

Airport rail warning

EXCLUSIVE
TOM MINEAR

Regional cities want tunnel option

MELBOURNE'S airport rail link will be an "infrastructure white elephant" if it does not deliver 20-minute services via a new tunnel, committees representing Victoria's biggest cities have warned.

As a decision nears on the final design of the long-awaited project, groups from Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat, Gippsland, Shepparton and Wyndham have joined forces to demand a dedicated link running underground from Southern Cross to Sunshine.

They say building the link without a tunnel will leave regional and western suburbs commuters "facing decades of slow and overcrowded trains and continue the crippling dependency on some of Australia's most congested roads".

It is believed some state government figures want to use existing rail to Sunshine, a cheaper option that would ignore a \$5 billion private consortium offer for a tunnel.

It comes as former Labor

premier Steve Bracks told the *Herald Sun* the rail link needed to get commuters to the airport "in a superior time to any other form of travel".

While he said he did not have a view on the best design, Mr Bracks said it would "not be impossible to have some stops along the way" as long as the train was quicker than driving or SkyBus.

The groups, led by the Committee for Melbourne, said the tunnel was needed to

untangle metropolitan and regional rail lines and deliver fast trains to Geelong and Ballarat — expected to house an extra 150,000 people by 2036.

Almost 400,000 people will move into Wyndham and Melton over the same period.

"We have united to ensure that Victoria does not squander a once-in-a-generation opportunity," the groups said.

"The train should link in seamlessly with regional rail services to provide a fast and

efficient journey to the airport for country travellers."

The state government's determination to include airport rail in its Suburban Rail Loop means airport passengers may have to change at Sunshine.

It is believed a decision on the final design is likely to be made in coming weeks.

"We continue to work closely with the federal government on the best design for airport rail," Transport Infrastructure Minister Jacinta Allan said.

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TALIBAN HOSTAGE BACK HOME

AUSTRALIAN teacher Timothy Weeks said being held for three "long and tortuous" years by the Taliban had had a "profound and unimagineable effect".

The 50-year-old was freed