TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone

Melbourne—Thursday, 9 July 2020

(via videoconference)

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Mr Ian Hopkins, Principal Advise\or, Network Planning, Yarra Trams.

   The CHAIR: Welcome to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone. We welcome everyone who is watching the live broadcast.

Before you can begin, Mr Hopkins, I would just like to read out a witness statement. All evidence taken at the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. We welcome any opening comments, but I ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. Can I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise any interference. If you have any technical difficulties, please disconnect and contact the committee contacts provided. Could you please begin by giving your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then start your presentation. Thank you.

   Mr HOPKINS: Thank you. My name is Ian Hopkins, and I will just share my screen. I have got a brief presentation that just covers the key points of our submission.

Visual presentation.

   Mr HOPKINS: Okay. Thank you for the opportunity to present this evidence. I am representing Emilie van de Graaff, who is Director of Passenger and Network Innovation, who is an apology today as she has lost her voice. My role at Yarra Trams is Principal Advisor of Network Planning. In this role I lead a small team who undertake analysis; we develop proposals to improve the tram network from the operator's point of view. So we work very closely with our colleagues at the Department of Transport on network change and improvement and with our mutual stakeholders, particularly local government.

Yarra Trams and I would both personally respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which the tram network operates, the Boon Wurrung and Woiwurrung people, pay our respects to their elders, past, present and emerging, and acknowledge and uphold their continuing relationship to the land.

The free tram zone has presented a number of operational challenges. I will just briefly touch on a couple of them that are covered in our submission. One is the way overcrowding can affect the passenger experience and quality of travelling on trams in Melbourne. Another aspect is the challenge of where the free tram zone has affected traffic on the city fringe, particularly around Docklands, for example, and the risk of expansion of the free tram zone into areas where the trams are not separated from the traffic could increase delays to the tram network. We have also identified in our submission some challenges where the free tram zone, or expansion of the free tram zone, may reduce some benefits from some of the other initiatives to improve public transport in the city.

There are a couple of practical operational issues that we have highlighted in our submission. One of them—and this photo is a photo of the tram stop at Collins Street and William Street—really highlights that the free tram zone and its extensions are not inclusive to all the users who might want to use the public transport network. You can see there a non-accessible stop. The free tram zone has also led to some crowding-related safety concerns. You can see the number of people who are waiting at that tram stop in this particular example.

One of the other issues that we cover off in our submission is that it slowed down the tram network at the time, issues around dwell time, and crowded stops and trams can result in longer operational dwell time. So we use staff at peak times and technology and things like countdown clocks to try to keep the network moving.

One of the things I thought we should share is that this photo kind of captures some of the key ideas that would need to be considered in order to introduce additional CBD services. In this photo you can see some of our vehicles, you can see some traffic signals and in the background there you can see a tram stop. So the sorts of

things that go through our mind as an operator when we consider questions like the provision of additional CBD capacity are things like whether we would need new terminus facilities on the city fringe, for example, so you can manage and evenly space the tram services; availability of vehicles, availability of drivers, if we are looking to operate, say, services on top of the existing peak-hour service. And those, in turn, can then have further downstream things to think about, in particular things like depot capacity because most of the tram depots that are close to the CBD are running very close to capacity already.

The traffic signals are a really interesting aspect of tram operations through the city—the balance of priority for trams and pedestrians in particular, the limits on throughput that the traffic signals present, and also the capacity of the tram stops, both for people and for tram-on-tram delays, with trams queueing to actually get into the stops. There are a couple of interesting aspects there.

In our submission we also touch on a number of opportunities for improving tram services in the free tram zone. One that we see as a potential quick-win, no-regrets kind of investment opportunity that really does align with our stakeholders' strategies as well is improving the safety of the network in the free tram zone. This map shows locations where we have had vehicle-to-tram collisions, passengers falling because of drivers needing to make an emergency stop—and those triangles there are showing the serious injuries that have resulted from that. That is five years of data, showing that these issues are concentrated actually in the free tram zone, partly because of the way the road space is allocated in the free tram zone.

Our submission also highlights the opportunities at the stops. Quite a few of the tram stops in the free tram zone need to be longer, they need to be more accessible on many routes, and there are some really great opportunities to look at better integrating with the footpath so that it is easier to get on and off trams, get to where you are going and access the opportunities in the city. Thinking through the stop design there are opportunities then to look at better safety and security systems and technology—so that touches on the other terms of reference—things like touch screens and passenger counting technology. Some of those opportunities for technology we cover in our submission. One is a modernised vehicle monitoring system. That can be a real enabler of new ways of running the tram network that are potentially beneficial for passengers—things like headway operation, better disruption management, better and more accurate real-time information. So that is a really key opportunity for technology to support the transport system.

Another thread is how you can roll out digital technology whilst making use of really scarce real estate, because space on our stops is really at a premium. This smart pole kind of concept can be the digital real estate; it can be the groundwork for laying out a pathway to introduce things like Internet of Things, capabilities on the tram network, and provide a whole range of urban digital services—environmental monitoring, emergency monitoring, hazard detection, customer service responsiveness, direct customer services like wi-fi. We have been exploring the role of these kinds of technologies with stakeholders like the University of Melbourne with the AIMES program. I think the committee has received some evidence on that.

Another thread for improved technology in improving the tram network is better data collection, so in particular passenger counting technology onboard and at the stop. We are working with the Department of Transport, looking at some projects to roll this out because there are some quite significant data gaps in this area at the moment.

This picture here is actually a photo of what modern tram priority technology looks like from the inside, as it were. This is an onboard unit. This is the actual onboard unit that we used in the trial for better tram priority that we did with the Australian Road Research Board, Department of Transport, VicRoads, La Trobe University and some other partners, using more modern communication technology for tram priority. This shows what it looks like from the outside with the on-road units that were also trialled as part of that on-road priority trial.

So in summary, we see quite a wide range of opportunities to improve tram services in the free tram zone. This gives you a little bit of an overview of the kinds of operational considerations that go through our mind as a tram operator in thinking about these questions and the role of the free tram zone. I will conclude my presentation there.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ian, for that presentation.

Mr TARLAMIS: When the free tram zone was established in 2014 was there any thought about the size of it actually being larger or was the current size of the zone always the plan, the original concept?

Mr HOPKINS: To my knowledge, the boundaries are determined by government. We simply worked with implementing the boundaries as proposed by government.

Mr TARLAMIS: Do you think there are other ways in which you could meet the objectives of the free tram zone without expanding the zone? If so, could you talk about what those might be?

Mr HOPKINS: Look, what I would invite the committee to consider is that the really powerful part of the free tram zone is not the free part, it is the tram zone part. So the vast majority of the benefits that we get in central Melbourne are from having that network and from having a frequent, street-level, high-capacity public transport network that is bringing people into the places where activities are actually happening. That network actually has an enormous amount of latent potential if we can make it accessible to all, we can make it safer, we can make it run more smoothly, we can make it run faster, we can make it have more consistent travel times. So on the sorts of opportunities that we think as being really compelling in that sort of space, we have outlined some of them in the presentation, but we would be focusing on safety and good experience at the stops to realise those sorts of benefits and really tap into that potential.

Mr TARLAMIS: In your presentation you made reference to data gaps. Can you elaborate on what they are a little bit further?

Mr HOPKINS: So one of the challenges we have on the network is we do not have a lot of real-time data collection and we do not actually have a lot of good passenger data collection. So the way the ticketing system works is we have some numbers from where passengers touch on. We do not have data generated inside the free tram zone where people are not touching on at all and we do not have data about where people are getting off the network. Now, there have been trials and pilots for new technology, and DoT and us are working on expanding the rollout of that. But the potential with things like the automatic passenger counting technologies is to get a much richer understanding of where people are actually travelling, which is really key to helping to better balance the way we are using the assets of the tram network on DoT's behalf in getting the best possible service offer.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Ian, for your presentation. You brought up a couple of interesting points in my mind. One, the expansion of the tram network, would you believe that would actually reduce the pressure—from some of these slides that you have actually shown? My understanding is Melbourne City Council in their integrated transport strategy had suggestions of expanding the tram network from the Docklands going towards Footscray, either down Footscray Road or down Dynon Road, to actually connect Footscray. Obviously the one tram, number 57, that takes an hour and a half to get to the city could easily be expanded down either Footscray Road or Dynon Road to connect the inner-west of Melbourne to the Docklands and to the Melbourne CBD. Are you a supporter of that expansion, of the missing links in our tram network, and making sure that the west of Melbourne is connected into the CBD by the tram system?

Mr HOPKINS: These sorts of network expansion questions raise some really interesting opportunities for the network. So absolutely DOT is lead agency for the questions of the expansion of the network. One of the things we bring to the conversation is our own network planning and network analysis approach, which is different to the way the department usually looks at it, but it generates some insights that complement that. When it comes to the network expansion and network structure I think the really interesting opportunities in Melbourne are for the tram network to expand with cross-links and connections—so bringing the network together in intensifying that inner core. One of the strategic needs is to look for opportunities to get to sites where we can have additional depots and what we call stabling—so just to have enough room for the assets. Those are some of the dynamics that drive conversations about where the network should reach out to.

Dr CUMMING: So, Ian, have you actually looked west in the way that obviously there are opportunities around the Docklands, being possibly some of the old siding sites around Pacific National or where the trains currently sit. There are obviously opportunities down Dynon Road and Footscray Road. Also obviously another site would possibly be not far from the Docklands or where the old markets were—the old fresh fruit markets on Footscray Road. So have Yarra Trams looked at that? Because I know that Melbourne City Council, part of their integrated transport strategy obviously saw that as an opportunity, and Maribyrnong City Council obviously supported Melbourne City Council. And it is not necessarily the department's push but the actual councils can see the merits of expanding those tram networks into the Docklands and into the inner-west of Melbourne in the Footscray CBD and the university city that is there.

Mr HOPKINS: The department leads the question about where and when and to where the network may expand. Our remit is to help with the conversation about how to do it really well from an operations point of view and also from getting how tram infrastructure actually gives you really great results. In that sort of space we are very much in live conversation with the DoT about the shape of the network and how it fits together but just as much in, say, a conversation about a Dynon Road tram to say, 'Well, how would you lay it out in the street so you've got the safest, smoothest, most rewarding customer experience out of that? How would you place the stops and integrate them into the public realm?'. So we are very aware of conversations about how trams might go out to some of those other parts of Melbourne, but DoT does lead those exercises in sort of scoping and evaluating and determining how those—

Dr CUMMING: So what I understand from you, Ian, is that you are virtually saying, with Melbourne City Council's push as well as Maribyrnong City Council's push, that DoT would actually have to grant the wishes of both those city councils—and not necessarily just Dynon Road. You could possibly be looking down Footscray Road because obviously both of those very important roads that go into Melbourne or the west currently have good bus connections but they obviously lack the tram network connections, and it makes no sense to me, nor has it done to the west, that it takes an hour and a half to get on a tram from Footscray and go north and then come back in and around to get into the city. It is quite archaic, obviously. And obviously— sorry—historically trams in Footscray used to be very different. There used to be trams to the western oval, there used to be trams into Seddon. There were historically certain trams missing or taken away to allow for more cars. So it would be great to get back to our tram network.

Mr HOPKINS: So I might just say Keolis Downer runs a couple of the modern tramways, modern light rails, elsewhere in Australia, and our Keolis colleagues in particular run many of the modern networks in Europe. I think is a good observation that, yes, there used to be an historic network in Footscray. When it comes to developing a really high-quality, modern line, the sorts of things that are key to the success of that are separation from other traffic, really good signal priority, and well-designed stops that are universally accessible. On the network we have there is still so much opportunity to actually provide those improvements to the network we have currently got, particularly in the free tram zone itself where we have some of those—they are quite genuine—safety issues and concerns about the quality of the network that we have. So it is just the observation that if a tram were to go out to those areas, I think our focus would be on helping the department make it the best possible modern light rail line.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Ian. Ian, one of the arguments of those who are opposed to the free tram zone is that it is overcrowded. That is an operational issue. That is not what we are talking about here. If we started charging these people, removed the free tram zone, are you telling us that, you know, 30 per cent of the people are going to get off the trams?

Mr HOPKINS: So overcrowding is an operational issue, but it is also a strategic problem in the sense that if to respond to it we give, say, additional service, that could lead to quite a large number of downstream costs— so, for example, questions like having enough terminal capacity, having the vehicles, actually having the depots to put them in. So there are some quite big potential ramifications there. As to the way people's decisions for travel would change with the price, I think those are the sorts of questions that DOT has been investigating, I understand from the evidence that Jeroen was just presenting. We would look to work with the department on seeing how any operational consequences of any changes to the free tram zone would need to play out. We take a risk- and opportunity-based approach to evaluating those sorts of things from our accountabilities as the accredited rail operator, thinking about safety, thinking about crowding, to work our way through understanding the sorts of steps that might be needed to mitigate any of those impacts.

Mr BARTON: I will be quick, Ian. When we are talking about increasing the zone to take in the university sector, we are talking about one extra stop, I believe, or two, and if we go down to the Royal Children's we are talking about one or two stops. I think the longest extension is down St Kilda Road, which will be offset by the Metro Tunnel and all the work that is going to be done down there. But with the other one, where we are going out towards the MCG and the sports precinct, what we are talking about is that most of those people who will be accommodated by that will be on weekends, going to the footy, or on Thursday and Friday nights—all that sort of stuff. I have not been convinced that it is a huge issue to increase these one or two stops, but it is being presented to us that it is all doom and gloom for the network.

Mr HOPKINS: I guess I would observe that the issues that are ongoing inside the free tram zone are the same sorts of constraints and issues that are potentially there in the extension. So I think the fact that the free tram zone is not inclusive—that we do not have low-floor trams and platform stops so that people can use the free tram zone—is one of the issues that would potentially be exacerbated if it is expanded into areas where there are still safety zones and non-accessible stops.

Mr BARTON: The government have got fairly big spending on new trams and development of these things, though, haven't they?

Mr HOPKINS: Well, the DOT looks after the overall size of the program, and at the moment the remaining stops in the city are still on the list of things to do, for example.

Mr GEPP: Just a very quick one. Thanks for your time today, Ian. I just want to tease out that last answer a little bit more. Obviously the infrastructure around the stops is not conducive to the flat trams and allowing people with disabilities et cetera access. I do not know whether you have examined the terms of reference and the proposed extension of the tram zone, but do you have an estimate on how many stops would be impacted by that deficiency, were we to extend? And—again you may have to take this on notice—what is the cost of modifying an existing stop to fit the requirements that you have just outlined?

Mr HOPKINS: I think in the background report that we included in our submission we identified some specific examples of non-accessible stops. Just off the top of my head I recall, for example, in the proposed extension towards the MCG, the question is: what do you do with the tram stop for Cook's Cottage and the Fitzroy Gardens, which is arguably an important potential destination? There is currently not an accessible stop there. The cost of accessible stops does vary quite a lot site by site.

So we are doing a lot of work with DOT at the moment. You may recall from, I think, the state budget last year that there is a tram stop rollout strategy in development, and it is looking again at the opportunities in the stop design itself to try to make sure that we can find that sweet spot between needing to have a very site-specific response to the particular location where we are looking to build the stop whilst also trying to make them a little bit more reproducible and making it easier to roll them out and help drive the cost of them down. So I am always a little bit reluctant to say how much each one costs, because they very much need to be thought about in context so you get the very best local result and fit around the local conditions.

The CHAIR: Mr Hopkins, thank you very much for your presentation today; I really found it informative. And also the discussion was interesting—and Dr Cumming's advocacy for the west, as always. Thank you very much today for your presentation. We really appreciate the contribution of Yarra Trams. Obviously you are the one that is running the network along with the workers and employees on the ground delivering this essential service, so thank you.

Mr HOPKINS: Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.