

Rail Futures Inc

Media release

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THE STATE GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSED MELBOURNE AIRPORT RAIL LINK IS BAD NEWS FOR REGIONAL VICTORIA

Regional communities should reject the Government's current Airport Rail proposal to access the city via Melbourne Metro and insist on the planned extra rail capacity between the CBD and Sunshine that is essential to meet their short and longer-term needs, advocacy group Rail Futures Institute urges.

Without additional tracks between the CBD and Sunshine (including the 7km West Footscray tunnel), more frequent, more reliable and faster trains, initially to Geelong, then to Ballarat and Bendigo will be off the agenda for many years, Rail Futures predicts.

The \$11 billion Melbourne Metro project (MM) is a massive undertaking including twin 9km tunnels extending from South Kensington to Hawksburn with five new underground stations serving the CBD and inner suburbs. MM will allow for the operation of many more metropolitan peak train services through the heart of Melbourne, linking its massively growing western and north-western suburbs with its equally burgeoning south-east.

When completed in 2025, MM will see trains travelling almost 100km from Sunbury and Melton (once this line is electrified) through the new tunnels to Dandenong, Pakenham and Cranbourne. Parts of the corridor are also shared by V/Line trains to Bendigo and Gippsland.

MM is designed to handle up to 24 trains per hour each way, but around 90 per cent of this capacity will be required to service these lines during weekday peak periods very soon after it opens, with population pressures on these lines such that 100 per cent of capacity will be utilised by the early 2030s.

Notwithstanding this, the State Government appears intent on allocating 25 per cent of MM track capacity between the CBD and Sunshine to Melbourne Airport trains. This can be achieved only by reducing the number of trains that could otherwise run at peak times on the Sunbury/Watergardens and Melton lines. Once added to the metropolitan network, the Airport line will remain part of it for a very long time.

"This is bad news, not only for these communities, but especially for Ballarat line travellers, promised major improvements under the Government's Western Rail Plan, including Melton line electrification and full separation of metropolitan and regional services," Rail Futures' President John Hearsch says.

"The alternative, long promoted by Rail Futures, is an additional express track pair between Southern Cross and Sunshine, supplementing MM and the Regional Rail Link track pair opened in 2015, already operating at near its designed capacity."

The additional track pair from Southern Cross would be designed for fast express trains and include twin 7km tunnels between Southern Cross and West Footscray, thus avoiding large scale property acquisition. Airport trains would use these new tracks, together with fast trains to Geelong, Ballarat and potentially Bendigo, reducing City to Sunshine travel time to just 8 minutes.

“However, the Government now seems to think these additional tracks are unnecessary, even though the Premier emphasised the need for additional track capacity between the CBD and Sunshine when announcing the go-ahead for Airport Rail in November 2017. But there’s worse,” Mr Hearsch warns.

“The Regional Rail Link tracks carry trains to Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo as well as peak period trains to Wyndham Vale. Melton/Bacchus Marsh trains also use these tracks pending Melton electrification when they will move across to the MM tracks.”

“Tarneit and Wyndham Vale are also served by Geelong trains, many of which are now overwhelmed by passengers from these stations, with Geelong line patronage having grown by 131 per cent since 2015. The City of Greater Geelong will be home to almost 400,000 people by 2036. The line to Wyndham Vale is also to be electrified as part of the Government’s Western Rail Plan although the timing of these works is yet to be announced.

“Our plan transfers Geelong trains to the new fast tracks between Southern Cross and Sunshine and also provides additional express tracks between Sunshine and Wyndham Vale,” Mr Hearsch explains.

“These changes will enable Wyndham Vale to have a full metro-style service and for Geelong to have its long promised fast trains. Without them, Wyndham residents will have a much less frequent service and Geelong commuters will continue to endure slow journeys and chronic overcrowding, as no more trains could be accommodated between the City and Sunshine.

“Even Gippsland trains will be impacted as the additional Airport trains will also use the Dandenong corridor, making them even slower and less reliable than they already are. Regional communities should reject the Government’s current Airport Rail proposal and insist on much improved rail infrastructure between the CBD and Sunshine capable of meeting the short and long-term needs of all regional and airport travellers,” Mr Hearsch concludes.

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The Rail Futures Institute (RFI) is an independent non-partisan organisation. RFI was formed in 2013 to advocate cost-effective rail and intermodal solutions for public transport and freight problems based on sound commercial, economic and social reasoning. The RFI Executive Committee and its membership includes experienced rail professionals, urban planners, engineers and economists.