

Full Steam AHEAD



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The Waratah Train Project, delivered by Downer Rail, a division of Downer Group, is the largest rolling-stock procurement project of its kind in Australian history.

Images by Scott Ehler

It is not surprising that it experienced a number of issues in the early days. But, according to Ross Spicer, CEO Downer Rail, “We did what we set out to achieve when we created our vision for the Waratah project more than three years ago—making the Waratah a transport icon that the people of New South Wales are proud to use.

“We are extremely proud of what we have achieved. We successfully delivered 78 passenger trains consisting of 626 carriages, a state-of-the-art maintenance facility at Auburn, and simulators for crew training. The turnaround on what was a challenging contract timetable has been quite remarkable, with the seventy-eighth train entering passenger service just eight months late—a near impossible recovery of 10 months delay in the past two years.”

Ross has earned a reputation in the rail industry as a ‘Mr Fix It’ of sorts; he has worked in the industry for more than 25 years and has extensive knowledge and experience, having been a supplier, client, and project manager on new

train projects in the UK such as Eurostar (300-km/h high-speed electric train), Virgin Voyager (200-km/h high-speed diesel train), and the Pendolino (225-km/h high-speed tilting electric train).

Ross was asked by the New South Wales Government to review the Waratah project in early 2010, and upon completion of his initial review Ross was asked by Downer to relocate to Australia and lead the delivery of the project—a challenge which he accepted. He was appointed project director on 1 December 2010.

Prior to moving to Australia, Ross held senior roles in both projects and train operations at Virgin Trains, where he was production director responsible for all engineering and daily train service issues for the largest UK intercity train operator. After leaving Virgin Trains, and before he joined Downer, he worked as a specialist consultant on a number of new train projects.

Ross views his time with Virgin Rail as an instrumental period in his career. “My seven years at

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Virgin Trains transformed me into a commercial-minded businessperson. I started in projects at Virgin and finished running operations, where I reviewed the revenue line and ticket sales, whereas when I started, that was never something very high on my agenda.”

In 2010, when Ross was asked to assist with the delivery of the Waratah project, he knew that there were a number of challenges to overcome. “Waratah was late. The teams at Downer Rail were experienced in Australian rail but were inexperienced in managing large-scale rail projects. Waratah was the largest rolling-stock project ever in Australia; it was 600 cars built over two and a half years, whereas the previous largest was 450 cars built over eight years. The rail industry in Australia just hadn’t dealt with a project of this size and scale before. I think there may have been an assumption that this was the same as smaller projects that had gone before it, but on a slightly larger scale. However, it was fundamentally a different project, and with that came a larger amount of risk than on previous projects. >





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“The project was fractured, which can happen; as soon as a project is running late, parties tend to take entrenched positions and blame gets placed, rightly or wrongly, among those parties. Suppliers look for someone to blame as to why it's late, and customers try to minimise risk and exercise their contractual rights. This can create adversarial relationships. Project managers deal with fellow project managers, with the occasional senior meeting, but their focus remains on protecting their individual positions.”

The size of the project and the involvement of numerous companies meant there were various issues that arose through siloed animosity. Ross notes the importance of communication in situations like this. “It's really simple: go and talk to companies and individuals about what our issues are and what their issues are, because one party is never entirely to blame. I've never known anything in life or business where a dispute is 100 per cent the fault of one party, particularly on a project as complex as building trains, with thousands of components being shipped from all over the world.

“The key is to get the right people talking to each other, with both parties listening to issues and then working out a plan to address them. That's important because success comes through partnerships, which are equally dependent on each other. It's not like we are successful and our suppliers fail, for example, because if they fail that means they are not delivering to us, and in turn this means we will fail. People tend to have a naïve view that you can have a winner and a loser. But you can't; you're either all losers or all winners. I strongly believe there is no middle ground with this.”

Downer is a partner organisation, not only in rail but in mining and infrastructure divisions as well. Downer and its divisions have entered numerous joint ventures across the country, says Ross. “We



bring technology partners into Australia and provide them with local knowledge and expertise—a key strength of Downer. We add value for our customers by bringing in the right partner, providing them with the local support to deliver products and services fit for purpose in Australia. We do this with DownerMouchel in our infrastructure business, Otraco in our mining division, and with Keolis Downer in our rail division, where we operate the Yarra Trams in Melbourne, and GoldLinQ, colloquially known as ‘C-link’, in the Gold Coast, of which I am a member of the board.

“We are very heavily involved in supporting these franchises in increasing efficiencies and reliability. For example, we have seen significant improvements with Yarra Trams in the past 12 months; its performance hit a peak in June this year and is improving with every month that passes. The team in Melbourne are fantastic, and we are supporting them to improve the performance of the fleet. Keolis is a worldwide train operator and light-rail specialist, so to work with them is just fantastic.”

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Ross has been in the rail industry since the age of 18 and has worked for some of the most well-regarded train networks in the world; he is now watching on as the Australian industry develops at a rapid pace and catches up with the standards set by its international counterparts. “I think the industry is changing a great deal in Australia, led by the privatisation of the freight railways three or four years ago. The privatisation of QR National (now Aurizon) and Pacific National has helped them gain enormous efficiencies, and implement new and different ways of working.

“This trend of privatisation in freight, along with the franchising of passenger railways like Metro Trains in Melbourne and Yarra Trams, means there is increased competition—and the private sector is pushing hard for efficiencies and improvements. State governments are looking for ways to improve the profile of rail and to increase patronage, which is why people like Howard Collins, CEO of Sydney Trains, have been brought in to spearhead a change in direction.

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Australia is catching up with what started in Europe, particularly in the UK, back in the 1990s when the railway industry was privatised. In Europe, there has been a significant increase in franchise models with private sector involvement over the last five to seven years.”

Australia's rail industry is moving with the times, and Downer Rail feels it has an important role in bringing our national industry up to global standards. “In terms of upcoming projects, Canberra Light Rail is something we would very much like to work on. In fact, we would like to be involved with all light-rail projects that are in the pipeline across Australia. Of course, with Sydney Light Rail, our constructor had to pull out for commercial reasons, and unfortunately that meant we had to pull out of the bid, which was extremely disappointing.

“In terms of passenger rail, we are working with an excellent Korean train builder in Melbourne at the moment. They've put tenders in, and we're supporting them with local knowledge for projects in Victoria, providing guidance on wheel and suspension arrangements, fit-out requirements, along with testing, commissioning, and maintenance advice. This is an exciting time to be part of the rail industry in Australia.”