

OFF THE RAILS

By Joseph Moore

Rail is not a recommended public transport option for the Hills, according to a report by SA's independent infrastructure advisory body.

The State Government commissioned the Infrastructure SA report, which explores public transport options, in response to Mt Barker's growing population and community concerns about increasing congestion on the freeway and its impact on commuters.

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Rail transport not preferred

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Mt Barker has experienced 30% growth in the past 10 years alone.

The report recommended greater investment in rapid bus transport and upgrades to the Freeway and Glen Osmond Road in the context of bus services, including:

- A standby tow truck fleet on the freeway to help reduce delays
- Smart motorway technology including automatic removal gates
- Ongoing investigations into Glen Osmond Road with a focus on improving bus travel
- Investment in Park 'n' Rides, upgrades to bus stops and the renewal of Hills bus fleets
- Broadening of local bus services
- The report also claimed a least-cost, \$300m bus service would offer an average of 39-minute trips between Mt Barker and metropolitan Adelaide, compared with a lower-cost, \$250m railway option which would take 71-minutes

Other options explored in the report included:

- A new heavy rail corridor to achieve a 37.5-minute trip to Adelaide, at a cost of \$5.8 billion
- A new light rail corridor to achieve a 55-minute trip to Adelaide, at a cost of \$3.6 billion
- Two new rapid bus transport tunnels, one at the Heysen tunnels and the other on Glen Osmond Road, and a dedicated busway from the toll gate to

Mt Barker, all to achieve a 33-minute trip to Adelaide, altogether at a cost of \$4 billion, and

• A dedicated busway along Glen Osmond Road and the Freeway to Mt Barker to achieve a 36-minute trip, at a cost of \$1.8 billion.

Rail as a transport option was ultimately rejected by the report due to what it said were "significant physical barriers".

Those barriers included the steep and winding nature of the existing rail corridor, necessitating train speed limits of 25-40km/h; the requirement for passing loops, meaning trains would have to wait for those in opposite directions to pass, making commute times "less reliable" and ruling out an express service; logistical difficulties in sharing the railway line with freight trains; incompatibility between the track gauges in the Hills and metropolitan areas; the need for signalling and crossing upgrades; and the near-capacity state of Adelaide Train Station.

Member for Kavel Dan Cregan said he rejected the report's findings against the viability of Hills rail, citing a Regional Development Australia report from December which embraced rail as an option, while Mt Barker Mayor Ann Ferguson said "after 12 years, no Government has been willing to develop let alone implement a viable short or long-term transport plan for Hills residents."

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2022

OPINION

Transport needs

Infrastructure SA's recommendation against rail as a viable transport option for the Hills will come as unwelcome news to many across the region who are continuing to grapple with increasing congestion on our roads while Mt Barker's population grows.

The independent advisory body, which made recommendations to the State Government, has written off rail as being too expensive and unable to meet consumer needs.

If this is the case, it is vital that an effective alternative solution is found.

Both the State Government and Infrastructure SA have backed buses as a more suitable solution.

But buses must take the freeway and it seems unlikely that more people will be incentivised to rely on that service if the freeway itself isn't equipped to handle accidents and roadworks without major delays.

Reviewing bus routes and updating fleets likely isn't enough to make buses an attractive enough option to get much of the commuter traffic off of the freeway.

What the region really needs is a major and meaningful investment that will make commuting via public transport an attractive option compared with driving.

The Infrastructure SA report recommends that an appropriate long-term corridor be identified to allow more efficient access between Adelaide and the Hills, including for freight.

Let's hope that planning begins now for such a solution and doesn't fall prey to the politics of short election cycles.

The reality is that any meaningful solution – whether rail or road – will come at a significant cost.

But it's a cost that can't be escaped if the Hills region is to be properly catered for. Traffic congestion on the freeway is getting worse.

Mt Barker and Strathalbyn's populations have grown 30% and 20% respectively in the past decade: triple and double the average of Adelaide metropolitan growth.

More than \$5 billion is being spent on a new road between the northern and southern suburbs and we need similar investment in the Hills before – not after – Mt Barker becomes SA's second biggest city.

Kuitpo
Gumerach
Mt Crawford
Birdwood
Millbrook
Lobethal
Lenswood
Inverbrackenzie
Uraidla
Clarendon
Crafers
Mt Loftus
Hahndorf
Meadowdale
Macclesfield
Strathalbyn
Milang
Callingwaite
Mt Barker
Nairne
Rainfall
from
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days to