

INQUIRY INTO INFRASTRUCTURE PROVISION IN COASTAL GROWTH AREAS

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Submission of

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Northern Rivers Trains for the Future (NRTF) was established in early 2003 to give voice to community concerns regarding the under utilisation of the Casino-Murwillumbah line.

NRTF has previously made submissions to a number of government inquiries regarding transport and has been involved in consultative processes at ministerial, departmental, local forums representing community views.

We are an independent self funded community based organisation.

6 May 2005

NRTF OBJECTS

Our *mission*:

Working in partnership with governments, operators, regional councils and other interested parties, Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc. (NRTF) aims to be the recognised voice of the community in promoting the social, economic and environmental benefits of rail services as part of an integrated regional public transport system.

Our *objectives*:

1. Advocate the establishment of commuter rail services on the Casino-Murwillumbah line.
2. Promote the long-term maintenance and upgrading of the Casino-Murwillumbah line.
3. Negotiate the return of the XPT (or similar inter-regional) service to the line.
4. Advocate the extension of the Casino-Murwillumbah line to Queensland.
5. Work with operators, regional councils, governments, the community and other interested parties to return freight to the Casino-Murwillumbah line.
6. Establish and maintain organisational structures that meet NRTF's objectives, in particular:
 - develop local networks of community supporters and establish links to inter-regional, state and national networks
 - participate in planning and other decision making processes affecting the development of integrated transport systems
 - lobby governments
 - gather and disseminate information
 - raise funds
 - demonstrate the social, historical, cultural, economic and environmental importance of rail, past, present and future
 - coordinate community campaigns.

Introduction

NRTF provides this submission addressing the infrastructure needs of communities within the Local Government Areas of Tweed, Byron, Ballina, Lismore City and Richmond Valley on the Far North Coast of New South Wales extending to the state border with Queensland.

Our submission primarily addresses regional transport infrastructure, but also discusses the role that transport infrastructure and services play in the delivery of human services as well as the provision of other infrastructure.

We recognise that this inquiry is focused on the issue of infrastructure in coastal regions, but wish to stress that in our region the economic and social linkages with hinterland centres such as Lismore, Murwillumbah and Casino mean that the needs of these important regional centres must be considered as part of regional planning.

It is also the case that Lismore and Murwillumbah are centres where much of the human service infrastructure accessed by coastal populations is currently located and planning for the movement of people between the coastal zone and these centres is a key issue for the equitable and efficient delivery of human services as well as a sustainable approach to infrastructure development.

We believe that rail is not an outdated approach, but the only approach that is capable of moderating the increasing impacts of growth, particularly those brought about by an over reliance on private road transport combined with rapidly increasing car and freight traffic within the Pacific Highway corridor that dissects the region. Within neighbouring South East Queensland, the fastest growing region in the country, rail infrastructure and services are continuing to expand towards the New South Wales border.

Broadly we propose a 'short term' development of commuter rail services using *existing infrastructure* and a 'long term' proposal to build a rail link between Murwillumbah (NSW) and the Gold Coast (QLD) as necessary to achieve socially, economically and environmentally sustainable transport solutions for the region.

Our comments are addressed to the Terms of Reference for this inquiry.

1. Key coastal population growth and urban consolidation trends in NSW

1.1 Growth rates on the Far North Coast

Coastal population and urban consolidation are continuing at faster rates than anywhere else in New South Wales with Tweed-Byron and adjacent Mid-North coast, the two fastest growing regions. (ABS, 2000)

In 2000, Tweed Heads was growing at 3.9% (a rate three times higher than Sydney, ABS 2000).

Between 1991-2001, population growth for Tweed/Byron was 31.3% at an annual average of 3.13% (ABS, 2002).

Based on current growth rates, the population of Tweed-Byron will double around the time today's new-borns graduate from University (approx. 2030), triple by the time they are 40 and well before they retire, today's population will have multiplied fivefold. That is the population of Byron Bay will be around 150,000,

On the other side of the border, Gold Coast (Moreton) and Brisbane are the fastest growing regions (3.5% and 2.5% respectively) in the fastest growing state with Queensland expected to become the second most populous state before the middle of this century. (ABS, 2001)

1.2 Impacts of growth on Coastal communities

Rapid population growth has made it difficult for all levels of government to maintain and provide new infrastructure including public transport infrastructure. Critically for our region, a number of factors compound the impacts of high population growth and urban consolidation. These are the lack of an integrated regional transport strategy, the impacts of the Pacific Highway corridor, the need to accommodate high levels of tourism and the interface between the separately regulated transport systems of NSW, QLD and the Federal Government.

1.3 Lack of integrated regional public transport system

The lack of public transport infrastructure sufficient for the development of a regionally integrated transport system has meant that transport needs are primarily met by private transport. In areas where bus services exist, they tend to provide a local service only with few if any connections to other services in the region. In some coastal/hinterland towns such as Byron Bay this reliance on private transport creates significant traffic congestion when tourist visitors arrive and travel about the region by private transport.

In the 2001 Census, over 90% of workers in Tweed-Byron indicated they travel to work by car.

The lack of an integrated public transport system has a major impact on the accessibility of transport services for those without access to private transport and has a major influence on the delivery (at times non-delivery) of human services. This represents a serious disadvantage for the many in our community who rely on public transport to access services including young people whose options regarding education, training and employment are often limited.

Regional populations include high levels of older people as well as people on pensions and low incomes who require access to human services that are often delivered in regional centres (such as Lismore) located some distance away and increasingly in South East Queensland for specialist medical services.

In our view, a regionally integrated public transport system is essential to the effective delivery of human services and the most efficient allocation of infrastructure resources within the region. The development of efficient linkages between local and regional labour markets and economies is also promoted by an integrated transport system.

1.4 Pacific Highway corridor and its impacts

Our region is dissected by the Pacific Highway corridor where increasing levels of local and regional traffic have to mix with high levels of interstate freight and other traffic. This corridor now funnels the majority of cross border road traffic through our region creating a dangerous interface between local traffic and heavy freight at increasing environmental and social cost. Traffic flows are expected to increase markedly with growth in population, tourism, freight and commuter movements.

Over 31,000,000 vehicles currently use the Pacific Motorway (Brisbane to Tugun QLD) annually with increasing numbers using Tweed-Byron as an on/off ramp. (Department of Main Roads, Queensland).

Australian Transport Safety Bureau data shows that between 1991-2001,

- The number of articulated trucks (B-Double, semi-trailer, tanker) on our roads increased by 18%.
- Load sizes increased as demonstrated by a rise of 62% in tonne-kilometres even though total number of kilometres travelled by articulated trucks increased by a more modest 34%.
- The incidence of fatalities involving articulated trucks ranged between 38-54 per 10,000 registered vehicles compared to a range of 1.6-2.0 for passenger cars. Fatalities involving articulated trucks thus occurred at rates between 19 and 34 times higher than for passenger cars.
- 11% of all registered articulated trucks in NSW were involved in an accident each year compared to 3% of all passenger cars.

Road deaths in NSW have steadily fallen from an annual 1384 in 1978 to 561 in 2002, yet deaths on North Coast roads continue to rise reflecting the increasing impacts of the Pacific Highway corridor. Data from the Roads and Traffic Authority show that.

- Number of people killed on North Coast roads each year has risen by 60% since 1997, going from 55 in 1997 to 88 for the year ending 30 August 2004.
- A rise in Pacific Highway fatalities has been responsible for most of the increase with 2 out of 3 North Coast fatalities occurring on the highway between 1997-2001.
- Around one in five (18%) of all Pacific Highway fatalities between Sydney and the Tweed Heads occurred in Tweed-Byron between 1997-2001.
- Pacific Highway fatalities per year (1997-2001) rise as the highway approaches the Queensland border with an average 6.5 fatalities per year in Tweed-Byron compared to an average 5 per year in Ballina and an average 2.6 per year in the Richmond Valley.

The Bureau of Transport and Regional Studies (BTRE) has estimated the average cost of road crashes (in 1996 dollars) to be \$1.7 million for a fatal crash, \$24,000 for one involving injury and \$6,000 for a property damage only crash.

In Tweed-Byron between 1997-2001, there were 62 fatal crashes, 1,712 crashes involving injuries and 2,280 crashes involving property damage. The cost of crashes over the five year period is just over \$160 million in *1996 dollars*.

In our view, it would not be socially environmentally or economically sustainable for the rate of private transport use and building of roads to continue to grow proportionate with the projected population growth for our region (and South East Queensland). Given the projected population increases, it is clear that solutions providing alternatives to road transport movements within the only Pacific Highway corridor are the only solutions capable of moderating the impacts of the growth in total journeys.

1.7 Importance of environmentally sustainable tourism

A key challenge for our region is how to manage the movement of large numbers of tourist visitors. We do not believe that a reliance on road based solutions is appropriate for a sustainable future for our communities for the following reasons.

- Tourism is a key driver of economic activity in our region. Byron Shire receives over 1,700,000 tourist visitors each year. The town of Byron Bay has a permanent population of around 30,000.
- It is the outstanding beauty of the natural environment in the coastal and hinterland zones that attract so many visitors to the region. The existing rail line showcases the natural environment and is capable of delivering visitors close to high traffic locations with minimal impact.

- Towns with limited infrastructure such as Byron Bay struggle to cope with the impacts of such high visitor numbers. Not only is the potential for increased growth in population or infrastructure in sensitive coastal areas limited, it is also undesirable as it undermines the reason why so many visitors come to the region.
- If the current trend of channeling all transport (including public) journeys into road based options within an expanded Pacific Highway corridor were to continue, it would seriously compromise the natural beauty of the area that could ultimately undermine the development of an environmentally sustainable economy based on tourism.

2. Short and long term needs of coastal communities for basic infrastructure (such as roads, power, water and sewerage) and human services infrastructure (such as hospitals, schools, aged care centres and sporting facilities);

In relation to transport, NRTF believes an integrated system of passenger and freight traffic that gives people options and provides for the efficient delivery of human services is essential for a future that is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.

2.1 'Short term'

In the 'short term' we need to be better able to utilise existing infrastructure such as the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line to meet local needs

We note that the mayors of the region are in full support of addressing the transport needs of the region through the development of commuter rail services that provide the spine of an integrated regional transport system. Current providers of local bus services would have an incentive to adjust and expand timetables to connect with such services thus linking currently isolated services.

Incorporating a 'rail experience' into tourism strategies as a method of moving visitors around the region with fewer impacts also provides a means to move the economic benefits of tourism around the region and decentralise the demand for tourist infrastructure and services from coastal zones to those around rail stations in each town on the line. In turn the need for high levels of infrastructure in coastal towns such as Byron Bay would be moderated and traffic congestion may ease.

Set out below is a needs analysis and user profile for each centre on the Casino-Murwillumbah line.

2.2 Needs analysis

Looking at the main centres currently linked by the rail line, it is possible to demonstrate profiles of likely users. Integration with local feeder bus services potentially expands

service to cover a wide area where little or no public transport currently exists.

Description –Casino

- Closest to typical rural profile
- Rail and road transport hub able to connect passengers and freight with Sydney-Brisbane rail services
- Agricultural service town drawing workers and students from surrounding area.
- Strong labour market linkages with Lismore and region generally.
- Primary and Secondary schools.

Current unmet needs -Casino

- Employees traveling to work in Lismore and other locations on the line
- Students traveling to University, TAFE and schools in Lismore.
- Jobseekers wishing to expand access to employment opportunities across regional labour market.
- Young people, families and others without access to private transport traveling to coastal locations for sport and recreation
- Aged and disabled travelers
- Providing access to retail and services (including specialist medical)in Lismore for anyone without access to private transport.

Description –Lismore

- Regional hub for retail, financial services, education, health, aged care and government services
- Draws large numbers of workers, students and consumers from surrounding areas particularly Richmond River, Byron and Ballina shires.
- Base hospital, St Vincent's hospital and various aged care facilities
- Primary, secondary schools, TAFE and University.
- Centre of regional labour market with linkages to Casino, Byron Shire and Ballina local labour markets as well as the Tweed/Lower Gold Coast regional labour market.

Current unmet needs -Lismore

- Mainly inbound traffic as described from other centres with especially high numbers of students, workers, tourists and consumers.
- Jobseekers, particularly young and/or without private transport to expand employment and training opportunities to all locations on the line.
- Young people,families and others without access to private transport traveling to coastal locations for sport and recreation.
- Aged and disabled travelers.
- Inability to access retail and other services (including specialist medical) for those

in other locations without access to private transport.

- Potential to link services throughout Lismore City covering suburban and outlying areas of Nimbin, Coraki, Goonellabah and surrounding districts.
- Connection for local tourism features including Nightcap ranges, Rainforests, Lismore and village markets, sporting and cultural events and historic villages.

Description -Bexhill

- Village approx.8 km east of Lismore with potential to connect workers and students from Corndale, Numulgi and Rosebank valleys with all points on the line.

Description -Eltham-Booyong

- These locations provide considerable scope to connect workers, students and others with all points on the line through one of the busiest corridors on the line.
- Potential to service Clunes, Nashua and surrounding districts.
- Booyong was previously a junction for a spur line to Ballina.

Description -Bangalow

- Market town popular with tourists for its restaurants, shops and monthly markets.
- 10 km from Byron Bay.
- Geographic centre for overlapping local labour markets of Byron Bay, Lismore and Ballina.

Current unmet needs –Bangalow

- Worker and student travelers to Lismore, Byron Bay, Mullumbimby, Brunswick Heads, Ocean Shores and Murwillumbah,
- Jobseekers, particularly young and/or without private transport connecting to all points on the line.
- Aged and disabled access to Lismore and other points on line.
- Young people,families and others without access to private transport traveling to coastal locations for sport and recreation.
- Potential to service Brooklet.Fernleigh,Newrybar and surrounding districts.
- Potential for integrated bus services to connect Ballina and district communities for passengers traveling to Lismore or Byron Bay and beyond to all points.
- Providing access to retail and services (including specialist medical) in Lismore for anyone without access to private transport.

Description -Byron Bay

- Coastal tourist town with over 1.2 million staying visitor and 500,000 'day

trippers' a year.

- Significant proportion of international tourists are backpackers usually without private transport.
- Limited potential to expand access to town by development of roads due to geographical proximity to wetlands.
- Strong labour market growth with linkages to surrounding local and regional labour markets
- Primary, secondary schools as well a diverse range of private training establishments.
- Centre for arts and light industry
- Gateway for coastal tourism operators and events.

Current unmet needs -Byron Bay

- Inbound and outbound workers, travelers, students and consumers to/from all points on line with most commuter traffic between Lismore and Byron Bay.
 - Students and jobseeker traffic accessing training and labour markets at all points on line, particularly Lismore.
 - Aged and disabled access to Lismore and other points on line.
 - Potential to connect with buses servicing Lennox Head and Ballina.
 - Providing access to retail and services (including specialist medical) in Lismore for anyone without access to private transport.
- Huge untapped potential to develop tourist subsidised services to transport visitors to other points on line linking with localised tourism providers and helping to share the wealth effect of Byron Bay 's tourism boom. Murwillumbah, Mullumbimby, Bangalow and Lismore are all potential destinations for such traffic.

Description -Mullumbimby

- 'Biggest little town in Australia '
- Main service centre for Brunswick valley
- Location of Byron Shire Council Chambers and offices.
- Primary and Secondary schools

Current unmet needs -Mullumbimby

- Inbound and outbound workers, travelers, students and consumers to/from all points on line with most commuter traffic between Murwillumbah, Byron Bay and Lismore.
- Students and jobseeker traffic accessing training and labour markets at all points on line, particularly Lismore, Murwillumbah and Byron Bay.
- Aged and disabled access to Lismore and other points on line.

- Potential to increase tourism visitors (especially from Byron Bay) through rail 'experience'.
- Providing access to retail and services (including specialist medical) in Lismore for anyone without access to private transport.
- Potential to service communities in upper Brunswick Valley and at Brunswick Heads.
- Connection point for tourism operators servicing the Brunswick Valley.

Description -Billinudgel

- Service town for Pocket area
- Potential to provide rail access for significant population at Ocean Shores.

Current unmet needs –Billinudgel/OceanShores

- Worker and student travelers to Murwillumbah, Mullumbimby, Byron Bay, Lismore and other points on the line.
- Jobseeker and youth travelers accessing training and labour markets in Murwillumbah, Byron Bay, Lismore and other points on the line.
- Aged and disabled access to services at all points on line, particularly Murwillumbah and Lismore.
- Provide access for Ocean Shores population historically isolated by lack of public transport.

Description -Brunswick Valley integration.

- As described rail access can be provided to Brunswick Valley communities, particularly main population centres of Mullumbimby, Brunswick Heads and Ocean Shores. This can be achieved through a southern access point at Mullumbimby and a northern access point at Billinudgel with integrated bus services linking the two access points and collecting passengers from Brunswick Heads and Ocean Shores. This could overcome major disadvantage suffered by these communities with generally higher needs (due to socio economic profiles) isolated by a lack of public transport options.

Description -Crabbes Creek-Yelgun

- Rural valley communities in high growth corridors with potential to provide access to students and commuter traffic, particularly to schools and businesses in Murwillumbah.

Description –Burringbar

- Tweed Valley town
- Dormitory suburb for Murwillumbah with increasing tourism development

- Potential student, worker, youth, aged/disabled passengers for training, employment and services access, particularly in Murwillumbah.

Description -Stokers Siding

- Hamlet in high growth corridor with student/commuter potential from surrounding Valleys
- Tourist potential

Description -Murwillumbah

- Main centre servicing Tweed Valley (currently fastest growing region in NSW)
- Terminus for branch line
- Primary,secondary schools and TAFE
- Hospital,health and aged care services.
- Potential to link rail transport with Gold Coast rail and bus services.
- Labour market linkages with regional and Byron Shire labour markets.

Current unmet needs -Murwillumbah

- Mainly inbound traffic as described from other centres with especially high numbers of students, workers, tourists and consumers.
- Jobseekers, particularly young and/or without private transport to expand employment and training opportunities to all locations on the line.
- Young people,families and others without access to private transport traveling to coastal locations for sport and recreation.
- Aged and disabled travelers.
- Providing access to retail and services (including specialist medical)in Lismore for anyone without access to private transport.
- Tourism potential as linking point for service providers throughout Tweed Valley, as entry point to a rail 'experience' drawing on the tourism hot spots to the north (Gold Coast) and south (Byron Bay). Connecting point for tourist draws including Mt Warning National Park, World Heritage Border Ranges rainforests and historic villages.

Description -Murwillumbah -Gold Coast (the missing link)

- Construction of the missing rail link between Murwillumbah and the lower Gold Coast would dramatically increase commuter rail traffic with Queensland centres, provide door to door connections with Coolangatta and Brisbane airports for tourists and others, further enhance integration with transport systems in surrounding regions, boost sustainable tourism in an area dependent on

maintaining its natural beauty as well as being a sound investment in sustainable planning for future growth.

2.3 ‘Long term’

In the ‘long term’ we propose an integration of New South Wales and Queensland rail systems by constructing a link between Murwillumbah and Coolangatta airport.

NRTF notes that the provision of a rail link with Queensland would provide a safe, attractive and environmentally sustainable alternative to private road transport options within the Pacific Highway/Motorway corridor that connects directly with Coolangatta and Brisbane Airports as well as providing the opportunity to integrate the movement of domestic freight through the Far North Coast and South East Queensland regions.

By providing accessible public transport options for many in our region who do not own or have difficulty accessing private transport, a rail link provides many benefits.

- Greater efficiency in the delivery of human services.
- Reducing the demand on some human services (eg community transport).
- Reducing the cost of some human services due to access to preventative and better health services.

As a rail link would provide the opportunity for commuters, tourists, airport users, students and many other groups to switch from road to rail, there are a number of potential savings to be made in relation to the maintenance and development of expensive road infrastructure.

3. Coordination of commonwealth, state and local government strategies to deliver sustainable coastal growth and supporting infrastructure;

This issue is of particular importance for our region given our proximity to Queensland transport systems (and other services) as outlined below.

3.1 Interface of three transport systems at the NSW and QLD border.

In addition to the problems created by the interface of two separately regulated transport systems in New South Wales and Queensland, there is a major difference in approach to planning for transport infrastructure. Whereas Queensland is continuing to expand a rail network southwards through the rapidly expanding Gold Coast region towards the border, New South Wales recently withdrew all passenger rail services from the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line and has no plans to extend a link northwards from Murwillumbah to meet the planned Queensland extension to Coolangatta.

Also in contrast to Queensland, there does not exist in our a region an integrated public

transport system. All services (with the exception of Community Transport services) are operated by private operators and cover local areas only with no regulatory framework aimed at providing linkages between local services. Passengers unable to access private transport do not receive the same concessions as those in metropolitan areas and it is therefore no surprise that Community Transport programs funded by Ministry of Transport programs have reached capacity and unable to meet the demand for services. (NSW Legislative Council, General Purposes Standing Committee No 4, *Closure of the Casino to Murwillumbah rail service*, Report 10, November 2004).

On the whole there is little incentive to encourage growth in existing public transport patronage and no planning for appropriate infrastructure to bring about a sustainable transport future.

In addition, the federal government is responsible for the delivery of other (notably rail) transport services and the upgrade of transport infrastructure such as the main Sydney-Brisbane rail line to facilitate the movement of freight through the region. These programs assist in the movement of (mainly import/export) freight from road to rail, but as they do not address issues involved in moving freight in and out of the Gold Coast and Brisbane, they have little impact on moving domestic freight from road to rail.

NRTF is hopeful that an early outcome of improved coordination between the states and all levels of government is that a commitment to provide a rail link with Queensland is matched by a commitment to bring forward the timetable for Queensland's planned rail link to Coolangatta Airport. A further useful outcome would be to progress plans for the development of a freight corridor through the southern Gold Coast following completion of a link with the Queensland rail system.

4. Best practice methods to plan, manage and provide infrastructure to coastal growth areas;

Best practice must include the opportunity to utilise existing infrastructure such as the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line where it can be shown to provide a range of benefits to regional communities.

NRTF takes the view that the development of an integrated transport system for the region must proceed from an assessment of regional transport needs, social and economic linkages with surrounding regions and industries and by taking account of the role of transport in the delivery of human and other services.

NRTF believes that best practice must include working more closely with regional communities to develop the most effective and efficient transport systems.

Sustainable transport and other infrastructure needs should be assessed and provided for on the basis of assessments of the full range of social, environmental and economic costs and benefits.

5. Management of social, environmental and economic considerations associated with infrastructure provision in coastal growth areas.

This submission has identified a range of social, environmental and economic considerations associated with infrastructure provision with particular regard to the development of an integrated regional transport system. In this part a summary of benefits is provided for the key proposals outlined that takes account of the role transport provision has on the demand for, planning and management of other infrastructure. The specific proposals are.

- a) the development of commuter rail services on the existing Casino-Murwillumbah rail line in the short term and
- b) the construction of a rail link between Murwillumbah (New South Wales) and the Queensland rail system on the Gold Coast.

NRTF strongly believes that development of an integrated public transport system for the region based around commuter rail services on the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line should be made a high priority. Such a proposal;

- utilises existing infrastructure
- is based around existing settlement patterns and transport corridors
- meets a range of currently unmet needs provides a direct link to all major centres (with the exception of Ballina)
- is environmentally desirable
- has the potential to be integrated into a low impact tourist management strategy
- could provide more efficient linkages between local/regional labour markets and economies
- improving efficiency in the delivery of a range of human services
- providing increased opportunities for bus operators to expand services and patronage
- assists with 'directing and guiding growth into specific areas to ensure more sustainable coastal growth for the future' by providing a regional transport network that encourages broader settlement patterns and shares the economic benefits of coastal tourism with hinterland communities.

The provision of a link with the Queensland rail system has the potential to;

- provide greater access to a range of human services (such as specialist medical and education) for people without access or ability to utilise private road transport options
- produce savings in road repair and through deferral of road infrastructure development costs
- lower accident costs
- improve integration with Queensland transport systems generally
- generate opportunities for the development of a rail freight corridor into the

southern Gold Coast

- reduce the costs involved in the development and delivery of human services due to expanded catchments brought about through efficient transport