

**Submission
No 63**

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

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Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services
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To the Committee:

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW

We are writing to you as the Greens NSW spokespeople on Transport, Ageing and Disability to provide a brief submission to the Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services' inquiry into access to transport for seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW.

The Greens support well-funded, publicly-owned and operated public transport across New South Wales. Over many years, rural and regional communities have been starved of reliable and efficient public transport that gets them where they need to go.

Successive New South Wales governments have closed essential rail lines, cut services, and reduced access to public transport for many people in our state's regions. This approach needs to change.

Availability of transport services

The limited – and, over recent decades, reduced – availability of public transport services in rural and regional areas is an ongoing problem that has its greatest impact on disadvantaged groups. People with disability, older people and socially or economically disadvantaged groups may often have limitations on their private transport options and need public transport services that not only allow them to travel within their community but to travel within or beyond their region, which is often crucial to having adequate access to health, social and other services, to engaging in education, employment and other opportunities, and to maintaining social and family connections.

In recent years, numerous essential regional rail lines have been shut down by the NSW government. The Northern Rivers railway line from Casino to Murwillumbah was closed in 2004. There is a strong community need for the reinstatement of these services. Older people and those on lower incomes who do not have access to motorised transport relied on these services to get around their region. It is essential that the government strongly considers running services on this critical line once more.

More recently, in December 2014, services were stopped on the Newcastle rail line as part of the government's plan to scrap heavy rail services into the heart of Newcastle and install a short stretch of light

rail from Wickham to Pacific Park. The resulting Review of Environmental Factors for the light rail has shown poor predicted patronage and related transport outcomes for this 'replacement' service.¹ Again, older people, particularly from around the Hunter region outside of Newcastle CBD, relied on this service to travel into Newcastle affordably and efficiently. The light rail will not provide an acceptable substitute for the previous heavy rail line into the heart of the city.

The NSW government also recently passed the Transport Administration Amendment (Authority to Close Railway Lines) Act. This legislation allows the Minister to effectively shut down railway lines to make way for what is determined to be State Significant Infrastructure, without the need for an Act of Parliament. It applies in a number of regional areas surrounding the Sydney basin.

Governments must not shut down or roll back railway services without full consultation with the communities who depend on them for public transport. In fact, there is a need for engaging with communities across rural and regional NSW, to improve current services (in relation to frequency, speed, and access), and further expand public and active transport that is integrated, efficient, and affordable.

Well-funded community transport and buses

It is essential that the NSW government properly funds and supports rural and regional bus and community transport services. Regional bus networks are regularly under-resourced and do not provide an adequate transport service for those who rely on them.

Community transport services are an important element to overcoming transport disadvantage and ensuring that people who have limited private transport options are able to engage fully in the community and access important services and other community connections. We encourage the committee to look at challenges facing community transport and opportunities for improvement, particularly as they affect disadvantaged groups including people with disability, older people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We note that the transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) will see changes to the funding arrangements that relate to community transport services. Our understanding is that the existing funding for community transport for people with disability through the Community Care Supports Program will cease and the funds redirected into the NDIS. NDIS participants would then need to have community transport access included in their individual plan to be able to fund their use of such services. It will be important to ensure that transport needs and services are being adequately included in the transitional and ongoing arrangements for NDIS participants. There is also the risk that some people with disability who do not meet NDIS eligibility requirements may no longer be able to access community transport services. We encourage the committee to examine ongoing arrangements to ensure that community transport services are able to continue operation and meet the needs of all people who require access to them.

Aboriginal community transport services are another key element of addressing transport disadvantage and promoting the wellbeing of Aboriginal people, including in rural and regional New South Wales. Adequately-resourced, community-developed and delivered Aboriginal community transport services are important to ensuring access to transport that meets cultural as well as social needs and allows access to services and opportunities for all Aboriginal people and communities across the state.

¹ Submission to the Newcastle Light Rail REF (Dr Mehreen Faruqi MLC), May 2016 (Available: <http://www.mehreenfaruqi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Newcastle-REF-Submission-Final-MFaruqi.pdf>)

System accessibility

As well as improving the frequency and availability of public transport connections, it is essential that accessibility barriers to public transport services are minimised. The loss of many regional rail services and their replacement with coaches has reduced accessibility for people with limited mobility. Ongoing and future public transport planning and procurement, including the promised replacement of the ageing XPT fleet, should include a focus on promoting accessibility to the greatest extent possible.

We note that although Transport for NSW had an existing Disability Action Plan 2012-2017, to date it does not appear that the Department of Transport or Transport for NSW have released a new Disability Inclusion Action Plan as required under the Disability Inclusion Act 2014. The introduction of a rights-based focus in the Disability Inclusion Act is an important opportunity for all public authorities to ensure that they focus on how the services they deliver can be improved to deliver on the fundamental rights of people with disability, and transport is an especially important component of promoting people's opportunity to participate equally within their community.

Transport hubs such as train stations must be accessible to all. While the government's Transport Access Program has rolled out station upgrades including lift access, progress has often been slow. People should not be excluded from transport on the basis of their disability.

The Greens welcome the recently doubling of the Taxi Transport Subsidy from \$30 to \$60. This is long overdue and a positive aspect of the Point to Point Industry reform package. Now, it is imperative that the government works with all players in the point-to-point industry to ensure that point-to-point transport does not exclude people with disabilities.

Seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW who use the rail system have recently made the switch to Gold Opal card. This has forced thousands of people onto an – in many aspects – inconvenient and invasive system where they are required to disclose their personal information and be 'registered' in order to travel, and often cannot purchase single-trip tickets or top up small amounts.

Station staff

Earlier this year, the NSW government announced plans to shed customer service positions at train stations across the NSW TrainLink network. This included proposing that a number of stations would operate without staff at all.² After facing significant community dissatisfaction, including from members of parliament from government and opposition parties, and the Greens, the government decided not to go ahead with this.

It is absolutely critical that stations are staffed by trained and experienced personnel. Seniors and disadvantaged people, including people with disabilities, often rely on station staff to assist them with their journey. Having a staff member to interact with is critical to a positive experience on our transport network.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

² ABC, 'Plans for Trainlink to cut jobs at regional NSW train stations raises concerns', 29 March 2016 (Available: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-03-29/plan-to-cut-staff-numbers-at-regional-nsw-train-stations/7281652>)

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Yours sincerely,



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Ms Jan Barham MLC
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