

Hey fellas, it's about the infrastructure, not the politics

What's the point in having an arms-length urban planning body if politicians won't listen, laments Farrah Tomazin.

For an organisation that was created to remove politics out of city planning, it didn't take long for Infrastructure Victoria to be undermined by politicians.

Within hours of the agency releasing its draft 30-year strategy this week, Premier Daniel Andrews had killed off one of its top priorities (a congestion tax); Victorian Greens MP Greg Barber had disputed its decision to dump his pet rail project (a train line to Doncaster); and state Liberal leader Matthew Guy had attacked its independence (three out of seven board members are government department chiefs).

It was enough to make you wonder whether the \$10-million-a-year infrastructure body is a valid investment or just another statutory agency beholden to political will. Truth be told, it's a bit of both.

For far too long, sensible debate about how we manage our growth has been hijacked by short-term opportunism: take the East West Link as a case in point. Having an arm's-length organisation to map out the state's long-term needs is therefore worthwhile, but only if its proposals are taken seriously – not dismissed immediately after being released for public debate.

With 134 recommendations peppered across 3500 pages of research, economic modelling, and technical reports, Infrastructure Victoria's draft strategy is an impressive body of work.

Among its priorities, it recommends a new arterial within the next 10 to 15 years to finally connect the Metropolitan Ring Road in the north with the Eastern Freeway or EastLink in the east.

It identifies that there are 75,000 to 100,000 at-risk households that do not have access to affordable housing, and calls for the provision of 30,000 new dwellings to offset that need.

And it suggests that if the government is serious about managing growth, then it should redirect people to live in established areas that are already well-serviced with infrastructure, even if that means fighting off the Not-In-My-Back-Yard brigade to build more apartments in highly guarded suburbs such as Glen Waverley, Bentleigh or Brighton.

But what makes this report so important is that it's not obsessed with bricks and mortar – indeed, only 35 per cent of its recommendations involve new projects; the rest suggest we need to be smarter about using what we already have. As chief executive Michel Masson put it last week: "We definitely need to think differently and change our behaviour. Business as usual is not going to cut it."

To that end, the former Yarra Trams boss is right. For instance, as the report points out, don't just build a rail link to Melbourne Airport – spend the next decade upgrading bus services between Tullamarine and the CBD and then begin a heavy rail option within 15 to 30 years.

Don't just create new schools adjacent to less desirable ones that are under-enrolled. Instead, get neighbouring schools to share facilities, resources, and teachers because that kind of collaboration could help all schools lift their game.

And don't just spend billions of dollars on new freeways – try to manage travel demand through a pricing system that actually makes people think about whether it's worth driving into the city or taking the train.

Just as you can't tackle obesity by buying bigger pants, you can't tackle congestion simply by building a shiny new road.

These ideas are worth genuine debate, not least because Victoria's population is expected to rise from about 6 million people this year to about 9.5 million in 2046. How we manage that growth will make all the difference to our ongoing liveability.

Infrastructure Victoria provides a solid template: a sequence of priorities based on evidence rather than pork barreling and electoral cycles. The government should assess its recommendations on merit, because the last thing we need is yet another planning report gathering dust on a shelf at Spring Street.

Farrah Tomazin is The Sunday Age's state political editor.



Photo: Simon O'Dwyer