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Opposition claims rail cost blowout

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September 9, 2010 - 3:00AM

OPPOSITION transport spokesman Terry Mulder has used a debate with public transport minister Martin Pakula to claim the costs of a controversial new rail line through Melbourne's western suburbs has risen to \$6.5 billion - more than \$2 billion more than its projected cost.

Speaking at Melbourne Town Hall last night with Mr Pakula and Greens MP Greg Barber, Mr Mulder said key engineering and construction industry figures had reported the cost blowouts to him. *The Age* has been told repeatedly over the past three months, by sources close to the project, that there have been big cost blowouts.

The government recently appointed a new authority to oversee construction of the 47-kilometre rail line, which runs from near Werribee to Southern Cross Station.

Mr Pakula did not get an opportunity during the debate to rebut the cost blowout claim, but his spokesman later flatly rejected it. He said the project was within its \$4.3 billion budget. Speaking to about 150 people, Mr Mulder also pointed to several major public transport infrastructure projects with either cost blowouts or major problems, such as myki and the bungled improvements to the Melbourne-to-Sydney rail line.

More accountability was needed for those behind big projects, he said.

Mr Pakula argued that his government's transport plan, a 2008 strategy promising \$38 billion in spending to improve the state's transport system over 12 years, was already "transforming Melbourne".

Mr Pakula said \$10 billion worth of major projects from the plan had already been completed or were under construction, including the South Morang rail extension.

He said the government's purchase of new trains - 11 have been brought into service since Christmas, and 27 more will follow - was improving the rail system.

Labor was spending 13 times more on public transport infrastructure than the Kennett government had, Mr Pakula said.

He defended the \$1.35 billion myki ticket system. "It has had its issues, but we are starting to see light at the end of the tunnel."

Asked whether conductors should return to Melbourne's tram system, Mr Pakula said this was a "romantic notion".

A massive amount of money had been invested in myki and "returning conductors to the network would be an astronomical expense", he said.

The Greens' Mr Barber has pledged to set up an independent public transport authority to co-ordinate Victoria's system if his party wins the balance of power in November's state election.

He said a visitor to Melbourne looking at a map of the city's train, tram and bus lines would think Melbourne had a superb system. "It's not until you start using it that you realise the number of problems. No one is co-ordinating it all."

Mr Barber was scathing about the Brumby government's method of planning big transport projects. "It is like the Manhattan Project: a crack group of people put a team together, they work it out in secret, and nobody is allowed to see what they are doing."

Privatising the rail and tram systems had failed, Mr Barber said. "The best we can do is boot them out and take it back over."

Mr Pakula said there was no proof privatisation had failed.

A series of questions was put to all three MPs in song by the Melbourne Public Transport Complaints Choir.

But one of their key questions - "Why is there 45 minutes between evening trains on the Hurstbridge line?" - went unanswered by the panel.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/opposition-claims-rail-cost-blowout-20100908-151ia.html>