

Budget Wrap: Fixing transport relies on concerted State/Federal action

The Victorian budget handed down on 2 May might have been a textbook exercise in the ‘balanced transport’ approach to transport policy. New spending initiatives, for both capital works and operations, are split almost precisely fifty-fifty between measures for private car travel and those for the public transport network.

At the same time, of course, the headline public transport initiative was made dependent on federal funding, which the state government insists is owed to it from the Abbott/Turnbull ‘asset recycling’ initiative following privatisation of the Port of Melbourne. The federal budget, one week later, was only prepared to provide about one-third of the funding asked for, and maintains Victoria is not entitled to asset-recycling cash at all.

While on one level this is straightforward political manoeuvring for the Andrews Government’s benefit - and commentators so far have belaboured this point more than any other - the merits of the argument do strongly favour the state.

It comes in a context where federal transport funding to Victoria is at an artificially low level, as a result of the federal Coalition’s petulant withholding of funds after the cancellation of the wasteful and mishandled East West Link tollway. Even today, as the federal government continues withholding ‘asset recycling’ funds on what is evidently a technicality about capriciously imposed deadlines, it maintains it is prepared to hand \$3 billion to any future government wanting to build the East West Link - despite the 45

cents in the dollar benefit-cost ratio that (like the Eddington Report in 2008) confirms it to be a massive waste of public money.

When Malcolm Turnbull became Prime Minister it came with a promise not to let ideology cloud investment decisions in transport. We regard the proposed \$1.45 billion Regional Rail Revival package as fundamentally a sound investment in our dilapidated regional rail network. As with all such initiatives, this is conditional on the community being involved in the detailed development of proposed rail upgrades, to ensure these are appropriately ‘future proof’. The state will now have to prioritise while continuing to push for the remainder of the required funding.

The Commonwealth, which has been quite ready in the past to hand

over money to roads with dodgy business cases, should be prepared to invest more in something of long-term benefit to regional Victoria. There is better news from the federal budget where it commits to the long-awaited ‘inland rail’ freight corridor between Melbourne and Brisbane - but most of the work required for this is outside Victoria. And while we may have seen the end of Tony Abbott’s roads-only agenda, federal infrastructure funding is still weighted about six-to-one in favour of roads. Much of the new rail funding is conveniently postponed beyond the forward estimates period, making it a matter for a future government in Canberra rather than the current one.

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Passengers boarding a peak hour Geelong train at Southern Cross station - photo from Daniel Bowen via Flickr

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The PTUA runs email lists for member discussions, and to stay up to date with PTUA events. Members can also view archived newsletters online:

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E-mail the office (see above).

PTUA members can obtain cheap yearly Myki passes – see www.ptua.org.au/members/offers

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Member meetings

Melbourne:

Meetings will be advertised in PTUA News and on our website
www.ptua.org.au

Geelong:

First Saturday of every month (except January), 10:30am
Mary MacKillop Room, St Mary's Parish Offices, cnr. Little Myers and Yarra streets, Geelong

Ballarat:

Second Thursday of each month (except January), 7pm
Freight Bar, corner Mair and Peel Streets

Call to extend suburban trams

Local media has flagged a proposal to extend tram 67 from the back streets of Carnegie into the shopping centre itself, to connect with trains.

The fact that the station is about to be rebuilt as part of the grade separation project means there is a good opportunity to extend the tram into the station precinct, with easy interchange between trams, trains and local buses.

The PTUA has maintained for a long time that some of Melbourne's tram routes terminate in the middle of nowhere, and we have urged that they be extended to more logical interchange points such as railway stations and shopping centres.

This would improve public transport network connectivity, and help grow patronage at the generally quiet suburban ends of tram routes, making better use of the frequent, good quality services.

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The state budget, for its own part, contains many smaller initiatives that do not depend on Federal funding. Many of these are important strategic investments promising benefits far in excess of cost. These include:

- Action on traffic priority for trams and buses.
- Capacity building measures on the existing rail network.
- An extra 10 E-class trams to keep up with booming patronage (albeit still short of what is needed).
- Upgrades to a number of key stations like Richmond.
- Making the Night Network permanent at a cost of around \$40 million a year (slightly less than Myki).



Do we want this. or that? Photos from PTUA via Flickr

In particular, we see encouraging signs that public transport planners are finally learning from the road planners, and keeping useful projects like these sitting in the bottom drawer ready for governments to fund.

A key disappointment, particularly given the Andrews government's prior rhetoric, is the lack of substantial new funding for buses, which remain the poor cousin of trains and trams despite being the primary local public transport mode for three-quarters of Melbourne's population.

On the whole, the funding goes in the right direction but falls short of

what is really needed as a sustainable investment to bring the existing public transport network up to best practice standards, and to the network to handle population growth and drive substantial mode shift from cars.

In part, this is because of the adherence to the balanced transport dogma of directing funding equally to fixing public transport and to expanding roads - even though the latter, on the evidence, will be of no lasting benefit to travellers.

There is no argument with the funding being committed in the state budget to maintaining the extensive network of ageing

regional roads and bridges. Compared to throwing money at big motorways, spending on regional road maintenance is vital to rural industries and to road-based public transport. It's a good example of targeted road funding that doesn't undermine its objective by inducing large volumes of extra travel.

The State Budget's true black mark is the new spending on urban motorways including the North East Link and Mordialloc Bypass. Our governments may be the last in the world to recognise that new roads generate new traffic, and that

the splurge on new roads in the past two decades is to blame for the chronic congestion we experience as motorists. Unfortunately, the tools used to assess these road projects, by everyone from Infrastructure Victoria down, rely on faulty assumptions that are better at reflecting the desires of the road lobby than at reflecting reality.

The ideological slant in favour of roads persists at state level, despite the effort at 'balance', when one looks at commitments to individual projects. The Mordialloc Bypass, for example, is not actually a 'bypass' at all but a 1960s-era radial motorway-by-stealth (see page 4). It gets full funding for construction with \$300 million in this Budget, on the basis of just a preliminary planning study.

Yet a rail link to the airport, which has support across the board and is widely thought decades overdue, gets just \$10 million from the state (and \$30 million from Canberra) to study yet more alternatives to the route reserved back in 2001.

We remain positive that a State-Federal deal might be made to the benefit of sustainable transport, and that our Federation can work to the benefit of ordinary people and not as a political grudge match. But that will require a display of political initiative well beyond what we saw this Budget season.

Melbourne's Zombie Road Apocalypse

The US-inspired enthusiasm for urban motorways in the 1960s never really died, even if on occasion it was just resting. In the 1980s State Government policy ruled out radial commuter freeways, on the basis that there's no point undermining public transport's obvious comparative advantage in bringing people to the inner city, particularly since the city has no capacity to absorb all the extra traffic.

Yet three decades later, Melbourne faces a triple threat from the revival of those same radial motorways from half a century ago, set to funnel huge volumes of additional traffic into the city centre from the west, the north and the south-east. Just as with their predecessors, their true nature comes disguised as political spin dressing them up as 'freight roads', 'bypass roads' or 'missing links'.

Threat 1: The West Gate Tunnel

The most immediate threat is the West Gate Tunnel (called the

'Western Distributor' until a month ago). This is an 'unsolicited proposal' from CityLink operator Transurban. It's being received favourably by the Andrews Government, perhaps in no small part due to its resemblance to the 'Westlink' tollroad project the Brumby Government took (unsuccessfully) to the 2010 State election.

Unlike the 'West Gate Distributor' taken to the 2014 election, which was a much more modest project targeted specifically at diverting Port-related freight vehicles from residential streets in Yarraville and Footscray, both the West Gate Tunnel and its Westlink predecessor are clearly intended as radial commuter roads. Their main focus is on increased capacity for private cars on the West Gate and Western Ring Road corridors, and new routes feeding traffic directly into Melbourne city centre. Any benefit for Port freight is obtained as a side effect, and just as is the case now, trucks will find themselves outnumbered 10 to 1 by passenger vehicles in

congestion that is almost entirely attributable to the latter.

The best way to hinder road freight and poison the economics of transport is with measures that increase the volume of general traffic - yet this is what current plans aim to do. It appears that Transurban's commercial interests - which are all about boosting traffic volumes and congestion to maximise toll revenue - are driving government decisions, rather than the interests of the public or of freight operators themselves.

PTUA is supporting a growing campaign to oppose the West Gate Tunnel and replace it with a package of targeted road and public transport measures focussed on the original objective - the efficient movement of people and goods. The campaign was launched at a public meeting at Spotswood RSL on 27 April. For more information and to get involved, visit ptua.org.au/campaigns/western-distributor

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Problem of the Week #POTW

Seen a Public Transport problem that you want to call out?

Something that bugs you - big or small - that could and should be fixed? Let us know by Email, Tweet or Facebook. Include

#PTUA #POTW hashtags. Send pics. We will investigate the most popular problems, look into the history, find the relevant authority, track down any planned or expected fixes, and we will post

a PTUA viewpoint on the problem. Help us expose the problems that exasperate you every day, and guide PTUA campaigning for better public transport.

But wait - there's more

So much has been happening in public transport that we couldn't fit everything into this newsletter.

Visit the PTUA website for more information about V/line overcrowding and the new tram

routes and timetables which were introduced on May 1st.

www.ptua.org.au

Melbourne's Zombie Road Apocalypse

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Threat 2: The North East Link

On the other side of town, plans have re-emerged for the North East 'missing link' through the Yarra Valley. During the environmental assessment for Eastlink a decade and a half ago, we warned that the consequential pressure to 'complete the ring road' through the sensitive Yarra Valley green wedge needed to be taken into account, only to meet bare-faced denial from politicians. Those politicians were either lying or hopelessly naive, because that's exactly what has come to pass.

To understand the true threat from the North East Link, it should be understood that it was originally proposed in the 1960s as yet another radial commuter road, funnelling traffic from the north east into the city via what is now the Eastern Freeway. This is still the most likely consequence in practice, particularly if construction were to proceed on the most likely alignment through Bulleen. It does after all match the dominant pattern of traffic on Rosanna Road, for which the Link is put forward as 'relief'.

How could this particular 1960s zombie have been rated as Melbourne's "highest priority transport infrastructure project" by supposed 'independent umpire' Infrastructure Victoria? The sad fact is that our newest agency still relies on old tools - the same tools that put a favourable gloss on the East West Link despite its ultimate benefit-cost ratio being just 45 cents in the dollar.

The improvement of these modelling tools is another key priority identified by Infrastructure Victoria themselves. But for the foreseeable future, any such modelling will rely on inherent assumptions that exaggerate the benefits of road projects and underplay the benefits of rail projects. And as long as the tools work systematically to the benefit of road builders in this way, there is no political urgency to remedy the situation.

Meanwhile, the concrete threat of this road is to the environmental values of the Yarra Flats, and (once again) to the amenity of Melbourne's inner north. With the West Gate Tunnel to one side and the North East Link to the other, it becomes more (not less) likely that pressure will mount once again for the East West Link, no matter how unnecessary and damaging it may be.

Threat 3: The Scouring of the sandbelt

The State Budget has placed on the agenda one more zombie road - this time the northern extension of the Mornington Peninsula Freeway to connect with the so-called 'Dingley Bypass'. Neither of these roads are in fact 'bypasses' - the ultimate intention, now closer than ever, is for an unbroken motorway stretching from the Mornington Peninsula all the way to South Road in East Bentleigh.

What could possibly follow as a consequence of this? South Road and Warrigal Road would replicate

the situation created in the 1970s with the Eastern Freeway 'dead end' at Clifton Hill. But the original 1960s plan had the Dingley Freeway continue as a road called the F2, through Bentleigh and Brighton to St Kilda Junction, then following the alignment of Punt Road.

The prospect here is of a deliberately created traffic nightmare in Bentleigh in the near term, followed by a fight equal to that against the East West Link in the longer term. All because the government is bent on creating a new congestion problem in order to 'solve' an old one.

Which comes back to the fundamental point connecting all these zombie projects. The community is owed an open conversation and decision regarding the kind of city and the kind of transport system we want in the future. With the strategy and planning functions of both Vicroads and PTV being re-absorbed into the higher level bureaucracy under the 'Transport for Victoria' umbrella, it seems these decisions are once again being made behind closed doors and shrouded in official secrecy.

Together with Friends of the Earth, PTUA is shortly to 'reboot' our Public Transport Not Traffic campaign to push for alternatives and stop the road monster. Keep up with developments at www.ptnt.org.

Geelong branch report

There has been some excitement caused by the recent state budget promise of \$210 million for rail projects in the Geelong region. We welcome this clear commitment to public transport, although it has to be noted that the promised funding relies on the federal government giving Victoria about \$1.4 billion which the state government says we are owed, and there is no timeline for any of the proposed work.

One project mentioned is a second platform at Waurm Ponds station - something V/Line wanted before the station opened in 2014. The new platform will allow Marshall and Waurm Ponds to have more services, and will also give flexibility to Warrnambool line trains, which will be advantaged by the promised construction of the long-planned crossing loop at Weerite, near Camperdown.

Vaguer components of the budget allocation are for "Torquay and Armstrong Creek Transit Corridor reservation", "paving the way for Waurm Ponds track duplication", and "development funding for future stages".

Rail duplication from South Geelong to Waurm Ponds should be expedited, to serve the rapidly-expanding southern suburbs and help improve the poor reliability of Warrnambool trains. No land has to be purchased, and the crossing of the Barwon River flood plain is the only difficult section along the route. It was very surprising to be told recently by some senior V/Line staff that this duplication shouldn't be done unless the tunnel between Geelong and South Geelong was included. Although the single-track tunnel would be a very minor choke point, we would hate the significant expense of any tunnel duplication to stand in the

way of this duplication.

The mention of the transit corridor to Torquay in the budget seems to have created some unrealistic expectations. Our convenor was rung by someone to ask where he should buy land in Torquay to take advantage of the new railway line!

A rail line from Waurm Ponds to Torquay was first proposed a dozen years ago. No route has since been decided on, although a strip of land in the Armstrong Creek subdivision has been left vacant, apparently as part of it. In the meantime, Torquay bus services certainly aren't designed to attract anyone out of their cars.

A passenger on a recent V/Line train to Geelong fell into conversation with a fellow traveller, who turned out to be the new V/Line CEO, James Pinder. It seems that the CEO was being an "undercover boss" that day.

Night Network

The State Government has announced that Night Network will be made permanent after the trial period finishes in mid-2017. This is good news - the all-night services have proven popular with users, though there is room for improvement.

It's not just revellers who benefit from Night Network - weekend shift workers and those heading to Sunday morning events can also use the services. Previously, the first trains on Sunday mornings only reached the city around 8am, too late for most fun run events, and later than anywhere else in Australia.

We understand that authorities are pleased the services have improved safety in the CBD, fixing the problem of large groups of people waiting for the first train home.

Key areas for Night Network improvement include:

- Half-hourly frequencies would attract a lot more passengers and make better use of the considerable investment in station and other staff and PSOs.
- Quieter sections of rail lines might be better served by buses.
- 24-hour bus routes are likely to be more successful than the current services which run completely different routes to

daytime.

- Southern Cross Station should be open and Night Train services should stop there, preferably all night, but particularly after 6am on Sundays when the station is open anyway. This would enable better connections to the 24 hour Skybus service and early Sunday morning V/Line departures.
- There is also scope to look whether an all-night rail bus service would be viable from Sunday to Thursday, as seen in Sydney, bringing Night Network's benefits to those travelling at other times of the week.

Ballarat branch report

In March, a group of western Victorian councils released a Passenger Service Feasibility Study, which investigated potential improvements to public transport in the state's west. Some key recommendations include the reintroduction of regular passenger trains to Horsham and Hamilton, increased service frequency between Ballarat and Ararat, and improved coach connections throughout the west.

Stage 1 of the recommendations included an immediate increase to the number of weekday return services to Ararat from 3 to 4, by adding an extra early morning Up service and an afternoon Down service. Encouragingly, the state government recently announced extra Ararat services that match these criteria, however whether they will actually go ahead is unclear. The Regional Rail Revival package, which relied on \$1.45 billion in contested federal funding, included \$39m of works to enable extra Ararat and Maryborough services. The federal budget did not allocate any funds

to this project, and it's unclear if the Victorian government is willing to "go it alone" on the Regional Rail Revival works, as they have with the Melbourne Metro tunnel.

Poor mobile connectivity has been a long-standing issue on the Ballarat line (as on other regional lines). This is partly caused by blackspots along the line, and partly caused by the design of the VLocity carriages themselves, which weaken the signal - while passengers waiting on the platform at Ballarat get a half-decent signal, those on the idling train a few metres away get nothing.

The government recently reached an agreement with the telcos, and launched the Regional Rail Connectivity Project to help address these issues. The project will take a two-pronged approach - it will build new towers along the line to improve the overall coverage, and will install repeaters in VLocity carriages to boost signals. Hopefully these two measures will give passengers uninterrupted mobile connectivity for the whole journey.

As mentioned in previous newsletters, the omission of a bus interchange in the Ballarat Station Precinct plans of December 2016 was one of many concerns raised by the PTUA and other groups. The interim measure of additional drop-off and layover bays on Lydiard Street had also caused a great deal of anger among Lydiard Street residents, which put further pressure on the government to act quickly. After several months of this, the government announced \$5 million in the recent budget to bring forward the building of the bus interchange, so that it will be completed by the end of 2018. While there are still a number of concerns about the Ballarat Station Precinct project, there can be no doubt that this is a big win.

The Victorian budget also contained \$4.4 million to expand and upgrade buses in Ballarat, Wallan and the Mornington Peninsula, but it's unclear at this stage which area gets what funding, or what exactly it will be used for - stay tuned on that front

V/Line a victim of its own success

V/Line has been very much a victim of its own success over the last decade, with each new investment from Regional Fast Rail to the Regional Rail Link resulting in a boom in passenger numbers.

This shows that when governments invest in a decent public transport option, people will flock to it - but unfortunately the number of passengers has grown faster than the number of

services, and passengers are suffering from widespread overcrowding, not just in peak times. While infrastructure bottlenecks are a contributing factor on some lines, the reality is that V/Line's fleet is simply not big enough to cope with demand - in some cases, the problem is not a lack of frequency, but 3-carriage trains running when a 6-carriage train is needed.

The recent state budget includes an order for 39 additional VLocity carriages, which will allow Bombardier to keep producing trains after the current order is completed. Ultimately this will have a positive impact, but unfortunately it doesn't change the rate the carriages come off the production line at all - so there appears to be little coming in the immediate future.

Read more at www.ptua.org.au

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