

North East Link: Wrong Way, Go Back

In April the government released its Environment Effects Statement for the North East Link tollway. It confirms that, despite extensive spending to reduce the damage to the Yarra Valley by placing the most contentious section into a deep tunnel, dozens of homes and businesses will be wiped out along the entire corridor.

Tunnelling will have major hydrological impacts on the Yarra and wetlands causing irreversible damage. The greatest disfigurement may be at the south end: it's proposed the Eastern Freeway become a 24-lane monster at some points.

How has it come to this, where the worst kind of US-style motorway development is inflicted on the Yarra Valley in what was the world's most liveable city?

What we now call the North East Link started out in the Bolte era as the F18, a radial commuter freeway joining the F19 (now Eastern Freeway). The reason we're even discussing this road, in other words, is it was deliberately planned as a central city access road. This is how we can expect it to be used in practice given that's also the dominant pattern of traffic using Rosanna, Greensborough, Lower Plenty and Bulleen Roads, and given that the fattening of the Eastern Freeway is occurring not just in the Ringwood direction but in the city direction as well.

It's a documented fact that even after Bolte's plan was shelved due to backlash and protests, government planners kept on with their road plans in secret. This is how relatively mature plans for major roads can emerge seemingly out of nowhere, while something as simple as a 5km rail extension can take

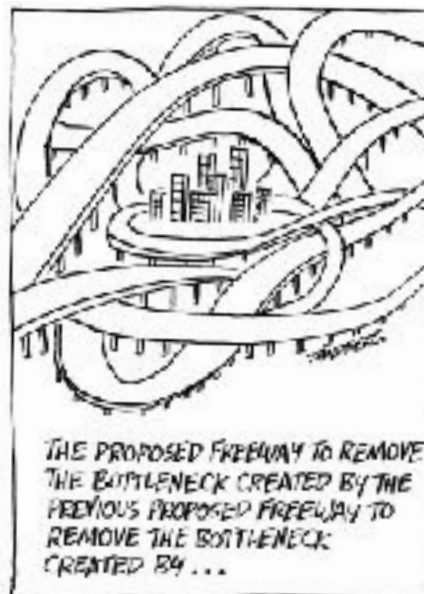
years to reach the same status. The North East Link is not a new idea that meets any recently identified 'need': it's a 50-year-old solution looking for a problem.

There's strong evidence active plans for this road were being made as long as 20 years ago, during the approvals process for Eastlink (then known as the

Scoresby Freeway). Some signs along its route at the time read "Reservation for the Eastern Ring Road (Scoresby Section)". The idea of a motorway through the Yarra Green Wedge has always been contentious: a Bracks Government denial of any plan for Eastlink to become part of a complete ring road around Melbourne was read into Hansard in October 2001. The Labor MP for Ivanhoe at the time, Craig Langdon, told a public meeting in 2002 there would be none while he was in Parliament.

Mr Langdon lost preselection in 2006, and Eastlink opened in mid-2008. Barely six months later, the North East Link was endorsed as government policy in Brumby's Victorian Transport Plan. For so few years to elapse between indignant denial and policy announcement, with no intervening change of government, it can only be concluded the intention was always to build a 'complete' ring road, and the honest course of action (as community groups argued before the Federal Court) was for an EES process to assess the Eastern Ring Road as a unitary project from Greensborough to Frankston. Instead, governments of both stripes engaged in 'salami tactics' Yes Minister style.

Opposition to the project has been softened by the obvious traffic problems in the area and the enduring



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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:

Meetings will be held regularly - watch the newsletter and website for details.

**Watch the
website for
details of our
first members'
meeting for
2019 - coming
soon.**

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Source - North East Link Authority.

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belief a new road will relieve congestion. Population pressures are cited despite the fact the north-east lacks the growth trend seen elsewhere. Instead, it suffers from a relative lack of quality public transport and higher dependence on cars.

Belief in the congestion-busting power of new roads is abetted by the 'independent' Infrastructure Victoria, which continues to feed this erroneous assumption into their mathematical models and have them regurgitate it as a 'scientific' conclusion. Senior modeller William McDougall and other experts drew attention to these modelling flaws in

submissions to the West Gate Tunnel and Mordialloc Freeway EES, and to the 2017 Senate inquiry into tollroads.

The best way to see the likely traffic effects is to look at the facts in the wake of Eastlink. Congestion on Stud and Springvale Roads was the pretext for Eastlink, just like Rosanna Road is for the North East Link, yet these roads are just as full of traffic as they were before.

There has been no *ex post* validation of benefits claimed for Eastlink. A 2011 Auditor-General's report found numerous road projects failed to adequately consider 'induced traffic' in their assessment and it was not possible

to say they had achieved forecast outcomes. A genuine *ex post* assessment would likely replicate John Odgers' 2007 CityLink study, which found actual travel times in 2006 exceeded estimates for a 2011 'no build' base case. Building CityLink had proved worse than doing nothing!

Infrastructure Victoria's favourable assessment of the North East Link is based on 2016 modelling similar to that for CityLink and Eastlink, forecasting benefits of \$10 billion, mostly through travel time savings that are unlikely to be achieved. Since IV's consultants estimated the cost as being in the range \$5 to \$7 billion, IV was able to paint a very rosy picture. Yet the government has inflated the budget to an eye-watering \$16 billion while relying on IV's enthusiastic assessment based on a lowball cost estimate. Something does not add up.

Lastly, the Link is also designed to kill Doncaster Rail stone dead. Though marketed as a 'ring road', the project seizes the freeway median long set aside for a rail corridor. It will be taken up for additional car lanes, and as a greenwash compensatory measure, bus lanes will be provided on the periphery. Even their benefit is likely to be marginal since the freeway section is where buses are least impeded by other traffic. The most problematic delays to buses occur elsewhere.

There are better alternatives to increasing north-east car travel. Doncaster rail is the most obvious: it is also the only form of transport development that properly supports growth of Doncaster Hill as a major district centre.

Autumn construction blitz causes delays

April saw numerous rail lines close for major works. While projects such as level crossing removals and the Metro tunnel are very welcome, this inevitably did result in some major delays for passengers.

Lines on all sides of Melbourne had closures, but worst affected were the Cranbourne, Pakenham, Gippsland and Frankston lines, with no trains between Caulfield and the City for eighteen days.

During the AM peak, the buses simply didn't cope. Some passengers faced waits in queues for an hour or more just to board a bus, with a long slow trip into the City, thanks to heavy congestion along Batman Avenue and Flinders Street. The lack of bus lanes, and the sheer number of buses converging on Federation Square meant wall-to-wall queues of buses.

At off-peak times, the buses managed better, thanks to fewer passengers and less traffic congestion. But travellers didn't necessarily have an easy time of it, with little in the way of published timetables, and no real-time information, resulting in long waits for a service.

It's a stark reminder that, particularly at peak times, buses can't do the job of trains—something seen every day by Doncaster area bus users.



Queue of buses in Flinders Street.

On Monday 15th April the delays were compounded when tragically, a pedestrian was hit by a train near Hampton station. Due to an ongoing infrastructure issue at Elsternwick, first flagged internally by Metro in January, this required the complete closure of the Sandringham line, alongside those already closed for works. The result was long queues across Princes Bridge of passengers waiting for buses.

We understand authorities intend to reinstate the ability to terminate trains at Elsternwick, but at the time of writing, Metro is flagging that the entire Sandringham line will be closed for two and a half weeks from late May.

We have raised concerns with Metro around replacement bus provision and information, and we're told they will review plans for future shutdowns—no doubt there will be many more as Melbourne's ageing rail infrastructure continues to be upgraded.

People waiting for buses at Caulfield.



Geelong “fast rail”

Once upon a time, federal elections weren't particularly relevant to the PTUA. But now, in a move clearly designed to help endangered Liberal MP for Corangamite, Sarah Henderson, the federal government has made a grand promise of \$2 billion for “fast rail” services to Geelong.

It's great that we have moved on from the Abbott government's silly assertion that Coalition federal governments only give money for road projects. But anyone who uses the Geelong–Melbourne rail line on a regular basis knows that this “fast” rail promise unhappily misses the main point.

The modest increase in top speed being touted, from 160 to 200 kph, even assuming it can be achieved, will not do anything to solve the urgent problems the Geelong line is facing right now.

What the Geelong line actually needs is more reliability, more capacity, and more frequent services. As the PTUA predicted in 2008, when the Regional Rail Link (RRL) project was first revealed, Geelong trains have been adversely affected by having to provide suburban services to Deer Park, Tarneit and Wyndham Vale.

The runaway patronage at those stations led not only to pervasive and annoying overcrowding, but also to long dwell times at stations, putting pressure on timetables.

Adding to those daily realities, there are emerging demands from the Wyndham area to build some or all of the other three planned stations on the Tarneit section. That will be completely

unworkable if Geelong trains have to serve them.

Geelong and suburban trains must be separated, so there is an urgent need to ‘quadruplicate’ the line from Sunshine to Wyndham Vale (for which partial provision was made when the RRL was built), and to electrify one pair of those tracks, allowing Metro trains to run the suburban services. (An electric suburban line to Tarneit was proposed by the PTUA in 2008 in response to the Eddington Report.)

starting in 18 months or two years. What work exactly?

To confuse matters, the state government has already started its own Geelong fast rail project, with a very leisurely five-year planning period. Our Branch convenor is a member of the Geelong Fast Rail Reference Group, which has met just once so far.

It seems that “fast rail” has become a fetish for some, with the need for it, and the practicalities of



Crowds at Wyndham Vale station.

As well as mistaking what is really needed, the costings and timelines for the federal “fast rail” project are very vague. Sarah Henderson's publicity declares that fast rail for Geelong has been “delivered”!

No money will be released unless the state government matches the federal amount. How was the \$2 billion figure arrived at? There's not even a plan, yet Federal ministers have talked about work

providing it, being ignored. As with many public transport improvements, less spectacular developments are needed more than headline-grabbing ones.

Could the Wheelie be the future of bike parking?

With access to railway stations a continuing issue for passengers living beyond walking distance of the train network, solutions must be found.

Unfortunately many politicians are fascinated with park-and-ride. While station car parks have some merit where land is cheap and available, recent pledges from both sides during the Federal election campaign entailed unsustainable investment of \$30,000 or more per parking space, with millions of dollars proposed to be spent to get a few dozen extra people to the station and onto a train.

Despite the prominence of station car parks, access to rail in most

suburbs is dominated by walking. Future investment must build on this, and improve modes that do not require the passenger to own and drive a car to get onto a train.

Some railway stations have large numbers of passengers riding bikes to the station, but bike cages have proven expensive to provide. Arguably more important than enclosing the bike in a cage is a well-lit, monitored, undercover area, where a bicycle can be safely locked. At some urban railway stations in Europe and Asia, you'll see hundreds or even thousands of bikes efficiently parked.

The good news is that authorities in Victoria have been working on a

new design for bicycle parking. Cheaper to install, and more compact than Parkiteer cages, the "Wheelie" bike stand, catering for up to nine bikes per unit, has the potential to be rolled out widely across the train network.

Stakeholders including PTUA have been involved in the design process, and while cycling may not be for everyone, for many it has the potential to provide alternatives to driving to the station, particularly for those within a ten minute bike ride.

With the design finalised, we hope to see the Wheelie deployed soon at railway stations around Victoria.

Ballarat branch report

The Ballarat line has seen further 'bustitutions' in the last few months, as works continue on the Ballarat Line Upgrade project. At the start of April, a shutdown had to be extended by two days because works on the Maddingley stabling yard ran overtime, resulting in a day of free travel later that week (and a free day of Myki money for affected pass holders).

Notwithstanding this delay, the Maddingley stabling is now complete and in use, and the old stabling at Bacchus Marsh station has been ripped up to allow work on the second platform and footbridge to proceed.

Works elsewhere along the line are proceeding rapidly, with overpasses already erected at Ballan, Rockbank and Cobblebank (formerly known as Toolern). Tracks for the various sections of duplication are also proceeding

quickly: hopefully some will even be ready for test trains in the next few months.

The second platform at Wendouree station is far less advanced—a consequence of its late addition to the project scope—with draft designs released shortly after the last *PTUA News* was published. The designs seem broadly fine in most ways: the aesthetics match the existing station, it's well laid out, and the added greenery is very welcome. However, it was extremely disappointing to see the opportunity missed to improve walkability from the south.

Under the plans as they exist, people approaching from the south must cross the tracks at the level crossing, walk all the way along the platform to the footbridge, ascend the stairs or lift, cross the footbridge, and descend again, to access the southern platform. Which is a long way to go, given

that a short shared use path between Gillies Street and the new platform would make the trip much shorter - and safer - by eliminating the temptation to run the gauntlet at the level crossing.

The City of Ballarat recently closed consultation on its draft master plan for the Wendouree station precinct, which included a pedestrian forecourt to the south of the station (adjacent to Gregory Street), increased residential density within walking distance of the station, and a better mix of uses. It is good to see that the current upgrades have taken this long-term vision into account, and have been designed with passive provision for the pedestrian forecourt. Nonetheless it's disappointing that this pedestrian link to Gillies Street won't be provided in the short term.



A Wheelie in use (photo from Monash University).

Geelong “fast rail”

As we have recounted in all-too-many reports over the years, the Branch has engaged in a frustrating, arduous and lengthy battle to keep buses running on logical and direct routes through Geelong’s city centre.

Last year, after methodically examining a number of possible alternatives, consultants employed by Transport for Victoria (TfV) made the rational and commonsense recommendation that all buses should run along Moorabool Street and then to Geelong station.

Ranged against that proposal have been some influential figures involved with the Geelong Council and the state government’s Geelong Authority, as well as the manager of the Central Geelong Revitalisation Project.

TfV Geelong staff told us a few weeks ago that the long-delayed Transport Network Operating Plan (TNOP) for central Geelong, which includes how bus routes through the city will operate, is virtually finalised.

It appears that a last-minute compromise has been hammered out with the opponents. Despite the greater operational expense, which will reduce funds available for better services, it has been decided that some bus routes will run in Yarra Street, parallel to Moorabool Street and one block east.

We can accept that outcome, provided that the only routes which run in Yarra Street are the logical ones—those serving the eastern side of the city: Newcomb, St Albans, Leopold, and Bellarine Peninsula services. There should also be appropriate way-finding to assist passengers transferring to and from buses in each street.

The TNOP may also contain a proposal that the central bus stops, at least in Moorabool Street, be moved from the pavement to the centre of the road, like tram superstops. We have suggested that as a way to counter the criticism of the current arrangement, but the design will need to be acceptable.

It would be ideal if through car traffic was barred from that part of

Moorabool street as well, but that seems to be a step too far at the moment despite the eagerness to limit through traffic as part of a ‘green spine’ in Malop Street.

Branch members are gratified that, although the announcement was somewhat buried by the blather surrounding the federal government’s unrealistic push for Geelong “fast rail” (see p7), the Coalition has promised to make its full contribution to a project that is actually needed—the duplication of the rail line from South Geelong to Waurin Ponds.

Less than five years ago, the PTUA was one of very few voices calling for that to be done. Now the project has bipartisan support, has a developed plan, and is fully funded. When completed, the duplication will allow for a doubling of rail service frequencies to Geelong’s burgeoning southern suburbs.

As well, the Warrnambool rail service will be more reliable, and provision of more services on that line will be facilitated.

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