

Ombudsman nobbled

Over a year behind schedule, Transport Minister Peter Batchelor announced the composition of the Public Transport Industry Ombudsman board on 13th of April. Unfortunately, the appointments to the board have proven disappointing and at odds with the recommendations of the earlier working group.

The PTUA participated in the working group represented by former Secretary Vaughan Williams, together with representatives from the Consumer Law Centre and Consumers Federation of Australia.

The working group had recommended that certain organisations representing passengers nominate the consumer representatives to the PTIO Board. The PTUA had been reasonably happy with the working group process, which involved significant goodwill between all parties and was assisted by the specialised expertise of the Energy and Water Ombudsman, Fiona McLeod.

It seems that the extended period of limbo for the PTIO has been put to good use by the Department of Infrastructure bureaucracy, undoing much of the good work done by the working party.

The consumer director positions on the board have become the gift of the Minister, and those appointed appear to have little expertise in consumer advocacy, public transport, or industry-based dispute resolution more generally.

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State budget slammed

The 2004 State Budget is disappointing, and only confirms that Victorians will continue to face a barely usable public transport system, and growing traffic congestion.

Government rhetoric recently has been all about increasing public transport use, repeatedly stating the aim that 20% of all trips are to be taken by public transport by 2020. This is a laudable goal, with environmental, social and economic benefits for Melbourne. But it will never happen without real investment in better public transport.

Even business groups have criticised the lack of commitment to public transport in the government's Melbourne 2030 strategy. The strategy's Implementation Reference Group, which includes representatives of the housing industry and the RACV, has said public transport is the "weakest component" of the strategy, and that they "do not have confidence that the transport elements....will be adequately delivered or addressed."

To make the goal a reality, substantial service upgrades are required. Public transport currently accounts for around 7% of all trips in Melbourne (9% of motorised trips). This figure falls to less than 3% in the outer areas, where most public transport remains slow and infrequent.

Public transport use simply will not increase while it remains unusable in many areas. The budget reveals what this government's real priorities are: around half a billion dollars in road expansion projects, which will only encourage more car usage, entrenching the most inefficient, polluting and expensive way of moving people around our cities, and ultimately bringing yet more traffic congestion.

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Committee Meetings

Meetings are on the fourth Thursday of each month.
Members are welcome to observe. Please call or e-mail the office for details.

Passenger Trains return to Bairnsdale

Local activists in Sale, Stratford and Bairnsdale have welcomed the restoration of their passenger rail service. Regular services recommenced on Monday, 3rd May.

Celebrations and local fanfare abounded the previous day, as many residents of Stratford and Bairnsdale converged on those two stations to welcome the special train that had travelled from Melbourne, conveying V/Line, Department of Infrastructure and community group representatives (including PTUA), as well as several dozen East Gippsland locals who had won tickets in local competitions. The Premier and Transport Minister boarded the special train at Sale.

Interestingly, under the previous timetable that remained mostly unchanged since the Bairnsdale line closed, the two trains that were extended to Bairnsdale were one that instead sat at Sale all night, and another that sat idle

at Sale for three hours. Its crew were being paid to sit around, while the additional cost of coaches and their crews also had to be paid. As a result, the operational cost to extend the service has been negligible, at the expense of almost eleven years of wasted operational expenditure.

It would have been nice if the new service level was superior to the one immediately prior to the service being suspended.

Two trains a day will provide fairly limited utility to the people of Bairnsdale and Stratford, who may either already have or want to find jobs in Sale or Traralgon, who will still have little alternative other than driving. Indeed, there is still scope for this to happen. However, V/Line seems to be reasonably satisfied with the few hundred passengers a day that the service is attracting.

Copy deadline for the next PTUA news is 1st August 2004

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Ombudsman nobbled (cont'd from page 1)

Although the final PTIO Constitution and Charter have not been made available to us, we can only assume they have been similarly weakened on their travels through the Nauru House bureaucracy. It seems clear that the DoI and the Minister felt that a robust and truly independent dispute resolution scheme was not in their own vested interests.

A point of some contention in the working group process was the issue of the conduct of ticket

inspectors and the processing of infringement notices. As members will be aware, this is the biggest single area of complaint to the PTUA Office, particularly in light of the continued unreliability and lack of user friendliness displayed by the automated Metcard ticketing system.

We had thought a reasonable consensus position had been agreed by the working group, but we now understand that revenue enforcement issues - the biggest

single source of complaint - will not be handled by the PTIO. As we pointed out at the time, this has serious ramifications for public confidence in the scheme.

The PTUA has no confidence that the new Ombudsman will be effective. We will continue advising members and the general public who have concerns about public transport to pursue these through their elected representatives.

Concession card move praised

The state government is to be congratulated for widening the availability of concession fares on public transport.

The reforms make all Health Care Card holders eligible for concession fares. In another sensible move, tertiary students will no longer pay a hefty up-front fee to obtain a tertiary travel card, which they require to travel on

concession fares. Students will now only pay a nominal fee to cover administrative costs. This change fulfils an election promise Labor made in 1999 and comes after intense lobbying from student bodies.

The funding for these measures was made possible by removing pensioner concession for car registrations. We understand the

concerns expressed by pensioner groups that this could make some worse off, especially those living in areas where transport services are poor or non-existent. To address this inequity, government should now boost public transport services throughout Victoria, especially in middle and outer suburbs and country centres to ensure that everyone has access to good public transport.

Knox rail study

The PTUA was pleased to hear that Knox Council has awarded its tender to conduct the feasibility study into the Rowville rail line. Knox Council is to be congratulated in undertaking this initiative in an effort to hold the state government accountable for a promise it had failed to deliver upon since 1999.

As mentioned in *It's Time to Move*, the Rowville rail line had been proposed as part of the 1969 Transport Plan. More recently the Rowville rail line was part of a number of public transport election promises made by the ALP back in 1999, however, no action had been undertaken by the current state government.

The PTUA and local groups including the Knox Environment Society continue to lobby for the Rowville rail line, as we have done since 1996. It is encouraging to see that while there is State government inaction, Knox Council is willing to provide advocacy for this crucial part of public transport infrastructure.



A map of the proposed Rowville rail line from *It's Time to Move* (PTUA).

Will 20/2020 happen?

A Labor MP has raised doubts over the achievement of the government's own target of 20 per cent of Melbourne travel by public transport by 2020.

In the 20/2020 forum hosted by the City of Greater Dandenong, Carlo Carli said that 8 to 10 per cent public transport usage is going to be the target in the outer east. He specifically blamed urban form as the factor explaining why it could not be higher.

Current modal share is 3-4 percent, so achieving 8-10 percent would require some service improvements. However an 8-10 percent share would be insufficient to stem growing car use in the Greater Dandenong area. He said that there was little available funding for public transport improvements from State Treasury, but hoped for Commonwealth assistance.

However on another occasion, Mr Carli rejected the argument that to reach 20% overall, public transport's modal share needed to be much higher than the current 16-18 per cent in inner areas such as his own seat of Moreland.

Mr Carli can't have it both ways. 8-10% in Greater Dandenong plus about 20% in Moreland does not make 20% metro-wide. And by dismissing the possibility of 20% in Greater Dandenong and higher than this in Moreland, is he really saying that 20% by 2020 won't happen?

Assuming the Government keeps its commitment of a 20 percent average share, it follows that inner areas will need modal shares nearer 40% if the expected share from outer areas are now only 8-10 percent. On the other hand, given poor existing service levels and a low current passenger base, a

quintupling of share in the outer suburbs could actually be easier than a similar percentage increase in inner suburbs.

It is achieving these sort of patronage increases that makes outer suburban route and service improvements such as the so-far unreleased BusPlan and selected train and tram network extensions so critical. Urban form should not be used as an excuse for inaction when existing services levels are so poor – the achievements of cities such as Toronto are proof of this.

The State Government should be reassured that 20% by 2020 is eminently achievable, that it is a worthwhile goal, and that it should be taking steps now, by improving routes and service levels, to make it happen.

State budget slammed (cont'd from page 1)

New public transport service initiatives are limited to \$3 million for bus lanes and the re-announcement of a \$30 million tram priority programme.

This is despite the Melbourne 2030 forums clearly showing people want better public transport, not more roads.

The State Government has claimed that low-income public transport users are among the big winners in the budget, and it is true that many low-income users and tertiary students in particular will benefit from the more generous concession entitlements announced in the budget. Yet it is often these low-income users that face the worst public transport services. Two thirds of Melbourne, including many less wealthy areas, lives beyond the rail and tram

network and faces bus services equal to the worst in the developed world.

According to the Victorian Council of Social Service, lack of access to public transport is a key factor in social disadvantage. The VCOSS submission to the 2004 budget called for funding of suburban rail projects left unfunded in Melbourne 2030, including heavy rail extensions to Rowville and East Doncaster. None of the VCOSS proposals for public transport have made it into the budget.

People will not use inferior public transport. To keep Melbourne liveable, the government must commit to substantial improvements to services. Without them, any talk of increasing patronage is just a lot of hot air.

VCOSS paper shows the way

The Victorian Council of Social Services released their "Place to be on PT" vision for public transport in mid-June. While our policies vary slightly on some detail, the PTUA congratulates VCOSS on the release of the paper.

The paper can be read online at: www.vcoss.org.au/campaigns/transport.pdf



Do we really spend more on public transport than on roads?

Transport Minister Peter Batchelor has responded to criticism of the State Budget as a road lobby bonanza, by pointing to figures from the 2003 Budget purporting to show that the government allocated \$1.41 billion to public transport and only \$725 million to roads in the 2003-04 financial year. This was immediately seized on by pro-road commentator Neil Mitchell, who published an article in the Herald Sun on 11 May 2004 claiming that the government was pandering to "lentil eaters" in the sustainable transport lobby and persecuting motorists!

Should we believe these figures? True, if you go to the 2003-04 Budget Estimates and add up the figures there, you get something similar to Batchelor's totals. But as Kenneth Davidson and other economic commentators have pointed out, figures in government accounts are now so divorced from reality as to be meaningless. The meaning of terms such as "accrual", "asset charge" and "net debt" are manipulated by State and Federal Treasurers as just another tool in political spin-doctoring.

Nonetheless, one can make limited attempts to make sense of the numbers.

Importantly, the total you get depends on what you count as "road" and "public transport" expenditure. In order to obtain totals close to those the Minister gets, we had to omit some items of road expenditure: about \$50 million in road safety initiatives, \$100 million for registration and licensing, and \$250 million to police the road system.

On the other hand, what makes public transport look expensive in these figures is the very large amount for metropolitan services: a whopping \$547 million for trains, \$270 million for trams, and \$310 million for buses. But what do these figures really mean?

For a start, they are much, much larger than the actual subsidies paid to the operators. It appears the government has padded out the budget figure in two ways:

1. The figures include not just the subsidy to run the actual services, but also a hidden "capital asset charge". This is a notional interest payment charged on all capital grants for public transport since 1901. It operates purely as an accounting device and does not reflect any real cost of operating the system. And it is not charged on roads, because Treasury deems roads a "social service" while public transport is a "trading enterprise" for accounting purposes.

2. The figures also include all the revenue collected from fares. Including fare revenue in this context is misleading, because fares are not a tax; they are a fee for service, just like CityLink tolls. Therefore the actual cost to the public purse is the subsidy required after fares are collected.

To get a measure of public transport's true "burden" on the taxpayer, one should replace the budget figures with figures for the actual subsidy paid to public transport. To give roads the benefit of the doubt, we can use the higher subsidy figures from the new contracts, even though these did

not apply in 2003. The annual subsidy for metropolitan buses is estimated at \$200 million (after deducting buses' share of fare revenue) and for country rail \$100 million (the budget figure is \$134 million). Taking the remaining figures for public transport and roads from the budget estimates gives us the list below.

All figures are in millions of dollars:

Public transport:

Metro train services 345.0
Metro tram services 112.0
Metro bus services 200.0
Metro PT development 18.4
Regional rail services 100.0
Regional bus services 50.8
Regional rail development 40.0

Public transport total **866.2**

Road System:

Major metro road projects 100.7
Metro arterial road links 160.5
Metro road maintenance 154.5
Regional road projects 144.1
Regional road maintenance 140.0
Road use mgt improvements 29.6
Blackspots and safer roads 7.0
Safety initiatives, regulation 49.3
Vehicle and driver regulation 94.2
Targeting driver behaviour 119.2
Traffic fines processing 81.5

Road system total **1080.6**

The conclusion? Last year the Government spent \$1080 million of taxpayers' money on road transport and \$866 million on public transport: hardly a sign of pandering to sustainability.

Outer East

The PTUA has continued to remain active in Melbourne's outer eastern suburbs, and has formed an outer east sub-committee to help local residents hold government

accountable for their continued inaction in improving services.

The Outer Eastern Sub-Committee meets on the first Tuesday of each

month. If you wish to attend, please e-mail alexander.makin@ptua.org.au or leave a message with the Office.

Train travellers kept waiting, guessing

Passengers on former M> Train lines are less likely to get compensation for late and cancelled trains after their services were recently transferred to Connex.

Under previous contracts, M>Train was required to report line by line details of service cancellations and delays each month. Regular passengers on lines where service reliability was below published benchmarks could claim compensation in the form of extra tickets.

Connex is not required to report service performance by line because of different contractual arrangements. Connex passengers experiencing unreliable service on their particular line never received compensation if the average for all lines was satisfactory.

An early casualty of Connex's takeover of M> Train services has

been the end of line by line reporting across the whole network. This means that passengers experiencing substandard service on their line are far less likely to be compensated. Abandoning line by line reporting also reduces the ability to hold Connex accountable for late and cancelled trains. Though a new customer service charter is being drafted with the State Government, neither parties have committed to reintroduce line-by-line reporting.

Train cancellations and long waits until the next service are now common, with reliability falling over the last year or so. As anyone who listens to ABC Radio in the mornings can attest, train cancellations are now a regular part of the show. It is not uncommon to hear announcements of multiple peak hour services being cancelled, instead of just one or two a year ago. Train

malfunctions were the leading reason for cancellations and were more significant than driver shortages and vandalism according to documents obtained by Opposition Transport Spokesman Terry Mulder.

A fortnight-long survey by an Ormond commuter found that his train was cancelled two days a week on average during April/May 2004. In some cases passengers were left behind due to overcrowding on the next operating service and had to wait even longer. There had been some improvement since Connex took over, but commuters deserve reliable service, train companies being held accountable, and a return to reporting service reliability by line.

See also: Bachelor on notice: fix the trains ⇒ page 7

Letter to the editor

Most public transport users will know there are a number of very old suburban trains still in use that should have been scrapped some time ago. These trains are putting lives at risk because of lack of video cameras and emergency telephones. We must demand a cessation date for these trains.

- Peter Behan, Pascoe Vale

We appreciate that some would like to see the Hitachi trains (which date from the 1970s) go, though most criticism we hear is during summer, and is about the lack of air-conditioning. With some train services becoming regularly overcrowded, the PTUA believes it is critical that the train fleet be expanded to allow increased patronage during peak hour. In the grand scheme of things, 30-40 year old trains are

not inherently unacceptable (some of the "Red Rattlers" were more than 70 years old by the time they were retired). Though we understand there are issues retrofitting them with air-conditioning, we believe the best of the Hitachi trains should be kept, fitted with security equipment and kept running, at least until additional rolling stock can be purchased to expand the total fleet.

South Morang

The PTUA wishes to congratulate the Friends of South Morang Association for its continued efforts in advocating for the South Morang Rail extension. The association has continued to ensure that this lack of commitment and failure to fulfil an election promise

continues to dominate discussion within City of Whittlesea.

The recently provided TrainLink extension serving Epping to South Morang is not comparable to providing the rail extension, which the PTUA sees as necessary to

serve this growing area of Melbourne.

The Friends of South Morang Association would like any interested PTUA members to visit <http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/fosm/web/railextension.html> to learn more of its advocacy efforts.

Bachelor on notice: fix the trains

When Transport Minister Peter Batchelor signed new contracts with private operators Connex and Yarra Trams earlier this year, he told Victorians that the financial stability of the public transport system was now assured, and that the focus would now be on improving services.

However, the recent poor performance of the train system in particular is giving passengers the impression that the system is falling apart. And patronage appears to be going backwards, for the first time in years.

In recent months, train travellers in Melbourne have been suffering from delays and cancellations on an unprecedented scale. As many as 83 train services have been cancelled on a single day and a report obtained by the opposition stated that almost 700 trains had been cancelled in a three month period: an average of nearly 8 trains each day. While Frankston passengers have suffered the most, passengers throughout Melbourne have had to contend with overcrowding caused by train cancellations and also the appearance of 3-car trains instead of 6-car trains in peak hour.

While some have blamed driver shortages, the most common reason given in the report was faulty trains. In April, a single night's downpour caused 18 services to be cancelled due to leaky windscreens.

Performance figures from the government's budget papers

confirm the extent of the problem: more trains are running late, the percentage of cancelled trains has increased, and customer satisfaction has declined over the last 12 months.

Even more worrying is that yearly train patronage is expected to decline in absolute numbers, for the first time in many years. The train system is expected to carry 133.4 million passengers in the 2003-04 financial year, which is down by 400,000 on 2002-03.

While the trend is still for public transport use to decline as a share of all travel, in recent years we have at least seen the absolute numbers increase. But now, it seems that former train travellers are actually being turned away from the system.

All this makes a mockery of the Government's plans to double patronage by 2020. But we cannot avoid the conclusion that the problems are of the Minister's own making. The bulk of problems have occurred on the lines formerly operated by M>Train, which the government itself has been operating since National Express walked away in March 2003. By all accounts it was cost-cutting by National Express that led to the deterioration in the train fleet and the driver shortage, but the government has had over 12 months to repair the damage. Instead, government-appointed administrators have been allowed to continue running the system into the ground.

We also cannot ignore the fact that while the train system was allowed to deteriorate, the State Government was spending public money on an advertising campaign calling for more Federal money for urban freeways. Instead of seeing the Federal Government's AusLink initiative as an opportunity to obtain Federal funding to fix and build on our public transport system, Mr Batchelor has criticised AusLink for diverting a small amount of money away from roads. We now have a Minister who not only fails to get commitments in the State Budget to improve public transport, but actively opposes the tiniest Federal move towards doing so.

In the twenty-first century it is inexcusable that normal autumn rain should knock 18 trains out of service.

While one could claim that it is Connex that is responsible for fixing problems, it is taxpayers who are footing the bill, and Peter Batchelor is the minister responsible. Mr Batchelor is now on notice: he must take whatever steps are necessary to ensure as a minimum that trains run when they are supposed to, and that the system functions to attract new patrons rather than turn existing patrons away. If he cannot act himself or convince Connex to do so, then we need another Minister for Transport – one who is up to the task.

Learning the hard way?

Carolyn Hirsh MP (ALP member for Silvan province) was recently caught for driving with a blood alcohol level above the .05 limit and a result her driver's licence was suspended for six months.

We hope Ms Hirsh will take this opportunity to travel by public transport, allowing her to discover first-hand how poor services are in the outer east.

If the Bracks government is serious about reducing car usage and increasing public transport share to 20% then shouldn't our MPs lead by example?

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- Do we really spend more on public transport than on roads?

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