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GROWING PAINS

As Melbourne grapples with the challenges of unprecedented growth, there's much we can learn from the mistakes of the past.

STORY: Sue Hewitt

Another day in Melbourne – another stop-start morning commute on roads choked by congestion; another teeth-jarring ride on a train or tram packed to strap-hanging capacity.

Sound familiar? Actually, this scenario was described in a 1954 report on the Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Scheme which identified key challenges facing the city – traffic congestion, crowded public transport and (even then), sprawling outer suburbs with inadequate infrastructure.

Sixty-five years on, the city is grappling with the same challenges, only now on a much greater scale. The latest annual Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey found that Melbourne workers spend on average 65 minutes a day commuting, up from 59 minutes in 2002, affecting health, job satisfaction and family relationships.

Another recent report by Infrastructure Australia warned that without a massive

increase in infrastructure planning and spending, Melbourne was heading for traffic gridlock by 2031, with an estimated cost of \$10.4 billion in lost productivity.

Where did we go wrong and how can we ensure that we're not dealing with the same issues 65 years from now?

To find the answers RACV has launched an ambitious three-stage research project, RACV Futures Series, firstly to analyse why the city developed the way it has since 1908 when RACV began, secondly to predict how Melbourne will likely grow in the next four decades based on current plans and trends, and finally to envision how we want the city to look in 2056 and what needs to change to ensure we get there.

RACV's senior planner, Stuart Outhred, who is leading the project, says this is a pivotal time in Victoria's development. "We have the opportunity to learn from the past and implement changes now that serve us well into the future," he says. "Some solutions will be shiny new innovations,

and some will be tried and tested techniques that we simply haven't invested in enough over the decades."

In the early 20th century, Melbourne's development followed strong 'transit bones' as housing clustered around train and tram routes. But by the 1950s, as post-war migration fuelled population growth in the suburbs, the car was king. As manufacturing moved out of the inner city lured by cheaper land, workers followed, moving to large blocks, each with a garage to stow a treasured car or two.

It was, says Stuart, a turning point in the city's development. As car ownership took off and commuting distances grew, building more roads seemed the obvious solution to emerging traffic congestion. And so the 1960s and early '70s ushered in the era of Melbourne's major freeways which accelerated outwards sprawl.

But as new roads made driving more appealing, car numbers burgeoned, fuelling demand for yet more roads. Melbourne



(From left) Electric tramway construction at the intersection of St Kilda and Domain Roads around 1925; building the Metro Tunnel Project's Anzac Station at the same intersection in 2019.

PHOTOS: State Library Victoria, Christian Pearson/ Misheye.

became caught in a perpetual loop of what Stuart calls induced demand. "It's why we have congestion today," he says, "despite promises that new roads would be 'congestion busting'."

With the clarity of hindsight, he says it's easy to identify the mistakes of the past that led to today's commuter stress. "After the pre-war investment in the tram network, investment in public transport has been sorely lacking. Good things are happening now with the Metro Tunnel Project and Regional Rail Revival, but is it enough to counter decades of under-investment?"

He says Melbourne's first significant post-war public transport improvement was the City Loop which opened in 1985. By this time workers were pouring back into the CBD as jobs in the services sector overtook manufacturing. Traffic congestion and crowding on public transport into and out of the city moved towards crisis point.

Now as the city grapples with past mistakes, unprecedented population growth means good planning is more critical than ever. Stuart says cities worldwide that are dependent on car use will struggle with growth. "Is this approach sustainable as we look at Melbourne having a population of nine million by 2056?" he says.

"That's why we need to take stock, think critically and look carefully at approaches to housing, transport and infrastructure," he says.

"Whenever a project or initiative is announced, we should ask 'will this really improve Victoria's liveability, or will we be having the conversation we had in 1954 all over again in 2056?'"

Edging out

If anyone knows about Melbourne's growing pains over the past decade, it's William Sharp. He moved to Mernda on Melbourne's northern fringe 12 years ago seeking the best of both worlds – country living near city amenities. When William bought in Mernda the blocks were big, the population small and there was a country market selling chooks behind the local pub. "Back then it still had a country feel with paddocks, parkland and kangaroos and other wildlife," he says. There used to be about 800 people in the township, now there are 16,000.

But while the population has boomed, infrastructure has not kept up and now he, like so many other residents living in Melbourne's fringe suburbs, is feeling the pain. "When I came here there were no major traffic problems. It used to take me 35 to 45 minutes to get to the city, but I went to the city recently via Plenty Road on a Saturday and it took me two hours."

'It still had a country feel with paddocks and kangaroos.'



William Sharp in Mernda.
PHOTO: Eamon Gallagher