



V/Line regional rail commuters headed to Southern Cross Station's coach bays during July while the Ballarat and Bendigo lines were shut for track maintenance and upgrade work

Shutdown shuttles shine

CONSIDERED THE BIGGEST BUS-BASED RAIL REPLACEMENT EXERCISE IN VICTORIA'S HISTORY, THE RECENT V/LINE REGIONAL RAIL SHUTDOWN PROVED BUSES NOT ONLY BACK UP WHEN NEEDED, BUT DO IT EXTREMELY WELL. **DAVID GOELDNER** WRITES

A bus logistics exercise to rival the scale of Melbourne's Commonwealth Games in 2006 has just unfolded in Victoria through a joint venture (JV) exercise which saw 204 buses replacing trains on the Ballarat and Bendigo lines into Melbourne last month.

Project-managed by Roscar Management Consulting's Managing Director Ross Walker, the JV exercise involved coaches marshalled at Melbourne's Docklands precinct, feeding 12 bays at Southern Cross Station working in continuous rotations over a 16-day period.

Walker's company was one of three joint venture partners to win the V/Line tender, partnered by noted Victorian operator Trotters Coaches in collaboration with the recently formed Sita Holdings which owns Kastoria, Seymour and Broadmeadows bus lines.

Walker says the JV team is no stranger to major event transport.

He partnered with Kastoria's Managing Director Dom Sita back in 2006 to provide bus transport for Melbourne's Commonwealth Games, and although Walker lives in Queensland, he has become

a specialist in delivering major event transport with the Victorian Government.

The success of the V/Line operation hinged around locating and setting up a layover bay in close proximity to the Southern Cross Station coach terminal to house up to 130 coaches.

Walker says the site chosen at Docklands Drive was effectively a dead-end street which provided for on-street marshalling of buses on both sides of the road, and an ideal space to turn buses around at the end of the street.

Walker developed the site's grid pattern

OPERATIONS

V/LINE RAIL REPLACEMENT



Rail replacement coaches line the Docklands Drive marshalling area, waiting in turn to pick up at Southern Cross Station

which allowed waves of buses to be marshalled in order, and according to departure times, from Southern Cross Station.

"This contributed to the 100 percent on-time departure record maintained throughout the project," Walker says.

He remarked that catching a coach during the shutdown was very similar to taking the train, with passengers getting to know exactly when each coach left the Southern Cross coach terminal below the rail station.

"V/LINE TOLD US THAT 10.5 PERCENT OF REGISTERED FEEDBACK RELATED TO COMPLIMENTS ABOUT STAFF."

Leading up to the start date, Walker says Trotters Coaches prepared detailed driver and staff manuals, including a training course for all staff to ensure compliance with V/Line protocols.

"Every rail station was clearly mapped and bus routes were detailed in the manuals, including access and egress pathways from the stations," Walker says.

During the planning phase, Austrics software provided the base information for the shift bats.

"The shift bats were constructed to reflect the need for layovers, breaks and compliance with fatigue management legislation," says Walker.

Station dockers were programmed using a combination of bus timetables, bus run numbers (every bus had unique numbering) and other information allowing on-ground supervisors of both Trotters and V/Line to have a complete time-based sequence

of arriving and departing buses, including information relating to stopping patterns of vehicles upon departure.

Walker says several operators took part in the exercise on a sub-contracting basis, with priority given to regional bus operators with toilet equipped coaches — a mandatory requirement of long-distance travel.

"A total of 31 subcontractors were used



Southern Cross Terminal Manager Mark Whitehead, left, with Docklands Coach Supervisor Mike Laker, smiling at the success of the rail replacement project

for the project with some companies having other operators' buses and drivers working under their banner," he says.

All up, 402 vehicles were used, including 109 coaches with toilets, 77 without them, and 18 low-floor buses.

Although coach numbers reduced over the weekends, there was still a demand to bring footy fans into Melbourne who would otherwise travel by train to AFL matches at the MCG and Docklands.

While the exercise was deemed a resounding success, it wasn't without its challenges.

"On our first weekday night of the operation, potential disaster struck when a coach broke down in the middle of the coach holding area under the Latrobe Street Bridge," Walker says.



V/Line's David Ramsdale, left, joins Trotters JV Project Manager Ross Walker at the Docklands marshalling yard during the rail replacement exercise

“A 100 PERCENT ON-TIME DEPARTURE RECORD WAS MAINTAINED THROUGHOUT THE PROJECT.”

“This restricted the flow of buses into the coach terminal for almost an hour, but fortunately passengers were understanding and appreciated the announcements being made by V/Line staff until the blockage was cleared.”

He says a late night staff briefing after the breakdown helped devise a strategy to avoid any further glitches.

“For the next nine days, the Trotters JV team recorded 100 percent on-time running performance for afternoon peak hour departure services from Southern Cross Station,” Walker says.

Indeed, managing commuters and buses during the afternoon peak times provided the project's stiffest test.

“By far the greatest challenge we faced with daily operations was the afternoon weekday peak hour services between 2pm and 6:30pm,” Walker says.

During that window, 239 coaches would arrive and depart from the Southern Cross terminal.

In the rush hour between 4:45pm and 5:45pm, about 100 coaches passed through the terminal, including 79 departures.

“With 12 coach bays in operation, this

effectively meant that during peak hour, each of the 12 coach bays had to turn over a coach every 7.5 minutes,” Walker says.

The project, commissioned by the Victorian Government, involved 204 coaches, more than 600 staff members and 50 supervisors deployed across 8,186 services over a 16-day rail shutdown period coinciding with Victoria's winter school holiday recess.

The rail shutdown was required for track upgrade and maintenance from July 2-17 on the Bendigo and Ballarat lines, presenting a logistical challenge for the Trotters JV team, which procured vehicles from operators around the state and put together within five weeks leading up to the exercise.

Walker has no doubt that the V/Line rail shutdown was possibly the largest of its type in Victoria's history.

“At our final debriefing session Zoanne Morrissy from V/Line told us that 10.5 percent of registered feedback related to compliments about staff,” he says.

“The significance of this percentage is reflected in the fact that no previous rail shutdown had ever received registered feedback above 5 percent, which we were told was an outstanding result for the Trotters JV team.”

Throughout the operation, Walker and his colleagues sought to develop a culture of ownership, consultation, support, responsibility and accountability among the staff and subcontractors.

“In the end, we could not have asked for a better team and the outcome was a resounding success for all concerned,” Walker says.

“Without exception, our staff and bus operators have only one question which is yet to be answered by V/Line: When is the next one happening?”

The exercise is the first of a proposed series of similar shutdowns managed by the Trotters JV team after it was awarded a five-year contract to provide V/Line rail replacement services.

Although Walker's question about the next shutdown is yet to be answered, early indications suggest the JV team could swing into action once again sometime in January 2012. ■



The Docklands Team: Adrian Bono, Carlo Mellini, Carmel Walker, Mike Laker and Jim Louzis