

Getting our trains on track

**Bernadette
UZELAC**



THE Chinese city of Guangzhou, home to millions of people, has more than 2000 years of history as being a major transportation hub along the famous Silk Road that stretches across Europe and Asia.

Yet remarkably, it was only two decades ago that the city's first high-speed metro rail was opened.

Guangzhou's metro system has quickly become one of the world's best along with services in Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, Paris and Madrid.

Guangzhou residents are serviced by 10 lines covering just over 300km of tracks and there are plans to expand that to 15 lines and more than 500km by 2020.

One of the features of the Guangzhou system is the 48-minute express trip to Hong Kong 119km away. In less than an hour you can commute between two of the world's key business districts.

The distance between Geelong and Melbourne is considerably shorter than that, yet it takes much longer to travel the journey via train.

The Melbourne-Geelong service is the busiest of V/Line's network with thousands of people commuting between the cities every day for work.

In 2016-17, 7.62 million people travelled on the Geelong line, an increase of 13 per cent on the previous 12 months.

Our service has experienced an increase in patronage of 95 per cent over the last four years and is almost double that of V/Line's next most populated service, the Ballarat line, which saw 4.33 million passengers.

It's acknowledged that Geelong is the fastest-growing region outside Melbourne and our region is recognised as one of Australia's best investment hot spots. It's estimated that by 2046 the Greater Geelong region population will have grown to 445,000.

One of the major recommendations in Victoria's 30-year infrastructure strategy developed by Infrastructure Victoria was the need to substantially upgrade the Geelong



UP TO SPEED: High-speed trains in China have commuters travelling 120km express from the southern city of Guangzhou to Hong Kong in less than an hour.

Picture: AFP / ED JO

rail network to support growth, reduce travel times and relieve overcrowding on our trains.

Early morning and late-afternoon services are bursting at the brim and it makes for an uncomfortable journey, especially in hot weather.

Already this year we've seen numerous occasions where commuters have been delayed because of heat restrictions and signal faults along the line.

Many solutions, such as introducing larger trains and more services have been put forward. Whatever the solutions are, ignoring the issues is no longer an option.

Passengers want a service where they can sit down, access the internet, respond to emails and do some work to make the most of their time spent travelling. So provision of a free on-board Wi-Fi ser-

vice and fixing black spots along the route are fundamentally important considerations.

Both the State and Federal Governments have committed significant allocations in their budgets to begin improvements on the line.

With a state election on the horizon this year, the Geelong Chamber will be urging both major parties to commit funding for much-needed upgrades

to the Melbourne-Geelong transport corridor.

Another commute option that's gaining traction is the ferry service between Portarlington and the Docklands.

Operated by Port Phillip Ferries, the company is reviewing the feasibility of daily services between Melbourne and Geelong. A new \$10 million ferry capable of carrying 400 passengers has recently been introduced into their fleet. It has an on-board cafe and Wi-Fi available.

The ferry service could well become a viable alternative to train travel between Geelong and Melbourne, particularly for commuters who need access to reliable high-speed internet to enable them to work while travelling to and from work.

Investment in public transport, especially our rail network, and expansion of the range of options available to commuters will be critical factors in driving our economy and creating greater opportunity for all.

Bernadette Uzelac is CEO of the Geelong Chamber of Commerce. Follow the Chamber on Twitter @GeelongChamber