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Statement by the Northern Councils Alliance

Launch of a campaign to improve transport services: *Connect Melbourne's North: It's time to transform our transport.*

Seven Councils in Melbourne's north are seeking urgent action to improve the region's transport system, in an effort to address severe traffic congestion, long trips to the nearest hospital, challenges in accessing jobs and education, and increasing social isolation impacting the lives of thousands of residents.

The Northern Councils Alliance, comprising the municipalities of Banyule, Darebin, Hume, Merri-bek, Mitchell Shire, Nillumbik and Whittlesea, today launched its new transport advocacy campaign: *Connect Melbourne's North: It's time to transform our transport.*

Saying communities deserve better, the campaign is calling for critical improvements to transport in Melbourne's north.

Kicking off the campaign is a call for federal and state governments to duplicate and extend the Upfield rail line.

Currently the train line terminates at Upfield, far short of our growing community, and the single train line between Gowrie and Upfield station results in one of least frequent services in the network, every 15 to 20 minutes in peak. Frequent delays also add to the frustration of communities in the area.

The extension and duplication will support current and future communities to access jobs and essential services throughout the corridor, helping people address the cost of living crisis, improving social connection and reducing climate change emissions.

This will support the existing and future populations of Merri-bek, Hume, Whittlesea and Mitchell.

This adds to the current regional priorities of revised bus networks, better active transport infrastructure, support for electric vehicle transition and other large rail upgrades.

Melbourne's north is home to one million people or 20% of the population of Greater Melbourne. It's one of the fastest growing regions, with a population of 1.5 million forecast by 2036 – a growth rate of 2.8% compared to 1.6% for Greater Melbourne. One in six Victorians lives in the northern Melbourne region.

This population growth has not been matched with the necessary investment in transport. Over the years this has caused massive road congestion and delays in connecting between transport options – limiting business growth and access to jobs, education and health services, and contributing to social isolation.

Our transport system is not supporting the current population and there is no plan for the future population.

Today, our community must rely on a public transport service that does not meet their requirements or else drive their own vehicle, which leads to increased congestion. In the north, a journey that is a 35-minute drive by car can be two hours or more by public transport, and weekend services in many areas across the region are almost non-existent.

The NCA has commissioned comprehensive research reports on the region’s transport needs and is now working with other regional stakeholders to advocate for the reports’ recommendations. But strong engagement and financial and policy support from state and federal governments are needed to achieve those transport goals.

Better transport options will stimulate economic growth across Melbourne’s north and improve quality of life for residents. Effective transport solutions will bridge the gap between inner urban and outer areas so that everyone has equal access to job, health and education centres.

Seamless connectivity is needed between different transport modes to ensure that commuting becomes smoother and hassle-free. Sustainable transport options are also key to future planning.

“With our region’s growth, planning and investment in transport options is critical. Our seven Councils are responding to this issue by working together to campaign for support from state and federal governments,” said **Cr Tom Melican, Mayor of Banyule Council and Chair of the NCA.**

Cr Melican said this is a great example of Councils working together to campaign for better transport in their region. “We’ve conducted comprehensive research and we know what’s required. With our population tipped to reach 1.5 million by 2036, we need to support our economy and improve our community’s access to essential services. Investing in critical transport infrastructure will be key to doing just that. As a region we need support from our colleagues in the state and federal governments and we are ready to work with them.”

Cr Adam Pulford, Mayor of Merri-bek Council said: “Connectivity is key to our residents having access to all they need. Rail options must improve, for example along the Upfield line, where demand is already significantly exceeding provision of services. Infrequent and unreliable services are not what our community should expect. They need and deserve better.”

Cr Nathan Clark, Acting Mayor of Mitchell Shire Council, added: “Population growth has not been matched with investment in transport options. Many of our residents face long commutes, with massive road congestion and delays in transport connections. More people are coming to live in our region, and we urgently need to improve rail and transport more generally to service our rapidly growing population.”

Cr Ben Ramcharan, Mayor of Nillumbik Shire Council said: “High-quality active transport options will provide desirable, safe and accessible transport and recreation opportunities for our residents and visitors. Together with provision of integrated bus routes, this will significantly lift the number of transport options available and improve the health and wellbeing of our community, especially our people who live in rural communities.”

Cr Susanne Newton, Mayor of Darebin Council said: “Sustainable transport is essential for our future. We need to work now to make sure our residents and businesses can make the transition to electric vehicles smoothly and efficiently. We also need to champion the use of all types of active transport and provide the infrastructure that is needed for bike paths and walking trails across Melbourne’s north.”

Cr Naim Kurt, Mayor of Hume Council said: “Public transport provision is not meeting our community’s needs. We urgently need a bus network that will replicate the planned Suburban Rail Loop route, so that residents, particularly those in the outer areas, can access the services they need. For example, we need to make sure that access to education is possible for all our residents and especially our young people who rely on public transport.”

“For our state to succeed, Melbourne’s north needs to succeed. Investment in the future, in terms of access to health, education and community services, improved transport options and infrastructure to support electric vehicles, will be critical to our economic future,” said **Lydia Wilson, Chair of Administrators** at the City of Whittlesea.

To find out more about the *Connect Melbourne’s North: It’s time to transform our transport* advocacy campaign, visit connectmelbournenorth.com

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