

Herald Sun

NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR



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C M Y K

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OFF THE RAILS



Long wait: crowds fume over delays at Flemington Station yesterday as police restrain a woman. Pictures: PAUL TREZISE, REBECCA MICHAEL

THOUSANDS of furious Oaks Day racegoers were stranded for hours after trains between Flemington and the city failed last night.

And tens of thousands more people had peak-hour trips home thrown into chaos, with the same overhead power line fault disrupting services on the Craigieburn, Sydenham and Upfield lines.

Mary Bolling and Anthony Dowsley

Oaks Day organisers were seething at the fiasco, which spoiled the day for many of the 89,000 who attended yesterday.

The Victorian Racing Club said Melbourne's reputation was at stake after Connex left up to 50,000 Spring Carnival patrons stranded.

Police arrested several people as

tempers flared on the packed Flemington train station platform, where the last train left at 5pm.

Several punters swam across the Maribyrnong River, while at least one man climbed on to the outside of a tram on Epsom Rd.

Tangled wires at North Melbourne cut power to the Flemington line just before the last race.

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OBAMA GETS DOWN TO BUSINESS

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OFF THE RAILS



Fashions on the platform: Laura Jolly and Vicki Nash, centre, wait with hundreds of other racegoers stranded at Flemington, while a passenger argues with staff at Newmarket, right.

Oaks Day derailed by fiasco at the finish

The fault brought road traffic to a standstill and boom gates blocked cars trying to leave the racecourse.

Masses of people poured on to Epsom Rd in search of scarce taxis, while others walked kilometres for buses.

Patrons had already been made to wait up to 20 minutes, with crowds swelling after a signal failure at Kensington about 4pm delayed several Flemington services.

But fury erupted over the next two hours, as regular Connex announcements told passengers to wait patiently.

Finally, replacement buses were ordered about 6.45pm, but the message that trains weren't coming didn't get to the platform until after 7pm.

Train services resumed at 7.30pm.

As hundreds of punters said they would never attend Spring Racing Carnival again, VRC chief Dale Monteith said unreliable train services threatened Melbourne's biggest event of the year.

"What does something like this do in terms of reflecting on Melbourne and Victoria's reputation? It doesn't reflect well," Mr Monteith said.

"Connex are meant to be in charge of the train system, and this is not the first time this has happened — we lost a number of trains on Derby night, and it's not acceptable."

Last night, Mr Monteith said the train cancellation caused public risk issues, as thousands of people walked

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the bridge over the Maribyrnong River, and more than 1.5km to Footscray Park where replacement buses were eventually organised.

Mr Monteith said VRC asked Connex and the State Government every year to make sure maintenance was done to avoid faults during Spring Racing Carnival — but service disruptions were frequent.

"All we want is the system to be guaranteed, as it would be for any other similar event around the world," Mr Monteith said.

"The VRC will most certainly be writing to the Premier tomorrow, to get this situation improved."

With a crowd of 90,000 at Flemington yesterday, Mr Monteith estimated up to 50,000 people had travelled by train.

"How do they get home ... and what does that do to our event in the future, when they don't come any more?" he asked. "We suffer and Victoria suffers."

Connex workers were abused as they advised waiting and dehydrated patrons to get drinking water from portable bathrooms next to the Flemington station.

Connex spokesman John Rees said he didn't know how a train had got tangled in the overhead power line, forcing the operator to kill power on the line to fix it.

"We will be talking to the VRC about their concerns but we must stress it is a combination of events and unfortunate timing that have coincided to create this regrettable outcome," Mr Rees said.

But patron Darren Grapsas, from Geelong, said lack of information had worsened the situation.

"It was just a joke out there. We ended up walking for about 5km, just because there was nowhere else to go," he said.

"I understand that things can go wrong, but what did they put in place to fix it?"

"If the Government wants people to take public transport to these major functions, they have to actually provide a decent service — to simply cancel the trains, that is a disaster approach."

Mr Monteith said dozens of interstate visitors had missed their flights home, while many more regional patrons had missed V/Line connections.

Public Transport Minister Lynne Kosky said the Department of Transport would investigate the incident.

"Connex are normally very good at moving large crowds to major events, so I was extremely disappointed to hear about the significant delays which occurred," she said.

"I have sought answers from Connex via my department, and I await the findings of the investigation."

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Commuter games: a racegoer hitchhikes a ride home on a tram. Pictures: ANDREW HENSHAW, PAUL TREZISE, REBECCA MICHAEL, IAN CURRIE

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\$5b necessary to end gridlock

THE Brumby Government's plan to end the gridlock on our roads and trains could be under threat unless the Federal Government commits at least \$5 billion to major infrastructure projects.

Treasurer John Lenders yesterday warned its multi-billion-dollar transport blueprint, due to be released at the end of the month, would be downgraded if Victoria missed out on key funds.

"If the Commonwealth does not put money into the state of Victoria, clearly the transport plan will be a smaller plan than it otherwise would be," he said.

"The Commonwealth has an extraordinary opportunity to build on the good work in the state of Victoria to date.

"We have in the last five years spent almost \$15 billion on infrastructure. The Commonwealth has put an equivalent to one-fifth extra into that.

Geraldine Mitchell and Mary Bolling

"They can make this go a lot further — it's in their hands."

It comes after Premier John Brumby attacked his federal Labor counterparts, saying Victoria needed a "stronger partnership" with the Rudd Government.

Mr Brumby and Roads Minister Tim Pallas have repeatedly said they want at least a quarter of the \$20 billion Building Australia fund put towards the Victorian Transport Plan.

But the Government's ire was raised when Treasurer Wayne Swan said this week the Rudd Government would be forced to make "tough decisions" in relation to state funding.

It came as the latest financial figures revealed the global financial crisis had blown a \$40 billion hole in the federal Budget.

Peak rail union boss Trevor Dobbyn agreed federal funding was vital, but said the Govern-

ment should still proceed as planned without it.

"We're the only country in the developed world where there's no federal funding for urban public transport, and that can't be sustained," the Rail, Tram and Bus Union state secretary said.

"These projects are vital to address patronage increases.

"We need those 20 new trains, and the system needs major infrastructure works to deliver more capacity. Without that cash we'll be looking at less jobs and a public transport system that doesn't work."

RACV public policy general manager Brian Negus said it was imperative the transport plan went ahead.

"Scaling down is the wrong approach. The Government should be scaling up the scope of this plan," he said.

"Funding is obviously a constraint, but equally the Government needs to be very conscious that one way to turn the economy around is to invest in infra-

structure, which adds to productivity of workers, as well as creates jobs."

The Brumby Government's transport plan will address recommendations in international transport expert Sir Rod Eddington's East-West study, but will also focus on other projects.

Sir Rod's report found Melbourne was headed for transport chaos unless a multi-billion-dollar investment were made in the development of infrastructure such as road and rail tunnels, rail line extensions and a plan to keep trucks from clogging city streets.

Metlink spokeswoman Michelle Herbert said there had never been a more critical time for investment in transport.

"The Eddington Report has laid the foundations for the future of Melbourne's public transport network. It's time those projects were actioned and given adequate funding," she said.