## Western Sydney city deal – no deal!

As hype clears from the Western Sydney ‘city deal’ announcement its time to look at what it means.

The big issues relate to rail.

The Prime Minister wants trains running to a new Western Sydney airport at Badgerys Creek when it opens in 2026. Yet far from the necessary billions of dollars, the Commonwealth’s commitment is to a ‘business case’ for a line between St Marys and the airport.

The cost is an outlandish $50million, but that is the good news.

Which is swamped by bad news: the rail study behind the ‘deal’ – presented a year late.

It recommended a line between Badgerys Creek and St Marys. That makes sense.

This might later extend to Scholfields and in 15-20 years south to Macarthur. Those following Sydney’s transport sagas know this means ‘not in your lifetime’.

The scheme – 75 km of line - is to cost around $20billion.

The obvious option - a 14km extension of the existing Leppington line to Badgerys Creek costing only a quarter of this - was rejected. That is very odd.

Stranger still is the proposal that any extension of the Leppington line stop 7km short of the new airport.

Below the surface this presents a world of trouble for Western Sydney.

The starting point is: new lines in Western Sydney are not to join the under-construction Metro or existing railway.

Not joining Metro is understandable. Metro’s reach is limited, its trains relatively slow with few seats with new tunnels reportedly so small as to forever isolate it from other lines.

Yet not joining the existing system is nigh impossible to understand.

The study’s explanation boiled down to double-deckers on the existing system being unsuited to airports.

This excuse is ludicrous. For one thing extending existing lines to Badgerys Creek does not mean only double-deck trains would operate to the airport. Single-deck trains can and do use the existing system.

The study apparently did not see any difference between track and trains. A failure so incomprehensible as to suggest clandestine motives.

Among which may be to cover-up Metro’s real consequences.

Consideration of linking new and existing lines would reveal whether enhancements necessary to take more trains from Western Sydney are prevented by Metro.

This is not fanciful. The possibility of a Metro in the CBD and across the harbour preventing necessary enhancements to the existing railway – perhaps needlessly - was warned about by the Sydney Morning Herald’s 2010 public inquiry led by Mr Ron Christie AO.

Among other things, such an impact would destroy the credibility of the Governments’ ‘three cities’ policy.

Why?

Metro offers few seats per line – not just per train. Metro is less suitable than other trains for trips over 20 minutes. It might be fine for short journeys – which is why metro trains are usually limited to small, highly built-up areas like central London or Paris. But few seats are not fine for commuting, the critical matter for Western Sydney residents. Few seats mean more commuters need to drive – or stay at home.

Western Sydney needs trains with lots of seats. It doesn’t need the study’s fantasies like Metro to Liverpool, 20-minute rides from Parramatta to the CBD or make-believe terminology like ‘fast’ and ‘light’ Metro.

Few seats – Metro - would change the ’30 minute’ city idea from one of no need to make public transport trips beyond 30 minutes to one where it is impractical to travel for any longer. The ‘three cities’ policy would be to confine Western Sydney people to ‘their area’. Meanwhile those outside Sydney - from the Central Coast, Illawarra and Blue Mountains - would still be able to comfortably commute to the city!

To the extent Metro affects the existing system it disadvantages everyone in Western Sydney – it reduces their ability to access opportunities elsewhere. This is the upshot of opinion pieces by experts such as Dr Dick Day and John Brew.

Is it telling the study did not use seating as criteria to assess options? Or the Greater Sydney Commission and Transport for NSW – both NSW Government agencies – present the public with conflicting rail policies?

In its eagerness to avoid discussing links to the existing system the study also ignored options unconstrained by Metro.

For example, linking Badgerys Creek with St Marys, Blacktown, Parramatta, Fairfield, and Liverpool by extending Leppington line and enhancing existing lines - to form a loop with tracks usable by single and double-deck trains - like Bradfield’s plan for Sydney. Complemented by a short link from Liverpool to the East Hills line, this would radically improve Western Sydney commuting and travel to airports.

Readers may recall the Sydney Morning Herald saying previous metro proposals had: *‘‘a bizarre premise that Sydney needs to create an entirely new public transport system*”.

A premise which is the central tenet of Metro - initiated in 2012 while the then and now Premiers opposed a new airport in Western Sydney!

If that premise is bizarre, what about three new systems – as recommended by the study?

The study was jointly conducted by the NSW and Commonwealth Governments.

That NSW would perhaps not want consideration of the best options for Western Sydney is explained by the above.

The Commonwealth has no such excuse. The study recommendations virtually guarantee the north-south line will fail, loss of value of Commonwealth investments and opportunities for integrated development squandered.

That it lacked either the wit or the guts to require the study to put real issues before the public says much. It is a failure consistent with the absence of foundations for its flaccid urban role. ‘City deals’ look like a new pork barrel where keeping the right States ‘sweet’ is all important.

In this case, keeping the NSW Government on-side may result in permanent damage to Western Sydney.

The sooner there is an independent, open public inquiry to get to the bottom of Sydney rail the better.

*John Austen is a retired former adviser to Commonwealth and State Governments on rail matters. He lives in Western Sydney.*