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More services, faster trains recommended for rail network

The State Infrastructure Strategy has recommended major improvements in passenger rail including more services through the CBD for commuters and faster journeys on intercity trains.

The Strategy, prepared by Infrastructure NSW for the NSW Government, concludes that congestion on the urban rail network is primarily caused by operating practices rather than a lack of infrastructure.

“CityRail moves fewer people per hour on its lines compared with overseas – about half of Paris and one third of Hong Kong,” Infrastructure NSW Chief Executive Paul Broad said.

“The existing infrastructure must be used as intensively as possible before building a second harbour crossing.”

Mr Broad said Infrastructure NSW’s proposed investments in passenger rail total over \$7.5 billion over the next 20 years, in addition to the Government’s existing commitment to the North West Rail Link.

“Sydney deserves a world class rail network. Our recommended investments in the existing system will start providing tangible improvements for customers within years rather than decades,” Mr Broad said.

Infrastructure NSW’s main recommendations to relieve commuter congestion are:

- Run more trains through the City Circle, which will relieve congestion on the Harbour Bridge Line at Town Hall and Wynyard.
- Introduce single-deck Rapid Transit services between Chatswood and Strathfield via the Harbour Bridge.
- Modernise Wynyard and Town Hall stations with better passenger circulation and improved bus/rail connections.

“The City Circle carries 29 trains in the peak hour compared with 48 trains in the 1970s,” Mr Broad said.

“We need to increase the use of this existing infrastructure before building another line through the CBD.”

Rapid Transit will allow the existing Harbour Bridge Line to carry up to twice the number of passengers it does today. Trains on the North West Rail Link will be able to run directly to the CBD.

Rapid Transit on the Inner West line will free up the main lines to carry more express services from the Western, Northern and South Lines.

“Infrastructure NSW believes it is possible to run an extra 30 trains an hour into the CBD just by using the existing infrastructure more intensively,” Mr Broad said.

Mr Broad also said that congestion in the CBD could be reduced if differentials between the cost of peak and off peak travel were increased to spread out demand.

Infrastructure NSW also recommends the acceleration of intercity services from a current average speed of 55-60 km/h to 80 km/h. This change would reduce the journey time from Wollongong and Gosford to Sydney to one hour, and Sydney to Newcastle to two hours.

“Today it takes me around two hours and 40 minutes on the train from Newcastle to Sydney; that’s slower than the “Newcastle Flyer” steam train before the war,” Mr Broad said.

“Slow journey times from the Illawarra and Central Coast to Sydney are holding back employment and leisure opportunities in these areas.”

Infrastructure NSW’s strategy emphasises operational changes such as tighter timetabling and review of speed restrictions to reduce journey times. A pilot program is proposed for Wollongong – Sydney in the first five years, with the acceleration program extended to Central Coast and Newcastle services thereafter.

“While the rail lines to the north and south of Sydney will never be true high-speed lines because of the topography, services can be vastly improved over what is offered today,” Mr Broad said.

Rail demand in Sydney has grown by only around 1% a year in Sydney over the past two decades, while it has grown by over 5% each year in Melbourne and 4% per year in London over the same period. At the same time, subsidies for the rail network are much higher in Sydney than these other cities.

Mr Broad said that rail fares were low by international comparisons. In 2010-11, the total cost of running the railway was \$3.5 billion compared with fare box revenue of just \$700 million.

“Infrastructure NSW supports the NSW Commission of Audit’s recommendation for greater cost recovery through fares, in line with the determination of the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal,” he said.

Infrastructure NSW has concluded that buses will be able to provide sufficient capacity on non-rail corridors for the next 20 years, and does not recommend a new metro rail network. Infrastructure NSW’s assessment suggests the next area where there may be potential for network expansion is the Eastern Suburbs Line.

“We have proposed consideration of the case for extending the line from Bondi Junction to Randwick and Maroubra after year 10 of the Strategy,” Mr Broad said.

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Summary of passenger rail recommendations

- Start construction of the North West Rail Link as per the existing Government commitment.
- A package of improvements to the CityRail network including:
 - A turn-up-and-go Express service between the Parramatta and Sydney CBDs delivered in the next five years.
 - \$1 billion to upgrade the City Circle Line to increase capacity and allow more services, delivered in five to 10 years.
 - Rapid transit service extension from the North West Rail Link to the CBD and Inner West and release of additional capacity on the Main West Lines, undertaken after 2022 at an estimated cost of \$5 billion.
- Mainline Acceleration Program for the rail network, comprising:
 - A \$100 million pilot program within the next five years to reduce journey times on the Wollongong-Sydney route.
 - A second phase worth \$1 billion that would focus on bringing travel times on both the Wollongong-Sydney and Gosford-Sydney routes down to one hour.
 - A third phase worth a further \$500 million to reduce Newcastle-Sydney travel times down to two hours after year 10 of the Strategy.
- Major upgrades for Town Hall and Wynyard stations as part of the CBD Transit Improvement Program. This major modernisation project is recommended to go forward in five to 10 years.
- Fare reforms including improvements to off-peak rail fares to act as an incentive for greater off-peak use of the network and reduction or removal of airport station usage fees. This would occur within five years.
- The case for the possible extension of the Eastern Suburbs Line to Randwick and Maroubra should be assessed after year 10 of the Strategy after major improvements to CBD transport and operational reforms have been completed, and in conjunction with increased densification of the south eastern suburbs.