

**Submission
No 212**

**INQUIRY INTO THE CLOSURE OF CASINO TO
MURWILLUMBAH RAIL SERVICES**

Organisation: Federal Member for Richmond

Name: Mr Larry Anthony

Telephone:

Date Received: 04/06/2004

Subject:

Summary

The Hon. Jenny Gardiner MLC
Chairperson
General Purpose Standing Committee No.4
New South Wales Legislative Council
NSW Parliament
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Ms Gardiner

Please find attached my submission for the inquiry into the closure of Casino to Murwillumbah rail services.

Thank you for the opportunity to be able to comment on this very important issue. The closure of this rail service affects not only the economics of our communities but also the morale.

I do not understand why the NSW government has made this decision especially considering it promised to leave it open until the end of the calendar year. It would also appear the transport department was not ready for the closure at the speed it was decided.

The bus service to replace the train was not the result of a specific tendered process and has not been awarded to local operators.

If you are holding hearings I would be interested in making an appearance and adding further remarks to this submission.

Thank you again and if you have any queries please contact my office on the numbers provided.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Larry Anthony', written in a cursive style.

Larry Anthony
Member for Richmond

Friday, 4 June 2004

Inquiry into the closure of Casino to Murwillumbah rail services Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No.4

Submission by
Larry Anthony MP
Member for Richmond

With the rapidly increasing population of the North coast and significant pressure already on our road networks, there is a need for expanded transport options.

Rail provides a safe and more environmentally friendly form of transport. Using some innovative thinking we need to look at how we can use our rail line to meet our transport and freight needs as well as boosting local business and tourism.

I think that it is important for me to also make clear whether or not I have any commercial conflict or interest in this matter. It is true that a number of years ago I was involved in a rail venture on the north coast of NSW. This involvement allowed me to glean specific knowledge and understanding of rail generally and specifically the Northern NSW line.

In 1991 I ceased being a director of the venture I was involved in. From that time through until 1997 I removed my equity interest in the project. In 1997 I ceased having any equity interest in the venture.

Therefore I currently have no commercial interest in rail or rail infrastructure. I cannot see myself being involved in this area of business again. I have fought hard on this issue because it is something that I care about, and something that means a great deal to a great many people in the Richmond electorate.

As a general comment to begin with, I am appalled by the decision of the NSW State Labor government to close the rail line between Casino and Murwillumbah. The NSW government had promised to keep the line open until the end of the year.

The community had taken this promise at face value and were working to get a feasibility study undertaken to examine how to improve the use of the line.

I successfully secured funding from the Federal government for this study.

I feel that it is important to remind the committee, this is a stretch of rail line that has been in operation for over 100 years. This area also remains one of the fastest regional growth areas in the country. Tourism expenditure continues to in this region.

The Federal Government is pulling its weight. The ARTC is already planning to invest \$872 million over the next five years in the NSW interstate and Hunter

Valley rail networks. A further \$450 million commonwealth grant is in addition to its existing investment program.

The branch line has played a vital role in the development of the far north coast and it should not be consigned to history or a museum. Rather, we should be capitalising on this infrastructure to solve some of our transport problems and build for the future in one of Australia's highest growth areas.

Fifty years ago, the railway tracks between Tweed Heads and Brisbane were removed and now the Queensland government is planning to rebuild this link. This will come down to Coolangatta airport on the border. It seems ironic that the NSW government cannot learn from this experience and maintain our transport infrastructure for the future let alone extend the line to the border and link the networks.

What is needed, and sadly lacking from NSW is a vision for rail and transport for the future.

My transport vision for the North Coast would see the linking of our local communities with a regular light commuter train service.

The rail motor would act like a bus on rail to provide a commuter service linking Billinudgel to Bangalow, Murwillumbah to Mullumbimby, and Byron Bay to Lismore, the home of Southern Cross University. Indeed with a bit of lateral thinking, the chronic traffic congestion we see in Byron Bay could be mitigated with a decent regular commuter service between Byron Bay and its neighbouring townships. The issue of public transport could be almost solved overnight with some genuine commitment.

A steel wheel on a steel line has one-seventh the friction of a rubber tyre on a bitumen road making it the most efficient form of land transport. It is environmentally friendly with the lowest greenhouse gas emissions, still arguably the safest form of transport and catering for people with disabilities.

Over many years, councils, community groups, members of parliaments, and others have worked to strike a balance between managing this growth, the tourist traffic, and our way of life. I, like many others in the area feel a certain level of pride in having a rail service, and the NSW government will do well to remember that what makes up a happy prosperous community involves a lot more than just dollars and cents.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

That General Purpose Standing Committee No 4 inquire into and report on:

(a) the decision by the State Government to replace the daily Casino to Murwillumbah XPT service with a coach service, including the accuracy of the Government's claims it will save \$5 million per year,

The service was promised by the NSW government to remain open up until the end of December. This was to allow for a number of things, including local feasibility studies to support the line. This promise was broken by the NSW State Labor Government.

It is difficult to see how the State Government could have come to the figure of \$5 million in savings. It is my understanding that the operational costs of the service were in the realm of \$2.4 Million. There will have to be ongoing safety maintenance of the line whether or not it remains open, there will be road bridges over the rail line that will have to be maintained.

There will also be a coach service that will need to be paid for. This service will as I understand, cost around \$1 million per year to operate. There will also be road maintenance costs associated with more vehicles using these roads, including a number of local roads that are in poor condition.

While we have become aware of the NSW government's approach to rail bridges, an example being the state that they allowed the Menangle bridge to decline into. It would appear the decision to close this line was not a result of needing to replace any specific bridges immediately. Thus it is reasonable to assume that up until December, there would not have been a significant need for asset renewal.

I also understand there is a recurring maintenance cost on the line. This has been estimated at about \$3 million per year. The advice that I have received, suggests that this figure is over stated as a result of the fact that the maintenance crews are based in Lismore. These crews undertake maintenance on other line areas in addition to the Casino to Murwillumbah line. Therefore such a saving cannot be fully realised by RailCorp.

The time period in question here is 8 months. Once everything is factored into the equation, it would be difficult to see how even \$1 million could be saved over this period by breaking this promise, let alone \$5 million.

(b) the economic and social impact on North Coast communities of the loss of the daily XPT service between Casino and Murwillumbah, in particular the impact of the loss of jobs within CountryLink and other State Government departments and agencies and the closure of local train stations and Travel Centres,

The contract for the Bus service has been taken up by a Queensland bus Company, Sunstate. This will mean that the jobs from our region will probably now go to Queensland. This has a direct impact on families within the area and the economy of the area.

Every time we loose a job in our region it affects both the morale of the community and the economics of the community.

I am also concerned by how existing bus operators running services from Casino and Lismore will be affected, as a result of the introduction of CountryLink services.

The Electorate of Richmond has been serviced by the line since Federation. Richmond is an electorate of contrasts and diversity. While in dollar terms we may not be the most prosperous area in the country, we do the best we can with what we have got. We work hard and we get results. In fact this

Within the area councils and community groups have been working together for some time in an attempt to be able make better use of the rail service. This is done in attempt to not only keep jobs in the area, but also to increase our employment base.

It will take sometime for the full effect of the job loss to take effect. However, its effect will be felt across the area. Of future concern is the inconvenience of people having to transfer to another mode of transport, may mean that they simply may not use the service.

Passenger numbers, as they are being used in the current debate, will be used to justify further cuts in service. This will only perpetuate the cycle. I am extremely concerned for the men and women who have lost their employment, and for those who may in the future.

I am appalled at the short sightedness of the NSW government and their total disregard of the consequences of its decision, especially on the families directly and indirectly reliant on the service.

(c) the future of the rail line between Casino and Murwillumbah, including, but not limited to, the present condition of the line, recent and future maintenance programs, options for and the financial impact of future development of the line and the possible extension of the line to the Queensland border,

There exists the possibility of developing the rail corridor through from Murwillumbah to the Border. This would no doubt improve the attractiveness of the service from Sydney to the Border, but also a service for local use.

Considering the population increase in the Northern NSW region, it appears to me, to be very short sighted of the NSW Government not to invest in public transport. We are all aware of the affect that increasing numbers of cars, trucks and buses is placing on the environment and general road safety.

In respect to the actual rail line between Casino and Murwillumbah, it is my understanding that the weight loading on the bridges has been decreased to a level just above that of the XPT. It is also my understanding that there is no short, medium or long term plans for this line, even if it were to be extended to the border, to carry freight services.

As a consequence of not needing to have construction and asset investment so that the line is capable of carrying say heavy coal trains, the purported figure by RailCorp of \$188 million over 20 years, is a significant overstatement of what is actually required.

Taking on board the above assumption, I believe many of the bridges do not require total, but rather partial replacement, certainly in the short term.

(d) any other matters arising from the Government's decision to terminate the rail services.

With sections of the NSW rail network having to be removed soon after being laid, as a result of failure in planning by RailCorp, costing circa \$7 million, it begs the question of what other maintenance and asset renewal monies have been wasted by the NSW government through its departments.

With a number of the bridges on this line having been in service for over 100 years, and being speed and load limited for many years, it begs the question of what has the NSW government been doing for the last 10 years with respect to asset renewal. If a number of the bridges currently in use had been replaced already, the situation should not have been allowed to get to this state.

The Federal government has been spending large amounts of money on both roads and rail. While the time to travel from Sydney to the Queensland border by road has significantly decreased over the last 10 years, the rail journey has not. Other states such as Queensland have spent significant monies on their rail infrastructure and rolling stock to see decreases in travel times.

Neglect, poor planning, and mismanagement are the hallmark of the NSW Labor government, and particularly when it comes to our rail system.

This has again been shown by the fact that RailCorp was not ready for the termination of this service on the 16th May. This is evident by the manner in which the coach transport services have been setup. There has been no tendering process for the service replacement, no impact assessment on these services running on existing services and limited access for people with disabilities.