

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Monday 20 May 2024

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

**WITNESSES**

Gabrielle Williams MP, Minister for Public and Active Transport;

Paul Younis, Secretary,

Will Tieppo, Deputy Secretary, Network Design and Integration,

Fiona Adamson, Head, Transport Services, and

Alan Fedda, Chief, Public Transport, Department of Transport and Planning.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, any comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream today and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Public and Active Transport the Honourable Gabrielle Williams as well as officials and officers from DTP. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time committee members will start asking questions. Thank you.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Thank you to the committee. Before I begin I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are currently gathered and pay my respects to elders past and present and any other elders or First Nations people who may be here with us today or indeed watching the live stream of these hearings.

Chair, this budget finds a raft of public transport improvements right across the state, building on the record public transport investment made by the Labor government over the past decade. As Victoria grows, so does our public transport network. As you all know, our public transport network brings together buses, trams and both metro and regional trains as well as a number of active transport connections and provides Victorians with an attractive and affordable alternative to driving in their vehicles.

Since 2014 this government has added over 2000 new rail services and more than 20,000 extra bus services that run weekly – additional bus services per week that is – and our \$9 billion rolling stock program has delivered hundreds of modern and more accessible trains, trams and buses, all of them made here in Victoria for Victorians. With the Metro Tunnel due to open in 2025, a year ahead of schedule, this budget makes the critical public transport investments necessary to switch on the Big Build, all while investing in the local bus and active transport initiatives in our growing suburbs.

**Visual presentation.**

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** This year's budget contains more than \$1 billion worth of key public and active transport initiatives. This includes \$751.9 million to switch on the transport projects we have delivered through the Big Build and \$233.4 million for activities to get us ready for the Metro Tunnel day one, which includes recruiting and training drivers, completing final testing, preparing customer information and education and training a dedicated customer service team. To support reliability and a positive customer experience on day one, we are also investing \$213.7 million to maintain our metropolitan train communication system and plan for future upgrades.

Since 2014 the government has invested to upgrade every regional rail line and deliver new trains, more services and a more modern and sustainable regional operator. This budget continues that commitment to our regional network by investing \$133.4 million to continue to modernise our regional infrastructure and operations and deliver the world-class customer experience that regional Victorians deserve.

This budget also enables us to continue the delivery of our bus plan, with a further \$29.7 million investment to deliver better services and connections and more efficient networks for bus passengers. This builds on the recently announced GAIC package of \$150 million for bus services in growth areas. It also demonstrates this government's renewed focus on integrating active transport into our public transport network, with a further \$29 million to add 10 projects to our delivery pipeline.

Next slide. The Metro Tunnel is drawing closer. As I have outlined, this budget invests \$233 million to finalise preparedness for the opening of the Metro Tunnel a year ahead of schedule. The Metro Tunnel will transform our network, with trains able to run through the tunnel every 3 minutes, new interchanges in the CBD between train lines so that passengers can conveniently transfer underground from city loop stations through to Metro Tunnel services without having to touch on and off again but also with the above-ground tram network. In relation to accessibility, we are delivering level-access stops on La Trobe Street as we speak, which will mean almost every CBD tram stop will be accessible when the Metro Tunnel opens. This is part of our accessible tram stop upgrade program, which has already upgraded 83 stops across the network, with a further three corridors currently in development. Chair, as you well know, we are also delivering 100 new accessible G-class trams to add to the low-floor C-, D- and E-class trams already on the network.

Next slide. One year on from the introduction of the regional fare cap, Victorians have saved more than \$50 million. This is an important cost-of-living measure, with a return ticket to, for example, Bendigo, which previously cost up to \$68.80, or Geelong, which previously cost as much as \$27.60, now capped at the daily metro fare of \$10.60. We are seeing Victorians voting with their feet, with more than 22 million trips taken since that fare cap commenced. V/Line has also added hundreds of special services across the network, put on extra carriages and trialled new reservation systems to meet increased demand on the regional network, and almost 200 extra weekend V/Line services are being added to the network thanks to a \$219 million investment in last year's budget. This includes extra services on long-haul regional lines so that Ararat, Shepparton and Warrnambool lines will have five return services on Saturday and Sunday and the Echuca line will have three return services on Saturday and Sunday. This also includes weekend uplifts on the Geelong line, where trains will run every 20 minutes between 8 am and 9 pm; on the Ballarat and Traralgon corridors, where trains will run every 40 minutes, and on the Seymour line, where trains will run every 60 minutes.

Next slide. Through our Regional Rail Revival we are upgrading every regional passenger rail line, and we have been steadily ramping up the number of regional passenger services over the past decade, with more than 800 new services per week added onto the V/Line network since 2015. This includes 135 extra services per week on the Ballarat line thanks to the completion of the Ballarat line upgrade, which improved track signalling and infrastructure; the 10 extra services per week on the Shepparton line, which were made possible by the first stage of the Shepparton line upgrade completed in 2021; and the 31 additional services per week added on the Geelong line last year thanks to our infrastructure upgrades. Investments in this budget will ensure that our regional network continues to be modern and reliable and deliver for regional Victorians.

Next slide, thanks. The Allan Labor government has invested more than \$9 billion in new and upgraded rolling stock and supporting infrastructure since 2015. We have built a pipeline of trains, trams and buses built right here in Victoria for Victorians. We have delivered more than 200 new trains and trams since 2015 and we have not stopped there, with another 150 new trains and trams in our forward pipeline. Our government's rolling stock program has not only helped us deliver more services more often but also boosted the safety, comfort and accessibility of our fleet across the transport network, all while using local content and creating more than 10,000 jobs across Victoria's rolling stock industry.

Next slide. Chair, for many Victorians buses are an important local connection to school and to medical appointments, to jobs and to recreation. There is 5200 kilometres of bus network across Melbourne and regional Victoria, incorporating a fleet of about 4000 buses. Melbourne alone has 350 routes. We know buses do a lot of the heavy lifting for our public transport network, and we know that there is more to be done in this space. That is why since 2014 we have delivered over 20,000 new bus services per week, with hundreds more services set to be delivered over the next three years. In 2021 we announced *Victoria's Bus Plan*, a clear and

practical vision for bus reform in Victoria. The bus plan has three clear horizons. The first was that by 2023 we would leverage the Big Build, address priority routes and get ready for future reform. From there until 2030 the plan is about implementing reform to meet growing demand, and that is why this budget commits an additional \$29.7 million on top of the recent \$150 million GAIC announcement, meaning this year has seen the Allan Labor government make the largest single investment into buses to date. We have funded bus upgrades from Yarram–Leongatha to Pakenham, Hastings to Mornington for the cross-peninsula link, and Dandenong to Chadstone, and in Werribee, Tarneit, Greenvale, Donnybrook, Officer, Berwick and Clyde North. This is in addition to our more than half a billion dollar investment towards our bus network to date since we have been in office, with that investment going towards delivering new and improved bus services across the state.

Next slide, please. As the first active transport minister for the Allan Labor government, my priority is to ensure that, while Victoria continues to grow, we are delivering safe active transport routes to improve local connectivity. Over the past decade our government has delivered around 320 kilometres of new and upgraded walking and cycling paths and lanes. We have a further 13 projects currently in delivery, including one from Montmorency to Eltham, the Waverley Rail Trail, the Scotchmans Creek Trail and the Heathmont trail. We are adding to this pipeline with further projects for delivery at Altona, Epping, South Morang, Melton, Diggers Rest and Deanside.

Chair, this year's budget continues our government's work to build a modern, fair and accessible public transport network, getting Victorians where they need to go quickly and safely. Since 2014 we have delivered an unprecedented program that has modernised our public transport network and enabled us to run more services right across the state. We have delivered cost-of-living relief for Victorian commuters through the regional fare cap and added thousands of extra public transport services across the state. Now we are preparing for the Metro Tunnel opening next year – one year ahead of schedule – and transforming the network, all while investing in the public and active transport projects that Victorians want and deserve.

I thank you, Chair and committee members, and look forward to taking questions from the committee about this very comprehensive agenda that we have on public and active transport.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister. The first 11 minutes is going to go to the Deputy Chair.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you, Minister. So many questions, so little time, but I will try and get through this. Perhaps I will start with the Secretary very quickly. Commercial passenger vehicle inspectors – how many inspectors are there?

**Paul YOUNIS:** I have not got that number. Actually, I have got the number here somewhere, but it will take me a little bit of time to find that number –

**Nick McGOWAN:** That is okay. Perhaps you can look for that, commercial inspectors, but also –

**Paul YOUNIS:** because we have done quite a review of the whole of Transport Safety Victoria and combined a number of the features of Transport Safety Victoria. I will have to take that question on notice.

**Nick McGOWAN:** If any of you can find it before we finish, that would be ideal, but also the inspectors in terms of the actual train network as well, so inspectors –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** The authorised officers, are you talking there?

**Nick McGOWAN:** The authorised officers, yes – the authorised officers in that case but also how many fines were issued and how many court notices were issued as well. If you could break that down by –

**Paul YOUNIS:** Minister, I have checked –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** The authorised officers should be –

**Paul YOUNIS:** Yes, for the authorised officers, Mr Fedda might be able to –

**Alan FEDDA:** There are over 600 authorised officers across the public transport network, split between Metro Trains, V/Line and Yarra Trams as well as the bus network.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. Do we know how many exactly?

**Alan FEDDA:** I can get the exact number, but it is just over 600.

**Nick McGOWAN:** And how many in the metro area versus the regional area?

**Alan FEDDA:** They predominantly are across the metropolitan area, where that is the largest patronage, but we have been increasing the numbers through our multimodal authorised officers that are now across buses and regional Victoria.

**Nick McGOWAN:** If you could tell us how many FTE but also the number of fines that were issued.

**Alan FEDDA:** I do not have that number on me.

**Nick McGOWAN:** If you can come back to us for this year but also for what is budgeted as well, that would be great. Minister, the Metro – when do we expect that to open? What month is that? I missed it, sorry.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** No, it is next year.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Which month, sorry?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Next year.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay, next year. I did notice in the budget there is quite a large amount – and you alluded to this in your presentation too; \$751 million I think you put roughly – in respect to switching on the Big Build. What exactly does this mean? That is a lot of switching on for \$700 million.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** The component that I was drawing attention to within my portfolio was – just bear with me –

**Nick McGOWAN:** That is okay – budget paper 3, page 75, to assist.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Yes, just bear with me. Hang on.

**Nick McGOWAN:** While you are looking, who is our expert on the Metro, Minister? Do you know who is most –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Sorry, just to go to your previous point, I was talking to the work that had to go into having a metro tunnel be prepared to switch on from day one – everything from recruiting customer service staff, to drivers and to the work that goes into ensuring that people know how to navigate a very significant change to the network. Mr Fedda, would you like to supplement that?

**Alan FEDDA:** Indeed. It is switching on the Big Build and making sure that all the new assets that have been delivered through the Big Build are able to be operationalised and maintained, so that is –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Sorry to interrupt you there, but maintenance should be a separate line item, surely?

**Alan FEDDA:** Well, it is in addition to the Metro Tunnel readiness. So switching on the Big Build is ensuring that the expanded train infrastructure, the new stations and all of that stuff has ongoing funding to be able to be maintained.

**Nick McGOWAN:** That is my point. Surely, maintenance in any budget should be a separate line item. Why is it being included in the so-called ‘Switching on the Big Build’? It is almost a billion dollars. In budgets previous I have never seen this before.

**Paul YOUNIS:** Can I just follow up. There are a number of parts to the new Metro Tunnel, so there is the operation –

**Nick McGOWAN:** It is not just the Metro Tunnel, sorry, Secretary, it is the Big Build – the whole Big Build. This is part of the problem with this sort of stuff. When you put \$1 billion in one line item called ‘Switching on the Big Build’, the public have no transparency about what it means.

**Paul YOUNIS:** So the issues – what we are paying for is there is a PPP alliance with the Big Build, so that will maintain the tunnels, but there are also the station boxes, so the franchise arrangement we have with MTM has adjustments in it to allow for additional assets that come on board, and that is set up in the franchise and franchise payments. What we make allowance for each year is increases in that franchise payment, which is a part of the payment to MTM, to take into account any additions to the assets. When there is a level crossing upgrade and a new station – new toilets, for instance – they are included in that operational arrangement with MTM through the franchise payments. That is the same with this; there is quite a significant upgrade with Metro Tunnel – you have got four new stations that need to be staffed and operated, and that is a part of the maintenance costs that go into the franchise payment to MTM.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Speaking of the franchise agreements, they are due to expire. Who is negotiating those at the moment?

**Paul YOUNIS:** The Department of Transport and Planning are negotiating those franchises. We have done quite a bit of market sounding in relation to both the tram, which is coming up in the next number of months, and in relation to the trains, so we will be putting that out soon, and we are in conversations with a number of parties across the world about what the form of that new franchise will look like. Of course what it does is incorporate the new Metro Tunnel, so we have got line of sight to the operating environment, and the new franchise, or the renewed franchise, arrangements take into account the operations of Metro Tunnel, which is a big part of that change in the network.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Minister, is that including proposed route extensions or upgrades that we are not aware of?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** What, the refranchising?

**Nick McGOWAN:** Yes.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** The refranchising will obviously look to enhance service delivery as much as we can. We always take these opportunities – they are longer term contracts to ensure we are getting the best value for Victorian customers that we can and uplifting the offering of our system. That is standard practice as a part of our refranchising process.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Are you involved in those negotiations, Minister?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** They are led by the department, and they tend to be very well led by the department. Obviously I am kept abreast of those negotiations and kept abreast of the performance enhancements that they can drive.

**Nick McGOWAN:** But you are not involved in the negotiations.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Not in the day-to-day negotiations, no. That is led by the Department of Transport and Planning, but obviously I am, as minister, kept abreast of those negotiations and of the value proposition that forms part of them.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you.

**Paul YOUNIS:** Mr McGowan, just to clarify: so what the franchise arrangements do is anticipate additional assets coming onto the network through the life of the agreement, because these are 10-, 15-year agreements. Some of those assets are asset changes we do not know and cannot foresee because they will be decisions of future governments, but the franchise structure allows for the addition of new assets into the network, and it is structured that way. They are all priced beforehand and a part of the negotiations, so in relation to the negotiations, in the negotiation team we have commercial advisers, we have probity advisers, so there is a whole team set up to manage and work through not only the agreements and the structure of the new franchise arrangements but also the consideration of the process and recommendations to government on the outcomes.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay, what is the budget for the negotiation team?

**Paul YOUNIS:** We do not really have a separate budget for the [inaudible] team. That is part of the negotiation framework.

**Nick McGOWAN:** But there must be a cost centre for all the people you have just talked about employing.

**Paul YOUNIS:** We have got a number of commercial negotiations happening at the moment. We have got bus franchises that are happening now. That is a really important part of it. That is just as big a concept. We have got the tram franchise commercial ones, so we have got a commercial team that is part of our annual appropriations that negotiate all of these over a number of years.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I appreciate that. Sorry, I am going to have to move on, Secretary, because I only have a limited amount of time. Minister, the Craigieburn line – once the Metro opens in, I think you said, February or March next year, will there be a 10-minute –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I do not believe I said that, Mr McGowan. I will have to pick you up on that.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I might have misheard you. I do apologise. Will there be a 10-minute off-peak service for that line once the Metro opens?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** What we will see from day one of Metro Tunnel opening is an immediate uplift to the lines that it connects, so that is Cranbourne and Pakenham through to Sunbury. Obviously it has then from there incrementally a growing impact across the network because it basically frees up capacity, for example, in our city loop and it allows us to continue to add services. That will be made more clear as we work through our timetabling process as a part of the switching on of Metro Tunnel, and we will have more to say about that in due course. Obviously we have got trains being tested in the tunnel at the moment, and the work with the Department of Transport and Planning over the next little while through that testing period is also to work through that timetabling and the flow-on impacts through other lines, so we will have more to say about that in due course.

**Nick McGOWAN:** They anticipate the Craigieburn line will have a timetable of 10 minutes off-peak. Is that correct? That is the basis for the business case is what I am asking. This is not new. This is the basis for the business case.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** We are determining the new timetabling from day one as we speak, and that is work that will continue over the course of the next year as the testing of the trains through the tunnels continues.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Minister, I understand the question. I apologise, Minister, but the Metro Tunnel business case is prefaced on the basis that it will be a 10-minute off-peak service.

**Paul YOUNIS:** Deputy Chair, part of that funding that is provided for Metro day one is the timetabling. It is going back to the business case, it is referencing the business case and it is providing government with the options in relation to that timetabling. There is quite a bit of work involved in that, because there is also refurbishment of the bus networks and the connections.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I get that. But when will the public know what this means for the Belgrave, the Lilydale, the Hurstbridge and the Mernda lines?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** In the lead-up to the switch on of the Metro Tunnel, we will be able to release, obviously, the new timetables that will result from that very significant piece of infrastructure coming online.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I am a little bit concerned, Minister, because it sounds like we are backing away.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** We will be notifying obviously –

**Paul YOUNIS:** I have –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Sorry?

**Paul YOUNIS:** I have the AO – authorised officer – numbers, Chair, if you want the list.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay, if I can just come back to you on that in a moment – I have got, like, a minute left.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I will do it – go back. That is communication that we will obviously be having with the Victorian public as we come closer to the switching on of the Metro Tunnel. But that timetabling work is part of what is being funded in this budget, and that is work that will be being carried out in the time ahead. We cannot answer a question about work that is still underway, but we will –

**Nick McGOWAN:** The work is already done because the business case is already finished. But anyway, Minister, I get that.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** No, the timetable will currently finish ahead –

**Nick McGOWAN:** What is the future, Minister, of the XPT service for Victoria?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** The what, sorry?

**Nick McGOWAN:** XPT service.

**Paul YOUNIS:** So XPT is joint funded by New South Wales and Victoria, and we are working with New South Wales about what the future of that looks like.

**Nick McGOWAN:** There are already new trains, Secretary. You know that. So are we going shared?

**Paul YOUNIS:** Yes. That is the negotiations and discussions we have continually with New South Wales, and we will continue those discussions with them.

**Nick McGOWAN:** There is no money in this budget for those new trains; they have already ordered the trains.

**Paul YOUNIS:** That is the conversation we are having with New South Wales.

**Nick McGOWAN:** What is our plan for our trains then?

**Paul YOUNIS:** We are in those conversations with New South Wales.

**Nick McGOWAN:** But if there is no money in the budget, Secretary, how can you pay for it?

**The CHAIR:** Deputy Chair, please let the Secretary answer your question.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** As the Secretary has indicated, those are live negotiations that are happening with New South Wales –

**Nick McGOWAN:** And where is the money in the budget for it?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** We will be able to offer clarity about that once those conversations have been settled.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I understand, Minister, but where is the money in the budget for the new XPT trains or actually the Spanish CAF trains?

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mr McGowan. Your time is up. Mr Younis, I believe you had some numbers that you wanted to put.

**Paul YOUNIS:** Yes. I have got the authorised officer numbers if you are happy for me to do that.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Yes, of course.

**Paul YOUNIS:** Do you want me to do that now or in the next bit?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, if you can do it quickly.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Please. Do you have the commercial passenger vehicle inspector numbers too?



**Paul YOUNIS:** I did not look that one up. Across the network we have got 675 AOs that are employed as of April 2024 – 568 are deployed by operators and DTP deploys 107. In Metro Trains there are 311 and 48 on the security and service officers, and Yarra Trams have 166 plus an additional 12. V/Line have 31. And broadly across the network there is an additional 107.

**Nick McGOWAN:** And the value of the fines that were given?

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Secretary. Mr McGowan, we are coming back to you, so if you just hold that question.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** The next 11 minutes go to Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Minister, I would like to ask about regional train services.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Sure.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I can see in the ‘Department Performance Statement’ that there is a measure there about the number of passengers carried. For 2022–23 we had an outcome of 18.7 million, and then we are expecting for the current financial year to hit 24 million, so clearly demand is increasing. Can you tell me how the government is maintaining that affordable and modern regional rail service for Victorians in light of that?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Thank you. It is a great question, and I think the numbers that you have quoted point to the popularity of our regional fare cap and the flow-on impacts of that for travel around our state, which is, it should be highlighted, not only great for regional Victorians who may want to come into the city for any large range of special events but also for Victorians who want to get out there and explore our state. It represents I think a great economic opportunity for many of our regional towns who are seeing a great uplift in the number of commuters heading in on pretty much every regional rail line across our state. It has been a huge success not only in terms of representing an important cost-of-living measure but also in encouraging people to explore the beautiful state of Victoria.

We know that in that first year since we introduced the fare cap, and I relayed some of this data earlier, there were 22 million trips, representing more than \$50 million returned to the pockets of Victorians in savings achieved. I have talked about it being a significant cost-of-living measure across our entire regional network. I think it is very easy to forget, when we talk about \$10.60 fares to our regions, what they were before that and how much of a saving that represents. I quoted a few examples of that earlier. I talked about the fact that it used to cost \$68, nearly \$69, for a return ticket to Bendigo, nearly \$65 to Traralgon, \$62 to Ararat, and even for a one-way ticket passengers were needing to pay, for example, \$46 to Swan Hill, \$41.20 to Albury and \$39.40 to Warrnambool. Now thanks to the fare cap that is down to \$10.60. It is making a huge difference for Victorians travelling to see family or travelling to get to work or appointments or just to explore our state.

In fact the popularity of those regional train fares or the regional train travel made available through cheaper fares in Victoria is not just recovering to pre-COVID levels; it is breaking records. We are seeing people flock to our regional rail network at greater numbers than they ever have, and V/Line in fact recorded its busiest month on record last month with almost 2.16 million trips taken. That is an enormous achievement, and I think it goes to show the value of our regional fare cap and what it is delivering not only to Victorians but to regional communities, who can certainly do with the economic uplift that that represents.

The fare cap is not the only way we have been making public transport journeys more affordable in the regions. To assist families with the cost of living we are providing support in the form of the free school bus program as well, which operates in rural and regional Victoria across more than 300 school bus networks, and the conveyance allowance program, which provides more than 36,000 rural and regional school students with an allowance to support their private or public travel costs. We have also got the Victorian student pass, which provides discounts of about 70 per cent on daily concession Myki fares if a student travels on all school days. We have also got the 30-day free travel pass for school students in crisis, which was funded in the 2022–23 budget.

You also asked about how we are modernising our regional rail network. This is an important point, as Victorians rightly expect a world-class public transport experience, and that is not only about affordability – that is important – but also about reliability and getting people where they need to go to safely and comfortably. Alongside the regional fare cap, we have transformed the regional network through our landmark investments in new rolling stock. In last year's budget we funded the latest order of 23 new VLocity trains for regional Victoria, and it was really great for me to meet the workers at Dandenong South in April who are building those trains and announce that manufacturing is underway on that next tranche. These trains are more reliable. They produce fewer carbon emissions than the old classic fleet trains, which are gradually being retired. In total we have invested in 82 new VLocity trains since we came into government. That is on top of a whole raft of other rolling stock that I referred to earlier.

Of course we would not be able to roll these out on the network without the critical work underway on upgrading each regional line through the regional rail revival program, which is a \$4 billion investment to deliver more reliable and more frequent rail services across our regional network. We know how important our regional train network is not only to regional Victorians but to all Victorians who want to explore our state, and I think this package of rolling stock, of regional rail line upgrades and of course of affordability measures presents a really strong package to encourage travel around our state and to make sure that regional Victorians have the services that they deserve.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. There is a certain charm to the older trains, but we are very happy to have the new ones on the line. Thank you. What is the government doing to maintain the V/Line network so that it can hold up in the face of the increasing popularity of regional rail travel?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** It is a good question. In this budget we are investing \$133 million in upgrades and maintenance across our regional rail network. When we undertake very transformational projects like that Regional Rail Revival, where we are upgrading every regional train line across the state, there comes an even greater need, I think we can all agree, to ensure that we are maintaining these assets and also ensuring that V/Line themselves are equipped to run services on those lines safely and reliably. That is why we are funding critical activities such as the replacement of V/Line's disaster recovery site, which supports its integrated operations centre in controlling daily operations across the regional network. In the event that there is an incident or failure at the integrated operations centre, V/Line is reliant on the disaster recovery site and its systems to keep that network running. As the current site is nearing the end of its life, this funding for a replacement site is really essential. These are investments that are not necessarily visible to the average punter, but they are really important to being able to ensure the reliability of the network.

We are also funding a renewal of V/Line's operational control systems. These are the operating systems and applications that manage the control and security of the entire regional train network. They include things like railway signal and control systems, CCTV and public communication systems as well, and as with the disaster recovery site that I was just talking about, if we do not provide the funding needed to update these systems then there is a greater risk of reduced service performance or outages. So they are very important back-end investments, if you like, to making sure that the parts of our network that are visible to Victorians are functioning as well as they possibly can. These investments are not just about maintaining current service levels, but they are also about ensuring that regional train travel is more reliable and comfortable than ever for passengers. It is about making it more attractive for regional Victorians to leave the car at home and choose V/Line as their number one option to get where they need to be.

We invested \$322 million in last year's budget to deliver stage 2 of the South Dynon train maintenance facility upgrade, which is now underway and will also further boost reliability across Victoria's regional network. These works will increase maintenance capacity at South Dynon by adding extra maintenance – roads and train wash capacity – at the site. This means that VLocity trains can get back into service quicker with less downtime, which we know is really important.

It is a really exciting time on our regional rail networks at the moment, the combination of all of those investments meaning that, with our regional revival program, we can have upgrades to every single regional line across our network and make sure that we can bring in new rolling stock which is more reliable so that we can add services. And of course we have got the commitment on foot to add an additional 200 weekend services to our V/Line network in addition to many of the weekday services that have already been delivered. This is critical – not only a cost-of-living measure in terms of our fares but also ultimately about economic

uplift in facilitating the movement of Victorians and indeed visitors to our state, around our state, on a world-class regional network. Those back-end investments that I have just spoken to are an incredibly important, albeit less visible, part of our investment agenda to make sure that we are delivering a service that is reliable for all Victorians.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister. So how is the government ensuring that regional services are meeting that extra demand that has been created?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Thanks for the question. As it stands V/Line runs more than 2200 scheduled train services and about 1500 coach services every week, with more than 800 new services per week added on to our V/Line network since 2015. Almost 200 extra weekend V/Line services are going to be added – I was just referring to that. I think I am out of time – apologies. I can hopefully get a chance to finish going through our many achievements on meeting demand.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Mr Tieppo, could you tell us how much internal work was put in to the project – that is the VicTrack Geelong fast rail project I am referring to, budget paper 4, page 188 – with regard to design, timetabling and route options?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I think that might be a question –

**A witness:** That is infrastructure.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** It is a transport infrastructure question, so it might be better placed to have been asked in Mr Pearson's contribution.

**Bev McARTHUR:** You are not concerned about the Geelong train travellers, Minister, and the taxpayers of Victoria?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** It is not a reflection on my concern, Mrs McArthur, just about the appropriateness of questions that might be better placed for another minister.

**The CHAIR:** You may wish to rephrase your question, Mrs McArthur.

**Bev McARTHUR:** How much of your budget has been spent on the design, timetabling and route options in the project that you have cancelled?

**Paul YOUNIS:** Mrs McArthur, that is a part of the infrastructure fund as a project. It is not funded out of our operating environment for train and tram services.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Well, Secretary, can you tell us: was it true that German railways Deutsche Bahn was engaged to assist in those plans?

**Paul YOUNIS:** That is a matter for the infrastructure minister. It is not a part of the public transport portfolio's expenditure.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. Well, this might be for Mr Tieppo then. At the moment the current V/Line timetable has Geelong trains running at a similar time to some trains in the 1940s when they were steam-hauled. I mean, Cobb & Co springs to mind here. How can you be going backwards in travel times?

**Paul YOUNIS:** Mrs McArthur, I might take that question. On the Geelong timetable we are running more services to Geelong than have ever been run before, and there have been 200-plus services added to the Geelong line.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Not the question, Secretary. Your trains are running at a similar time as they were in the 1940s.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Steam trains, I think.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, they were steam in those days.

**Paul YOUNIS:** We are running modern VLocity trains, which are designed in accordance with their specifications and are running at the appropriate speeds for that line. The intent has not been to change the running times of our VLocity trains.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I should also add, Mrs McArthur, and I was talking about it in response to the government question: I think it is an unfair characterisation of the developments across our regional rail network over time. We have had record investment, particularly through the Regional Rail Revival program, which is upgrading every single regional line across our state, to go to effectively being able to modernise service delivery, to be able to run modern rolling stock that is more reliable and to do upgrades not only to things like track but to signalling and some of those less visible infrastructure items that mean we can deliver an improved service, and we have seen additional services run across weekdays. We have got another additional service –

**Bev McARTHUR:** They might be additional services, Minister, but they are running slower in many cases than they were in the 1940s.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me, Mrs McArthur, there is a point of order by Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Chair, on factuality, Mrs McArthur is referring to two services which ran at an average speed of 73 minutes after 5 o'clock to an average speed of 61 minutes after 5 pm –

**Bev McARTHUR:** So what is the point of order?

**Michael GALEA:** The point of order is factuality.

**The CHAIR:** On the point of order, Mrs McArthur, if you have another question or you wish to rephrase it, please move on.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So there is no point of order. Do not disrupt me, Mr Galea.

Secretary, can you advise whether routine track maintenance levels on this line – that is, the Geelong line – have been reduced over the last two years?

**Paul YOUNIS:** Mrs McArthur, we have increased the track maintenance on all of our lines across the regional network. That was very much a part of the Regional Rail Revival program: to upgrade the lines to an upgraded standard but also to maintain those lines to that standard. The lines on Geelong are classed as – I cannot remember the class; Mr Tieppo might be able to help me.

**Will TIEPPO:** Class 2.

**Paul YOUNIS:** Class 2 lines. That is the highest level of line classification, and they are maintained in accordance with a program of maintenance which ensures that they are maintained at that level across the board. There are often new ways of doing work, and we can achieve the same outcomes by being more efficient about it, by rearranging our contracts, but the level of output has been maintained at that class 2 level along the Geelong line for a number of years now.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay, well, Secretary, drivers have advised us that there are noticeable track dips on the down side of the Werribee interchange on the up line, and on the up line on the Geelong side of the track near Little River, but these track issues have gone unresolved for some time. Is that due to maintenance funding issues?

**Paul YOUNIS:** In actual fact Geelong is a class 1 line, and what we do is maintain the line to that level. In any maintenance of any dynamic asset, such as rail – and we can talk about roads another time – there are often changes in that network, and we have a program of identifying any changes.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So the drivers are not right – they are not correct?

**Paul YOUNIS:** We have a program of identifying any issues with the track and using driver input as a part of that identification of track status, and then we have a program of prioritisation of the works and implementation of the works. The important thing is that we have in Geelong a class 1 track and it is maintained to that, and it has a top speed of just under 160 kilometres an hour for sections of that. Of course, because we have so many passengers on the Geelong line and there are so many stops that we have on the Geelong line, that is a challenge for us, but it is certainly a good one because it is a very well utilised line.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Let us go to ‘Western Rail Plan’, budget paper 4, page 187. Minister, given this proposal has clearly been abandoned, how much longer can you advise Melton and Wyndham Vale residents that they will be relying on country trains to service these two lines?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I think there are aspects of your question that might actually again go to transport infrastructure, Mrs McArthur, but what I would –

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur, you had ample opportunity to ask those questions of the minister last week on transport infrastructure.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Sorry, budget paper 4, page 187.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Look, what I can say is we are continuing to investigate rail investments which will deliver a faster, higher capacity rail network for our growing suburbs –

**Bev McARTHUR:** No, we just want to know: how long will you be using country trains on these lines?

**Paul YOUNIS:** They are VLocity trains running on the Wyndham Vale line, which run out to Geelong. As you know, they continue that journey. It is not an electrified line. What we have done is upgrade the lines. They are new trains running, the VLocitys, so they are not old trains. They are modern, fit-for-purpose lines. We have put nine-car VLocitys into those areas. We did some stabling upgrades to that –

**Bev McARTHUR:** But for how long will they have to rely on country trains in Melton and Wyndham Vale?

**Paul YOUNIS:** Well –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** On that – sorry; excuse me, Secretary. I will pass back to you to answer that more fulsomely in a moment, but we cannot brush over – you referenced the *Western Rail Plan* and the significance of the investments that are underway. We have got the \$650 million Melton line upgrade, which will see stations upgraded and platforms extended to make the line ready for nine-car VLocity trains by 2028, which will increase the capacity of that line by up to 50 per cent. The Melton line upgrade –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Minister, you clearly do not want to answer the question. We will go to another.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** No, you asked about the *Western Rail Plan*, and I think it is important –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Yes, and I asked how long the trains would be country V/Line trains on those two lines.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Well, I am talking to you about the upgrades on the line that will –

**Bev McARTHUR:** How long?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I just gave you the fact that those nine-car VLocity trains post that Melton line upgrade will be available by 2028. We talked also about –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Okay. 2028. Thanks.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** No, it is pertinent to your question, Mrs McArthur – the opening of the Metro Tunnel and more trains, more often as a consequence of that, particularly on the Sunbury line. We have also removed four level crossings on the Sunbury line. We have completed the Ballarat line upgrade.

**Bev McARTHUR:** I did not ask about level crossings, Minister. Thank you very much.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** We have got another seven level crossings on the Werribee line, a brand new station in Tarneit West – they are all a part of the *Western Rail Plan*.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Sorry; I am not interested. Mr Tieppo, perhaps we can go to you. Ballarat – you are spending \$49.2 million or thereabouts on a project to upgrade the Ballarat station, but disabled and physically infirm passengers are still having to traverse the train tracks. Mind you, you have given money to the travellers aid people to help people get across the train tracks. They will not get a proper facility to be able to get to their train until 2026. Is that good enough?

**Will TIEPPO:** Well, I think –

**Michael GALEA:** On a point of order, Chair – apologies, Mrs McArthur, but I believe this is a question for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure.

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur, perhaps you would like to rephrase your question or move on.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Mr Tieppo, would you like to answer the question?

**Will TIEPPO:** Well, I think the government's investment is part of building the new lifts and accessible walkways that prevent that from happening, but obviously one of the things that we are doing at the moment is making sure that people are safe, when they have some sort of disability, to cross over. But the works are in progress. The design is underway for the construction of that new accessible facility.

**Bev McARTHUR:** So they should just put up with travelling across the train tracks until 2026?

**Will TIEPPO:** Well, I think those safety mechanisms are already in place, as V/Line is already doing that.

**Bev McARTHUR:** What are you doing about the heritage gates there, Mr Tieppo?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Chair, can I just point out that the project that Mrs McArthur is referring to is a Ballarat station upgrade project, which again is a matter for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure.

**Bev McARTHUR:** But you are –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** We can talk to the Lydiard Street gates, it is just –

**Bev McARTHUR:** You are in charge of public and active transport. I would have thought that referred to train passengers.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Mrs McArthur, your time is up. I will remind members we had an opportunity to speak with the Minister for Transport Infrastructure last week. We are now with the Minister for Public and Active Transport. We are going to be going to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Minister, Secretary and officials. Minister, I would like to talk to you about bus services. I refer to budget paper 3, pages 75 and 80, which shows that \$29.7 million is being invested in critical bus and ferry services. I understand the government has also recently announced an additional \$150 million for bus services in growth suburbs, which is extremely exciting. Could you please explain to us how this investment will better connect more Victorians to jobs, schools and their loved ones?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** My pleasure, Mr Galea. I know this is something that you are deeply passionate about, and I know that we have had conversations around the importance of buses in your community too over time. In fact probably almost every member of PAEC at some point has talked to me about the importance of bus services in their areas, particularly those of you that occupy or represent growth areas in our state.

We know that our bus network is a critical connector in the broader public transport network. We have a very complex network – a multimodal network – here in Victoria, and increasingly we need to make sure that our buses perform that important connecting ability, particularly in connecting people to other modes of public transport. But for many Victorians in parts of our state, buses may be their only connection to places like local shopping centres, to medical activities and to social activities. In fact we know that 80 per cent of the metropolitan population is within walking distance of a bus stop and that bus users overwhelmingly do walk to

their bus stop, so with my active transport portfolio hat on, that presents a really important opportunity for us to really lift our active transport rates as well.

Now, there are 5200 kilometres of bus network across Melbourne and regional Victoria, which incorporate a fleet of almost 4000 buses across our state. Melbourne alone has some 350 routes. We know that buses do a lot of the heavy lifting for our public transport network, and that is why since coming to government we have invested more than half a billion dollars towards our bus network to deliver new and improved bus services across the state. Since 2014 we have delivered over 20,000 new bus services a week. That is remarkable, when you break that down, what that represents for local communities around our state, but more than that, we have got hundreds more services set to be delivered over the next three years, in particular, and more to come. We never set and forget when it comes to any of our public transport services. These are constantly being assessed for new opportunities of growth and constantly being monitored in terms of the way communities themselves change. That does not just go to growth, that also goes to the way communities move around their areas. We know that the hotspots and hubs of 30 or 40 years ago may not be the hotspots and hubs of today, so we have got to make sure our public transport system adapts to that as well.

*Victoria's Bus Plan* is founded on six key objectives, if you like, each representing a step change in reform and a step change in investment and of course in innovation. The transformation of the bus network is well underway, with a variety of bus reform improvements across Victoria which deliver on the objectives and the growing number of people choosing to travel by bus but also the growing number of people we want travelling by bus as well. That is why I am pleased that this budget provides \$29.7 million in funding to deliver more bus services more often for Victorians. As I mentioned earlier, and as you mentioned, Mr Galea, this builds on that \$150 million GAIC contribution that we recently saw, which brings our investment to almost \$180 million in extending current services and introducing new ones. That is the largest single investment in buses on record. It represents an enormous uplift. It also sits on top of the over half a billion dollars of investment that we have made in bus services since coming to office in 2014.

We are not just investing record amounts into bus services; we are also getting on with delivering more new and extended routes across the state. In fact since January we have introduced brand new services between Sunbury and Diggers Rest, operating every 20 minutes. We have delivered a new bus interchange at Deer Park, 10 new school bus services for school students across Melbourne's northern and western suburbs, and ongoing community consultation with growing communities, such as Gisborne, on how to improve their bus network. In fact over the last 12 months more than 15 bus routes have been extended or upgraded, with another 25 undergoing a timetable change as we speak to ensure that they are fit for purpose and meeting those changing needs that I identified earlier, which are particularly acutely felt in our growth areas.

Bus reform we know takes time, with a very, very extensive bus network across our state. It is also really important that as we do it, we consult with community to make sure that those new services or extended services that we are delivering reflect local needs, and the local intelligence that we gather from those consultations is really important and often leads to changes to our reform agenda. You know, what looks good on paper – sometimes when you test it with communities, you will find that there are different trends that are emerging that need to be met as we modernise our bus network, and that is why that consultation process is really important.

We know that when you do that consultation well, passengers vote with their feet. For example, we reformed the Yarra Valley bus network in November, and in the first four months of that change we saw a 50 per cent increase in patronage on weekends. We reformed bus route 863, which travels from Endeavour Hills to Cranbourne West – which will be known well to you, Mr Galea – and also route 895 from Narre Warren South to Fountain Gate to remove some of the duplication that existed in those routes, to provide direct access to businesses and to reinvest to better meet community needs. In the first nine months of that change we saw a 55 per cent patronage increase on those routes on weekdays and about a 40 per cent uplift on weekends. So what we know is it is a case of 'If you build it, they will come'. People will use the service when it does what they want it to do, which is typically getting to where they want to in a more direct fashion and of course adding frequency to it as well. So these are very promising trends that we are seeing, where we have reformed our bus services.

Another excellent example of course is our bus reform work in Fishermans Bend, where we delivered weekday peak uplifts and a longer span of hours, including late-night services and weekend frequency uplifts. In the first

five months of operation of these changes we have seen a 300 per cent improvement in patronage on Sundays and around 80 per cent on Saturdays. We have delivered bus service uplifts in over half of the local government areas across the state so far, and we have funded bus service uplifts in our fastest growing suburbs in every single budget since coming to government.

But we do know that there is more work to do, which is why this budget includes funding for several bus improvements on routes where we know the demand is particularly high. That includes route 800, which is very well known to me and to my neighbour the Member for Mulgrave and indeed the Member for Oakleigh as well. That route 800 goes from Dandenong to Chadstone, and these uplifts will mean that we get a significant uplift over weekends, which we know is particularly important for those who may work at Chadstone too. So it is not just about those wanting to go and do their shopping, it is also the benefit to the significant workforce that exists in that precinct. Also there is a commitment to new infrastructure for a new cross-peninsula link, a coach service uplift connecting Yarram and Leongatha to Pakenham train station, and of course a continuation of the popular Melton South FlexiRide service to provide public transport access to areas in Melton South, Weir Views and Thornhill Park. I was very pleased to be out there with the Member for Hastings and upper house member Mr McIntosh to talk about that cross-peninsula link and what that will mean to the community there. There is consultation about to commence on that route and funding for the new stops that it will involve, so that is very exciting. I also had the opportunity to be out with the Member for Bass to look at those connections from Yarram and Leongatha to Pakenham and the connection that that presents too to a train line that post a switch on of Metro Tunnel will have a turn-up-and-go service at peak times into the city. That represents a huge opportunity for her community, whether they want to go into town or whether they want to access the V/Line service out the other way.

Importantly, we continue to do this work in consultation with the Victorian community. We have held consultations with hundreds of Victorians right across the state, including with residents in the Yarra Valley, in Mildura, in north-eastern Melbourne and northern Melbourne, in Armstrong Creek and Torquay, Box Hill and Burwood, Heatherton and Clarinda and Gisborne and Greensborough as well. Again, we know that this reform piece takes time, but we are on our journey to get there. We have the plan that is directing how we will get there, and we will continue to consult with the Victorian community to make sure that the bus services that we do deliver as a part of these plans reflect local needs and support Victorians to get to where they need to go, whether that is getting to work, getting to school or seeing loved ones or to uptake those recreational opportunities that we know are really important for maintaining social connections as well. We are going to continue to invest in this work as we have. I think the budget outcome both across the budget and the GAIC process and the GAIC funding –

**Nick McGOWAN:** I hope there is something there for Ringwood, Minister.

**Michael GALEA:** You just got a new Bulleen park-and-ride.

**The CHAIR:** Excuse me.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** is incredibly important to continuing to make progress on this agenda that we have.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. Indeed for Mr McGowan in North-East Metro, that Bulleen park-and-ride is a fantastic project too.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** That is right. Indeed.

*Members interjecting.*

**The CHAIR:** Order! You will cease the interjecting, please. Mr O'Brien.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Secretary, budget paper 3, page 75, lists more than \$600 million for COVID impacts on the transport network. How long do we keep paying for COVID impacts on the transport network?

**Paul YOUNIS:** The COVID impacts relate to the decrease in fare revenue. We are still not seeing the patronage come back to pre-COVID levels. I think it is sitting around about 77, 80 per cent at the moment, so there will be allowances in the forward estimates for that. We are predicting and our modelling shows a



recovery back to normal numbers over years, but it has been a difficult process to predict the fares, particularly, and the patronage post COVID. We are seeing a gradual recovery into that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So we will keep topping them up until it hits back to 100 per cent of pre-COVID levels?

**Paul YOUNIS:** Well, it is covering the cost. The structure of our fare arrangements is a shared fare-box arrangement, so we do not wear all of the hit. As well as the state, as well as the franchisee, that is a shared arrangement that was structured in the set up of the franchises. I must say that we were one of the very few networks in the world that continued operating through COVID, so that structure of arrangements proved to be quite successful. So, yes, we will be continuing to subsidise the state. We will continue to subsidise the loss in fare revenue that we have experienced post COVID.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Until it gets back to 100 per cent of pre-COVID?

**Paul YOUNIS:** We will be moving into new franchise arrangements. We will make adjustments for that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Great. Minister, you talked a lot about the Regional Rail Revival projects. Obviously I am interested in the Gippsland one, which is now listed in the budget papers as having another \$31 million budget blowout plus an estimated completion date now listed as TBC. This is despite the fact that in 2017 the now Premier said this was shovel ready and ready to go. Here we are seven years later, you cannot even tell us when it is going to be finished. Why is that?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I think first and foremost, Mr O'Brien, I should point out that the issue of the Gippsland line upgrade is primarily an issue for the Minister for Transport Infrastructure.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** But you have talked about it at length.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** It is an infrastructure project. I am happy to give you the high-level points on that. It is obviously a part of our \$4 billion Regional Rail Revival program, which I referenced earlier.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I know. I get all that, Minister. The question is: it says in the budget papers that the completion date is TBC subject to 'signalling design' seven years after the project started or was announced and:

... co-ordination with the pipeline of projects underway across the program ...

What the hell does that even mean? How is it that seven years after the project was announced we still do not know when it is going to be completed?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I am happy to step you through the works that have taken place – and the Secretary – because public –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, the question is: when is it going to be finished?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** That is a part of the agenda that I am talking to, with what has taken place and the work that is still to come. These are complex pieces of work. I know the –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Ballarat was done in a couple of years.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, allow the minister to answer. It is borderline whether it is the minister's portfolio or the Minister for Transport Infrastructure's.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** All right. Perhaps I can go to what is the minister's portfolio.

**The CHAIR:** The minister does wish to –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** If you want to talk to aspects that do relate to me, we can talk a bit about the signalling works, which might go part way to answering your question outside of the Minister for Transport Infrastructure's part of this. The Secretary would like to add to that.

**Paul YOUNIS:** Thank you, Chair. Mr O'Brien – and I think the minister asked this question of us: when will these projects be completed? – one of the challenges we have had, particularly in the last four or five years,

is signalling resources. They are very short across the entire world, and we have had to restructure our entire program of works to account for the resources available for signalling. The challenge with the Gippsland line, the challenge with the Warrnambool line, is another one –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** And Shepparton.

**Paul YOUNIS:** They are works that are spread right across the network, right across those corridors, and they require specialist signalling works. The Ballarat gates is another one that requires specialist signalling works.

**Bev McARTHUR:** You are going to put the heritage gates back, Secretary, are you?

**Paul YOUNIS:** It is still reliant on the signalling works to be done. That is the challenge, so with all of the works going on we have had to stage these. Keep in mind signalling works are the last absolutely critical safety element that we have got on the network, and we do not want to put people and resources in there that are untrained, that do not go through it properly. So it is a challenge for us because there are not the resources around the world, and we have had to stage them across – particularly the Gippsland line, particularly the Warrnambool line –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Shepparton line is also TBC.

**Paul YOUNIS:** because the rest of those projects are so signal upgrade resource heavy.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Secretary, can I ask: how many –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Also, it is pertinent – sorry, Mr O'Brien, can I just add to supplement that –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, sorry. I got an answer, thank you, Minister. I have got the answer; I do not need you to waste more of my time. Thank you.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** No, I am not.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, you are.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I am not seeking to waste your time, but you were asking about uplifts for services. I was going to contribute to that, but if you do not want to hear it, that is open to you.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** I will come to that. Secretary –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I imagine you also do not want to talk about the 20 years since Labor reopened the Bairnsdale line to passenger services.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Chair, come on.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** It is the anniversary this year since the Liberals cut it.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, we are moving forward. Mr O'Brien, another question.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** But I will take that as a congratulations.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Secretary, how many days have you had to use rail replacement buses on the Gippsland line due to works associated with this project?

**Paul YOUNIS:** So all the works across the network have been really challenging. Now, I think Mr Fedda or Mr Tieppo will be able to talk through the disruptions. It takes a lot of our effort to keep track of the amount of works that we are doing and –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** It is a data question. I just want to know how many days, and ideally how many days in general, that the Gippsland line has been disrupted, including for things like level crossing works.

**Will TIEPPO:** I have not got it.

**Paul YOUNIS:** You have not got it. While he is finding that, I have got a –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** You either want the upgrades or you do not, Mr O'Brien, too. A significant part of upgrading live lines is that you need to have an alternative –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Sorry, Minister, I just asked a factual question. That is all I want the answer to. Thank you.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Well, it just seems to be incongruous with the line of questioning in your previous question.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Well, it would be easier to ask: how often have we had trains in the last seven years – than buses – 'on the Gippsland line? So do not give me this, 'Oh, no, you don't want disruption – you don't want better services.' We have been putting up with this disruption for seven years now – longer, if you take into account the LXRA and Metro disruptions that have affected the Gippsland line – and we have still got the same services at Bairnsdale, affecting Sale, that we had in 1990. Now, that is my next question: when this project is finally finished, will we actually get additional services to the Bairnsdale line?

**Paul YOUNIS:** So, Mr O'Brien – I will just cover it –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Sure.

**Paul YOUNIS:** The disruptions on that line and others – that is a challenge to get all these works done without disruptions, and unfortunately the Gippsland line will experience further disruptions later this year while we do some more to –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** We have got buses right now.

**Paul YOUNIS:** Yes. Actually, we are in May. Yes, it is now; correct.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** But we are committed to it.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Will we get additional services to Bairnsdale after this is finished?

**Paul YOUNIS:** We have committed to the 40-minute services –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** To Bairnsdale, I am talking about.

**Paul YOUNIS:** to Bairnsdale.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That is Traralgon.

**Paul YOUNIS:** That is the commitment we have put, and that is the timetable we will be putting together.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That is Traralgon, Secretary; I am asking about Bairnsdale.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** We are committing to uplifting the services on the Gippsland line, Mr O'Brien. We have already announced that we are increasing the frequency of Traralgon services between 8 am to 9 pm on weekends –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Again, that is Traralgon. I am asking –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** and extending the Sunday Gippsland line service so that it runs through to Bairnsdale rather than terminating at Sale, and that is all part of our \$219 million investment in last year's budget.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No answer, then. Minister, are there any plans to terminate Gippsland line trains at Pakenham?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I would have to – Secretary, I do not know if you could steer –

**Paul YOUNIS:** Mr O'Brien, you have probably heard, because one of the options of course to get more services into the Gippsland line is to truncate the lines – but the plans and designs of that are not in active operation; we are not doing that at the moment.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So you may in the future stop Gippsland lines –

**Paul YOUNIS:** As a transport department we would always put options up to government about how you can increase services without huge infrastructure costs. Anyone would know that that is clearly an option. It is not an option that the government have asked us to pursue in any form.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Is it likely to happen in any –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I could talk to you about what we –

**Paul YOUNIS:** It is definitely nothing that the government have asked us to pursue. We will always, as a transport department, put options up to government around what they are, but that is not an option that they have asked us to pursue in any form.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Can you say the same, Secretary –

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I have already outlined to you, Mr O'Brien, the services that we have committed to adding to the line. I think that represents the commitments that we have made to date, and I am happy to go through the works on the line and the benefits of those, if that helps.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Secretary, can I just get the same clarification on any other regional line, that they will not be stopping at metro stations and forcing –

**Paul YOUNIS:** It is the same answer for all of them. We continually look at options as a transport department about how you can change services.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** No, I got that. I got that, thank you.

**Paul YOUNIS:** So there is discussion internally about that, but the government have not asked us to do any work on that case.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** If it is not a commitment, Mr O'Brien, that the government has made publicly, then it is not a commitment. I think we have been very open about the commitments that we have made.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Of course – apart from the \$75 billion in contingencies in the budget that no-one knows about, but anyway. Minister, the VLocity trains that you talk a lot about that have been added to rural lines, including the Gippsland line – are you aware these are the longest distance trains in Australia with no sunshades, no reclining seats and limited buffet services, including on the Gippsland line? Is that really a better service for country passengers, and why didn't you include longer sets so that we could have buffet services?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** On what line, sorry, were you referring to there?

**Danny O'BRIEN:** On all of them where you have introduced VLocitys.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** The VLocity represents significant uplift to reliability on our networks.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The question is about comfort.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** They are a greener fleet, obviously, as well. They are a far more reliable fleet. I think that is a key part of the uplift to those services as well.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The question is about –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Green does not equal comfort.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** You referenced buffet cars, Mr O'Brien, as well. It is important to note, as we are trying to boost capacity on these lines as well, a buffet car represents about 42 seats lost in a three-car carriage set and about 84 on a six-car carriage set –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That is why I asked why you did not go with longer sets.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** which is why we are maximising the space being able to be used for passengers through these trains.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Will there be any buffet cars on future VLocity services on the long-haul lines?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I think on the Albury line, from memory, there is.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** That is the only one.

**Paul YOUNIS:** Yes, we have got them on the standard gauge set for the Albury line.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** So you can do it on the Albury. Why haven't we got them on the other long-haul services?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Because our priority, Mr O'Brien, is to ensure that we can get as many passengers to where they want to go as possible, and they represent a very significant loss of passenger capacity on these trains.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** We are going to go to Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Minister and Secretary and officials. I will speak to active transport, which, as you know, Minister, is a particular passion of mine. I might take you to budget paper 4, page 78, which outlines the critical public and active transport upgrades. I am hoping you can talk the committee through some of those active transport projects and how they will better connect Victorian communities. Certainly I am really appreciative of what has been listed in the budget as well.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Mr Hilakari. I know you are a passionate advocate for more active transport connections and indeed just more active lifestyles generally. I am very proud to be the first minister in a government with an active transport portfolio; I think it represents this government's priorities in that area. Although we often think about active transport through the prism of our very keen cyclists – our mamils, if you like, our middle-aged men in lycra – the active transport portfolio actually has a much broader focus than that, and that is about getting people to uptake use of active transport options in that last mile. This is people who might not ordinarily consider walking or cycling or any of the other multitude of ways that constitute an active transport engagement.

I think the creation of the new portfolio recognises the important role of active transport in delivering on the government's broader priorities, not just in terms of health but supporting families and creating livable suburbs, which I know is a topic very close to your heart and to many of our PAEC committee members, to make sure that we are enabling those closer connections to work, to education, to the services that we know families need in particular.

The government has a very strong track record on delivering active transport projects over the past decade. We have completed about 109 projects and around about 320 kilometres of new and upgraded walking and cycling paths and lanes. We have completed the Highbury Road shared use path, which has seen a new set of pedestrian signals which has enabled pedestrians and cyclists to cross Highbury Road safely when using the Melbourne Water Pipe Reserve trail. We have delivered the Northern Trail stage 1 and 2 improvements, providing a cycling connection from Heidelberg station to Burgundy Street.

The committee might be also interested to hear about the 85 kilometres of pop-up bike lanes we have delivered across some of those key inner Melbourne suburbs like Yarra, Maribyrnong and Moonee Ponds. This program

saw an increase in particular of female ridership, which is very important, across those trial areas, including a significant increase in the City of Yarra. We also have a further 250 kilometres of cycling and walking paths that are currently in or committed to for delivery.

This budget, along with the recent GAIC announcement, adds to this already strong pipeline, with a further \$29 million committed. This includes funding to deliver a 60-metre shared use path over the Laverton Creek and the vital missing link along Queen Street connecting the east–west activity centres between Laverton and Altona with the Bay Trail, which of course links with the CBD. I know this has been something that you have been a very passionate advocate for, and I hope it has been an achievement that has been celebrated by your community as well. It is a vital project. It is one I know that the community has been advocating to you for and indeed to me as well and for quite some time. In 2021–22 our government committed about a million dollars for the development work to be undertaken on that, so now that that is completed – it was completed late last year – we have that knowledge to directly inform the delivery of that initiative, and that goes to that point I was making earlier around bus services and the importance of community consultation on these projects as well to make sure that we properly understand the needs that we are seeking to meet through the delivery of these projects.

We have also funded nine active transport projects across Melton, Casey, Hume and Whittlesea through the Growth Areas Infrastructure Fund. That includes a new shared user path on Ferris Road in Melton, along with a new shared user path between Grand Boulevard and Sheahan Road and the widening of Hopkins Road in Rockbank, new active transport connections at Taylors Road in Deanside and a new active transport connection along Vineyard Road to provide greater access to the Diggers Rest train station. We also have a new pedestrian and bike bridge on Toyon Road across the Merri Creek at Kalkallo for the community of Hume and the Darebin Creek Trail shared user path from Greenbrook Drive to Epping station in Epping. So it is quite a significant pipeline of active projects that we have ahead. As I have said, it is very important that we consult with the community on these. They can sometimes be more difficult projects than they first appear, and we are always keen to get them right and make sure that we properly understand the primary need that is being sought to be met through these projects, and we do that by fundamentally talking to communities about where the priority connections are for them and what those key connection points are, where people need to go, to understand what we need to be delivering, so it is an important pipeline ahead that we look forward to be able to deliver on.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** And it is just a huge deal for the community that I represent and also Minister Horne represents. The creek is the borderline between our communities, and that 60-metre bridge effectively separates us and separates our communities. It also sits alongside a massive basketball stadium. So many people come in from Altona and go in through Altona Meadows and just cannot reach the destination safely at the moment, so we are really appreciative of it, and the community has been talking to me since before the election just about how important it is, so it is great to be able to get that funding now.

I want to take you to the active transport targets, because this is fundamentally a big deal in terms of what this government is seeking to do. I am going to take you to the same reference point on page 78. We have a target of 25 per cent of active trips by 2030. You mentioned we have got more than \$20 million in active transport investments through GAIC, and I am just hoping you can talk about how the investments that we are making now are going to reach those 25 per cent targets.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Thank you for the question, and thank you for the context around the importance of the active transport project in your community. It is always good to receive that feedback. As you have identified, the Allan Labor government made a commitment in 2021 to increase the active transport mode share to 25 per cent by 2030. That commitment is a part of our transport sector emissions reduction pledge and it supports the whole-of-government climate change strategy, so it sits within a very important framework of work across government to ensure that we are driving down emissions over time. To achieve this pledge we know that it is not good enough to just tell people to get out there and embrace more active modes of transport; we have also got to provide safe infrastructure that connects people to those key destination hubs and attract new interest, I guess, in taking up these modes through a change in attitudes and behaviours. Those two things are very linked – being able to provide those safe options I think in turn draws more people into being prepared to take up those options. We see that particularly in some of that data I recounted earlier about an increase in women participating in some of these activities. I often have the benefit of talking to members of the community, particularly women, about wanting to, for example, take their kids to child care or to school

through an active transport mode and wanting that to be better facilitated through better connection points. As a mum myself with a young child, I do get to walk him to child care; I know the benefits of that. That is the kind of opportunity that I think we want to unlock through this portfolio – working out how we can get more people taking those short trips through active modes.

We know that Victorians enjoy walking and bike riding: 76 per cent tell us they want to walk and bike more. We want to open up these options to those under-represented groups to a much greater extent than has been the case previously. I have talked about one cohort of that with women, but children and seniors as well – the opportunity to create more active modes of connection for seniors in our communities is really important. I think they are another key target cohort in this portfolio. We have been testing innovative and safer bike riding treatments to improve safety for all road users and have seen changes in ridership resulting from that innovation. For example, our pop-up bike lane initiative I highlighted before has seen a pretty significant increase in female ridership, most significantly in the Yarra trial area, where I think it has increased to up to about 41 per cent of those riders. That is great.

We also want active transport to be a preferred mode in our suburbs and our regions, not just in our inner-city areas. We have active transport projects in both development and delivery across our suburbs and in regional Victoria. This pipeline includes projects in Bentleigh, in Eltham, in Heathmont, in Heidelberg – those are the metro Melbourne projects – and also in Ballarat North, in Bright, in Horsham and Wodonga as key locations in the pipeline for our regions. It is a great opportunity to really I think drive a cultural shift in the way people move around their suburbs and to get the health and wellbeing benefits of that as well as the climate benefits of that as we move towards being a greener city and state.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We will now go to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, everyone.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Good morning.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** In 2002 the federal government gave all states 20 years to comply with the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* by making all tram stops fully compliant with disability standards for accessible public transport. We are here 22 years later and the Victorian Auditor-General has been pretty clear that Victoria is nowhere near achieving that currently. Just to see where we are at, what percentage of tram stops are currently compliant?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Thank you for your question. I am just trying to find our tram figures for you.

**Alan FEDDA:** Minister, would you like me to answer that?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** If you want to start us off, Mr Fedda, that would be great while I just try and find out the stats.

**Alan FEDDA:** There are 450 level-access tram stops in Melbourne at the moment. We know that about three-quarters of our tram stops still need to be upgraded, and we are doing significant work at the moment to continue upgrading those tram stops. We have got 12 level-access stops in six locations on La Trobe Street that are scheduled for this year. There are also two level-access stops at the Park Street interchange, and then there are a number of others as well around Domain Road, Moonee Ponds civic centre, Moreland Road and Fitzroy Gasworks that are all in the pipeline. Over the last two years a number of tram stops have been upgraded on William Street and Collins Street, at Parkville station, on Grattan Street and at Anzac station. I acknowledge that there are still many more to go, but we are moving forward.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** It is also worth noting alongside that that one part of the equation is the level-access tram stops. The other part is the rolling stock itself, and our next-generation trams, which are referred to as G-class trams, are a really important part of that accessibility story. It also goes to show, to your point, how important it is that we do not treat accessibility treatments as kind of bolted on; they have got to be built in, so it is increasingly a part of the way we are shaping any of our major projects and any of our rolling stock orders – to make sure it is factored in as a requirement of those builds. While we have got work underway – I think La Trobe Street is underway at the moment – and there is certainly more to do, the delivery of new rolling stock

and the work across our public transport network as a part of business-as-usual upgrades are a really important part of making sure that we can continue to build accessibility across our network.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I appreciate those comments. Just to make sure I have heard you correctly, though, from the department perspective is it that three-quarters of the stops are still not compliant?

**Alan FEDDA:** We have got 1600 tram stops across the network, and at the moment 450 of those tram stops are level-access, with the addition to come forward.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you for clarifying that. I might just move forward to Windsor station. Funding was allocated for planning and development works for the second entrance in the 2021–22 state budget, and that was completed but works have not progressed past that stage. I was just wondering if funding has been allocated for construction of the second entrance on the southern platform of Windsor station.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Just let me get an update on that. Is that falling within the transport infrastructure?

**Paul YOUNIS:** It is part of transport. We did some works at Windsor station; I am just trying to remember the details. We did deliver stage 1. On stage 2 the planning work has been done – if this is wrong, I will clarify it – but those works have not been funded.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. I appreciate that response. Moving forward to Chapel Street, the Labor government announced plans to install bike lanes on Chapel Street in 2020 as part of the pop-up bike lanes program, but the program was cancelled before those were installed. I understand that subsequently the department has stated it is considering options for permanent upgrades in the area. Could I just check in on that? Where are the bike lanes up to?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** For the pop-up bike lane project?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Around Chapel Street if that is possible.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** I will give you the update on where our pop-up bike lane process is up to in terms of the closing out of that. My departmental colleagues might be able to supplement my answer with some more specific information about Chapel Street.

**Paul YOUNIS:** We had a range of proposals for the pop-up bike lanes. We ended up delivering 94 kilometres of the pop-up bike lane work. Of course it was pop-up, so a lot of them were to be reviewed. We will end up installing around about 95 kilometres permanently. The ones down Chapel Street did not make the final cut. It was really just about making sure that we addressed those that were the highest priority at the time, and we got to 85 kilometres of pop-up bike lanes that met that. The Chapel Street ones – we had a whole bunch of others that we did not list – did not make that final list of pop-ups.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** There are two parts to that, just to clarify. In determining the original 100 kilometres, obviously, there was work done with local government areas to design where they were. There was some feedback very early on in the project whereby local government determined that areas that we had originally earmarked were not suitable for reasons they had identified, which reduced that figure to a bit over 95 kilometres in total. The second phase, as we close out the project, is about again working with key stakeholders and local government and assessing the data on the use of those bike lanes to look at which ones as a part of that trial really stacked up as being suitable for being made permanent, which is a process that we are in right now to close out that project and to make permanent the overwhelming majority of those bike lanes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. I appreciate that clarification. I suppose, specifically for that area in Chapel Street, are they getting bike lanes?

**Paul YOUNIS:** They are not currently on a plan that I am aware of, but what we do with all of our active transport works is work with local governments and work through priorities for them. I am not aware of Chapel Street being on our current – not that I am aware of.

**Fiona ADAMSON:** No, it is not. I think probably just to clarify what the minister said, we worked closely with the City of Stonnington. Probably the biggest concern there was for traders and the loss of car parking. It is something we are still in discussion with local council on, but obviously there is a –



**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** That probably goes to a really important part about these active transport projects. It goes to why they can be such challenging projects. Because of the competing road uses, we are often trying to – say in this example – work out whether you can have a bike lane that operates alongside a main road thoroughfare which might also be somewhere that has a fair heavy vehicle sort of thoroughfare. Also, with the business community, there are two aspects that relate to the business community that are pertinent to finding the best solutions. One is parking, as Ms Adamson has pointed out; the other is ensuring that we have got appropriate access for, say, trucks to be able to deliver produce and the like to the businesses along those thoroughfares. So they can actually prove to be quite challenging projects. It is why we work really closely with local government and also with residents and businesses to make sure that we have a proper understanding of the needs of that community – who needs to be getting in and out, how to support the traders in the area and what local government tells us about their intel about who is using an area – because we want to make sure that if we are going to put bike lanes in too, they are going to be safe.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes, for sure, and I appreciate you raising the different stakeholders that you are having to deal with in these programs. Speaking of busy roads – Sydney Road. Does this year’s active transport budget include any funding towards building protected bike lanes on Sydney Road?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Sydney Road is one of those thoroughfares that I think presents us with the challenges that I have just spoken to. It is obviously a very significant business hub or activity hub if you like. Heavy vehicles use that road as well as significant amounts of traffic, so it is probably one of the most challenging environments for us to resolve. We continue to work with those communities around finding an appropriate solution, but it is certainly, across our state, one of those that still needs more work to be done and more consultation to be done to try and find the appropriate solution that balances the needs of traders, of other road users and of course of our active transport users as well.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Look, I appreciate you raising that idea of balancing. I specifically note Sydney Road because it is, by all accounts, so dangerous for bike users in that area, and I note this month the government’s road safety inquiry report recommended prioritising the protected bike lanes to keep those vulnerable road users safe. So I just clarified that particular thoroughfare for that reason.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Yes. You are probably familiar that in 2021 there were various treatments made to that corridor – yellow painted crosswalks, green paint for cycling lanes, I think it was orange pavement treatment for part-time tram lanes and prominent safety signage across intersecting streets along Sydney Road. There are also pedestrian safety improvement works that have been completed at five of the key intersections along Sydney Road, in particular between Harding Street and Albert Street, and also a new level-access tram stop for route 19 was recently completed. So there has been some work done along that line; our further assessments of some of the greater complexities, to go to your point, are ongoing.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you for that. Staying in the area, the Upfield line I understand has the worst peak train frequency on the network with trains arriving only every 20 minutes in that context. Could you just clarify – or confirm really – that the peak train service frequency on the Upfield line will improve in 2025 following works that are ongoing in the broader metro?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Across the network?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Are you talking in particular on the back of, say, the Metro Tunnel opening? Is that why you have listed 2025?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes.

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** As I outlined earlier, we are in the process over the next year or so in the lead-up to the opening of the Metro Tunnel of doing the timetabling works. There will be some immediate uplift to some lines, incremental over time, as we unlock the capacity that that project allows us to. The Secretary might like to make some specific comments about Upfield, but we will have more to say about the timetabling impacts of the Metro Tunnel in due course.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Have you considered a turnback at Gowrie, for example?

**Paul YOUNIS:** We have not talked about turnbacks. I think we covered turnbacks before – but no. There are a number of options with Upfield, but what Metro Tunnel does – and the new X'trap 2.0 train – will also add capacity in there.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Secretary. We will go to Mr Tak.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, Secretary and officials. I would like to talk to the metropolitan rail investments. I refer to budget paper 3 on page 79, which outlines that funding is being provided to modernise the digital train radio system – almost \$214 million in total to ensure the safe operation of the train system. Minister, can you please provide the committee with some details about how this and other initiatives in the budget will make train services safer and more modern and improve reliability for Victorian communities?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Yes. Thank you, Mr Tak, for the question. As I have outlined previously, we have made and are making significant upgrades to Victoria's train network. That is obviously designed to make our train network more attractive and encourage people to leave the car at home and also meet the demand in a range of areas around our state where that demand is really growing. That is a part of the process of modernising our public transport network, alongside the work that is being led by my colleague the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, to make sure we are futureproofing our network through projects like the Metro Tunnel to ensure that we can add capacity and effectively put in place the enabling infrastructure that allows us to add services to our network over time. We were quite constrained prior to the Metro Tunnel, and that is why that project is so very important to unlocking greater capacity across our entire train network. It also presents a very big shift to our broader public transport network as we ensure through that timetabling process that we have got an integrated public transport network and, as new stations come on line, for example, that we have got the appropriate connection points between trams and buses to make sure that that works in an integrated way and works really well.

While it might not sound like the most exciting thing in the world, our investment is an incredibly important part of the government's commitment to a modern public transport network, and the investment I am referring to is that \$213.7 million to support the continued operation of our digital train radio system in particular. Again, I talked earlier about less visible kinds of investments in our system but ones that go to the reliability and punctuality and safety of our system, and the DTRS is a really important part of that. It is about preparing our train network communication system for the future. The DTR system allows train controllers, drivers, guards and signallers working on passenger and freight train services to use a single system for voice and data communication, including, and importantly, emergency calls as well. I want to take this opportunity to highlight the extraordinary contribution of these workers each and every day in keeping our network moving. It is one of those tasks that you do not notice if it is going well, and so often we are not aware of the work of these people in ensuring that we have got a safe public transport network each and every day.

We are investing in an extension of the current Metro DTRS support contract with Nokia Siemens. That is really essential to keeping the network operating, but we are also funding DTP to deliver a business case for that next-generation digital train radio system, which goes to that story of innovation that I think I have been telling across a number of different modes of public transport. It builds also on the \$200 million that we provided in the 2022–23 state budget to replace the ageing DTRS equipment. Without this funding to maintain the existing communication systems and prepare for the next-generation systems, the safety and reliability of our network would be put at risk from things like outages – and any outage of that system effectively makes it necessary to immediately stop trains, either on parts of the network or – in really severe cases – across the entire Metro network. So it is an absolutely essential component of us being able to continue to keep people moving across our state and the city. We saw an example of this in Sydney, actually, in March last year, when there was an outage of their DTRS, which connects train crews with signallers and the rail operations centre, and that resulted in the entire network going down for several hours on a Wednesday afternoon, so not ideal. We do know that when these things happen, they are incredibly disruptive.

The investment we are making in this budget to futureproof the DTRS is part of the government's strong commitment to a reliable world-class public transport network for Victorians, especially as we switch on Big Build projects like the Metro Tunnel, which I was talking to earlier, which is obviously designed to deliver a truly turn-up-and-go service for our city to add that capacity that we know we need to continue to modernise our network as a whole. Sitting behind that are really important investments like this one to make sure that we

have got those communication systems on board to enable the network to actually function. It also complements of course the \$233.4 million investment that we have made to prepare systems, infrastructure, staff and customer information for the Metro Tunnel opening and the work that we referred to earlier to switch on those Big Build rail network upgrades and make sure that they are operational and safe.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you very much, Minister. You also mentioned the preparations for the Metro Tunnel, and we heard about some of this work from Minister Pearson last week. As minister for public transport, can you please tell us a bit more about how this budget's investment, including the Metro Tunnel readiness funding but also the DTRS, will help operationally prepare for work for the tunnel opening?

**Gabrielle WILLIAMS:** Sure. Thank you. It is a good question. That \$233 million that I referred to earlier is really about ensuring that the Metro Tunnel is well and truly integrated into the network so that it can deliver not only the frequency uplifts but also the reliability uplifts in our train system to keep pace with a rapidly growing city. We have all been talking ad nauseam in just about every portfolio area about not only the growth that is occurring right now across our city and state but the growth that is due to come our way of course with that figure about Melbourne being the size of London in the 2050s. While housing is one part of that question, we also need to make sure that we have got a public transport system that can grow to meet that demand. Obviously the Metro Tunnel is a very important part of that, and so are our investments to make sure that we are ready for it.

I know the Minister for Transport Infrastructure spoke to the infrastructure and trial operation elements of the tunnel last week. The investment in this year's budget for Metro Tunnel preparedness, though, includes funding for customer readiness, such as developing wayfinding and customer information, keeping in mind that this will represent quite a different way of moving through our public transport and in particular our train system, and also funding to continue recruitment and funding for drivers and building on the investments that we have made in previous budgets.

Because the Metro Tunnel is introducing so many new features to our network, it is critical that we are preparing both staff and the community as well as we can and as carefully as we can to ensure that smooth transition to the greatest change to our network since the city loop opened, what, 40 years ago. The new features will include in the new Metro Tunnel stations things like platform screen doors at each of the stations. We have not had that before. That is quite new to public transport users in our city, so it is important people are prepared for some of those changes. We have also got things like high-capacity signalling along the Cranbourne, Pakenham and Sunbury lines and of course the fact that passengers will now be interchanging in new ways and navigating their way around five brand new stations in the centre of Melbourne, so there is quite a lot of work to make sure that we prepare Victorians for that but also manage well the knowledge and safety implications of that to ensure a smooth transition to a different way of using our train network.

There are also changes of course to the way that train passengers will interchange with our tram network, which has been made easier and more accessible than ever before thanks to our investments in the level-access tram stops that we are continuing to make. Passengers getting off the train at the new State Library station will be able to transfer to a level-access tram stop on La Trobe Street, one of the 12 new level-access tram stops that we are delivering at six locations along that corridor. That is thanks to a \$68 million investment in the 2022–23 state budget. At the new Anzac station, passengers will be able to take advantage of Melbourne's first direct train–tram interchange – again, another significant change to the way people move through our public transport system. At Parkville we have recently opened a new level-access tram stop right at the doorstep of where that new station is to make it as seamless as possible for the passengers to navigate their way around the city without missing their next train or tram. We know it is critical to make sure that the right signage is there and that the right passenger information and support from customer service staff is there as well and in place from day one to help people adjust to a very different network.

We are committed to delivering the world-class turn-up-and-go service that Victorians expect after the Metro Tunnel opens, but we know that there is a risk that if there are any outages or disruptions caused by the communications system failing, for example, as I was just talking to, we need to be able to manage those. That is why the funds on the maintenance and replacement of our DTRS are very important in that context as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister.

Minister and officials, the time has come to end this session. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee this morning. The committee will follow-up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is now going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the Parliament portfolio at 11:40 am.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**