

## **To inquire into the factors leading to and causes of failures in the provision of metropolitan and V/Line train services.**

“If your train is late, it’s a 100% failure on our part.”

Ian Hodges, General manager VicRail

(‘Vicrail’s “profit”’ by Ross Warneke, The Age, 12/12/1978, p. 9)

### **Prologue**

In the 1970s when VicRail was being starved of funds due to the cost overruns of the underground loop and general cutbacks in railway expenditure, its General Manager would still take responsibility for service failures. The current operator Connex will simply ‘apologise for the inconvenience’ but not even be liable for compensation payment unless a service is grossly late.

### **About this submission**

The purpose of this submission, written by the Upgrade Upfield Corridor Committee (UUCC) in response to the terms of reference of the Select Committee on Train Services, is to highlight relevant issues with reference to the provision of services on the Upfield rail service in particular, and the metropolitan network in general.

UUCC is a public interest group which seeks to improve public transport services in the northern suburbs of Melbourne specifically, and in Melbourne generally. It grew out of organisations which were formed about 20 years ago to oppose the State Government's intention to close the Upfield suburban rail line.

### **Background**

The Upfield train line is part of the Melbourne suburban rail network, running from central Melbourne through the suburbs of Macaulay, Flemington, Parkville, Brunswick, Coburg, Merlynston, Fawkner and Campbellfield. The line shares the junction at North Melbourne Station and the city loop tunnel with lines from Craigieburn, Sydenham, Werribee and Williamstown. The maximum number of trains that can travel through this loop (as stated by the Department of Transport), constrained by existing infrastructure and procedures, is 24 per hour. The current maximum number of trains travelling through the loop is 21.

In the late 1980's the then State Government decided to close the Upfield rail line, and replace it and the Sydney Road tram service with a tram service along the rail line easement. From the early 1970's the rail service had been had been running at a capacity less than that of the metropolitan network. Weekday and Saturday services ceased at 7pm. and there were no Sunday services.

Much of the line infrastructure was outdated and in need of replacement or repair. A campaign by community and public transport advocacy groups eventually convinced the State Government to abandon plans to close the line and to upgrade the infrastructure and services to the standard of the rest of the network. Following the upgrade, the service was re-opened in 1998 with the addition of night and Sunday services.

Unlike every other line on the suburban network the Upfield line does not have additional peak hour services. The current peak hour frequency, 20 minutes, is the same as the non-peak frequency. The frequency reduces to 30 minutes after 7 pm despite large numbers of city commuters who are travelling much later than the traditional 5:30 "knock-off" time.

The only change to the Upfield service in the last decade has been the replacement of 3 carriage sets with 6 carriage sets in peak periods. However all peak hour services are now regularly overcrowded, and this situation is exacerbated whenever services are cancelled or run with only 3 carriage sets because of service disruptions.

Overcrowding occurs also when major events, including football and cricket matches, concerts and festivals occur in Melbourne at night (usually on Friday and Saturday). No additional services are timetabled on the Upfield line to transport the additional number of people returning home from these events, the usual 30 minute service frequency applies.

The Upfield line, with only three premium stations, has the lowest proportion of premium to non-premium stations (23%) on the metropolitan network. There are no premium stations between North Melbourne and Coburg; in between which there are 7 non-premium stations.

### **Service failures, their causes and contributing factors**

Service failures experienced by passengers on the metropolitan train network include:

1. late running services;
2. cancelled services;
3. replacement of 6 carriage sets with 3 carriage sets;
4. insufficient number of services;
5. inadequate information systems;
- 6 Lack of facilities at unstaffed suburban stations
7. lack of rail network in many areas of Melbourne.

#### **1. Late running services**

Connex has been fined repeatedly over several years for its poor performance in relation to running trains on time. However the actual number of late running services has been many times larger than the official figures as trains running late by less than 6 minutes are not considered "late".

Late running services cause inconvenience to passengers. This includes being late for work or appointments, missing other transport connections, and having to travel on trains that are more crowded than would be the case if the service was running on time.

## **2. Cancelled services**

Cancelled services, particularly in peak periods, have been the norm for several years. The consequences for passengers are generally the same as those for late running services but can be more severe. A cancellation occurring in a peak period when trains are often overcrowded can result in passengers having to travel on a subsequent extremely overcrowded service, or being unable to board the next one or more services because of overcrowding.

A cancelled service on the Upfield line produces a service gap of 40 minutes, in both peak and non-peak periods. Most cancellations have occurred in peak periods. There have been a couple of occasions in the morning peak period when two adjacent services have been cancelled, producing a service gap of 60 minutes.

## **3. Replacement of 6 carriage sets with 3 carriage sets**

It has been only in the past few years that six carriage sets have replaced three carriage sets during peak periods on the Upfield line. However, reversion to 3 carriage sets in morning peak periods has been a regular occurrence during this time. When this has occurred in the morning peak it has become almost impossible to board a three carriage set between Jewell and North Melbourne. And likewise in the evening peak at Flagstaff Station.

## **4. Insufficient number of services**

The recent growth in passenger numbers on the train network has not been matched by an increase in timetabled services. Again this results in overcrowding, which contributes to late running.

On the Upfield line the peak hour frequency has remained at 20 minutes for more than 20 years despite the passenger numbers increasing 4 to 5 fold during this time.

The number of services operated, or service frequency, should be based on a minimum frequency that makes the overall system viable and minimises waiting times for passengers using more than one per journey. This frequency should be enhanced appropriately to allow all passengers to travel comfortably and safely.

Current service frequencies on many lines are inadequate. We consider that the following minimum frequencies should apply:

peak hour services - 10 minutes (on the Upfield line, it is 20 minutes);

shoulder hour (period immediately before and after peak hour) services - 15 minutes (on the Upfield line, it is 20 to 30 minutes);

non-peak weekday and weekend day services - 15 minutes (on the Upfield line, it is 20 minutes);

weekday and weekend evening services - 20 minutes (on the Upfield line, it is 30 minutes).

In addition there are no extra Upfield services on nights, weekends and public holidays when major events are held in the city. These events include cultural events and concerts in the Alexander Gardens, Myer Music Bowl, MCG and Etihad Stadium, and sporting events including cricket, football, soccer, and the Australia Open Tennis Tournament. In particular there are a large number of Carlton Football Club supporters who live in the Upfield corridor, and trains (and Sydney Road trams) taking supporters home after matches at the MCG and Etihad Stadium are often overcrowded. This is exacerbated after night matches at the MCG and Etihad Stadium with a 30 minute train service.

## **5. Overcrowded trains**

Overcrowded trains, another service failure, have been occurring for several years and result from all of the failures discussed above. When trains are overcrowded they are delayed, which results in them being late running, and potentially delaying other trains which share the same line.

There have been significant problems caused to passengers from overcrowding including illness, exacerbation of existing health conditions especially respiratory ailments, stressing pregnant women and the elderly, and causing panic attacks. In addition overcrowding has resulted in injuries to passengers, exacerbated existing injuries, and further stressed the conditions of passengers with physical disabilities.

Another issue with overcrowding is the negative experience for passengers. Those who use train services infrequently and find them overcrowded, are unlikely to be persuaded to use them in favour of private transport whatever the limitations of the latter.

## **6. Inadequate information systems**

While some suburban stations have visual display units which provide updated information on timetabled services, service delays and cancellations, the majority of stations on the network do not have these. On these stations the only form of information on service disruptions is provided by recorded announcement from a remote source. Such announcements are made only one minute before the timetabled arrival of the train. Disruptions to timetables are often known well in advance of the scheduled arrival at a particular station. If this information was provided as it became known then passengers would have more time to make alternative travel arrangements, advise people of delays in reaching their destinations, and make other arrangements as appropriate.

Information about train services was once previously provided by station staff, using manually operated information boards and announcements.

The lack of visually displayed information is a form of discrimination against people who have impairments to their hearing.

On the Upfield line there is no visual display of information at the ten non-premium stations.

A more general inadequacy of the system is the lack of information about the public transport system as a whole – trains, trams and buses. Electronic displays of continually updated service information should be available at all stations for all local tram and bus services, all metropolitan train services, and Vline services. The system should also provide information on major disruptions to any Melbourne suburban tram or bus service.

## **7. Lack of services at unstaffed suburban stations**

Services that are available at premium stations but not at unstaffed stations include;

availability of the full range of tickets including Vline tickets;

the use of credit card facilities to buy tickets; and

open toilets, which are permanently locked at unstaffed stations (a potential problem for passengers who become suddenly ill).

The presence of staff at stations, apart from making the above services available, would remove some of the causes of train delays, including:

enabling timely assistance to be organised for ill passengers;

assisting with the boarding of mobility impaired passengers (replacing the need for the driver to leave the cabin to do so); and

being a contact for passengers to provide information on illegal behaviour and vandalism on trains.

The presence of staff at stations would also improve confidence among passengers in respect to safety concerns. Station staff may be able to provide, for example, an escort service at night for passengers to their cars in station car parks.

Fare evasion is also likely to be reduced if stations are staffed.

An analysis of the benefit/cost ratio of staffing stations may well find an economic advantage in doing so.

### **Causes and contributing factors of service failures**

Causes and contributing factors of service failures include:

1. infrastructure faults;
2. operational issues;
3. infrastructure inadequacies;
4. Governance issues.

#### **1. Infrastructure faults**

A recent report in the Herald-Sun (May 24, 2009), **Connex delays exposed in State Government documents**, lists the reasons for train delays for the period July 1 to December 31 2008. Of the 2746 incidents mentioned, 1156 (train faults – 917, track faults - 114, signal problems – 111, overhead failures – 10 and derailment - 4) were the direct result of failure of the network infrastructure, while the remaining 1590 were the result of external factors outside of the control of Connex.

The most frequent cause of delays mentioned were train faults, faulty brakes and faulty passenger doors. Faulty brakes and passenger doors should not be a problem with an effective cyclical maintenance program. However the brake problems were specific to the Siemens trains. This indicates that the Government and/or the operator (National Transport, owner of M-Trains) responsible for purchasing these trains did not carry out a sufficient assessment and testing of the suitability of them for the network.

Relevant to this issue was that the most recent trains were purchased by the two companies operating the network, and each chose different carriage types; M-Train chose Siemens and Connex chose Xtrapolis. In addition there are the older Comeng and Hitachi trains still running on the network. That there are incompatible train sets running on the network adds to the expense and difficulty of running maintenance programs.

Lateness resulting from track faults, signal problems, overhead failures and derailment suggest that maintenance programs for essential infrastructure are also inadequate.

Other incidents outside of the control of Connex include vandalism (638), unruly passengers (441) and ill passengers (157). However some of these incidents may well have been avoidable if services were running without delay or cancellations as these result in many services being dangerously overcrowded. And overcrowding contributes to delays by increasing the time passengers spend boarding and disembarking at each station.

Furthermore many delays resulting from these incidents may have been prevented or minimised if stations had been staffed.

## **2. Operational issues**

Operational issues that can lead to delays and cancellations include not having standby train sets and drivers available to replace unserviceable trains and ill drivers at short notice.

Another issue is the dwell time of trains at Flinders Street Station. The typical dwell times have little to do with congestion on platforms or trains, but are related to staff and administrative delays. Because all trains arrive or depart from Flinders St, they typically wait there far longer than is necessary even in peak times to pick up or drop off passengers. Trains may be reversed, drivers change shifts, trains are inspected for faults, and timetable make-up time all cause considerable delay at Flinders Street. Not only does this practice delay the train involved, but also any trains waiting in loop portals, the viaduct track or in what used to be the Jolimont yard. The delays which were once blamed on the stabling yard still occur because much of the delay in the past, as now, was caused by operational practices at Flinders St.

These time-consuming but necessary activities could be moved away from Flinders St to suburban termini or major stops such as Caulfield, Ringwood, Footscray, Clifton Hill and North Melbourne, where they would have less chance of impacting on other services to as great an extent as they do at the busiest point on the system.

## **3. Infrastructure inadequacies**

Other submissions to this inquiry have discussed how inadequate infrastructure on various suburban lines leads to delays and cancellation of services, and restricts the addition of more frequent services. These inadequacies include:

insufficient number of train sets to operate (and provide backup for) the needed number of services;

insufficient number of trams and buses to provide the needed feeder links to train services;

single track sections on several lines, which restrict service frequencies;

signalling and control systems, the metropolitan train network does not have a single control system;

absence of rail lines to many areas of Melbourne which contributes to overcrowding on existing networks. For example commuters in the Doncaster – Templestowe corridor need to catch trains on the Hurstbridge or Ringwood lines, and commuters in the Mulgrave/Rowville corridor need catch trains on the Glen Waverley or Dandenong lines. The use of cars to drive to distant railway stations adds to road congestion.

#### **4. Governance issues**

In the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's when the rail network (suburban, country and freight trains) was operated by the Victorian Railways, peak hour services on many lines were more frequent than today, cancellations were unheard of, and punctuality was the norm. The Victorian Railways produced an operating profit until 1967, although expenditure on infrastructure was subsidised by the State Government.

In 1983 the Victorian Railways and the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board were merged to form the Metropolitan Transit Authority, which was reorganised in 1989 to include country passenger services and renamed the Public Transport Corporation.

The decline of services on Melbourne's trains (and public transport in general) started during the 1970's. From this time onwards the number of peak hour, night and week-end services were reduced, as was the span of night and weekend services. Many stations became unstaffed or staffed only at certain times of the day.

There were many reasons this including lack of adequate funding and support from the Government, and reduced patronage. The latter resulted from the attractiveness of private transport which occurred because of the massive Government expenditure on roads, relatively cheap cars and petrol, and tax breaks for the use of private transport.

However until the privatization of the network, late running and cancellation of services were still rare. The Public Transport Corporation did its best in difficult circumstances. One success story of this period was the introduction of the multi-modal ticket.

The contracting out of public transport services has broken up the planning and operation of Melbourne's public transport network into a number of organisations. The system is now run by the State Government (through the Department of Transport), Metlink, the operators Connex and Yarra Trams (previously also M-Trains and National Express), several bus companies, Public Transport Safety Victoria, the Public Transport Ombudsman and the Ticketing Authority. Over recent years this unwieldy structure has produced the following:

the 2003 transport plan had a target of 20 percent of trips to be undertaken on public transport by 2020. The recent surge in public transport usage is in line with this target. However the Government did not plan for this by providing additional train capacity, and similarly did not immediately respond to this surge when it actually occurred. On the contrary it allowed the Hitachi trains to be scrapped as the new Xtrapolis (2003) and Siemens (2005) were put into service, leaving no net increase in capacity. This passenger surge required the Government to buy back and refurbish, at great cost, several Hitachi sets.

the purchase of different train sets (Siemens and Xtrapolis) by the two private operators (the same occurred with the trams) which were incompatible with each other and the existing Comeng and Hitachi carriages.

the Siemens trains were incorrectly specified originally and needed to be modified to prevent them from side-swiping station platforms, delaying their introduction for several months.

the Siemens trains were discovered to have braking problems after their introduction to service, resulting in their operating speeds being reduced until the problems were rectified;

the recent purchase of new trams in which the length specifications are two metres longer than the recently constructed super stops, thus requiring a further expenditure of funds on extending the stops;

expenditure of over \$850 million in developing a ticketing system (MYKI) that is years overdue in being implemented, that appears to have major flaws, and may never work;

a seemingly bottomless pit of public funds to prop up the private operators, when the privatisation model assumed that over time (privatisation occurred 10 years ago) subsidies to private operators would reduce to zero. While the Auditor-General has stated that the subsidies to the private operators are reasonable, (Submission 55 – Connex) there is no comparison of this expenditure and the likely expenditure on a system run by a public authority;

the development of an operating culture which emphasises cost-cutting, profit maximisation and convenience of the operator instead of a service culture. This mindset has seen such customer-unfriendly policies such as the closure of the Elizabeth Street subway and rear entrance at Richmond station outside peak hours; erection of fences to corral passengers through single entry barriers rather than providing direct routes to platforms; and in search of maximum profits from real estate development, the blocking of access to Melbourne Central station from both Swanston and Elizabeth Streets by constructing retail space directly in front of, and blocking, the original entrances, forcing station access to become indirect, slow and frustrating for commuters;

the same lack of service culture with respect to trams, which has seen the removal of several city tram stops from intersections, the most convenient place for passengers, and their relocation (and reduction in number) to less convenient and

dangerous mid-block locations where passengers do not have traffic light protection; the replacement of seats in trams which seated eight people with a standing room in which only four people fit; the purchase of trams in which some of the seats are unusable because of the contortions required of passengers to sit in them.

no strategic direction for the development of the public transport network. The major items in the most recent Government transport plan (the sixth in nine years), incorporates projects recommended by the Eddington Report on East-West transport options. The Eddington report is not a good starting point for developing a transport plan for Melbourne because of its limited terms of reference. It looked at only at the east-west corridor and did not consider the links between this corridor and Melbourne as a whole.

There is much evidence that shows that the most effective way of operating a metropolitan public transport is with a single public authority run by transport and other relevant specialists. Several submissions (Submission 18 – Paul Mees, Submission 34 – John Stone for example) have described and given examples of best practice of metropolitan public transport systems. Conversely, there appears to be no evidence of an effective transport system operated along the lines of the privatization model that has been implemented in Victoria.

### **Planning for the future**

The Premier has stated that the Eddington Report would be the starting point of a comprehensive transport plan for Melbourne. The Government has accepted most of the public transport proposal and incorporated them into its latest transport plan.

However the report is not a good starting point for developing a transport plan for Melbourne because of its limited terms of reference (it looked at only at the east-west corridor and did not consider the links between this corridor and the other parts of Melbourne in any detail), and its flawed analysis of, and solutions for, Melbourne's transport problems.

A details analysis of public transport needs for the whole of Melbourne is required, and this should be undertaken by a transport specialists, such as a transport authority as described above.

With respect to the Eddington report's major proposals, this submission suggests the following.

1. The east-west rail tunnel (Caulfield to Footscray via the Domain) should not be built. Appropriate infrastructure should be built and procedures implemented as soon as possible to eliminate train congestion at Flinders Street and in the City Loop. This would obviate the need for the rail tunnel at much less cost.
2. The road tunnel linking the Eastern Freeway with the western suburbs should not be built. This project and the east-west rail tunnel would utilise all available funds and construction resources until their completion in 2020, and prevent the construction of other urgently needed transport infrastructure.
3. The Tarneit section of the Regional Rail Link should be deferred. There are more effective and cheaper ways of reducing the conflicts between Vline and suburban services (see submission number 32 - PTUA). In the long term this link will be able to service the growing urban

population in the Tarneit area. Short term requirements can be realised with connecting bus services to existing railway lines.

4. The Doncaster rail line with feeder bus services should be built immediately. DART services should be redirected to provide feeder and local services.

Other projects worthy of consideration are:

1. Public transport initiatives to transport poor parts of Melbourne (such as a train line to Rowville) should be incorporated into a transport plan and built as funds become available. Other projects include rail lines to Aurora and Sorrento, and electrification of existing lines to Melton (including Deer Park and Caroline Springs), Mornington and Stony Point.

2. There should be no more freeway construction in Melbourne until it has been fully connected by public transport services.

3. Pressure on the Craigieburn line can be eased by building the link between Upfield and Craigieburn. The Upfield line has capacity for additional services, and these could include Vline services from Seymour.

These suggestions should be analysed in the context of a new comprehensive transport plan developed from scratch by a new transport authority.

### **Summary**

UUCG considers that the underlying principle of our public transport system should be access and equity. This means that all people living in metropolitan Melbourne should have reasonable access to a mode of public transport to enable them to travel to any other part of metropolitan in a reasonable time. It means making available to all areas of Melbourne frequent and reliable rail services from early morning until late night supported by an integrated network of frequent and reliable tram and bus services. The system must provide effective transport for all those who do not have access to private transport and an option to those who do have access to private transport.

Currently the interests of public transport passengers come behind those of the State Government which seeks to shed responsibility for the system, and shareholders and commercial interests which see public transport as a source of profit without competitive pressure.

Melbourne's metropolitan public transport should be operated by a single public authority, with representation from the State Government and Local Councils, and professional expertise from transport specialists (engineers, technical experts), urban planners, economists, sociologists and relevant community organisations.