

The North East Link: its impact on the Ringwood Metropolitan Activity Centre

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This article comprises extracts from a paper written by Philip Daw, the President of HCAG. The full paper was first published on the HCAG website here: <https://hcag.online/home/> on 25 August 2022. Thank you to HCAG for allowing Eastsider News to publish this extract.

There are a number of unresolved issues arising from the North East Link project. The HCAG document, however, focuses on specific issues arising from the North East Link that impact on the Ringwood Metropolitan Activity Center (RMAC), and solutions and timelines needed to address them.

Overview

The North East Link has been committed to and to date \$11.8 billion of the estimated \$16.8 billion cost has been allocated with construction having commenced on the chosen option – Option A. Option A is the shortest of the four assessed routes and has several features (all creating choke points) that the other three options do not, the primary ones being:

- It is the only option that feeds traffic into the Eastern Freeway tunnels which present a choke point just west of the Ringwood MAC, limiting the capacity of the link and forcing substantial traffic into roads and streets in Whitehorse (Some estimates by others outside of the NE Link Authority suggest as much as 70,000 extra vehicles a day into Whitehorse Roads).
- As HCAG understands, the choke point resulting from the Eastern Freeway tunnels under the Mullum Mullum Creek and the limitations of the Ringwood bypass have been deemed to be outside the scope of the NE Link project.
- The North East Link and particularly the elected Option A results in substantial and greater impacts on both the Ringwood bypass and the Ringwood Metropolitan Activity Center (RMAC) than does any of the rejected options.
- Traffic is not only turned east along the Eastern Freeway to link with Eastlink, but a substantial volume is also turned west towards the city. The western end of the Eastern Freeway is already a choke point at Hoddle Street.

Given these three choke point issues, is the North East Link shaping up as a 'white elephant?' The reality is: If the North East Link is to function optimally the three choke points (west at Hoddle Street, the NE Link northern end, and east at the Mullum, Melba tunnels and Ringwood Bypass) need to be addressed.

The cost of removing these choke points is of a similar order or more than the cost of the North East Link itself (estimated \$16.8 billion total). That is, it is the hidden agenda the NE Link authority and its successor has been hiding from everyone - Including the Premier? The real cost of the North East Link is of the order of \$33-34 billion.

- Impact of tolls on the North East Link

In March 2020, the state government announced the 'North East Link State Tolling Corporation.' Direct tolls on the North-East Link will have a detrimental effect on the Link by encouraging cars to avoid it and use local roads instead. This is contrary to one of its stated purposes which is moving cars and trucks off local roads and onto the Link.

Shadow tolling could avoid this adverse impact. Private sector funding and a design-build-operate solution could also be used to provide early elimination of the eastern choke point impacting the RMAC and surrounding area. Paying back the private provider could be by either direct or shadow tolling.

This paper addresses one of these choke points: the eastern most interchange between the east end of the Eastern Freeway – Ringwood Bypass – Eastlink and its impact on the Ringwood Metropolitan Activity Center (RMAC).

Proposed benefits

North East Link would complete Melbourne's Metropolitan Ring Road project and is estimated to carry around 100,000 vehicles a day, providing non-stop movement and easier access for freight operators, particularly between the growing industrial areas around Dandenong, Campbellfield and the new freight-hub near Donnybrook. This is not achievable with the North East Link co-sharing with the Eastern Freeway east-west traffic (particularly going forward in time since there is no future growth potential) beyond the planned Eastern Freeway works.

With Melbourne's north expected to be home to around one million people in 2026, it is posited that the North East Link will reduce reliance on Fitzsimons Lane, Heidelberg Road and Rosanna Road, and enhance road access to Melbourne Airport as well as popular regional and interstate destinations, and will allow traffic to bypass central Melbourne.

Criticisms

North East Link fails to effectively complete Melbourne's Ring Road project due to its connection to and reliance upon the Eastern Freeway and would be the only section of the Ring Road to rely on an existing radial freeway as a part of the route.

The Victorian transport association has expressed a preference for an unconstrained ring road (known as Option C) to be constructed. North East Link is the most expensive road project ever constructed in Victoria and has already faced significant cost blowouts from an originally planned \$10bn to \$16bn.

A shift away from public transport to road transport of around 25,000 commuters per day is expected, with Tony Morton of the Public Transport Users Association quoted as saying 'It's remarkable that anyone working in the public interest would be so positive about a project they find will put more traffic on the road at the expense of public transport.'

HCAG considers these criticisms that are put forward in the public domain are valid and the proposed benefits do NOT adequately address the criticisms.

The paper written by Philip Daw, President of the Heatherdate Community Action Group provides a comprehensive exposition of the group's opposition to the North east Link. Please go to the HCAG website at <https://hcag.online/home/> to read the full paper and to explore other work done by this group.