

Poll shows public prefers rail tunnel ahead of road link

Adam Carey
Josh Gordon

The Age

27/5/13

Victorians have narrowly backed a new rail tunnel under the city over the Naphine government's proposed east-west road connection.

An Age/Nielsen poll found 47 per cent of voters backed the metro rail tunnel from South Kensington to South Yarra over the \$6 billion to \$8 billion road project connecting the Eastern and the Tullamarine freeways.

But the results were finely balanced, with 43 per cent favouring the road project, which the government says will begin towards the end of next year.

The rival plans are set to be a key election issue in Victoria, with Prime Minister Julia Gillard backing the rail option and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott promising to help fund the road tunnel.

The finding came as Premier Denis Naphine predicted "thousands" of motorists would use the road tunnel daily. But Dr Naphine declined to give details about the expected patronage, arguing it formed a key part of the government's confidential business case, which is expected to be submitted to Infrastructure Australia in coming days.

"There are thousands who use that tunnel each and every day," he said. "There are people who currently use the Eastern Freeway who will use it, there are many people who don't currently use the Eastern Freeway who will see that as a really significant and important option for their travel plans."

The comments follow a Department of Transport report to Roads Minister Terry Mulder, detailed in

Fairfax Media, which concluded the road link would do little to relieve congestion on Hoddle Street if there were no off-ramps into the city.

Potential private-sector bidders for the project are adamant that they will not bear the financial risks if patronage predictions turn out to be lower than first thought. One industry source said the level of risk that would need to be taken on by state taxpayers would "blow the [Wonthaggi] desalination plant out of the water".

Under one scenario being considered, the state government would set up a new statutory authority to collect toll revenue, with an option to privatise it in the future when patronage levels become clear.

Mr Mulder said he was confident traffic volumes on the road would be significantly higher than the levels predicted in Labor's 2008 study, headed by infrastructure expert Sir Rod Eddington.

"I'm quite confident when you have a look at the traffic that is coming in ... that there are a lot of cars that are going down Hoddle Street, avoid Alexandra Parade, and trying to find other ways to get across to the west, rat running across the top end of the city," he said. "That information has been put into the business case that forms part of our application to the federal government for funding."

The state government says it is committed to both the road and rail projects, but will build the east-west link first because its project planning is more advanced. It sought at least \$1.5 billion in federal funding for the project but got none in last week's budget.