

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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REROC

RIVERINA EASTERN REGIONAL
ORGANISATION OF COUNCILS

Response Inquiry into Inter-Regional Public Transport

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<p style="text-align: center;">Riverina Eastern Regional Organisation of Councils Response Inquiry into Inter-regional Public Transport</p>
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The Riverina Eastern Regional Organisation of Councils (REROC) is a strategic alliance of fifteen local government bodies located in the eastern Riverina region of NSW. Originally formed in 1992 the aim of the organisation is to assist councils to operate more efficiently and effectively through working together to achieve economies of scale and scope and present a better informed and representative voice for its members.

The members of REROC are the councils of Bland, Coolamon, Cootamundra, Corowa, Gundagai, Greater Hume, Junee, Lockhart, Temora, Tumbarumba, Tumut, Urana and Wagga Wagga as well as Riverina Water and Goldenfields Water County Councils.

The REROC region covers an area in excess of 45,000 sq kms and a population base of approximately 140,000 people. Public transport that connects the LGAs in the REROC region as well as the services that connect the region to Sydney are extremely important to the communities that our members represent.

Public transport in rural and regional areas is an on-going problem that never seems to find a satisfactory resolution. Most rural and regional communities have very limited public transport options and for some, if Community Transport was removed, there would be no public transport at all - no trains, no buses and no taxis.

CountryLink services do not appear to be designed to meet demand for public transport but instead scheduling arrangements and destinations appear to reflect the needs of State Rail rather than what works best for customers. Consequently, CountryLink services are consistently under-utilised because the services do not go to destinations that people want or they depart at times which do not serve customer needs. In addition services are often late and this unreliability undermines confidence in the Service further eroding customer usage.

In the eastern Riverina region there are few intra-regional public transport options i.e. public transport that links LGAs to LGAs or public transport that links LGAs with the major service centre, Wagga Wagga. This is of particular concern to young people undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships who can experience considerable difficulty in accessing further education and particularly TAFE classes.

Individual TAFE campuses now specialise in delivering specific courses, this specialisation allows TAFE to deliver its courses in a more cost effective and efficient manner. However this approach means that students are often required to travel in order to access the campus offering their course. In order to access campuses students must either have their own transport or rely on family, friends or their employer to transport them to and from classes. This can be a major disincentive to young people taking up apprenticeships and traineeships in country areas.

Community Transport is a heavily utilised service particularly in the LGAs outside of Wagga Wagga where there are no town bus services. These services are underfunded and as a consequence service delivery tends to be restricted to transporting clients to health and medical appointments rather than for accessing transport social activities. This can mean that those that are dependent on community

transport as their major public transport solution are as a consequence unable to engage in a broad range of social activities, which can be an extremely isolating outcome.

For the Inquiry's information Appendix A to this response is a list of public transport services operating within the REROC region. The list has been compiled by the NSW Department of Transport and shows the high level of dependence communities in our region have on the community transport service.

In response to the particular issues raised by the Committee we offer the following:

a) How CountryLink services can be improved

The two most important ways in which CountryLink services can be improved is in timing and speed. The service needs to regularly and consistently run on time and it needs to be quicker. It is our understanding that the XPT has the capacity to travel at 160kms per hour; however it cannot travel at this speed because the condition of tracks across NSW do not allow this to occur.

Further it is our understanding that on parts of the main Southern Line the XPT's speed is restricted to between 40kms and 60kms per hour because of the condition of the track.

Travelling on CountryLink's XPT is further exacerbated by the fact that it regularly runs late and often runs very late. A REROC staff member recently first-hand experience of the problem. Intending to catch the midnight XPT to Sydney in order to make a mid-morning appointment, the staff member booked a first class ticket with a sleeper berth. The train arrived in Wagga Wagga 3 hours late at 3.00a.m. The service then took over 6 hours to arrive in Sydney forcing the staff member to change her plans when she finally reached Sydney. The cost of her ticket was virtually the same as a one-way economy ticket to Sydney by air. The likelihood of this staff member becoming a return customer for CountryLink is slim at best.

The Service's lack of punctuality undermines confidence in its product which ultimately must result in fewer people choosing to use it, particularly those that can afford to pay a premium price for their ticket and have the choice of either flying or driving.

b) How network linkages between CountryLink train and coach services can be improved.

Closer attention needs to be paid to what customers actually require and where they want to go. Our members agree that more work needs to be done to improve network linkages and this is best achieved by CountryLink undertaking intensive market analysis to determine where its services are required and when.

CountryLink would do well to reconsider its focus on the Sydney-Melbourne route, with pick-ups occurring along the route at what can be very inconvenient times. Cheap airfares between Sydney and Melbourne must raise questions about the value of retaining a service that is focused on linking those two cities at the expense of providing NSW residents with appropriately timed services from regional cities and towns that take them to their capital City.

Well honed hub and spoke operations using buses to link to rail services that operate during reasonable hours that taking passengers to Sydney would improve the level of usage for all CountryLink services.

c) The potential for CountryLink to carry light freight

Our members do believe that there is potential for CountryLink to carry light freight, we assume that the Committee is considering this option as a way of improving the financial returns for the Service.

We note that if CountryLink was to add this service it would need to be able to guarantee delivery, and provide door-to-door servicing in order to compete with existing courier firms. This would require substantial investment in logistics and tracking systems as well as delivery vehicles able to take the light freight from the train station to its intended destination.

For CountryLink to make inroads into the light freight market it will also have to overcome its current branding problems, whereby the Service is perceived by business to be unreliable, late and inefficient.

d) How CountryLink can be better utilised to increase tourism in New South Wales

CountryLink could be better utilised to increase tourism to country NSW. However for this to occur the service would have to respond to consumer needs and demands. Scheduling changes would need to be made; internal improvements to customer service are needed to provide a better experience for travellers and an investment in the infrastructure is required to improve both comfort and speed.

CountryLink should form alliances with regional tourism bodies to develop tourism packages in regional areas to ensure that it has quality product to sell.

e) How the amount of inter-regional travel undertaken by public transport can be increased

This question assumes that public transport is currently available for inter-regional travel, which of course is not the case for many country towns. Our members believe however that a quality hub and spoke transport arrangement that was delivered reliably and at times when the services are actually required would increase use of public transport.

Currently inter-regional travel is dominated by school bus services delivering students from outlying regions to high schools. Our members have, over many years, questioned whether school bus services could be utilised to increase public transport options. The State makes a huge investment in the school bus network and many bus services remain dormant for the balance of the day. It would seem that there is an opportunity to extend existing service provision, perhaps with a relatively small investment on the government's behalf.

We have in the past explored the co-use of school buses by adults and children. This is occurring in some areas where school buses are bringing workers into regional towns and centres. However, some operators have expressed concern about sharing bus services which are predominately used by minors and the suitability of the interface between those minors and adults using the same service. While some adult travellers express dismay at having to share their trip to work with a busload of children.

As stated above the other staple in the mix for inter-regional travel is community transport. The community transport network is severely under-funded and highly reliant on volunteer workers. Community transport services require more funding

to enable them to provide additional trips for their clients would also improve public transport usage.

f) The extent to which regional public transport networks are integrated and how they can be better integrated

Regional transport networks are not really integrated. Most communities are grateful to have any form of public transport and accept that it is likely that whatever the service is, it is not likely it will integrate with any other service.

Currently, the best chance of integration is achieved through community transport services because they can be ordered in such a way as to meet other transport services. Community transport is able to offer flexibility in its service delivery because it usually operates small buses or cars and transports only a small number of people at each time a service is provided.

g) The role local councils can play in improving inter-regional public transportation networks

Our members do not believe that councils should play a role in providing public transport networks. Public transport is a core responsibility of the State Government and not a core activity for local government. Local government would not consider undertaking this role without substantial, guaranteed long-term funding coming from the State. This funding would have to be provided over an agreed number of years to ensure there was some longevity to the service.

Local government could, however, work collaboratively with the State to provide assistance in identifying appropriate inter-regional transport networks and public transport services which the State could introduce or fund private enterprise to deliver.

h) The type of buses and trains that will be required for the provision of regional passenger services in the future.

REROC recently participated in a Forum to promote High Speed Rail (HSR) for the region. While the concept of HSR is certainly attractive, our members appreciate that the cost means that the project's development is probably a long way off.

However our members believe that it is imperative that the Government make substantial investments in the quality of the rail tracks across the State. This would allow less technologically advanced rail services, such as the XPT, to reach their maximum speeds. If the XPT could actually travel for most of its journey from Wagga to Sydney at 160km per hour the journey's time could probably be halved from the current 6 hours to just over 3 hours. As the journey currently stands it is much faster to drive to Sydney than it is to take the train.

REROC is also participating in the State Government's Long-term Transport Master Planning process. We trust that the findings of the Committee will feed into this long term planning to provide the State with a blueprint for improving transport services not just for Sydney residents but for the entire State.

The members of REROC look forward to any opportunity that may arise to provide the Committee with further information on the important issue of transport planning in NSW.

APPENDIX A: List of Public Transport Services in the Eastern Riverina for the Major Townships

(Information supplied by the NSW Department of Transport)

LGA	HACC Comm Trans	CTP	Taxis	WATs	CountryLink Service	Days	Destinations	Other	Destination	Days
Bland	✓		✓		Y	W, Sa, Su	Condobolin-Cootamundra	Greyhound	Melb-Bris	W
Coolamon	✓		✓		Y	M,W,Fr,Sa,Su	Wagga-Griffith	Allens	Wagga	M-Fr
Cootamundra	✓		✓	Y	Y	Multi	Condobolin, Tumbarumba, Hay, Mildura, Bathurst, Orange, Canberra, Queanbeyan, Grenfell, Dubbo, (train Melbourne-Sydney)			
Corowa	✓		✓	Y	Y	W, Sa	Albury, Howlong, Echuca	Private	Albury	W
Greater Hume	✓				Y	Daily	Limited/varied (train)	Greyhound Firefly	Melb-Syd Melb-Syd	W,Sa,Su W
Gundagai	✓		✓		Y	Daily-Alternate	Wagga, Cootamundra, Tumbarumba			
								Greyhound	Syd, Melb, Adel	W,Sa,Su
								Firefly	Syd, Melb, Adel	W
Junee	✓	✓	✓		Y (Rail)	XPT-Daily ; XPL - Sa&Su	XPT-Melb-Syd; XPL - Griffith-Syd	Junee Buses	Wagga	M-Fr
Lockhart	✓	✓			Y	M,W,Fr,Su	Echuca-Wagga			
Temora	✓	✓	✓		Y	W,Sa,Su	Cootamundra, Hay, Condobolin, Mildura			
Tumbarumba	✓	✓			Y	Daily	Cootamundra, Wagga (alternates)			
Tumut	✓	✓	✓		Y	Daily	Cootamundra, Wagga (alternates)			
Urana	✓				Y	M,W,Fr,Su	Echuca-Wagga			
Wagga Wagga	✓		✓	Y	Y	Daily	Bus and rail (varied regional & metro)	Greyhound; Firefly; Allens; Junee Buses		