

TURNING THE WESTERN DISTRIBUTOR PROBLEM INTO A SOLUTION

INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Transport Action Group (VTAG) is an independent forum that addresses transport challenges in Victoria. Its members have extensive expertise across transport, planning, the environment, industry and government (local, state & federal). This paper expresses its views on the **Western Distributor (WD)** proposal.

VTAG was pleased the Andrews Government was mandated at the 2014 election for an alternative package of works to the East West Link. This included a **West Gate Distributor (WGD)** designed to address longstanding freight issues in Melbourne. For an estimated \$0.5 Billion cost the WGD aimed to widen the Footscray Road bridge over the Maribyrnong River, add a pedestrian-bicycle path, and reconstruct the intersection at Whitehall Street (the northern section – now nearing completion) then improve the road link along Whitehall and Hyde Streets to Westgate Freeway via ramps (the second southern section). Disappointingly, no funds have been allocated to complete the second section that is necessary to move trucks between Swanson Dock and the Westgate without them going through Footscray.

Instead the Government's focus has turned to Transurban's unsolicited WD bid which incorporates a version of the WGD ramps onto Westgate (southern section) but does not deliver it until between 2018 and 2022 with the rest of the WD. After analysis of Transurban's WD proposal, VTAG is concerned that the WD is a mega project linking several freeways and arterials that has grown to be 11 times larger than what the ALP election policy platform originally proposed with the WGD. It seeks to embed the proposed future mega-road network into Melbourne's arterials and City Link Tollway in such a way as to maximize tolls and profits for Transurban by attracting additional truck traffic to the area rather than reducing it. It is not clear that this is the best infrastructure solution to the most pressing community issues nor that its rushed community consultation, fast-tracked studies, massive over design, costly private funding will produce net community benefits and prove economically sound for Victoria.

WD is a city-shaping project but one with many potential problems and negative community impacts. It will reshape Melbourne for the worse unless proper governance and objective appraisal processes are instituted to balance the conflicts between public and private interests.

It is in the interest of the Andrews Government and the Victorian community to utilise the Environment Impact Statement (EIS) process that is about to happen to address key questions about whether the Western Distributor will deliver a cost-effective solution to the freight and traffic problems of the inner West. VTAG has outlined below a number of immediate recommendations to help improve that process, with a view to assisting the Andrews Government to transform what is shaping as the WD problem into a smaller, more cost-effective, balanced solution for the whole community that can be delivered in a timely manner with appropriate funding.

REASONS WHY THE WESTERN DISTRIBUTOR SHOULD BE DE-SCOPED

Reasons why the WD proposal should be de-scoped and transformed into a community oriented solution are explained in the following paragraphs, leading to 10 recommendations in the final section of this paper.

1. **Government's electoral mandate** The Andrews government received plaudits for its 2013 "Project 10,000" alternative package to the East West Link which included projects important to inner and western suburbs: **"Get 5,000 trucks a day off West Gate Bridge"** with a \$0.5 billion West Gate Distributor (WGD) and **"Double the size of the City Loop and build five new train stations"**. These are not being delivered in full. Only the first northern part of the WGD from the port to Footscray is under construction by VicRoads with no further funding set aside for the southern section past Yarraville to/from the Westgate Freeway. Instead Transurban's unsolicited \$5.5 Billion WD bid for a private tolled mega road is being considered. The huge cost of the WD proposal will syphon funds from the other important public transport part of Labor's promised package and from proper community land use/ transport solutions.
2. **Wrong objectives** Instead of meeting the Government's objective to reduce port and West Gate truck traffic in an economical, socially-acceptable manner, the WD has been designed by Transurban

to maximise truck and traffic volumes and its toll revenue. It does not provide a second Yarra River crossing as it only crosses the Maribyrnong River. The proposal is not part of a multimodal metropolitan-wide master plan. It fails to apply the Transport Integration Act objectives to achieve integrated triple bottom line solutions. More radial road arterials pointed to Melbourne's inner suburbs will increase traffic congestion and undermine amenity and liveability. By contrast, circumferential arterials like the proposed Greensborough to Mitcham North East Link would alleviate inner congestion by attracting through traffic out and around the periphery of the metropolis.

3. **Deliberate over design to maximise toll revenue** The WD will cost 11 times the estimated cost of Labor's initial WGD proposal. Transurban's original WD design has been linked to other major arterials and extended out to the M80 Western Ring Road widened to 12 lanes along Westgate Freeway to accommodate the additional traffic that will be induced. Transurban now proposes the most road lanes that it can fit into road reservations with minimal or no vegetation buffers and intends the WD emergency stopping lanes to be converted into traffic lanes in future, including inside the WD tunnel. The proposed size of the West Gate Freeway, tunnel laneways and on-off ramps are now all excessive and will attract unwanted additional road traffic to the edge of Melbourne CBD, Kensington, Flemington, North Melbourne, West Melbourne, Docklands, South Melbourne, Port Melbourne, Spotswood, Yarraville, South Kingsville, Altona North, Altona, Footscray, Brooklyn, etc. This mega toll road will be city shaping in a bad way (like a tail wagging the dog). Despite its over design, the WD proposal assumes that WestLink and East West Link will still be necessary to handle the future traffic the WD brings through the western suburbs and displaces from rail.
4. **Denies western suburbs residents proper public transport services** The excessive and unaffordable cost of the WD at this time of budget deficits will divert the capital needed for proper development of train, tram and bus services for the western suburbs for several decades. Residents of the West are being tricked into thinking that a WD with 12 lanes and a wider Westgate Freeway will end traffic congestion. The WD does not replace WestLink which is still planned to be built in future, attracting even more traffic through the western and inner suburbs. The WD has no transit lanes included so any future bus services and emergency vehicles will get stuck in traffic. Transurban has removed the high occupancy vehicle/bus lanes from City Link Tullamarine. The toll road owner wants the maximum number of vehicles to toll rather than more efficient people movement. Extensions of rail or light rail services to places such as Altona Meadows, Seabrooke, Sanctuary Lakes, and Point Cook should be considered as part of the solution.
5. **Truck problems in the western and inner suburbs will get worse** Transurban's proposal risks attracting more (port) road cartage contractors into the western suburbs from the north, east and south thereby increasing truck traffic congestion, road trauma, and community health problems due to truck noise and diesel emissions. Additional secondary truck trips will be needed to double-handle containers from the western suburbs container yards to end users in the north, east and south. Many trucks are over 30 years old, poorly maintained, noisy, polluting, defective mechanically, un-roadworthy, accident-prone and susceptible to breakdowns as evidenced by the high rates of infringements detected at random roadside checks. There is negligible enforcement of laws by VicRoads, the EPA and Police. Victorians have been waiting for 3 years for the Government's release of VicRoads' new road noise maximum limits with night-time protection like in New South Wales and maximum noise levels as low as overseas best practice. Increased heavy truck traffic will cause health problems due to noise and emissions, especially on gradients from tunnel portals near Seddon and Maribyrnong, and ramps in Spotswood, West Melbourne, Kensington and Flemington, as no noise barriers are proposed to address night-time noise, especially due to truck engine brakes. We urge the Government to seek international best practice for mitigating noise and air pollution. As the WD tunnel will prohibit oversize trucks and tankers carrying hazardous chemicals and fuels, these will continue to use public roads close to schools, residences and public places. Therefore, it is vital that existing or new truck curfews are enforced to eliminate the longstanding truck impacts on residents' safety and health. From consultant's modelling of truck traffic, it is concerning that associated accidents, noise and pollution is forecast to increase in Ballarat Road, Moore Street, Smithfield Road, Racecourse Road, Flemington Junction, Dynon Road, Williamstown Road, Millers Road, Simcock Avenue, Grieve Parade, Dohertys Road, etc. Residents in Melbourne's west will be commuting on a

more congested Westgate Freeway linked to other tollways and freeways. Passenger delays on trams and buses on these and related routes will increase due to the traffic congestion.

6. **Shifts freight from rail to road** Massive additional road provision for truck traffic undermines the attractiveness of rail for carrying heavy freight efficiently and minimising road trauma. While the largest port trucks (B-doubles) can carry 3 containers weighing up to 64 tonnes, Transurban has over-designed the WD to ISO1600 Standard to carry 160 tonne monster trucks that are currently illegal in Australian cities. These would attract heavy shipping containers off freight trains on to much larger road vehicles, increasing Transurban's toll revenue, and further undermining port rail operations. Transurban's elevated roof-over tollway above Footscray Road would prevent direct on-dock rail access for shuttle trains to East and West Swanson Docks and thereby undermine the economics of the Government's port rail shuttle proposal. The Government needs to develop a master plan for on-dock rail tracks to make sure future rail access options are not prevented, as occurred when the City Link Bolte Bridge was built. That required subsequent government funding of \$200 million for a Dynon Port Rail Link project to reinstate access to the docks (without any contribution from City Link toll revenues). Transurban's elevated WD road will not be high enough to allow double-stacked containers on rail wagons to run directly to and from the wharves of East and West Swanson Docks. Pylons supporting the elevated WD road will inhibit new access track alignments needed for direct on-dock rail. As Transurban's proposed design now includes major upgrading of Westgate Freeway, connecting arterials and roads to container depots in Altona, Brooklyn, etc., the Federal and State Governments' previous \$40 million joint investment in 2012 towards two new Altona intermodal rail terminals will be redundant. This was part of \$126 million federal-state funds agreed for development of 3 new suburban rail-road intermodal terminals for Melbourne in 2009 of which not one has been built. The Government, the Port of Melbourne Corporation, and the Port of Melbourne Authority have all failed to enforce any of stevedores' contractual requirements to promote freight on rail. Consequently Melbourne has become a truck dominant port. The Government has recently sold the port lease, allowing the new port manager a full 3 years to produce a rail strategy that could be implemented over the next 5 years (although no funding has been set aside). The port rail mode share, now only 8%, is likely to drop further in time towards 0%, as it has done at Webb Dock. 0% trains means 100% will go by truck. In the absence of rail economies of scale, thousands of B-double and Super B-double trucks a day will choke the roads to the Port Melbourne, enter Webb Dock, turn, manoeuvre and reverse into position to unload/load containers, and so on. This is very land intensive and necessitates more resumption of Hobsons Bay as Webb Dock Stage 3 is built in future instead of decentralising heavy freight to Hastings, BayWest and/or Geelong Ports. Industry economists, importers and exporters are very concerned that the lack of efficient port-rail systems are shrinking Melbourne's trade hinterland catchment as the modern container ports at Adelaide, Botany, and Brisbane poach Melbourne's trade and jobs. Whilst the new stevedore at Webb Dock has installed world best autonomous ship-to-shore quay crane container handling systems, the federal and state Governments have missed the opportunity for best practice landside systems. No anti-terrorist X-ray scanning of containers, no automatic overheight/overweight/unbalanced container detection, no licensed modern high-tech fleet, no drug-free driver checks, etc. Unless rectified this could mean up to 800 containers a day will be trucked between Port Melbourne and the X-ray scanner or intermodal terminal at Swanson Docks via Westgate Bridge or Wurundjeri Way.
7. **Blighting of land, parkland, pedestrian-bicycle trails and waterways** The Footscray Road boulevard gateway to the Western suburbs will be roofed and destroyed. Valuable land like the former wholesale fruit and vegetable market site and E-Gate site will be blighted, as will many properties near noisy ramps (including Scienceworks) unless international standards for night-time and daytime truck noise (especially near ramps and gradients) are adhered to. The WD reference design consumes much open space without paying any cost or replacing and compensating for any lost land and amenity. The design will remove parkland and constrain public access and linear trail development along Moonee Ponds Creek, Maribyrnong River, Stoney Creek and Kororoit Creek. The Federation Trail from Brooklyn to the CBD has been omitted from the WD design which states that it will end at Hyde Street. Even though the Moonee Ponds Creek is a tributary of the Yarra River, the Government continues to neglect its management including during the current City Link Tullamarine Widening. The WD will drain its stormwater and litter into the waterways and flood the valleys with vehicle pollution, dust and 24/7 noise. No noise barriers are proposed for these open spaces. Hundreds of mature trees will likely be felled in the night without community consultation, as

happened recently with City Link Tullamarine Widening. As Transurban's vegetation plans for the City Link Tullamarine Widening demonstrate, local communities will have no say in the minimal revegetation proposed that uses cheap mass-planted tube stock, without proper ground preparation, fertilisers, irrigation, ongoing maintenance and tree care. Some residences will be left without any vegetation buffers. After completion of WD road construction, municipal councils and ratepayers will be left with the effort and costs of unfinished landscaping rectification and ongoing care, maintenance and rubbish removal just as occurred with City Link.

8. **Inequitable funding** Transurban will be the main beneficiary of value capture from the WD, not Victorians. It is inequitable that Transurban's WD toll revenue is proposed to come partly from City Link Tullamarine Freeway users who receive no benefits but will be tolled for a further 15 years by the Concession Deed extension. Monash, Peninsula Link, Craigeburn Bypass, Deer Park Bypass, and Western Ring Road freeways remain untolled. It is also inequitable that Transurban's WD costs lack transparency and will be partly imposed on road users, local municipalities and communities not benefitting at all. Levying tolls on port trucks will increase the cost of goods carried, imported and exported. West Gate Bridge tolls caused so much truck diversion through the Western suburbs from 1978 they had to be abolished in 1985. Before contributing financially to such a project, the Federal Government should insist on a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and independent justification. Municipal councils should likewise assess the impacts on their municipalities and seek remediation and compensation.
9. **Flawed consultation, planning and appraisal processes** Transurban has failed to feed back to affected communities its understanding of community concerns and needs. Many issues and design alternatives repeatedly raised by citizens have been dismissed and neglected. Only selected local micro issues are described on Transurban's website after being dumbed down. Significant problems like night time noise and carcinogenic ultrafine diesel particulates are being neglected, just as Transurban has done with the consultancy studies for City Link Tullamarine Widening. Public consultation processes have not allowed community participation in solutions or resolution of community concerns to the extent of previous major projects, contrary to the Transport Integration Act requirements of genuine stakeholder engagement. The EIS lacks epidemiological and other vital studies: The Government's less-than-normal EIS Terms have allowed Transurban to issue its EIS consultants with restricted terms of reference and to fast track the process in less time than the East West Link Comprehensive Impact Statement. The EIS exhibition is scheduled for 30 business days during the January 2017 summer vacation, an insufficient period for proper community investigation and response. The Andrews Government needs to ensure processes that include community participation in decision making at least as per the W.H.O. Consultation Guidelines. VTAG requests that the Terms of Reference for the EIS be amended to try to resolve community concerns.
10. **Lack of governance and objectivity** The Government appears to have given Transurban carte blanche to deliver a market driven proposal delegating to Transurban the State's planning role for the west. VicRoads' staff have been seconded to the project and to report to Transurban. Transport and Planning Departments and the EPA involved in the proposal's designs, EIS studies and preparation of documents for assessment by the Minister, are required to test these against the public interest principles and objectives of the Transport Integration Act as well as the Planning and Environment Act. However, there is little confidence that these statutory provisions are being applied in the overall public interest. The WD 'business case' was redacted by the State before its release so there are major doubts over its assumptions and claimed community and industry benefits. The required EIS is diminished (e.g. no epidemiological study component) and is being fast-tracked. The WD will be Victoria's first mega project in which the State has surrendered its governance role to Transurban whose priority is creating a toll road that captures private profits. Neither Transurban's unsolicited bid nor their overall solution was subjected to competitive tendering, notwithstanding competition requirements. This appears to allow the tollway monopolist to dictate policy rather than the Government delivering its pre-election mandate. It is critical to learn from the 'City Link Concession Deed' mistake of the Kennett Government which gave Transurban a basis for preventing public transport to Tullamarine Airport and road proposals that could lower toll revenues. WD toll revenue is expected to exceed the cost of construction in less than a decade. Toll revenues from CityLink have already enabled Transurban rapid growth interstate and overseas e.g. funding toll roads in Washington and Pennsylvania. A far more cost-effective solution is for the State

to borrow to fund transport solutions for the inner west while interest rates are historically low and retain toll revenue for State purposes. It is in the interests of all Victorians that such toll revenue is applied to fund essential public infrastructure such as rail transport, hospitals and schools, and to support local jobs rather than private sector profits much of which are exported from Victoria. The opportunity exists to both steer a win-win community solution that is modest, affordable with net social benefits and create a funding stream for the State. Priority in such a project must be given to meeting the needs of all Victorians ahead of providing windfalls to private interests.

VTAG'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WD

VTAG recommends that:

1. the Andrews Government delivers its 'Project 10,000' policy commitment as per its mandate from the 2014 election which included *a \$0.5 Billion West Gate Distributor* (both northern and southern sections) to address freight issues as well as *doubling the size of the City Loop and building five new train stations*: the WGD southern section should be delivered within the current term of government independently of Transurban's WD.
2. the Government completes a multimodal metropolitan-wide master plan that gives priority to circumferential not radial roads, heavy freight on rail not road, and improved public transport services before committing to any opportunistic private tollway bids.
3. the Western Distributor be **de-scoped: halved in size and cost** with funds redirected to building direct rail tracks for shuttle trains to run to Swanson and Webb Docks to reduce road freight, associated road trauma and community health impacts.
4. improved public transport services be part of the solution for congestion in the inner and western suburbs by providing people with more transport choices and reduction in the number of cars with low occupancy on the road.
5. long-standing truck problems are addressed and laws, regulations and truck curfews fully enforced by VicRoads, the EPA and Police including through more random roadside checks, supported by retrospective fitting of automatic detectors on all tollways and freeways for speeding vehicles, smokey vehicles and noisy vehicles.
6. Government re-regulates and incentivises rail based supply chains between the port and inland rail-road intermodal terminals to help remove trucks from local roads in the western and inner suburbs.
7. consideration of community benefit be made paramount and people's wellbeing protected - homes, land, parks, pedestrian-bicycle trails and waterways near the WD protected from 24/7 truck noise, pollution, litter and amenity loss.
8. sources of efficient public funding are used rather than unaffordable Transurban finance and tolling of roads is made equitable across Melbourne.
9. consultation and planning processes be compliant with World Health Organisation (WHO) Consultation Guidelines, the Victorian Transport Integration Act 2010, and Planning and Environment Act's normal EIS processes that include an epidemiological study encompassing ultrafine diesel particulates and night-time noise, with an EIS exhibition period of at least 90 business days.
10. the Government adopts proper governance with segregation of public servants from Transurban's teams and independent socio-economic evaluation to ensure that Government decisions are made on the basis of economic, environmental and social benefits and net community benefit in accordance with the requirements of the State legislation, the objectives of Plan Melbourne and Federal evaluation guidelines.