

Tell us more please, Mr Andrews

The huge rail proposal is a welcome alternative to more freeways, but there are major issues still to be addressed.

John Hearsch



The state government caught many by surprise yesterday with its announcement of what it spruiked as "the biggest public transport project in Australian history". In dollar terms, it probably is.

A circumferential underground railway from Cheltenham to Box Hill, Doncaster to Broadmeadows, and Melbourne Airport to Werribee costing \$50 billion-plus, taking 30 years to build, and seeking to strike a blow at congestion, cater for population growth, connect key activity centres and provide a long-term pipeline of economic activity and employment must be taken seriously and examined carefully.

The proposal is a most welcome alternative to freeway proposals that induce more car travel.

Cross-town trips between suburbs and major activity centres not on the same rail line are not well catered for by public transport. Buses have carried that burden for years but patronage has declined, and fare avoidance, heavy subsidies and empty trips are too common.

The SmartBus initiative a decade ago was a serious attempt to provide cross-town links, but far less than what is now needed. Melbourne's strongest performing public transport networks (trains at 250 million annual trips) and trams (215 million trips a year) are both radial in design.

Successive metropolitan strategies such as Plan Melbourne proposed that our massive population growth be underpinned by polycentric central activity centres; these are in embryo –

Epping, Box Hill, Monash, Dandenong, Footscray, Sunshine and others. Fast rail links connecting such nodes would strongly reinforce their development. Experience worldwide shows this with carefully planned rail investment.

But there are significant issues yet to be addressed.

First, there is a problem with announcing a mega-project without an overall plan. In 2010, the state government legislated the Transport Integration Act. It required a transport plan and mandated processes for community involvement in the interplay between transport projects and land use planning, and their social, economic and environmental context.

We don't have such a plan for the proposed rail project and therefore can't be confident that this is a holistic solution to our transport and urban planning challenges. For \$50 billion, we need that confidence. And recent experience with the East

West Link and the West Gate Tunnel shows the limitations of post-decision consultation.

Then there is the question of whether this project best fits Melbourne's expected urban growth during its long construction period. Recent population forecasts (which have so far proved conservative) predict a doubling in size from 2010 to 2050, with mushrooming growth of inner and middle-city apartments and sprawling growth of suburbs on the urban fringe.

The government's previous follow-up project to Melbourne Metro was Melbourne Metro 2. It

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and Melbourne Metro would intersect at Parkville, forming a big X, with Melbourne Metro running north-west (Sunbury/Melton) to south-east, (Pakenham/Cranbourne) and Melbourne Metro 2 running north-east (Mernda) to

south-west (Wyndham Vale). This would provide enormous benefits while intensifying public transport support for the rapidly densifying inner and middle suburbs, which the circumferential project does not.

The travel needs of densifying suburbs require urgent attention, including recognition that the jewel in the crown of Melbourne's public transport is its tram system, which moves an incredible 215 million passengers a year, 85 per cent of the volume of passengers by rail.

This is despite very limited investment over recent years in new trams, power supply, route extensions and tram priority. New apartments in the CBD, South Yarra, Brunswick and Fitzroy/Collingwood straddle tram corridors that are already at capacity in peaks. This problem is intensifying to a critical scale.

We believe in an integrated plan that links inner, middle and outer-suburban growth to a public transport system that really works. Shortly, the Rail Futures Institute will launch our 30-year rail plan to shape Melbourne for 8 million people covering multiple transport modes. There are common elements with the government in planning for circumferential links. We also show how much more can be achieved from our trams and new light rail.

Rail Futures welcomes the government's vision for a circumferential underground for Melbourne. We need visionary solutions that link people to jobs, hospitals, schools and universities, retail areas and sporting events.

But a comprehensive understanding of Melbourne's development must be the context for our next generation of transport projects. We have prepared our plan in this light and think the community is entitled to review the government's new proposal in a similar way. Not to do so invites high risks.

John Hearsch is president of the Rail Futures Institute and a former chief operating officer of V/Line.



For \$50 billion, we need certainty we're on the right track. Photo: AAP