

**Submission
No 83**

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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Ms Carolyn Littlefair
The Committee Manager
State and Regional Development Committee, Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Email: stateregional@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Ms Littlefair,

Inquiry into Inter-Regional Public Transport in New South Wales

National Seniors Australia welcomes the Committee's consideration of how inter-regional public transport can better serve the needs of regional New South Wales. CountryLink is a vital service that carries almost two million passengers to 365 destinations every year.

By way of background, National Seniors Australia is the country's largest organisation representing the interests of those aged 50 and over, with around a quarter of a million members nation-wide. This broad-based support enables National Seniors to provide a well informed and representative voice on behalf of its members and contribute to public education, debate and community consultation on issues of direct relevance to older Australians.

In presenting this submission we wish to acknowledge the work of University of Newcastle students Clarice Hurren, Rachel Otto, Samantha Jeffery and Katrina Rose, who did the groundwork for this submission as part of the requirements for their Bachelor of Communications course.

Our focus in this submission is on the particular needs of older travellers and on improvements to current services which will encourage older travellers to make greater use of inter-regional public transport. In particular, we will address the issues of accessibility, physical security and respect.

Generally speaking, increasing age is related to long-term health conditions, higher rates of disability and poorer reported health status. Although there are many fit and able older travellers, there is also a large cohort for whom public transport is their primary travel option.¹ This includes those whose

¹ RTA (2012). *Options for Older Drivers*. Retrieved 2 May 2012, from http://www.rta.nsw.gov.au/licensing/renewingalicence/olderdrivers/olderdriver_options.html

driving skills have deteriorated or have lost their license and those who have impaired mobility and/ or a disability,

Accessibility

Difficulties arise particularly in relation to access to up-to-date timetables, access to toilets on board buses and at train stations, and ability to board and alight from buses and trains.

The internet has rapidly become an essential tool for living. Our research shows that while older people are quick to embrace this technology for its convenience, a significant number (especially those with a disability and mobility impairments) find it too hard to keep up and are less likely to use the NSW Transport Info App than younger travellers preferring to rely on printed brochures.² Customer feedback suggests that current printed brochures are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain.³ This lack of effective communication makes it increasingly difficult for a significant user group to access current CountryLink timetables and track work schedules.

Traveling by train also presents accessibility problems with limited train stations having wheel chair access points or offering assistance when boarding and alighting and numerous stairs at many stations. Older people are especially concerned about crowds and the heightened risk of a fall.⁴ Although coaches used by CountryLink exceed current Disability Standards for public transport benchmarks, older travellers report that travelling by coach remains difficult for people with mobility impairments or medical conditions as they are unable to move around as freely on a train and there is limited or no access to facilities such as toilets.⁵ In addition, facilities at bus stops, such as toilets and cafeterias, are not always wheelchair accessible and walkways and footpaths are often inadequate.

Security

We note that the NSW Government has recognised the importance of security issues for transport network users and is implementing a strategy to increase police presence and to upgrade security infrastructure (e.g. improved lighting, more CCTV cameras). However, a major issue for older travellers living in rural and regional NSW is that there are limited security guards and officers patrolling trains and stations in regional areas. Any action that can be taken to upgrade security at regional stations will encourage older travellers to be more confident about using public transport, particularly in the evenings.

² NSPAC (2011), *Older Australians and the Internet: Bridging the Digital Divide*. Canberra.

³ Australian Transport Discussion Board (2010). *The Timetables that are NOT available yet*. Posts from September/October 2010. Retrieved on 116 May 2012, from <http://www.busaustralia.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=21&t=54578>

⁴ NRMA (2010). *Transport and Mobility Needs of Elderly Australians: Discussion Paper*, pp 1-8.

⁵ Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association (2010). *Closing the Transport Gap: Meeting the Needs of Transport Disadvantaged People in NSW*, pp 1-35.

Respect

The effects on older people of losing independence and becoming dependent on public transport can be far-reaching. The RTA has noted that 'ceasing driving can sometimes have extreme effects on the life of an elderly person ... for many, a licence represents freedom, treasured memories and a connection with the community and its loss is felt as a crushing blow to a person's self-esteem.'⁶ Others suggest that older people equate access to transport with access to a positive and better quality of life and that loss of easy access can cause profound identity problems.⁷

This could be mitigated by a more proactive focus on the needs of older travellers, so that they feel welcomed and valued as customers. This is not the case at present, particularly for those older travellers who have impaired mobility.

Our recommendations are:

1. Regularly update printed timetables for buses and trains and distribute widely.
2. Make public transport information (e.g. about track work schedules) available through a variety of media, including radio and/or television as well as online.
3. Conduct an accessibility audit of regional train and bus stations
4. Conduct a security audit of regional train and bus stations
5. Establish an Older Travellers Advisory Group to advise on initiatives to improve the public transport travel experience for senior travellers.

Yours faithfully

Peter Matwijiw

General Manager Policy and Research
National Seniors Australia

⁶ RTA (2007). *Licensing of Older Driver Discussion Paper*, p. 6.

⁷ Mollenkopf, H., Hieber, A. & Wahl, H. (2011). Continuity and Change in Older Adults' Perception of Out-of-home Mobility over Ten Years: a Qualitative-Quantitative Approach, in *Ageing and Society* 31, pp. 782-802.