



Adelaide Hills Mayor Jan-Claire Wisdom is hoping for billions of dollars of government investment to benefit the Hills region, including a multi-billion dollar investment in a northern freight rail line.

HILLS COUNCILS WANT TO SEE MAJOR INVESTMENT IN REGION

BILLION DOLLAR

WISHLIST

LOUIS MAYFIELD

The Adelaide Hills Council is hoping for billions of dollars worth of investment for the region under a wishlist released ahead of the State and Federal elections, with the Mt Barker Council also hoping for major investment.

Headlining the Adelaide Hills Council's list are solutions for passenger and freight transport, including a northern freight rail line, improvements to GP and ambulance services in the region and funding for the Community Resilience and Readiness Program.

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Mt Barker Mayor Ann Ferguson and council chief executive Andrew Stuart at the incomplete Heysen Boulevard.

Councils' billion dollar wishlist

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Mayor Jan-Claire Wisdom said they were priorities which needed to be progressed on behalf of the community, visitors and region as a whole.

"We take our role in progressing such priorities seriously and, in doing so, are making election candidates aware of their importance," she said.

"A commitment to deliver on such priorities now, provides the greatest opportunity to enhance the social, economic and environmental prosperity for our local community, our State and our nation."

For transport, the Adelaide Hills Council is pushing for a commitment to the actions outlined in the recent Infrastructure SA Mt Barker Mass Transit Study report, which include:

- Ensuring fast commuter passenger transit between Mt Barker/Strathalbyn and Adelaide (approx \$200–500m)
- Improving public transport in the Hills in the short-term through rapid bus transit along the freeway
- The establishment of new and expanded Park 'n' Rides, including expanding the Crafers Park 'n' Ride
- Constructing a Northern Freight Train Bypass to connect with the national rail network (approx \$4.5–6 billion)

The health wishlist includes attracting and retaining GPs at Gumeracha, re-opening the Gumeracha Hospital Emergency Department and allocating additional ambulances at Aldgate, Mt Barker and Woodside.

The council is also seeking \$980,000 to expand the Community Resilience and Readiness Program, which involves

working with communities to plan their recoveries from future disasters.

Meanwhile the Mt Barker Council has listed its top five infrastructure projects for government support, including the completion of the Heysen Boulevard, the Mt Barker Town Square development, establishing a regional emergency services hub, a major expansion of the Mt Barker Hospital and the Hahndorf Main Street Revitalisation Project.

The council is pushing for timely investment in essential infrastructure to enable Mt Barker to fulfil the role of a regional centre as it grows to become the second largest city in SA.

Currently only 53% of the Heysen Boulevard connector road has been constructed, and the council is calling for the State Government to provide the funding needed to complete the road.

The Mt Barker Town Square is forecast to create 450 jobs in the city centre, with the council in the process of submitting the stage one elements of the project for grant funding through the Federal Government's Building Better Regions Fund. Further information is being sought on the Government's plans to establish a regional services hub in Mt Barker to cater for the SA Metropolitan Fire Service, Country Fire Service, SA Ambulance Service and State Emergency Service.

The council is also calling for a firm commitment from the State Government to include the Hahndorf Main Street Revitalisation in the scope of the \$250m Hahndorf Township Improvements and Access Upgrade.

Stakeholders concerned over transport report

JOSEPH MOORE

Last week's Infrastructure SA (ISA) report into long-term transport options for Hills residents has sparked concern across the region over its recommendation against rail as a viable solution, with some fearing the report has effectively rubber-stamped State Government inaction.

Transport Minister Corey Wingard said the report had "highlighted" long journey times for passenger rail and "to deliver it would be far too expensive."

"Instead, ISA has made a series of recommendations," he said.

"Including offering more convenient public transport, investing in Park 'n' Ride facilities, improving incident response on the freeway and bus priority options."

The ISA report was commissioned by the State Government in response to rapid population growth in Mt Barker and mounting congestion on the freeway, with a May 2021 traffic study by the RAA finding it was near capacity.

However, some Hills residents and community leaders rejected the report's findings on rail, with some concerned a meaningful solution to traffic congestion in the region has not yet been identified by the State Government despite years of advance warning.

Transport plan

"(Mt Barker) Council has highlighted these issues to the Premier and successive transport ministers," Mt Barker Mayor Ann Ferguson said.

"The fact remains that after 12 years, no Government has been willing to develop let alone implement a viable short or long-term transport plan for Hills residents."

Adelaide Hills Mayor Jan-Claire Wisdom said public transport remained a key issue for communities in the region and the Adelaide Hills

Council had lobbied for a long-term solution since 2010.

"While it's disappointing to see short term rail proposed as a non-viable option, the study does highlight the issues with freeway congestion caused by the Glen Osmond Road bottleneck and the frequency of incidents on the freeway itself," she said.

"Many Mt Barker and Hills residents have no reasonable alternative route to the city and suburbs when the freeway is blocked or congested."

Executive member of Mt Barker and District Residents' Association and engineer Douglas McCarty said the ISA report "may have provided a convenient outcome" for the current State Government but its findings "cannot be considered definitive".

Costed proposal

"A viable passenger rail option for Mt Barker and the Adelaide Hills is still on the table and is both wanted and needed by residents in this high growth area," he said.

Mr McCarty submitted his own costed proposal to ISA saying passenger rail could be achieved with 61 minute transit times between Mt Barker railway station and Adelaide railway station at a total cost of \$317m.

He said ISA had failed to include his proposal in their final report.

"The absence of my proposal in the final report suggests that it has been ignored in substance and certainly not considered seriously," he said.

Mr McCarty said problems with passenger rail that were raised in the ISA report were "all issues ... I addressed", rejecting ISA concerns over train pollution and delays from sharing the track with freight and other passenger trains.

"I recommended and costed hydrogen fuel-cell/battery railcars... presumably diesel buses are magically non-polluting," he said.

"Freight movements can be planned for – the rest of Australia can do this, so can we."

Freeway fix

The State Government's \$75m promise to upgrade the freeway is a welcome investment.

However, it is still just a Band-Aid fix for the freeway's congestion issue.

The Government plans to install a moveable centre barrier system which would respond to accidents by automatically creating an extra lane to accommodate traffic.

But while any investment to improve traffic flow on the freeway is welcome, this measure alone will not solve the overarching fact that at times the freeway is at capacity.

It will not provide a long-term solution to congestion – a problem that will only worsen with time as Mt Barker continues to grow.

Neither the State Government nor the Opposition have promised anything that will remove significant volumes of traffic from the interstate highway or create a meaningful alternative route.

The latest promise of \$75m may seem like a large amount, but in reality it is just a fraction of the expenditure needed.

A real solution that will future-proof our region is likely to cost a significant amount – and it's money that will eventually need to be spent.

The issue will not simply go away – it will only get worse and continue to create a dangerous environment on the freeway.

The Adelaide Hills Council has made improvement to passenger and freight transport the number one item on its State election wishlist, including a Northern Freight Train Bypass to connect the Hills to the national rail network at an estimated cost of between \$4.5 and \$6 billion.

It also wants to see faster commuter passenger transport while the Mt Barker Council has announced that its top five infrastructure priorities ahead of the election include the much-needed completion of the Heysen Boulevard, as well as a new Mt Barker Hospital.

Let's hope both of SA's political parties listen to the needs of the region and take meaningful action to solve some of the problems Hills residents have already been living with for far too long.