

Full V/Line buses push passengers into taxis

AS the price of petrol goes up with little relief in sight, more and more people from South Gippsland are using the V/Line bus services to travel to and from Melbourne.

In fact, bus services have been so full, particularly on the last Sunday bus to Yarram via Koo Wee Rup and Leongatha, passengers have been forced into taxis.

Taxis have ferried passengers from Southern Cross Station to Koo Wee Rup in an effort to keep seats for those passengers travelling further down the line.

V/Line confirmed one taxi transported passengers from Southern Cross Station to Yarram on Sunday, May 22, but did not have any records of passengers transported to Koo Wee Rup.

"Where there would have been a significant overflow [of passengers], another bus should have been ordered if possible," a V/Line spokesperson said.

"V/Line endeavours to try to keep costs down and rarely sends passengers by taxi over very long distances."

A public transport users group, set up a month ago with the aim of returning rail to the region, said it was aware of two or three cases where passengers were ferried to Koo Wee Rup after their bus was filled.

"On the one hand it's good news in a sense because it shows demand is there," group spokesperson Andrew McEwen said.

"But it also shows a need to

By Danika Dent

schedule additional buses, particularly the Sunday night service to spread the load over a few more buses."

The Yarram bus is unreserved and is subject to fluctuations in passengers.

On one of the confirmed cases where passengers were transported to Koo Wee Rup by taxi, the extra passenger loading came directly after a Collingwood v Adelaide match at Etihad Stadium.

The V/Line spokesperson said "often passenger loadings increase according to significant events and festivals that do occur in Melbourne", but the provision of extra bus services remained the Department of Transport's responsibility as the funding behind V/Line.

A Department of Transport spokesperson said bus services to South Gippsland and Bass Coast were doubled in 2009 and the "Victorian Government has no immediate plans to change public transport services in South Gippsland".

The public transport users group intends to lobby to change that situation.

It says the need for efficient and reliable public transport was clearly identified and the solution must include a train service.

"As the price of petrol goes up as it will, where we get closer to peak oil, there will be more pressure to use public transport," Mr McEwen said.

"And if you look at the congestion on the Monash Freeway already, the reality is schedules are already running late.

"A recent study by the Victorian Auditor General has shown all the freeways have already been filled and reached capacity.

"In fact, travel time has increased.

"What we need to look at is a reliable and efficient service for the area.

"In the longer term, that has to include a train with connecting buses."

Awaiting a population boom

Fellow group member Max Semken believes the predicted population boom in Koo Wee Rup, Pakenham, and Cardinia shire will have bus services at breaking point.

"Cardinia is the third fastest growing local government area in Australia," he said.

"Koo Wee Rup is growing too; you don't get companies like Woolworths and McDonalds at Lang Lang coming in for nothing - they're expecting the customer base."

Mr Semken would like to see rail returned through to Yarram with connections up to Rosedale.

He also wants rail to return via a Wonthaggi, Bass Coast route and connecting Koo Wee Rup to Cranbourne.

It's an ambitious plan, but at this stage the public transport us-

ers group are just pushing for rail to return to Lang Lang and then Leongatha further down the track - pun intended.

Mr Semken said he expected a feasibility study would cost around \$4 million.

He estimates the connecting track from Lang Lang to Leongatha would cost \$1 billion.

"If you're going to do it, you've got to do it properly," he said.

"The last report that was done on returning rail was done by halves.

"It had more holes in it than Swiss cheese.

"That's why the project didn't get the support it needed.

"But no matter the cost, it must be done, for the community and growth of the area.

"Why I say a billion to get from Lang Lang to Leongatha is that a regional rail line connecting Bendigo and Ballarat with the Geelong V/Line track was estimated to cost \$3.2 billion and that's for 47km.

"In Western Australia, the Mandurah line, which was built from scratch, all 150km of it, all the stations, car parks and bus interchanges cost \$1.168 billion.

"It's a mystery to me why things in Victoria are so expensive to build while in other states it's so much lower.

"The Alice Springs to Darwin track only cost \$4.5 billion - and that's bloody huge!

"Maybe some people are doing naughty things with the figures," he said.