

National Victoria [Public transport](#)

Call for SkyBus priority lanes as Melbourne Airport Rail link delayed

**Patrick Hatch**

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The shock delay of Melbourne's long-awaited Airport Rail project has renewed calls to give SkyBus a dedicated lane on the congested Tullamarine Freeway to make it a faster and more reliable alternative to car travel.

The Airport Rail link was due to open in 2029 but now faces a [delay of up to four years](#) as the cash-strapped state and federal governments look at deferring their joint \$10 billion funding commitment.



The SkyBus operator has called for a dedicated lane on the Tullamarine Freeway to Melbourne Airport. [Luis Ascu](#)

The delay means another decade with SkyBus and private vehicles being the only viable options for most people to get to and from the airport.

But Professor Graham Currie, chair of public transport at Monash University, said the privately run SkyBus would suffer worsening travel times as congestion returned to the recently widened Tullamarine Freeway and CityLink tollway.

“So in some ways our solution gets worse,” he said. “It’ll not take long before the airport’s under pressure with access by road and that’ll put SkyBus under pressure. An obvious thing to do is to give SkyBus more right of way.”

Melbourne Airport is one of only 18 in the world’s top 100 busiest airports without a rail connection.

Victoria’s Transport Department considered giving SkyBus a dedicated lane as an interim [alternative to the rail line as long ago as 2011](#), because of concerns it was being held up by traffic.

SkyBus was designed to be a 20-minute service from Southern Cross, but it now tells customers to allow for a 35-minute journey. The Airport Rail project’s business case forecasts peak-hour trips on the Tullamarine Freeway will blow out from 39 minutes in 2021 to 44 minutes by 2031 and 53 minutes by 2041.

Michael Swards, co-chief executive of SkyBus operator Kinetic, said average travel time from Southern Cross was still 21 minutes during the day and he was not concerned it would blow out significantly.

But a priority bus lane would speed up the service and give passengers certainty they would not be caught in traffic jams, he said, which was a key selling point when competing with cars.

“It’s absolutely sensible to have a dedicated bus route,” Swards said. “It’s obviously beneficial, and at some point it needs to be pursued.”

SkyBus carries about 11 per cent of passengers to and from the airport, while another 3 per cent take local or regional buses and the rest travel by road. In Sydney, a quarter of airport passengers travel by the airport rail line, which opened before the 2000 Olympics.

Melbourne’s Airport Rail link promised trains from the airport every 10 minutes and a 30-minute journey to the five underground CBD stations being built as part of the Metro Tunnel project, via Sunshine, Footscray and another new station at Keilor East.

Swards said SkyBus could continue as a frequent alternative service when the rail line opens, noting that many major airports around the world have both bus and rail options.

The company would look to increase services and open new routes around the city as travel demand bounced back from the pandemic lockdowns, he said.

“Where there’s demand, we’ll look to introduce a service. No matter how fast the airport grows, we know bus mass transit can be a really good alternative for people,” Swards said.

SkyBus’ Frankston bus resumed in December and Swards said its Doncaster/Box Hill service would follow some time this year. Southern Cross services would increase from every 10 minutes to pre-COVID levels of every five minutes at peak times as travel demand increases, he said.

Public Transport Users Association spokesman Daniel Bowen said SkyBus was sometimes overcrowded and could take 40 minutes or more when the Tullamarine Freeway was congested.

“The operator should be putting on more services to cope with demand, but the travel time is really up to the government and Transurban to ensure SkyBus does get a fast run on the freeway,” he said.

A Melbourne Airport spokesperson said public transport played an important role reducing congestion around its terminals and it would “always welcome measures to ensure reliable travel times for passengers and staff”.

An Andrews government spokesperson said travel times on the Tullamarine Freeway had eased since it added an extra lane to the 24-kilometre road in each direction in late 2018. “We’re getting on with delivering the transport projects Victorians deserve,” they said.

Deputy Premier Jacinta Allan said last week that the revised timeline for Airport Rail would be confirmed in the state and federal budgets next month.

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