

Quiet achiever keeps a city ticking

Jason Murphy

The Number 96 tram is not just where affluent inner-city commuters get close and personal with more colourful types. It may be the great unsung hero of the Victorian economy.

The line provides access to an incredible 11.3 per cent of Melbourne's jobs along its 14 kilometre route, according to new data.

The tram drops off fashionable baristas in Fitzroy, public servants at Spring Street and lawyers at William Street before taking backpackers and hospitality workers all the way to St Kilda.

There are about 3800 paid positions within 400 metres of each of the tram's 45 stops.

Patronage grew by 6 per cent in 2010-11, and the line carried 16 million passengers.

The whole tram network serves 34 per cent of Melbourne's jobs and 17.5 per cent of households.

In contrast, the 830 kilometre metro train system with more than 200 stations serves 14.9 per cent of Melbourne's jobs and 7.7 per cent of households.

Yet the state government is investing billions in extending the train network.

The Baillieu government has pledged hundreds of millions of dollars for rail line extensions to Avalon airport and South Morang, is researching train system expansions to Melbourne airport and Rowville, and is preparing for a multi-billion-dollar train tunnel under the city.



On track . . . Melbourne's No 96 tram makes 45 stops, and each has 3800 jobs within walking distance. Photo: ARSINEH HOUSPIAN

Terry Mulder said investment in heavy rail would determine the success of motorists being attracted from single occupant cars.

But experts warned that the tram system could not be ignored.

State government investment in trams is centred on updating ageing vehicles. It will buy 50 new low-floor trams, and remake some tram stops.

"A large street tram network . . . is a key reason why Melbourne achieved the title of the most liveable city," he said.

SGS Economics and Planning principal Terry Rawnsley said the city needed both trams and train improvements.

The tram system did not just respond to the shape of the city — it changed it, he said.

"If you look along the route of

scale developments, and that is because of the speed and frequency of the tram. It effectively makes areas along the route closer to the city centre."

Mr Rawnsley suggested investing in bigger trams running on more routes to increase the system's capacity and usefulness. Improving inner city tram networks could be efficient, he argued, because the tracks and

Public Transport Users Association president Daniel Bowen agreed. "Trams, trains, and even buses all have a role to play."

Mr Bowen suggested speeding up road public transport by providing traffic light priority, which would lead to better services.

"The high-frequency tram services along St Kilda Road have, over time, clearly resulted in high-density office and residential development."

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Vic Transport Minister Terry Mulder

He took issue with the Department of Transport's methodology, which he suggested made trains look worse than they really were.

"I suspect if they had used 600 or 800 metres [to measure the distance to jobs] it might be quite a different picture," he said, noting people would walk further to trains than trams, because the subsequent trip tended to be at a higher speed.

In the early 20th century, Sydney had Australia's largest tram network but ran its last trams in 1961. Trams were stripped and burned at a depot in Randwick.

Melbourne is the only major Australian city with a surviving tram network. Adelaide has one tram line, as does Sydney. Perth and Brisbane have recently debated