

**Submission
No 115**

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Name: Name Suppressed

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The Committee Manager
State and Regional Development Committee
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Submission to Inter-regional Public Transport Inquiry

1 Introduction

1.1 As a frequent consumer of inter-regional public transport (IRPT) services, and as an employee whose clients are frequent users of IRPT, I hope to provide a commuter's perspective to your inquiry. I request that you withhold my name and address when publishing this submission.

2 Overview of Comments

2.1 New South Wales's IRPT system is largely Sydney-centric with services radiating outwards to different corners of the state in a "hub and spoke" layout. This system is let down by modal shift as well as the frequency and duration of services that act as a disincentive to travel. Moreover, there are insufficient links across these sectors for people who may need to travel within country regions rather than to and from metropolitan areas. This puts increasing pressure on metropolitan areas as services providers and undermines efforts by business, government and communities to make country areas more self-sufficient.

2.2 To encourage the development of regional centres and increase patronage, services must improve. This obviously calls for an increase in investment. With state budgets constantly squeezed, one must take a realistic viewpoint in relation to the state's ability to improve services but there are still many calculated investments that can achieve service improvements with good value for money.

2.3 Although Cityrail or its future incarnation is not directly mentioned in the Terms of Reference, its reach to the Upper Hunter, Southern Highlands, Blue Mountains and Shoalhaven means it has an important role to play in providing IRPT services.

3 How Countrylink services can be improved.

3.1 Countrylink staff should be commended for their conduct and performance. They are courteous and knowledgeable. Whatever the outcome of this inquiry, this culture and attitude should continue to be fostered.

3.2 The most obvious way of improving Countrylink rail services would be to have faster journeys. Many Countrylink rail services between cities and towns across the state are comparatively slower than public or private transport alternatives to the point of being a disincentive to passengers. Faster services on rail could be achieved with improvements to track such as duplication, curve easing or more ambitious deviations. It is not for this submission to point out the locations of these projects as they have been on the public record for many years.

3.3. Although these measures are expensive, they would stimulate demand for services and improve the experience of existing passengers. Moreover, there would be ancillary economic and social benefits, far greater in value than the benefit to IRPT itself. Improved track would increase attract more freight onto rail, reduce congestion on roads, improve highway safety and save money on future maintenance costs. The State has hitherto been timid in lobbying the Commonwealth for assistance with improvements to its major rail lines with a preference for highway road improvements. The case should be made for rail to receive greater financial assistance, particularly on ARTC controlled lines that are used by Countrylink. This would reduce the NSW's share of the cost of upgrades and improve journey times for Countrylink.

- 3.4 Consideration should also be given to the acquisition of rolling stock that incorporates tilt train technology. This rolling stock has proved successful in reducing journey times across Queensland's regional rail services as well as in Europe on track that would otherwise not support faster speed.

4 How network linkages between Countrylink train and coach services can be improved.

- 4.1 Countrylink rail services provide the main "trunk" route from which many coach services branch out. These coach services are a mix of Countrylink and private sector services. Unfortunately, the linkages are not entirely obvious to commuters because they are not jointly marketed and because there is little public awareness of IRPT services other than Countrylink. For example, a passenger travelling from Armidale to Coffs Harbour is told via the Countrylink website it takes 16 hours, as one needs to change trains at Maitland. However, there is a limited private coach service between these two towns that takes 3.5 hours. The reason this is not advertised on Countrylink is because Countrylink promotes only its own services.

- 4.2 To resolve this problem, Countrylink and private operators should provide an interface such as a website where their integrated services can be displayed and marketed. This would be a "one stop shop" for IRPT users. The privately run "Railmaps" website (<http://www.railmaps.com.au>) offers a service where visitors can browse IRPT options between two different locations in Australia using both government and privately operated services. Unfortunately it does not have fare information or sell tickets. Inspiration can be taken from the UK's National Rail website (<http://www.nationalrail.co.uk>), which displays timetable and fare information between any two stations and enables users to purchase tickets required for the journey, even if services are provided by more than one operator.

4.3 A "one stop shop" would present the range of IRPT travel options much easier than the current method of contacting different providers separately. This user-friendly method could translate into greater patronage for both private and government services, especially if selling tickets was possible on the website as well. Ideally this service would also incorporate inter-city journeys to be covered by the newly announced NSW Trains organisation.

5 The potential for Countrylink services to carry light freight.

5.1 I understand this has been done in the past. Although one should be generally supportive of any initiatives that make Countrylink services more profitable without the need for fare hikes, the obvious query is whether the frequency, travel times and reach of services are sufficient to make such a venture profitable.

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

6.1 In many instances, there is a substandard Countrylink service connecting major tourism centres. The quality of services to the Far North Coast and Mudgee wine region are obvious examples. In the future, Countrylink could consider improving its service by reopening of the Murwillumbah railway line. This would service the tourist centres of the Tweed Coast and Byron Bay as well as major population centres such as Lismore, Tweed Heads and Ballina. In the longer term, the state could look at extending the line to Tweed Heads to service the Gold Coast. In relation to the Mudgee region, the current route to and from Sydney requires modal shift and takes much longer than driving. In the future, increased coal mining and agri-business activity could justify an upgrading of the Gwabegar railway line, which may make passenger rail services to and from Sydney a viable consideration.

6.2 Another drawback for tourism is in the marketing of IRPT. In some instances, there is a well performing but privately operated IRPT service to tourist regions whose links with the Countrylink network are not immediately apparent. For example, the NSW snowfields and the Hunter Valley wine region near Cessnock. An integrated website as described in Part 4 would encourage tourists to leave the car at home if it can demonstrated that IRPT to those areas is a viable method of travel

6.3 Charter trains have successfully been employed for events in the past where the journey becomes part of the experience itself. Countrylink should encourage the growth charter services for sporting matches, music festivals and other events that are likely to draw tourists from Sydney. In this regard, local councils have a role to play as a point of contact or intermediary between event organisers and IRPT providers.

6.4 Of course for some tourists, it is important to have a car, as attractions may stretch beyond one town. Countrylink holidays already incorporate hire car options in their holiday packages. This could be extended to regular passengers as an option when buying a fare even if they do not purchase holiday packages.

6.5 Faster services would encourage tourists to consider travelling by public transport. At the moment, a rail journey to Canberra is 90 minutes longer than driving. This means a return journey by car instead of by train would mean 3 hours more leisure time for tourists, quite a bit of time for somebody visiting for a day or weekend. As mentioned in Part 3, improvements to journey times would encourage tourists to consider IRPT as a means of travel.

6.6 For tourists who are regional residents travelling to metropolitan areas for day trips, current IRPT services are unattractive. For example, Western line services travel outbound during the mornings and inbound during the evenings. The option for tourists and others, who need to travel to Sydney to visit family, attend events or consult a medical specialist is to take a

coach to Lithgow and change for a Cityrail service. This is a substandard alternative because it means increased journey time and modal change, both disincentives for passengers. A second Dubbo XPT travelling to Sydney during the morning and returning during the evening would encourage IRPT for these tourists.

6.7 Countrylink should consider lifting the restrictions on non-Australian residents purchasing travel passes. Most travel passes are only available to international visitors. Alternatively, Countrylink could develop a new travel pass for local residents. For example, a pass with a limit of one return rail trip ex Sydney along each Countrylink sector, valid for six months. This saving would encourage Australian tourists to consider Countrylink journeys.

6.8 In some cases, the timing of services is a disincentive to tourists. For passengers visiting Broken Hill, there are two return rail journeys per week, one provided by Countrylink and the other being the Indian Pacific. Unfortunately, both depart Broken Hill for Sydney on a Tuesday. Any tourist wanting to travel to Sydney from the Far West is limited in choice to Tuesday morning or Tuesday evening, unless they are prepared to do the hard slog of a coach/Cityrail journey, with longer travel times and modal shifts that are off-putting. Countrylink could provide a second return Broken Hill service later in the week which would give passengers greater flexibility in the timing of their trips. If this is not feasible, the existing service could be moved to a different part of the week so that it complements the Indian Pacific service rather than competes with it.

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

7.1 Unfortunately there are several barriers that make inter-regional public transport an unattractive option. These include journey times, cost and the frequency of service. Some suggestions already mentioned would increase patronage, such a "one stop shop" website and improvements to

track/rolling stock. There should also be consideration given to the provision of more services along key routes.

7.2 By and large, IRPT in NSW has the right route linkages but they are under serviced. Many important links have only one direct service per day, either morning or evening. The Dubbo XPT is a key example. Direct links between the Central West and Sydney are limited to one direct service per day. The coach/Cityrail service that supplements this requires a modal shift at Lithgow and is a longer trip, both of which are disincentives to patrons. Increasing the service along this key route to twice a day, with a Dubbo-Sydney-Dubbo service to complement the existing Sydney-Dubbo-Sydney service would encourage day trips for medical appointments, meetings, shopping, tourism and other events. It would also encourage travel within the Central West.

7.4 Other services suffer from a lack of frequency across the week. This is particularly true of services that do not connect to Sydney. The Dubbo-Cootamundra coach service provides an important link across sectors of NSW Countrylink for residents of western and southern NSW. Unfortunately, the service only runs three times per week. The state should consider increasing the number of services on an "arc" of routes that move across the sectors of Countrylink's network, which would encourage IRPT within regional areas. These services should run twice daily in both directions to give passengers flexibility and encourage day trips in both directions for meetings, social gatherings, shopping and medical appointments. The arc of services could encompass:

7.4.1 Coffs Harbour-Armidale-Tamworth

7.4.2 Tamworth-Dubbo

7.4.3 Dubbo-Cootamundra

7.4.4 Cootamundra-Canberra

7.4.5 Canberra-Batemans Bay-Nowra

7.5 This arc of services could broaden the catchment of regional centres as service providers and lessen the reliance regional residents have on visiting Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong for various services.

7.6 Many of these services are already provided by private operators on a limited basis. If services can be marketed on an integrated basis with government Countrylink services, they could continue to be provided by the private sector and therefore not encroach on private transport businesses.

7.7 The notion of a twice daily service would be to make a day trip possible for people at both ends of the journey. The limitation of a once daily service is the necessity for an overnight stay when visiting certain towns. This additional cost is a disincentive to public transport travel. For example, passengers travelling via IRPT from Armidale to Coffs Harbour for a day trip do not require an overnight stay on the present timetable as the service moves east in the morning and west in the evening. However, those travelling from Coffs Harbour to Armidale for a day trip would need an overnight stay on the existing timetable.

7.8 It is important that these services also incorporate Shoalhaven region, terminus of the South Coast line which, despite being a rapidly growing regional centre, has no direct link with the Main South line, its adjacent sector. Residents currently need to interchange at Wollongong or Batemans Bay. An improved connection would help address the isolation of the South Coast and its reliance on Wollongong as a service provider.

7.9 Other cross sector services that could be examined in the future for possible increases in frequency include Grafton-Moree, Port Macquarie-Tamworth, Dubbo-Newcastle, Bathurst-Canberra and Canberra-Far South Coast.

7.10 Day trips should also be encouraged on major rail routes. The Grafton XPT service provides a second daytime trip which complements the

Casino and Brisbane services and facilitates day trips. Along the Main South line, the evening Melbourne XPT service passes southern NSW during the middle of the night, which is inconvenient for passengers when travelling within southern NSW on day trips. A second daytime Countrylink rail service from Sydney to Albury during the afternoon and returning to Sydney the following morning would provide a similar function to the existing Grafton XPT in that it would facilitate day trips between regional areas and encourage people not to use the car. This service could even incorporate a split-service to Griffith similar to the Moree Xplorer, thereby upgrading services to the western Riverina.

7.11 The fare structure for IRPT needs to be revised. For Countrylink rail and inter-city coach services, a single adult fare is viable when compared to the cost of airfares within regional NSW or private vehicle journeys. However, the fare structure is a disincentive as people travel in groups of two or more. Countrylink should consider a fare structure that provides further discounts for group purchases on a journey. This would make the cost of public transport more competitive compared to car travel and therefore draw people to IRPT. Fare structures could also be integrated with private operators, similar to Sydney's public transport system. There should also be consideration given to extending concessions and the pensioner travel voucher system or pensioner excursion ticket to private coach providers.

7.12 The possible destruction of the Newcastle rail line must also be mentioned, as it has the potential to decrease the number of IRPT journeys. Even if it is replaced by a bus or tram service, it is well known that modal shift is a disincentive to public transport journeys. The line should not be closed as it provides a direct service into the heart of New South Wales's second largest city. A replacement service with unintegrated fares and modal shift would discourage IRPT to and from Newcastle.

7.13 Countrylink should consider extending the evening service between Canberra and Sydney to 7 days per week to encourage day trips and offer increased choice and flexibility to passengers.

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

8.1 The existing IRPT system in New South Wales is largely "hub and spoke" in its layout with a focus on linking Sydney. The four "spokes" of the Countrylink network operate independent of each other with very little integration. The connections between sectors are too few. As highlighted in Part 7 above, a twice-daily service between adjacent sectors in an arc around the state would provide connections between the sectors and encourage IRPT travel within New South Wales regional areas.

9 The role local councils can play in improving inter-regional public transportation networks.

9.1 As organisers and supporters of community events, Councils can help draw tourists to IRPT by working with tourism bodies to encourage charter services, as highlighted in Part 6.3 above.

9.2 Councils should also be encouraged to promote IRPT in their facilities, such as visitor information centres, public libraries and their own tourism websites.

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

10.1 Theoretically, the existing fleet of trains and buses could serve the state well but they are often let down by travelling on roads and tracks that prevent them from operating at their maximum speed. Improvements to the alignment and condition of tracks and highways are as important as the type of bus or train that travels on them.

10.2 In relation to the trains and buses themselves, tilt train technology should be considered and buses should keep pace with the standards of competitors.

Regards

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