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SUBMISSION TO LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE ON TRAIN SERVICES

The Geelong Branch of the PTUA is pleased to be able to make a submission to the Legislative Council Select Committee on Train Services. The Committee has been set up in response to the problems apparent on metropolitan and regional rail services during the recent summer. This submission concentrates on the situation regarding regional rail services, and the Geelong line in particular. It is an adjunct to the submission from the PTUA Committee.

Introduction

The Regional Fast Rail (RFR) Project in the early years of this decade represented a major commitment by the state government to improving regional rail services. Despite its title, the project was in fact an essential infrastructure upgrade, which ameliorated, to some extent, the effects of decades of under-investment in Victoria's regional rail network.

While the RFR project resulted in only marginally faster rail services, it was accompanied by a boost in service frequencies, which was strongly supported by the PTUA, and the introduction of the new V/Locity trains. Fares were also integrated to include metropolitan travel and regional bus services, a move originally proposed by the PTUA. As well, following the 2006 state election the government cut V/Line fares by about 20%.

Improved services, new trains and fare cuts, as well as a number of other external factors all contributed to a significant increase in V/Line patronage, with passenger trips now at record levels [1]. This has led to the overcrowding of some (especially peak) services.

With regards to train reliability, the RFR project unfortunately did little to remove the conflicts between metropolitan trains and V/Line services in the Melbourne metropolitan area. Consequently V/Line services were badly affected by problems with metropolitan services on days of extreme weather. Despite claims made for it, the current proposal for a Tarneit link to separate V/Line services on western lines from metropolitan services may not be the most cost-effective solution.

Given limited funds for infrastructure, we have concerns about the maintenance of the country rail infrastructure (tracks and signalling) which has affected trains in extreme weather conditions. Problems with air conditioning on older trains also affect the ability to run trains safely in very hot weather. Where trains need to be replaced by buses, information should be clear and timely.

Our submission expands on these points.

Service reliability problems

1) Conflicts with suburban trains

As mentioned above, disruptions on the suburban network affected many V/Line trains during the recent summer months.

“V/Line replaced 19 services with buses yesterday.

As a result of yesterday's disruption, at least four services out of Geelong this morning will be replaced by buses, V/Line spokesman Daniel Moloney said.

An emergency fleet of 30 buses was on standby at Southern Cross station yesterday to deal with cancelled country services.” [2]

It's important to note that V/Line is heavily reliant on infrastructure shared with suburban trains and will continue to be, even with the construction of projects like the Regional Rail link (see **2**) below).

Although complete separation of suburban and regional trains seems to have advantages, it would be prohibitively expensive if applied across the whole network. It is also not clear that such separation is the best or most cost-effective solution to the present problems.

It is essential that the planning of the rail network should be done as a whole, to ensure that both metropolitan and country services can be efficiently and effectively accommodated. This will require a review of metropolitan and V/Line timetables, which would be done best by planners with internationally-recognised timetabling expertise, and experience in making cost-effective use of existing infrastructure. Such a review could then identify serious choke points and propose a series of infrastructure upgrades to relieve them

2) Tarneit Line (Regional Rail Link)

The Tarneit line (or Regional Rail Link) has been promoted for a number of reasons. Most pertinent in this regard is the claim that it will improve reliability on the Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo lines, by separating V/Line from metropolitan services.

However there is continuing uncertainty about the configuration of the proposed line, and the way services on it will be structured. This means that the PTUA remains very unsure about how well it will fulfil its stated purposes. It may in fact make things worse for Geelong passengers compared with an upgrade of the existing route to Melbourne. This uncertainty underlines our concerns about the need for highly-competent rail planning, which has not been obvious under the current governance arrangements.

Some or all Geelong line trains will use the new route, which by-passes both Newport and Werribee stations, where passengers can currently make convenient changes to other public transport services. For example, up to 1500 passengers a week make use of V/line trains to get to and from Werribee station. It is still not known how these passengers will be catered for when the Tarneit by-pass is built, or if any alternative arrangement will leave them worse off.

Another concern for Geelong passengers is that travel time might increase when trains use the longer by-pass route. It has been said that the line will be constructed to allow for RFR-type 160 km/h speeds. However up to six new stations are planned to be provided on the by-pass. These can only be served by V/Line trains, given that the line will not be electrified initially. Because trains take some time to accelerate and decelerate when stopping at stations, it would be impossible for stopping trains to travel at 160 km/h along the length of the Tarneit line. The Minister for Public Transport has acknowledged that Geelong trains will take longer to traverse the by-pass route:

“... in a press conference selling the proposed route through Tarneit, Ms Kosky said there would be no time gains in the speed of services. She said "seconds" could be added to some existing train times.” [3]

The PTUA feels that a serious examination was not made of the feasibility of providing extra capacity on the Geelong line by building additional tracks along the existing route from Werribee to Southern Cross. The idea was touched on in the **Analysis on Rail Capacity** which formed part of the **East West Link Needs Assessment** (EWLNA or “Eddington Report”) [4]. One of the reasons it was rejected was that it would require a major reconfiguration of Footscray station. Yet that reconfiguration is now going to have to be done as part of the current Regional Rail link proposal.

The EWLNA, which recommended the Tarneit line, made no mention of the now-proposed regional tracks into Southern Cross station, using a new rail bridge over the Maribyrnong River. In fact the Report stated that: “early delivery of Tarneit line ...would provide little benefit without the [east-west] CBD [rail] tunnel” [5]. This was because the proposed rail tunnel was to start west of Footscray station, thereby avoiding the need to re-configure Footscray station.

Reasonably detailed information has recently been provided about the configuration of the West Werribee (Manor) to Deer Park West section of the line (though no detailed plan for services has yet been revealed). However no similar information has been released about by far the most challenging aspect of the project – the section from Deer Park West to Southern Cross station.

This latter section will involve major junction reconfiguration of Sunshine station and junction, Footscray station and junction, a new Maribyrnong river bridge and new through tracks in the crowded section between Footscray and Southern Cross stations. This could face many or even more challenges than alternative proposals, none of which were seriously evaluated against the Regional Rail Link project.

3) Heat-related speed restrictions

On days of extreme heat V/Line has a policy of reducing train speeds because of the danger of track buckling. This is more likely on tracks that weren't re-laid as part of the RFR, but it has also occurred on RFR tracks.

“As the temperature again soared to almost 36 degrees rail operator V/Line placed heat speed restrictions on its services from noon, meaning services scheduled to travel at 160kmh were reduced to a comparatively slow 90kmh.” [6]

While the slowing of trains on days of extreme heat is a prudent and unavoidable precaution, it disrupts the travel plans of hundred of commuters. Given that these speed restrictions are likely to continue despite the investment in improving the quality of the tracks, it would greatly assist passengers, as well as train operations, if there was a specific timetable, with adjusted times, that trains would follow after extreme heat conditions were declared on any line.

Planning for speed restrictions (as well as other contingencies) would be assisted by following international best practice and instituting timetables that have service patterns which repeat every hour (with additional trains added between the normal services during the peaks). This means that detailed "recovery plans" can be developed for one hour and apply throughout the day.

The extent of track buckling could also be eased by the progressive replacement of wooden sleepers with concrete sleepers laid with heavier rail. The PTUA is concerned that infrastructure upgrades are being concentrated on large “headline” projects such as the

RFR or Tarneit line, with a lack of emphasis on systematic, ongoing upgrades across the network.

4) V/Line air-conditioning problems

There have been problems with the air-conditioning in the 50-strong fleet of locomotive-hauled N and S class carriages. One problem is that the air-conditioning only works when an operating locomotive is attached to a carriage set, because the locomotive's generator is required to power the equipment. If the carriages have been stored out of use in the sun on days of 35+ degrees, the temperature inside the carriages can become extreme.

If those carriages are then placed in service, especially if there is a large passenger load, the air-conditioning isn't capable of cooling the carriages to any great extent. This leads to heat stress for passengers which can lead to delays when people require medical assistance. Given that many stations are not staffed continuously or not staffed at all, the train has to wait until paramedics arrive to treat the affected passenger (also see **E** below).

As well as the problems with carriage air-conditioners not reducing the air temperature to acceptable levels on hot days in crowded carriages, the air-conditioning units themselves have broken down on a regular basis. This not only causes great discomfort for passengers, but the capacity of the carriage fleet is reduced while the faulty vehicles are taken out of service for repairs. Clearly better operation and maintenance of the air-conditioning systems is vital if the reliability of the locomotive-hauled carriage fleet is to be optimised.

V/Line's fleet has been stretched to capacity in the last couple of years, even to the extent that a stored set of compartment-style carriages (some up to 60 years old) had to be extensively refurbished and returned to service. Therefore there was virtually no spare capacity to help deal with the problems encountered last summer. The progressive introduction of over 50 new V/Locity carriages, which started in August 2008, will clearly help ease this problem (see also "Crowding problems" below).

Off the trains, given recent weather extremes, as well as increasing public transport patronage, more needs to be done to provide climate-controlled waiting rooms for passengers on days of both extreme heat and cold.

5) Longer delays due to unstaffed stations

Many stations on the regional network are unstaffed, or only staffed for a part of the day, usually in the morning peak. This not only leads to concerns about passenger safety at or near stations, but it can contribute to delays on the network.

As has been mentioned above, emergencies involving passenger health or behaviour can lead to significant hold-ups because a train which has to stop at an unstaffed station must wait until police or paramedics can attend, which may take some time. Medical emergencies are more likely in the hotter months, for the reasons already noted.

Staffed stations have the additional advantage of reducing the likelihood of vandalism and other anti-social activity in and around the station. The expense and time involved in removing graffiti or repairing damage, is lessened by having staff present. Passengers are also very reluctant to ride bicycles to the station or leave cars in the car park at many unstaffed locations, due to fear of property damage and theft.

In this regard it is pleasing to note that V/Line have recently extended the opening hours of both Lara and North Geelong stations to include the evening peak. Late night opening is

rare on almost all stations however, and that is the time that passengers are most likely to feel vulnerable.

6) Inadequate information about service cancellations or alterations

Passengers have experienced frustration with the not-infrequent changes to V/Line schedules. This is particularly a problem at Southern Cross station, which is the originating point of most V/Line trains. Delays in having carriages and locomotives available, or breakdowns in the infrastructure such as points and signalling, has often resulted in last-minute alterations to the scheduled services.

On a large and complex station such as Southern Cross these changes can result in passengers having to quickly move quite a distance from one part of the station to another, even to the road coach terminal at the extreme western end of the station. These sudden unexpected moves have sometimes proved confusing and stressful, which is a difficulty for everyone, but especially those with limited mobility or other disabilities.

Overcrowding problems

An obvious result of the increase in patronage since the completion of the RFR project has been overcrowding on many regional rail services, particularly peak period trains on commuter routes, and trains servicing major sporting events. This overcrowding puts additional pressure on the system when delays arise, whether they are due to conflicts with metropolitan services, heat restrictions or infrastructure breakdowns.

Severe reliability problems have plagued all of V/Line's major corridors, with all lines consistently missing the 92% on-time running target [7]. The biggest single factor is the lack of clear train paths for V/Line trains through the Melbourne suburban area.

The government is now purchasing additional V/Locity rolling stock to assist in meeting patronage growth on V/Line services. This is a very positive initiative. However it must be noted that almost all the new carriages are trailer cars without driving compartments, so while adding much-needed capacity to existing services, they will be less likely to allow additional services to be run.

In April this year V/Line issued a pamphlet to passengers on the Geelong line suggesting that passengers wanting a seat on an up Geelong service in the morning peak should consider travelling on one of the slower services where there was some spare capacity – ironic advice given the name of the RFR project [8]. A thorough-going timetabling review could help to reduce the relative attractiveness of the few super express “flagship” services, by introducing more regular express services (even if these make one or two additional stops).

A recently-completed program to lengthen some strategic platforms in order to run longer trains was a sensible initiative. This should be continued to cover all platforms on the network. As well, a method of allowing selective opening of carriage doors at stations could be introduced, to allow longer trains to use platforms not long enough to accommodate them. Doors of carriages not alongside platforms could then be kept shut (with appropriate warnings to passengers).

Recommendations

Arising from the foregoing, the Geelong Branch of the PTUA makes the following recommendations to the Committee:

A (i) An autonomous metropolitan public transport authority should be set up (as proposed by the main PTUA submission), operating at arm's length from the government, which will plan and manage Melbourne's public transport system. This body would bear ultimate responsibility for all aspects of public transport, and would contract-out the operation of its services to public or private operators.

This metropolitan public transport authority would also plan train paths and timetables for regional trains within metropolitan Melbourne in conjunction with a country transport authority (see **A (ii)**).

A (ii) A country public transport authority should be established to plan the rural and regional rail and bus network. It should also operate at arm's length from the government, under a clear charter.

It would have responsibility for services now run by V/Line (which is effectively a wholly state-owned "private" company, having been left in limbo since the withdrawal of its former private franchise-holder National Express in 2002). V/Line currently plans and operates its rail services, and plans and sub-contracts many rural and regional coach services to private bus operators.

The new country authority would also assume, from the Department of Transport, responsibility for planning and supervising the operation of the considerable number of non-V/Line country buses which presently operate between and within smaller rural centres.

These arrangements would allow for better co-ordination of all public transport services, creating a real network across Victoria, maximising the linkages between all public transport modes and routes.

Through a separate division, the country public transport authority would also have responsibility for controlling access to the network for rail freight services.

A (iii) In larger regional centres with their own existing internal public transport networks, such as Geelong and the Bellarine Peninsula, Ballarat, Bendigo and the Latrobe Valley, regional public transport authorities should be established to plan and supervise the operation of public transport services in those areas. They would ensure that there were good connections to rail and inter-city coach services, in consultation with the country public transport authority. [8]

B) The country public transport authority, in conjunction with the metropolitan public transport authority, must plan a special timetable (or develop suitable contingency plans) for days when track speeds are limited due to extreme heat.

C) The new country public transport authority should develop a publicly-released plan for rail infrastructure maintenance and upgrades, including as one focus, work to reduce track buckling in hot weather.

D) The new country public transport authority should upgrade the air-conditioning in locomotive-hauled carriages to be able to cope with hot weather; and/or provide "shore power" in rail yards to allow carriages to be cooled before use.

E) V/Line should make the staffing of stations a priority, in order to provide easier off-train transfers for unwell passengers, as well as providing more security for rail users generally.

References

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<http://www.vline.com.au/media/news/MediaReleases/989077905/Article.aspx>

[2] Herald Sun, 29/1/2009

[3] Geelong Advertiser, 17/6/2009

[4] "East West Rail Link, Analysis on Rail Capacity", p 37-8

[5] *ibid*, p 42

[6] Ballarat Courier, 19/1/2009

[7] V/Line historical performance results

<http://www.vline.com.au/media/performance/historical.html>

[8] Australian Railway Historical Society Victorian Division, "Newsrail", June 2009, p 178

[9] see "A Regional Public Transport Authority for Geelong",

<http://www.ptua.org.au/geelong>