

LAST CHANCE TO STOP THEM RIPPING UP OUR TRACK

FEBRUARY 2004 UPDATE OF THE BETTER RAIL ACTION GROUP

What is it all about?

The Victorian Government came to power with an exciting and surprising pre-election commitment. They undertook to upgrade the rail service on the Bendigo Line. This was great news.

But the government chose a very odd way of delivering on this promise. Their 'upgrade':

- **results in an actual *downgrading* of the capacity and reliability of the line, because they propose to remove one of the two tracks over long stretches between Kyneton and Bendigo;**
- **is wasteful – \$200 million when a better overall outcome could have been achieved for much less;**
- **is disruptive, involving total closure of the line for more than six months.**

This has been overwhelmingly rejected by communities along the Line in many public meetings, letters to the press and a petition to Parliament over the past year, but the government is pressing on.

The problems arise because they said 'upgrade' meant provision for an 84-minute non-stop service between Bendigo and Melbourne. 'Upgrade' should mean that all services are faster and more reliable.

Why is the government obsessed with the non-stop 84-minute service?

The community down the line certainly hadn't asked for it. They only see it whizz past.

Most people are more concerned with reliability, frequency, better bus connections and extended hours – like being able to get to Bendigo before 10.34am! That's more important than shaving a few minutes off an express train.

Why remove one track?

The government say that there isn't enough room for the new 'Fast' trains to pass safely in heritage tunnels and under heritage bridges.

However, our existing, wider trains now pass safely on existing track. So why cannot new, narrower trains running on new, smoother track be made safe?

'Changing the contract may be irritating, but not to change it would be irresponsible'

Why is reliability reduced?

The government's report (*Bendigo Line Design Review*, November 2003) admits that single-track running reduces reliability. This is because a small delay to one train can cause a delay to a train travelling in the opposite direction which is waiting for it in a passing loop. Any delay can thus lead to a chain reaction affecting the timetable for the rest of the day.

The government says the loss in reliability is 'acceptable'. We do not see why *any* reduction in reliability should be regarded as 'acceptable'.

What are the real causes of current delays?

Almost all the delays and time-wasting occur in the congested metropolitan section of the line between Sydenham and Spencer Street: but no upgrade is scheduled for that section of the line.

If the major problems with the country services occur in the last 20 km into town, that is where the money should be spent.

What's the alternative?

The government should vary the Regional Fast Rail contracts to:

- keep the double track to maintain the reliability of the line – the most important consideration to most travellers – and to preserve its capacity to carry greatly increased traffic;
- give us trains which can travel safely on the present track alignments without alteration to heritage bridges, tunnels and stations;
- restrict realignment to the smoothing out of

bends on which there are serious speed restrictions. Though the cost of this is trivial compared with what is proposed, it will generate almost all the promised time benefit.

The government should then make a commitment to put the money saved towards upgrade of the metropolitan section of the line, to allow country trains reliable fast paths into the city.

The government's report agrees!

The government's report describes a solution very like this as 'the Status Quo option'. It concludes:

This solution would significantly reduce works proposed in this section, and would be achievable within the current project timeframe, but would increase express travel time by an estimated 8 to 9 minutes.

As this solution would incur costs associated with the legal and commercial processes required to vary the contract (without providing additional benefits to the community), further investigation was not pursued.

In short: greater reliability, greater capacity for growth, protection of heritage structures and minimising line closure are not seen as 'additional benefits to the community'!

Changing the contract may be irritating, but not to change it would be irresponsible.

STATE GOVERNMENT CLAIMS ... COMMUNITY RESPONSE

1	Services will be more reliable (<i>Linking Victoria Fact Sheet</i> , Nov 03.)	The government's <i>Bendigo Line Design Review</i> , Nov 2003, admits (p. 11) that the single track solution is less reliable.
2	It is unaffordable to upgrade both tracks, and there would be years of delay (Minister for Transport, Peter Batchelor) <i>Midland Express</i> 9/12/03)	There is no need to upgrade both tracks, and nobody is proposing it. The report (as above) confirms that the status quo option can be delivered within current budget and timing.
3	For safety reasons there would have to be massive reconstruction of heritage bridges and tunnels if both tracks are kept. (Minister as above)	The new trains will be narrower and more stable and clearly able to travel at least as safely as the present ones.
4	Two tracks are not necessary for more frequent passenger and freight services. (Minister as above)	It is true that clever scheduling can permit quite heavy traffic on a single track <i>so long as every train is on time</i> , but the slightest delay to one train can disrupt the timetable for the rest of the day, as users of single lines know to their cost.
5	Single track can provide capacity for future growth in patronage. (Minister as above)	The maximum capacity of a single line is only a fraction that of a double line, and the greater the traffic, the greater the likelihood of disruption.
6	The proposed upgrade meets the 'travel time' objective under the contract. (<i>Bendigo Line Design Review</i>)	This is the crunch. <i>The contract only requires the capability for an express train taking 84 minutes</i> . It should require instead that the speed and reliability of all services should be improved.
7	Upgrading Sydenham-Kyneton only and retaining the status quo between Kyneton and Bendigo 'would result in a 92 to 93 minute express time and would not meet the project's travel time objectives'. (<i>Bendigo Line Design Review</i> page 11)	Minor improvements to the double track (at far less cost) would make an 86-minute schedule possible. Why the obsession with 84 minutes (at a cost of \$200 million)?
8	The Minister is pleased to announce that the Bendigo-Kyneton section will be shut for only 29 weeks. (Minister for Transport Media Release, November 17, 2003)	Any closure involves massive inconvenience to passengers and possibly irreversible loss of patronage. Retention of the two tracks eliminates the need for such closure.

This Community Update concentrates on the removal of the second track, because this is the most urgent issue. It is about to be ripped up. Once this has happened it is lost for ever.

The Bracks Government made a strong commitment to listen to the community, so please write now to The Premier, Steve Bracks at Parliament House, and or email him at steve.bracks@parliament.vic.gov.au or contact the Minister for Transport, Peter Batchelor at peter.batchelor@parliament.vic.gov.au, or your local state members of parliament.

Future Updates will deal with other crucial issues, such as metropolitan congestion, timetabling, freight and gauge, heritage, regional connections and access, integrated ticketing (regional and metropolitan). These will soon be available on our website; please email ur015429@a1.com.au for further details.

Compiled by The Better Rail Action Group (BRAG), established at a public meeting organized by Mount Alexander Shire Council on October 3, 2002. It represents a broad range of community groups including rail commuters, Latrobe University (Bendigo) Students Association, Castlemaine Business Association, Maldon Inc and the University of the Third Age.

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