



Rail Futures Institute

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Don't settle for a third-rate Melbourne Airport Rail Link!

Advocacy group Rail Futures Institute has warned that the State Government's latest proposal for a Melbourne Airport Rail Link will compromise the project, resulting in a slow journey for airport passengers on crowded suburban trains rather than the previous vision for a fast, standalone railway offering direct transit to the Airport via Sunshine in little more than 15 minutes using new underground tracks starting from Southern Cross Station.

If adopted, the proposal to scrap the planned new Airport Rail Link tunnel between Southern Cross Station and Sunshine would extend airport journey times to more than 30 minutes and make it less attractive than the current Skybus option, particularly during peak periods when airport trains would be relatively infrequent and many passengers with luggage would be forced to stand.

In November 2017, Premier Daniel Andrews committed to build an Airport Rail Link and additional tracks in the congested rail corridor between the city and Sunshine. This would not only accommodate the first leg of an Airport Rail Link but, to quote the Premier, "untangle the regional and metropolitan network on the Geelong and Ballarat lines and give Melbourne's booming west access to electrified metro rail services". North of Sunshine – the so-called East Albion route – would complete the Airport Rail alignment from Southern Cross to Tullamarine.

Instead, the Victorian Government has now proposed that an Airport Rail Link make use of the existing suburban tracks from Sunshine that will connect into the Melbourne Metro Tunnel (otherwise known as MM1). And the Federal Government now appears to be softening its previous resistance to this plan in a bid to secure agreement between the governments and get the project done.

"From the outset, Rail Futures has argued that attaching an Airport Rail Link to MM1 was a bad idea," Rail Futures President John Hearsch said. "It would involve an attempt to wedge some airport trains into the extremely busy Dandenong, Melton and Sunbury lines that will use MM1. This will limit airport trains to around a 20-minute frequency at peak times and provide a slow, multi-stop service on crowded high capacity trains coming from Dandenong and beyond."

"This is extremely short-sighted, provides a third-rate solution for the Airport line and compromises badly needed capacity for the lines MM1 is designed to accommodate. It will defer for years the promise of fast trains to Geelong and Ballarat and lead to scrapping the proposal for a high-profile, highly functional, well-connected city terminal for airport rail at Southern Cross Station. The argument is that the tunnel solution will be too expensive," Mr Hearsch noted.

"Instead, the Airport Rail Link needs to be a standalone railway offering direct transit between Southern Cross, Sunshine and Melbourne Airport in not much more than 15 minutes. Airport services should operate 24/7 and mostly every 10 minutes using a dedicated train fleet with plenty of space for luggage," Mr Hearsch said.

Under the Rail Futures' Airport Rail plan, known as *AirTrain*, travellers from Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs coming via MM1 would interchange with airport trains at Sunshine, as would

many from regional centres. Connections from other suburban and regional lines would be at Southern Cross.

“New underground tracks starting from Southern Cross are the only practical solution to avoid massive property acquisition and unlock additional train capacity between Southern Cross and Sunshine. These tracks will not only carry airport trains but also have ample capacity to provide the first section of infrastructure needed for fast trains to Geelong and in future, Ballarat”, Mr Hearsch added.

“Some of Melbourne’s fastest-growing suburbs would further benefit when Geelong trains move off the existing Regional Rail Link tracks, allowing additional peak services to Wyndham Vale, as well as Ballarat and Bendigo.”

“It would seem from numerous media reports over a long period, both in Melbourne and in regional Victoria, there is wide community support for a high quality, fast and reliable Airport Rail Link, recently backed up by statements from the Committee for Melbourne and the Victorian Tourism Industry Council,” John Hearsch observed. “Whether or not the Government accepts the private sector proposal to build and partially fund a Melbourne Airport Rail Link is a secondary issue. What really matters is that the right solution is adopted.”

“The most successful overseas airport trains such as London’s *Heathrow Express*, the *Leonardo Express* in Rome, *Arlanda Express* in Stockholm and the *Hong Kong Airport Express* all provide fast journeys with minimal stops from a major city terminal using specialised rolling stock,” Mr Hearsch noted.

“Melbourne has but one chance to learn from overseas and get this right. If common sense prevails and the parties move promptly, the complete project could still be operational by around 2027. By then, Melbourne Airport will be facing a similar transport task to that of London Heathrow Airport today. Heathrow will soon be served by three separate rail lines. Let’s not delay Melbourne’s first any longer but stay with the right solution for a liveable city!”

Background

In 2018, the Premier committed \$5 billion to the building of the railway including a new superhub at Sunshine. The Prime Minister also announced support for the Sunshine route with a matching \$5 billion Federal contribution. Then followed IFM’s *AirRail* consortium’s offer to actually build the project – starting from Southern Cross, with a maximum 20-minute trip time and a further \$5 billion contribution. In the lead-up to the 2018 State Election, the State Government also announced a Western Rail Plan to electrify existing lines to Wyndham Vale and Melton, construct extra tracks to segregate metropolitan from regional express trains and the prospect of fast trains to Geelong and Ballarat.

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Rail Futures Inc. is an independent non-partisan group formed to advocate cost effective rail and intermodal solutions for public transport and freight problems based on sound commercial, economic, environmental and social reasoning. Rail Futures’ Executive Committee and members include experienced rail professionals, engineers and economists.

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