

Puffing Billy is an Australian icon. Steam from Puffing Billy has been rising through the hills since the early 1900's. Its whistle has excited generations of children and means just as much to the army of volunteers who help keep the rail line running.

It is one of the finest preserved steam railways in the world. Hundreds of thousands of locals and tourists visit it every year.

Who can forget the wonder of riding Puffing Billy when we were children or, years later, the joy in taking our own children or visitors to the old steam train. Puffing Billy holds a special place in our hearts.

Yet it also plays a vital role for our local economy.

This tourist attraction creates and supports hundreds of local jobs and delivers a massive economic benefit of \$23 million to our region every year.

For these reasons Puffing Billy needs every little bit of government support it can get. And it needs it right now.

Puffing Billy as we know and love it is under threat. Despite huge popularity and the work of hundreds of volunteers, this iconic tourist attraction is struggling to keep up with rising costs.

Unless there is significant government support we face the very real possibility of Puffing Billy being forced to significantly downgrade its service. Without government support they will be forced to drastically cut services and increase prices - hundreds of thousands of people will no longer have the opportunity to experience Puffing Billy as we did.

Unfortunately, it appears the Baillieu Government is choosing to ignore requests to help meet the costs of this iconic tourist attraction.

That wasn't the case last year in the lead up to the election. The then Liberal Opposition visited Puffing Billy last year, made all the right noises and called on the then Labor Government to provide \$15 million. If it was good enough for the Liberals in 2010 when they were in Opposition, it is good enough in 2011 now they are in government.

I'm proud of the support the previous Labor Government provided Puffing Billy over many years. And unlike the Liberals we did commit to a multi-million upgrade of Puffing Billy in 2010.

I have raised this issue in Parliament and recently distributed a petition that already has 600 signatures.

We need to make the Baillieu Government listen and act. We must save Puffing Billy.

You can make a difference by signing the petition. You can find it at my new website jamesmerlino.com.au