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Life on the railroad: caught between state screw-ups and federal follies

by Pat McGrath, a business journalist and Footscray resident

More than six months after the ill-fated Brumby government rattled dozens of Footscray residents and business-owners by forgetting to tell them about a plan to bulldoze their properties to make way for the new Regional Rail Link, homeowners here are facing more uncertainty. They have found themselves in the bizarre position of lobbying the government to ensure that their houses are acquired and, according to some of my neighbours, things could soon become even stranger.

Following a year characterised by uncertainty and misinformation, the residents of the 27 or so houses slated for demolition went into Christmas believing that at least one thing was certain: that their houses were set to be acquired early in the new year.

But unhelpful comments by new Transport Minister Terry Mulder last week threw all this into disarray. After earlier issuing statements confirming the \$4.3 billion project was destined to go ahead, Mulder told ABC Radio's Jon Faine last week — before notifying any affected residents — that “no decision” had been made on its future after the federal government redirected \$500 million worth of funding to the Queensland flood recovery.

“The project is currently being re-profiled, as they would say, because the federal government has pulled \$500 million out of this term of government, pushed \$500 million out to 2015-16,” he said. “We don't have the capacity within our budget to take up what the federal government is pulling out... There's a number of options that are being looked at the moment... We've got to work out what we can afford to do.”

Federal Infrastructure Minister Anthony Albanese confirmed in a statement yesterday that the funds would be redirected, but promised the project “will be delivered”.

Within hours of Mulder's comments, the [Fair-Go for Footscray Residents \(https://sites.google.com/a/ffrr.footscray.org/fair-go-for-footscray-rail-residents/\)](https://sites.google.com/a/ffrr.footscray.org/fair-go-for-footscray-rail-residents/) email forum had broken into a fury. Why weren't we directly told that the project's funding was being “re-profiled”? Will this mean that houses might not be compulsorily acquired? If the project is pushed back, when is construction likely to begin?

There were plans to dust-off the banners and placards and head for the steps of Parliament House.

Most of the affected residents are well into the process of finding new homes, and at least two have already placed bids on houses. Loans are being secured, new school enrolments organised and lives packed into boxes. The 80 or so businesses affected have already begun looking for new premises.

In just six months, residents and businesses have gone from knowing nothing about plans to demolish their property to fighting to ensure they were properly consulted and compensated, and finally to pressuring the government to ensure that the acquisition process goes ahead.

[My rented house will be spared \(http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/07/14/brumbys-rail-may-run-through-my-laundry-but-i-cant-be-sure/\)](http://www.crikey.com.au/2010/07/14/brumbys-rail-may-run-through-my-laundry-but-i-cant-be-sure/) — despite a sleek animation released by the RRL in July showing a train on the proposed line passing through the current location of my laundry sink — but now it appears residents in houses surrounding the construction area will [need to start wearing earplugs \(http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/residents-face-lost-sleep-over-rail-project-20110205-1ahsy.html\)](http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/residents-face-lost-sleep-over-rail-project-20110205-1ahsy.html) to bed.

Mulder has since confirmed the residential acquisitions will go ahead regardless of the project review, apparently by the end of this week. But according to Nick Fahey, who has spearheaded the residents' campaign, the commercial property acquisitions have been postponed until after the review. I have asked Mulder's media adviser for confirmation of this, but have not received a reply.

And in a truly bizarre turn, Nick says some residents have been told by their RRL case managers that they could hypothetically lease their own houses back off the government if, as Mulder hinted, the project is delayed for several years: "I've been told by some people that they had hoped to live in their homes until they die, so renting their houses back off the government may eventually be an option for them."

If the houses aren't leased back to their previous owners, it seems likely they will sit vacant for however long it takes for construction to begin.

Of course, Mulder can't be blamed for the federal government's withdrawal of crucial funds for the RRL, but some of his other comments during the interview throw light on the overall progress of the project and the Baillieu government's view of it. He told Faine:

"When I took over the role as minister, I was presented with a document that showed me that the project had blown out by \$700 million plus \$180 million for level crossing upgrades at Sunshine — or grade separations — that hadn't been included, plus unfunded rolling stock."

According to Nick, Mulder's comments demonstrate how little planning had been put into the project when it was announced in July: "The fact that he only has to take one look in the project to find existing funding holes shows that the planning process was far from complete when the project was announced and the consultation process began. This was a back-of-the-envelope job that was far from being 'shovel-ready', as they called it. We were being asked to make submissions on a project that wasn't even fully planned."

While the underlying disorganisation of project has been evident from the start, it's astonishing that the Baillieu government is repeating the same public relations mistakes of the previous government.

Ted Baillieu drew enormous rhetorical leverage from the PR follies of Brumby and former transport minister Martin Pakula in the lead-up to last year's election, particularly after it was revealed the government had [hired law firm Frehills \(http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/voters-shunted-on-rail-project-20100830-147cu.html\)](http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/voters-shunted-on-rail-project-20100830-147cu.html) to provide advice on how to dodge crucial elements of the project's consultation process. Now it seems the Baillieu government has used its free kick to score an own goal.

The solution here is quite straightforward: rather than rushing to tell Jon Faine that the project's future is in doubt due to existing funding holes, just tell the residents first. Mulder has promised to meet a delegation of residents this week, though his staff is yet to schedule a time for the meeting.

Hopefully the meeting unfolds in a more respectful manner than Pakula's private forum with residents at the Footscray Senior Citizens' Centre in July. The meeting was closed to the media, so it's best not to go into detail about what was discussed, but many residents came away feeling that crucial information on the project still hadn't been provided.

Pakula's demeanor also put many offside. At one point he redirected a question to a Department of Transport staffer before adjourning to the hall's bathroom and treating residents to an audible flush. Later in the meeting, after Pakula reached for a piece of paper to take notes, I watched him pat down his jacket pockets and silently mouth the words: "I didn't bring a pen."

The Baillieu government would struggle to do worse, but they seem to be trying. According to Nick, the new ministers of transport, planning and the treasurer have been meeting in the past few days to develop a clearer picture of the project's future. I also asked Mulder's media adviser about this, but did not receive a reply before deadline.

It's uncertain what form the government's review of the project will take, but it's clear the residents whose futures depend on it will need to be involved in the process. We've already devoted many hours deciphering the government's mixed messages in the media and asking our own questions, and we'd no doubt be happy to spend a few more in open and direct discussion with the decision-makers.

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