

## **The North East Link: an introduction**

The North East Link (NEL) is a freeway-standard road being built by the Victorian Government. It will link the Metropolitan Ring Road (M80) in Greensborough to the Eastern Freeway at Bulleen Road. The project is jointly funded by the Australian and Victorian governments.

The major elements of the project include:

- North East Link Tunnels comprising 6.5km tunnels with parklands, wetlands and a Greensborough Road boulevard above and 3 interchanges at Lower Plenty Road, Manningham Road and the Eastern Freeway
- Completion of the M80 Ring Road with 5 new lanes, 2 bridges at Elder Street and Watsonia Road, and a multi-level car parking at Watsonia Station
- Upgrades of Eastern Freeway with 45km+ of new and upgraded lanes and 6 express lanes between Middleborough Road and Chandler Highway
- Eastern Express Busway comprising 11km of dedicated bus lanes from Doncaster to the city. a new Bulleen Park & Ride and upgraded Doncaster Park & Ride
- North East Trail consisting of 34km+ of new and upgraded walking and cycling paths, 40 new and upgraded bridges crossings and 8 main trails

The project continues to be controversial on many grounds and has attracted criticism from community and business interests, local government and transport planning experts. Opposition to the project covers its environmental, social, commercial and economic impacts and the unsubstantiated claims regarding the benefits it will deliver. These issues are discussed in articles posted on the Eastsider News Eastsider Extra blog [here](#).

## **History of the project**

In December 2016, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews announced that a re-elected Labor government would build the North East Link at a cost of \$10 billion. Early works began in 2020 and tunnelling is planned to commence in 2024, with an expected completion in 2028.

In 2021, the length of the tunnelled portion was increased by 1.9 km to 6.5 km, and the cost of the main construction contract, to be delivered through a public-private partnership, rose to \$11.1 billion. The overall long-term budget for the project was set at \$16.5 billion.

The proposal has, however seen several iterations over the years. In 1969, the Bolte Government's Transportation Plan floated a possible freeway connection between the Metropolitan Ring Road in Greensborough and the Eastern Freeway at Bulleen Flats or the East Link junction in Ringwood. This was subsequently dropped by the Hamer Government in 1973.

The concept was picked up again in 2007, with the release of the Eddington Report recommending the development of a North East Link. In December 2008, the Brumby Government, announced plans for a North East link. The proposal was

included in the Government's 2008 Victorian Transport Plan with an estimated cost of over A\$6 billion.

### **Development to date of the NE Link Project**

Action to put the the NE Link proposal into effect began in August 2017 when the State Government released 4 corridor options. The preferred option (Option A) was announced in November 2017. In September 2018, an invitation was made to the construction industry to engage with the project and a Reference Design subject to further refinement was made available to the community.

Between April and September 2019, the Draft Environment Effects Statements was released for public exhibition and hearings by the Draft EES Inquiry and Advisory Committee were held. In December 2019, the Minister for Planning completed his assessment of the EES and the Committee's report and announced that he considered the project should proceed. The Minister subsequently approved an Urban Design Framework and an Urban Design Strategy in March 2019 and a Urban Design and Landscape Plan in February 2023.

The early works package began in early 2020, following planning approvals, and delivered a range of power, water and other utility works.

In October 2021, the Victorian Government formally awarded the Spark consortium the contract to deliver the Primary (Tunnelling) Package. The package will be delivered as a Public Private Partnership. Spark comprises WeBuild, GS Engineering and Construction, CPB Contractors, China Construction Oceania, Ventia, Capella Capital, John Laing Investments, DIF and Pacific Partnerships.

In 2023, the tunnel boring machines (TBMs) are being built and should be delivered later in the year. Five road headers, including some that were used on the Metro Tunnel, are being refurbished to dig a section of the North East Link tunnels in Bulleen. Work has also started on the TBM launch box in Watsonia.

Crews will excavate the site to North of Lower Plenty Road to prepare to build ramps into the North East Link tunnels. A section of Bulleen Road is being moved further west to make way for the construction of the Yarra Link Green bridge and the major interchange connecting an upgraded Eastern Freeway to the tunnels,

This year should see the completion of Bulleen Park and Ride, contracts awarded for the Ring Road upgrade and the first section of the Eastern Freeway overhaul, and a tender process for the remaining Eastern Freeway upgrades between Springvale Road and Hoddle Street.