

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Organisation: Snowy River Shire Council
Name: Mr Joseph Vescio
Position: General Manager
Date Received: 18/05/2012



**Snowy River Shire Council
Submission to NSW Government
Inter-Regional Public Transport
Inquiry**

*Legislative Assembly - State and
Regional Development Committee*

Introduction

The lack of public transport options is a major impediment to residents who wish to access services delivered outside the Snowy River Shire. Residents are totally dependent upon private vehicles as a means of transport except during limited times within the seasonal peak period.

Few post secondary education, training, health and social services are located locally and currently individuals have to travel large distances to access these. This impacts significantly on the most vulnerable members of the community, including young people, older people, the disabled, unskilled workers, the unemployed and carers.

Extensive community consultation undertaken by Council as part of the Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework as well as previous consultation as part of the Jindabyne Action Plan, and the Learning Needs Analysis have clearly demonstrated that the distance from education and training providers as a major impediment to residents wishing to undertake skills development.

Context

Snowy River Shire, adjacent to Kosciusko National Park, is currently the fifth fastest growing Shire in NSW. The population in the shire is around 7,500 however the Department of Planning population projections indicate a 49% increase in out resident population by the year 2036. It is important to note however, that this figure represents the permanent resident population estimate and that the population in peak periods i.e. winter, can escalate to around 20,000 people.

Aside from the challenges of catering to significant population fluctuations, there are some matters of particular concern to residents of the Shire which arise as a consequence of its geographic/physical location.

These matters provide a context for many of the other issues which are identified in the Snowy River Shire's Social Plan (2005 - 2009) and impact on the strategies which can be developed in regard to issues. They include:

- a severe winter climate
- an extremely large visitor and seasonal worker population during the winter months
- the location of Kosciuszko National Park with its urbanised ski resort centres and growing permanent populations within the boundaries of the shire
- the presence of Snowy Hydro as the single largest landholder in the shire
- economic and social issues associated with tourism

Snowy River Shire Lands Study (2002) carried out by Snowy River Shire Council identified some specific social issues for Snowy River communities that still remain relevant today. Of particular significance is the ageing farming family demographic and the increased pressure that places on services. While a number of challenges confronting Snowy River are also

encountered in many other rural areas, Snowy River is one of the few areas in the State of NSW that has no access to services such as Countrylink.

The largest township in the region is Cooma, where most services exist and therefore where residents of Snowy River can access them. It is approximately a 50 minute drive by private vehicle from Jindabyne to Cooma. Cooma is 125 kilometres south of the business Centre of Canberra, and around the same distance to the coast on our east, and Bega, which, with Canberra, are where most of our medical transports are destined. Cooma is the location of the closest access to Countrylink services.

While there are some transport options available during the winter period June - October such as some coach services from Canberra, and air transport options there are significant limitations in terms of timing of services and pricing. In summer the options are extremely limited and with respect to some services, nonexistent.

According to ABS Census Internal Migration 2006 data, Snowy River had in migration of 1624 in the previous 5 year period (2001 - 2006). Yet, setting aside fertility and mortality figures the overall population did not appear to reflect that growth meaning that people coming to live in Snowy River are possibly not choosing to stay.

That said, once the Jindabyne Central School was established in 2006 out migration, at least in respect to families with school aged children, appeared to drop. This is evidenced by the increased number of young people in education at secondary level in Jindabyne. However, the out migration of post secondary aged young people can only be resolved with increased access to education and training. This can only be achieved if young people can flow between Jindabyne and Cooma and on to Canberra. Currently the only form of transport available to residents of the shire is private vehicle and limited air services.

Opportunities for older people to travel throughout the region and beyond would also have some fundamental benefits beyond leisure. There are currently around 259 people aged over 74, and older people suffer significantly in relation to transport disadvantage which means that access to health and other services can be problematic. But also, for those not eligible for Community Transport there can be some significant issues. Social interaction is a key element in ensuring people can remain independent into their later years but people cannot remain in their homes if they cannot access services or social contact.

There is also a risk that as people age in the community they will migrate elsewhere. This only shifts the burden of services to other communities. This can also displace people who have been resident in the shire all their working life. Transport disadvantage is a significant issue for both the young and the elderly.

Literature Review

Snowy River Shire Community Strategic Plan

The Snowy River Shire CSP forms part of the Integrated Planning and Reporting Framework and is currently in draft form. Commencing in October 2010 with a series of community forums which resulted in over 8,000 comments, it gives us the most current assessment of the transport needs of the Snowy River Shire community as a result of extensive community members and business representatives participation in the process across the Shire.

The CSP research found that transport continues to be raised a major issue for the Shire and is one of the seven key themes of the plan;

2. Expanding connections within the Shire and beyond

Objectives

2.1 Increased universal accessibility throughout the Shire

2.2 An adequate and accessible public transport network within and beyond the Shire

2.3 Transport infrastructure that is safe and sustainable and meets the changing needs of the community

2.4 Shire-wide access to high quality communication technologies

Objective 2.2 specifically relates to public transport and the feedback from the community was that transport plays a fundamental role in keeping the community physically connected to workplaces, recreational areas and services. There is a need for effective and efficient year round public transport, which is important to promote interaction and linkages across our villages and towns. It is also seen as an important strategy for supporting year round tourism within the Shire.

Public transport services in the Shire are currently very limited, although school bus services are available for the general public to use. Opportunities however, for local public transport services to connect with similar services outside the Shire remain limited.

Additional bus services are made available during winter season to accommodate the influx of people to the Snowy Mountains, although these predominantly serve the tourist market. The Shire does have a commercial airport offering services six days per week during winter but no service in summer.

The Shire provides a community transport service, which is available to eligible people. Although this service is highly valued, it remains a limited facility due to funding constraints. Issues of parking and access for individuals with reduced mobility are areas that need to be addressed in the future.

Social Plan

Snowy River Shire Council's social plan has identified the impact of the lack of public transport for the Shire particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups within our community. The plan notes that in common with many rural areas, the lack of public transport is a major issue in the Shire. Lack of transport access contributes to social isolation, access to employment, to training, to government and community services.

In relation to public transport the social plan notes:

- The lack of equity in provision of transport services and infrastructure when compared to other local government areas in the region and more broadly.
- A lack of access to public transport is identified as contributing to social isolation for numerous groups within the community including young people, older people, women and people with disabilities.
- The need for public transport services that meet the needs of seasonal workers
- The high dependence on private car travel and the need to explore alternatives to private car use.
- The impact of increasing centralization of vital services, in particular health services, in relation to the availability of suitable public transport
- The consistent identification of transport issues as a contributor to disadvantage and vulnerability in rural areas in planning documents and issues papers relevant to the region.
- Few vital government agencies and services are located within the shire necessitating that residents travel large distances to the larger centres of Cooma or Queanbeyan and Canberra. Residents without access to private cars are severely disadvantaged in relation to their access to these services which include amongst others; courts, hospitals, Centrelink and housing providers.
- Students wishing to study at TAFE are required to travel large distances to centres such as Cooma, Queanbeyan and Bega and are severely impacted by the lack of transport options.
- Young people living in smaller centres are particularly disadvantaged in terms of their ability to connect with their peers due to their lack of access to any transport options including private car travel.
- Transport is a major contributing factor for isolation amongst women particularly where no second car is available.
- Older residents are unable to access services located outside of the shire due to a lack of transport options
- People with disabilities are especially disadvantaged by a lack of public transport accessible to their needs such as wheelchair

Jindabyne Action Plan

Council undertook a collaborative planning process with the community living within Jindabyne and environs during 2008 to prepare the Jindabyne Action Plan. Council reported that 22% percent of Jindabyne's regular population of 3,500 people took part in some form of engagement.

A total of six overarching themes emerged from the consultation. Lack of public transport options appeared as one of these.

The lack of public transport options attracted a high number of unprompted responses from questions such as: *What do people like least about Jindabyne*, and *What three things would improve Jindabyne*.

Lack of public transport was the strongest theme in response to the question *What three things would improve Jindabyne*, where it was raised by all groups of people. Along with children and families, Older People, and Young People, it was also mentioned by People with Disabilities as the major theme in response to the question : *What do you like least about Jindabyne*.

In the discussion of these questions, most people wanted to see expanded public transport shuttle options not only in and around Jindabyne, but also extended services to Cooma and Canberra.

In another part of the consultation, discussions were centered around the nominated existing public transport routes and services, where people made a variety of comments about proposed usage and availability.

This theme also featured in the Survey of Jindabyne Businesses where it was raised as a major theme in response to both questions: *What do you like least about Jindabyne as a location for business* and *What three actions could be taken to improve Jindabyne as a location for your business*.

The findings demonstrated that the ability to use more frequent and expanded public transport options would significantly increase the feelings of connection and the ability to access the full range of the regions business, leisure and recreation services.

Village Plans

Prior to the Jindabyne Action Plan Council undertook a collaborative planning process with the communities living in Adaminaby, Berridale and Dalgety during 2006 and 2007 to prepare Village Plans. Each town identified overarching themes from the consultation regarding the future planning and growth of these villages. For this growth to be achieved a range of services will be required including public transport options.

Learning Needs Analysis

During 2009 Snowy River Shire Council undertook a learning needs analysis to determine the level of demand for local delivery of education and training services. One critical factor driving the need for such an analysis is a change in the Shire's demography. Prior to the establishment of Jindabyne Central School in 2006, the majority of young people aged 12 years and up left the shire to access education. A small number of local students attended secondary school at Snowy Mountains Grammar (established in 1996); but the majority of young people completed secondary education at schools outside the Shire and generally in boarding schools around NSW and the ACT.

The current population of the two schools in Jindabyne is approximately 830. This is an increase of around 300 students since 2006. The majority of those represent the cohort that would traditionally leave the area to access secondary education.

However, this recent significant increase in the Shire's youth population raises the issue of how well-placed the local education sector is to respond to the emerging post secondary educational and pre-employment training needs of this population.

Recent changes to government policy in relation to school leaving age is also an important consideration within this context. The availability of educational pathways for students which include access to vocational education options such as TAFE will become an increasingly important consideration. The closest TAFE campus is located in Cooma and at present the students accessing TAFE need to travel to Cooma to participate in those programs.

The Learning Needs Analysis gathered data through surveys and face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders. Persons interviewed included:

- Industry and employer representatives;
- Local government managers and officers;
- Adult and vocational education services providers
- School teachers and principals
- Community members; and.
- young people

Transport and travel issues were the second most commonly identified among young people in relation to barriers to undertaking further study after cost and financial constraints. Interview participants from the business sector reported that the cost associated with sending staff away to attend short courses or other training was high, particularly in terms of transportation costs. There are cases identified where young people have to access TAFE training and cannot access the training and have had to gain special consent to drive as a 16 year old which can be very hazardous. Other young people have missed opportunities for trades as they cannot access the training due to transport disadvantage.

The lack of such facilities within the Shire along with limited transport availability to access facilities in other centres will present a challenge into the future. It is also an ongoing risk factor in terms of employability of local youth.

Terms of Reference – Issues

a. How Countrylink services can be improved

Countrylink currently services the Bombala community and the route then links back into Canberra through Cooma by-passing our Shire. Snowy River Shire Council proposes that a trial be undertaken in our shire that would result in a simple deviation of that route.

As the Snowy River Way is now sealed between Bombala and Jindabyne there is an opportunity to change the route to include a leg along the Snowy River Way through to Jindabyne.

A change to the Countrylink route from Bombala through to Jindabyne along the Snowy River Way and then to Canberra, via Berridale and Cooma would provide people in a number of ageing communities with access to transport for the purpose of health, education or leisure and would reduce the disadvantage currently experienced by many members of those communities. It may also assist in attracting visitors and potential new residents to some of those communities such as Dalgety and Berridale.

It would be important to ensure that the service links back into Canberra so as to pick up the train connection. The Council would be happy to discuss potential timetabling options.

A trial of this type could then be evaluated after six months so as to determine its future operation.

b. How Network Linkages between CountryLink train and coach services can be improved

Network linkages between CountryLink train and coach services can be improved by a reconfiguring of the timetable to include return travel and provide a bus service that would link up with selected arrivals and departures from Canberra. The route could include stops at Canberra Hospital and Canberra Airport as well as Canberra Train Station.

c. The Potential for CountryLink Services to carry Light Freight

With the increase in the number of people buying and selling online, there is the opportunity for local businesses to use the CountryLink service to carry light freight at competitive prices. Whilst there are several privately run freight operators delivery outside of the peak winter period can be spasmodic dependant on loads.

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

Snowy River Shire is one of the largest domestic tourist districts widely recognised as the shire borders the Kosciuszko National Park, the only Alpine Area in NSW and location of our highest summit. Contained within the park are the four snow sports resorts.

Given the NSW State Government have mandated that domestic tourism expenditure in NSW is to be doubled by the year 2020 our Shire is handicapped in its ability to grow tourism within the spring/summer months due to the lack of a permanent year round public transport service. While the winter season is well serviced by private operators the summer season is not.

The largest tourism activity within the Snowy River Shire is the ski season, which runs from June to October each year. The ski season is the major economic contributor to the Snowy area, either by direct employment, small business income or associated businesses.

However over recent years there has been an increase in tourist numbers outside this season. There are now any number of spring/summer activities held in the region; Lake Light Sculpture, Dragonboat Flowing Festival, a growing number of mountain bike events, the iconic trout fishing and the Kosciuszko National Park, which is one of the top 5 national parks for tourists to visit.

As detailed above the region has the product and attractions to become a destination for the backpacker market. To date though access to the region for this market has not been available and so the region, and NSW as a whole, has seen these travellers visiting and spending elsewhere.

Given the significance of the Snowy Mountains as a tourism destination, there is a significant opportunity to bolster Countrylink as a tourism asset. This can only be achieved if visitors to the region can readily access Jindabyne. Innovative marketing partnerships with regional businesses and local tour operators could provide for a whole of journey travel experience. Travellers using Countrylink could be linked in directly with hotels, vehicle hire and other products which would benefit both Countrylink and the regional economy.

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

As our national capital is only two hours to our north with the large student populations in tertiary education many of whom are overseas students enormous potential exists to increase visitation to our region.

With many retirees now inhabiting our nearby coastal regions and reluctant to drive long distances or mountain roads potential for an increase in local domestic visitation also exists.

Increased domestic and international growth within our own “Snowy Mountains” region would be greatly enhanced by the ability to have access to the entire region not just select segments.

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

An extension of the existing CountryLink ticket would be an integrated ticket that allowed use of the Cityrail network. VLine currently have a bus service that runs through Cooma and CountryLink may be able to partner with them to increase services for our region.

g. The role of local councils can play in improving inter-regional public transportation networks and in encouraging increase patronage

Snowy River Shire Council is strongly supportive of any initiatives aimed at improving the access to public transport in the Shire. In response to the findings of its internal planning, Council has identified a range of ways it can help facilitate improvements in this areas

Council supports collaborative approaches between Local government authorities in the broader region, other levels of government and business groups through mechanisms such as SEROC, RDASI, High Plains Forums etc

Council would also consider the need for public infrastructure to support services such as bus stops, bus lanes, pedestrian access etc and would provide for these within their budget framework.

Council would also encourage the establishment of a “transport hub” for coaches in the centre of Jindabyne.

Council would advertise and promote services in a variety of ways – links of website, newspaper advertising, etc in order to provide additional support to promotion of any services.

Council would facilitate the gathering of constructive feedback on services and assist with the evaluation processes to ensure that routes and timetables are “fit for purpose” and relevant to both the community and the transport provider.

Council would be in a position to play a role in the dissemination of information from the transport provider to the public as required.

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

Normal buses and those with wheel chair access would provide the necessary service.

Conclusion

The issues pertaining to public transport that have already been identified in this paper will only increase as the towns and Shire continue to grow. The NSW Department of Planning released a report that presents population projections over the period 2006-2036 for the NSW Statistical Local Areas (SLAs) and Local Government Areas (LGAs) of NSW. The projections take into account 2006 census data and the latest expertise on fertility, mortality and migration.

The population projections are not targets. They do not necessarily reflect policy positions and may well differ from policy targets in departmental strategies (e.g. Sydney Metropolitan Strategy). It is important to recognise that population projections reflect the outcome of certain assumptions about the future mortality, fertility and migration - assumptions which may or may not eventuate. The projections should not be interpreted as precise predictions of the demographic future.

The key points for the Snowy River Shire Local Government Area are:

- Like every SLA in the State, the Shire population is projected to experience continued population ageing (an increase in the percentage aged 65 and above) over the next 3 decades;
- By 2036, our population is estimated to be 11,300. That is nearly 4000 people more than at the 2006 census count or a 49% increase.
- Unlike many LGAs with small populations, the population of Snowy River is projected to grow.
- Whilst there is the growth in the older populations there is also predicted to be growth in all other age groups except for 20-24 and 30-34 year old males.
- In a regional context the Shire's population could bypass that of Cooma-Monaro's by 2031. (Snowy River with a population of 10,800 and Cooma-Monaro being 10,500).
- In terms of the Shire, with 80% of most development actions occurring within a 10km radius of Jindabyne, much of the growth is likely to occur in and around Jindabyne.

Table 184.1: The past and projected population of Snowy River LGA, 1996-2036

Year	Total population ^a	Growth rate ^b (%)	Growth Index (2006=100)
<i>Past</i>			
1996	6,300	n/a	83
2001	7,200	2.78	95
2006	7,600	1.02	100
<i>Projected</i>			
2011	8,200	1.63	108
2016	8,900	1.53	117
2021	9,500	1.40	126
2026	10,200	1.27	134
2031	10,800	1.15	142
2036	11,300	1.04	149

Source: past data – Australian Bureau of Statistics; projections – Department of Planning.

a. Population numbers are for 30th June of the year shown.

b. Annual average growth rate over the five year period ending 30th June of the year shown.

The NSW Department of Transport CountryLinkup Community Consultations Report 2010 - Response January 2011 stated the following;

“Recommendation No. 62 - that Countrylink examine what improvements to coach services can be made to the connection between Cooma, Jindabyne, Dalgety and Bombala as a result of recent road upgrades. This was due to be considered in the 2011 timetable review. “

Council asks what has happened to this recommendation and suggests that a trial be undertaken of an amendment to the current Countrylink service from the Bombala community route link back into Canberra through Cooma. As the Snowy River Way is now sealed between Bombala and Jindabyne there is an opportunity to change the route to include a leg along the Snowy River Way through Dalgety to Jindabyne then Berridale and Cooma before linking with the train service to Canberra. Other potential links for this service would include Canberra Hospital and Canberra Airport.