

LEADWEST'S NEWS SUMMARY FOR MELBOURNE'S WEST

30th December 2011



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BRIMBANK

HELP FOR CHRISTMAS DAY STORM VICTIMS

Brimbank Leader—29th December 2011

<http://brimbank-leader.whereilive.com.au/news/story/help-for-storm-victims-fbready/>

Representatives from SunCorp insurance will be at Keilor municipal offices today (Thursday, December 29) until 5pm to offer advice to Brimbank residents affected by the Christmas Day storms.

According to State Emergency Services call-out figures more than 1400 homes in Brimbank were badly affected by the storm which ripped through the outer western and northern suburbs of Melbourne late in the day on Sunday.

Areas hardest hit were Taylors Lakes with 519 calls and Keilor with 278.

Six SunCorp representatives will be available to assist with claims and provide up to date information at the Brimbank Council Information Centre at the Keilor offices, 704B Old Calder Highway Keilor.

People unable to attend can phone a 24 hour Insurance Council of Australia hotline on 1800 734 621.

For help with grants or financial aid, phone the Department of Human Services toll free number 1800 990 660 during business hours.

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STORM CLEAN UP CONTINUES

Brimbank Leader—27th December 2011

<http://brimbank-leader.wherelive.com.au/news/story/storm-clean-up-continues/>

Kinglake SES rescued children trapped in a car in floodwaters on Christmas Day.

Kinglake SES controller Leanne Klammer said her crew had attended “countless” jobs, which included rockslides on Heidelberg-Kinglake Rd and the rescue of children trapped in one of many cars washed away by floodwaters on Eltham’s Main Rd.

She said the unit was helping metropolitan crews, including Brimbank and Whittlesea, clean up in the aftermath.

“We did not have any hail, up here was torrential rain and a lot of flooding in particular metropolitan areas,” Ms Klammer said.

“We have been asked to send more crews down tomorrow and Thursday.”

Earlier update 11.45am: THE SES has recruited interstate volunteers after 4000 calls were made over Christmas.

SES spokesman Lachlan Quick said 3200 calls for help came in on Christmas Day, while another 800 came through yesterday as people were returning home from festive celebrations.

“We had cleared about 2000 by yesterday and another 800 this morning, but we expect to get through the backlog in the next 2-3 days,” Mr Quick said.

“We had 250 volunteers come in on Christmas Day and again on Boxing Day.”

Mr Quick said 25 volunteers from the South Australian SES arrived this morning and another 30 were coming from NSW this afternoon to help clear the backlog.

“That will help us get through the work more quickly, and a lot of these people are giving up their holidays and time with family to help, so it means a lot to us.”

North east and north west Melbourne was hardest hit with flash flooding and hail stones the size of golf balls reported throughout the region.

Mr Quick said Greensborough, Eltham, Taylors Lakes, and Keilor were the worst hit areas, with some properties damaged by early hail and hit again by storms later on Christmas day.

Eltham SES controller Glen O’Donnell said flash flooding of up to 2m engulfed homes in the area.

“I have lived in Greensborough for 35 years and that is the worst I have seen it, both in rain (volume) and hail size – some residents who have lived there for more than 50 years have said the same,” Mr O’Donnell said.

Water damage forced more than 80 Greensborough Plaza stores to close for yesterday’s traditionally lucrative Boxing Day sales.

Earlier report 11am: SES volunteers are working through a backlog of calls after Christmas storms lashed the suburbs.

Eltham SES controller Glen O’Donnell said his unit, with the help of support crews, was working through almost 800 calls for assistance since about 7pm on December 25 as major flash flooding of up to 2m had engulfed homes and roads across Greensborough, Briar Hill, Montmorency and Eltham.

“We have probably got roughly about 200 contacts we still need to make and out of that determine how many jobs we need to go to,” Mr O’Donnell said.

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"I have lived in Greensborough for 35 years and that is the worst I have seen it, both in rain (volume) and hail size – some residents who have lived there for more than 50 years have said the same."

Several storm cells hit Melbourne on Christmas evening with hail, rain and wind causing widespread damage.

Parts of Greensborough Plaza were closed due to water damage.

Mr O'Donnell said crews received about 19 rescue pleas from people trapped in flooding homes or cars within an hour of rain sweeping the area.

He said low-lying areas with natural water courses, such as valleys, were hardest hit with Nepean St, Greensborough one of the worst.

"(The flooding) started near Greensborough College and followed the street down to near Henry St, crossing eight streets," he said.

"It was strong enough to push cars into other cars, move sheds and bring down fences."

He said rapid impact assessment teams were evaluating severe cases, such as inhabitable homes, for assistance.

"We are still going and, being the weekend it is, expect it to keep going for quite a while as people come home after holidays," he said.

2011: OUR YEAR THAT WAS

Brimbank Weekly–26th December 2011

<http://www.brimbankweekly.com.au/news/local/news/general/2011-our-year-that-was/2394346.aspx>

Ben Millar and Anthony Loncaric recap some of the major issues in Brimbank during 2011.

Some familiar stories continued around Brimbank in 2011. Residents again led the state in poker machine losses, pouring \$140 million into pub and club coffers.

A number of popular programs faced the axe, including VCAL coordinators in schools, the Take-a-Break occasional childcare program and library funding. Only library funding has been saved to date but campaigners still hold hope for the other programs.

St Albans was hit by two tragedies that reverberated throughout the community.

When 15-year-old Cairnlea schoolgirl Teresa Ho was killed by a train as she crossed the tracks at Ginifer station in October, her friends and family were left mourning another needless death.

The fatality reignited calls for the removal of dangerous railway crossings across the area.

The state government has promised to remove the Main Road crossing in St Albans town centre, but no money has yet been committed to the project and the Furlong Road crossing has dropped off the priority list.

Teresa's death came soon after a four-year-old girl was killed in a dog attack in a St Albans home in August.

Grief-stricken mother Jackline Anchito had tried to rescue her daughter Ayen Chol as she was mauled by a pit bull cross after it had already attacked her five-year-old niece.

The family had recently lost their home and possessions in a fire.

Parliament was quick to respond and the incident was the catalyst for a raft of new laws designed to make owners responsible for the actions of dangerous pets.

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An amnesty on the registration of dangerous and restricted breed dogs was brought forward and new powers granted to council to assist in their control.

Big changes in St Albans and Sunshine town centres began in 2011.

A public art project is the first small step for reinvigorating St Albans.

The multi-million dollar development of Hampshire Square is well underway and looks like reshaping Sunshine as we know it.

On the political front Brimbank ends 2011 where it began - residents in the dark as to whether they will be able to vote in local government elections next October.

The Weekly revealed a number of former councillors are keen to recontest a future election, but community groups are divided over whether the area is ready for a return to democracy.

The North West's many culturally diverse communities came together as one in winter to block a Brimbank Council proposal to sell off 14 public spaces. Council deemed the sites surplus to its needs and argued all money raised from the sale of the blocks would be channelled directly into its expanded parks program. But hundreds of angry residents banded together to prevent the sale so that the spaces would stay in public hands.

Many of the spaces are used by residents for recreational purposes and they feared the sales would create safety issues for hundreds of children who walk through them to get to and from school to avoid busy roads.

Residents staged meetings in protest of the proposal and about 50 people stormed out of a council meeting on July 19, frustrated at not being allowed to table questions. Relief finally came when the council's administrators told a meeting in mid-August they would no longer consider offloading 12 of the 14 parcels of land

after receiving more than 700 submissions against the proposal. Council is still considering the sale of land in Trickey Avenue, Sydenham, and the former Kealba Preschool site on Driscolls Road.

Relief also finally came to parents and children who suffered much heartache after ICA College Melton was unexpectedly shut down in late 2010. Parents were left devastated when the Caroline Springs school was put up for sale after its parent company went into voluntary administration on November 1 last year. The school was reportedly sold to a faith-based organisation in December, but the deal fell through giving the parents a chance to step in. Although their efforts to lobby state and federal governments proved fruitless, they refused to give up and fought hard for months to secure funding to buy the college site.

A chance encounter between ICA Melton College Principal Andrew Ponsford and Executive Director of the Zig Inge Group, Peter Inge, led to the Zig Inge buying the ICA property on behalf of the parents in early May. The new school, Southern Cross Grammar, opened its doors on July 18.

Zig Inge will lease the property back to the parent group for no charge until the school gets on its feet. Southern Cross Grammar hopes to eventually buy back the property making it a 100 per cent community-owned school. The secular, independent school has retained the popular 'new generation learning model'. At the time of its opening it had 46 students, enrolled from prep to grade 5, but many pupils who left the school after it closed in 2010 are expected to return in 2012.

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SUNSHINE STATION'S PLATFORM OF CHANGE

Brimbank Leader—24th December 2011

<http://brimbank-leader.wherelive.com.au/news/story/sunshine-stations-platform-of-change/>

Sunshine's dingy and depressing railway station is set to undergo a major redevelopment as part of the Regional Rail Link project.

Basic photographs depicting the improvements were released last week, with public information displays also held at the station on Friday.

Rated by commuters in August as the fifth worst in Melbourne as part of the pt4me Better Stations Survey, the new station will include a new pedestrian overpass with a ramp, lift and stair access to platforms, ticket office and waiting area.

The station forecourt areas will also be given a makeover and the bus interchange will be reconfigured to create a "friendly new open space."

Public Transport Minister Terry Mulder said the new design addressed community safety concerns.

"Sunshine railway station was recently rated one of the worst in Melbourne, with passengers describing it as 'depressing', 'dingy' and 'rundown'," he said.

"This redevelopment will breathe new life into the area, complementing work already under way to revitalise the Sunshine town centre."

Consultation has already started with the Brimbank City Council, VicRoads and bus operators.

A contract is expected to be signed by early next year, and work is expected to start soon afterwards.

HUNDREDS AGITATE TO HELP BRIMBANK STRAYS

Brimbank Leader—23rd December 2011

<http://brimbank-leader.wherelive.com.au/news/story/hundreds-agitate-to-help-brimbank-strays/>

A local pet action group is urging Brimbank Council to take a tougher stance on responsible pet ownership.

The Pet Neighbourhood Watch action group submitted a petition to the council, tabled at a meeting last week with 687 signatures, requesting the council apply further animal management measures to prevent dogs wandering and crack down on stray cats.

Founder Liliana Iuri said the group had been working in the community for more than two years, but the number of stray cats was increasing.

She said the group was calling on the council to introduce subsidised de-sexing rates for pensioners.

"Residents are happy to feed stray cats but not to de-sex," she said.

"Cats reproduce very quickly, live in colonies and birth defects are quite prevalent due to inbreeding.

"They are also more vulnerable to human cruelty as well as falling prey to other wild animals, not to mention being run over by cars."

The council's City Development general manager Stephen Sully said cat issues were acknowledged as a problem across metropolitan Melbourne.

"Most of the cats we collect are feral," he said.

"We are always reminding pet owners to be responsible."

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Meanwhile, Nathan Miles from the Western Suburbs Animal Rescue Service said in a bizarre coincidence he had seen stray kittens and cats near the Keilor municipal offices following the council meeting at the Keilor Bowls Club last week.

The council will report its findings at its first ordinary meeting of 2012 in February.

MARIBRYNONG

FOOTSCRAY EMERGENCY WORKERS ON CALL

Maribyrnong Leader—29th December 2011

<http://maribyrnong-leader.wherelive.com.au/news/story/footscray-emergency-workers-on-call-fbready/>

Footscray emergency service workers were called in to clear the backlog of Christmas storm clean up jobs in neighbouring suburbs in Brimbank this week.

Maribyrnong received minimal damage with the SES receiving only seven call-outs for flooding or building damage compared to Brimbank where the SES received about 1400 calls for help.

Keilor and Taylors Lakes were hit the hardest with 278 and 519 calls logged.

But Footscray SES unit controller Ruby Haoucher said even once the current backlog of calls was cleared the clean-up would not be over.

She said the SES was expecting “a flurry of calls” in January after people returned from holidays.

Ms Haoucher said she had been deployed as a sector commander and one crew have been working in Brimbank each day this week.

She said two Footscray SES members were driving crews from NSW and South Australia around damaged suburbs.

With 95 per cent of the calls relating to building damage from tiles off roofs and ceilings caving in, Ms Haoucher said the main work involved “tarping roofs, providing plastic to residents, covering furniture (and) helping (people) move furniture to drier areas”.

She said the SES were also giving people who could not stay in their houses advice about where they could stay.

While some residents had been a bit anxious about when their house would be attended to, Ms Haoucher said most were being “very hospitable”.

“Whenever I’ve gone up to one of the houses to check on my crews the residents have given them food and (drink),” she said.

“They’re very thankful that we’re there.”

One Footscray SES crew was also deployed to assist in Whittlesea.

Important numbers and contact for assistance:

Emergencies: 000

SES: 132 500

The Insurance Council of Australia: 1800 734 621

Relief grants found at: dhs.vic.gov.au

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MIDWIVES PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT FOR WEST

Maribyrnong Leader– 24th December 2011

<http://maribyrnong-leader.whereilive.com.au/news/story/practice-makes-perfect-1/>

Midwives And Mothers Australia (MAMA), Victoria's first independent midwifery practice is marking a new era.

Midwives were declared eligible Medicare providers in November last year, meaning parents can claim rebates and subscriptions.

MAMA director Jan Ireland said the reform allowed her to open a private clinic in Kensington combining different elements of prenatal and postnatal services.

Ms Ireland said the process of employing a midwife was now more streamlined.

"One of the key benefits is a mother can go to one building and see a midwife, and have other matters attended to," Ms Ireland said.

The clinic's clients largely reside in Melbourne's east, but it is families from the west that MAMA wants to attract.

"The western corridor has the highest population of new babies in Victoria," Ms Ireland said.

"And we're very excited about that. Women living in those areas have not had access to private midwifery to the same extent as other areas of Melbourne."

SUDANESE CARES FOR HIS FOOTSCRAY FLOCK

Maribyrnong Leader– 24th December 2011

<http://maribyrnong-leader.whereilive.com.au/news/story/sudanese-cares-for-his-flock/>

Footscray's reverend Chaplain Soma Jackson is the first South Sudanese person to be inducted to lead a church in the Anglican diocese of Melbourne.

The vicar was inducted to lead the Anglican parish of Footscray, which includes the St John's and All Saints churches, on December 9, following the departure of the former vicar, Moira Evers, to St Albans Anglican church.

Mr Jackson is also associate chaplain at the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Mr Jackson - Father Jackson to his congregation - said he moved to Australia in 2003 after fleeing persecution in Sudan, where he was a lay minister for 14 years.

He said the Footscray parishioners came from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

"We welcome everyone," Mr Jackson said.

He said his role involved organising services, pastoral care, visiting parishioners, linking the church to the community, weddings, funerals, baptisms and confirmations.

While the new vicar enjoyed the work as "a gift that God has given me", he said it could be quite demanding and "sometimes it's a bit (stressful)".

Mr Jackson, now of St Albans, said his work involved a great deal of commitment and time and that he would soon move to Footscray.

Services at his Anglican churches over the holiday period include 9.30pm on Christmas Eve at All Saints in May St, North Footscray.

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On Christmas Day, St John's in Paisley St, Footscray, will have a 9.30am service, while All Saints will hold its service at 11am.

MISSION TO BRING CHEER TO 400 DISADVANTAGED

Maribyrnong Leader– 24th December 2011

<http://maribyrnong-leader.whereilive.com.au/news/story/mission-to-bring-cheer-to-400-disadvantaged/>

Prahran Mission is decking Malvern Hall in Christmas decorations ready for the annual Christmas Day lunch.

Sixty volunteers will don red aprons to serve guests a special lunch they might not usually get on Christmas Day.

Prahran Mission special event co-ordinator Sarah Condon said they already had 217 guests confirmed and hoped for 400.

Ms Condon, who is volunteering on the day, said she had put so much effort into the day she wouldn't miss it for the world.

Guests include people experiencing homelessness, poverty, mental illness or physical disability, as well as the elderly and those who will be on their own at Christmas.

Prahran Mission's catering team is preparing a three-course meal of butternut pumpkin soup and ham with summer vegetables and cranberry jus and plum pudding with brandy custard and cream.

Buddy England and the Vi Queens will perform on the day.

MELTON

FIREWORKS TO WELCOME 2012 AS NEW YEAR'S EVE SCORCHER TIPPED

Brimbank Leader–29th December 2011

<http://brimbank-leader.whereilive.com.au/news/story/fireworks-welcome-2012-heat-forecast/>

Melbourne's iconic New Years Eve fireworks display appears certain to go off with little trouble despite concerns about extreme heat.

Concerns had been raised about the display's viability because of expected total fire bans, with temperatures reaching 32 degrees on Saturday.

But Metropolitan Fire Brigade acting deputy chief officer David Bruce said the event should happen as planned.

"Our people, along with Melbourne City Council and the pyrotechnics team, are working together to ensure everything goes to plan," Mr Bruce said.

MFB spokesman David Jarwood said no permit applications had been lodged by Melbourne councils.

But he said the MFB would continue to work with Melbourne Council, along with any others that applied for permits up until New Years Eve.

"As long as the permits are being carried out and the proper risk assessments are done they will happen."

CFA deputy chief officer Alan Ellis warned residents who lit backyard fires or let off fireworks without authorisation would be caught.

"The main thing for us is any illegal fireworks," Mr Ellis said.

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"They're a concern not only from a fire point of view, but also from a public safety point of view."

Temperatures are expected to reach 36 degrees on January 1 and 2.

GIVE WAY ON PORT PHILLIP BAY

Brimbank Leader—29th December 2011

<http://brimbank-leader.whereilive.com.au/news/story/give-way-on-port-phillip-bay/>

Bay users who do not keep their distance from marine mammals will risk fines and having their vessels impounded.

As the holiday season gets into full swing this week, boaters and jetskiers in particular are warned to be on the lookout for dolphins, seals and whales.

Department of Sustainability and Environment spokeswoman Brigid Ennis said that this year two dolphins were killed in Port Phillip Bay by possible boat strikes and three people were bitten by seals.

"Last month, a seal bit a man while he was trying to return it to the water at Somers Beach," Ms Ennis said, noting that, even with the best of intentions, it was still illegal to approach wild marine animals.

DSE compliance manager Glenn Sharp said plain-clothes and uniformed enforcement officers would patrol the bays and beach to ensure animals were not put at risk.

"We are privileged to have marine mammals in our water," Mr Sharp said.

"People who approach a dolphin or seal at a distance closer than the law allows they will be penalised."

Recreational boaters must remain 100m away from dolphins and 200m from whales, while swimmers must not approach within 50m of a whale and 30m of a dolphin.

If a seal is on the beach, you must keep a distance of 30m.

High-impact vehicles, such as jetskis, must remain 300m away from the mammals.

Meanwhile, swimmers and boaters will benefit from reforms to boating and swimming zones across Port Phillip Bay and Western Port.

Parks Victoria maritime manager Wayne Hill said the zones would be marked with either piles or buoys installed in some areas in coming weeks and all bay users should ensure they were familiar with the laws.

"The three principal zones are swimming only, boating only and shared zones," he said.

HILLS' STAR ATTRACTION RESTORED

Melton Leader—27th December 2011

<http://melton-leader.whereilive.com.au/news/story/hills-star-attraction//>

Monash University's historic astronomical observatory will become a community resource for stargazers in the hills.

The observatory, at Mt Burnett near Cockatoo, will re-open next year thanks to the efforts of passionate astronomy supporters.

The observatory was built in 1972 and used by students at Monash University until it was no longer needed.

Amateur astronomer James Murray said Monash University made the decision to close down the observatory this year because there was little use for an ageing telescope so far from its campuses.

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It was then that he, Ray Schmidt, and Astronomical Society of Victoria Council members Perry Vlahos, Barry Cleland and Ken Beard began a campaign to save the observatory, and give it a new life as a community resource.

The group signed a new lease on December 1, and its next goal is to raise money to refurbish the building and begin running viewing sessions next year.

“There is huge interest in astronomy locally but until now there has been nowhere for people to go,” Mr Murray said.

He said the having observatory in the Dandenongs was a great spot to view the stars, 300m above sea level and far from the city lights.

“It’s perfect, there’s nothing similar out this side of Melbourne at all,” Mr Murray said. “You would have to go into the planetarium to get that sort of experience.”

He hoped school children and scout groups would also use the observatory.

The observatory’s new home is at 430 Paternoster Rd in Mt Burnett.

Details: mtburnettobservatory.org or phone: 0409 703 929.

MOONEE VALLEY

FILL UP NOW, PETROL PRICES ARE SET TO JUMP

Moonee Valley Leader– 28th December 2011

<http://moonee-valley-leader.whereilive.com.au/news/story/fuel-prices-set-to-soar/>

Motorists are being warned to fill up before petrol prices skyrocket by as much as 17 cents.

Unleaded prices remained steady across Monash this morning hovering around \$1.30/L.

The cheapest petrol was reported in Chadstone and Mt Waverley, while prices rose slightly in Glen Waverley and Oakleigh, according to fuel watch website MotorMouth.

RACV vehicle engineering manager Michael Case said Monash fuel prices were on par with the rest of Melbourne, but some stations had already raised their price.

“It appears that about 15 per cent of stations across Melbourne have already raised prices to as high as \$1.47,” Mr Case said.

“Our advice would be to fill up today, or tomorrow at the latest, as the current petrol cycle should be about to end.”

Mr Case said prices could remain high until at least the New Year.

“It’s very hard to predict where petrol prices are heading,” he said.

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ESMART MEANS STUDENTS ALERT TO CYBER TRAPS

Brimbank Leader—27th December 2011

<http://brimbank-leader.wherelive.com.au/news/story/esmart-means-alert-to-traps/>

A new program is helping our schools teach students that stranger danger extends online.

Albany Rise Primary School in Mulgrave is one of the first schools in Victoria to take up the State Government's eSmart anti-cyber bullying program, which teaches students about internet safety.

School co-ordinator Angela Maltezos said the program provided guidelines on how to teach children to behave safely online.

"We will be teaching them things like on social media not to make friends with people unless they have physically met them," Miss Maltezos said.

"Not putting personal information online and making their passwords safe. And that when it says, 'You're the 1,000,000th visitor and you have won \$1 million', don't click it."

The State Government's \$10.5 million program was created by the Alannah and Madeline Foundation. So far, 290 Victorian state schools and 108 Catholic and independent schools have registered for the program.

Miss Maltezos said her school would use its \$2000 grant for teacher training and holding parent information sessions.

"It's more getting the community involved, rather than us teaching the kids what to do," Miss Maltezos said.

"It's not just the school's responsibility, it's the community's responsibility."

BOXING DAY TEST: SPECTATORS WARNED TO BEHAVE AFTERWARDS

Moonee Valley Leader—25th December 2011

<http://moonee-valley-leader.wherelive.com.au/news/story/boxing-day-test-spectators-warned-to-behave-afterwards/>

Police have warned loutish cricket fans that they will swarm the area around the MCG on Boxing Day and adopt a zero tolerance approach to drunken behaviour to prevent trouble.

Operation Patrol will focus on responsible service of alcohol at Richmond's most popular venues from 4pm to midnight from December 26 – 28.

A large brawler van will patrol the area to keep an eye on rowdy fans on the streets and Transit Police will man the Richmond Railway Station.

Richmond police Sen-Sgt Ciaran Boyle said the three day operation would ensure Richmond residents, traders and visitors could enjoy themselves over the festive season.

"The police, local hotel management and council are working together to maintain a safe and orderly environment," Sen-Sgt Boyle said.

"We want people to enjoy themselves, but also be aware that unacceptable behaviour will not be tolerated"

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WYNDHAM

REMINDER TO RECYCLE DURING SILLY SEASON

Brimbank Leader–29th December 2011

<http://brimbank-leader.wherelive.com.au/news/story/reminder-to-recycle-during-silly-season/>

Environment groups are urging the public to remain vigilant about their recycling habits during the festive season.

Environment advocacy organisation Planet Ark has launched The 12 Dos of Christmas, a page including tips on how to celebrate the festive season while recycling.

Head of campaigns Brad Gray encouraged the community to be mindful of the environment while enjoying the silly season.

“We started the program because Christmas tends to be the time of year when Australians eat more, drink more and buy more during the year,” Mr Gray said.

“We want people to keep up their recycling habits over Christmas and the new year, so that we’re not undoing all the good work that’s been done during the year.

“Our advice is to make use of unwanted gifts - if you don’t like your presents, donate them to charity or return them to the store so that they don’t go to waste.”

CHRISTMAS DAY STORM AID HELPLINE ESTABLISHED

Wyndham Leader– 29th December 2011

<http://wyndham-leader.wherelive.com.au/news/story/christmas-day-storm-aid-helpline-established/>

A storm damage hotline has been set up for hard hit residents of the northern and western suburbs.

While there have only been a trickle of residents seeking emergency relief payments from the government, insurers have been swamped with claims.

Community Services Minister Mary Wooldridge said today that the hotline would help those affected by the Christmas Day storms to apply for emergency relief payments.

“By last night we had issued 29 Emergency Relief Assistance payments, and we’re processing 21 applications for Emergency Re-establishment Assistance ” Ms Wooldridge said, noting she expected applications to increase in coming days.

While households have been slow to seek government assistance, the Insurance Council of Australia (ICA) has declared the storms as catastrophic, with more than 15,000 claims lodged.

ICA chief executive Rob Whelan said it was too early to estimate the damage bill.

““Since Christmas Day, insurance companies have received more than 15,000 claims, including about 11,000 on December 27 and 28 alone,” he said.

“We expect this will grow as many Victorians return from their holidays to discover their properties and vehicles have been damaged.”

The State Government is offering emergency relief payments of \$480 per adult and \$240 per child, up to maximum of \$1200 per household for emergency shelter, food and clothing.

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There are also Emergency Re-establishment Assistance payments of up to \$30,000 to eligible households which provides money for clean up, rebuilding and replacing some damaged contents.

The State Government hotline is: 1800 990 660

Information about grants is also available online at dhs.vic.gov.au

The Insurance Council has also established an information line for people unsure of which insurer they are with or those with general questions: 1800 734 621

PATRIOTISM UNFURLED IN WYNDHAM

Wyndham Leader– 24th December 2011

<http://wyndham-leader.wherelive.com.au/news/story/patriotism-unfurled-in-wyndham/>

Werribee South's foreshore again will be the setting for local Australia Day celebrations.

The day of national pride is on Thursday, January 26, next year.

Wyndham Council is planning fireworks, a sausage sizzle, live music, children's games and an appearance by marathon runner and Australia Day ambassador Steve Moneghetti.

More than 3000 people came together on the foreshore in fine weather last Australia Day.

The foreshore was first used for Australia Day celebrations in 2010, when more than 2000 people attended.

Mayor Kim McAliney said it was the perfect setting.

"What better way to spend a public holiday in summer than with a picnic basket and a deck chair on the sand watching the fireworks," she said.

"I encourage residents and their families to come along to this event and enjoy the sand, a sausage and hopefully some sunshine."

This year's celebrations will kick off at 6pm. Car parking will be at Price Reserve, off Duncans Rd.

Also on the public holiday, Tarneit Community Learning Centre will celebrate with a sausage sizzle, face painting, art and craft workshops, jumping castle and performances by community groups, from 11am-3pm.

The centre is on Sunset Views Blvd.

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ACROSS THE REGION

POWER SHIFT SEES MINISTER LOSE KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

The Age—30th December 2011

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/power-shift-sees-minister-lose-key-responsibilities-20111229-1peab.html>

Victorian Environment Minister Ryan Smith has lost several key responsibilities involving logging and hunting, capping off a tumultuous year for the Liberal MP.

Premier Ted Baillieu's decision just before Christmas means Nationals deputy leader and Agriculture Minister Peter Walsh takes greater control of the areas.

Labor environment spokeswoman Lisa Neville labelled it a "demotion by stealth" and said it showed the government cared little for the environment. "This is clear evidence the National Party are running environmental policy in Victoria," she said.

The move was detailed in an order made by Mr Baillieu two weeks ago and discreetly uploaded to the Department of Premier and Cabinet website.

While Mr Smith and Mr Walsh previously shared several areas of responsibility, the order reveals some of these will now be overseen solely by the National MP.

The changes will give Mr Walsh more say in the regulation of Victoria's controversial native forestry industry, including keeping protesters out of certain logging sites.

It also gives him more influence over hunting policy.

This week Mr Walsh launched the biggest duck and quail hunting season in over a decade, allowing hunters to shoot 10 birds a day for 87 days starting on March 17, as he announced the creation of Game Victoria to oversee hunting in the state.

Mr Smith's year has been dogged by controversy, starting with the reintroduction of cattle grazing into the Alpine National Park.

That move was later halted by the federal government.

He faced bitter criticism for signalling a possible reduction in Victoria's target of a 20 per cent cut in greenhouse gas emissions this decade, and last month it emerged that he owned shares in a solar panel company that received a \$50 million government grant.

Ms Neville said: "Victorians knew that the environment was not a priority for Ted Baillieu when he failed to take an environment policy to the last election, and the removal of these powers from the Minister for Environment ... to the Minister for Agriculture is the latest sign."

A government spokesman said the move fulfilled a pre-election commitment, but declined to provide further information.

The power shift to Mr Walsh came in the same month as he moved to guarantee the long-term future of Victoria's timber industry, fulfilling a Coalition election commitment.

Under a new forestry plan, the government-owned commercial timber agency VicForests takes responsibility for determining the amount of timber to be harvested and when and where it is logged.

A host of promised changes includes a decision that new native timber contracts for forestry companies will last 20 years, up from the current five-year maximum, and a review of timber legislation.

The government will also indemnify VicForests if a contract is broken due to future changes in policy.

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The Wilderness Society's Luke Chamberlain said the decision to take power from the Environment Minister showed the Baillieu government saw forests only for loggers.

"This government is doing anything to back what is a dying industry, and when we have got a biodiversity crisis in a time of climate change, our forests need more protection, not handled like a wood crop," Mr Chamberlain said.

POLICE WANT GPS DEVICES TO KEEP TRACK OF HOONS

The Age—30th December 2011

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/police-want-gps-devices-to-keep-track-of-hoons-20111229-1pedb.html>

Police will apply for state government funding to have all their cars fitted with GPS technology that can track every move during pursuits.

Deputy Commissioner Kieran Walshe announced the move yesterday after two high-speed chases that ended in crashes, one involving an armed man in a stolen car and the other an alleged drink-driver.

At Chelsea Heights, a man aged between 20 and 30 left behind a shotgun after the stolen Holden he was driving became airborne during a pursuit and somersaulted at a funeral parlour.

On Wednesday night, an 89-year-old woman narrowly escaped injury when a car driven by a 36-year-old man, who allegedly returned a blood-alcohol reading of .16, crashed into an Altona North house after a police chase.

The Deputy Commissioner was confident that police involved in both chases had acted appropriately, but the Ethical Standards Department will investigate.

Mr Walshe said mobile data terminals, which are installed in about 700 of the 2400-strong police fleet, would eventually be placed in all vehicles if police received government funding.

The terminals are in vehicles ranging from vans to patrol cars based in the metropolitan area and larger regional centres.

A police spokeswoman said officers could access registration and criminal history data on the terminals, meaning they did not have to radio the control centre for information.

She also said data on the location of police cars could be taken from the GPS in the terminals.

Such data was recently given as evidence in the Coroners Court inquiry into the 2008 death of Shane Bennett, who died after a collision during a police pursuit. It showed the police involved were travelling significantly faster than they had admitted.

Mr Walshe said police had been involved in more than 600 pursuits in 2010, with most being abandoned.

He said hoons were increasingly taunting officers to chase them, aware that police must call off pursuits that endanger lives.

"The vast number of pursuits our members get involved in, they do make the right call," Mr Walshe said.

Police are still searching for the man involved in the Chelsea Heights crash. He suffered "significant" arm and head injuries, but evaded police after a scuffle in which he was sprayed with capsicum. The car was travelling at 120km/h in a 60km/h zone before it crashed.

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Local hospitals and doctors are being asked whether they have seen the man, who police believe may be injured.

The man who crashed in Altona North had his licence suspended immediately and is expected to be charged on summons with several offences, including conduct endangering persons and evading police.

WHAT LIES BENEATH

The Age—30th December 2011

<http://www.theage.com.au/travel/what-lies-beneath-20111229-1pe0x.html>

Luminous creatures dart between corals and multicoloured sea plants reach upwards through the deepest of blues. No, it's not the Great Barrier Reef but the rarely seen depths of Port Phillip Bay. As summer lures Melburnians to the city's often-maligned beaches, the bay's heritage is seen anew.

SHEREE Marris sits on a rock at Williamstown and looks out over the bay. Her wetsuit is heating up in the sunshine, her mask and snorkel are primed for action, and her fins are ready to clip on. We are about to enter the waters of Port Phillip Bay to explore Jawbone Marine Sanctuary, one of many bayside underwater worlds Marris frequently visits — places most people haven't even heard of, much less seen. To her, a visit to the bay means being in its depths, the flipside of what most of us experience.

The cliché that Melbourne and its residents turn their backs on the bay is no less truthful than that other hackneyed statement: that Port Phillip Bay sure ain't Sydney Harbour.

That voluptuous body of water, with its gracious limbs, bosomy rises of land and charming ferries and watercraft, simply can't be compared with its plain and tight-mouthed southern cousin.

As with all clichés, though, there's much more nuance at play when you start investigating — and the bay is well worth looking at.

Port Phillip Bay, known by that name for less than 180 years, is not the sort of place to boast brassily of its charms, which are subtle. Spectacular beaches, towering promontories and majestic views are hardly abundant around its 1900 square kilometres.

Yet it is not just a great, boring, grey puddle, as Marris, an aquatic scientist and 2002 young Australian of the year (environment), is about to reveal at Jawbone.

As we plunge into this lush sanctuary, nestled between the flaming plumes of the Altona Mobil refinery stacks and the glitzy faux-mansions of Williamstown's Rifle Range estate, a vibrant netherworld appears.

Within minutes, we've seen a sparsely spotted stingaree, followed during the next two hours by several schools of zebra fish, two tubby puffer fish, a smooth stingray and barbless fiddler rays, one of which Marris cradles in her hands. That's not to forget different coloured corals, fields of waving sea grass and drifts of bright-green sea lettuce, as well as white mangroves with exposed roots, various species of sea snail, a sea urchin and an array of starfish, including the enormous 11-armed seastar and the caramel-coloured biscuit star.

Marris' latest book, *Melbourne Down Under: The Jewels of Port Phillip Bay*, contains incredible images. When she showed these photos to potential sponsors or publishers, some scoffed. Even a few old salties refused to believe such creatures — tropical coloured nudibranchs, 25-centimetre seahorses or iridescent sea slugs — existed in the bay.

Surely, these pictures were taken somewhere much more exotic and equatorial, not in our bay. Some shots do look as if they were taken on the Great Barrier Reef,

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but all this beautiful flora and fauna was photographed, and can be found right under our noses or, more precisely, under our snorkels.

It is strange to think the bay hasn't always existed. In truth, it's only been there for a blip in geological time and the shore-dwelling indigenous inhabitants — the Wathaurung, Woiwurung and Bunurong, part of the Kulin nation — have cultural memories of when bay-area volcanoes erupted.

Those people may have been in the area for 40,000 years or more but the bay wasn't there 18,000 years ago during the Pleistocene ice age. Then, it was just a huge, frosty plain criss-crossed by mighty rivers, which eventually became the Yarra and the Maribyrnong.

About 8500 years ago, Port Phillip Bay as we know it began to form as sea levels rose. So much ice melted that 3000 years later the water level was two metres higher than now — there were lapping waves where Melbourne's central business district now sprawls.

Latest research suggests the bay may have dried up again because of a blockage at the Heads that was eventually breached about 1000 years ago, with the waters tumbling back in.

The tribal people watched it all and, as historian Gary Presland writes in *Aboriginal Melbourne: The Lost Land of the Kulin People* (1994), the tribes adapted slowly to the dramatic environmental changes. But nothing could prepare them for the rapid changes that followed European settlement, when the first explorers sailed through the Heads, bringing their lust for land, wealth, industry and colonisation.

As we stand on the beaches of Brighton, St Kilda or Altona, at the Heads, or the rise of Mount Eliza, or at the Docklands, it is hard to imagine the bay's physical

boundaries having once been so different or that we ought to be preparing for it to alter again.

Recent *New Scientist* and *Scientific American* reports have warned of huge rises in sea levels in the wake of global warming. *New Scientist* says studies of sea level and temperatures in the past million years suggest that a rise of only one degree in the global mean temperature could lead to a 20-metre rise in sea levels.

As cities such as San Francisco and New York develop policies to deal with the threat of inundation, glaciologists predict sea levels could rise by about one metre by 2100. In the long term, if the ice in Greenland and Antarctica melts, it could result in a 60-metre rise in sea levels, they say. Each metre that the sea-level rises is likely to result in between 50 and 100 metres of coastal land being inundated.

For now, Port Phillip Bay seems pretty much as it was when John Batman sailed in from Tasmania to buy the beautiful green grasslands from the local tribes. Migrants from Britain in the early 19th century would have experienced the same sights, too, if their ships were lucky enough to survive the perils of Bass Strait.

Rodney James, a senior curator at the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, is intimately acquainted with the bay. While researching a new show, *Sea of Dreams: the Lure of Port Phillip Bay*, James reflected on paintings that cast the bay in its true majesty.

There are summer-scented Ricketts Point and Sorrento paintings (1888-90) by Charles Conder, glorious Mentone views (1887-88) by Tom Roberts and works by Eugene von Guerard, Arthur Streeton, S. T. Gill and an especially atmospheric painting by Emma Minnie Boyd of the Esplanade from St Kilda Pier (1896).

James, who has spent most of his life on the peninsula, says when he lived on the surf side, he thought the bay "a little bit too still, that nothing happened there".

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Since moving to Safety Beach, near Dromana, he has revelled in what he describes as more a huge inland sea than a bay.

"When you live in proximity to the bay, and you see the nuances of it, it is a really interesting place that is constantly changing," he says.

"You can see the weather as it comes towards you and the aftermath of storms, where the sun pierces through rain-sodden clouds.

"You also get a feel, too, for how important it is as the gateway to Melbourne and Victoria. You see these huge tankers coming towards you, making a bee-line . . . and then they turn and go towards the channel back to the port.

"It is a place that has a lot of natural beauty . . . but also it is a working place, a place of industry."

As he researched the exhibition, he repeatedly found comparisons with Sydney Harbour — and many commentators had greater appreciation for the bay than he expected.

"Even in the 1880s, in *The Argus*, someone was writing comparing the two and saying we don't have the striking cliffs or the stunning colours but, in the end, there is a lovely familiarity that makes it our bay."

Diary entries by immigrants describe long, arduous voyages across the world, a frightening passage into the Heads, then elation when they approached the shore and saw the park-like appearance of the land and its rich flora and fauna.

For many new arrivals, emigration was both a hopeful experience and a heartbreaking one, director of the Mornington gallery, Jane Alexander, says. The bay was their first experience of a new life — the gateway to riches, especially during the gold rush. But these early immigrants were unlikely to see many of their

loved ones who stayed behind. Her own family history, she discovered, is full of such stories.

The Mornington exhibition records a wealth of history about the bay: its first known exploration in 1802; the short-lived settlement at Sorrento in 1803; the threat of invasion by world powers; the emergence of Melbourne from cultural backwater to economic and cultural powerhouse of newfound wealth; the massive deforestation and environmental changes that followed the new settlements; and, of course, the destructive effect on tribes that had lived undisturbed in the region for thousands of years.

More recent disturbances have included the dredging of the bay to deepen shipping channels, and the increasing pressure of pollution on the catchment area and marine life.

For Sheree Marris, these are pressing questions. She cares deeply about the bay and her new book is part of a wider campaign to protect this fragile environment. She will donate 15 per cent of profits to community groups to encourage marine conservation.

"About 85 per cent of marine life found here in the southern shores is found nowhere else in the world," Marris says. "Every time I go in the water, I see something different. I get so excited. It is my home away from home — the only place that I can relax and chill out and not think about anything.

"The funny thing is that [while growing up], I never knew exactly how awesome it was. I used to want to be a marine mammalogist, travel around the world and study whales and dolphins."

But during a study group tour for university, she turned over a rock and saw a brightly coloured, blue and yellow nudibranch.

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"I was blown away to find something so incredibly delicate and beautiful without having to go up to the north, and without even having to go snorkelling. Imagine what else I might see. It became, for me, about finding out what else we have on our front doorstep. I thought, 'I don't need to go to the Great Barrier Reef.' "

Marris is perfectly happy here in Port Phillip Bay — at home with its quietly revealed treasures.

THE HEART IS WHERE THE HOME IS

The Age—30th December 2011

<http://theage.domain.com.au/real-estate-news/the-heart-is-where-the-home-is-20111229-1pe9p.html>

A small pocket of 1950s real estate on a sharp bend of the Maribyrnong River is the state's most tightly held suburb.

Home owners in Essendon West stay in the ubiquitous weatherboard Californian bungalows that line the suburb's leafy streets on average nearly 19 years, according to property research group RP Data.

Analysis of "hold periods" - the length of time people live in a property before selling - for the year to November shows Essendon West residents prize residential longevity more than most.

Other Melbourne suburbs with long hold periods in 2011 were Vermont South, Coldstream, Fawkner and East Melbourne, all averaging 15 years.

RP Data researcher Cameron Kusher said people were living in their homes for longer because of rising house prices, stamp duty and other costs associated with selling.

Mr Kusher was "surprised" to see how long residents stayed in Fawkner.

"I probably would have expected places like Brighton to make the list," he said.

Over the past eight years, the average length of time home owners held on to their home has risen from 8.5 to more than 10 years, RP Data figures show.

Essendon West, 11 kilometres north of the CBD and between the Maribyrnong and the inner north's most exclusive suburb, Aberfeldie, was just a bare paddock when Frank and Beryl MacDonough moved into Diamond Street 44 years ago.

"We moved in on Christmas Eve 1967," Mr MacDonough recalls. "There were just two or three houses in the whole street with a dirt road.

"We had no sewerage. There was a 'pan' man instead, a nightman they were called in those days, who collected the pan once a week."

Real estate agent Brad Teal, who grew up in the neighbourhood, says the trend of staying put in the suburb began in the postwar period when the children of many families also settled in the area.

"Families who went to the local school, played together and stayed together," he said.

Mr Teal said that Essendon West was "a little bit of a hidden secret because everyone focuses on Essendon instead".

Over in East Melbourne, Nerida Samson, who moved there 40 years ago, intends to stay for the rest of her life.

"We have our bridge clubs, our tennis clubs, it's a community," she says.

"The drunks have moved out and it has become gentrified ... everyone seems to be of a same mind, they love the area, they don't want to move and will fight for it."

In regional Victoria, Lake Boga near Swan Hill and Kinglake about 50 kilometres north of Melbourne were also tightly held, between 17 and 15 years respectively.

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But Kinglake Historical Society member Barry Spencer says the devastating 2009 bushfires have changed the way many residents feel about their homes.

"Maybe we're now seeing people who have lived there a long time, who probably felt they couldn't sell 12 months ago directly following the fires, now moving somewhere else," Mr Spencer says.

Prime beachside locations in coastal areas are also tightly held.

Holiday home owners and locals in the hamlet of Smiths Beach on Phillip Island averaged 16 years.

Other seaside retreats such as the Mornington Peninsula's Balnarring Beach and East Gippsland's Mallacoota were not far behind.

"Smiths Beach has the best surf, a great feel and everyone knows each other," says local builder Stephen Demos.

"People guard their property very tightly."

RACV OPENS REPAIR CENTRE FOR CARS SMASHED BY HAIL

The Age—28th December 2011

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/racv-opens-repair-centre-for-cars-smashed-by-hail-20111227-1pbst.html>

Extensive hail damage to cars from the Christmas Day storms has forced the RACV to set up a makeshift repair centre to deal with demand.

The RACV has temporarily replaced its mobile repair service with a satellite warehouse in Sunshine, where a production line has been formed.

"The calls haven't stopped," RACV Auto Glass manager Ross Ginns said.

"We've taken bookings right up until next week and we're virtually booked out into the new year." Mr Ginns said the warehouse had repaired about 80 vehicles since

Christmas - more than double its normal rate - and another 80 were already booked in for coming days.

RACV drivers usually repair only about five vehicles each per day, because of travel time.

Mr Ginns said many customers had been in tears, with their holiday plans thrown into disarray because of the damage.

"We've seen some cars with roofs that have caved in," Mr Ginns said. "We've even seen people with bruises where they've gone out to try and save their car.

"There's a lot of people that have been caught out."

Mr Ginns said he had been forced to call staff back from their Christmas holidays.

Up to 11 workers manned the production line yesterday.

One witness to the damage was Taylors Lakes resident Michael Morcos, who was having Christmas lunch with his extended family when the storm hit the area.

The windows of 10 cars parked outside his home were smashed in as little as 10 minutes.

"It sounded like there was a train coming down the street," he said yesterday. "All of a sudden, these cricket ball-sized hailstones crashed straight into the cars.

"We had about 10 cars here and they were all damaged."

Mr Morcos said one car's rear windows sustained eight holes alone.

"We were just standing here watching the cars get smashed," he said.

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"You couldn't do anything about it, you didn't want to walk outside. If they were going through cars, we certainly weren't moving. Everyone had their little cry and we just went and had dessert."

FEW APPLICANTS FOR EMERGENCY FUNDS

The Age—28th December 2011

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/few-applicants-for-emergency-funds-20111227-1pbor.html>

The Baillieu government has made just seven payments under its relief assistance program to victims of the Christmas storm despite the SES attending 4000 callouts.

The limited response is fuelling concern that people are not aware the grants exist.

The catastrophic storm wreaked havoc on parts of Melbourne's outer west and north as hail tore through roofs and windows.

Under guidelines announced by Minister for Community Services Mary Wooldridge two weeks ago, any residents whose home is not habitable can receive emergency government grants of up to \$1200 to pay for shelter, food and clothing.

Department of Human Services spokesman Geoff Russell said the number may rise as more people return home to inspect damage. But he said the department was surprised that the number of claims so far was so low. "We are surprised given the reported property damage," he said.

"But most of the damage our officers are discovering is ... not the sort of stuff that has rendered properties uninhabitable.

"Although the damage is widespread, perhaps ... it's not as severe per household as we might imagine."

Taylor's Lakes residents who copped some of the worst storm damage after a tornado touched down there said they were not aware the grant existed.

Kosta Souhlas, whose home has been written off by insurers, said the storm had left him facing large costs for things like food after he was forced to throw out everything in his kitchen.

He said the grant would be helpful but the government needed to advertise it more widely.

Murray Morgan, who has water in several rooms of his home, said he had not been told about the grants when he attended an emergency meeting yesterday where Brimbank Council workers were present.

"It's not much good if you say 'look at this offer we had', but no one uses it because they didn't know about it," he said.

Mr Russell said the payment usually came in the form of a credit card immediately after departmental officers assessed the property damage.

He said anyone needing an assessment should organise it through their council.

Deputy Opposition Leader Rob Hulls said the government had failed to guide displaced people through the crisis.

"Obviously they've gone off and had Christmas celebrations and they're still recovering from the headache," he said.

"The fact is the families that have seen their Christmas blown away by this storm have been crying out for guidance and leadership from the Baillieu government but no one has heard a peep from them."

Late yesterday afternoon the government announced a second tier of grants, which are means-tested and provide up to \$30,000 for households facing large costs with tasks such as clean-up and emergency accommodation.

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A government spokesman said the grants had been promoted extensively and continued to be promoted in badly affected areas.

RAILPAGE AUSTRALIA™ FORUM INDEX -> INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Rail Page-28th December 2011

<http://www.railpage.com.au/f-t11365682-s0-0-asc.htm>

Tonymercury

Location: Botany NSW

A Lend Lease and Leighton Holdings joint venture will carry out \$505 million worth of rail work in Victoria.

The work includes the design and construction of about 25 kilometres of railway track and stations between Deer Park and West Werribee Junction, west of Melbourne.

It will be carried out by a 50-50 joint venture between Boulderstone, owned by Lend Lease, and Leighton Contractors.

Construction will commence in January and is due to be completed in 2014.

Work on the Regional Rail Link - Australia's largest public transport infrastructure project - will ramp-up in the New Year, following the selection of contractors to build its two longest sections as well as install the technology which will manage the flow of trains along this new line and provide 'real-time' information to those using it.

Gorton MP Brendan O'Connor - representing the Federal Government - and Victorian Public Transport Minister Terry Mulder today announced contracts worth more than \$1.6 billion have been awarded to:

Thiess, Balfour Beatty, Parsons Brinckerhoff and SKM, the consortium tasked with laying 7.5 kilometres of new track between Footscray and Deer Park as well as building a new station at West Footscray and upgrading the existing stations at Footscray, Sunshine and Tottenham.

Work is expected to start in early 2012.

Boulderstone/Leighton Joint Venture which will lay 25 kilometres of new track between Deer Park and West Werribee as well as build new stations at Wyndham Vale and Tarneit.

Work is expected to start in mid-2012.

UGL and Manidis Roberts, the consortium which from mid-2012 will install the fibre optics network that will support the train control systems, the signals along the corridor and provide information to the passengers waiting at the new and upgraded stations.

Mr O'Connor said after more than three years of planning work, community consultations and preconstruction activities, it's now full steam ahead on a project which will give Melbourne its first new major rail line in some 80 years.

"All up, the contracts awarded today will put over 500 Victorians - including more than 50 apprentices - to work laying 32.5 kilometres of new track, building three new stations, upgrading two existing stations and removing two level crossings," said Mr O'Connor.

"In partnership with Victoria, the Federal Labor Government is building the new, modern rail infrastructure that will make Melbourne as well as regional centres such Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo even better places to live, work and raise a family," said Mr O'Connor.

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“Without a doubt, the Regional Rail Link project ticks all the right boxes.

“And unlike our predecessors we recognise that the task of modernising and expanding the infrastructure within and between our major cities is too big for any one level of government. That’s why we have already allocated more to public transport projects, like Regional Rail Link, than all our predecessors since Federation combined.”

The Regional Rail Link project is being built with funding from by both the Federal and Victorian governments, with the former contributing \$3.2 billion.

Victorian Public Transport Minister Terry Mulder said once completed in early 2016, the new Regional Rail Link will remove major bottlenecks from the State’s public transport system by separating regional and metropolitan trains.

“With major construction activity now on track to progressively kick-off in the west from early 2012, this is without a doubt an exciting time,” said Mr Mulder.

“This multi-billion project will revitalise our State’s public transport system and in doing so, better connect our growing communities to each other as well as to jobs, education, recreation and other vital services.

“Footscray Station will be upgraded to a major regional interchange with new platforms and escalators. The new line will allow regional trains to run express from Footscray to Southern Cross Station.

“Regional commuters who currently experience lengthy delays waiting near North Melbourne will enjoy a faster, smoother journey into Southern Cross Station once the Regional Rail Link is completed.

“The Regional Rail link Authority will continue to proactively engage with stakeholders and communities to further develop project design solutions as construction progresses.”

Delivery of the Regional Rail Link project will involve a total of six major packages of work, with the remaining two contracts - Southern Cross Station to Footscray and at West Werribee Junction - expected to be awarded next year.

The contract for track and civil works from Southern Cross Station to Moonee Ponds Creek was awarded earlier this year to Activate, a joint venture between John Holland and Coleman Rail.

More information on the project can be found at: www.regionalraillink.vic.gov.au.

Media Contacts

For Mr Mulder - Larissa Garvin - 0427 669 628

Key Features of the Three Major Contracts

Footscray to Deer Park

The following works will be delivered by Thiess, Balfour Beatty, Parsons Brinckerhoff and SKM as well as Metro Trains Melbourne, V/Line and the Regional Rail Link Authority:

7.5 kilometres of new dedicated Regional Rail Link tracks from Footscray to Sunshine;

A new West Footscray station with a pedestrian overpass and ramps to provide cross-corridor access, and increased car parking;

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A significant upgrade to Footscray station, including new platforms, escalators, ramps (subject to heritage approval) to provide cross-corridor access, and a new station forecourt;

A significant upgrade to Sunshine station, including a new pedestrian overpass with ramps to provide cross-corridor access, new platforms and a new station forecourt;

Improvements to the entrance and forecourt at Tottenham station, and an upgraded car park on the north side of the station;

Removing two level crossings on Anderson Road, Sunshine; and

Improvement works to level crossings at Fitzgerald Road, Ardeer, and Mt Derrimut Road, Deer Park.

Deer Park to West of Werribee

The following works will be delivered by the Baulderstone/Leighton Joint Venture:

Approximately 25 kilometres of two new regional railway tracks from Deer Park to West Werribee Junction;

Two new stations at Wyndham Vale and Tarneit with ramp access to provide cross-corridor access, car parking and forecourts;

A full depth cutting through Manor Lakes, maintaining connectivity on both sides of Manor Lakes Boulevard;

No new level crossings with 12 road over rail bridges; and

Four new waterway crossings.

Train Control and Systems

The following works will be delivered by UGL and Manidis Roberts as well as Metro Trains Melbourne, V/Line and the Regional Rail Link Authority:

Modification to existing train control systems, the creation of a new train control system and a new generation computer based signalling system for the Regional Rail Link corridor;

Installation of approximately 45 kilometres of fibre optic cable to support the new train control systems; and

Installation of new passenger information systems to new stations and upgrade of existing systems at existing stations that are being modified by the project.

NEW RAIL LINK MOVES A STEP CLOSER

K Rock–28th December 2011

<http://krock.com.au/index.php/news/16086-new-rail-link-moves-a-step-closer>

Ted Baillieu Work on the Regional Rail Link will start in the New Year.

Over one-and-a-half-billion-dollars worth of contracts are now out, with Premier Ted Baillieu saying the project's especially important for Geelong:

SES REINFORCEMENTS ARRIVE IN VIC

Weekly Times Now–27th December 2011

http://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/article/2011/12/27/424055_latest-news.html

The SES has called in reinforcements from interstate to help clear the backlog of damage from the Christmas Day storms.

Emergency volunteers manning back-to-back shifts cleared about half of the 4000 requests for assistance yesterday, after Melburnians put aside traditional Boxing Day festivities to survey the damage, the Herald Sun reports.

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Twenty-five volunteers from South Australia will arrive this morning to lend a hand, followed by 30 NSW volunteers this afternoon.

SES spokesman Lachlan Quick said it could take up to three days for volunteers to get to all homes, depending on the complexity of the tasks.

The Brimbank Community Centre, in the city's north-west, has opened as a "one-stop shop" for residents, housing the Red Cross, Brimbank Council staff, SES volunteers and the Department of Housing.

Mr Quick said it appeared no one needed emergency accommodation so far, with many of the affected staying with family members.

"The resilience is pretty tough with this lot," he said.

THOUSANDS MOP UP AFTER HAIL BARRAGE INFLECTS HAVOC ON CHRISTMAS DAY

The Herald Sun—26th December 2011

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/more-news/hail-barrage-inflicts-holiday-havoc-on-christmas-day/story-fn7x8me2-1226230033794>

Insurance companies have been inundated with inquiries as householders mop up after wild weather that ripped through Melbourne on Christmas Day.



An estimated 300 to 400 State Emergency Service volunteers will be out in force for at least the next two days to clean up after yesterday's series of storms, which brought huge hailstones, torrential rain, flash flooding and even a tornado, prompting 3000 distress calls.

SES spokesman Lachlan Quick said 15 SES crews from western Victoria would be drafted in today to help with the clean-up in the north and northwest parts of the state.

"They're out getting allocated to jobs now and they'll be there at least another two days," Mr Quick said.

This morning an estimated 2000 requests for help remained outstanding.

The damage was caused by large hail which pelted the northwest and north-eastern suburbs. The areas of Taylors Lakes, Keilor, Eltham, Greensborough and Keilor Downs were the hardest hit.

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Mr Quick said the hail had punched holes in roofs, skylights and windows, leaving buildings more exposed to the ensuing round of storms.

"I'd anticipate the clean-up to take at least two days, if not longer, simply because of the sheer number of jobs and type of damage," he said.

Insurance Council of Australia CEO Rob Whelan said insurance companies had been inundated with calls, and had handled more than 1000 inquiries by noon on Boxing Day.

Mr Whelan said insurers would send assessors out to affected areas in the next few days to review the damage, but it would take several days to quantify its

Full impact, especially with more wild weather forecast and the potential for further damage.

"Many Victorians will be feeling the hangover from the Christmas storms for some time," he said. "Insurance losses could be in the tens of millions of dollars, though it's too early to be precise.

"We are aware more than 3000 properties have experienced damage, and some individual insurance companies have already received many hundreds of inquiries about damage to homes, businesses and vehicles."

Mr Whelan said many insurers were calling staff in from their holidays to cope with the large number of telephone inquiries, and he urged policyholders to remain patient as companies dealt with a backlog of calls.



Travel disruption

The Hurstbridge line has been closed, with Metro estimating that it won't be able to finish repairs until Wednesday at the earliest.

It is understood the flooding of Diamond Creek has damaged the tracks and forced the replacement of trains with buses between Hurstbridge and Macleod stations.

"We have started repairs, but they will not likely be finished until Wednesday," said Metro spokeswoman Leah Waymark.

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Commuters can expect to wait up to 45 minutes per bus, as Metro has issued replacement buses that will match today's train timetable.

Earlier today, Metro tweeted that that faulty signal equipment had forced the closure of the Upfield line. Metro has since repaired the problem and the line is now running normally.

Melbourne Airport spokeswoman Anna Gillett said there would be minor delays to some domestic flights this morning but that international departures were flying on time.

"People should check the Melbourne Airport website and their airline directly for the latest flight information," Ms Gillett said.

International and domestic flights were diverted to Sydney and many other flights grounded in Melbourne after multiple storm cells intensified yesterday afternoon.

Heaviest rainfall

Weather bureau senior forecaster Scott Williams said rainfall was heaviest at Greensborough, in the city's northeast, with 92mm.

Nearby Bundoora received 79mm, while the CBD had 35mm of rainfall.

He said thunderstorms were continuing east of Melbourne this morning with a risk of severe thunderstorms in the state's Far East this afternoon.

"Southeast NSW will see some monster storms this afternoon and this evening," Mr Williams said.

There were also reports of the tornado hitting several suburbs in Melbourne's northwest

"Sometimes the same storm could touch a tornado down in multiple places," Mr Williams said.

He said while wind damage was most prolific in the city's northwest, the north-eastern suburbs copped the brunt of hail and flash flooding.

The worst weather incident was a mini-tornado that hit Fiskville, 15km west of Bacchus Marsh.

Most calls to the SES were from Keilor Park, Keilor Downs and Taylors Lakes.

Parts of Eltham and Greensborough were hit more than once by wild weather.

Lightning hit the 3AW transmission tower, knocking out its analogue signal and putting it off air to most listeners.

Metro warned commuters to expect major train delays, with most lines disrupted, and advised passengers to defer non-essential travel.

The storm blacked out more than 5000 homes in Port Melbourne, Ballarat, Armadale, Toorak and South Melbourne as families sat down to Christmas dinner.

A family in Apollo Rd, Taylors Lakes, had nine cars damaged and roof tiles and outdoor lights broken when the storm hit about 3.30pm.

'It was like a roar' Robyn Sullivan said the hailstones had been almost as big as tennis balls.

"It was like a roar as it came through," she said. "I've never heard anything like it."

Jim Egan was at the house for Christmas lunch when his car was pelted with hailstones.

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"I had nine holes in the back window," he said. "One had come through the window, bounced around the car, and it was lodged between the console and the front windscreen."

A couple in Montmorency arrived home from Christmas lunch to find almost a metre of water running through their garage.

Michel Long said his Mercedes-Benz, caravan, bikes and other items were damaged.

"It's come in through the back of the garage from the next street and it's pushed the caravan through the door of the garage and there's debris everywhere ... the car has damage on the side of it where it's pushed a big cupboard out of the garage" Mr Long said.

"I estimate it's probably \$25-30,000 damage."

In Melbourne, the wild weather has now passed and the Bureau of Meteorology is predicting a morning shower and a maximum of 23 degrees for the start of the Boxing Day Test between Australia and India at the MCG.

MANIDIS ROBERTS WINS MAJOR MELBOURNE RAIL PROJECT

Manidis Roberts—26th December 2011

<http://www.manidisroberts.com.au/about-us/news/story/manidis-roberts-wins-major-melbourne-rail-project>

Manidis Roberts and alliance partner UGL have today been announced as a successful bidder for a major rail infrastructure project in Victoria.

The \$278 million alliance contract involves the design, construction and testing and commissioning of the project wide train control, signalling, information and communication technology and power supply for the Australian and Victorian Government's Regional Rail Link (RRL) project.

The project, which will become metropolitan Melbourne's first major new rail line in 80 years, will improve capacity and reliability across the network.

"Regional Rail Link is an important part of the Australian and Victorian government's plan to upgrade and improve rail services in Melbourne and we are excited to be part of this landmark project," said Manidis Roberts' Executive General Manager, Victoria, Meegan Sullivan.

"This is the only work package to span the length of the corridor and requires a number of technical, organisational and stakeholder interfaces to work together to deliver the project. Working closely with our project partners, Regional Rail Link Authority, MTM, and V/Line we are very much looking forward to successfully delivering this key public transport project."

Manidis Roberts will lead on all environment, sustainability and stakeholder communication issues, with a particular focus on integrating the works with other works packages and stakeholders – including operators, transport agencies, government departments, local councils and the public.

CONTRACTORS SELECTED FOR MAJOR REGIONAL RAIL LINK WORKS

URB Analyst—26th December 2011

<http://www.urbanalyst.com/in-the-news/victoria/923-contractors-selected-for-major-regional-rail-link-works.html>

Contracts worth more than \$1.6 billion have been awarded to three consortiums for works on Victoria's Regional Rail Link project, including the construction of its two longest sections of track.

The contracts were announced last week by Victorian Public Transport Minister Terry Mulder and Federal MP for Gorton, Brendan O'Connor, who said that work on the major project will ramp up in the New Year.

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A consortium comprising Thiess, Balfour Beatty, Parsons Brinckerhoff and SKM will lay 7.5 kilometres of new track between Footscray and Deer Park, construct a new station at West Footscray and upgrade the existing stations at Footscray, Sunshine and Tottenham. Work is expected to start in early 2012.

Boulderstone/Leighton Joint Venture will lay 25 kilometres of new track between Deer Park and West Werribee as well as build new stations at Wyndham Vale and Tarneit. Work is expected to start in mid-2012.

A consortium comprising UGL and Manidis Roberts will install the fibre optics network that will support the train control systems, the signals along the corridor and provide information to the passengers waiting at the new and upgraded stations.

Mr O'Connor said after more than three years of planning work, community consultations and pre-construction activities, it is now full steam ahead on a project which will give Melbourne its first new major rail line in some 80 years.

"All up, the contracts awarded today will put over 500 Victorians - including more than 50 apprentices - to work laying 32.5 kilometres of new track, building three new stations, upgrading two existing stations and removing two level crossings," said Mr O'Connor.

"In partnership with Victoria, the Federal Labor Government is building the new, modern rail infrastructure that will make Melbourne as well as regional centres such Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo even better places to live, work and raise a family."

Victorian Public Transport Minister Terry Mulder said once completed in early 2016, the new Regional Rail Link will remove major bottlenecks from the state's

public transport system by separating regional [Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo] and metropolitan trains.

"With major construction activity now on track to progressively kick-off in the west from early 2012, this is without a doubt an exciting time," said Mr Mulder.

The Regional Rail Link is a jointly funded project, with the Federal Government contributing \$3.225 billion and the balance coming from the Victorian Government.

The Regional Rail Link project involves a total of six major packages of work. The remaining two contracts, Southern Cross Station to Footscray and at West Werribee Junction, are expected to be awarded next year.

The contract for track and civil works from Southern Cross Station to Moonee Ponds Creek was awarded earlier this year to Activate, a joint venture between John Holland and Coleman Rail.

REGIONAL RAIL LINK

Power 103.1 FM – 22nd December 2011

<http://www.powerfm.com.au/ballarat/index.php/news/14936-regional-rail-link>

It's all aboard Victoria's regional rail link as nearly a dozen companies are splashed with \$1.6 billion in government contracts to get the project rolling.

Victorian Premier TED BAILLIEU announced has half of the six needed contract packages, saying the work is under contract and under way.

The Victorian rail link is considered to be Australia's largest public transport project, with several new stations planned and more than 30 kilometres of new track, to be completed in early 2016.

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The link means major regional trains will get their own dedicated lines so that services from Bendigo and Ballarat will no longer be held up behind city trains.

REGIONAL RAIL LINK

3BA–22nd December 2011

<http://www.3ba.com.au/index.php/news/15096-regional-rail-link>

It's all aboard Victoria's regional rail link as nearly a dozen companies are splashed with \$1.6 billion in government contracts to get the project rolling.

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VICTORIA AWARDS \$1.6-BILLION RAIL CONTRACTS TO 3 BIDDERS

International Business Times– 22nd December 2011

<http://au.ibtimes.com/articles/271213/20111222/victoria-awards-1-6-billion-rail-contracts.htm>

The Regional Rail Link Authority of Victoria announced on Thursday the award of \$1.6-billion rail contracts to three bidders. The Leighton Group, Lend Lease and UGL won the bid to build a part of the \$5.3-billion Regional Rail Link project.

Leighton and its joint venture partner, Baulderstone, which is a part of Lend Lease's infrastructure business in Australia, will build the part from West Werribee to Deer Park. Their contract, worth \$835 million, aims to separate regional trains from metropolitan trains for the first time.

With this project, the Geelong, Bendigo and Ballarat trains will have their own tracks.

Thiess, a subsidiary of Leighton, will work on the Footscray to Deer Section of the rail project. Thiess is a JV with Balfour Beatty, a global contractor, and design partners Parsons Brinckerhoff,

"We have worked closely with our partners through the selection process to develop a programme of works that addresses engineering challenges and community expectations," Thiess General Manager Rod Heale was quoted by The Australian.

The \$505-million section from Werribee to Deer Park, which will connect the latter to western suburbs in Melbourne and the Southern Cross station, will include the construction of new broad-gauge double railway tracks for trains with a speed of 160 kilometres per hour and new stations at Tarneit and Wyndham Vale.

Design work on the 25-kilometre section will start in January 2012 and is scheduled to be finished by 2014.

UGL won the \$278-million contract to provide train control, signalling, telecommunications and passenger information systems.

Meanwhile, miner Rio Tinto entered into a 10-year contract with ports and rail operator Asciano to haul 8 million tonnes of coal yearly in central Queensland.

The contract, which begins on Nov 2013 and is in addition to current haulage deals between Asciano and Rio Tinto, would cover coal sourced from Rio's Hail Creek and Kestrel coal mines bound for the Dalrymple Bay coal terminal near Mackay.

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MELBOURNE REGIONAL RAIL LINK RAIL CONTRACTS AWARDED

Railway Gazette– 22nd December 2011

<http://www.railwaygazette.com/nc/news/single-view/view/melbourne-regional-rail-link-rail-contracts-awarded.html>

Australia: Contracts for construction of the Regional Rail Link project in Melbourne with a total value of more than A\$1.6bn were announced on December 21.

Scheduled for completion by 2016, the Regional Rail Link will provide dedicated tracks for long-distance regional passenger services, which will be separated from suburban services to increase capacity and reliability.

A new pair of tracks dedicated to regional trains is being laid between Southern Cross Station and Sunshine, largely within the existing rail corridor. Existing tracks will then be used as far as Deer Park. A consortium of Thiess, Balfour Beatty, Parsons Brinckerhoff and SKM has been awarded the A\$835m contract covering works on the 7.5 km section along the existing corridor between Footscray and Deer Park, a new station at West Footscray and upgrading the existing stations at Footscray, Sunshine and Tottenham.

From Deer Park a new 25 km double-track line will be built by a joint venture of Boulderstone and Leighton, with two stations serving the growing western suburbs of Tarneit and Wyndham Vale. The route will then join the existing Geelong line at West Werribee Junction.

UGL and Manidis Roberts will install the signalling and information systems.

A contract covering track and civil works from Southern Cross to Moonee Ponds Creek had previously been awarded to the Activate joint venture of John Holland and Coleman Rail, while the remaining two contracts covering Southern Cross Station to Footscray and works at West Werribee Junction are to be awarded early in 2012.

Major works are expected to get underway in early 2012. The project is being jointly funded by the national and Victorian governments, with the federal government contributing A\$3.2bn.

SKM ALLIANCE AWARDED VICTORIAN REGIONAL RAIL LINK CONTRACT

Sinclair Knight Merz– 22nd December 2011

<http://www.skmconsulting.com/Knowledge-and-Insights/News/2011/SKM--Awarded-Victorian-Regional-Rail-Link-Alliance.aspx>

Sinclair Knight Merz (SKM), is a member of an alliance team that has been awarded an \$835 million contract for works on the Footscray to Deer Park section of Regional Rail Link Project, jointly funded by the Australian and Victorian governments.

In an Alliance with construction partners Thiess and Balfour Beatty and design partner Parsons Brinckerhoff, SKM will join with the Regional Rail Link Authority, Metro Trains Melbourne (MTM) and V/Line to design and construct a key section of the first major new rail line for metropolitan Melbourne in 80 years.

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Considered a critical component of Melbourne's rail network, the Regional Rail Link will separate regional trains from metropolitan trains for the first time giving Geelong, Bendigo and Ballarat trains their own dedicated tracks - increasing capacity and reliability.

SKM's General Manager Buildings and Infrastructure, Dr Michael Shirley, said the company was ideally placed to deliver the project which will provide improved connectivity and greater flexibility for the community.

"We are excited about the opportunity in this historic investment in Victorian rail which will bring significant benefits to the western suburbs and to regional Victorian communities both socially and economically," he said.

Key features of the Footscray to Deer Park section include:

- Construction of 7.5 kilometres of new regional track
- New rail bridges
- Two road / rail separations at level crossings on Anderson Road, Sunshine
- New station at West Footscray featuring a pedestrian overpass and increased car parking
- Station upgrades at Footscray and Sunshine, including new platforms and new station forecourts
- Improvements to Tottenham station, including additional car parking
- Design and construction of train control systems (TCS) for the metropolitan lines
- Improvement works to level crossings at Fitzgerald Road, Ardeer and Mt Derrimut Road, Deer Park.

SKM Regional Manager for South East Australia, Angus Mitchell, said the alliance delivery model would provide the client with an optimal solution drawing on the skills and expertise of local and worldwide rail specialists.

"We have worked closely with our Alliance partners through the selection process to develop a program of works that addresses engineering challenges, community expectations and that will be experienced on a complex project like this," he said.

"We are confident that our team has the right skills, experience and innovative thinking to successfully deliver the project, while minimising disruption to rail services and ensuring the safety of everybody."

The team has already commenced mobilisation with major works between Hopkins Street, Footscray and Anderson Road, Sunshine expected to commence in early 2012.

BAULDERSTONE JV SIGNS CONTRACT TO DELIVER MAJOR REGIONAL RAIL LINK WORK PACKAGE

Boulderstone – 22nd December 2011

<http://www.boulderstone.com.au/index.php?page=press-releases&id=175&name=Boulderstone+JV+signs+contract+to+deliver+major+Regional+Rail+Link+work+package>

A Boulderstone Joint Venture has been awarded a major contract as part of the Victorian Government's highly-anticipated Regional Rail Link Project. Valued at \$505 million, the project is a significant addition to Boulderstone's portfolio of major Victorian projects.

The project, which is a 50/50 joint venture with Leighton Contractors, involves the design and construction of approximately 25 kilometres of double railway track between Deer Park and West Werribee Junction in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

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This work package is a critical part of the broader Regional Rail Link Project, which will see up to 50 kilometres of new track built along the existing rail corridor through suburbs including Sunshine and Footscray to Southern Cross Station. The project will improve capacity on the Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo lines as well as on metropolitan services from Werribee, Sydenham and Craigieburn.

Boulderstone General Manager Pat Cashin explained the project represents a critical piece of infrastructure for Melbourne's continued growth.

"We are delighted that the Boulderstone joint venture has completed contract negotiations for this flagship project for the Victorian Government.

"The Regional Rail Link Project represents the single largest rail investment in the State's history and will provide significant benefits to the people of Melbourne. This work package is well-suited to Boulderstone's core project management and civil engineering skills and further strengthens our reputation as one of Victoria's leading engineering contractors.

"At Boulderstone, we pride ourselves on our ability to deliver complex, time-critical projects within budget, whilst maintaining our absolute commitment to safety. We look forward to a successful partnership with the Victorian Government and Leighton Contractors," Mr Cashin added.

Design work will commence in January 2012.

ENCOURAGING NEWS ON REGIONAL RAIL SERVICE INVESTMENT

The Courier – 22nd December 2011

<http://www.thecourier.com.au/news/local/news/opinion/encouraging-news-on-regional-rail-service-investment/2402255.aspx>

Ballarat travellers will be encouraged by the latest announcement regarding the Regional Rail Link project this week.

Premier Ted Baillieu officially kicked off work on the project, announcing \$1.6 billion in government contracts to 11 companies which will complete the three major sections.

The new link is considered to be Australia's largest public transport project, with several new stations planned – including at Tarneit, Wyndham Vale and West Footscray – and more than 30km of new track.

Its goal is to provide a direct link for passengers travelling from Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong into Southern Cross Station.

The lack of such dedicated lines has long been an annoyance for people in regional areas who were promised significantly improved travel times under the former state government's fast rail project.

Unfortunately, those goals – including a one hour direct service between Ballarat and Melbourne – were never achieved.

Notwithstanding this fact, the benefits of the fast rail project have been widely heralded. New trains and more frequent services have encouraged travellers, with the Ballarat line continuing to break patronage records. The Regional Rail Link project will solidify those gains.

Inherent problems will remain. Earlier this year The Courier published an online petition, which garnered several hundred responses from travellers wanting V/Line

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to reinstate peak hour express services. Sadly, it has not and train time travel has increased because of these changes.

A lack of dual lines on much of the Ballarat route also continue to cause delays. This is neither good for tourism nor commuters. All this said, the most frustrating issue has been the slowdown experienced once V/Line services hit the metropolitan area.

Central to the issue is the tracks near North Melbourne station. According to the detail released this week, V/Line trains will no longer stop at North Melbourne, creating angst for some commuters who currently use it to catch metropolitan loop trains or who do not work in Melbourne's CBD.

The reality is that many of the problems we talk about cannot be solved in one foul swoop. The cost of redeveloping or renewing rail infrastructure is highly prohibitive and time consuming.

The investment in the regional rail link project will deliver time savings, and above all else, this is the best selling point there can be to increase tourism to Ballarat and to provide a more attractive option for people to take up residence in our city.

UGL WINS \$176M OF VIC RAIL WORK

Financial Review— 21st December 2011

http://afr.com/p/home/ugl_wins_of_vic_rail_work_IWOUXL2dh5rsvBEuBVfHHK

Engineering firm UGL has secured \$176 million worth of work with Victoria's Regional Rail Link Authority.

UGL will provide train control, signalling, telecommunications and passenger information systems throughout the regional rail link system until late 2015.

The regional rail link is a new rail line separating regional trains from metropolitan trains.

The total value of the contract is approximately \$278 million, of which UGL's share of revenue is anticipated to be approximately \$176 million.

V/LINE'S \$6M PUSH FOR 24 EXTRA GEELONG SERVICES EACH WEEKDAY

Geelong Advertiser— 20th December 2011

http://www.geelongadvertiser.com.au/article/2011/12/20/298691_news_pf.html

V/LINE has tabled a bold \$6 million plan to dramatically improve train travel between Geelong and Melbourne.

The rail carrier wants to run three trains an hour during off-peak periods and has briefed City Hall on the scheme. .

The plan would introduce about 24 extra services between 9am and 4.30pm on weekdays.

It would be a boon for commuters with off-peak services currently running only at hourly intervals between Geelong and Melbourne.

Public Transport Users' Group Geelong convenor Paul Westcott yesterday said the move would be "revolutionary".

Mr Westcott said if off-peak passengers missed a train, it would only mean a 20-minute wait until the next one, whereas if it was an hour wait they would probably jump in their car.

You're Say

"Peak service is crap, you can't even get a train from a major station like Lara in the morning every 20 minutes, not to mention a seat. Let's fix the current set of issues before we create new issues. "

John

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"It was V/Line that actually generated the proposal on the basis that they have got so much rolling stock now with the V/Locity order having just been completed that they are finding difficulty in parking it everywhere in the off peak," he said.

"So they thought it was preferable to have it running around rather than stick it in some sidings that they didn't have.

"They made up the business case and put it to the Government, I think the major expense was the 20 extra drivers that would be needed, and the previous Government accepted their case and made it their policy.

"We talked to V/Line about it early this year and they said the case still stands."

The public transport users' group has been calling for more frequent services for years, and Mr Westcott said it would make public transport more competitive compared to car travel.

State Public Transport Minister Terry Mulder said the Government was always looking at ways to improve Geelong's trains.

"Recently V/Line had a small timetable change to better match train capacity with demand on some trips," he said.

"The Coalition Government has faced a situation since coming to government where, thanks to Labor's financial mismanagement, the cost of the Regional Rail Link has blown out by around \$1 billion.

"The Coalition's priority is in completing the Regional Rail Link, notwithstanding that the Commonwealth Government's decision to defer \$500 million previously committed RRL funding will delay completion until 2016."

Geelong Mayor John Mitchell said yesterday more frequent services would definitely be welcome.

"There is no doubt the plan is there and the capability is there to do that," Cr Mitchell said.

"It would come at a cost and the cost would be recurrent. I think they said they would need an extra seven to 10 drivers and the rolling stock is there."

Cr Mitchell said the city was supportive of such a move, which he said appeared to be achievable.

"There is no doubt that to have a 20-minute off-peak service to Melbourne would certainly benefit us greatly," he said.

"Deakin would also support it with the extra students coming to the waterfront and Waurn Ponds campuses over the coming years."

A spokesman for V/Line said the only thing he could say was to confirm there was a proposal but it was up to the State Government to make a decision.

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LeadWest is on Twitter as LeadWestLtd

<http://www.linkedin.com/company/1917641?trk=tyah>