

THE AUSTRALIAN

New roads alone won't free up our sclerotic city streets, say lobbyists

EAN HIGGINS, EMILY RITCHIE THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM April 29, 2017

Key Sydney and Melbourne lobby groups will push for a fundamental shift in strategy to deal with urban congestion, which costs billions in lost productivity.

The groups advocate big public transport projects and have branded new road construction on its own as counter-productive. The move comes as a survey by *The Weekend Australian* reveals average speeds in Australian cities have fallen over the past six years.

The Committee for Sydney and the Committee for Melbourne have warned slow traffic is costing the nation in productivity.

One estimate put the cost of congestion in Australia at \$16.3 billion in 2015, and it is forecast to grow 5.5 per cent a year between last year and 2030.

The Committee for Sydney, formerly chaired by Lucy Turnbull, is proposing new pricing mechanisms through a congestion tax on motorists and a per-kilometre distance charge, in a move that is likely to spark fierce debate with state politicians who regard such proposals as political suicide.

Chief executive Tim Williams said the intensified congestion despite billions spent on infrastructure showed politicians were perpetuating a myth that new road projects would reduce travel times.

“Only road pricing can reduce congestion and only public transport can perform the function we need of getting masses of people around the city without congesting the roads.”

The Committee for Melbourne is more wary of a congestion tax but called for it to be kept open as an option, despite Premier Daniel Andrews's rejection of the idea.

Chief executive Martine Letts said: “You can't build your way out of congestion.”

In a keynote address in Melbourne next month, Ms Letts will call for a “major mass transport link” from the CBD to Tullamarine airport.

She says highway expansion alone will not solve the problem.

Dr Williams and Ms Letts's organisations plan to work together to challenge the traditional political approach to urban planning issues. The campaign will seek to explode claims made by politicians — particularly at election time — promising that a new and vastly expensive piece of road infrastructure will reduce congestion.

Sydney, which was last year named the nation's most congested city by peak transport body Austroads, has had significant reductions in average speeds since 2011.

A major traffic jam with a traffic queue of up to 17km was spurred by an accident earlier this week on the M2 freeway in western Sydney as students returned to school after Anzac Day.

Adelaide's King William Street came out on top as Australia's slowest thoroughfare, with an average speed of 13.5km/h. Harris Street in Sydney's inner-city suburb of Pyrmont ranked second as drivers crawled along at an average pace of just 14.5km/h.

Between 2006 and 2013, speeds on Melbourne's major arterial roads have slowed by an average of 13km/h.

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