

**Submission
No 66**

**INQUIRY INTO CURRENT AND FUTURE PUBLIC
TRANSPORT NEEDS IN WESTERN SYDNEY**

Organisation: Rail, Tram and Bus Union

Date Received: 26 September 2023

Submission to the Current and Future Public Transport Needs in Western Sydney Parliamentary Inquiries

Submission by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union NSW (RTBU NSW)

September 2023



RTBU
NSW BRANCH

Executive Summary

This submission is in response to the Legislative Council inquiry into the Current and Future Public Transport Needs in Western Sydney.

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union NSW welcomes the opportunity to put forward its views for this inquiry and looks forward to subsequent recommendations stemming from the inquiry.

The commuters and transport workers of Western Sydney deserve a world-class public transport system in the region. With growth in the region expected to continue, better meeting the current needs while planning for the future needs of commuters needs to be a key focus for the government.

It is the view of the RTBU NSW that the NSW Government has opportunities to improve transport services across Sydney's West in a number of ways including:

- Improving heavy rail in the region
- Improving the quality and accessibility of the bus service
- Halting any further metro conversions
- Improving public transport integration
- Improving transport accessibility

The following submission provides further detail into these areas.

Heavy rail

Sydenham to Bankstown Metro conversion

The RTBU is of the firm belief that the decision to convert the Bankstown heavy rail line to a metro service is illogical.

The existing Bankstown heavy rail line is a sound service for commuters. Unlike other lines, the service does not suffer from overcrowding during the peak demand and is one of the best functioning in the region.

Safety for rail staff and for commuters is paramount, which is why the RTBU is against the conversion of the heavy rail line for a high-speed Metro line that would operate alongside a goods line, risking the potential for a dangerous (or even fatal) collision with freight trains carrying loads that can shift.

Converting the rail corridor to a metro service raises numerous safety, accessibility and other concerns.

Transport experts including the former Coordinator of RailCorp, Ron Christie, raised concerns about the project in 2015, noting that removing heavy rail on the Bankstown line will cause 'major disruption to the efficient operation of the network, resulting in- [a] reduction in network flexibility and reliability, longer journey times for commuters who will need to change trains into Metro services to the city and loss of the Bankstown line as a relief line in times of major disruption.

An inquiry held by the Upper House also recommended that 'the NSW Government not proceed with the Metro Southwest project and that project funds are instead spent on connecting new communities to rail services and improving existing rail services.'

The RTBU believes the Sydenham to Bankstown Metro conversion is poor transport planning for a myriad of reasons, including:

Tearing up the existing heavy rail line is illogical: The current Bankstown line is one of the best functioning heavy rail lines in the state. Governments should be focused on improving the existing heavy rail service, not tearing down one of the state's best functioning railway lines.

Commuter disruption: The unnecessary metro conversion will see commuters along the line forced onto replacement buses for months on end, causing significant disruption. At a time when the NSW Government should be doing everything possible to get commuters back onto public transport, this commuter disruption will set public transport patronage in the area back.

Less access to stations: Up to 20,000 commuters are expected to be forced onto buses with at least nine train stations servicing commuters on the heavy rail line anticipated to close (Berala, Regents Park, Sefton, Chester Hill, Leightonfield, Villawood, Carramar, Birrong and Yagoona). The closure of these stations was allegedly contained in a report by Sydney Metro to the former NSW Government.

Forcing commuters onto an already crippled bus network: It is well documented that NSW is currently in the grips of a bus driver shortage, caused in large part by the previous NSW Coalition Government's decision to privatise our bus networks.

In the midst of a bus driver shortage which is already plaguing existing bus routes with issues, putting additional pressure on buses is also a severe risk.

Forcing commuters onto an already crippled bus network in the midst of driver shortages is a recipe for disaster and will undoubtedly have flow on effects to other bus services across the city.

Squeeze ways for emergency access on the Metro will be limiting for people with disability or injuries: There are some serious concerns around the safety of the changes as they relate to emergency access. In an emergency, passengers will need to embark through squeeze ways which are approximately 80cm wide, which would be an issue for someone with a disability, an injury or who is pregnant. The small space would also be an issue for emergency services personnel who would need to carry rescue or medical equipment into the situation. Squeeze ways have already been proposed for the Metro West and Western Sydney Airport lines and the RTBU holds serious concerns about whether this operational tactic would be suitable for the Bankstown line conversion.

Elevated walkways, which are one metre wide and contain a handrail, have been used elsewhere in the Metro network and can be accessed from all doors on the train.

Fewer seats, impacting our most vulnerable: Removing double-deck trains on heavy rail for single-deck Metro services means there are fewer seats for commuters.

Regardless of the claims around more frequent services - which the RTBU NSW strongly disputes will happen in reality - the shift to single-deck Metro trains means fewer seats for all commuters including the elderly, people with disabilities, children and other more vulnerable commuters.

Forcing commuters onto a service with fewer seats for a longer journey time doesn't just define logic, it's a risk for commuters.

Large-scale job loss resulting in significant safety concerns: The loss of hundreds of frontline jobs and safety concerns that there will be no drivers, guards or station staff to assist in incidents on the Sydenham to Bankstown conversion, which will rely on the existing heavy rail line.

Public transport needs workers. Without the oversight of drivers and guards to ensure commuter safety, the travelling public is being put at risk.

The RTBU recommends: There should be a greater focus on improving and expanding our existing heavy rail infrastructure across Western Sydney and beyond.

Consideration should be given to North South corridors rather than fixation on East West (growing areas of Sydney, Hills District etc). If a Metro is deemed necessary, it should not replace existing rail infrastructure, but rather service new areas.

The NSW Government also needs to learn from past mistakes in order to ensure future decisions are made in the best interest of commuters and the public at large. This includes reviewing the failures and issues associated with the Chatswood to Epping line, such as the significant commuter impact during the closure period and serious safety failures around the launch.

The case for rethinking the Metro conversion: digital systems

Further to the above-mentioned issues with the Metro, in planning for the system it is apparent that there has been limited consideration given to a potentially viable and more attractive (both financially and operationally) alternative to the Bankstown Line Metro conversion utilising existing infrastructure with upgrades currently in progress.

The Digital Systems project that Transport for NSW is currently undertaking should be a key consideration in any decision to continue with the Bankstown line Metro conversion.

The Digital Systems project is a ground-breaking in the way that it will increase frequency and efficiency of our heavy rail network. It is an unprecedented change to the signalling system which will see the Metropolitan network upgraded from the current, antiquated signalling system to ETCS Level 2, utilising axle counters and delivering in-cab signalling.

This is an uplift from the current “limited supervision” Automatic Train Protection to the genuine “full supervision” recommended in the Waterfall inquiry.

It is the RTBU’s understanding that the current limited roll-out of Digital Systems, quarantined to the Cronulla branch line, is in no small part due to the lack of interoperability between passenger and freight rolling stock utilising the Sydney Trains Network.

At one point in time, freight had been slated as moving to an Automatic Train Management System (ATMS) which would be incompatible with the Sydney Trains ETCS system. We now believe that this is no longer the case as the freight sector will also move to an ETCS system.

Considering this significant development, there is now opportunity to amend the scheduled roll out of ETCS and prioritise upgrading the Bankstown line earlier to achieve a comparable uplift in services while maintaining heavy rail and greater capacity to recover in degraded operations across the existing rail network.

Put simply, many of the benefits that the metro promises to deliver can be realised using what we already have enhanced by Digital Systems.

While the union acknowledges the financial difficulty in justifying the already significant taxpayer spend on the Metro conversion, it makes no sense to throw good money after bad in preserving predatory and onerous private sector contracts that will see Sydney experience significant disruption and ongoing reduction in network resilience.

Further, the RTBU's understanding is that the infrastructure upgrades that have already been completed. The disruption caused by the proposed 12-month shutdown and the flow on effects on the rest of the network from carving out a vital piece from the heavy rail puzzle could be avoided.

The RTBU recommends: The NSW Government should reweigh the benefits to the community of the Bankstown Line conversion against its substantial cost and significant disruption over the course of the coming years.

Transport Connectivity

Forward planning in the Western Sydney region to ensure genuine public transport connectivity is crucial.

Planning our transport systems to ensure commuters aren't forced onto multiple modes of transport or services in order to get from A to B should be a key focus of the NSW Government and transport executives.

Where multiple modes of transport are required, the connectivity between the modes should be seamless – which is not currently the case as bus and heavy rail service integration is generally limited to existing space at rail stations.

The RTBU recommends: A piecemeal approach to transport makes planning for genuine connectivity difficult. Adopting a long-term approach to transport planning in NSW is vital.

Bus network

The problems with privatisation

The bus services in Western Sydney – and in fact the whole of Sydney – are not of the standard the travelling public deserve and should expect.

Much of the failings of our bus services can be attributed to privatisation.

The dire findings in the interim report by the Bus Taskforce confirms privatisation of the bus network hasn't worked and has led to a huge impact on services for commuters.

The former Liberal government, including Premier and previous Transport Minister Gladys Berejiklian, argued for the privatisation of bus services with the never realised intention of the savings being used to reinvest in improving and expanding services and facilities.

Unfortunately for the long-suffering commuters of the now-privatised services, all they have been left with are unreliable services riddled with delays and cancellations.

Privatisation of the bus network has also caused significant issues of the recruitment and retention of bus drivers.

Since private companies took the reins, we've seen a two-tier payment system for bus drivers in some regions, with many being paid at differing rates for providing the exact same services.

Payslips are another issue that needs to be addressed by simplifying the system as some drivers are unable to calculate whether they are being paid correctly.

These issues have contributed in large part to the significant driver deficit of which has further exacerbated the unreliability of the network in region/s leading to poor services and increased frustration from commuters.

NSW Labor has inherited a woefully inadequate bus system due to the decision by the former Liberal government to privatise the network, but it is now up to the current government to rectify the situation.

The RTBU NSW recommends: a genuine commitment to implementing the findings of the NSW Bus Taskforce and on working with the RTBU to find further solutions to the issues plaguing bus drivers, and in turn commuters. These should include a genuine increase to the base pay for drivers, better incentives other than 'sign on' bonuses and one system of payment to begin to rectify the issue.

Accessibility

It is unacceptable that there are elements of our public transport network that are not accessible to everyone.

That people, including those with a disability, parents with prams, older people and others – often our most vulnerable – do not have access to every railway station in the state needs to be addressed as an urgent priority.

As Western Sydney grows and new transport infrastructure is put in place, it is crucial that accessibility for all is a key focus.

Conclusion

The people of Western Sydney deserve a world-class, coordinated public transport system, but that is not currently the case.

The RTBU recommends, as a key priority, placing a greater focus on expanding and improving the current heavy rail system, rather than looking to convert to metro services which create issues – not least of which include the issues around not having workers on hand in the event of an emergency.

Given its benefits over metro services in terms of technological advancements, safety, connectivity and accessibility, there's no question heavy rail should be prioritised.

If the Metro conversion is still being considered (*noting the RTBU has a strong issue with this*), it should be routed through new suburbs missing rail entirely, like the area now serviced between Epping and Rouse Hill, and areas commonly considered transport 'black spots'.

Addressing the significant issues caused by bus privatisation will also help deliver improved transport services for the people of Western Sydney. The first step in addressing this should be to implement the recommendations of the Bus Taskforce while also consulting with the RTBU on ways to further improve driver attraction and retention.

Public transport is a basic responsibility of government, and it is important that the people of Western Sydney – which includes those currently living there, those working there, and also the future residents' forecasts tell us to expect in the region – are properly catered for.