

August 2023 Submission to Merri-bek Council in response to Moving Around Merri-bek Discussion Paper

Introduction

The Upfield Transport Alliance welcomes the opportunity to provide input into Merri-bek Council's new transport strategy. In responding to the Moving Around Merri-bek Discussion Paper, our comments focus on public transport particularly the Upfield Train Line. Whilst public transport is the responsibility of State Government, Council still has a responsibility to advocate on behalf of its residents and visitors for public transport that meets our needs and has parity with other metropolitan areas.

The Upfield Transport Alliance is an alliance of local community groups and individuals concerned to improve the reliability and frequency of the Upfield train line by campaigning for track duplication between Gowrie and Upfield Stations, building a much-needed station at Campbellfield and extending the line to the northern growth suburbs between Upfield and Wallan. Members of this group were successful in saving the Upfield Line from closure in an 8-year campaign from 1987-1995.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Council needs to make a stronger and more explicit acknowledgment of the significance of the Upfield Train Line in addressing:
 - the public transport needs of Merri-bek residents and visitors;
 - Council's broader transport strategy objectives (safety, liveability, health, sustainability and accessibility);
 - Council's climate emergency objectives.
2. As a priority Council needs to **advocate strongly and consistently** for the State Government to:
 - address the immediate duplication of the rail track between Gowrie and Upfield, particularly during the closure of the Upfield Line for the removal of level crossings in Brunswick;
 - ensure adequate and efficient bus replacement services particularly in the northern suburbs of Merri-bek when the Upfield Line is closed for the removal of level crossings;
 - ensure the **entire** Upfield Line has parity with other Metro Rail Lines where passengers are enjoying a 10-minute service;
 - install accessible tram stops along North Coburg, East Coburg and West Coburg tram routes **before** the Upfield Line is closed for level crossing removal.
3. Council needs to increase and prioritise resources to enable officers and Councillors to undertake a sustained level of advocacy around public transport issues to state and other local governments.

4. As a priority Council needs to address the north/south divide in Merri-bek in relation to public transport. We need council to join with City of Hume to advocate for the State Government to:
- review bus services and routes across the northern suburbs;
 - increase the frequency of bus services in the northern suburbs including links to Campbellfield Shopping Plaza
 - build a railway station at Campbellfield to provide easy access to the Shopping Plaza and link to the airport;
 - build bus shelters at Campbellfield Shopping Plaza;
 - extend the Upfield Line to the northern growth areas between Upfield and Wallan;
 - hold the pre-election Sustainable Transport Forums in the north of Merri-bek.

The issues informing these recommendations are outlined briefly below:

Issues to be addressed

Intrinsic importance of Upfield Train to Quality of Life in Merri-bek

The discussion paper makes several comments about the Upfield Train Line but there needs to be a much stronger and more explicit acknowledgment of the importance of the Upfield Line in not only addressing public transport needs but also its underpinning Merri-bek's aims to increase walking, liveability, accessibility to services, improve sustainability and combat climate change.

The lack of public transport options in the northern growth corridor is a massive problem with heavy reliance on private vehicles that impact on the Merri-bek's roads. The Craigieburn Bypass is nearing capacity. Infrastructure Australia's 2019 Infrastructure Audit predicts the Hume Freeway will be Melbourne's most congested road by 2030.

The improvement and extension of the Upfield Train Line to the growth areas north of Upfield will do much to reduce the number of private vehicles travelling through Merri-bek and relieve congestion on the Hume Freeway/Craigieburn By-pass.

Urgent need to duplicate track between Gowrie and Upfield

Despite the crucial and integral nature of the Upfield Train line to the quality of life in Merri-bek, it is currently one of the worst rail services in the entire Metropolitan area. The State Government has promised 10-minute services on all metropolitan train lines once the Metro Tunnel is completed. This cannot be achieved on the Upfield Line without duplicating the 4 km of track between Gowrie and Upfield.

A key hold-up to this track duplication is the expense of removing the level crossing at Barry Road. A cheaper and quicker solution is to duplicate the track and install the necessary crossover and platforms to the south of Barry Road. The grade separation at Barry Road could then be dealt with at a later date when more money is available to extend the line beyond Upfield.

We need Council to advocate strongly and consistently for the State Government to immediately duplicate the 4km rail track between Gowrie and Upfield, promoting the option to establish the Upfield station and crossover south of Barry Road.

Duplicate track when Upfield Line closed for level crossing removal

The Upfield Train Line will be closed for the removal of level crossings in Brunswick for at least 18 months. We need Council to advocate strongly for the State Government to duplicate the track from Gowrie to Upfield while the line is closed, thus reducing the need to close the line again when duplication occurs.

Need for accessible tram stops before level crossing removal

The closure of the Upfield Line for level crossing removals will make it really difficult for people with mobility issues to move around Merri-bek, particularly in accessing shops and services along Sydney Road. We need Council to advocate strongly for the State Government to meet its legal obligation to install accessible tram stops along Sydney Road before level crossings are removed.

Council also needs to advocate for accessible tram stops on the East and West Coburg tram routes.

Public transport as a priority for addressing sustainability and climate emergency

In addressing sustainability, there needs to be a greater emphasis on improving public transport to reduce emissions. The discussion paper puts too much emphasis on private electric vehicles for achieving this.

The State Government is favouring spending on costly road improvement projects (including level crossing removals) at the expense of much cheaper public transport solutions. We need Council to advocate for extending tram lines as well as the Upfield Train Line and increasing the span and frequency of east-west bus services.

The current poor interchange between different modes of transport is arguably the weakest part of the Merri-bek's public transport system. To get significant numbers of people out of their cars, all modes of public transport need to operate at 10-minute intervals as a minimum and operate till midnight. Sunday timetables should be the same as on Saturday.

Addressing inequity between north and south Merri-bek

There is a clear north - south divide in Merri-bek regarding access to public transport yet council continues to hosts pre-election Sustainable Transport Forums in Brunswick.

Moreover, Council has improved housing developments in former industrial zones in the northern parts of the municipality. It is essential that any such developments are serviced by frequent and accessible public transport in order to reduce the need for private vehicles.

We need Council to be pro-active in lobbying for good public transport options for new housing developments and to host Sustainable Transport Forums in the north of Merri-bek where transport needs are greater.

Future developments will deepen north south divide

The inequity between north and south Merri-bek will be reinforced with:

- the closure of the line during level crossing removals;
- tentative plans to run a 10-minute service only between Melbourne and Coburg once Metro Tunnel is completed.

Whilst the southern part of the municipality will enjoy the benefits of the initial pain and inconvenience of level crossing removals, there are no benefits for those passengers living in Hadfield, Merlynston and Fawkner.

Council needs to argue for equity

As a priority Council needs to address the north/south divide in relation to public transport. As argued above, Council must lobby strongly to duplicate the rail track between Upfield and Gowrie to ensure a 10-minute service along the entire Upfield Line.

Good bus replacement services needed particularly in north of Merri-bek

All passengers will be impacted by the temporary closure of the line but those living in the north of Merri-bek will be affected the most. In the past replacement buses have been woefully inadequate, overcrowded and greatly increase travelling time. Passengers who can, resort to using their cars as they do not have the luxury of catching the tram or cycling short distances to reach their destination.

We need Council to advocate strongly for the State Government to provide adequate and efficient bus replacement services particularly in the northern suburbs of Merri-bek when the Upfield Line is closed for the removal of level crossings in Brunswick.

This would include providing additional bus services to link passengers to alternative train lines and providing express services from Upfield, Gowrie and the city.

Work with City of Hume to improve public transport links in Fawkner and Campbellfield

For Merri-bek residents in Fawkner the nearest large shopping centre is at Campbellfield. Public transport to Campbellfield's shopping centre is difficult and time-consuming forcing people to resort to private vehicles. There are no shelters at Campbellfield Plaza when waiting for buses.

We need Council to join with the City of Hume to lobby the State Government for

- a railway station at Campbellfield with easy access to the Shopping Plaza;
- bus shelters at Campbellfield Shopping Plaza;
- more frequent buses linking northern suburbs including to Campbellfield Shopping Plaza

A station at Campbellfield will allow the Upfield Train to link with the 901 Airport bus, thus reducing the need to drive to the airport.