



Transport Administration Amendment (Rail Trails Community Management) Bill 2014

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Extract from NSW Legislative Council Hansard and Papers Thursday 27 March 2014.

Second Reading

The Hon. MICK VEITCH [9.51 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I am excited to introduce the Transport Administration Amendment (Rail Trails Community Management) Bill 2014. Members well know that I have been a keen supporter of the rail trail concept for some time. Rail trails have the capacity to unlock economic and social opportunity for rural and regional communities. This is an opportunity for governments of all persuasions to stimulate regional economies. In a broader sense, rail trails are also great for the physical and mental health of all New South Wales residents. One has only to visit other States in Australia or travel to New Zealand, Canada or the United States of America to witness the rail trail phenomena. This is a real growth activity and regional and rural communities in this State should be able to access the benefits and advantages of rail trails. The Brisbane Valley Rail Trail plan defines a rail trail as:

A multi-user recreation trail using a disused rail corridor (public land) for non-motorised outdoor recreation.

The rail trail movement began in the United States in the mid-1960s. The Bristol and Bath Railway Path, which was one of the first rail trails in the United Kingdom, commenced construction in 1979. In Australia there are more than 30 established rail trails across all jurisdictions except New South Wales. Our regional communities are missing out on valuable dollars. South Australia has the Riesling Trail. This 27-kilometre track offers spectacular views of the Clare Valley. One can ride a horse, pushbike or walk the full length of the trail. Victoria has the Lilydale to Warburton Rail Trail. This rail trail passes wineries, cafes, pubs and restaurants, and others have opened stalls along the way to make a dollar. But the Victorian rail trail I admire most, and the one I have traversed, is the Murray to the Mountains Rail Trail. This rail trail goes through Beechworth. The entire surface of this 97-kilometre track is sealed. As the Hon. Steve Whan said to me, it is the Rolls-Royce of rail trails in Australia.

The Victorian Government has actively enabled rail trail conversions, and they are very popular. It has developed the Victorian Trails Strategy 2005-2010. Victoria has 18 rail trails, which traverse 463 kilometres, and another four were under construction when I last checked. What are the economic benefits of rail trails? In Western Australia the Railway Reserves Heritage Trail in the shire of Mundaring is estimated to generate \$15 million annually. In South Australia the Riesling Trail is estimated to generate approximately \$1.1 million annually. In Victoria it is estimated that each visitor on the five-star Murray to the Mountains Rail Trail contributes \$472.96 per day. Why should New South Wales not be a part of that economic and social activity?

Yesterday my colleague the Hon. Steve Whan and I joined Coalition members from both Houses at the Fountain Court in Parliament House to help launch Rail Trails for New South Wales. On display were several potential rail trails from across New South Wales. Representatives of Tumbarumba shire were advocating for the creation of a Tumbarumba to Rosewood rail trail—the Hon. Penny Sharpe and I inspected this non-used rail corridor in 2011. It has real potential and would make a wonderful addition to the beautiful Tumbarumba community. My friends from the Gundagai shire were advocating for the creation of a rail trail from Coolac to Tumblong, another beautiful part of south-western New South Wales. The people from Wagga Wagga were advocating for the creation of the Ladysmith Rail Trail—an outstanding opportunity to drive economic and social benefits to the communities from Wagga Wagga to Ladysmith.

At the launch the Minister for Local Government, Mr Donald Page, spoke about the proposed Northern Rivers rail trail. His presentation detailed the journey that has been undertaken by his community in progressing a business case for a Northern Rivers rail trail. Some I spoke to at the launch were advocating for a New England rail trail through Guyra—I note that Mr Scot MacDonald is nodding in agreement. All present at yesterday's launch were committed to turning non-used rail corridors from a liability, and often an eyesore, into an asset. A booklet was distributed at the launch. I quote from the section titled "Why are rail trails so popular?" which states:

Following the route of the railway, Rail trails cut through hills, over embankments and across gullies and creeks.

As they were designed in the Steam Train era, the steepest grade of a railway line is seldom more than

1 in 30. This means **no sharp rises and falls, no sharp bends, just sweeping curves and gentle undulations**. Visibility ahead and behind is usually very good. This is why abandoned railway lines make such superb and safe pathways for walkers, runners, riders of all ages and those simply strolling...

Many rail trails take you to otherwise inaccessible places.

Rail Trails provide a window into the past, to a time when railways opened up the country. Historic buildings and equipment can be seen and provide opportunities for cafes, souvenir shops and other services.

Towns and villages along the way offer **refreshments, meals and accommodation**.

The time I spent on the Murray to the Mountains Rail Trail highlighted to me how we can turn these often derelict and non-used rail corridors into viable assets for our local communities. The railway station at Beechworth has been turned into a camping area. The toilets have been turned into an amenities block so people can shower. People can even store their pushbikes at the railway station and then walk to Beechworth to enjoy its historic delights. These rail trails are a significant contributor to the Victorian economy. One of the criticisms levelled at rail trails often comes from the farming fraternity because they do not want people traversing through properties. To some extent that is a valid concern. However, in a question on notice to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services I inquired about criminal activity along the only comparable walking trail in New South Wales: Hume and Hovel Walking Track. The Minister replied that since its inception there had been no reported criminal activity on that fantastic walking track.

My bill is essentially an enabling bill. Minister Page's contribution at the launch pretty well articulated why this bill is necessary. The Northern Rivers community has undertaken a consultation process, obtained funds to develop a business plan for the creation of a rail trail and that business plan is now being checked before presentation to the Government. My bill talks about a community consultation process and the development of a business case to be put to the Minister for Transport, who can then enact a rail trail corridor. It talks about turning non-used corridors into viable assets for local regional communities. My bill talks about creating rail-trail agreements. It talks about maintaining the ownership of the land with Transport for NSW, which is very important. So it is not talking about the transfer of Crown lands. The main reason for that, and this is how it is done in other States, is that if at some stage in the future the rail corridor is needed for freight again the rail trail can be converted back to a railway line.

The Hon. Dr Peter Phelps: We might run out of petrol and have to go back to steam trains.

The Hon. MICK VEITCH: The Government Whip is right; we may well have to go back to some other mode of transport. The critical thing here is that the rail corridors can be converted back to active rail line at some stage in the future if required. They are not being sold off and lost to the people of New South Wales. I am very keen to have community management of the rail trails. I am keen to adopt a model similar to that of the reserve trusts under the Crown Lands Act, where there are representatives from local government and the local community, in particular the local business community. They can actually guide the future direction of the rail trail.

This bill represents a significant step forward for New South Wales and for regional development. It is about stimulating the economy in regional New South Wales. I am excited about the concept of rail trails, and I am certain that a number of other members in this place will join me in supporting this proposal. The Hon. Steve Whan has been badgering me for years about the potential of a wonderful rail trail at Captains Flat. I met with residents of Guyra yesterday. They are very keen on their rail trail. Members will be able to identify areas suitable for rail trails. A large amount of money could be injected into regional economies through local rail trails. I commend the bill to the House.