

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Inquiry into infrastructure projects

Melbourne — 13 April 2016

Members

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Mr Anthony Morton, president, Public Transport Users Association.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Morton, for coming along this evening. Were you present here for the beginning when I went through the explanation of what is covered under parliamentary privilege and the like?

Mr MORTON — Yes, thank you.

The CHAIR — Very good; fabulous. Then I will just hand over to your good self for some introductory comments, and then we will move on to some specific questions.

Mr MORTON — Very good. I have just provided a summary with some brief comments relevant to the inquiry on this 2-pager that I have handed out to the committee.

Clearly our ambit covers essentially the entire scope of this inquiry, so it is fairly broad ranging, so I will try to be brief in summing up what I have here. Just by way of introduction, of course I am here as the president of the PTUA, the Public Transport Users Association. We are the recognised consumer organisation representing passengers on public transport in Victoria. Our objective is an environmentally sustainable transport system which incorporates provision of high-quality public and active transport and the increased use of rail for freight transport. We are a member-funded non-profit organisation with no party political affiliations.

I guess we have comments relative to the specific infrastructure projects that the committee is investigating in this inquiry. By way of general comments I might just make a few observations initially. First of all of course what we really focus on on behalf of the people of Victoria who travel around on all forms of transport is of course having successful passenger outcomes from our transport system, and that has really two major components, one of which is the provision of physical infrastructure and the other the actual provision and scheduling of services, particularly when we are talking about public transport.

I guess there is a tendency, and there has been in the past, where sometimes, certainly in the public eye, the physical infrastructure has at times taken precedence. If we look at the regional rail link, for example, there was a plan indeed from the start for how many trains were to run on that and where they were going to stop. Unfortunately that plan was not made public until much later in the piece, and it seems that it was not until much later that it actually informed procurement decisions, so there was a lot of catching up with the rolling stock required to provide the service on the regional rail link. We therefore would emphasise that it is very important at the early stages of any infrastructure project to have an agreed service plan that is in fact published and that the public can see and can see the link between the service that is ultimately to be provided and the infrastructure that is going to facilitate that service. So just as a general point, we do always stress the importance of service as well as infrastructure.

We also believe that there needs to be a balance between the provision of new infrastructure and the utilisation of existing infrastructure to the best of its capability. There is certainly still much scope to make use of existing rail and bus assets in particular to grow patronage on the public transport system, and we emphasise measures such as high-capacity signalling, which should make that much better in future.

As a general rule we note what transport experts and planners worldwide now generally agree on — that if we are trying to address traffic congestion, there are some targeted road measures that will do that, but ultimately we cannot hope to address congestion problems in a city the size of Melbourne with the addition of new road capacity, due to the effect of induced traffic, which is sometimes called the law of congestion, as is now recognised by planning authorities in Britain and the United States, for example. We do know that when we provide new road lanes, such as on the Monash or Tulla freeways, they soon enough fill with traffic and reproduce the same congested conditions as we had before.

Ultimately if we really want to come up with solutions to congestion and not perpetuate the problem, it is important that we do focus on alternatives to private car use so people can choose to avoid congestion, hence the importance of having first-rate public and active transport solutions as part of our transport mix. We would also stress the need for public engagement and a degree of public control over major infrastructure decisions, because we see with decisions, certainly in the recent past but also going back further, and even currently debates out in the public, that people do feel frozen out still of the process whereby infrastructure is selected, designed and implemented.

We believe that citizens stakeholders must be able to engage directly with subject matter experts. This is particularly important where they are personally affected by works. There is a need also for transparency and for

a basis in evidence for project solutions and project selection and decisions to proceed. In that respect we are watching with interest the creation of Infrastructure Victoria and hope it will play an important role in the independent scrutiny of business cases and assessments for infrastructure projects.

Those are just some general comments. We have some more specific comments on the matters of particular interest to the committee. The Melbourne Metro rail tunnel, as we have observed before, is an important project, especially for boosting the capacity for public transport services in Melbourne's west. In the west we believe, and have stated numerous times, that it appears to be equivalent in passenger capacity — on the raw numbers — to around three extra West Gate Bridges. But we also believe it is important, to get the full benefit of the capacity the metro tunnel is providing, that we also proceed with complementary projects in the rail and bus network. Those include the Cranbourne-Pakenham corridor project that the government is proceeding with and also projects such as Melton electrification, the extension from Cranbourne to Clyde and future opportunities for rail extensions to Rowville and to Melbourne Airport.

On the matter of the western distributor, we would note that there is a need to focus on what is the primary objective of this project for the sake of the public interest. As it has been put out in the public, the primary objective of developing the western distributor project has been, in the community's eyes, getting large trucks out of residential streets in Melbourne's west. That is an ongoing problem; it is many years old. It is a serious problem in the inner west of Melbourne, in terms of pollution, noise and residential amenity effects. The thing that concerns us about the current design of the western distributor is there seems to be as much if not more of a focus on radial commuter travel to the CBD of Melbourne rather than providing an alternative to Francis Street for port access for freight vehicles from the logistics precinct in the west. I guess if it is not planned carefully, this actually can undermine the freight objective of this link in the road network, because ultimately what we have seen when we have built new roads on the assumption that they will be used by freight, what happens, especially if they are pointing straight at the CBD of Melbourne, is that they actually fill up with private car traffic, which then acts as an impediment to freight movement. It is ultimately not the best thing you could do for road freight to build a new road and allow that to fill up with car traffic.

We also note the Dudley Street off-ramps project could have the potential to compromise the future development of the E-gate precinct, especially if that is anticipated to be an urban project based around a reduced rate of car dependence compared with traditional Melbourne suburbs. It could also compromise the management of traffic in the inner city where the trend, established over the past couple of decades, has been to improve access by public and active transport and to de-emphasise car travel into the Melbourne CBD, which is in line with various planning objectives that have been in place for quite a while. We believe that there is a need to rescope and redesign that project in order to focus on what the objective is of this project for the people of Victoria, to ensure that the freight outcomes of that project are maximised and also to involve the local community in decisions around that.

Turning to the port privatisation, we again would emphasise the future need for providing rail freight capability in addition to road freight capability in the port. This is consistent with the practice of port facilities overseas. We note the port rail shuttle project, which is fully funded and is a strategic project to develop rail-based freight handling capacity. We have had at least 13 previous government reports recommending that this proceed. Unfortunately the current sale legislation appears to give the operator a window of eight years to implement this. We believe it needs to proceed faster than this in order to serve the public interest of the people of Victoria and the Victorian economy and 21st century freight logistics. This we believe needs to be developed in partnership with the private operator of the port. We also in the longer term need to look at the issue of Webb Dock, where unfortunately such rail access as was provided in the past is no longer available, and there needs to be some plan put in place to provide that in the future.

Moving on to level crossing removal, we at PTUA regard the grade separation of level crossings as a vital project, and have always done so, in order to boost local activity centres, to reduce transport delays and to enable the renewal of the rail network. The best method of doing this, we would argue, is location dependent. We have seen traditionally that a lot of grade separation of road and rail has occurred by putting the rail in cuttings, which have banks on which you can grow vegetation and which aesthetically are some of the better, we think, grade separations that have happened in the past. Unfortunately what we understand from our discussions with the industry is that to provide a cutting today would not be in accordance with contemporary construction standards. The current standards would require you, if you put the rail under the road in these grade separations, to do what has happened at Nunawading and Mitcham and put the rail in a trench with concrete

walls, essentially. This is, we believe from a number of factors — such as the ability to move around the local area and just the aesthetics of travelling on a train through a trench like this — an inferior outcome to the earlier cuttings.

We would urge that there be full consideration given to all of the options for achieving road and rail grade separation. These could include trenches, they include cuttings, they also include elevated rail solutions. But to ensure that the pros and the cons, the costs and the benefits, of all of these are appropriately developed by subject matter experts who can communicate directly with affected communities on these projects. Because we know that whatever method of grade separation is used, these are projects that create major change in the local area. They will all have a significant short-term impact on residents and traders, as we are seeing currently in the Bentleigh and McKinnon grade separations. They also have of course a long-term effect on the local area. They affect the permeability of the neighbourhood; they can have a visual impact. It is important that we understand all of these issues and that we have a clear conversation with the community on this.

We also believe that with road-rail grade separation, however it proceeds, there is a vital opportunity to use this to improve multimodal coordination. Primarily this is coordination between train services at stations and the bus and tram services that also call at those stations. We take a positive view of how this was done at Boronia station, for example, in the late 90s, where the bus interchange is actually quite close to the entrance to the station. We believe that bus stops must be located close to the station entrances where these grade separations are done and the station is rebuilt. We also would emphasise the need for walking and cycling paths through these new station precincts that are created to be continuous and unbroken and to ensure that there is access by all modes of transport through these areas for maximum community benefit.

Finally, just a couple of remarks on the airport rail link. We have heard from Melbourne Airport tonight. We would simply add that for a long time it has been clear from transport patterns in Melbourne that Melbourne Airport is in fact the largest single trip destination in the metropolitan area outside the Melbourne CBD. We believe that this fact alone justifies including Melbourne Airport in the backbone suburban rail network. But we see the added urgency, which is also emphasised by APAC themselves, in looking at the projected passenger numbers through Melbourne Airport and the need to move these people between the airport and other parts of Melbourne.

We believe that future rail access to Melbourne Airport is best developed as part of the regular suburban train network. There is no need to go to a completely different technology that is separate from everything else, because we already have a reserve corridor via Albion and the Airport Drive median. This airport rail link, in technical terms, can be developed even ahead of the Melbourne Metro tunnel. The Melbourne Metro tunnel makes that airport link easier, but it could be done earlier, in the shorter term, utilising platform 8 at Southern Cross station, which is surplus to requirements for V/Line and can actually be used to terminate suburban trains proceeding through Footscray and Sunshine to Melbourne Airport.

We also think that in the short term there is a need to do something about the bus interchange, as has been remarked before. We see no reason why there could not be two bus stops — the existing stop at T4 where the buses can stop and lay over in an appropriate place, but then they could also come around to T1 or T2 and stop for a minute to pick up the passengers there and then proceed on their way. We do not see that there is any impediment to doing that based on terrorism law or anything else. We know that the airport's own car park shuttles do use that forecourt extensively. So this should also apply to public buses at the same time.

We also think there is a need to upgrade and extend the 901 and 902 SmartBus routes that serve the airport in order to improve access to the northern and western suburbs and also to improve access for the workforce — a very substantial workforce numbering some 20 000 people who actually work every day at Melbourne Airport. Currently their travel options are largely limited to car travel. But with the provision of a fairly simple extension to the bus network, we could actually serve those a lot better. We could also consider measures such as a high-frequency shuttle to Broadmeadows station to complement the existing 901 and 902 service. They are my remarks by way of introduction, Mr Chairman.

The CHAIR — Wonderful. Thank you, Mr Morton. I congratulate you, because that is an excellent summary of some of the projects that we have certainly been looking into. Certainly many of the questions that I have you have answered, so I very much appreciate that. There is just one question that I have with regard to an issue that is not necessarily related here but one that has been quite topical for me, and that is the V/Line issue.

Mr MORTON — Yes.

The CHAIR — I am just curious to see whether or not you have had an opportunity to read the wheel wear report or have any even brief comments about what you see as the issues that face V/Line and opportunities that may come from it.

Mr MORTON — As I understand the report — I have not read the whole thing from cover to cover yet; I do have the gist of it — it seems to come as no surprise to those of us who understand the way these issues have evolved. It is largely in accordance with what we at the PTUA and various people in the industry had assumed — that there is a trade-off between running trains at a high speed and having tight curves on the track that they run on. So it seems that the issue has come about because there are some quite tight curves on that regional rail link track, in particular the existing flyover that was recycled, I suppose, between North Melbourne and Southern Cross. The curves on that have in particular been problematic for running trains at more than a certain speed, so the recommendation there has been to place a lower speed limit on those particular curves and also to engage in some manual lubrication of the track there to try to avoid wheel wear.

Wheel wear is an issue, we understand, that occurs whenever you have trains going around curved track. Basically the higher the speed of the train and the tighter the curve, the more wear that you get. It is a fairly straightforward idea. But it seems that the full import of that issue may not have been fully appreciated when the decision was made. It was actually right at the outset of the project in fact to use that existing flyover. There was, we understand, some brief consideration at a later stage of developing the project of actually building a new flyover and not using that existing flyover to North Melbourne, which may well have mitigated that issue. But of course we can all say that in hindsight.

But it appears that, yes, there was not sufficient consideration of the particular wheel wear and lubrication issues that arose from that particular piece of track and possibly some wider issues for V/Line's management of their network, that V/Line themselves — it has been indicated that they do need to give more consideration to track lubrication in general across their entire network as a result of this.

The CHAIR — Excellent. Thank you for that.

Mr EIDEH — It is a quick one. The *Age* indicated that you support the sky rail proposal. So, if that is correct, for what reason?

Mr MORTON — We have cautiously come out in support of the concept of what is known as sky rail or a rail-over-road type of grade separation. On balance we are convinced that there is some merit to the idea of elevated rail in certain sections of the network. It is very much a location-specific thing. There are a lot of parts of the network where it does not make sense to have an elevated rail solution, where you are better putting the rail in a trench. There are even places, in particular outside district centres — somewhere like Altona North, Kororoit Creek Road — where you would actually elevate the road in place of elevating the railway potentially.

But, as we say, the method of grade separation is something that is going to be location-specific and that also needs to be developed in close engagement with the affected community. I think we see with sky rail and the controversy around that issue that there has not really been adequate explanation at even a technical level to the people who are affected by this elevated rail concept of what the real impacts actually are. There has been no detailed explanation of the precise acoustics of elevated rail. There are certainly arguments that when a train passes over an elevated rail track, if you build the sides of the structure appropriately, then the sound is actually projected up rather than outward. This is an argument that is made; we would like to see detailed acoustic evidence to support that, and the local community clearly would like to see that as well. It has not been forthcoming in the detail that we would like to see.

That said, we are open to the idea of elevated rail in appropriate places, especially considering some other advantages that it has. It is, we understand, easier to construct while keeping the existing corridor in operation. And in a place like the Dandenong line, which is now the busiest rail corridor in Melbourne and indeed in the state, we see that the sheer disruptive effect if we were to put that entire line in a trench and close it for a three-month period, as we are seeing with the Frankston line, would have a huge impact on the south-east of Melbourne.

As it is on the Frankston line there is a very large impact from that closure. We will be running buses up and down through the middle suburbs, through Caulfield and Bentleigh — very large numbers of buses, with a lot of disruption. Local traders are unhappy with the disruption that has occurred to date. This is even before we do the three-month shutdown. The problem is, if you look at the patronage of the Dandenong line compared to the Frankston line, it is now something like double what the Frankston line is. So it actually becomes a very difficult proposition even to do anything with that line, simply because of the number of people who are using it. It is really like if you might consider shutting down the Monash Freeway for three months. It is that magnitude of impact, so anything that makes the construction process proceed more smoothly without, or while minimising, those major disruptions is quite an advantage.

At the same time there really is the need to have a proper conversation with the affected communities, and the reports we have had from people in the area are that that has not happened to the extent we would like to see.

Mr EIDEH — Thank you; very comprehensive.

Ms HARTLAND — I would particularly like to talk about the rail shuttle in terms of the port, because clearly this is a project that has federal funding. It has state funding. As I understand it could take approximately 3000 trucks off the road at its maximum. Can you shed any light on why it is that this current government or previous governments — considering the funding has been there for a substantial amount of time — have not proceeded with this project?

Mr MORTON — As you say, the funding is there from both state and federal levels. The recommendation to proceed has been made 13 times, as we have said. The only conclusion we can come to is that there has been a reluctance to make it happen so far simply because it complicates the privatisation process. That is all we are able to make of this situation.

It would seem to be a no-brainer that this should have proceeded a year ago, and it could even have been ready for an upcoming privatisation after the fact. That is all we can see that might explain it — just the additional complication it throws into the works when you are trying to negotiate a major sale or lease of something as large as the port of Melbourne, that if you are throwing in a rail upgrade at the same time, meritorious as it is, it is just too hard for people to think about, and it is a real disappointment to us. We would have liked to see it as a condition precedent in the contract for the privatisation that this project actually proceed within the next 12 months, but as it is we know there is this eight-year window which we think is inadequate.

The CHAIR — Mr Morton, can I thank you very much for your attendance here this evening. The coverage you gave to those topics was exceptional. We are certainly very thankful for that. You will receive a transcript of tonight's evidence for proofreading and that transcript will eventually make its way onto the committee's website for the public to see. I thank you very much again for your attendance this evening and close our hearing.

Mr MORTON — Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee.

Committee adjourned.