street gates

In Ballarat, after many months of locals demanding action from the government, there has finally been progress on the question of the Lydiard St level crossing – though not the outcome many were seeking.

After the heritage swing gates were destroyed by an out-of-control train in May 2020, the level crossing was closed to car traffic while a decision was made about its future.

Many locals were adamant that the road be reopened to car traffic as soon as possible, and also that the heritage gates be restored to their previous state of operations – however the government ultimately announced that the crossing would be reopened with standard boom gates.

The plan is to incorporate the gates into the precinct in another way – presumably some kind of static display, although the details have not been decided yet.

Given that so much of the debate up till now has focused on heritage, it's likely it will continue to rage until the final plans are revealed.

Victorian Government kick starts electric bus rollout

Our last issue of PTUA News highlighted the decision of London and other cities (now including Sydney) to electrify their public bus fleets over coming years, and the relative inaction in Victoria with only a single electric bus operating on the initiative of a private operator.

We're therefore delighted to see the government will now join its peers at the forefront of bus electrification, with a formal Expression of Interest (EoI) being issued in early May for a Zero Emissions Bus demonstration project with $20 million of funding.

Although this is officially classed as a 'trial', it is expected to form the first stage of a full rollout of zero-emission public buses from 2025 onward.

According to the government's briefing to stakeholders, the term Zero Emissions Buses has been deliberately chosen so as not to pre-empt non-electric technologies such as green hydrogen, which may yet have advantages for heavy vehicle applications.

It's still likely that in the near term, battery-electric technology will predominate given its relative maturity worldwide.

And of course buses are already a 'low emission' form of transport as long as they are not completely empty - but moving from low-emission to genuine zero-emission technology is still a vital step in Victoria's climate change response, and is known to improve the desirability of bus travel to potential passengers.

The government is also making the scope of the trial deliberately broad as it foreshadows the 2025 rollout will take in not just urban route buses but also V/Line coaches, school buses and special purpose bus fleets - in short all publicly contracted bus services.

Responses to the EoI are encouraged to consider the role and deployment of not just vehicles but also charging and depot infrastructure, and the necessary electricity network supports.

Unfortunately, although the EoI launch coincided with the enactment of a '25% by 2030' mode share target for walking and cycling (the current level is apparently 18%), there is no sign of a similar target being adopted for public transport mode share, by zero-emission means or otherwise.

Admittedly, the earlier Bracks/Brumby '20% by 2020' target for public transport suffered badly from a lack of political will to enact measures to drive mode share away from private car travel.

But with the need to ensure we don't drown in traffic as our cities and regions recover from COVID-19, a target backed by policy muscle is arguably needed more than ever.

Pic: Transdev Melbourne