

Submission

No 22

INQUIRY INTO THE UTILISATION OF RAIL CORRIDORS

Organisation: Regional Development Australia Illawarra

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Mr Charles Casuscelli, Chair,
NSW Parliament Legislative Assembly Committee on Transport and Infrastructure
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000

Mr Casuscelli,

Inquiry into the utilisation of rail corridors

Thank you for the invitation to contribute a submission to the inquiry. Regional Development Australia Illawarra promotes and facilitates sustainable economic growth and job creation in the Illawarra region.

Proposals for utilisation of rail corridors in the Illawarra region need to be considered in conjunction with infrastructure planning for road and rail transport. In particular, the region's rail corridors are being considered in relation to High Speed Rail phase 2 and as an integral feature of current urban renewal activity and proposals. It is assumed that corridor utilisation will also feature in the proposed NSW Long Term Transport Master Plan (discussion paper not available at time of writing).

Rail corridors in the Illawarra and contiguous regions represent vital infrastructure connecting residential and commercial environments with one another, to centres of trade in Sydney and the port of Port Kembla, and to the regional airport at Albion Park. In broad terms, rail corridors can be viewed as not only vital infrastructure enabling a diversified economy but as a public good, a shared use amenity for the safe movement of citizens and visitors.

Regional Development Australia Illawarra (RDAI) is the consultative organisation for the Illawarra region (Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama LGAs) that promotes sustainable development through business and employment growth. It provides a link between community, business and all tiers of government. The region's rail corridor extends from Bondi Junction and Central in Sydney, through the regional city of Wollongong and south via Kiama to Bomaderry (Nowra). Funding has been allocated for the Maldon-Dombarton freight link from the Southern Highlands to Port Kembla.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

Opportunities for mixed use property development

Mixed use property development opportunities abound as an aspect of Transport Oriented Developments (TODs) at nodes along the rail network, predicated on the need to service resident commuters and tourists for travel and establishment of new enterprises to provide employment opportunities.

Rail corridors could contribute to the attractiveness and accessibility of such living and working environments through sustainable landscaping, shared walking and cycle paths and park and ride facilities. Consistent with provisions for public safety, there may be possible routes for bridle trails and facilities for other recreational pursuits.

There is capacity south of Wollongong for industrial development along the corridor at Port Kembla and Dapto, enhanced when the Maldon to Dombarton rail link is completed. The re-location of Dunmore station to Shellharbour suggests further opportunities also, including siting railway repair facilities at Dunmore. The prospect of upgraded rail infrastructure to accommodate a high speed rail service suggests residential development at the nodes where stops are scheduled, with enhanced station amenities (note that Wollongong City Council's submission to this study presents Dapto as a major regional hub). Other opportunities for mixed use development could add value to the Tallawarra Business Park, Bombo Quarry, Kembla Grange facilities and industrial land releases adjacent to the corridor.

Income generation for future infrastructure projects

Investment attraction can be an outcome of enhanced amenity along the Illawarra rail corridor as enterprises cluster and employees use rail for travel to work. Income could also be derived from a portion of promoted excursion fares for tourist packages that showcase the region's natural features. It may be possible to derive income from the sale or lease of surplus RailCorp property along the corridor. Developer contributions and retail business rent are other potential sources of income for later projects.

Innovative use of corridors can provide opportunities for ecotourism and generation of income from Public Private Partnerships. These prospects hinge on adopting the view that the rail corridor is a public resource to be used appropriately and not a quarantined community the community is locked out of. Income generated by leases for industry or property development purposes should be transparently retained in a fund for infrastructure. Options for income generation may emerge from the Long Term Transport Master Plan and when the connectivity between road and rail corridors is clarified further.

Facilitation of sustainable renewal and development

An increasing preference for rail travel instead of road will benefit the environment in terms of carbon emissions and congestion reduction. Ecologically sensitive management of the Illawarra corridor, particularly adjacent to the escarpment north of Wollongong, can provide an exemplar for commercial enterprises to emulate. Imaginative use of rail corridors can contribute to social inclusion and stimulate employment growth. Indeed, in addition to the focus on improving commuter travel, RDAI and its constituents would very much like to see industry development that provides jobs *in* the region.

The Illawarra rail corridor provides significant access to the Royal National Park, a stunning coastline of beaches framed by the escarpment and natural beach and forest environments in the adjacent Shoalhaven region. The network also services the University of Wollongong. Plans exist to construct a tunnel between Waterfall and Thirroul along the corridor. Public access to the rail corridor, where safety and security can be ensured, could enhance the creation of clean technology jobs and reduce the impact of motor vehicles. Public sector interest in drawing together the currently rundown Wollongong station precinct with the CBD to the coast will attract much needed private investment.

Facilitation of TOD schemes

The rail corridor can be viewed as an enabler of Transport Oriented Developments as it provides the conduit for population clusters and siting of enterprises. Plans for TODs will feature in the infrastructure planning considered by all levels of government and the placement of private capital and is not directly addressed in this context of rail corridor utilisation. However, the authority to determine how the corridor may be used can leverage a balanced consideration of commercial and public amenity needs.

Accessibility of stations along the corridor would be enhanced by completing plans for pedestrian lifts and upgrading pathways. TOD schemes need to consider both resident and industry needs. Areas such as West Kembla can support TODs when shipping and freight activity increase at Port Kembla with the completion of the Maldon to Dombarton rail link. TOD principles are already reflected in Local Environment Plans at the region's central rail station and for planned residential growth adjacent to Dapto station.

Connectivity of communities either side of railway lines

The connection between both sides of the railway lines is already good and buses provide services from stations. There are instances where one side of the corridor is under-utilised but the primary connection occurs at stations. Significant upgrades for pedestrian traffic and bus access are required at many stations along the corridor route. Further modelling of transit interchanges may suggest the need for railway overbridges at some locations.

Current planning and policy framework

There have been multiple studies just in the last six or seven years that have implications for the utilisation of rail corridors. Public policy deliberations have been well informed by industry and regional peak bodies. Auslink published a report on the Sydney – Wollongong Corridor Strategy in 2007. The most recent iteration of transport policy would appear to be the "NSW Long Term Transport Master Plan" for which regional forums are anticipated shortly. Phase 2 of the Commonwealth Government's High Speed Rail study is also underway. It is hoped that such initiatives will allow solid planning and sequenced implementation of development around both rail and road transport nodes, including an urgent ramping of residential, commercial and industrial development prior to completion of the Maldon-Dombarton line and the consequent increase in freight.

Regulatory and policy barriers to implementing rail corridor projects

RDAI, in collaboration with the Illawarra Government Co-ordination Group (announced by Minister for the Illawarra February 11) is in a position to facilitate engagement with stakeholders and the region has the research expertise to provide detailed plans with regard to rail corridor utilisation. The SMART facility at the University of Wollongong has a rail logistics capability so is able to provide evidence for the best way forward for use of the corridor: SMART is developing a national synthetic data set to assist policy makers gain new insights into the complex interplay of infrastructure, land use and liveability". (University of Wollongong SMART Infrastructure Facility brochure, 2011, p7).

Barriers of a regulatory or policy nature include the loss of a 1% developer levy (see WCC submission) and delays in securing state government commitment to major infrastructure developments. It is hoped that the planned long term transport master plan will bring together many proposed initiatives with an integrated plan for implementation. The Illawarra region, with its major hub at Wollongong, provides an excellent opportunity to showcase a transport-led, “whole-of-government” nation building program to revitalise Australia’s 10th largest city and stimulate economic activity and jobs along its elongated corridor.

Issues relating to financing and funding rail corridor projects

Public seed funding is needed to attract private investment in bold projects that provide employment. Many such projects are leveraged, enabled and enhanced by transport links. Transport infrastructure planning and subsequent funding allocations require the commitment and cooperation of all three tiers of government and engagement with the regional community.

Methods of assessing compatibility of projects with community

RDAI’s brief is to do the work of community engagement in the Illawarra region and it is concerned with human as well as direct economic impacts. Strong networks exist in the region representing the whole range of business and community interests. Agencies are able to draw on expertise at the University to conduct surveys and consultations to assess citizen alignment with proposed projects.

Examples of best practice from other jurisdictions

Extensive research exists on Transport Oriented Developments, both in Australia and internationally. The case for rail as an environmentally-friendly alternative to road use has been well made. I do not propose to document them here but such evidence-based research can be collated readily for the committee’s purposes if required as there are other organisations equipped to do this.

In conclusion

It is critical that the Committee on Transport and Infrastructure, in considering options for rail corridor utilisation, refers to plans already developed for transport infrastructure in the Illawarra and current development activity in the region. If further research is required to prioritise options, the region has the capability to conduct it.

The newly established Illawarra Government Co-ordination Group should be invited to comment on any proposals emanating from this study. RDAI, industry and community peak bodies and local government can readily be engaged in dialogue concerning this issue. If some preliminary briefing was publicly available in the short term, rail corridors could be placed on the agenda of the anticipated regional stakeholder consultation forum to inform the Long Term Transport Master Plan.

RDAI appreciates the opportunity to contribute a submission to the parliamentary inquiry.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long, sweeping tail that extends downwards and to the left.

Eddy de Gabriele

Chair, Regional Development Australia Illawarra