

**Submission
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INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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Submission to NSW Parliament Legislative Assembly Inquiry Into Inter-Regional Public Transport

The Friends of The Northern Railway is an Armidale-based lobby group with a long involvement in rail passenger and freight issues in the New England region. We have existed for twenty three years and continue to maintain a strong paid-up membership base of around 80 people.

We make the following submission to the Inquiry addressing the eight issues raised in the Terms of Reference and using the term "inter-regional" to refer to travel between regional areas or between a regional area and a metropolitan area as stated in the Terms of Reference.

Preamble.

We note with some concern that this inquiry will mainly be focused on CountryLink and is effectively the second parliamentary inquiry into CountryLink services in less than two years, the previous being the CountryLinkUp review chaired by Penny Sharpe MLC. Our concern is that frequent inquiries and the resulting external pressure for change can become very dispiriting for any organisation at both managerial and ground level. We hope the present Committee takes this into consideration when formulating its final report.

(a) How CountryLink Services Can Be Improved.

We believe CountryLink currently does a very good job within the environment in which it operates. The trains provide a pleasant, comfortable travel experience. The timetables are convenient, and interconnecting road services to neighbouring regions are effective. The onboard staff are consistently praised by passengers. The following comments are made within this context.

Service reliability and timekeeping. The most frequent source of complaints about CountryLink services relates to delays and substitution of buses for trains. There was a time when many of the delays were clearly the result of a poor maintenance regime in Sydney. The complete re-organisation of the maintenance system has seen a return to much more reliable rolling stock. This increased reliability has been accompanied by a rise in passenger numbers over recent years, in contrast to the marked drop-off in the preceding period. Unfortunately, some recent problems on the Moree line again seem to be related to mechanical issues, suggesting a watch will need to be maintained on this aspect of operation.

Most delays and service disruptions in recent times have been due to forces outside CountryLink's control, but the effect is significant. Large sections of restricted speed due to poor track conditions mean time keeping becomes impossible, and complete shut downs of track that range from a day to a week require bus substitution for train services. Our membership have made it clear that the replacement buses are perceived as a very much inferior service. Not only do they fail to meet the timetable but they are completely unsuited to cater for the needs of long distance passengers who require ready access to toilets and food services. The more CountryLink is required to substitute buses for trains, the less "reliable" its primary service is seen to be.

There is an indication that a three-month track shut down is planned for later this year in the Upper Hunter region. No commercial organisation such as CountryLink is be able to sustain such a disruption without a serious impact on its perceived service delivery, yet it is something that it is expected to simply absorb.

Track operators such as ARTC severely penalise train operators who are unable to maintain the schedules that they have been assigned. Perhaps a similarly severe form of penalty needs to be applied in the reverse direction, with the track operator being required to compensate train operators for delays, regardless of whether or not the delay is required for track work. Such a system would ensure that the track operator does not become "lazy", adopting the approach that is most convenient for them rather than that which enables them to provide the service they are being reimbursed for while still carrying out essential maintenance. Related to the issue of lazy maintenance regimes is the issue of poor management of such jobs. A recent item in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (16 May, 2012) noted a weekend shut down of the Central Coast line during which no maintenance actually occurred because of poor planning. Thousands of CountryLink and CityRail passengers had their journeys disrupted by the shutdown for no benefit to the track system.

Speed. In addition to the comfort and convenience of train travel, trains are potentially also able to offer sustained periods of high speed running where track conditions permit. On the main CountryLink routes,

excepting the abysmal North Coast line, sustained speeds of 140-150 km/hr should be attainable from the Xplorer and XPT units respectively over long sections. CountryLink should work with the Government and track operators to make more track available for such running. Research in Britain at the time they introduced sustained 200 km/hr (in 1976) showed a direct impact on passenger numbers. Faster trains and shorter journey times are likely to have the same effect here. It is potentially a major source of differentiation between road and rail transport and thereby a factor in drawing people away from private cars towards rail services.

Fleet Replacement. Some of the XPT units are now around 30 years old. They have been refurbished but are beginning to show their age. It is important that CountryLink is provided with sufficient support to work toward a replacement program over the next decade. The Xplorer units are not an issue at this point.

Extension of Rail Service to Lismore. Lismore is a city catering for well over 45,000 people yet the train service stops 30 km short of the city, with a fleet of buses providing a connection from the North Coast XPT. The first of these buses leaves Casino later than the connecting train would have arrived in Lismore if it had been permitted to carry on. The bridges on some sections of the Casino to Murwillumbah line are in very poor condition, but most of these are beyond Lismore. Many openings between Casino and Lismore are of steel construction, with very few significant timber trestles. The chaos, disorder, and sheer inconvenience of the Casino changeover is a major disincentive to travel by the North Coast XPT, with the result that only the youngest and the most needy, appear to use the service. Government support to the track operator for the restoration of the Casino-Lismore section of the line should be considered.

What is not needed. From time to time the issue of onboard entertainment systems is raised by commentators advising on increasing CountryLink patronage. Many of our members think this is not a good idea. They believe any such system would be an intrusive distraction from the relaxing ambience of the train carriage. The cost of installing such equipment, or requiring it in any new train design, would be unwarranted, particularly now that most people who desire such entertainment have their own personal devices which they program in their own preferred way.

(b) How Network Linkages Between CountryLink Train and Coach Services Can be Improved.

Transfers generally occur smoothly where the number of passengers and coaches is low. As implied in the preceding paragraph, a moment spent at Casino observing the transfer of passengers between the train and the many coaches required to carry them forward, reveals a scene of chaos. This arises from too many coaches being required to make the connections. The need for multiple coaches travelling over fundamentally the same route should be evidence enough that a train service is required. Connecting coaches should only be used where the ongoing passenger numbers are relatively light and do not justify an extension of the train service. In most existing locations this is the case, and the transition generally occurs smoothly.

Coach Routes. CountryLink provides an extensive range of coach connections with train services. They appear to strike a necessary balance between a need to cover as many centres as possible while not making the coach journey unnecessarily long. We can not speak in detail for regions outside our own, but locally the route between Armidale and Tenterfield, travelling via the New England Highway, effectively connects a range of smaller communities to the train with no route compromises. However, compromises do arise in relation to connections to and from the Inverell district with the Northern Tablelands Xplorer. The journey via Armidale, which is made once a week, provides a shorter, faster link than the connection to Tamworth which takes a circuitous route to include all the smaller locations on the way. However, the Armidale route means two communities nearer Tamworth are not provided with a connecting service on the day it operates. There is no easy answer to resolving the competing issues on this route. A faster, more comfortable connection to/from Inverell, via Armidale may attract more custom from Inverell and Wyallda, but necessarily means communities closer to Tamworth miss a connection on that day. Perhaps consideration could be given to providing Inverell with the faster route most days, while also contracting an operator to run what CountryLink calls a "taxi connection" between Tamworth and the nearer communities of Barraba and Manilla on the days the coach does not run through their centres. At present this type of service is used at Walcha Road to connect with the town of Walcha. In practice a mini-bus is used by the contractor and appears to attract reasonable patronage. It seems to be the ideal solution for providing smaller communities with a regular link.

Increasing Awareness of Local Travel. In addition to the connection with train services, CountryLink coaches also provide a link between the various communities along the way and at the terminating point. In our own region this network is quite extensive and we see no pressing need to expand the coverage. However, for the full benefit of this coach service to be achieved, the local population needs to be aware of its potential for links within the region. Too often, local communities perceive the CountryLink coach service as just a connection to and from the train. The utility of the service may be improved by increasing the awareness that the coaches also provide a connection between centres within the region and can be used for shopping trips, appointments, and so on.

Service Frequency. By combining local transport and train connection functions, CountryLink is able to optimise the number of potential passengers on coach journeys and so sustain a viable service. Without the train connection it is unlikely that passenger numbers would justify additional services of a purely local nature.

(c) The Potential For CountryLink Services to Carry Light Freight.

This would seem to be a good idea as a source of additional income, especially if train speeds are increased, but it would require considerable infrastructure development, providing rooms at stations to accept and process the items. Most stations once had parcels rooms, but they have long since been transferred to other purposes. Staffing and security would also be issues. It is unlikely that the service would warrant a full-time position being allocated to it. Existing station staff are trained in passenger handling and would likely not respond favourably to being diverted to other tasks at the same time. It is perhaps a position best handled by a contractor who may choose to work from their own premises and bring the parcels to the station for loading.

The rollingstock would also need to be reconfigured to handle the parcels. Our local train is so frequently close to capacity that it would not be feasible to take any more passenger room for parcels, yet the existing luggage area is also generally full. Passenger capacity should not be sacrificed for the secondary function of parcel transport.

(d) How CountryLink Can be Better Utilised to Increase Tourism in NSW.

Package Tours. CountryLink responds well to the tourist potential of NSW. They produce a range of attractive multi-page brochures promoting a wide variety of package tours to and from the regions and Sydney and to special events such as the recent Picasso and Renaissance Art exhibitions. Feedback we have received from members indicates the various package tours they have taken have been of excellent quality and value.

A major problem appears to be low community awareness of these packages. When shown the brochures some of our members have indicated surprise at their existence. In most cases they would only have noticed them if visiting the station or other travel agency and provided they had time to browse while there. We believe the excellent, and very appealing, brochures are being under utilised due to an absence of support promotion in the wider media. We suggest more supporting promotional material in local newspapers, and occasional television advertisements focused on the packages. In this way there is a chance of attracting a wider range of patrons who might otherwise not travel by train and therefore be unaware of the brochures.

CountryLink is Responsive to Demand. At times of local activities, such as the Tamworth Country Music, and the Parkes Elvis festivals, CountryLink presently increases train compositions substantially or runs extra trains to cater for the additional demand. This reflects the tourism awareness that already exists within CountryLink. We believe the sponsoring of the Parkes festival, along with the excellent media coverage given to the Elvis Train each year, represent strong tourism initiatives. Perhaps a few more such initiatives, directed at other festivals or special occasions, are worth trying in conjunction with local government bodies.

(e) How The Amount of Inter-regional Travel Undertaken by Public Transport Can Be Increased.

The CountryLink train service is the public transport mode that underpins the network. The sorts of improvements suggested in previous paragraphs, including increased reliability and speed will inevitably make that core mode more attractive to potential customers. Extension of the rail service to Lismore will also encourage more people, from a wider demographic, to use the train as their preferred transport mode.

To maintain patronage it is essential to understand that people do not wish to leave Sydney at very early hours or arrive there late in the evening. They also do not want overnight travel without sleeping accommodation. Although "out-and-back-in-a-day" services may be convenient to the operators they discourage a large proportion of the demographic from travelling by train. In the case of Armidale and the Northern Tablelands region, the existing departure and arrival times are just about optimum.

In the case of what might be called intra-regional transport, we believe giving the coach services a higher public profile beyond simply being seen as a connection to the Sydney train service will increase the awareness of communities to the accessibility of public transport between communities within their region.

(f) The Extent To Which Regional Public Transport Networks Are Integrated and How They Can Be Better Integrated.

We can only speak for our own region in which we see good integration. The CountryLink coaches connecting with the train at Tamworth and Armidale provide a link with most of the smaller communities in the

region. These coaches are supplemented by the “taxi connection” between the railway station at Walcha Road and the town of Walcha, and intervening localities.

The fact that the coach services are connecting to and from the train which departs the region in the morning and returns in the evening, means the coaches can also provide valuable opportunities for local communities to travel to either of the major regional centres for medical, shopping, or recreational pursuits with a day return.

At present the link between Armidale and Tenterfield is at the limit of what can be reasonably accomplished, requiring quite early departures from Tenterfield and returning journeys that arrive equally late in the day.

(g) The Role Local Councils Can Play in Improving Inter-Regional Public Transport Networks.

Working Together on Package Tours. Local councils, through their tourism bodies, ought to be encouraged to work as closely as possible with CountryLink to encourage more travel to their areas. As noted in a previous paragraph, CountryLink is very good at putting together attractive package deal holidays which are well received by those who use them. This vehicle provides a good medium for councils to increase their own tourism numbers. In return, the local tourist information centres could display the full range of CountryLink brochures thereby encouraging further use of the train service.

Seasonal Promotions. In addition to annual festivals, some centres such as Armidale are well placed for seasonal promotion in Autumn and Spring and both CountryLink and the councils could be encouraged to develop seasonal package tours to these areas.

(h) The Type of Buses and Trains That will be Required For The Provision of Regional Passenger Services in The Future.

Refurbishment and Replacement of XPTs. As noted in a previous paragraph, support needs to be given to CountryLink for eventual replacement of the ageing XPT fleet. These trains have served a valuable role in revitalising rail, and it is fair to say that in Britain, from where the design originated, they still provide the backbone of a large part of the intercity and interregional services, at sustained speeds of 200 km/hr. The British units have, though, undergone progressive upgrading and refurbishment at a frequency greater than the NSW variant.

Need for Flexibility. Any new train units need to have the flexibility to add and subtract carriages to and from the consist to ensure CountryLink is able to continue the practice of reacting to demand as required.

Sleepers for Overnight Services. A large part of the travelling population are deterred from travelling on overnight services that require sitting throughout. CountryLink currently provides a limited sleeping car service on its overnight trains. This needs to be continued in any future configurations.

Tilt Trains. The possible use of tilt train technology on the winding North Coast line needs to be considered. Speed is potentially a selling point for trains, and low speeds are certainly a deterrent to travel. On the existing North Coast track the profusion of curves means that conventional trains have no opportunity to run at their design, and desired, speed. It is unlikely that major realignment will occur in any foreseeable period, so the trains will need to accommodate to the existing track. Tilt technology is the only way of doing this.

Beyond the North Coast line there are large sections of track where sustained high speeds can be maintained without tilt, provided the track is maintained to a satisfactory level, and so not all new trains need to have the additional tilt features. The Xplorer trains, with their potential 140 km/hr, are well enough suited for those areas they presently serve and should be able to continue service for some time yet. Non-tilt XPT replacements could then handle the remaining routes outside the North Coast.

No need for Entertainment Systems. As noted in a previous paragraph, we see no need for expensive onboard entertainment systems given the fact that most people who desire such entertainment have their own, battery-powered personal devices with their individually preferred forms of entertainment already loaded.

(Signed) Donald Martin

17 May, 2012