

SWAN RIVER CROSSINGS ALIGNMENT FORUM #2
Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, 25 November 2020

Response to rail operational capacity concerns and questions

Main Roads and the Public Transport Authority have reviewed the feedback received following the Swan River Crossings Alignment Forum, regarding the operational capacity of the existing rail network and provide a response below.

Background

Transperth's urban train system runs on narrow-gauge (the width between the wheels) tracks, whereas freight trains run on both narrow gauge and the wider standard gauge. Where the two gauges share an alignment, rather than going to the expense of building (and taking up the room for) a third set of tracks, a dual-gauge section can be created by laying down a third line on the outside of one of the narrow-gauge lines.

There is a dual-gauge section like this on the Fremantle-to-Perth passenger line where it crosses the Swan River, which allows the freight line coming up from the south to also cross the river to access the container terminal at North Quay. At this stage, this is the only rail bridge over the river, meaning both passenger and freight trains use these tracks. However, having different train systems share a section of track requires careful management and strict regulation, and the competing priorities can create challenges and constraints.

Q: *What are the areas of conflict?*

A: The two systems share a section of tracks and, obviously, there can be only one train on it at any one time.

Q: *Do passenger trains get priority over freight trains?*

A: Yes. On the Public Transport Authority rail network, Transperth trains take precedence, with the second priority going to track and infrastructure maintenance, repair and inspection. Mainly, this takes place between the last train at night (or very early morning) and the first train in the morning. On average, this is limited to just four hours a night (typically 1am to 5am) – less on weekends. Freight trains must fit in and around these times.

Q: *So, when do the freight trains get access?*

A: There is a 6.5hr weekday curfew on freight traffic, from 6:15am to 9:30am and from 3:15pm to 6:30pm – i.e. during morning and afternoon peak. Outside that, they must find timeslots (called train paths) between timetabled Fremantle Line passenger trains or when services are not operating (generally 1am-5am) if no maintenance activities are required.

Q: *What access is available to freight trains through this common section of track?*

A: Two types of access are available. The first, called ad-hoc train paths, are available at any time outside of the established curfew windows and when no maintenance is occurring. These paths can be requested at relatively short notice but are not guaranteed and may be inconsistent from day to day, depending on passenger train operations. The second, known as scheduled train paths, are guaranteed under the WA Rail Access Regime.

As these can be amended only by agreement between the relevant rail operator and the PTA, they are, in effect, a permanent arrangement and must be honoured.

The ability to provide scheduled train paths depends on a range of factors, including not only track capacity but also capacity at North Quay rail terminal and other locations in the supply chain such as inland freight rail terminals.

Q: *How about at night – how important is the overnight maintenance?*

A: The overnight window is very important, because it is the only time in which we can undertake proper track and infrastructure repairs and maintenance without causing significant disruption to our passengers. For this reason, we have done our best to preserve the maintenance window.

Q: *Do you provide any overnight freight train paths?*

A: Until recently, to (a) preserve the maximum possible window in which to conduct track and infrastructure inspections, maintenance and repairs; and (b) to protect the amenity of local residents, we did not allow scheduled overnight freight traffic, with only ad-hoc train paths granted when available. However, this does not provide the freight rail industry with any certainty around which to plan their business.

In recognition of the increasing requirements of the freight rail sector and in an effort to be more flexible, in December 2018 the PTA commissioned an independent review of maintenance needs from Robbs Jetty to North Fremantle. Also, early in 2019, it agreed to a trial of requested paths at 3.30am on Wednesdays and Thursdays – along with additional 3:30am Saturday and Sunday paths, these were made permanent from June 30, 2019.

The independent study concluded that the PTA could not provide scheduled freight train paths additional to those existing in 2018 without impacting its asset management requirements.

Summary

This situation is not satisfactory, either for Fremantle and wider southern suburbs residents who now have a noisy freight train running through their suburbs in the early hours four nights a week, or for the Fremantle Line's repair-and-maintenance program. Nor was the previous arrangement satisfactory for the freight operators. Nor is it feasible for the PTA to lift its peak-time curfews (which have been endorsed by the Economic Regulation Authority).

Clearly, the shared bridge is, and always will be, a bottleneck – and it is important to note that the situation will get worse as Perth's train system continues to expand and improve. The existing volume of passenger rail traffic in Fremantle is expected to increase, especially as operations coordinate further along the line and through to Bayswater, with a related significant increase in train services associated with the Forrestfield-Airport Link and Morley-Ellenbrook Line.

One option remains ... and the Government (through the PTA) and the freight industry are aligned in acknowledging that separating freight and passenger rail services is the single biggest improvement we could make. Separation will provide significant additional flexibility to the market ... freed from the PTA curfew, freight operators will be able to run trains more efficiently, maximising the capacity of both the track and the supporting terminals at North Quay and inland locations such as Forrestfield and Kewdale.

This is a unique opportunity to de-conflict and future-proof the passenger and freight networks. It is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss.