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The Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

### **Submission to Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport**

I wish to make the following submission as a resident of the north coast of NSW under items (a) and (e) of the terms of reference for this Inquiry into the investment of Commonwealth and State funds in public passenger transport infrastructure and services.

The north coast of NSW is one of the most rapidly growing areas of population growth in the state, yet public transport options are sorely lacking when compared with SE Queensland. The area faces challenges in transporting people and freight, managing tourism, providing public transport and dealing with climate change.

The last train ran on the **Casino to Murwillumbah rail line** in May 2004. The north coast line was closed by the NSW Government without public consultation. The existing Casino-Murwillumbah corridor lies unused despite the fact that 86% of residents in the Lismore and Byron Shires live within 5 km of the Casino-Murwillumbah line (ABS, 2006). This line already connects eight of the ten largest population centres in the Northern Rivers, yet lies idle and rusting.

As an indicator of unmet demand and the future viability of the line, a recent Southern Cross University (SCU) survey found that 72% of respondents would use a commuter service at least once a month. This translates into an estimated 2,875 passenger trips per day. If the line was extended from Murwillumbah through to the Gold Coast, then 91.2% of respondents indicated they would use the service at least once a month.

No action has been taken at the state or federal level to maintain or restore services to the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line, and no action has been taken to plan the expansion of the line a mere 25km to the Gold Coast.

NSW Transport Minister David Campbell's office has confirmed that the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line was **not** part of the NSW government's wish list to

Infrastructure Australia for federal funding, and now claims the cost of restoring the line to be \$150 million over five years. PricewaterhouseCoopers, in its 2004 report, estimated a cost of only \$30 million over 5 years. The NSW government has never released the basis for its figures.

Local councils and lobby groups put in submissions to Infrastructure Australia in support of the key infrastructure that is the north coast rail line, but it seems that without State Government support, the project does not get considered.

The Price Waterhouse Coopers report - the only publicly available report that considered every part of the line - stated that in 2004 we needed \$30 million to restore the line for commuter services. Even if that figure has doubled, our rail line is still very cheap.

A Cross Border Taskforce was due to report in June 2007. It is now February 2009 and there still has been no report. However we do know from a FOI action that the final report is a 4-page report to cabinet, which has yet to be made public.

Despite overtures from local Labor candidates at the last federal election to support the rail line there has been no action to follow through on these commitments since their election.

In her maiden speech to Parliament four years ago, Justine Elliot MP said "Forget the buck-passing and politics, I am here to do a job to represent Richmond," and "Many locals are very positive about federal Labor's long-term commitment to restoring the train". We are yet to see any tangible evidence of either.

Prior to her election as Member for Page in 2007, Janelle Saffin told TOOT "I support trains and I want them back and running. This is a very real issue and I will work hard at it. I will work with TOOT, the community and across all levels of government for this, especially advocating for the needs of the commuter. I will also place the issue before the appropriate infrastructure advisory process and raise the matter with Infrastructure Australia. I have already discussed doing so with Kevin Rudd who agreed that this would be the appropriate place for such a study on our infrastructure needs."

The Member for Page recently declared that she was "supporting an Integrated Regional Transport Plan being prepared by NOROC (Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils)". My inquiries through NOROC indicate that this plan has no funding and is yet to begin planning.

Restoring a rail service to the north coast would also go a long way to reducing the carbon footprint of road based transport across this region. Federal MPs with seats along state borders need to be proactive in getting the states to work together.

I support the proposals by the Trains On Our Tracks group (TOOT) for the rehabilitation of the line in the Northern Rivers region of NSW, beginning with the restoration of commuter services on the Casino to Murwillumbah line, including:

- \* a commuter service (2-car trains, several per day);
- \* the line extended 26km into Queensland;
- \* more freight off the roads and on to rail;
- \* an inter-regional service to Sydney.

In Sydney, they are looking at \$13 billion for the CBD Metro and West Metro projects. That's about \$3000 per Sydney resident. If we apply the same funding formula to our region, with a population of 280,000 (that's not including the millions of tourists), we should be eligible for \$850 million. For that amount of money we could repair the Casino-Murwillumbah line, build the link from NSW to Qld and still have change for connecting Ballina to the rail.

The NSW north coast has been neglected by the NSW government, and it seems our federal representatives also, as far as restoring rail services and planning for future transport needs for this region.

We know that getting the Casino-Murwillumbah line reopened to enable a safe, user-friendly and environmentally sustainable local commuter rail service is a 'shovel ready' project, and that planning for the Gold Coast rail link should be starting right now!

To conclude, it is quite clear that if any funding is to be forthcoming for restoring rail services on the NSW north coast and linking them to Queensland, it is going to have to come from the federal government.

**Section 51 of the Constitution clearly states the Legislative powers of the federal Parliament include; the acquisition, with the consent of a state, of any railways of the state on terms arranged between the Commonwealth and the State, and; railway construction and extension in any state with the consent of that state.**

Thank you for considering my submission.

ANDREW N GOUGH