

Melbourne's Trams Overlooked in Election Promises

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Both major parties in Victoria have made extensive election promises to invest in public transport. They recognise that our city and state can't manage expected population growth without the connectivity and ease of movement enabled by investment in public transport, especially trains and trams.

The promises for Melbourne differ. Labor's centrepiece is its \$50 billion orbital railway around Melbourne. Also promised are suburban train extensions to Wyndham Vale and Melton and more level crossing removals. The coalition has packaged outer suburban train extensions to Clyde and Baxter. Both support early construction of a Melbourne Airport railway, via Sunshine.

But both have overlooked Melbourne's iconic tram network, failing to recognise why much more should be invested in upgrading and extending one of the world's most extensive tram systems. Not only is it a much-loved community asset, but for many parts of Melbourne, trams are the most effective means of moving people.

As new apartment blocks appear, population density rises in the CBD and inner and middle suburbs making the need for improved tram services increasingly more critical.

Evidence of their key role is that last year, trams carried 207 million passengers compared to 240 million over the entire suburban rail network. The system is under serious pressure. In the peaks, tram after tram is full on routes through Brunswick, Preston, Moonee Ponds, South Yarra, Prahran and St Kilda. Many are 40-year old Z class, groaning under over-capacity loads. Packed passengers too are groaning, without air-conditioning in the warmer months.

Melbourne is among the fastest growing cities in the developed world. Apart from building booms in Melbourne's sprawling outer west, north and southeast, apartment development has intensified in the CBD and fringes, and middle ring suburbs through Maribyrnong, Moonee Ponds, Moreland, Darebin, Boroondara, Whitehorse, Stonnington, Port Phillip and Yarra municipalities.

Promises made by Labor and the Coalition address some outer growth area needs, but without major tram investment, people in the inner and middle suburbs will find it increasingly difficult to access jobs and services.

Roads in these suburbs are already as congested at weekends as on weekdays. As residential densification marches on, their future is gridlock.

Buses, while necessary for feeder services to stations and local access, are rarely a solution – without dedicated lanes buses become part of traffic hold ups. Melbourne's bus system is losing patronage and needs a major revamp.

From 2025, Melbourne Metro will free up City Loop capacity and allow more trains on 9 of our 15 suburban lines – but trams are doing the heavy lifting in many inner and middle suburbs.

Importantly, the tram system offers an opportunity to increase its capacity and connectivity without the massive investment involved in freeway construction or underground railways. Many cities worldwide are investing in new or upgraded tram and light rail networks as cost-effective and environmentally responsible ways of coping with urban travel.

A recent study by Rail Futures estimates that major upgrading and near doubling capacity of the tram system, including service enhancement, fleet replacement and route extensions, could be achieved over the next 20 years for around \$13 billion. That's about 12% of the overall investment necessary over that period in rail-based public transport (heavy rail and new light rail routes) to address Melbourne's predicted population of 8 million people by 2050.

The highest priority is to significantly accelerate acquisition of new high capacity trams. The present drip feed of around 10 new trams annually needs to triple for the next 15 years. This would replace over 300 high floor trams not accessible to all passengers, offer a fully air-conditioned fleet, and provide the capacity uplift so critically needed on most routes. Upgrading of power supplies and expanded tram depot facilities are also required.

For around \$400 million, early improvements can occur through route re-structuring and modest infrastructure works that complement the new tram fleet. These include disability access, enhanced tram priority on busy thoroughfares and better coverage of expanded employment areas on the city fringes. Added peak supplementary services and better frequency, especially at night and weekends, are other short-term imperatives.

In many ways, trams are the unrecognised jewel in the crown of Melbourne's public transport. Often taken for granted, trams are critical to reduced car dependency and rapid inner and middle suburban densification.

Our decision-makers need to look hard at the remarkable benefits that tram investment will contribute to Melbourne's liveability. It would be popular. It's the big gap in the political offerings so far.