

Herald Sun**Cracks in the air link tracks**

THERE is just one chance to get Melbourne Airport Rail Link planning right, and squibbing on scale or cost is not an option.

As a nationally significant project to accommodate a doubling of traffic through Melbourne Airport (from 35 million passengers per annum now to a forecast 67 million in 2038), speed and the most efficient access is paramount.

The Melbourne Airport Rail Link's success will be wholly defined by its patronage, which will be driven by convenience and competitive ticket pricing.

A slow, suburban journey stopping all stations won't attract passenger numbers and the Tullamarine Freeway, despite recent widening, will again become a stagnant carpark.

There are a range of competing factors being debated as the Melbourne Airport Rail Link (MARL) business case is developed.

By way of a quick recent history (for a project that was first mooted in the 1950s): in November 2018 the Morrison and Andrews governments agreed to a general route proposal through Sunshine — with the creation of a new “Southern Cross-type” station for the west.

While three other route options were on the table, the Albion link through Sunshine was identified for its capacity to tie in the CBD, regional lines and dovetail with the Melbourne Metro Tunnel and proposed Suburban City Loop.

A formal Heads of Agreement was signed off by Canberra and Spring St in March, with \$5 billion committed from each level of government to build MARL at an estimated cost of \$8 billion to \$13 billion.

But cracks have emerged between federal and state governments about the need to build a high-speed twin tunnel between the CBD and

Sunshine, rather than using existing suburban rail lines in the section.

The higher price of tunnelling and construction capacity pressures already being experienced are testing planners. Given the cost and scope of the Andrews Government's “Big Build”, with about \$50 billion in projects underway and rising cost overruns of \$770 million amid a considerably tighter economic outlook, some state Labor figures are pushing back against the federal government's tunnel preference.

One of the highest profile proponents talking with government about project partnership is AirRail, a group including Melbourne Airport, Southern Cross Station, Metro Trains Australia and fund manager IFM Investors. AirRail has pitched a sub-20-minute city-to-tarmac service with 7km of tunnels, \$20 tickets and purpose-built trains running every 10 minutes, 24/7. AirRail, which says it will add \$5 billion to the cross-government \$10 billion, requires 27km of new, dedicated tracks to deliver a premium service.

Its market-led proposal is now being considered by the Andrews Government and the group says it can start building next year, two years ahead of other options.

Government agency Rail Projects Victoria's technical and commercial advisers are assessing multiple options and geotechnical review has begun.

But one thing is clear, trundling out to Sunshine on standard surface tracks won't be embraced by travellers who need efficient airport access. The Andrews Government needs to ensure razor-sharp cost-benefit contracts. It can't repeat the mistakes made on West Gate Tunnel where Transurban ran rings around the bureaucracy to turn a \$4 billion WGT investment into a \$19 billion toll return.