

Buses: Finally signs of action



Buses, long the poor cousin of public transport modes, have been getting some attention recently, with a new State Government bus plan document, the long-awaited public release of bus network performance data in July, and a number of route changes and service upgrades introduced.

The release of “Victoria’s Bus Plan” in June is potentially very promising, signalling a determination to improve bus services that has been missing

from the State Government for years.

It was accompanied - for a short time at least - by a firm and laudable goal stated on the Department of Transport website: a target of 200 million bus trips per year by 2030, up from 122 million metropolitan trips in 2019.

So what’s actually changing? We’ll have to wait and see. The plan is strong on rhetoric but less strong on specifics, at least in terms of the biggest problem for Victoria’s buses: service levels.

But there are some welcome details. All new buses acquired from 2025 will be zero emissions vehicles - paving the way for a conversion to electric (or other technologies) for the entire fleet in the coming decades.

Alongside the 100% electricity offset already in place for the Melbourne tram network, and a recent similar announcement for Melbourne’s trains, the move to zero emissions buses will mean Victorian public transport is well on the way to being a cleaner way to travel.

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Three lines to be crossing-free... but...

Conceived by Labor for the 2014 state election, the Level Crossing Removal Program (LXRP) has been expanded by another 10 crossings, with a total of 85 to be removed by 2025.

So far 47 have been removed, which has improved safety and reduced delays for pedestrians, cyclists, tram and bus users, and of course motorists, right across Melbourne.

Many railway stations have also been rebuilt, or at least had upgrades. An RACV survey last year found that the top ten rated stations were all built in the last five years.

Some years ago, then-PTV head Ian Dobbs noted that while trains have absolute priority at level crossings, it's impractical on some lines to run more train services, because of the disruption it would cause to local

road networks.

Users of some stations would know that it remains difficult to actually catch your train when the boom gates remain down for extended periods.

With the LXRP continuing to get funding, so many crossings have now been pledged for removal that another milestone will be reached by 2025: three of Melbourne's rail lines will be completely free of level crossings.

The Cranbourne, Pakenham and Lilydale lines will be completely grade-separated from road traffic.

This will make it possible for Metro to run more services, particularly important on the Cranbourne/Pakenham line where (in pre-COVID times) crowding reached endemic proportions even when all services were running to time.

There's a big caveat however. The Lilydale line will be crossing-free, but there will still be several

kilometres of single track between Mooroolbark and Lilydale.

This is despite the crossing removals at both those locations meaning those stations will be rebuilt. Unbelievably, the government won't take the opportunity to duplicate the line.

Entire rail lines being free of level crossings is to be celebrated, and would have been unimaginable just a decade ago.

But given single track limits frequency and easily causes delays to snowball, it seems the dreams of frequent punctual services will remain elusive on the Lilydale line.

RACV survey results:

www.racv.com.au/ontracksurvey



Auditor General: There is no plan

The Victorian Auditor-General's report into Integrated Transport Planning, released in August, is very welcome.

The Auditor-General found that while the Department of Transport has more than 40 separate plans and strategies, this does not constitute an integrated transport plan, as required by the Transport Integration Act.

We support the Auditor-General's calls for the State Government to ensure that an integrated

transport plan is prepared and made public, as soon as possible.

With the huge government investment in transport at the moment, it's crucial that it's all working towards a clear, shared goal.

For example, given the enduring view that we should move towards zero emissions, and become less dependent on private car travel, a proper transport plan would consider whether widening the Eastern Freeway to 20 lanes actually contributes to that goal.

Likewise, we should have a public transport system where all the

different modes connect with each other seamlessly to get people where they need to go. This means an easy and accessible walk to the bus stop, a bus that's timetabled to connect with the local train, and level boarding at the tram stop.

We all rely on the transport system for access to jobs, education, services and a myriad of other journeys. Better public transport services and effective transport planning are key to achieving sustainability and continued prosperity for Melbourne and Victoria.

Contact the PTUA

office@ptua.org.au

247 Flinders Lane, Melbourne, Vic 3000

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

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](https://twitter.com/ptua)

Facebook: fb.com/ptua.vic

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Geelong branch: Paul Westcott

Ballarat branch: Ben Lever

Newsletter

Edited by: Daniel Bowen

Contributions from: Ben Lever, Tony Morton, Paul Westcott

Responsibility for electoral comment in PTUA News is taken by Tony Morton, 247 Flinders Lane, Melbourne.

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Car Park Karma: the Federal 'Pork and Ride' Scheme

In politics, it not infrequently occurs that the sausage machine produces a good outcome for bad reasons.

The idea of splashing half a billion dollars of public money on car parks should have failed on its merits long before finding its way into the 2019 Federal Budget.

Now this waste of money may be avoided, at least in part, if only through having fomented a pork-barrelling scandal six times the size of the infamous 'sports rorts'.

By the time the Commonwealth Auditor-General reported on the so-called 'National Commuter Car Park Fund', the committed funding had increased from \$500 million to \$660 million.

Most of the projects had been announced by the Morrison Government the day before entering caretaker mode prior to the 2019 election, which allowed them to be incorporated into the subsequent Budget with minimal official scrutiny as 'election commitments'.

As has been extensively reported since, the process of selecting these projects was extensively criticised by the Auditor General and has every appearance of being driven by the need to buy votes in key seats, rather than in the broader public interest or with any concern for net public benefit.

The PTUA's concern is less with the politics of this episode as with the abuse of the planning system it represents. It starts with the usual confusion of

responsibilities between different tiers of government.

For decades now, planners have worked toward the goal of having local communities work with local and State authorities to determine local transport and place-making strategies. The role of the Federal government, where appropriate, is to independently assess the merits of these schemes and provide funding (given it collects the lion's share of tax revenue).

For the Federal government to make unilateral decisions on railway station car parks makes a mockery of this process, which would otherwise have sidestepped Canberra's more embarrassing mistakes.

Many of the proposed locations were *prima facie* unsuitable: in locations of intense land-use with better than average public transport access, or alternatively at sites too far away from the stations themselves.

Attempting to build car parks in these locations would inevitably have been destructive of higher-value land uses; some even proposed to demolish homes and businesses in order to park cars.

Yet even where providing car parking made a little more sense, the sheer cost of provision should have raised red flags.

As reporters in *The Age* commented on 24 July, the Berwick station project (costing \$65 million for 500 additional spaces) should on its face be "much easier and less costly" than one at Glenferrie or Surrey Hills that would alienate valuable land and add to congestion. Yet even here, the raw cost amounts to \$130,000 for one parking space.

The real tragedy in the case of Berwick is the wasted opportunity provided by \$65 million of expenditure.

A sustainable alternative can readily be outlined here. Buy a fleet of 10 electric buses at \$1 million each. Allocate four full-time drivers to each bus to run a 7-day service, and invest \$35 million in paying their wages for 10 years. Spend the remaining \$20 million on a charging station supplied with renewable electricity.

Result: a frequent zero-emission bus network covering a substantial part of Berwick, delivering thousands of people to and from trains and their local shops and workplaces all day, every day. Genuinely taking cars off local roads, and creating 40 ongoing local jobs into the bargain.

Unfortunately, it still seems par for the course for politicians and their advisers to assume 'public transport' means 'trains' and that if one doesn't live next to a station, this requires getting in a car first.

This neglects the enduring fact that public transport is most attractive to those who can walk to it: the number of people who walk to trains or use feeder transport exceeds those who drive to the station by a factor of four.

For too many people in this country the missing link in public transport is between home and the station, and not everyone has a spare car to take them there.

The PTUA's submission to the Senate Inquiry on the Urban Congestion Fund can be read on our web site:

www.ptua.org.au/papers

Buses: Finally signs of action

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At last - performance data

PTUA has lobbied for years for bus performance data, in an effort to drive discussion and debate about how to improve bus services - including highlighting the need for bus network reform and on-road priority.

The publication of this data for the first time in July was therefore very welcome, even if the interface (using Microsoft Power BI) is a little difficult to browse, and tricky to export for analysis.

The data shows that some routes couldn't achieve 90% punctuality (within 5 minutes) even in the middle of Melbourne's 2020 lockdown - when there was little traffic and few passengers - underscoring the need for measures to help buses keep to time.

The progress in provision of bus lanes and traffic light priority has been slow in recent years, despite the growing need. In fact in one case (Fitzsimons Lane) the bus lanes were actually removed.

Bus network changes

The first sign of bigger changes was the announcement of wide-ranging reform to the Night Bus network. This was due to start in August, though this was postponed due to Melbourne's lockdown curfew.

The network re-design included the conversion of most of the Night Bus network to 24-hour versions of the busiest daytime routes, a very positive move, which will mean the services are much easier to navigate than the previous arrangement of special

night routes that were completely different to the daytime routes.

More changes were announced for late September, including additional services for 19 routes.

A new route serving Keysborough South was also announced, though it will only run hourly at most times. Such a service might be vital for serving members of the community with no other option, but is unlikely to shift many people out of their cars.

Showing more potential for mode shift is the new 202 route from Victoria Park station to Melbourne University, running every 10 minutes, providing a shortcut for passengers from the Mernda and Hurstbridge lines, and helping to relieve crowding on existing Johnson Street route 200 and 207 services.

The downside? The upgrades were offset by evening service cuts on some routes. We understand the government has aimed to use bus operating kilometres more efficiently - the cuts were on routes and at times that have shown consistently low patronage numbers.

But it underscores that - despite the rhetoric - funding for the bus network remains wanting, even as many billions of dollars is thrown at other transport projects, including almost \$16 billion into the North East Link, and billions more of government money going to the West Gate Tunnel.

More needed

There's obviously a long, long way to go to bring buses up to scratch in Melbourne and regional Victorian cities.

The pandemic, and the eventual lifting of restrictions, also provides opportunities. Much of the investment in public transport

in Victoria in recent decades has been driven by the crowding pressures of CBD commuters. It's quite possible that this market may be permanently changed by large numbers of employees permanently working from home.

It makes a lot of sense to focus investment for a while elsewhere in the public transport network: on off-peak services, and suburban routes, particularly buses, where travel demand is likely to recover much faster.

Bus route reform is important. Too many buses run via long indirect routes which are confusing and totally uncompetitive with driving. And more efficient routes will help with boosting frequency, which remains the biggest failing of the bus network.

A strong network of frequent main road buses, with additional feeder routes to fill the gaps where necessary, is a proven strategy to boost patronage. We know this thanks to the successful Smartbus rollout just over a decade ago: high frequencies (by Melbourne standards) along main roads, and patronage has boomed.

The initial burst of activity we're seeing now provides some signs that the government is willing to invest in improving bus services. Let's hope to see more action - and more investment - soon.



Paris emissions targets impossible without public and active transport policy

The Grattan Institute's paper "Towards net zero: Practical policies to reduce transport emissions" includes sensible suggestions for transitioning Australia's car fleet to electric vehicles.

They include immediately setting mandatory emissions standards which tighten to zero by 2035; reducing the upfront cost of electric cars by removing duties and taxes; and ensuring charging infrastructure is plentiful.

But the report's claim that focussing almost solely on electric cars is the best way to get the required reductions in transport emissions doesn't stack up. It only mentions switching to public and active transport in passing, to say:

"These behaviour changes alone cannot be expected to get the sector close to net zero by 2050; a doubling of public transport use would still leave a huge number of cars on the roads, while also requiring major investment in public transport infrastructure."

This reflects a common strawman argument: public transport can't cater to every trip, so we must focus on cars.

The report rightly notes the objective isn't just net zero by 2050, it's staying within the "carbon budget" the world can emit while limiting warming to 1.5 °C.

Australia cannot just emit recklessly for the next few decades then make rapid cuts at the last minute – we must make significant cuts early, saving the carbon budget for the long tail of

sectors that are harder to clean up.

Inexplicably, this last-minute dash is implicitly what Grattan recommends: prepare in the 2020s, then rapidly transition the fleet from 2035.

Even if Australian governments instantly adopted all Grattan's policies, and even if their optimism about a rapid transition plays out, we would still burn through too much of our carbon budget in the 2020s.

Such a narrow focus on a long-shot policy is too reckless.

Cars will always handle much of our transport task, and transitioning our car fleet to zero-emissions is necessary and urgent; no serious transport advocate suggests otherwise. But to significantly increase mode share on public transport is absolutely achievable: it's happened before.

Despite a lack of strategic focus (and megaprojects like Melbourne Metro yet to come online) PTV statistics show that Metro train patronage more than doubled from 1999 to 2019, and tram patronage rose 70% in the same period. Even just repeating this in the next 20 years would slash transport emissions, buying precious time to transition the car fleet.

Would incorporating public transport into our emissions reduction plan require huge investment in infrastructure, as Grattan claim?

Not necessarily: the biggest gains are to be had from upgrading service levels on existing infrastructure.

Well over half Melbourne's CBD workers already arrive by public transport, thanks to our strong radial train and tram networks,

and to increase this further would indeed be expensive. But public transport's mode share is much lower for off-peak travel, and out in the suburbs – because service levels are much poorer.

With minimal investment in infrastructure or rolling stock, the government could quickly increase off-peak train frequencies to run every 10 minutes during the day on most lines.

With some investment in new buses, and paint for bus lanes, the government could revolutionise Melbourne's cross-town bus network to provide high-quality tram-like service patterns, so millions of Melburnians could leave the car at home for many trips. These measures aren't just cheap, they're quick to implement, using existing assets.

Active transport measures – footpaths and bike lanes – are even cheaper and quicker to implement, and are increasingly important as working from home has renewed focus on short trips to local shops and services. We could gain significant mode share for walking and cycling over the coming decades while spending a fraction of our roads budget.

It's not just a low cost to government, it's the cheaper option for households – even when EVs reach price parity with ICEVs, they'll represent a huge expense to buy, register and maintain, compared to public transport fares or the humble treadly. It's regressive to continue locking lower-income suburbs into car-dependence.

Then there's the environmental costs of building EVs. They may have no tailpipe emissions, but mining, shipping, processing and manufacturing them from raw materials, then shipping the

finished product to Australia, burns a lot of carbon.

These emissions are significant: in a petrol car they may account for up to half the vehicle's lifetime emissions.

We cannot just outsource the emissions of our policy decisions offshore. The carbon cost of a

bus, that will move exponentially more person-kilometres in its lifetime, is clearly preferable.

It's true that net zero by 2050 is impossible without a strong electric car policy, and we should all get behind the measures Grattan has proposed.

But it's also true that holding the

world to 1.5°C of warming is impossible without improving our public and active transport networks. We absolutely can, and must, do both at the same time.

This article by Ben Lever, Convener of the PTUA's Ballarat Branch, first appeared in The Driven - thedriven.io



Ballarat branch: Melton electrification a must

Infrastructure Victoria's recent 30-year strategy recommended several extensions of the electrified rail network by 2031, including to Wyndham Vale in the southwest and Beveridge in the north.

However, on the Ballarat line they've only recommended going as far as Rockbank – or a new station at Mt Atkinson – rather than all the way to Melton.

Their reasoning is that this would slow down urban sprawl to the west. But there's no real evidence this is true – and that horse has very much bolted.

Melton will likely have joined up with Melbourne's west by 2025, which is realistically the earliest electrified trains could run on the line (since this is when the Metro Tunnel opens). Delaying electrification will only help entrench car-dependence in these new-built suburbs.

Melton electrification is also important from Ballarat's perspective.

Melton is by far the busiest contributor to train crowding – in 2017 it served 726,339 passengers while Ardeer, Deer Park, Caroline Springs and Rockbank combined only served 441,992 passengers. If we don't electrify to Melton, we don't solve Ballarat's overcrowding problem – it's as simple as that.

Meanwhile, stopping at those suburban stations turns what would be about a 10-minute journey from Melton to Sunshine into a 20-minute journey.

Any amount of electrification and quadruplicated track would help, but the best time savings would be made by bypassing the whole section – not just on peak express trains, but every train, every day.

Despite Infrastructure Victoria's strange recommendation, suburban and regional passengers alike need full electrification and quadruplication to Melton as soon as possible – and we're urging the government to recognise that.

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

There is little chance of resuming Branch meetings any time soon given the COVID situation. As someone said the other day: “only three more lockdowns until Christmas”.

Rail Projects Victoria (RPV) recently released its draft plans for the duplication of the South

Geelong to Waurin Ponds rail line, combined with three grade separations: at Fyans Street, Barwon Heads Road and the Surfcoast Highway.

A consultation period ran until 5th September, but government surveys and information are still available online:

engage.vic.gov.au/south-geelong-waurin-ponds-duplication

It's good to see some real progress at last (in the design phase, at least). The proposals seem quite uncontroversial. South Geelong station will be re-built for the third time in about 40 years.

The elevated rail chosen to eliminate the crossings at Fyans Street and the Surf Coast Highway are by far the best alternative, as has been demonstrated in Melbourne over recent years, despite the initial campaign against so-called “skytrain”.

As already reported, the rail track will unfortunately remain single where it crosses the Barwon River flood plain, due to the strict requirements about building on a flood plain.

Any single-line section is a potential bottleneck, but it won't prevent 20-minute off-peak services to Marshall & Waurin Ponds. Duplication of the flood plain crossing has been pushed back to a later stage.

Meanwhile, the new second platform at Waurin Ponds station is nearing completion, and the train stabling and maintenance yard further down the line at Pettavel is taking shape.

Both will support an increase in the frequency of trains south of Geelong, even before the track duplication happens.

We have just discovered that the Department of Transport

has allocated \$20 million to finance local initiatives involving electric buses.

Karly Lovell, director of transport at Deakin University, has told us know that a “consortium” of the university, McHarry's Buslines and AusNet (electricity supplier) has requested some of that funding, and has made the short-list of applicants.

The Deakin inter-campus shuttle bus service seems especially suited to electric conversion. There are only two buses (provided by McHarry's), with a very prescribed route and running time, and only one intermediate stop. We naturally hope the application is successful.

Buses are far more suited to electric operation than cars, for a range of reasons.

Various forms of public transport have been powered by electricity for well over a century. This year marks the 140th anniversary of the running of the first electric tram by Werner von Siemens, in May 1881.

