**Executive Summary**

This Study of the passenger service needs of the Grampians and Barwon South West regions was commissioned by eight local government councils in western Victoria, and covers the area from Ararat to the South Australian border and from Yarriambiack in the north to Glenelg Shire in the south.

Councils asked the Study Team to investigate the extent to which existing passenger services – both train and coach – supported the social and economic requirements of this large and productive region, and whether the services currently provided and the infrastructure used could be improved. Councils wanted passenger services and infrastructure that would improve social and economic access and connectivity, reduce isolation, and enable the present and future residents of the region to easily connect with regional centres and Melbourne to meet social, economic, medical, educational and business needs through safe, efficient, frequent and reliable public transport. Central to this issue was whether train services could be reinstated to Horsham, Hamilton and other centres.

The Report is based on extensive investigation, and many meetings with councillors, council officers, business leaders, educational and health services and residents in the region. The Study Team also reviewed social and economic statistics for the region in detail. It investigated rail and coach operational questions in fine detail.

The work undertaken by the Study Team identified significant unmet needs for better public transport in the region. The Study found that residents, businesses, government agencies and local governments in the region were not being provided with fast public transport access to Ballarat and Melbourne. It found that regional residents, including young people, the aged, those in need of medical specialities and those in need of access to choices in work and education, often had inadequate public transport access to regional centres like Horsham, Ararat or Hamilton, let alone Ballarat, Geelong or Melbourne. And it found that the public passenger services that are being provided beyond Ararat are sub-standard, being little improved from 30 years ago, and offering limited access to regional centres and inadequate connectivity.

In response to these deficiencies, the Study Team looked at rail and coach services in the region from the passengers’ point of view. It then developed and costed staged proposals for public transport improvement in the region.

The proposals made in the Report range from improvements capable of immediate implementation to those requiring substantial investment, particularly needed as Victoria’s western rail network moves toward standardisation of gauge.

The most immediate **Stage 1** recommendation is to increase the Ararat to Melbourne train service from 3 to 4 daily return services, including a new early morning train to Melbourne and a return afternoon train from Melbourne. This will greatly assist business travellers. By 2019, Ballarat line upgrades will allow a further improvement to 5 daily return trains between Melbourne and Ararat.
The central conclusions of the Study are that rail passenger services can and should be reinstated to Horsham and Hamilton, and that the railway between Ballarat and Ararat should be converted from broad to standard gauge, in Stage 2 of the recommended process, between 2021 and 2026. By 2026, or sooner if possible, there should be 4 daily trains, with comfort and performance at least comparable with the popular VLocity trains, in each direction from Horsham, 3 from Hamilton and 6 from Ararat, with passengers changing at Ballarat for rapid and frequent Melbourne services. There are currently 22 daily trains to choose from at Ballarat and more are likely to be added after the $518 million Ballarat line upgrades approved in the 2016 state budget are completed.

Safety upgrades are recommended including signalling improvements such as automated train protection warning systems and the upgrading to active protection (booms and barriers) of 77 level crossings between Ararat, Horsham and Hamilton.

The Study also looked at coach connections servicing the region and identified important improvements in coach services, including additional services between Hamilton and Ballarat and new weekend services to Casterton and Mount Gambier. Coach service improvements are also proposed for a number of towns to provide better regional connectivity, including Balmoral, Cavendish, Coleraine, Dunkeld and Lake Bolac.

Other improvements are recommended to better overcome isolation in smaller communities and to provide tourist friendly coach schedules that would enable more public transport-based holidaymakers to visit the region’s many attractions, including the northern and southern Grampians, the Pyrenees, the Wartook Valley, Little Desert, West Wimmera and Glenelg shire attractions. Such access is currently very limited; better access will help accommodation and hospitality industries in these areas.

The Report also highlights the need to upgrade facilities for disabled and elderly travellers, as most coach stops and stations in the region don’t currently comply with the Disability Discrimination Act. As well as upgrading these to compliance, the Report also recommends improved disabled toilet facilities, such as “Changing Places” adult disabled facilities at several stations and staff to assist passengers with luggage at major interchanges. All stations in the regions - including Stawell, Murtoa, Horsham, Glenthompson, Willaura, Dunkeld and Hamilton - will need to be restored and upgraded as part of the process, improving local infrastructure and providing local employment.

Longer term possibilities for Hamilton and Horsham trains to also travel to Geelong or via Geelong to Melbourne are also outlined and costed for consideration.

The cost of proposals in the Report has been estimated in a peer-reviewed process. Stage 1 of the proposals (those for early implementation) - are costed at $1.6m; Stage 2, including new trains and standardisation of the Ballarat to Ararat railway and associated train stabling, maintenance and signalling, has an estimated capital cost of $369m and an additional annual operating cost of $6.1 million. Although the required investment is substantial, all major transport investments involve large spending to provide the access and connectivity communities need. The investments are spread over several years and will be reflected in employment opportunities as well as wider economic and social benefits.
Findings and Recommendations

Findings

1. Towns and catchments in the Grampians and Barwon South West regions of Victoria are home to over 110,000 Victorians and are provided with reasonably extensive public passenger services through Public Transport Victoria and V/Line, but these services can and should be improved.

2. Such enhancements will support the social and economic development of the regions by providing better access by residents to employment opportunities, health services, education and training and social connections.

3. Benefits of these improved services will be very significant to many population groups in the regions, including the aged and the aging, young people such as students, apprentices and job-seekers, members of ethnic communities working in the regions, as well as visitors to the region.

4. Improved and in some instances new or re-scheduled coach services can help support small towns as well as aging in place in the regions by allowing residents to more readily access regional centres for medical appointments, education and training as well as shopping needs not met in smaller towns and visits to friends and family, supporting social inclusion.

5. Many important tourist destinations in the region are not currently accessible by public transport, and improvements should be made to better serve tourists and holiday makers, whose expenditure in turn will contribute to the growth of the hospitality, accommodation, ecotourism and viticulture industries in the regions.

6. Reintroduction of passenger trains to Hamilton and Horsham will provide widespread benefits to communities throughout the regions and beyond and be the centrepiece of revised public passenger services through faster, more reliable and more comfortable links with Ballarat and Melbourne. Coach connections to regional centres, inter-town coaches, and coach services to tourist destinations also require improvement.

7. Upgrading of these services is considerably more complex than elsewhere in Victoria due to differences in rail gauge, fragmented control of rail corridors, the need to procure suitable standard gauge passenger rolling stock and related maintenance facilities, and the need to upgrade many level crossings, signalling, safe working and stations in the regions.

8. Despite these challenges, reintroduction of passenger train services to Hamilton and Horsham is feasible and is recommended, together with a strengthening of connecting coach services. Implementation and improvement of services will take some years to complete and will involve substantial costs in infrastructure, rolling stock and support for coach and rail services.

9. Future public transport in the study regions could be strongly complemented using non-scheduled types of services such as taxis, Uber, greater use of school and community buses and of demand responsive services.

10. Greater use of marketing, promotion and communication channels between operators and the public could significantly raise public awareness and use of public transport services.

11. Although the estimated additional annual operating cost of over $6 million and capital investment of $369 million is substantial, the investments are spread over several years. They will provide the access and connectivity the community needs and will be reflected in wider economic and social benefits.
Recommendations

1. Rail Service Improvements-Stage 1 - (2017-2019):

1.1 Increase Ararat train services from 3 to 4 weekday trains in each direction with the addition of an earlier morning train to Melbourne and a faster mid to late afternoon service from Melbourne, and an increase from 2 to 3 return services on weekends.

1.2 After currently funded Ballarat line improvements are completed, increase Ararat train service to 5 weekday services, accelerated by Ararat trains omitting stops on the Ballarat line served by other trains, i.e. Ardeer, Deer Park, Caroline Springs, Rockbank and Melton, and increase to 4 return services on weekends.

2. Rail Service Improvements-Stage 2 - (2021 to 2026):

The second package of improvements to the rail service to the region should be the reinstatement of passenger train services to Hamilton and Horsham, commencing from about 2023 but with a prior lead time of approximately 5 years:

2.1 Provide 6 return daily train services to Ararat, 4 to Horsham and 3 to Hamilton. These services would all connect at Ballarat with direct trains to/from Melbourne via Ballan.

2.2 Horsham trains would also serve Stawell and Murtoa and Hamilton trains would also serve Willaura, Glenthompson and Dunkeld.

2.3 Stage 2 requires provision of supporting infrastructure including:

2.3.1 Standardization of 88 km of railway from Ballarat to Ararat

2.3.2 Provision of a new crossing loop at Trawalla

2.3.3 Improvement to ARTC track infrastructure between Ararat and Horsham and between Ararat and Hamilton for increased speed and compatibility with V/Line rolling stock

2.3.4 Upgrading of 49 level crossings between Ararat and Horsham and 28 level crossings between Ararat and Hamilton to current passenger train standards

2.3.5 Provision of standard gauge access to both main platforms and to train maintenance facilities at Ballarat

2.3.6 Upgrading of rail/rail and rail/coach interchange facilities at Ballarat station to meet DDA standards and to provide a seamless passenger experience

2.3.7 Upgrading of all other stations that are served to DDA standards and to meet contemporary passenger expectations

2.3.8 Upgrading of signalling and safe working

2.3.9 Provision of overnight train stabling and servicing facilities at Hamilton and Horsham

2.4 Acquisition of suitable standard gauge rolling stock, with comfort and performance (Including 160km/h capability) at least comparable with the VLocity trains, to operate the proposed services.

2.5 In the longer term, the option that some trains could be extended from Ballarat to Geelong or to Melbourne travelling via North Shore (near Geelong) should be evaluated.
3. Coach Service Improvements

3.1 Ararat should become the focal point for western road coach services that operate along the Western Highway, including services to Nhill and Warracknabeal/Ouyen that currently terminate at Ballarat.

3.2 A new daily road coach service using an appropriately sized vehicle should be introduced between Horsham and Hamilton via Balmoral and Cavendish and co-ordinated with Hamilton to Portland services.

3.3 An additional mid-morning service should be introduced on weekdays from Hamilton to Ballarat and corresponding return mid-afternoon service, with suitable train connections at Ballarat.

3.4 Existing weekday services between Ballarat and Mt Gambier and between Casterton and Warrnambool should be extended to operate seven days per week, with adjustment as necessary to optimise train connections at Ballarat and Warrnambool.

3.5 Road coach connections from the study area to South Australian destinations, particularly Adelaide, should be improved including good connections via Ararat, Horsham and Mount Gambier.

3.6 In cooperation with local communities, a review should be undertaken of local bus services that provide intra-town services and access to regional centres (including services to Edenhope, Goroke, Natimuk, Warracknabeal, Ouyen, Donald, Rupanyup and, Minyip). The review is to assess the suitability of scheduled routing and timings and consider options for use of demand responsive type services and greater use of school buses.

3.7 V/Line and PTV should permit the conveyance of bikes on regional road coaches.

3.8 Horsham and Hamilton road coach hubs should be upgraded, to provide better waiting, boarding, alighting and transferring conditions.

3.9 Transport agencies should work with councils to improve coach stops in smaller towns to maximise safety and comfort, ensure good lighting, seating and passenger information and provide real time information. Opportunities to combine bus stops with local facilities such as shops, tourist information or community centres should be investigated.

3.10 Councils should provide advice to Government that unsatisfactory road conditions are contributing to poor ride quality and increased safety risks for road coach travellers on the services in the study area, particularly on the Glenelg and Henty Highways.

3.11 Explicit service standards should be adopted for coach services to towns of various sizes and tourist destinations.

4. Tourism

4.1 Coach connections, including weekend and public holiday services, should be provided to serve key destinations in the region and permit weekend visits to them, including the Grampians Peak Trail at Mount Zero and Dunkeld, the Little Desert, the Wartook Valley, northern and southern Grampians and the Pyrenees wine region.

4.2 V/Line should include more destinations in the region in its Escape with V/Line promotions and other marketing.
4.3 Tourist agencies and councils in the region should consider adopting, in conjunction with V/Line and coach operators, a pro-active approach to rail based cycle tourism as is applied in Wangaratta.

4.4 The arrangement for on-demand access to Mount Arapiles provided by Wimmera Roadways should be considered for application to other tourist destinations.

4.5 The Halls Gap coach service should be extended as recommended by Sandlant Coaches to provide improved access for walkers and to accommodation houses in Halls Gap.

5. Services for persons with disability and/or aged persons

5.1 All operating rail stations in or serving the region, should be made DDA compliant as soon as possible; this includes Ballarat, Beaufort, Ararat, Stawell, Horsham, Dimboola and Nhill.

5.2 Station upgrading, including DDA compliance where not already in place, should be planned as part of the reintroduction of rail passenger services to stations on the Hamilton and Horsham lines at stations to which passenger trains are reintroduced: these include Hamilton, Horsham, Dunkeld, Glenthompson, Willaura, Stawell and Murtoa.

5.3 All coach stations and coach stops in or serving the region should be made DDA compliant, including weather protection, hard stand for coach ramps, and smooth sealed connections from coach ramps to footpaths.

5.4 Signage and wayfinding at stations and coach stops serving and in the region should be reviewed as to adequacy and legibility, including legibility to persons with reduced vision: this needs to include fixed signage and visual displays including those at Southern Cross Station as well as other stations serving the region.

5.5 Internal layouts of stations should be reviewed to ensure they facilitate easy movement for people with special needs. Ease of transfer is particularly important at interchanges.

5.6 Consideration should be given to providing a “Changing Places” adult disabled toilet at Ballarat, Ararat and at Southern Cross as, under the NDIS, greater independent travel by persons with disability is expected.

5.7 V/Line should highlight, in the roles of station and on-board train staff, the importance of customer service in luggage handling and assistance to elderly and disabled travellers, particularly at interchanges.

5.8 Consideration should be given to providing, or funding a community group to provide, a designated and highly visible traveller assistance officer at Southern Cross, Ararat and Ballarat to assist elderly and/or disabled passengers to transfer themselves and their luggage between coach and train and/or between trains, and/or to and from taxis and where appropriate, to arrange onward transport on arrival (such as through taxi booking or links with other service providers).

5.9 New rolling stock for longer distance services should form the centrepiece of the Government’s announced intention to acquire “New Generation Regional Trains”. Their design needs to pay significant attention to facilitating easy movement for people with special needs – the elderly, people with children (and strollers),- as well as adequate stowage for luggage, bikes, bulky items, wheel chairs and electric mobility scooters. Spaces need to be uncluttered, easy to navigate, with clear aesthetics to help customers feel at ease.
6. Recommendations in relation to Passenger Experience

6.1 Maps and timetables covering the region should be upgraded. Regional maps should be produced that show all route and town services, irrespective of whether designated as PTV, V/Line or Great Southern Railway, with cross-references to timetables and other relevant travel information, in type sufficiently large for elderly and vision impaired people to read them.

6.2 Static and dynamic passenger information providing clear directions regarding current services and connections should be provided and displayed at all stations and major coach stops in the region.

6.3 All V/Line trains, coaches and major stations should be Wi-Fi enabled as soon as possible, to enable passengers to use phones, tablets, computers and other devices – and to enhance the advantage rail travel offers for the productive use of travel time.

6.4 Transport operators need to work with councils and PTV in locating regional coach terminals and local stops where access is easiest for most potential travellers, with attention being given to convenient, well-lit and safe access pathways.

6.5 The myki ticketing system should be extended as soon as possible to all train and coach services in the regions.

6.6 In the short term, PTV should work with GSR to improve The Overland service, particularly to reduce the excessively long travel times between Melbourne and western Victoria and to improve publicity concerning the availability of the service at V/Line prices for travel to Ararat, Stawell, Horsham, Dimboola and Nhill. Purchasing arrangements for tickets for The Overland should be streamlined, including the requirement for 48 hours advance booking.

7. Transport Governance in the Grampians and Barwon South West Regions

Local governments in the region should consider establishing an ongoing Public Transport Forum to articulate the region’s needs. The Forum would:

- include representatives of participating councils, PTV or other appropriate government agencies, coach operators and public transport users;
- be a conduit for wider community consultation and feedback to State Government agencies on specific issues, e.g. proposed major changes to rail services or timetables;
- help ensure that coach and local bus service reviews conducted by PTV fully reflect local needs;
- provide an opportunity to confer and co-ordinate council public transport approaches and strategies within the region;
- if practicable, fund a full or part time Transport Connections Officer to support local public transport development in the region;
- explore opportunities for local transport innovation, including innovation to assist elderly and disabled persons, and mobility.
Additional notes regarding Reintroduction of Train Services

Rail Service Improvements-Stage 2: Reinstatement of Passenger Train Services to Hamilton and Horsham

Underlying reasons for recommending return of rail services to Horsham and Hamilton are that:

- It responds to many of the identified needs
- It provides better inter-city connections
- It is strongly supported by the region’s communities
- It provides equity with other cities and towns throughout Victoria
- It is operationally and financially feasible

Restoration of rail service beyond Hamilton to Portland or west of Horsham is not recommended because:

- Portland is better served via Warrnambool rail
- Population west of Horsham is generally insufficient to support a rail passenger service, however the region will still benefit from rail to Horsham
- Daily rail services west of Horsham would require additional rolling stock
- Dimboola and Nhill still have a limited train service provided by the twice weekly The Overland train to Adelaide but its future beyond late 2018 is undecided.