

Air Pollution and the North East Link Project

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The North East Link Project (NELP) is a massive and hugely expensive infrastructure project that proponents claim will improve road traffic to the north eastern areas of Melbourne. The major elements are 6.5k of road tunnels from Watsonia to Bulleen, and upgrades to the Eastern Freeway and the M60 Ring Road to be completed by 2028.

The 10-kilometre toll road was initially budgeted at \$10 billion; by December 2023, it was estimated to have reached \$26 billion. This figure includes only those costs that can be easily quantified in financial terms. By taking a narrow economic view of the project, the Victorian Government has failed to calculate the many other costs to which it is difficult to allocate a direct, accurate monetary value.

Air pollution is costly to our health

Air pollution from motor vehicle emissions is the major source of urban air pollution. These emissions include PM2.5 fine particle pollution (particulate matter at a size of 2.5 micrometres found in vehicle exhausts especially diesel trucks), nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, ozone and benzenes.

These pollutants are harmful to human health and well being. Exposure to PM2.5 fine particle pollution can cause allergies, sinus congestion, acute asthma, heart attacks and sudden death, cancer, cardiovascular disease and lung disease. Approximately 11,000 Australians die each year from motor vehicles air pollution. The World Health Organisation has stated that the only safe level of PM2.5 is zero.

The North East Link is scheduled for completion in 2026. This will add a further 100,000 vehicles per day to the widened Eastern Freeway. Modelling in the NELP Environment Effects Statement (EES) shows that PM2.5 will increase by 136% and Nitrogen Dioxide will increase by 85% on the Eastern Freeway. The increase in heavy commercial vehicles here and on other roads in the area and the absence of filtering on the south tunnel portal vent stack contribute to these levels.

The Victorian Environment Protection Agency has stated that, despite the relevant Environmental Reference Standards having legal status and that the air quality limits apply to NELP, the EPA has no statutory powers to enforce compliance or capacity to intervene. If so, who does have responsibility for enforcing compliance and enabling stronger intervention action on the anticipated air pollution breaches?

A threat to the health and wellbeing of children and adults participating in sport or other outdoor activities.

Recent research has shown that relatively small increases in air pollution levels over a short time frame can lead to significant cognitive declines in children.

The NELP EES modelled air pollution location close to three college sporting fields, Veneto Soccer, Bulleen Sports Oval, Belle Vue Primary School and Freeway Golf Course. This showed that PM2.5 fine particle pollution generated by motor vehicles will breach the EES 24 hour limits near these schools and sporting precincts. These breaches are expected to occur frequently.

NELP has sought to deflect blame for high pollution levels away from motor vehicles by pointing to 'existing high background levels', due to bushfires, dust storms and gas heaters. In reality, the highest pollution occurs in the winter months when there

are no bushfires and dust storms. Cold overnight temperatures can cause a temperature inversion that traps pollution that fails to disperse on low or no wind days.

In the light of this troubling data, we need to ask the Government some hard questions. What will the likely effect be on children at these schools and on those using these playing fields? Will it be safe to participate in outdoor activities in these areas? What assurance can the Government give the community that the health of school children will be protected? What protection actions are proposed on these dangerous to health high pollution days?

Go here www.eastsidernews.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/NELP-EPA-Fact-Sheet.pdf to find references that support claims made in this article, including those regarding cognitive decline in children. Sign up to the Stop North East Link Alliance for transport solutions that don't damage our health and maintain a liveable Melbourne at <https://stopnortheastlink.net.au/>