

**SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION INQUIRY
INTO THE ADMINISTRATION AND EXPENDITURE OF FUNDING UNDER THE URBAN
CONGESTION FUND:**

SUBMISSION BY THE STOP NORTH EAST LINK ALLIANCE

September 10, 2021

This submission by the Stop North East Link Alliance principally addresses paragraph “e” of the Committee’s terms of reference, i.e. *the fund’s impact in reducing congestion, including whether the allocation of funding under the program was appropriately targeted to meet the stated objective of the Urban Congestion Fund.*

In this regard, we pay particular regard to a limited number of car parking projects in inner eastern suburban Melbourne to be funded from the Commuter Car Park Fund, which is a sub-set of the Urban Congestion Fund. These include two commuter car parks associated with the Victorian government’s North East Link project and four railway car parks proposed in the electorate of Kooyong which were announced during the 2019 federal election campaign.

This program, which the Commonwealth Auditor-General has criticised recently in a detailed performance audit tabled in the parliament (*Administration of Commuter Car Park Projects Within the Urban Congestion Fund* 28 June 2021), has also been attacked in the general community, largely on the grounds that the Commonwealth government assigned project funding to locations with little regard for merit, and evidently for party political gain.

The report of the Auditor-General may be read at <https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/administration-commuter-car-park-projects-within-the-urban-congestion-fund>

A TRANSPORT AND LAND-USE PLANNING CONTEXT

The populations of Australian capital cities have been growing quickly in recent decades, none more so than Melbourne whose population has risen from 3,361,000 in the year 2000 to 4,968,000 in 2020, an increase of nearly 48%.

During this period, one of the most pressing issues faced by successive Victorian governments has been the economic, social and environmental costs associated with urban sprawl. This remains unresolved, despite the declared attractiveness to successive Victorian governments of concepts such as the polycentric city and the 20-minute neighbourhood for the purpose of reigning in the sprawl with its attendant economic, social and environmental costs.

Rather than make more effective use of existing space within defined boundaries, the Urban Growth Boundary of the Greater Melbourne Metropolitan Area has continued to expand significantly in recent decades and with it the space allocated to transport, and especially roads-based transport which is relatively space-inefficient in comparison with public and active transport modes.

COMMONWEALTH FUNDING OF NORTH EAST LINK

The Commonwealth Government has committed \$1.75 billion to the North East Link Project under the Commonwealth Investment Road and Rail Program.

The all-up build cost of the project has been estimated to be in the order of \$15.8 billion. However, based on the recent experience with cost blow outs on other large transport infrastructure projects in Victoria, including the West Gate Tunnel and the Melbourne Metro, the North East Link Project may end up costing much more than has been officially declared. It is noteworthy that each of these projects involves major tunnelling work, which has been the source of cost escalations in both projects. The West Gate Tunnel project, previously predicted to cost \$6.7 billion may now cost over \$10 billion.

The basic problem with the North East Link Project is that it would stimulate greater motor car use in large areas of Melbourne which are very poorly served by public transport and where facilities for active transport are also inadequate. It would be a major contributor to the sprawl referred to above.

It is likely that if any analysis of sufficient rigour were to be conducted on required transport infrastructure and services in the project corridor, it would conclude that a mix of service upgrades and smaller infrastructure projects, which may include a lesser increase in roads capacity, is really what is required. It is of no credit to the Commonwealth that it has committed \$1.75 billion to the project in the absence of any such examination.

Despite the significant increase in Melbourne's population, and increasing pressure on urban space, the relative contribution of more space efficient public transport and active transport in meeting the passenger transport task is no greater now than it was many years ago.

Park and ride facilities and North East Link

Commonwealth funding of the North East Link Project would assist in the funding of two park and ride facilities adjacent to the Eastern Freeway. The first of these, the expansion of an existing park and ride facility in Doncaster Road includes a Commonwealth funding contribution under the Urban Congestion Fund of \$6 million.

An additional park and ride facility in Bulleen, was also announced by the Victorian government in October 2020. It is not known at the time of writing whether there is a specific Commonwealth funding contribution under the Urban Congestion Fund for this project.

This facility is intended to permit commuters to either park their car next to the proposed Eastern Freeway bus way to catch east-or west-bound bus services on the freeway or to utilize the pick/ up drop-off facility there. The facility would occupy existing open parkland bounded by Thompsons Road, the eastbound on-ramp to the Eastern Freeway and the residential Kampman Street in Bulleen. (Greater Melbourne Melway Street Directory map 32, E10)

The project, estimated to cost \$69 million, would provide only 370 car parking spaces, in addition to permitting bus patrons to be dropped off and picked up by car.

It has been a major failing of the Victorian government that there been no assessment of the effect of this facility, and its extra 370 car parking, both on the public transport system and the road network.

On each weekday, there are typically about 20,000 passenger movements on Eastern Freeway route bus services in this area. However, and as noted, the new park and ride facility would only provide for 370 cars, most of whom would be for commuters whose vehicles would occupy the car park all day, and especially on weekdays.

However, the additional bus patrons that would be attracted is likely to be less than that. This is because some of those likely to use the park and ride would be existing bus patrons who already drive their car to catch buses at other locations, including the existing nearby park and ride facility on Doncaster Road in Doncaster.

Upgrade to public transport not considered

It is evident that the North East Link Project has not assessed the relative merits of improving connecting route bus services as well as active transport facilities in comparison with greater use of park and ride facilities as part of the project. In fact, written responses to representations made to Victorian government transport authorities show they have little idea of the composition of trips to the current park and ride facility in Doncaster.

If the Victorian government were really interested in spending \$69 million on public transport in the area its first priority would be to upgrade route bus service standards in the area. This would be an effective measure to reduce road congestion in a way that the park and ride facility is not.

It is a fact that many of the route bus services that connect with the Eastern Freeway services to Melbourne CBD are poorly designed and infrequent. There is no route bus service on Bulleen Road north of the Eastern Freeway. The so-called "Manningham Mover" 280/282 service, for instance, caters for next to no passengers because it was so poorly designed. Connecting bus services on the southern side of the Eastern Freeway are also poor.

For a broad comparison of what it may be possible to do with \$69 million, in December 2018 the Victorian government purchased 100 replacement fleet buses for eastern suburban services in Melbourne at a cost of \$16 million; that is each bus cost \$160,000 each. Thus, for \$69 million the Victorian government could purchase an extra 430 buses.

In all probability, the government would not need to spend that much money to significantly enhance route bus patronage in the area, including connecting services on the Eastern Freeway busway, but it does throw into question the effectiveness of spending on park and ride facilities in the absence of necessary upgrades to the public transport system itself.

Enhancements to the route bus network would allow many more people to walk from their home to catch a good quality bus service, not drive for kilometres to park their car in another residential area already degraded by large volumes of road traffic.

In this regard, inquiries made of the North East Link Project of the use of the existing park and ride facility on Doncaster Road confirms that little transport planning effort has gone into an assessment of the relative merit of park and ride facilities. They could not even advise where trips to that facility actually originate.

There goes the neighbourhood

For decades, residents in Bulleen and North Balwyn have been inflicted with greater levels of road noise and air pollution from increased traffic in the area, principally on the Eastern Freeway.

The proposed park and ride in Bulleen would attract even more traffic into an already congested part of the road network, adjacent to the freeway and hundreds of residences. This will make daily life even more unpleasant for residents. In announcing the project on October 19, the minister for transport infrastructure, Jacinta Allan, declared the facility to be Victoria's "first green roof park and ride." This gilds the lily. The park and ride facility is to be built on existing parkland. A large concrete structure with a "green" roof does not qualify as a net environmental gain.

On a fundamental level, it should be asked: why is the Commonwealth involved at all in funding state transport facilities? After all, land transport is a state responsibility. The answer is probably fairly straightforward; it is the fact of vertical fiscal inequity and that that state expenditure responsibilities are not matched with their revenue raising capacity. This has been an enduring issue in Commonwealth-State fiscal relations. In the current circumstances we should reasonably expect that the Commonwealth would make reasonably robust assessments to justify its funding commitments to states. In the case of the deeply flawed North East Link Project, however, this was evidently not the case.

THE COMMUTER CAR PARK FUND IN THE ELECTORATE OF KOORYONG

It was noted in the report of the Auditor-General (p. 54) that "The distribution of the projects selected for funding commitment reflected the geographic and political profile of those given the opportunity to identify candidates," and that in this regard four sites for car parks were put forward by the office of the Federal Member for the Coalition-held electorate of Kooyong (p. 54).

Subsequently, on 1 May 2019, The Honourable Josh Frydenberg, MP, member for Kooyong and Federal Treasurer, made an election promise to outlay \$65 million to build car parks at

Glenferrie, Camberwell, Canterbury and Surrey Hills railway stations which are on the Lilydale/Belgrave line (Frydenberg media release attached).

These four railway stations are located in the City of Boroondara. It is not known what contact Mr Frydenberg or his representatives may have had with Boroondara Council or individual councillors prior to the selection of these four locations for Commonwealth funded car parks.

Involvement of City of Boroondara

More recently, City of Boroondara has commenced to quietly lay the groundwork to have these car parks built in Boroondara. And it is doing so in the absence of any informed dialogue with its own electorate and community on whether there is any merit in these proposals.

Remarkably, the Council has not commenced by posing the question: Would these car parks actually be “congestion busting,” and an effective approach for connecting more people to the heavy rail network at each of these four locations? It has instead quietly gone about assessing feasible locations where railway car parks might feasibly be built. The Council, according to its webpage, has received funding for this purpose.

It appears, moreover, that the Council has not applied itself to any examination of what transport modes train patrons currently use (i.e., car, walking, cycling, tram, route bus) to connect with the heavy rail network, even though such data is publicly available (and which we quote below in relation to Surrey Hills).

It was claimed in the Frydenberg media release that “The increased capacity of up to 2000 new car park spaces across Kooyong will make it easier for commuters to get to and from home safely and on time.” A more general claim was made in the media release that the projects would be “congestion busting.”

However, each of these stations are on heavily trafficked north-south arterial roads, especially during morning and evening peak periods, when most train patrons would be on the move. These roads are Glenferrie Road (Glenferrie), Burke Road (Camberwell), Balwyn Road (Canterbury) and Union Road (Surrey Hills).

Significantly, these arterial roads have strong network connectivity with the North East Link, which would increase the volume of road traffic in the City of Boroondara, including on each of these four roads.

It is at least paradoxical that the Council is concurrently engaged in “place-making” initiatives in at least two of these locations, Glenferrie and Canterbury. It is doing so, the Council says, for the purpose of improving social interaction, creating thriving local economies, contributing positively to the environment, and enhancing the community’s quality of life. In this regard, it is important to note that precincts that are dominated by motor car traffic struggle to meet such objectives.

In this respect, the four proposed railway car parks in the electorate of Kooyong would have the same effect as the two park and ride facilities on the North East Link project. Rather than be “congestion busting,” they would draw additional road traffic into already congested parts of the road network, but provide only a very modest increase, if any, in rail patronage at each of these stations.

Surrey Hills railway station and car parking

For the purposes of this submission, we examine the Commonwealth proposal to increase car parking at Surrey Hills railway station. As one of the targeted stations in the Kooyong electorate, Surrey Hills was assigned \$15 million under the Urban Congestion Fund for this purpose.

In fact, the railway station at Surrey Hills is to be rebuilt under the Victorian Government’s level crossing removal program. Initial advice provided by the Level Crossing Removal Authority was that the number of car parking spaces at the new station at Surrey Hills would be no greater than that currently provided in aggregate at Surrey Hills and at Mont Albert, 380. In more recent advice, however, the Level Crossing Removal Authority admitted to being in consultation with the Commonwealth in relation to a car park at Surrey Hills.

Mont Albert is the next adjoining station immediately eastward on the line. It is to be closed under the grade separation project with a view to the new Surrey Hills station catering for Mont Albert patrons as well.

Connecting with the train

Data on how train patrons travel to Mont Albert and Surrey Hills stations on weekdays to connect with the heavy rail network is shown in the table below. The data is drawn from a survey conducted by Public Transport Victoria in 2014. It is dated but it might be expected in subsequent years since 2014 that patronage would have increased, at least until the end of 2019 when the COVID-19 pandemic intervened.

Infrastructure Victoria has predicted that motor vehicle travel is likely to increase at a much greater rate than public transport, which would lead to major congestion on the road network.

	Mont Albert		Surrey Hills	
Access mode	Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)
Bus	0	0.0	59	2.0
Car	343	29.9	1420	48.0
Cycled	12	1.0	0	0.0
Other	11	1.0	0	0.0
Train	0	0.0	49	1.7
Tram	0	0.0	0	0.0
Walked	784	68.2	1431	48.3
Totals	1150	100.1	2960	100.0

Average weekday station entries, Surrey Hills and Mont Albert 2013-14

As indicated in the table above, current car parking capacity cater for only about 9% of weekday train patrons at Surrey Hills and Mont Albert, assuming that they are principally commuters. There are much more cost-effective and environmentally sustainable ways for train patrons to connect with the network than by car.

What is also striking about these figures is how few train patrons connect by cycling and route bus. As shown in the table, only seventy one out of 4,110 cycled or connected by route bus, about 1.8% of all rail patrons.

These proportions are much higher at some other stations on the suburban rail network. These stations have far more frequent connecting route bus and/ or tram services. And in many cases available facilities for active transport are fit-for-purpose.

The connecting route bus services at Surrey Hills and Mont Albert railway stations (routes 612 and 766) are mediocre for most users, and especially for regular commuters. They offer only between four and six services in weekday morning and afternoon peak times (7.00 to 9.00 a.m. and 4.00 to 6.00 p.m.) and no services on Sundays.

Canterbury station shares some of these characteristics. The single connecting route bus service (route 285) provides similarly poor peak hour services and does not operate on Sundays either.

By way of contrast, Camberwell and Glenferrie stations have frequent connecting tram services, on Burke Road and Glenferrie Road, respectively. A difficulty that they share is slower running time through these activity centres, a problem that would be accentuated if additional free car parking were to be provided in the station precincts.

Cyclist connections to rail

As shown in the table above, only 12 of the 4,110 weekday train patrons' cycle to Surrey Hills and Mont Albert stations on weekdays. A bicycle trail is proposed in the rail corridor parallel to the rail line which will materially assist future cycling access to the station. However, a major impediment is likely to remain for cyclists – the suitability of the road

network for radial trips to Surrey Hills station which would be the primary catchment for the station. This could be resolved relatively easily, primarily by on-road treatments but there is no indication that state authorities have this in mind.

Significantly increasing the numbers of train patrons who connect by route bus or cycling would reduce the volumes of road traffic in and around the area.

Grade separations and traffic volumes

A common consequence of grade separation projects, as is to proceed at Union Road and Mont Albert Road in Surrey Hills, is that traffic on these roads increases as a consequence. This is due to the fact that the removal of level crossings improves running time on these roads which has the effect of diverting traffic from other parts of the road network. This would make more problematic the provision of additional car parking at Surrey Hills railway station.

CONCLUSIONS

Commonwealth funding of both the North East Link and associated car parks in Bulleen and Doncaster is an error. Far from alleviating road congestion, they would draw additional predominately single occupancy cars into already congested parts of the road network. The cost of opportunities foregone is substantial in that equivalent expenditure on public and active transport capability would greatly increase trips by these modes and reduce motor car trips on the road network.

This additional patronage, it could be expected, would include individuals who currently travel by car and also others who are currently inhibited from travelling in the absence of a reasonable public transport servicing areas where they live.

The four railway car parks proposed to be funded in the City of Boroondara under the Urban Congestion Fund suffers from the same deficiencies. In addition, though, they would each be located in activity centres of significant character and for the most part high population densities. The availability of space to meet the place-making aspirations of the City of Boroondara is in short supply, however. Boroondara's apparent complicity in the construction of these car parks mocks its declared ambitions for these locations.



THE HON JOSH FRYDENBERG MP
Federal Member for Kooyong
Treasurer of Australia

MEDIA RELEASE

1 May 2019

CONGESTION BUSTING PROJECTS ANNOUNCED FOR KOOYONG

\$65 million for commuter car parks across Kooyong

The Morrison Government is investing \$65 million in park-and-ride facilities at Surrey Hills, Canterbury, Camberwell and Glenferrie stations. The increased capacity of up to 2000 new car park spaces across Kooyong will make it easier for commuters to get to and from home safely and on time.

The car parks are part of a targeted plan to take up to 13,000 cars off the road in Melbourne's growth corridors, with the Morrison Government building or expanding 30 park-and-ride facilities across seven train lines.

At \$383 million, it is the largest investment in park-and-ride facilities Melbourne has ever seen, easing access to public transport in some of the fastest growing areas in the nation.

Camberwell station services approximately two million commuters per year, with Surrey Hills and Canterbury stations each servicing approximately 1.5 million commuters per year respectively. Glenferrie station in Hawthorn – one of Kooyong's busiest stations – services more than three million commuters per year.

The funding is being made available through the Morrison Government's \$500 million Commuter Car Park Fund announced in this year's Budget, which means planning for these works with the relevant authorities can commence immediately.

Relieving congestion on our local roads

The Morrison Government is also investing \$2.85 million to upgrade Camberwell Road, Burwood Road and Balwyn Road, further busting local congestion and helping Kooyong residents get home sooner and safer.

A \$1.8 million investment in the Camberwell Road, Monteath Avenue and Redfern Road intersection in Hawthorn East will better manage traffic flow, with full signalisation of the intersection.

The Government will also ease congestion along Burwood Road, with \$600,000 in funding for upgrades to both the Glenferrie Road and Auburn Road intersections in Hawthorn.

Furthermore, with locals raising concerns about congestion hotspots in the Balwyn area, an additional \$450,000 will go towards traffic signal improvements at intersections along Balwyn Road.

Today's announcements are in addition to the \$260 million invested by the Morrison Government to fully fund the removal of the Glenferrie Road level crossing at Kooyong station.

Victorians will continue to benefit from a record \$21 billion in Commonwealth infrastructure investments over the next decade. It is part of our plan to bust congestion and for a stronger economy.

Ends