

**Submission
No 33**

**ACCESS TO TRANSPORT FOR SENIORS AND
DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE IN RURAL AND
REGIONAL NSW**

Organisation: NSW Parliament
Name: Mr Greg Piper MP
Position: Member for Lake Macquarie
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The Committee on Community Services
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Committee Members

INQUIRY INTO ACCESS TO TRANSPORT IN RURAL AND REGIONAL NSW
Submission by Greg Piper MP, Member for Lake Macquarie

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Inquiry into Access to Transport in Rural and Regional NSW.

I have spent more than two decades in public office, firstly as a councillor and mayor of Lake Macquarie City Council and then as the State Member for Lake Macquarie where I continue to serve, but my interest in regional transport issues spans a much longer period.

Over the past nine years I have made a number of representations to State Parliament which have detailed the significant issues affecting access to transport in this region, particularly by (but certainly not limited to) the elderly and those with mobility issues.

Lake Macquarie is a large regional area which lies to the south of Newcastle. It has a population of more than 200,000 people and includes one of the largest populations of people aged over 65 in the State.

While many people settle in the area for its natural attributes, others are attracted to its relatively affordable housing. Unfortunately, as many people find, affordability is often illusory if the costs of transport for essential needs and socialisation is unaffordable, and of course, if public transport options are not reasonably available. This particularly becomes a problem for those with medical needs. For some, particularly the elderly or disadvantaged, a trip to see a medical professional can mean an entire day spent traversing a web of inadequate bus routes.

The problem with access to government services is much broader than simply the issue of accessing health professionals. This was no more evident than last year when the State Government closed its motor registry at Toronto in my electorate. The move was designed to centralise government services at Warners Bay. Both Toronto and Warners Bay are reasonably large retail centres which serve communities on the western side of Lake Macquarie, but trying to travel between them is a highly arduous task unless one has access to a car.

For example, a resident of Bonnells Bay (one of eight moderately-populated suburbs on the Morisset Peninsula south of Toronto) would face a round trip of up to six hours if they needed to attend the Services NSW office at Warners Bay. That trip could involve as many as 10 bus and train interchanges, depending on the time of day.

Many groups in this region have campaigned for improved bus services. Most recently, the South Lake Macquarie Public Transport Action Group lobbied for a direct and regular bus service between Morisset and the district's closest major hospital at Wyong. That campaign began in 2007 after a health forum held locally identified it as being a priority.

In 2010, several thousand people signed a petition calling for a regular bus service to the hospital, but they are still waiting for a result.

Wyong Hospital is located at Kanwal, 32 kilometres from Morisset. It is 46 kilometres away from other suburbs such as Wangi Wangi, Mandalong and Martinsville which all fall into the same 'ambulance zone'. The hospital is 13 kilometres distant from Wyong train station, and while some bus services between the station and hospital exist, they are infrequent and do not appropriately serve people travelling from Lake Macquarie. A round trip by public transport to the hospital can consume a whole day.

The problems are in no way limited to the number of public transport services in the region, or their frequency. Parts of Lake Macquarie are serviced by a train line but access to the majority of stations is almost impossible for many elderly people or those with mobility problems.

I have been campaigning on behalf of frustrated users for better access to the rail stations at Wyee and Dora Creek. Both these stations have significant accessibility issues which have become the subject of growing concern in the community.

Wyee is the busier of the two stations. It has a central platform which can only be accessed by a pedestrian bridge over the rail lines via steep stairs on either side. Access for people in wheelchairs is impossible, and significant difficulties are created for older people and anyone less mobile. I believe these accessibility issues are also deterring people from using public transport. Regular users of the station report that many people have come to grief on the stairs, which are not covered and provide no protection from the rain.

There is no doubt in my mind that these accessibility issues are having a profound impact on the numbers of people using Wyee and Dora Creek stations. Recent data from Transport for NSW supports that theory. The data shows that passenger journey numbers at Wyee fell from 167,000 in 2001 to just over 106,000 in 2014.

Similarly, numbers at Dora Creek fell from almost 18,000 in 2001 to under 12,000 in 2014. That is a drop of more than a third and more recent data suggests the trend is continuing. That drop has occurred while the total number of people using the Newcastle rail line has increased from 1.93 million journeys in 2001 to 2.02 million in 2014. We are told that people are not using these stations for a reason, and I suggest that it is likely because they simply cannot access them or do not enjoy the experience.

The figures come at a time when government policy is to encourage more people onto public transport. They also come at a time when our ageing population is growing.

There are a number of strategies which I believe could improve these access issues. At Wyee, a lift on either side of the overhead pedestrian bridge would allow people to better access the central platform. However, there are smaller improvements that could be undertaken. The simple provision of seats at the top of the existing stairs would give elderly or less-mobile people the opportunity to take a break from the arduous trek between the stairs and the central platform. This suggestion came from a local resident frustrated with the facilities provided.

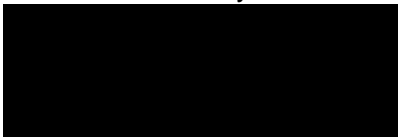
Without doubt, there is much that can be done to better co-ordinate the different modes of public transport services in Lake Macquarie. Further, more direct routes to places such as Wyong Hospital should be considered, or at least trialled.

It is my belief that these issues can only be fixed by more frequent and more direct transport services, better alignment of different modes, and the provision of improved access to railway stations for seniors or those with mobility problems.

As a final point, I note that the State Government's five-year \$770m Transport Access Program has been very successful in alleviating some of the access issues raised earlier in this submission, but less than half that money has been spent in rural and regional areas, and the program is due to conclude this year.

I strongly recommend that the program be continued and re-funded to continue improving access to public transport services.

Yours sincerely



Greg Piper, MP
Member for Lake Macquarie