

**Submission
No 192**

INQUIRY INTO THE CLOSURE OF CASINO TO MURWILLUMBAH RAIL SERVICES

Organisation: Richmond Valley Council
Name: Cr Charlie Cox
Position: Mayor
Telephone:
Date Received: 04/06/2004

Subject:

Summary

3 June 2004

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No 4
Legislative Council
NSW Parliament
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Madam

Reference is made to the Inquiry Into The Closure Of Casino To Murwillumbah Rail Services. Richmond Valley Council provides the following as a submission to the Inquiry and requests that Mayor Charlie Cox be given the opportunity to address the Hearing to be held in Lismore on Wednesday, 9 June, 2004. (Note: arrangements made for 12 noon).

- (a) The decision by the State Government to close the Casino to Murwillumbah Rail Services has been met with significant concern by the Richmond Valley Council and the community.

In that regard Council and the community have participated in both regional and local forums to discuss, consider and express concern on the issue. The community concerns on this issue were emphasised through local Members of Parliament in September and October 2003. A submission was also made at that time to the Ministerial Inquiry into Public Passenger Transport, emphasising the need for reinvestment in railway infrastructure. Council and the community were also involved in supporting a community petition that was undertaken via the Northern Rivers Train for the Future (in November 2003). Correspondence from the Minister for Transport Services (Michael Costa) dated 15 December 2003 advised that the Country Link train services would be returned pending review by State Rail of various matters. It is disappointing that that commitment has not been kept.

During 2004, Council (again with the support of the community) has been participating in regional forums and rallies involving the closure of the Murwillumbah to Casino rail line.

The above demonstrates the concern of the Richmond Valley community in relation to rail services. This level of interest contradicts somewhat the claims that rail services are not utilised. In 2003, Richmond Valley Council undertook a survey via its Transport Working Group. That survey resulted in one third of individuals participating, stating that they travel to destinations along the Casino to Murwillumbah line. There was a high level of interest (over 60% of respondents) who indicated that they would utilise public transport if changes such as availability, times/frequency of service, etc, were addressed. Accordingly, there is a level of community interest and need for public transport services such as the Casino to Murwillumbah rail service.

In that respect the recent decision by the State Government does not take a strategic or long term view; the increasing and ageing population of the Northern Rivers area requires increased public transport and associated infrastructure, not less.

(b) The following statistical based data indicates the need for public transport needs (which could be provided/enhanced by a Casino-Murwillumbah rail service):

- ▶ the Richmond Valley Council area has a lower socio-economic profile than other areas in the Northern Rivers Area Health Service region.
- ▶ there is also a higher crime rate related to transport via car in the Richmond Valley area. The lack of rail services is likely to accentuate that issue.

There are a number of issues that will impact from an economic/social perspective as a consequence of the reduction in the rail services. These include:

- ▶ increased traffic movements; will create added pressures on Bruxner Highway (Casino-Lismore) and also on the routes via Pacific Highway.
- ▶ the increased traffic volumes will impact on traffic accident statistics. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Country Link passenger numbers have decreased since the cessation of the rail services. This reinforces the likelihood of increased traffic on roads and as per recent NRMA predictions an increase in motor vehicle related accidents.

- ▶ it would appear from State Budget processes that Sydney metropolitan train link services are having an increasing amount of expenditure spent on that infrastructure with a decreasing amount being spent on Country Link services. This does not augur well for regional/rural growth nor for impacts that are being felt in the Northern Rivers as a consequence of the “sea change” population trend.
- ▶ due to the social demographics of the Northern Rivers community, there is a need for accessible safe transport to be provided for not only rail services, but other public transport services. Access issues vary; for the frail, aged or physically disabled, it is often a matter of being able to use a service safely (disabled seating, access to/from transport medium etc). It is difficult to meet those needs without a more consolidated/integrated public transport service. Access issues in relation to youth are influenced strongly by the cost and timing of services. In that regard, the need for a Casino to Lismore commuter service is sought by students, workers, job seekers, those accessing health and related services, etc. Lack of transportation options also decrease recreational opportunities available to rural and remote population areas (particularly youth).

Accordingly, there is a range of economic and social issues that will be affected by the closure of the Casino to Murwillumbah rail service. This not only relates to current services but also to potential services should an increased strategic focus be taken on the development of more integrated and outcome focussed services.

- (c) The Tweed and Gold Coast areas (adjacent to the Casino to Murwillumbah route) along with the rest of the Northern Rivers are significant tourism areas. There is an opportunity to enhance that market through the extension of the existing line (to Gold Coast/Brisbane). From that perspective the establishment of a loop service Casino-Murwillumbah-Gold Coast-Brisbane-Kyogle-Casino can not only provide a tourist route but also an effective commuter service arrangement. It is considered that the economic benefits of retaining the Casino-Murwillumbah line/service can enhance tourism and freight opportunities but also provide a range of other strategic options which can not only be of economic but also of social (transport need) benefit.

The recent announcement of a feasibility study in relation to commuter services on the Casino to Murwillumbah line is strongly supported. That project has the capacity to identify and expand on a number of issues. The support of the State and Federal Governments of the project will encourage a strategic focus and the possibility of real community outcomes. In that regard, there have been a number of State and Federal Government forums in which the impacts of the ageing population have been raised. This is an opportunity to begin to address the public transport issues that currently and will increasingly face the Northern Rivers area.

- (d) In addition to the above, issues such as environmental impacts (fuel efficient transport, less contaminants on road surfaces, etc) also arise as a consequence of the decision to cease the Casino to Murwillumbah rail service. Another consideration is the ability of the rail line to provide a "flood free" transport option; whilst flooding is not a regular occurrence, it can inhibit road routes in the Northern Rivers area during flood periods. The rail line option has the ability to overcome that circumstance.

Council appreciates the opportunity to make this submission and to participate in the Inquiry.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charlie Cox". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Charlie Cox
MAYOR