

# STATE LIBERAL GOVERNMENT DERAILS TRANSPORT SOLUTION

Luke Harris

Calls for a passenger rail service to be established in the Hills may have reached the end of the line, as a new report from Infrastructure SA has found it would not meet commuters' needs.

The *Mount Barker Mass Transit Study* was commissioned by the Government of South Australia to provide a holistic, independent view of options to address passenger transport issues through the Hills.

Though the findings acknowledge significant congestion on the South Eastern Freeway and that point-to-point Hills mass transit is challenging, it notes that rail would not achieve travel times competitive with current bus services or cars if using the existing rail line between Belair and Mount Barker.

The report estimates that journey time by rail from Mount Barker to the city would take in excess of 70 minutes, which would not provide any significant decrease in travel time over conventional methods such as passenger vehicles or buses.

Instead, the report considers the option of 'rapid bus transit', similar to the north-eastern suburbs' O-Bahn, as a favourable solution.

Kavel MP Dan Cregan, who has been a supporter of passenger rail in the Hills, rejected the findings of Infrastructure SA.

"The Hills community expects the government to act on this report and invest in rapid bus transport and rail solutions, including more local park and ride facilities," Dan said.

"I reject the finding that rail is not viable. An alternative study has found modern railcars with higher power-to-weight ratios can do the trip to Mount Barker in as little as 45 minutes with \$70m in track improvements."

The report to which Dan refers was commissioned by Mount Barker District Council and produced by Rod Hook & Associates. It was published in December 2021.

Chair of SA Transport Action Group John Hill disagrees with Infrastructure SA's report, saying that there are many things that are wrong or untrue in it.

"The time taken between Mount Barker and Adelaide is probably about 50 minutes, as opposed to the 71 minutes the report estimates," John said.

"50 years ago, Adelaide to Mount Barker took 67 minutes with a slow Bluebird train. A Redhen train could do it in 47 minutes.

"Infrastructure SA has assumed the plan is to transfer to the existing Belair line, adding nine stops before reaching the Adelaide Rail Station.

"Our proposal is to go to Blackwood, and then express to the Adelaide Rail Station. This would be a lot quicker for Hills residents by taking out unnecessary stops, as well as offer an express option for Blackwood residents."

John notes that rail would improve both safety and environmental factors if introduced as a travel option.

"Rail would be a safer method of transport," John said.

"With fewer cars on the freeway,



Kavel MP Dan Cregan beside rail lines in Mount Barker

there is less potential for crashes.

"A rail car can hold around 100 people. This could take 100 cars off the freeway, resulting in greater environmental savings.

"They're also talking about diesel trains being dirty. These diesel trains have been hybridised, so they are not as dirty as they used to be."

Mount Barker District Council said they were "concerned, but not surprised" by Infrastructure SA's findings and that it is "unclear how the transport needs of Hills residents will be met in the future".

Mount Barker mayor Ann Ferguson said the state government desperately needs to commit to developing transport infrastructure in the Hills.

"Council has highlighted these issues to the premier and successive transport ministers," Ann 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.

"Our community is growing so rapidly, and it is imperative that essential services and infrastructure are in place which rightly requires government leadership and support."

Adelaide Hills Council has also thrown its support behind improving transport infrastructure throughout the Hills, with Mayor Jan-Claire Wisdom stating that councils and Hills communities have been asking for a long-term transport solution since 2010.

"While it's disappointing to see short term rail deemed 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," Jan-Claire said.

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

"Making public transport more accessible to the broad range of origin points for our dispersed Hills communities is vital to the solution.

"Whoever is in government after the March state election must act with urgency on the short term solution and long-term transport corridor."

Regional Development Australia has supported all six recommendations of the Infrastructure SA Study, which includes more frequent bus services between Adelaide and the Hills, investment in additional Park 'n' Ride facilities, and targeted investment in Glen Osmond Road to improve efficiency and bus prioritisation.

CEO and Director of Regional Development Australia Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu & Kangaroo Island Damien Cooke said doing nothing is not an option.

"Growing congestion on Adelaide Hills transport corridors is gradually eroding quality of life for residents and visitors, and impacting business productivity," he said.

"Our Hills communities experience these challenges every day and are seeking improvements. The ISA report reinforces findings of our own work with stakeholders since 2019 and we look forward to seeing action on these recommendations."