

Opinion

# Derailed again, the decades-long quest for a Melbourne airport train feels like a mirage

*Anna Spargo-Ryan*

Talk of a rail line has existed longer than the airport, but broken promises and stalled construction make you wonder if it will ever materialise

Fri 19 May 2023 11.00 EDT



California residents have certain rights with regard to the sale of personal information to third parties. Guardian News and Media and our partners use information collected through cookies or in other forms to improve experience on our site and pages, analyze how it is used and show personalized advertising.

At any point, you can opt out of the sale of all of your personal information by pressing

**Do not sell my personal information**

You can find out more in our [privacy policy](#) and [cookie policy](#), and manage your choices by going to 'California resident – Do Not Sell' at the bottom of any page.



that cars can and will move in a forward motion. From most parts of the city, your options are privately owned Skybus or a very long walk.

But there has been, for decades, the promise we would eventually be able to catch a train to Melbourne airport. Now, it seems that the notoriously imaginary connection could be delayed once more.

Talk of a rail line to Melbourne airport has existed for longer than the airport itself. In the 1960s, with the new airport soon to open, the state's transport minister, Edward Meagher, argued for an affordable and convenient way to get there. "Melbourne is fortunate in that its new airport, although 14 miles from the city centre, is so located that it can be conveniently linked with the suburban railway network," he said at the time, wrongly.

Since the airport opened in 1970, this mythical transport service has been conceived as a French-designed monorail (1970s), a mechanism to export agriculture and a connection from the Broadmeadows line (80s), something called "Rapid [Transport Link](#)" (90s), and Melbourne Airport Transit Link Project (00s), which ultimately resulted in an upgrade to the Spencer Street bus depot instead. At least three additional feasibility studies have been completed since 2002.

Curiously, proposals to connect Melbourne airport with Melbourne often pop up around elections. In 2010, then-opposition leader Ted Baillieu pledged \$50m for planning, land acquisition and initial works, if elected (he was elected - no such train exists).

In 2018, the Andrews government promised to begin construction in its second term, if it was given one. That year, Australian and Victorian governments had committed \$5bn each to deliver Melbourne Airport Rail. This version would connect the new Metro Tunnel (designed to "[untangle the City Loop](#)") to existing Sunshine station, before continuing on through two brand new stations to the airport. And it would be ready and raring by 2029.

There remains, you may have noticed, no such train.

Last month, minister for transport and infrastructure Jacinta Allan told ABC's Virginia Trioli the 2029 end date is "under significant pressure at the moment", because working with the federal government and private airport owners is hard. True! For decades, investigations have shown just how many people and groups must be on board to get this off (on?) the ground.

This week, however, Melbourne Airport Link went from being behind schedule to being officially paused. This, we were told, was because [Victoria](#) and other states cannot ink contracts while the federal government undertakes a \$120bn, 90-day infrastructure pipeline review. That includes trains to the airport. The premier said construction workers would be temporarily redeployed to other government projects.

A more cynical person might wonder if this train line - like its distant cousin, the Melbourne to Sydney high-speed rail - has ever been intended to materialise.

One challenge oft cited is the buildup that now exists around Tullamarine. When the airport was opened to replace nearby Essendon airport, the area was largely paddocks. At 23km from what was then a much smaller metropolitan area, it lent itself to large-scale development without the hindrance of homes that needed to be acquired or families that would be uprooted. Meagher's 1960s proposal to turn farmland into railway is now decidedly more complicated - and expensive. The federal investigation into its affordability may be the end of the line. Its terminus. Its buffer block. (These are all train words I've learned against my will.)

To the Andrews government's credit, this iteration of the airport train has seemed real. Work on its sister project, Suburban Rail Loop, has commenced, and the government's media team has put out [some very convincing maps](#). This time, the promises are substantive. It has been possible to believe that, come 2029, passengers will get on a train and end up at Gates 1 through 68.

Whether or not this will eventuate is now unclear. It seems possible we may find ourselves, for eternity, making the breathless dash across Southern Cross, from the Frankston line to Skybus. Praying for traffic to clear before the gates close. Trainless.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## **Most viewed**

---







