**JOHN AUSTEN – More on the Sydney transport mess-the Western Sydney dud ‘deal’**

[11 April 2018](https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-more-on-the-sydney-transport-mess-the-western-sydney-dud-deal/)

*Announcement of a Western Sydney ‘city deal’ by the Prime Minister and Premier was touted as securing a rail line through Badgerys Creek airport. It does not. In fact, it merely committed to yet another review about what to do. That may turn out to be lucky for taxpayers and Sydney.*

I previously commented on the problems arising from NSW rail policy; for example, Metro makes planning for Badgerys Creek airport difficult. <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-the-commonwealth-is-meddling-in-nsw-rail-at-last/>

The Western Sydney ‘city deal’ is another case in point.

The ‘deal’s’ transport aspects reflect an ‘outcomes report’ of the joint Commonwealth/ NSW Western Sydney rail study – which was more than a year late. <https://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/projects/current-projects/western-sydney-rail-needs-scoping-study>

The ‘outcomes report’ rightly concluded that the first rail lines through Badgerys Creek airport should follow a north-south axis.

There is only one possibility for the north segment: airport-St Marys. The media reported a $20bn spend to ensure this segment is operating when the airport opens. In fact, it will probably cost $10bn and the only commitment is for further study.

Beyond this, the report is highly problematic. Its recommendations would:

* introduce further breaks of rail gauge in Sydney – resulting in yet another independent rail system;
* hinder airport development;
* impede transport in southwestern Sydney;
* probably waste $20bn.

Two omissions from the report are responsible for, or cover-up, these problems: the lack of proper maps and failure to use seating as a measure of rail capacity.

A possible explanation of how these contributed to the fiasco follows.

The report recommended a ‘preferred rail network’ for western Sydney. While the inclusion of the north segment from the airport is straightforward, two options for a south segment were considered; Macarthur and Leppington (near Liverpool).

The report put Macarthur as its preferred network via a 35km segment to the airport. The cost, not specified, is probably in the order of $10bn. Such a line may eventually be necessary for commuters to jobs etc. in Parramatta and north-west Sydney.

Leppington, despite being much less than half the distance and cost of a Macarthur line, was not included. Extraordinarily, the study assumed this line should stop 7km short of the airport. Its $2bn cost would supposedly increase by $4bn to extend it to the airport – likely a gross exaggeration.

The report offered some explanations for rejecting Leppington – but they are not believable. It said:

* expected demand on the Leppington segment would be less than demand on both the Macarthur and St Marys segments – hardly a surprise since it compares one segment against two;
* planning for Western Sydney Airport provided for only two rail lines to the airport. It didn’t say why;
* there are significant road investments around Leppington. This is no argument for preferring Macarthur over Leppington as there are significant road investments near both places;
* current CBD-Leppington services – using double-deck trains – are not convenient for airport passengers. This ignores the fact that such services could easily be changed to single-deck trains.

The last point is astonishing. It suggests ignorance of the most basic rail principles: that infrastructure should be used by a variety of fleets and that rail lines can merge via a junction.

Any competent analysis would have considered better options than stopping the Leppington line short of the airport e.g.:

* the Leppington line being used by airport friendly fleet e.g. single deck trains;
* a junction between Leppington and Macarthur lines – so trains on either could run to the airport. This would maximise the capacity and flexibility of airport rail services;
* a circular route Leppington-Airport-St Marys-Parramatta-Liverpool. This would pick up far more demand from Western Sydney than the proposed plan – by also covering the Fairfield and Liverpool districts using existing lines. If supplemented by a very short connection from near Liverpool to the East Hills line it would also pick-up demand between centres in southern Sydney e.g. Bankstown, Hurstville, Sutherland and the airport as well as Parramatta.

As it is almost impossible to believe any report could be so incompetent, there probably are undisclosed reasons for the recommendations.

One possibility is to avoid investing in rail in south-west Sydney. The Macarthur segment is pencilled for 15-20 years from now – those following Sydney’s airports’ saga know this is code for ‘not in your lifetime’ due to ‘budget constraints’. This argument is much easier for a $10bn Macarthur line than a $2bn Leppington line.

Another possible motive is an ideology of constraining Sydney trains and creating separate train systems.

Sydney Trains – which operates the existing CBD-Leppington line – seems anathema to the State Government.

The Government probably thinks: Sydney trains cannot be allowed to run to the airport, therefore, any airport line must not connect to Leppington. Fine print buried deep in the report, indicating an airport line will be separated from Sydney Trains, supports this theory.

But such reasons would entail terrible mistakes reducing the viability of the railway, impacting the commercial potential of the airport and ‘aerotropolis’ and adversely affecting Western Sydney.

First, Leppington trains would carry many more airline passenger who would pay station access fees (like at Kingsford Smith) than Macarthur trains. If any trains are to go to the airport they should be from Leppington.

Second, contrary to what is assumed by the report, there is no impediment to single-deck ‘airport’ trains using the Leppington line. Sydney Trains predecessors for many years ran single deck trains. And other (single-deck) train operators can and do use Sydney Trains’ lines – the long established NSW Rail Access Undertaking was set up for this very purpose!

Is it possible the report transposed Macarthur and Leppington options – to connect the wrong place to the airport – because an ideology-blinded it to the difference between trains and tracks? Leading to an idiotic view that single-deck trains can’t run on ‘double-deck tracks’? The result of which is the shortest, most cost-effective route to the airport with the best prospects for viability and offering maximum upside for the airport has been sidelined in favour of a $20bn grand scheme?

Incredible? It would not be the first howler in recent years. There are numerous examples:

* a north-west rail line rather than augmentation of Parramatta-CBD;
* the wrong type of capacity – a Metro in suburbia;
* a timetable that ignored resource constraints; and most recently
* spending over $2.3bn on trains that can’t use tunnels on the lines in which they were to operate <https://www.smh.com.au/national/engineer-could-have-put-nsw-on-right-track-before-we-bought-2-billion-worth-of-new-trains-20180308-p4z3gx.html>.

The ‘outcomes report’ reeks of disdain for Western Sydney. Further proof is first the reiteration of the thought-bubble of extending the Metro from Bankstown to Liverpool, a multi-billion-dollar project probably reducing capacity from Bankstown inbound and second a failure to identify any line between Parramatta and the northwest, even though one is considered essential by planners.

The Prime Minister should be furious at the junk he has been presented with. While very keen to make a real announcement, he was left with no choice but to ask for further ‘work’.

NSW might be happy as this will defer a confronting reality until after the next State election.

I previously recommended the Prime Minister grab the whip hand and be the ringmaster of the NSW rail circus rather than joining the clowns.

This ‘outcomes report’ misinforms the public and cannot be part of a proper ‘city deal’.

This is what happens when policy is developed behind closed doors. It again demonstrates the need for an open public inquiry to prevent wastage of at least another $20bn of taxpayers’ money and further irresponsibility by a State Government wrecking the future of Western Sydney and going from one mess to another in Sydney transport.

It all started in 2012 with a hasty switch from a long-standing and well-understood Sydney rail plan to an unusual ‘Metro’ scheme amid the State Government opposing another airport for Sydney! <https://johnmenadue.com/john-austen-badgerys-creek-testing-times/>

*John Austen is a happily retired former official living in the Macarthur area of Western Sydney. He was Director of Economic Policy for Infrastructure Australia from its inception in 2008 until his retirement in 2014.*