

**Submission
No 59**

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

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The Committee Secretary
Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie St Sydney
NSW 2000

Inquiry into access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW

Submission by Action for Public Transport (NSW)

Introduction

Action for Public Transport (NSW) is a transport advocacy group which has been active in NSW since 1974. We promote the interests of beneficiaries of public transport; both passengers, and the wider community.

Focus of this submission

We appreciate that the focus of this Inquiry is the needs of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW. We have some suggestions specific to that group, but this submission is somewhat broader. In this submission (under term of reference (e)) we suggest that the needs of this specific group and those of other public transport users overlap in many important respects. There are measures we recommend that would be of benefit across the board.

Traveller assistance

Older passengers and passengers with mobility problems are greatly assisted at Victoria's Southern Cross Station by an impressive "Travellers' Aid" service. We recommend that the Committee examine how a similar scheme might be operated at larger stations in NSW. Details are available at http://www.southerncrossstation.net.au/travellers_aid.html. There used to be a similar service at Sydney Terminal station.

Better services

No one, whatever their age, state of health or mobility, has access to transport services that don't exist. Action for Public Transport (NSW) suggests that the level of public transport service in rural

and regional NSW is much less than it needs to be to connect residents of those areas with services, jobs, training, friends and family. The gap in health and employment outcomes is well known, and is due in part to low levels of public transport service. Transport disadvantage is a marker of social and economic disadvantage, and a key contributor to the development and persistence of disadvantage.

The long period of disinvestment in the NSW rail system beginning in the 1970s, and the curtailment of services to regional areas in particular, was a grave mistake. In some cases coaches serve former rail routes, but they are a poor substitute over longer distances. In addition to coverage, the frequency of services is a critical factor in their usability.

New South Wales is lagging compared to both Queensland and Victoria in turning around a very unsatisfactory situation. In Queensland there are now upgraded lines between Brisbane, Caboolture and Nambour, and the Gold Coast. In response to population increases in districts around the Gold Coast the Queensland government has built the Gold Coast light rail, connected electric rail services to Varsity Lakes, and is planning to extend both. The Victorian Regional Fast Rail project on four lines was completed in about 2006; and significant improvements are ongoing.

There are many growing population centres in regional areas of NSW that could and should have faster, more frequent, rail services. APTNSW has recently made a submission on this subject to a Federal Parliamentary Inquiry http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/ITC/Transport_connectivity (see submission no. 60). We ask that you regard it (also at <http://aptnsw.org.au/documents/connectivity.html>) as part of this submission.

One area warranting improvement is the Northern Rivers, an area of sizeable and growing populations. Federal funds should be sought to restore the railway from Casino to Murwillumbah, and extend it from Murwillumbah to a future interchange station near the Gold Coast airport at Coolangatta.

The scheduled times (4am-5am) of arrival and departure of the Brisbane XPT at Roma St station are grossly inconvenient. The reason for selecting those times three years ago was never announced but could relate to minimising interference with peak-hour services south of Brisbane. Whatever the reason, a solution needs to be found which makes the service suitable for people with normal sleeping habits.

There used to be three stops on the Brisbane service between Coffs Harbour and Grafton; now there are none. Serious consideration should be given to restoring a stop, perhaps at Glenreagh. This would be appreciated by passengers who do not have access to a car or find driving long distances difficult.

The Hunter region also needs better services. Rail services to and from Newcastle and Maitland could be greatly improved by straightening out the tracks in a few locations. The journey time to Sydney would be significantly reduced, to the benefit of all passengers. Better connectivity would also be of economic benefit to the region and all its residents. APTNSW also believes that to cater for future growth, an easement suitable for two tracks needs to be preserved at or below ground level along the former rail corridor from Wickham to Newcastle.

A relatively minor re-timing of the Melbourne XPT services, perhaps in conjunction with track

improvements permitting higher speeds, could see the northbound and southbound services cross near Cootamundra. That would allow Trainlink coach services to connect with both trains, improving the efficiency of the coach services and thereby encouraging people to use public transport.

Rail fleet

The programmed replacement of the ageing XPT fleet and other regional trains is a pressing need. The fleet also needs to be augmented, as there are already some problems covering existing service levels. The service levels required to cover regional areas adequately will require a larger rail fleet, and this should be planned for as a matter of some urgency.

Freight and passenger rail

Finally, the mixing of freight rail operations with passenger services impedes both. Every opportunity to separate these two very distinct kinds of service should be taken: for example, the long-awaited 35 km Maldon-Dombarton line would significantly improve passenger capacity on the South Coast line, as well as improving rail freight access to Port Kembla and reducing heavy vehicle traffic on the road system.

Conclusion

It is pleasing that the Committee is addressing this important issue. APTNSW is grateful for the opportunity to comment. We hope this submission will be of assistance and that this inquiry will be a step towards better transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW, and indeed for all the residents of NSW.

Jim Donovan
Secretary
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