Melbourne's East West Link: A Missed Opportunity

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to review the abandoned "East West link road project" in Melbourne, Australia. Increased population growth, increasing life expectations and rates of family formation combine to place significant pressure on Melbourne’s infrastructure. In addition, the shift from rural to urban living -especially in Melbourne, exacerbates such impacts. Such demands expose the limitations of existing Melbourne transportation networks. As a consequence on-going transportation infrastructure planning is constantly required for greater Melbourne and its authorities, along with some alignment at the national level. Subsequently Melbourne transportation infrastructure planning needs to carefully adopt a long-term approach. While the processes of land acquisition, design and delivery of transportation infrastructure cannot be achieved in the short term, long-standing strategies need to be cautiously established. For Melbourne in particular, the financing of such long-term assets is problematic and thus possess uncertain conditions, especially when dealing with transportation forecasting and future modeling. Going back to mid-1990s such forward transportation planning was essential to ensure a high-level livability for Melbournians. As Melbourne continues to expand both in population and geographically it was to cope with such demand that the East West Link project was proposed. This project was seen as crucial, not only to uphold the livability status, but also to sustain and prolong Melbourne's ageing road transportation infrastructure. However, soon after their election win in late 2014, the Victorian labor government scrapped this project. In doing so, certain transportation outlook was unfortunately neglected. This paper investigates some of the key missed opportunities of the East West Link project.

Keywords: Transport Infrastructure Development Modeling (TIDM); Traffic Analysis, Transportation Planning and Implementation, Infrastructure.

1.0 Introduction

Transport congestion is a growing concern for most expanding global cities, including Melbourne. Subsequently, the demands on Transport Infrastructure services are increased by the rising expectations of the growing population, which in turn, places greater stress on Melbourne infrastructure and its services. Dimitriou (2010) noted that, an intriguing aspect of Transportation Infrastructure is the inclusion of related land use considerations. Guhathakurta (2010) highlighted that a robust urban transport geography and development need to be carefully aligned with such land use considerations. This methodology requires the involvement of specific Transportation classification such as road networks, as the basis of specific modeling. Such transportation modeling is compulsory for cities which enjoy rapid urbanisation. Traditionally, population growth along with rapid urbanisation, are the main reasons for infrastructure developments (Gharehbaghi and Raso, 2013).
Gudmundsson et al (2016) confirmed that, an appropriate Transport Infrastructure Development Modeling (TIDM) is a must for expanding cities. Expanding cities such as Melbourne, require careful Transportation planning and implementation which involves the evaluation, assessment, design, construction and operation of such facilities. In addition, as a part of effective TIDM planning for expanding cities, fastidious and rational specific transportation goals and objectives are also required. Such planning would identify the potential transportation problems, generate and evaluate alternatives, and develop various technical plans. For Melbourne and its greater areas, such transportation planning is vital not only to ensure its livability status, but also to satisfy its long-term development strategies. In the mid-1990s Melbourne's long-term strategies were carefully defined and recognized. Doing so was necessary to ensure a high-level livability for Melbournians. To help cope with such demand, the East West Link project was one proposal. This proposed project was deemed important, not only to uphold the livability status, but also to sustain and prolong Melbourne's aging transportation infrastructure.

2.0 The abandoned Melbourne East West Link project

Public transport patronage in Melbourne is rising at a rapid pace. Although this is a much anticipated outcome, this has created significant challenges for the Victorian state government as well as the local governments (O’Connor, 2003). Due to the congested public transportation services, Melbournians still prefer to commute via private transport - ie cars (ABC news - 1, 2018). Cancelled and congested trains, Trams and buses have all magnified such preference. Despite carbon pollution reduction strategies, increasing traffic congestion, the impact of rising fuel prices and inner city parking constraints, there is no competition for the motor car as a means of transport for much of Melbourne's population (The Age, 2016). As a result, during 1999 the Melbourne East West Link Project was proposed as a recommendation to such dilemmas. The Melbourne East West Link Project was a proposed 18-kilometre toll way. This project was scheduled to connect the existing Eastern freeway with the Western Ring road (see figures 1a and 1b). In the early 1999, the Victorian government argued that there were not sufficient funds available to exhaustively plan ahead and therefore, it took the most optimistic and uncomplicated solution - the Melbourne East West Link Project.

Figure 1a: The proposed East West Link and its areas connections.  
Figure 1b: The proposed stage 1 of East West Link and its 'Road arterial network' connections.
The proposed East West Link is a road/tunnel connection extending across Melbourne from the Eastern to the Western suburbs. After its inception, planning commenced for the first stage of the East West Link, a six kilometer roadway connecting the Eastern Freeway with the existing CityLink toll road. Stage 1 was thus fully committed by the Victorian government (Figure 1b). As a part of this formal planning, a study was also conducted to include a road connection from the existing CityLink to the Port of Melbourne area. This road expansion was part of a strategy to divert heavy goods vehicles from the inner city and urban streets. Moreover, prior to its cancellation, the Linking Melbourne Authority (the government agency responsible for the purpose of planning and executing the project) continued to explore additional opportunities for procuring this section of the overall project within the associated timeframes. During this time there was significant community dissatisfaction and a subsequent backlash against the project. The community's dissatisfaction was based on increased pollution, congestion and unacceptable road conditions. The community in question disputed that, although the Melbourne East West Link Project may seem to be the best solution, it would ultimately reduce the livability of the surrounding areas. Such arguments were discarded as unacceptable objections by the Victorian state government. The Victorian state government contended that during the initial project feasibility study, no such evidence was found. Furthermore, the Victorian state government correctly highlighted that the proposed project and its transportation infrastructure planning and implementation strategies were necessary for Melbourne's future growth and related zoning requirements (VDTP and LI, 2013). Figure 2 provides the Melbourne urban growth zoning, together with the existing Major Transport Infrastructure activities within the Melbourne.

During the many community consultations, the then Victorian state government also claimed that, the proposed Melbourne East West Link Project clearly followed the projected urban growth zoning patterns. Importantly, this alignment followed the principal transportation planning law - aligning of the Transport, infrastructure development with the overall planning expansion. Moreover, the Victorian state government underscored that during the design of a comprehensive TIDM, they thoroughly
aligned and integrate the proposed Melbourne's urban growth zoning pattern with that of the Melbourne East West Link project's scope. Such methodically alignment and integration were also endorsed by VicRoads, EPA and other government authorities. Accordingly, the Melbourne East West Link project would ultimately be the most feasible, efficient and sustainable infrastructure solution for Melbourne - linking east to west. However, soon after the Victorian Labor government's election win in late 2014, this infrastructure project was cancelled and the money already paid was forfeited. In doing so, certain transportation outlook, such as efficient mobility, were neglected.

3.0 The missed opportunity

The main aims of the Melbourne East West Link project were to reduce traffic congestions, improve safety, and supply a more efficient travel between the two sides of the city. Moreover, this project would ultimately reduce carbon pollution, but more importantly present a more viable connection between the main business centers across greater Melbourne. This project would not only mitigate some traffic congestion, but also offer reduced travel times. The Melbourne East West Link project was well planned and based on reliable data. By abandoning the East West Link project, many opportunities were overlooked. Although, there were indirect prospects neglected, the main and directly missed opportunities of the Melbourne East West Link project can be categorized into two specific domains:

- Economic - to conscientiously consider the broader financial dimension and thus the overall feasibility of such complex road infrastructure. The main aims of major cities’ roles as increasingly dominant regional service centers are underpinned by a strong urban economy based in manufacturing, logistics, and wholesale trades (Cordera et al, 2018). Thus indicating the importance of urban areas, since their economy is usually dynamic and vibrant, making it well placed to cope with future economical structural changes resulting from the needs of an ever-changing demographic profile. As a part of Melbourne's overall economic development, such considerations were carefully modeled and encompassed into its TIDM. The TIDM in an economic sense was a robust, sequential and more adaptive system, and considered all of the said factors as a part of its future predictions. Accordingly, during its inception in 1999, the feasibility study, along with impact assessment clearly highlight the economic advantages as one of the primary benefits of the Melbourne East West Link project. Such assessment was based on: faster, safer and smoother transport between the east and west of the Melbourne - as a part of the developed TIDM. Currently, the traffic which needs to move from the two sides must use the Eastern Freeway through the existing CityLink. The current arrangement for travelling from the East to the West of Melbourne is presented in figure 3.
The current travelling route between East to West consists of using existing arterial and major road networks. However, such arrangements require travelling through very populated areas - shaded zones. This arrangement, in particular for the heavy vehicles such as B-double trucks increases congestion and thus is extremely time consuming and at times risky, especially during the peak hours. Moreover with such vehicles close to residential areas and with high pedestrian traffic there is an increased chance of probable collisions and increased noise, vibration and pollution. All of these drawbacks would ultimately lead to higher transportation cost along with increased expenditure for the vehicle operators. Such shortcoming could eventually mean less economic activity and therefore less financial turnover (ABC news - 2, 2018).

- Social - improved mobility and quality of life, via promoting enhanced livability. As a part of the TIDM for the Melbourne East West Link project, social factors were also carefully considered. In particular, social sustainability considerations such as demographic distribution analysis together with flexible legislation. This included rezoning some of the areas to include more green space. In addition, some relocation of public transportation buses and trams were also planned to improve the authentic aspect of neighborhoods. The overall aim of such inclusions was to achieve high quality and sustainable development outcomes in urban areas while taking into account important issues such as the preservation of the physical environment and settings (ABC news - 1, 2018).

Most importantly, the Melbourne East West Link's TIDM considered the project's bigger picture, linking the outskirts of the Melbourne metropolitan area to the city hub. Three issues were clearly highlighted: improved auxiliary services, integrated public transport modes including upgrading and rehabilitation of existing road networks; and the design combination of major arterial roads. As a part of such road network integration, a "Transit Oriented Development (TOD)" was also developed. The TOD enclosed a Comprehensive Mobility Plans (CMP) to design and deliver specific implementation methodologies as a part of an integrated road network. For the Melbourne East West Link, this included various scenarios such as Future Transport Network, Future Land use to further improve the overall quality of the proposed TIDM output. As a part of CMP a mixture of stage-by-stage trial passes are also conducted to observe any improvements in the overall traffic congestion and Transportation systems. The main areas of abandoned transportation linkages were; improving the employment opportunities, developing better transport nodes, expanding the capacity of the existing road arterial network, and ultimately enhancing Melbourne's road transportation networks are the most significant.
Low (2012) argued that the livability aspect is a paramount factor in determining the most sustainable cities. For Melbourne and its greater area, to be recognized as one of the most sustainable cities around the globe, the proposed East West link road project was an important new infrastructure project. Ironically, the current Victorian government is now proposing a similar option of North East link to resolve the Melbourne's increasing road transportation issues (ABC news - 2, 2018).

5.0 Conclusion

In 2014 the Australian Labor Party won the election to run the Victorian Government and they were re-elected with an increased majority in November 2018 (ABC News, 2018). As such the Victorian Infrastructure Plan (Victorian Government, 2017) still stands. Under this plan, funds had been allocated for the East West link project have been redirected in a number of different ways, including:

- $5.6 Billion for the West Gate tunnel for trucks travelling to the Port of Melbourne,
- $11 Billion for the Metro Rail Tunnel,
- $6.9 Billion to remove 50 suburban train level crossings,
- $100 Million for Stage one and two of the North East Link.

The North East Link is an alternative scheme to the East West Link. It will not connect the Western and Eastern suburbs of Melbourne, but it will extend the Northern road connection to the furthest Eastern areas. In addition, the tunnel to the Port of Melbourne (completion time 2022) was part of the original East West Link project and will ease existing traffic congestion considerably. Although it is disappointing that the East West Link has been scrapped, Melbourne still has many important transport infrastructure projects that are ongoing, or are to commence shortly. All of these projects are important for moving both people and vehicles and it is still likely that the East West Link will proceed in the future.

References