

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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Executive Summary

The Northern Rivers Social Development Council (NRSDC) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the **Inter-regional Public Transport Legislative Assembly Inquiry**.

People in regional NSW frequently have to travel long distances to access the services they need including health, education and employment. Improving inter-regional and cross border connections is therefore a high priority issue. CountryLink services provide coach transport across much of regional NSW but their potential to increase transport options is limited by a number of factors, including the need for passengers to travel a distance of at least 40 kilometres, restricted routes, timetables and bus stops, lack of connection and coordination with other transport services, and the high cost of fares. There is immense scope to broaden the capacity of CountryLink services to better meet the needs of rural and regional communities across NSW. At present, inter-regional public transport is limited by contracts which appear to favour the needs of service providers over service users and policies that limit flexibility, innovation and cooperation.

The Northern Rivers is a highly transport disadvantaged region, where public transport is limited, expensive and particularly lacking in inter-regional and cross border services. There is a high level of need for the development of an inter-regional transport system that is affordable, accessible, appropriately time tabled and responsive to community needs. For the system to be accessible to regional communities, it should be fully integrated with intra regional and local transport services. This will require a multimodal approach that includes flexible demand responsive micro transit services.

Northern Rivers Social Development Council

NRSDC is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation, which promotes community wellbeing across the Northern Rivers of NSW. The NRSDC Transport Development Project (TDP) works collaboratively across the region towards the realisation of relevant, effective, affordable and accessible transport solutions for transport disadvantaged communities.¹

NRSDC's knowledge of transport need is informed by regular consultations with community members and groups across the region. This includes surveys conducted at annual transport information events, broader NRSDC surveys on social issues, convening transport forums and workshops, regular contact with agencies who work with transport disadvantaged people as well as informal conversations with public transport users.

How CountryLink Services can be improved

There is a strong perception in the community that CountryLink services are entirely Sydney-centric. Timetables are designed to meet the needs of metropolitan users and are based on travel between Sydney and Brisbane without much consideration for the travel patterns of regional users.

There is a lack of readily available information about CountryLink services, particularly for those without access to the internet. Timetables are confusing and many people find it difficult to interpret the system of arrows denoting transfers between bus and coach services. Roll out of the 131500 Transport Information service across NSW would greatly improve people's capacity to access and understand CountryLink information. There is also a lack of awareness about the Pensioner Excursion Ticket (PET)

¹ NRSDC Transport Position Statement Appendix II

among eligible people. Consultations by NRSDC suggest many pensioners are unnecessarily purchasing full fare tickets. We also receive feedback that booking requirements are a barrier to accessing CountryLink services, particularly for people who do not have internet access, do not have a credit card or who need to undertake urgent unplanned travel. Many of the potential users of CountryLink services are in these categories.

There is currently a low usage rate of CountryLink coach services and, conversely, a gap in intra -regional transport provision. People are unable to travel on CountryLink coaches unless they are travelling over 40km. This arrangement creates an unnecessary barrier, particularly in light of the spare capacity in CountryLink vehicles. The ability to use this service for travel from one town to the next would vastly improve the usability of the CountryLink service to regional passengers. CountryLink coaches could also be more flexible by providing minor deviations from the route and stopping along the route for rural people who are unable to drive into their nearest town to access the service.

There is a high demand for cross border transport that encompasses not only commuters and tourism, but includes access to essential medical care, Gold Coast airport and the rail network north. The NSW Government is currently undertaking a study into the viability of reintroducing the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line. If this were part of an integrated transport network the reinstatement of this line would improve transport options for Northern Rivers' residents. Linking this line to the existing South East Queensland rail network by connecting Murwillumbah to Robina could provide a vital cross border transport link. There are obvious economic, environmental and social benefits in establishing a twice daily cross border commuter service between the Northern Rivers and South East Queensland. The 2001 ABS Journey to Work data for Tweed Shire identified that 22% of all workplace destinations were in SEQ, with 63% of these in the Gold Coast.² The involvement of the Cross Border Commissioner in NSW regional transport planning will assist in addressing some of these issues.

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

At present there are no CountryLink coaches to deliver people to meet early morning services from the North Coast to Sydney and Brisbane. For example, there are no services to get from Maclean to Grafton for the 6.30am Sydney XPT service, or from Lismore to Casino for the 3.55am Brisbane XPT service, which is the only rail service to Brisbane. There is no other public transport available at these times. Even for people who do have access to a car or are able to afford a taxi, there is no provision for secure car parking at the train stations or security for people waiting alone in the dark. The provision of coaches or a demand responsive micro transit arrangement would make these services accessible for those who are unable to drive, get a lift or catch a taxi to the station.

Routes and timetables need to be reviewed to reflect the travel needs of regional residents, rather than having all services aligned to the needs of metropolitan residents. This would include appropriately timed services as well as increased flexibility. Inter-regional travel is not always from or to Sydney or Brisbane; it would be helpful to consider providing services for other mini routes of identified need, for example between the North Coast and Newcastle. Inter-regional services avoiding Sydney need to be developed, for example Wagga-Orange-Dubbo or Canberra-Mudgee-Armidale. These services could be timetabled to suit the needs of those communities.

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

A cultural shift from car to public transport must be developed in tandem with efficient, flexible, affordable public transport and effective campaigns to promote public transport. The use of incentives for public transport, as well as disincentives for car travel, plays a vital role in cultural change. Public transport must be cost effective, fast and pleasant and presented as an ethical choice. Improved business

² SGS Economics and Planning 2005 *Overview of Economic Implications of South East Queensland on the Northern Rivers Region: A Discussion Paper as Input to the Draft Northern Rivers RIEP V3*, Northern Rivers Regional Development Board, Lismore.

travel services, such as Wi-Fi, and frequent traveler programs to reward regular users would encourage increased use by commuters.

Cost is a significant factor in people's choice of travel mode. Public transport needs to represent a cost saving compared with car travel and this should be achieved through subsidisation if necessary. There are clear links between transport costs and a number of other government functions, with funding repercussions that cross government departments. Lack of transport results in transferred costs to other budget areas, such as health and social welfare. Road congestion cost Australia \$10 billion in 2005 and this figure is predicted to double by 2020.³ Approximately 1 500 people are killed and 30 000 seriously injured each year on Australian roads.⁴ The costs of externalities such as these need to be factored in to analyses of the relative costs of transport infrastructure and subsidies. Increased subsidisation of public transport will reduce costs in other areas and increase the amount of travel on public transport.

The issue of fairer concessions should also be addressed. There are a number of people on low incomes who are not eligible for concession cards, particularly young people, who would benefit from inclusion in a scheme similar to the RED ticket and PET concessions.

Access to easily understood information about public transport is a key factor in encouraging people to use public transport. Roll out of the 131500 Transport Information service across regional NSW would greatly improve people's capacity to access and understand information and assist them to plan their travel on public transport with confidence.

The benefits of increased modal share to public transport, at the expense of single occupant car trips, are enjoyed by the whole community through increased transport options, decreased congestion and improvements to air quality.⁵

What is the extent to which regional public transport networks are integrated and how can they be better integrated?

Inter-regional public transport cannot be considered in isolation from *intra-regional* transport. Regional NSW is characterised by highly dispersed populations and isolated communities and villages. Inter-regional public transport provides the 'backbone' of the transport system but this is of little use to people who are unable to get to a designated bus stop along the main routes. It is essential that *inter-regional* public transport is thoroughly integrated with *intra-regional* public transport. Feedback from rural communities indicates that they would benefit greatly from better connections between CountryLink services and local bus services, for example integration with the bus service at Iluka.

There is strong demand in regional NSW for regular, affordable public transport services that link villages, towns, larger regional centres, including South East Queensland, using multi modal systems based on interlocking different routes, modes and lines to form a network that passengers then access through transferring. There are three different levels of hierarchy- trunk routes, district routes and local routes- that need to be considered. Local routes should be serviced by demand responsive feeder services that are designed to meet the needs of transport disadvantaged people. For example, small buses with flexible times and routes pick up passengers in less populated rural areas and transfer them to larger scheduled bus services in the closest town, which then link to rail and coach services for travel to major centres. The key features of this type of system are a single ticket for the whole journey and minimal waiting times between transfers. The Inter Regional Public Transport Inquiry should consider how micro transit systems can be used to increase access to inter- regional services and to address transport gaps in regional NSW.

³ JWK Health Consultants 2011 *Sustain Northern Rivers Transport Options Plan*, Discussion document prepared for the North Coast Area Health Service

⁴ Stanley, John & Simon Barrett. 2010 *Moving People-Solutions for a growing Australia*, Australasian Railway Association, Bus Industry Confederation and International Association of Public Transport-UITP

⁵ McCabe, N. 2008 *Discussion Paper*, Lower Hunter Councils Transport Group

There are particular issues for those who live near the NSW/Queensland border in regard to differing fare structures and concessions. It would be useful to have a national agreement whereby concessions or subsidies could be utilized on either side of the border or a system of shared concessions around Australia. The current arrangement places unnecessary hardship on people who have already been determined to be financially disadvantaged and warranting fare assistance.

What types of buses and trains will be required for the provision of regional passenger services in the future?

There is clearly a need for an expanded, integrated, multimodal public transport system that is affordable, flexible and responsive to community needs. Modes and services should be integrated so that, for example, bus timetables are coordinated with connecting coach or bus services to ensure minimum waiting times. This needs a mobility management approach that emphasises moving people as the starting point, rather than focusing on a specific transport mode.⁶ Examples of this are mobility management models operating in Western Sydney and the Gold Coast. Mobility management creates a one-stop-shop to provide transport information; travel bookings and spare seat brokerage service to promote better use of existing services. Mobility management can improve the use of existing services and resources and call forth new types of transport in direct response to demand through coordination of government programs, service providers and community needs.

Future transport planning and development will need to address issues such as the impacts of fossil fuel use, sterilisation of environmental assets by infrastructure development, peak oil, climate change, establishing a low carbon transport system and the costs of environmental externalities. The transport sector currently contributes to 13.5% of total carbon emissions⁷ and occurrences of extreme climate events and the resulting inundation impacts on transport infrastructure are likely to become more frequent. To reduce the long term maintenance costs, it is critical that the inter-regional public transport system is based on future proofing strategies by building transport infrastructure for future conditions. Alternative technologies, including the use of bio-fuels, will be a large part of the solution outside of metropolitan areas.

Collaborative approaches that involve government, non-government and community stakeholders can maximise government funding by reducing duplication of transport services, maximising use of spare transport capacity and ensuring that solutions are appropriate and acceptable to local communities. State government can benefit by tapping into the work of local and regional networks that already exist across NSW. For example, many local councils convene bi-monthly transport working groups. These groups consist of council representatives such as community services staff and engineers, transport development project workers, Transport for NSW regional coordinators, representatives from local transport providers (buses, taxis and community transport) as well as community representatives. These groups have been effective at identifying and responding to inter-regional public transport issues. The groups are uniquely effective because their membership cuts across local and state government bodies, service providers and local community. The Sustain Northern Rivers collaboration also convenes a transport working group, Sustain Transport, which represents a broad cross section of regional transport interests and has a unique understanding of transport issues and unmet needs for this region. There is also scope for greater collaboration between the state government and regional groups such as Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils (NOROC) and Regional Development Australia -Northern Rivers in relation to transport planning.

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⁶ Leigh, J. 2010 *Transport: Everyone's Concern*, Transport Development and Solutions Alliance Policy Platform

⁷ <http://www.environment.gov.au/settlements/transport/fuelguide/environment.html>

Appendix II

Northern Rivers Social Development Council Transport Position Statement

The future we want:

A range of accessible transport options across the Northern Rivers that enable social inclusion and wellbeing for everyone.

How we will achieve this:

We will increase access and opportunities through the development of relevant, effective, affordable and accessible transport solutions, with a focus on our most transport disadvantaged communities. NRSDC will work collaboratively across the region to develop innovative transport solutions that help create a fairer society.

NRSDC seeks the following results for our community:

- **Better planning for the future of people's mobility**
 - A comprehensive integrated regional transport plan for the region that has a strong focus on passenger transport and contains realistic strategies to overcome transport disadvantage in the region. The plan should be supported by a commitment to fund additional public transport needs identified in the plan.
 - Action to expand transport connections with South East Queensland. Northern Rivers' residents have high need to travel to South East Queensland for health, education and business purposes and many people also have cross border family networks.
- **Increasing passenger transport options**
 - Better, safer, more appropriate and affordable transport for young people in the NR region, including extension of the current Regional Excursion Daily concession fares to under 16's, and eligible job seekers including Newstart and Youth Allowance recipients and provision of travel vouchers.
 - Additional funding for the Transport for Health program. We need to improve access to health services for the Northern Rivers, especially Aboriginal people and residents in remote communities, who may forgo treatment for want of accessible and affordable transport. Many specialist appointments require transport to Gold Coast or Brisbane.
- **Greater use of existing passenger transport**
 - Better transport information services for residents in the region, including extending the 131 500 transport information line to regional NSW and development of up-to-date comprehensive web-based transport information for rural and regional communities.
 - Fare parity for rural and regional public transport so that our communities pay an equivalent fare per kilometre travelled to residents of metropolitan centres.
- **Innovative solutions**
 - Funding to develop and test innovative and flexible public transport services including a Northern Rivers Mobility Management Office to act as a one-stop-shop to provide transport information; travel bookings and spare seat brokerage service to promote better use of existing services.

There is no bus to my local shops- I have to walk for half an hour to visit a doctor.
(Lismore Survey Respondent 2011)

The Northern Rivers transport story:

Access to transport is one of the highest social priorities for the Northern Rivers region. It cuts across many other areas, including health, education and training, employment, youth issues, ageing, disability and Aboriginal disadvantage. People who don't have transport can't access education and training opportunities, look for work, attend health appointments, visit family and friends, or participate in sport, recreation and cultural activities. There are high levels of transport disadvantage in this region as a result of

There are no buses apart from a school bus along my road. It's hard to get around for those of us who no longer drive.
(Lismore Survey Respondent 2011)

- Socio-economic status. Incomes in the Northern Rivers are roughly two thirds of the national average. Unemployment is one and a half times the national average. Some communities in our region are amongst the most disadvantaged in the country.
- Population is dispersed across villages, small towns and larger centres.
- Public transport options in the region are limited, inflexible and costly. Passengers in the Northern Rivers often pay more than twice as much as people in Sydney to travel the same distance.
- High reliance on private vehicles but comparatively low rates of car ownership. Rising costs of car dependency increase hardship for low income families and place a real burden on communities without an affordable public transport system.
- Transport policies across all levels of government that privilege car dependence and roads development over public transport and active transport options.

Good transport = good communities:

Efficient, safe, accessible, affordable and pleasant transport options for people in the Northern Rivers will:

- Build social inclusion, strong communities and community connectedness
- Increase economic participation (education, training and jobs)
- Increase our standard of living
- Improve access to services that support community needs
- Promote a healthier population through access to healthy, active living options

We support progressing transport options that encompass public transport, community transport, car pooling, active transport (cycling and walking) and disability access, as well as reducing the need for travel through the use of information technology alternatives.

Current NRSDC actions:

- Founding member and lead agency for transport action team within the Sustain Northern Rivers Collaboration
- Provision of information to encourage use of existing transport capacity through the Transport Information Pages in the telephone book, the www.goingplaces.org.au website and engaging with and educating community members through transport awareness events across the Region.
- Accessibility information project, which will compile and promote information on various types of accessible transport options available in the Region.
- Advocacy, promotion and representation
- Contribute to planning and policy on a national, state and local level that focuses on the particular needs of transport disadvantaged groups such as Aboriginal people, aged people, young people and people with a disability.
- Working on projects with Transport Working Groups across the region
 - Transport promotion events
 - Health transport networks
 - Bicycle network maps
 - Car pooling
 - Development Application assessment
 - Funding applications to improve public transport infrastructure
 - Other issues as identified by community members

