

Act now instead of waiting for trains

Much can be done to get passengers actually into trains says Janet Rice.

As commuters are being jammed into peak hour trains like sardines, many more are being left stranded on platforms. It's frustrating and dangerous, but worst of all it is unnecessary.

It is clear that the current train, tram and bus system could be used more effectively to increase capacity.

The tardiness of the Government's response to the big increase in public transport patronage raises serious questions about the adequacy of the State's vision for our public transport system and its management. After years of encouraging more people to use public transport, the State Government seems unable or unwilling to embrace the scale of the change needed.

The State transport budget included the fast-tracking of ten new trains. The trains won't arrive until late 2009, but the Government can do more to get people moving in the meantime.

The Metropolitan Transport Forum welcomes news of timetable improvements but urges Minister Kosky to go further and play a strong leadership role in the transport portfolio.

Many reforms do not require capital investment – just clear and flexible thinking. Efficiency reforms need to include a complete overhaul of timetables so that the existing stretches of third track, and third platforms are used effectively to maximise the number of trains. Melbourne University's Paul Mees has shown that more than twice the current volume of passengers could be carried on the Dandenong line during peak periods simply by having more efficient timetabling. This would mean more express trains, more stopping trains, and more V/Line services.

More trains could also be run direct to Flinders Street station and out through the other side as used to occur decades ago. More trains outside peak hours would attract more commuters to use off peak services – this could also be supported with cheaper off-peak fares.

Buses and trams are also crucial to the public transport capacity 'crisis'. The current reviews of buses should be fast-tracked and expanded so that more suburbs can get bus services that run 18 hours a day, 7 days a week. People could then actually rely on buses to provide a fast and frequent service. Better bus services to stations are much more viable and sustainable than ever expanding car parks. Local government can work with State Government to ensure trams get priority in traffic. It's not just about more clearways, but

better solutions for keeping cars off tracks at intersections and giving trams priority at traffic lights.

Our transport planners must unshackle their thinking from the past. We need a complete overhaul of our current fragmented, train, tram and bus systems to build a modern public transport network which seamlessly connects all major destinations with fast, frequent and reliable services all day every day.

We need to restructure how we run our public transport systems to ensure that the design and operation of the network is managed in an integrated, accountable and transparent way, regardless of whether the actual services are run by the Government or by private operators. This reform has to occur well prior to the end of the year when a decision needs to be made on the public transport franchises.

It's time to face two undeniable facts. Firstly, Melbourne is growing faster than our public transport system. Current planning expects a city of 4 million people in the 2030s to rely on an out-dated Melbourne CBD commuter focussed public transport system that carried more people in the 1930s than it does today.

Secondly, spiralling petrol prices and growing concern about climate change can only increase the demand for public transport. The public transport system needs to expand more rapidly to meet this demand.

Greenhouse emissions from transport have grown by 30% in the last 15 years, and according to the Australian Greenhouse Office are set jump to 60% above 1990 levels by 2020. Every kilometre travelled using public transport, rather than a car, saves around three kilograms of carbon dioxide. Tackling greenhouse gases seriously means making alternatives to cars more attractive, not just for commuting but for leisure and routine travel.

To maintain transport greenhouse emissions at today's levels in 2020, we need to increase public transport use to at least 20% of trips (up from the current 9%).

20% of trips on public transport is achievable, but it requires decisive action over the next decade. The urgent investment must include extensions of the rail network to the urban growth boundary, new rail lines to Doncaster and Rowville, and serious investment in public transport at principal activity centres. These urgent improvements are far beyond the Government's current policy.

Unless there are bold and brave changes, the overcrowding on platforms can only get worse – and that's frustrating for all.

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