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Premier of Victoria
Deputy Premier
Minister for the Suburban Rail Loop
Minister for Transport and Infrastructure
Treasurer of Victoria
Minister for Public Transport
1 Treasury Place
Melbourne VIC 3002

1 March 2023

Introduction

The Metropolitan Transport Forum (MTF) is a transport interest group for Melbourne metropolitan local governments. The MTF has been established for over 25 years and has a membership of 26 metropolitan councils, and meets regularly to discuss transport topics of interest and relevance to local governments and their communities. The MTF also acts to liaise between local and state governments, and advocates on behalf of member councils on key transport issues of metropolitan significance. The MTF works closely with the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV).

The MTF informs, researches and debates transport issues with metropolitan local governments throughout the year. Our strategic plan identifies three main areas of attention within the Victorian transport planning agenda:

- Active – to achieve more funding for cycling and pedestrian infrastructure and projects that improve rider and walker safety;
- Buses – to increase patronage on buses; and
- Choice – to provide alternatives to private cars for the wider Melbourne community to move around Melbourne for recreation, employment and education.

In recent years we have held well attended transport related seminars on the challenges and opportunities facing the bus sector in metropolitan Melbourne with senior speakers from the Department of Transport, academia and industry.

Election promises noted

The election commitment tracker site shows that transport remains an integral part of the Labor party's policy platform, and the MTF notes that there have been considerable commitments in previous budgets to major infrastructure programs such as the Level Metropolitan Transport Forum –
2023 budget submission
to the Treasurer of Victoria

Crossing Removal Program, and the Suburban Rail Loop, as well as major projects in the west and to the airport.

The MTF is also very aware of the considerable change in travel habits which occurred during the lock downs responses early in the Covid pandemic, and that other changes have occurred in people's transport choices around their recreational as well as social activities, not just their employment and educational activities.

As part of the lead up to the 2022 state election, the MTF again hosted town hall forums with a number of councils, particularly to allow candidates and the community to exchange views, policies and concerns about transport issues. Eight forums were held across wider Melbourne with strong community attendance both in person and on-line.

What was very evident at these meetings was the strong desire of the community to be genuinely consulted in the development and timing of projects which affect their lives. As more people work from home, their exposure to expected and perceived project impacts is now across a much wider geographic area, and people's appetite for change is greatly reduced. The community's reserves have been considerably depleted through three years of covid restrictions, and now they do not wish to be constrained, or have their lives interrupted without good notice.

However, the community also clearly voiced its long term desire for service improvement. This is particularly true in transport (which we believe runs a close second to the health sector concerns which were a major focus of the 2022 budget).

A new electoral mandate has provided the government with an opportunity to tackle some of the intransigent problems which have shrouded the success of this vital public service.

Bus Service funding needs

Lack of investment, erratic timetables, short service days, and poor information systems have led to poorly patronised buses not fulfilling their potential role in the transport system. This is a major concern when buses are the only mode of public transport for 70% of Melbourne beyond the effective reach of rail and tram services.

Poorly connected and serviced growth areas suffer high car dependence, financial pressures, and high levels of congestion. Those without car access suffer social isolation through limited links to jobs and services.

The MTF considers that service improvements are required across the entire bus network. Particularly, changes must be identified, funded, tested and implemented in a customer-orientated manner to provide:

- frequencies better integrated with tram and train services;
- more direct routes, faster travel times between locations;
- earlier starts and later finishes, as well as Sunday services;
- ready access to real-time bus information, like tram tracker;

- expanded services in growth areas;
- More comfortable, better driven buses; and
- Extension of E-buses beyond the current trials, especially on routes with high pedestrian and cyclist use.

The MTF is concerned that delivery of these improvements cannot be achieved within the commitments made during the 2022 election. Failure to make these improvements will result in even further degradation of the perception and place of buses in the overall public transport network.

As has been identified previously, bus services can be upgraded at far less cost to the budget than heavy rail, light rail or tram services, and at far less cost than freeways. Accordingly, it is critical to ensure that the underutilised metropolitan bus system is enabled to play a greater role in Melbourne’s transport system.

Planning

Major projects can take more than a single election cycle to deliver, and it is acknowledged that Melbourne’s residents can and do move home/jobs more frequently than on a four yearly cycle. It is strongly recommended that the community be kept well informed during the entire planning process in the lead up to projects being formally budgeted for and included in capital work program.

As the front line for community contact, local government regularly sees concerns raised that community members are surprised by the announcement of projects. Much of the current engagement approach is about informing, rather than consulting. What consultation is undertaken is usually considered by the community to be “window dressing” which does not take into account deeper issues which the community identify during design and construction. Project teams arrive like an invading army, occupy locations, communicate from behind palisades, and seem to deflect rather than respond to issues raised.

It is considered that the government should identify ways to work with the community on these projects, rather than simply delivering outcomes.

The long lead time for major projects also provides an opportunity to prime the community for their arrival to maximise their use once the ribbon is cut. For example, the SRL will deliver a whole new set of connections for people not wishing to make CBD trips between their homes and offices/schools/etc. But it is expected to take decades to deliver.

During the planning and construction phase, services could be provided which “forecast” the ultimate project, allowing the benefits of the anticipated circumferential transport routes to be understood and embedded, increasing the appetite of the community for the finished product. For example, a new bus route that mirrors the SRL alignment as a short-term solution before Stage 2 of the SRL is open, running at similar frequencies and for similar ranges of service times as the final SRL would promote patronage for the rail line.

Transport Integration

Major projects often appear to be visioned as single mode solutions. They rarely reflect the complexity of the community, or the complexity of the problems they are trying to address. One of the surprising side effects of the Covid lockdowns has been a greater appreciation for the local community, and the benefits which are available within 5km of our homes. This realisation should be reinforced with a determination to deliver truly integrated transport at a local level as part of major works.

For example, one of the critical objectives for the SRL project is to enhance multi-modal transport connectivity. There are however no plans within SRL's current scope to make any improvements to connections, accessibility, safety or convenience to some bus interchanges. This will be a poor transport outcome. While it is understood that "scope creep" is undesirable, proper scoping and consultation during the concept development phase, would result in stronger finished products.

It is vital that there is a coordinated and holistic approach by the Victorian Government to planning and implementing transport projects so that areas around the "major" project elements can function as safe, accessible, sustainable and connected environments. It is therefore important that the transformation of bus services and other mode infrastructure be funded and constructed concurrently with the SRL project and other major projects and reflects the effort and contribution made by communities through the EES and similar phases. Similarly clear communication by project proponents of what adaptations are will or will not be able to be incorporated should be made. Community members expect this courtesy.

Having city-shaping projects such as SRL and LXR that don't close the gaps in infrastructure does not provide for convenient and connected transport systems and detracts from the work to encourage sustainable and active transport.

Active Transport

Walking and cycling funding in Victoria is falling behind as the NSW Government ramps up spending with local government active transport grants (\$150 million in the last two years). Victoria should emulate this successful approach, working in partnership with local government to deliver various critical pedestrian infrastructure that complement the SCC network.

For many years, Metropolitan Councils have developed active transport strategies, aiming to increase the safety and attractiveness to less confident users, as well as the legibility of cycling and pedestrian connections. These plans are developed in conjunction with the community and reflect the communities' appetites and ambitions.

Co-funding of these already identified (and costed) projects on a metropolitan wide scale would rapidly increase the quality and extent of infrastructure servicing these two transport modes. Such an approach would ensure that projects are delivered quickly and reliably,

and would demonstrate interest in and support for these smaller projects which are likely to make a significant difference to transport mode choice.

Public transport accessibility

The Victorian Government is yet to comply with public transport accessibility targets. This reduces access to jobs and services for Victorians' with a disability. And it is well recognised that accessible infrastructure is also highly valued by older community members, and parents travelling with small children.

A funding plan for our public transport is urgently needed, including upgrading tram stops and rolling out low-floor trams across the network so our public transport can work for everyone.

Conclusion

Improved transport services and infrastructure can be a significant legacy for any government; likewise, a failure to recognise and act on community needs to help create a thriving social as well as economic environment for all residents.

The MTF urges the state government to not just deliver on its election commitments, but to look to the way it engages with the community in the design as well as the construction phase; to see that local knowledge can, and will if used, enhance the building of a rich and connected society.

We strongly urge the government to pick up the moribund bus reform program; and to see it deliver improved service frequency, span of hours and days, and for it to integrate into the wider train and tram service. We also urge the government to meet its access obligations on public transport infrastructure, and to significantly increase funding for pedestrian and cycling projects.

I would be pleased to meet with you to discuss this submission and can be contacted at mtf@mtf.org.au.



Cr Jonathon Marsden
Metropolitan Transport Forum Chair

Cc President of MAV

Metropolitan Transport Forum –
2023 budget submission
to the Treasurer of Victoria

February 2023

Page 5 of 5