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## **EMPTY CONTAINER CHAIN – DON'T KILL FLEXIBILITY**

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Amid continued actions to address empty container transport & storage issues in the Port of Melbourne, the Victorian Transport Association (VTA) has sought to clarify the position of its members.

“There are significant empty container chain issues being dealt with right now between road transport carriers, empty container park operators, shipping lines and the Port of Melbourne Corporation.” the CEO of the VTA, Philip Lovel AM, observed.

“Some core issues are contentious and have led to divided opinions. Yet, the overwhelming majority of stakeholders acknowledge that the “status quo” cannot remain if we are to avoid lengthy delays and truck queuing at empty container parks, growing inefficiencies, and increased disputes between the commercial parties as container volumes rebound.”

Mr. Lovel was speaking after an important meeting of the VTA Container Group held last week in Melbourne, where VTA members engaged in spirited debate on the way forward.

“While the discussions were robust, our members adopted important resolutions that set a platform for actions to achieve positive change.” Mr. Lovel noted.

The most contentious issue is the potential introduction of rigid time-slotting arrangements for trucks arriving at empty container facilities, as part of broader information visibility and exchange systems likely to be adopted by container parks and shipping lines in the near future.

“The VTA supports and encourages the implementation of better information visibility and exchange – our members can see advantages in this helping to improve park performance, reducing futile truck trips and redirections, and removing inefficiencies in administering container availability and container receipt information.”

“But this shouldn't occur at the cost of reduced flexibility in empty container return.”

We don't want undue added administrative cost burdens on transport operators, or significant costs incurred through the need for additional transiting of empty containers via transport yards because the parks lack the gate capacity to accept empty returns.” Mr. Lovel warned.

“The VTA is committed to holding bi-lateral discussions with all empty container park operators in Melbourne to achieve the cooperative implementation of information systems that meet the commercial needs and legal obligations of the parks and transport operators.”

“We'll be sitting down very soon with the park operators to make sure that we get adequate outcomes for everybody.”

“For instance, we understand the legal obligations on parks under chain of responsibility laws to manage truck queuing – they have to manage this to avoid being the subject of possible investigation and prosecution by the authorities.”

“So, we are prepared to discuss the development of real-time gate monitoring technologies to assist in eliminating truck queues, including the ability of transport operators not to commit trucks to a facility if queues become excessive.” Mr. Lovel said.

Despite the issues surrounding the implementation of improved information exchange, there are still fundamental concerns about the mismatch of operating hours between empty container parks and the rest of the container transport chain, and the identified lack of empty container storage & handling capacity to meet future container volumes.

“Shipping lines can’t walk away from these issues, and need to pay for these improvements.” Mr. Lovel said.

“The VTA urges all container parks to implement an Infrastructure Fee on shipping lines to fund the extension of park operating hours. We will be lobbying the Minister for Roads & Ports, Tim Pallas, and the Port of Melbourne Corporation in support of this outcome.”

“6am to 4pm, Monday to Friday, has got to become a thing of the past for empty park operations.

“We are in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century now, where others in the container chain have moved towards 24/7 operations. But, many empty parks and most of the overseas controlled container shipping lines servicing the Port of Melbourne are mired in 19<sup>th</sup> Century thinking.”

“We’ve got the current Victorian Government looking to impose an Infrastructure Charge on container road transport operators, seemingly on the policy grounds of influencing positive operational behavioural change and helping to fund improved transport infrastructure.”

“Well, we will be lobbying the Minister to show him where the real inefficiencies lay, and asking the Government to support actions to ensure parks can open longer hours on viable financial terms, paid for by the shipping lines.” Mr Lovel concluded.

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