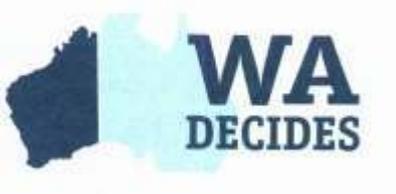




# Barnett puts airport railway on fast track

Julie-anne Sprague



West Australian Premier Colin Barnett has brought forward plans to build a railway to Perth's airport, promising to spend \$1.9 billion on the project as he steps up efforts to tackle transport concerns before the March 9 election.

Fixing congestion has become a focal point in WA, and both major political parties have committed to spend heavily on roads and railways.

But WA's revenue growth is slowing and the government must deliver higher surpluses to offset volatile mining royalty income.

Mr Barnett promised to build the railway but matched the construction timetable set out in Labor's plan. Construction would start next year and be completed by 2018, he said.

His commitment is in stark contrast to the release six months ago of the government's preferred route for the airport rail line. The government had then expected construction to take place between 2021 and 2031.

Labor floated plans to build a \$732 million airport railway in December as part of its ambitious \$3.8 billion Metronet plan.

The Liberal Party thinks Metronet will cost as much as \$6.4 billion and that Labor's railway plan underestimates the complexity of construction and is likely to cost \$1.6 billion.

Recent polling shows that, although Labor leader Mark McGowan has significantly improved his position with voters, the Labor Party is headed for defeat.

On Sunday, Mr McGowan tried to exploit Mr Barnett's broken 2008 election promise to build a rail line to Ellenbrook in Perth's north-eastern suburbs. "The Liberal Party will simply break this promise because they have no credibility on public transport," he said. "They have been panicked into this announcement because of the success of WA Labor's Metronet integrated public transport plan."

Mr Barnett said his proposal needed federal funding. "The Commonwealth will contribute," he said. "We will fund this. Make no mistake."

The project includes building three new train stations to also connect residents in eastern suburbs to the city.

Mr Barnett said the Liberal plan would deliver passengers to the airport's "front door", unlike the Labor proposal, which would use shuttle buses to ferry passengers from its train station, to be built about a kilometre from the airport.

Treasurer Troy Buswell said the government would use the second phase of federal nation-building funds for the project, some of which was already in the budget forward estimates.

Mr Barnett attacked Mr McGowan's admission that he did not support the Gillard government's carbon tax.

Mr McGowan said he did not support the tax but did support an emissions trading scheme.

"Mark McGowan has, I presumed, supported the federal Labor position or has just sat on the fence," Mr Barnett said. "Now in an election campaign suddenly he doesn't support the carbon tax. It's just not credible."

The carbon and mining taxes are unpopular in the resource-rich state.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard has refused to commit to campaigning with Mr McGowan in the election. On Sunday her office said it was "expected that the WA campaign will be fought on state issues".

It is also unclear if former prime minister Kevin Rudd will visit WA during the campaign.

Deputy Opposition Leader Julie Bishop said she would consider Mr Rudd for overseas posts if the Coalition was elected and he applied.

"If Kevin wants to apply for a job I'll judge it against the others who are applying for that same position," she told Sky News on Sunday.

"But certainly he has talents and ability and experience in foreign policy that shouldn't be wasted and I think that former prime ministers usually have a contribution to make."

with Gemma Daley

Phillip Coorey, Opinion, page 47 ■