

One Gippsland

Rail Policy Paper





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Executive Summary

One Gippsland, as a peak regional advocacy body representing Gippsland has developed this paper to highlight the importance of and challenges with rail and freight connectivity in Gippsland.

Issues with reliability, speed and accessibility are impacting the Gippsland Rail Line, which is evidenced by the following:

1. **Commuter travel:** currently only 1% of people are travelling to work via train, despite 17% of the Gippsland population working outside the region; and
2. **Freight:** freight trains currently compete for access with passenger services impacting reliability, accessibility and efficiency of freight services.

Demand for rail travel has been accelerated by COVID-19 which has seen a mass exodus of metro residents moving to regional Australia.

Improving both public transport access and freight networks is a critical economic enabler to facilitate sustainable growth in the Gippsland region.

About Gippsland and One Gippsland

Gippsland is a geographically, socially and economically diverse region. At approximately 41,000 km², it is the largest region in Victoria. Home to over 270,000 people¹ and 6 Local Governments, the region annually produces \$16 billion in Gross Regional Product (GRP).

One Gippsland is a peak regional advocacy body representing this diverse region. We aim to connect the dots between government, business and community, while also collectively working together to champion the interests of our region and our people.

It is our mission to create a thriving and dynamic region that harnesses social, environmental and economic capabilities and assets. We do this to ensure that Gippsland continues to have remarkable diversity so that we can offer residents the opportunities for a great lifestyle and access to services at all stages of life.

The Gippsland Regional Plan outlines following goals:

- Become Australia's most liveable region by 2040;
- Attract 75,000 new residents by 2040;
- Raise the average household income above regional average by 2025;

- Decrease homelessness population to below the regional average by 2025; and
- Decrease instances of family violence to be in line with regional average by 2025.

Gippsland Rail Line: Background

The Gippsland Rail Line is approximately 275 kilometres long, connecting communities from Melbourne to Bairnsdale. Passenger services are operated by V/Line and freight services are run by Qube Holdings. (GHD, 2022)

In 2016 John Hearsch Consulting prepared a report entitled the *Gippsland Rail Needs Study*, which found that:

- Gippsland rail services were some of the slowest and most unreliable in Victoria;
- There were no freight services beyond Morwell;
- Efficiency of the network was impeded by inadequate infrastructure, slow speeds, single line networks and obsolete systems;
- Significant social benefits could be achieved if improvements were made to the rail network to reduce the reliance on car travel, and improve access to the region for tourism, jobs, education, health and social inclusion. (GHD, 2022)

Subsequently, the Regional Network Development Plan 2016 outlined a number of key priorities to deliver modern commuter services from growth areas such as Traralgon.

In the years following, the Australian and Victorian Government have committed to invest in the Gippsland Line including as part of the Regional Rail Revival Program including

- Additional platforms at Morwell and Traralgon with an extended loop east of Morwell capable of holding and passing freight trains;
- The Avon River bridge at Stratford has been replaced;
- Safeworking and signalling upgrades are progressing to Traralgon with level crossing detection upgrades along the corridor;
- Bunyip and Longwarry development with new station platforms and duplicated track at these stations, although the single-track corridor between these locations remains;
- Development of car parking capacity at Bunyip, Longwarry, Drouin, Warragul and Moe;
- Dandenong /Pakenham corridor Additional car parking spaces provided at Bunyip, Longwarry, Moe and Drouin (station car park and a secondary location) (currently underway); and
- Proposed implementation of a 40 minute off peak service to Melbourne once the construction issues are completed.

The upgrades are expected to be finalised in Mid 2023.

The completion of new stabling for VLocity Trains at Bairnsdale has also been announced with a target date of 2024.

Gippsland Rail Line: Commuter Demand

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) suggests that the region's population is growing at an annual rate of 1.4% from 2015 to 2020. (ABS)

The ABS Census data (2016) also indicated that 85% of people journeyed to work by car, and only 1% travelled by train. An estimated 17% of people work outside of the region, with a high degree of labour mobility between Melbourne and Gippsland. (Infrastructure Victoria, 2019). This figure was higher in the Baw Baw shire with over 20% of workers traveling outside of the region for employment.

For residents employed outside of the region the majority travel by car, and only 9% travel using public transport. This data shows that there are high rates of labour mobility between Melbourne and the Gippsland region.

The Gippsland region has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, with a shift to more people working in flexible locations, increasing demand for rail services. Rail services in Gippsland will need to accommodate this shift in demand and expectation from the Gippsland community.

Gippsland Rail Line: Freight

Freight train services on the Gippsland Line are in high demand including steel trains to the Port of Hastings, cement trains to Dandenong, bulk mineral sands, Maryvale paper manufacturing and the development of a waste to energy manufacturing plant which is expected to bring 300,000 tonnes of waste per annum from Melbourne.

Passenger trains are given priority on the network therefore freight train operations are limited or delayed because of this competition for access. Currently, there is no holding or stopping point for freight trains approaching metro Melbourne at Pakenham East which further exacerbates delays and reliability issues, as well as impacting passenger services.

The introduction of holding points and passing loops would potentially alleviate these bottlenecks however funding has not been forthcoming to date.

Recommendations

Tranche 1 (1-5 years)

1. Complete current works under the Regional Rail Revival Program by mid 2023
2. Provide a full VLocity service to Gippsland once stabling is complete at Bairnsdale (scheduled for 2024);
3. Enhance the frequency of daily commuter services on the Gippsland Line, particularly from Sale to Bairnsdale;
4. Provide a crossing loop to the east of Pakenham as a holding point for freight trains.

Tranche 2 (5 -10 years)

1. Provide additional peak and off-peak services including provision of new rolling stock and stabling to ensure services can run at 30 minute intervals between Traralgon and Warragul;
2. Duplicate tracks and bridges between Bunyip and Longwarry to enable more reliable service provision;
3. Progressively upgrade the track between Traralgon, Sale and Bairnsdale to increase speed capabilities and travel times;
4. Develop a freight passing loop at Sale or Warruk to enable passing of passenger trains;
5. Progressively upgrade the northern tracks to improve travel times and extend track duplication to Morwell.