

INSIDE AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST BUS CLASSIFIEDS

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Buses fill the 'Big Shut' void

Possibly Australia's biggest-ever rail shutdown went largely 'hitch-free', thanks to the hard work of the bus industry, writes **Ian Porter**

When you have to shut down the largest country passenger rail network in Australia, you'd better have a plan, a good one.

The potential for things to go wrong is immense when you try to replace 4,200 train services carrying around one million people over three weeks with a substitute system.

V/Line, the Victorian Government service provider that operates all regional public transport is only too aware of the challenge, and hired some of the best brains in the transport industry — bus brains — to help get it right.

The Regional Rail Link (RRL) Authority was specially formed to oversee the \$4.8 billion project, which will involve building a 45km rail line from the Southern Cross station — the epicentre of Victoria's regional rail operations — through Melbourne's western suburbs.

The new line will duplicate some existing track, finally ending a system where regional and suburban trains had to share crucial parts of the inner suburban rail network. Services to

Victoria's major regional centres of Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong will be more frequent and reliable.

While there have been several large and expensive RRL elements already completed since 2011, the project reached its main crunch point in late December 2013.

For 23 days from December 28 to January 19 most of V/Line's regional operations were disrupted in what has been the biggest rail closure ever seen in Victoria.

Tracks will also be laid over new bridges and wider rail easements through the inner western suburbs of Melbourne, but it's not the length of new track installed that is important.

Having regional and metropolitan trains share the same tracks creates bottlenecks and delays and makes the V/Line system susceptible to problems on the metropolitan line and vice versa.

Clearing these bottlenecks now is crucial. Between 2005 and 2011, patronage on the three busiest regional lines — Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong — jumped 150 per cent and it is still growing.

The RRL works will allow an extra 23 metropolitan and 10 regional services during each morning and evening peak.

BUS INDUSTRY EXPERTISE

In order to keep passengers moving during the 23-day shutdown, V/Line instituted a massive rail replacement strategy that relied heavily on the resources and expertise of the bus industry.

Years of planning culminated in a five-year V/Line contract being awarded to the Trotters Joint Venture in 2011 for the rail replacement component.

The Trotters JV is a bus industry consortium with decades of bus operations and rail replacement experience, together with a unique track record in handling major events.

The multimillion dollar contract covers all the V/Line rail replacements needed during the RRL project, which is believed to have run several months ahead of schedule.

"This is the biggest rail shut ever seen in Australia," says Ross Walker, a long-time bus industry professional and project manager for the Trotters JV. "I was in the joint venture that did

the 2006 Commonwealth Games. That involved more buses, but it was a different kind of passenger movement.

"Under the RRL project, we will be running upwards of 230 coaches most days, and that's without the cricket and the tennis and anything else that comes our way, which can happen."

That Commonwealth Games experience and, more recently, running the rail replacements during the 2000–06 Regional Fast Rail project in Victoria, helped the Trotters JV develop the systems, protocols and software it needed to tackle this momentous task.

All systems run on the web, so stakeholders can know quickly what the state of play is, whether it's bus availability on a particular day, driver rostering and other aspects of the operation.

The Trotters JV can also call on decades of operator experience. It comprises Des Trotter, owner of Trotters Coaches; Dom Sita, owner of Kastoria and other bus brands; Con Patista, General Manager of Trotters Coaches; and Ross Walker of Roscar Management Consulting.

This is the biggest rail shut ever seen in Australia.



The rail replacement coaches use all the available bays and sometimes more.

While each of the partners bring some vehicles, the vast bulk of the 200-plus coaches being used have been provided by 43 operators spread across the state — 40 per cent from regional areas.

“When we originally bid on the project, it was recognised that it would be a good thing to have a high level of regional content and I must say that our regional operators are second to none,” Walker says.

“The opportunity for regional operators to be involved in a project of this scale has seen widespread interest and a new level of enthusiasm from coach drivers who are hungry to learn and to put in and do it well. It’s great encouragement for us.”

Country drivers are also more familiar with the roads and destinations and, schedules allowing, regional buses and drivers can sleep at home, minimising hotel stays.

SOUTHERN CROSS STATION

Perhaps the biggest challenge for Trotters JV was the Southern Cross station site itself. The station was completely remodelled only a few years ago and the bus terminal is now one of the largest in the country, completely under cover.

The problem is that the bus terminal is



Dom Sita, Con Patista and Ross Walker at Southern Cross Station

connected to the outside world by a single 200m chute off Adderley Street, through which buses must enter and exit. The whole operation hangs on the availability of this chute, which will be at full capacity in the peak hours with around 180 Trotters JV coaches entering and leaving in little more than three hours, as well as Skybus, Firefly Express and other long distance and V/Line regional coach providers.

Apart from laying new track and building new bridges, the RRL project also includes extensive works in the Southern Cross rail yards. This involves a massive amount of earth moving, mainly the removal of old rails, sleepers and even the ballast, and the replacement of all these.

The rail yard contractors were planning to send 3,000 trucks down the chute in the first six-day period during the RRL bus operation.

A combination of these trucks and the peak hour bus numbers was going to jam up the chute, so Con Patista had to negotiate a deal with the rail yard contractors.

“Once we started operations and they saw what the peaks were like here, they realised that peak times were a no-go zone for them,” Patista says.

“So they agreed to stay out of our peak bussing times and work feverishly in off-peak times and overnight in order to get the rail infrastructure laid down in the yards while we’re in operation.”

The Southern Cross holding bay under the LaTrobe Street bridge can only handle a total of 12 coaches, so V/Line leased the old fish market site on Footscray Road as a staging point that can hold more than 100 coaches ahead of the evening peak. There were also spare coaches sprinkled along the different routes to provide rapid back-up in case of problems.

Normally, fewer than half the 24 available bus bays at Southern Cross are used by airport transfer buses and the interstate coaches. During the Big Shut it was stretched to its limits.

“The rail replacement coaches use all the available bays, and sometimes more,” Walker says. “We actually have 12 bays in there and we turn them over every seven minutes. We do that for about three and a half hours solid in the peaks.”

Loading passengers was simplified by the installation of myki fare collection readers at every gate in the bus terminal.

Allocating the bays for a single day was a major job and took Dom Sita several hours, depending on demand and the daily events.

“When we get busy, we have to negotiate with all operators within Southern Cross including Firefly and Sita Coaches, which does the Avalon airport transfers,” Walker says.

Relatives of Dom Sita own the Sita Coaches operations.

NEGOTIATING THE ‘SNARLS’

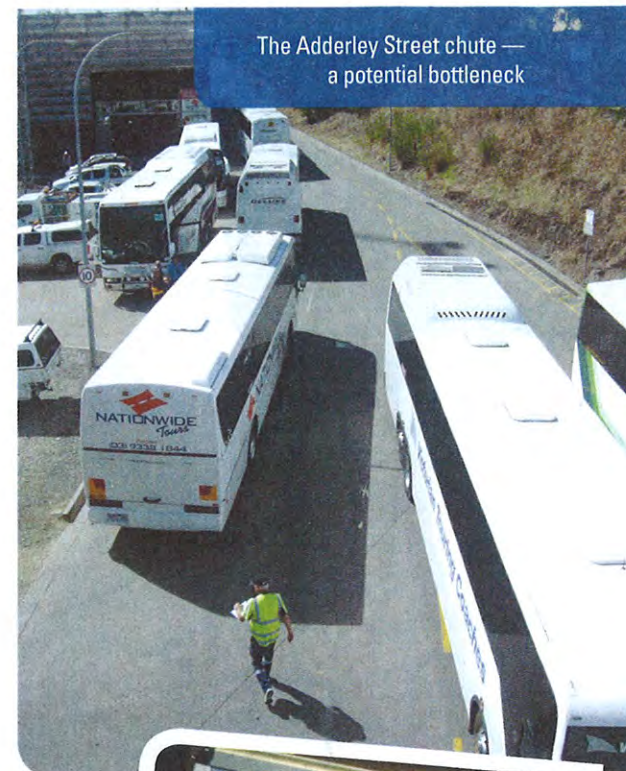
Unlike trains, buses are vulnerable to traffic snarls and the Trotters JV put in place some meticulous strategies to ensure passengers made their train connections. For instance, Albury passengers are bussed to Broadmeadows, where they pick up the train to Albury.

The buses to Broadmeadows must arrive within a 16-minute window as the trains can’t wait. They must take their allocated ‘pathway’ on the congested Melbourne to Sydney line, which carries freight trains as well.

“The last thing we want to do is pull into the station as the train’s pulling out,” Walker says.

The drivers have to report in at various places along the freeway and, if there is a crash on the freeway that caused the coaches to miss their connection, they were told to drive on to Albury.

Even though the odds of this happening were very low,



The Adderley Street chute — a potential bottleneck



Rail Replacement Coaches:

- ← V/Line Albury
- ← V/Line Ballarat
- ← V/Line Bendigo
- ← V/Line Shepparton
- ← V/Line Seymour

Trotters Coaches led the recent Victorian rail replacement operation from Southern Cross Station



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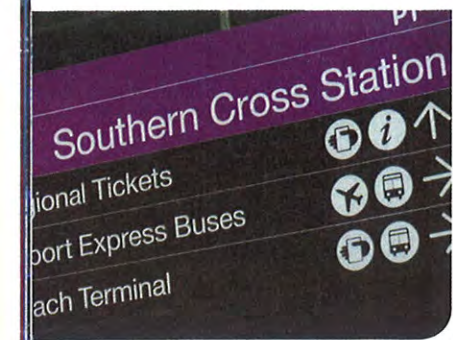
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Trotters Coaches General Manager Con Patista (left) with JV Project Manager Ross Walker

buses were loaded at Southern Cross as if passengers were going all the way to Albury or were getting off at a stop on the way, express or stopping.

If the express and stopping passengers were mixed up in the buses and missed the train connection, every single bus would have to do an all-stopper to Albury.

“You can imagine how the passengers are likely to feel if that happened,” Walker says.

A non-negotiable element was driver training, with every driver having to be familiarised with the route he or she will be driving. The Trotters JV has run more than 900 driver training modules for the 700 drivers available for the project.

“We have got very detailed training manuals on the web. All the companies supplying coaches can download them. All drivers have to be trained to do an express and a stopper before they are allowed on the runs,” Walker says.

As well as teaching the routes by physically taking the drivers over the roads involved, the training modules also offer a thorough briefing on policies and procedures including what is allowed on the bus and what is not, as well as policies on bicycles, pets and food.

Thanks to its work on the Commonwealth Games and other rail shuts, the Trotters JV has been able to draw on a pool of experienced people to assemble the 100 operations and field staff it needed for the Big Shut.

Walker says this experience allowed the joint venture to cover potential problems in scheduling, programming, rostering, communications strategy, contingency planning and temporary infrastructure.

“This approach also allows a great deal of certainty in the budgeting process and Trotters JV has always delivered within or very close to forecast outcomes for all rail closures to date,” Walker says.

“It’s very customer service orientated and I have consistently reinforced this message to coach operators, drivers and supervisors. We want to be the best — we make no bones about that.”



Myki readers were installed for the rail shutdown exercise