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COMMENTS ON THE AVALON RAIL LINK PROPOSAL

Opening Statement

Given the many pressing needs for public transport improvements in Victoria, the PTUA does not believe that a rail link to Avalon Airport should be a priority project. Instead, we strongly support the establishment of a connecting bus service from Lara station.

Preferred Public Transport Connection

The Association maintains that a bus service timed to connect with trains at Lara station is the most practical and cost-effective way to provide a public transport service to the airport. It would be able to serve both air passengers and the many people who work at the airport.

Optimum Configuration of Rail Link

If a rail line is to be built, it would work best as a through line, leaving and rejoining the Geelong line, rather than an isolated branch. However that is apparently seen as being too ambitious, so the link will have to be a dead-end branch line from the main railway.

The Problem with Branch Line Operation

Short branch lines are notoriously difficult to service effectively. They can only work well if there is a significant traffic generator on the branch which allows the running of through trains on the branch separately from those on the line from which it branches (e.g. Express airport shuttles from Paddington to Heathrow). Avalon could not justify regular, dedicated, direct trains until the number of passengers has increased significantly.

An Unacceptable Service Pattern

Any idea of shuttling through trains on the Geelong line to and from the branch terminus at Avalon is unacceptable. Existing train travellers won't be at all happy travelling in and out of Avalon because it will add too much to the travel time from to Geelong-Melbourne. As well, the government will doubtless be under pressure to minimise further increases in travel times on the Geelong line, not lengthen them.

Disadvantage of Providing a New Station

An Avalon branch line should commence at an existing railway station rather than at a newly-created one. Providing an additional station on the existing Geelong line would slow down train services. The introduction of an extra stopping point should only occur if there is a significant traffic generator at that point, such as a major urban growth area.

Wherever the branch line commences, it should be planned or built with a junction connecting to the main line in both directions, so that future options are enhanced.

Transfer Station

The optimum place to link the branch line to existing rail services on the Geelong line is Lara station. That is because Lara is a major station, currently served by most trains to and from Geelong, with a number of them making semi-express journeys. Any other trains added to the timetable in future are also likely to stop there. Lara also has an existing island platform, which facilitates transfers between trains.

As an alternative, Little River station could be the transfer point. It is four or five minutes closer to Melbourne than Lara. However Little River township is small and the station receives less frequent services than Lara. That situation is not immutable of course, particularly if transfers to the Avalon shuttle are occurring there.

Little River residents in particular will need to be properly consulted in the formulation of any major proposal involving their local station. There are almost certainly going to be heritage constraints related to the station, but they could be overcome with sensitive and imaginative planning.

Transport Mode on the Branch

For maximum flexibility and interoperability, the transport mode selected for the shuttle service between the transfer station and the airport should be compatible with the existing rail service.

Therefore the branch should be a broad gauge (1600 mm) rail line, as is the current Geelong line, but gauge-convertible sleepers should be used to allow for later conversion to standard gauge (1435 mm). While only light rail vehicles might use the branch at first, the track and all other associated infrastructure should be built to a sufficient standard to allow for heavier rail vehicles to be employed if and when required.

Any idea of using an “orphan” mode such as a monorail should be rejected. A monorail would eliminate any chance of running through trains on the branch. It would also not allow the branch to be used for freight trains, so would not be “future proofed”.

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