

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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Andrew Gee MP
Chair
The State and Regional Development Committee
NSW Parliament
Macquarie Street
Sydney

Dear Mr Gee

Inquiry into Inter-Regional Public Transport

On behalf of YHA Ltd, I am writing this submission to the Inquiry into Inter-Regional Public Transport.

YHA Ltd is a not-for-profit membership organisation that provides budget tourism accommodation for Australian and international tourists through a network of hostels. We currently have 31 properties in our NSW network and accommodated more than half a million guests in 2011.

Our visitors came from more than 100 countries and all parts of Australia. The majority of our international guests use some form of public transport to visit NSW and therefore the type and quality of inter-regional public transport is critical to attracting this form of tourism to regional areas.

More than 560,000 international visitors to Australia are designated as 'backpackers' (International Visitor Survey, Dec 2011). They spend an average of 74 nights here, and more than \$5,400 on their travels with a propensity to travel much more widely than more traditional inbound tourists. 76% visit NSW (more than 420,000 in 2011).

Backpacker-style travel offers great benefits to regional tourism in NSW because expenditure is spread throughout the local economy, working holiday visa holders can provide additional seasonal employees, and backpackers are more adventurous in their choice of destinations and activities than other tourists.

YHA would like to comment on a number of items in the Terms of Reference as follows:

a) How Countrylink services could be improved

The Countrylink network currently services some of the more popular tourism regions in NSW, but not others. Two regions with particular potential are:

i) The South Coast – the Princes Highway is poorly served with public transport to the regional towns along the highway and then with connections to services in Victoria to Melbourne.

ii) Snowy Mountains – this is an area of unique significance as Australia's alpine region and Australia's highest peak. At present, there is no public transport options beyond Cooma outside the ski season so tourism to the region is severely hampered. The Countrylink coach service to Cooma could be extended to Jindabyne with local connections to Thredbo which would greatly help develop an all-year tourism economy in this region.

b) How network linkages can be improved

Improved linkages between train and coach services, and the range of destinations serviced, can be helped by increasing the usage of these services by youth travellers. They travel year-round, and all days of the week, and this business can help in the overall viability of these services and the more uneven pattern of local usage.

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

YHA would submit that whilst Countrylink has products relevant to the backpacker market (e.g. The Backtracker Pass for international visitors), this product range is not adequately marketed or commercially driven, and awareness of these passes in the target markets is poor. However, there is the potential to grow this as visitors from key source markets like Europe are used to travelling inter-regionally by train. It would often be their preferred means of public transport, but the network and services in NSW need to meet their needs and expectations.

In particular, Countrylink does not adequately compete in the travel market place with the rail companies from other states. This has led to a reduced awareness of Countrylink and its services, less product distribution and sales through travel agents, and poor online distribution direct to consumer. The latter is increasingly important for the youth travel market who primarily find their travel information online.

Increasingly awareness of, and sales of Countrylink passes would be the most effective way of increasing inter-regional travel.

YHA Ltd welcomes this Parliamentary inquiry and would be happy to further participate if requested.

Yours sincerely

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Julian Ledger
CEO

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