

Trains run early on South Morang line...

BY TOM MCILROY

DEBATE surrounding the proposed South Morang railway extension continues in the lead-up to November's state election, despite a revised completion date.

The state government announced last week that the \$650 million South Morang extension would be delivered nine months ahead of its planned completion date.

Turning the first sod on the site of the new

Epping Station, Public Transport Minister Martin Pakula said the project would be completed in late 2012.

The state opposition has criticised the timing of the announcement as politically motivated.

"It's disappointing that after 11 years in power it's only now – in the midst of a closer election – it is being done rather than when it should have been done, which is when they started building thousands of houses out there," opposition planning spokesman Matthew Guy said.

South Morang and Mernda Rail Alliance spokesman Darren Peters, who is considering running as an independent in November, called the development a victory for residents.

But Mr Peters said he would continue to campaign for the rail extension to Mernda, promised by 2027, to be brought forward to 2014. "The Brumby government recently took \$3.6 billion in stamp duty, and considering that the HIA stated in August that Whittlesea is the fastest-developing growth area in the nation, the Premier

should be extending rail to Mernda now."

Yan Yean MLA Danielle Green said the new South Morang station would be crucial to future growth in the area.

"The new South Morang Station will offer a substantial bus interchange facility that will accommodate five bus routes on opening, with scope to expand to cater for future growth," she said. "The local community will reap the benefits of the intensive planning phase, which will now see the rail extension come online in late 2012."

...but will buses take their place on Epping North route?

BY MICHAEL QUIN

TRANSPORT experts say a priority bus service from Epping to Epping North could ease traffic congestion, but residents fear it will end any hope of extending the train line.

BusVic has proposed a busway-style line from Aurora Estate in Epping North to Epping Station running along the Epping North rail reserve, with buses stopping at the Northern Hospital and Epping Plaza and meeting every train at Epping.

Public Transport Minister Martin Pakula supported the concept at a recent transport forum but, according to spokesman Stephen Moynihan, had no specific plans for Epping North.

"What he was saying was there needs to be a cultural change to the way people view bus travel in Melbourne and it could be appropriate in some locations for buses to be introduced much quicker than heavy rail and provide a similar service frequency," Mr Moynihan said.

But Aurora Community Association's Tony

Francis said the train – originally proposed to service the medium-density estate – would accommodate the area's growth and alleviate congestion more effectively.

"We need a train immediately, because within several years premium buses will not be able to match trains for handling significant numbers of passengers with regard to quick boarding, fares already paid and number of drivers required," Mr Francis said.

He feared the bus line was being considered

without consulting residents and would become another obstacle to extending the train line.

Monash University public transport professor Graham Currie said the rail extension was two decades overdue but remained a distant government priority, whereas the proposed bus offered a more realistic solution. "I think we are in danger of having nothing in these corridors unless it's a Bus Rapid Transit system," Professor Currie said. "On this basis the ideas make a lot of sense."