

Submission re Inquiry into the investment of Commonwealth and State funds in public passenger transport infrastructure and services

From Mr Nick Casmirri, former Secretary Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc
(TOOT – Trains On Our Tracks Campaign) 2004-07

I wish primarily to draw the committee's attention to recent resolutions passed by local councils in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales supporting the introduction of commuter rail services on the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line and the extension of that line across the border to link with the Gold Coast line.

I understand the committee should have received other submissions concerning the Casino-Murwillumbah railway and the public transport shortage confronting the Northern Rivers region, however I will include some further background here in case this has not been sufficiently covered by other submitters.

In general, the public transport situation in the Northern Rivers is typical of many regional areas. However, the Northern Rivers has many features which magnify the problems of the lack of convenient, affordable public transport options. These include rapidly expanding urban development, especially in the north of the region, significant numbers of transport disadvantaged groups in the community, including a substantial ageing population, and large tourist numbers, including both day trippers from south-east Queensland and those making longer stays.

Notable impacts of the public transport shortage include the severe traffic congestion experienced in Byron Bay, where road is currently the only available transport mode whilst a rail line running through the centre of town is left to rust away.

The Casino-Murwillumbah Railway

The Casino-Murwillumbah rail line is a 130 km branch line that connects with the North Coast line (the main Sydney-Brisbane rail line) at Casino. From there the line goes to Lismore, a regional service centre with hospitals, schools, a university, courts, government offices and a large commercial and retail centre. The line passes through the historic towns and villages of Bexhill, Eltham and Bangalow. Next stop is Byron Bay, a tourist drawcard for 1.7million visitors per annum. Then through vibrant Mullumbimby and the villages of Billinudgel, Burringbar and Stokers Siding, before arriving at Murwillumbah, a service centre for the Tweed Valley, an area with a large retiree population. (A further section of line from Murwillumbah to Condong was closed in 1993).

Much of the scenery along the way is spectacular, such as stunning views from the escarpment into Byron and rainforest areas further north. The population is one of the fastest growing in the state, projected to increase by 60 400 by 2031 in the NSW Department of Planning's Far North Coast Regional Strategy, although others suggest an even higher growth rate.

The first sections of the line were opened in 1894, and in the early years it served as a major freight conduit for cedar harvesting and the dairy industry. Although the line carried local freight, particularly local produce for many years, it has mainly served as a passenger line. Until 1990 a MotorRail service ran during daytime hours on the line

and was popular for local as well as inter-regional travel. It was especially popular with young people in Casino and Lismore, who used it to travel to the beach at Byron Bay, hence it became known as 'the surf train'.

In 1990 the Greiner Government replaced the MotorRail with the XPT. This move attracted widespread opposition throughout the Northern Rivers. The then Opposition Leader, Bob Carr, was amongst those who travelled on a 'protest train' to oppose the changes. Subsequent timetable changes saw the XPT's daily service from Sydney to Murwillumbah arrive and depart from the region during the evening, making it completely unsuitable for travel between local towns. Nonetheless, this service was well patronised despite Countrylink's poor state-wide punctuality.

In December 2003 the Parry Report into Sustainable Transport prepared for the NSW Ministry of Transport recommended drastic cutbacks to regional rail services, including the axing of the service on the Casino-Murwillumbah line. The Carr Government quickly announced that the service would continue for at least a year pending a more detailed review, but just four months on, in the April 2004 mini-budget, it was announced that the Murwillumbah XPT service would cease the next month.

The effective closure of the rail line was met with widespread and unprecedented levels of protest from local communities, with community groups calling not simply for the continuation of the XPT service, but for the introduction of local commuter rail services that would operate several times per day and serve local transport needs, as well as investigation of extending the line to connect with the southward expansion of the Gold Coast line to the Coolangatta Airport, a mere 22kms or so from Murwillumbah.

The Iemma Government would subsequently announce in September 2005 that owing to community opposition, no further recommendations of the Parry inquiry would be implemented.

Proposals for new rail services

Immediately following the axing of the last train on the Casino-Murwillumbah line, the NSW Legislative Council launched an inquiry into the decision, and its final report made several recommendations, including the immediate introduction of a local commuter rail service connecting with the XPT's on the main line at Casino.

A feasibility study into a local commuter service produced by PriceWaterhouse Coopers and commissioned by Tweed Shire Council found that a regular local light rail passenger service between Casino and Murwillumbah was financially feasible, and that such a service, as opposed to the higher axle-load XPT, would not require such a rigorous maintenance program on the line as that cited by the Carr Government as the reason for its closure.

The restoration of the Casino-Murwillumbah railway became a hot issue at the 2004 federal election. The Howard Government offered \$30 million to the NSW Government to assist with the introduction of commuter services based on the PwC study, whilst the ALP offered \$150 million of federal money to NSW for the complete refurbishment of the line and return of the XPT service. (See attachment 1).

Following the election the NSW Government declined to accept the \$30 million offer from the Howard Government.

As community campaigning continued, in May 2006 lobby group Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc released their TOOT Now! Plan, a vision for local commuter rail services based on the PwC model. The NSW Opposition and Greens quickly expressed in principle support for the Plan.

The following month, the Iemma Government announced a new proposal for the re-opening of the line. The proposal was drawn up with no stakeholder or community consultation, and was for the reinstatement of the nightly XPT service only. The proposed \$150 million project over 5 years was to be funded jointly by the federal and state governments each contributing \$75 million. Work would however not commence until the federal funding commitment had been received, and the state government imposed a November deadline for the commitment of federal funding or the project would be scrapped.

Federal funding was not forthcoming and the proposal consequently lapsed, however this is hardly surprising. There is no evidence that any meetings or negotiations between the two governments ever took place, and we understand that the NSW government failed to respond to federal requests for more details on the project costs and the engineering assessment those costs were allegedly based on, preferring instead to simply run radio commercials in the marginal state Labor seat of Tweed saying that the return of rail services was now up to the federal government.

Community groups such as NRTF were placed in an impossible position by the state government, being asked to lobby for federal funding for a service model they did not want and which would appear to be twice the price-tag of the local commuter service that will more effectively meet the needs of locals and visitors alike. The state government's apparent refusal to participate in meaningful negotiations with the federal government or provide access to the more detailed costings and full engineering assessment further diminished the leverage available with the federal government, as there did not seem to be a genuine commitment on the state's part to engage in a co-operative process. NRTF and others were consequently not in a position to support this state government proposal.

From June 2006 onwards the Iemma Government also announced, on at least three separate occasions over the next six months, the formation of a Cross-Border Transport Taskforce with the Queensland Government, one of the purported aims of which was to consider the future possibility of extending the Gold Coast rail line south from Coolangatta Airport (where it is planned to terminate) into northern NSW. In February 2007, a month prior to the NSW state election, a discussion paper was released which was based on a number of unsound premises and lacked informed community or stakeholder input. It did not examine the potential uses of the Casino-Murwillumbah line, but rather made vague indications about the possible construction of an entirely new line along the coast south from the border following the completion of the Gold Coast line to Coolangatta. Promised consultation sessions on the discussion paper never took place, and although a final report was to be presented to state cabinet in mid-2007, it was continually asserted over the next 18 months that the report was either still to be finalised or still being considered. An FOI request in late

2008 from state Nationals MP Geoff Provest failed to result in the release of the report, but revealed that it was only 3 pages in length. On March 12 2009 the NSW Legislative Council resolved to order the tabling of the report within 14 days.

Recent action from local government

The reopening of the Casino-Murwillumbah line and rail link to the Gold Coast has enjoyed ongoing support from various regional organisations, and from local councils.

A new effort to place the project back on the agenda was launched in October 2008 by Cr Basil Cameron from Byron Shire Council, himself a former Vice President of NRTF, who put forward the following council resolution, which was subsequently supported by the other three councils along the rail corridor, Tweed, Lismore and Richmond Valley:

Resolved that Council prepare and lodge a submission to Infrastructure Australia by 15 October for funding to:

- a) refurbish the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line for the introduction of commuter rail services
- b) construct a rail link from Murwillumbah to connect with the Queensland Rail at Coolangatta Airport.

This submission to note the strong community support, including NOROC, for a regional and cross border rail network in the context of:

- a) The southward expansion of the South East Queensland urban corridor into NSW, which is the fastest growing urban corridor in Australia.
- b) The expected threefold increase in truck traffic through the Pacific Highway corridor in the next 10 years, which will shortly become the busiest transport corridor in the country.
- c) The potential for an efficient rail network to assist workers, low income families, students, tourists and others, and freight movement, while promoting sustainable economic growth and reducing carbon emissions.

Copies of the submission to be forwarded to local State and Federal members and the NSW Premier and Transport Minister.

The Infrastructure Australia submission sadly made little progress due to the state government's lack of support for the project. Undeterred, local communities and local councils continue to pressure federal and state governments to re-examine this issue. On March 10 2009 Lismore City Council unanimously passed a further resolution, moved by Deputy Mayor Vanessa Ekins, which reads:

RESOLVED that Lismore City Council:

- 1 Confirms its support for commuter rail services on the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line and the construction of a rail link to the Gold Coast.
- 2 Writes to local Federal and State MPs informing them of this council resolution and urging them to fully support and secure funding commitments for the establishment of commuter rail services.
- 3 Request that the integrated regional transport plan be included on the agenda for the March NOROC meeting.

Further Information

The TOOT website – www.toot.org.au, has a number of resources providing further information on the Casino-Murwillumbah line and proposals for its reuse and extension, including the 2004 PwC study.

If the committee wishes to call witnesses to provide further evidence on this issue, I recommend contacting either Karin Kolbe, President of NRTF/TOOT (contact details available on TOOT website), or Cr Basil Cameron, who may also be able to provide additional details on the efforts to place this project before Infrastructure Australia. His contact details may be obtained from Byron Shire Council's website at www.byron.nsw.gov.au.

Some further information is provided in the attachments to this submission. Some of these documents are available on the TOOT website, whilst others are no longer and are instead copied from my personal records.

Attachments

1. Letter to residents of the Richmond electorate from ALP candidate Justine Elliot prior to 2004 election
2. *A Sustainable Transport Vision for the Northern Rivers* – document produced by NRTF in February 2006.
3. *Needs analysis – Transport for the Casino-Murwillumbah rail corridor* – revised edition produced by NRTF in January 2007