

**Submission
No 158**

INQUIRY INTO THE CLOSURE OF CASINO TO MURWILLUMBAH RAIL SERVICES

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Subject:

Summary

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SUBMISSION

It is the opinion of the Members of the Far North Coast Branch of the Association of Independent Retirees (A.I.R.) Limited that the decision taken by the Government to close the Casino to Murwillumbah railway line is a devastating decision for the residents of this very fast growing area of New South Wales.

We cannot understand how the Minister for Transport Mr. Costa and his predecessor Mr. Scully and indeed the Premier of this State can be so short sighted in their decision to shut this section of the railway network of this state down in such a salutary manner. We know that Section 5 of the Transport Administration Act 1988 sets out the Objectives of Railcorp. These include:

- *To exhibit a sense of social responsibility by having regard to the interests of the community in which it operates.*
- * *To exhibit a sense of responsibility towards regional development and decentralisation in the way in which it operates.*

The decision taken by this government to axe rail services on the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line clearly breaches these principles.

It is clearly evident from figures quoted in our local press that the Government and the Ministers concerned have not got their stories straight. These figures show that the number of patrons are 365 each day and not 180 as claimed because patrons do travel both ways in most cases.

Maintenance costs are also questionable when one reads in our local press that the averaging of maintenance costs for the line over the last seven years is \$2.53 million. Surely, this is less than one third of the figure Minister Costa is claiming.

How can the Government of the day justify this closure in such a pre-emptory manner saying that they must 'save money.' More figures quoted are that the Countrylink service has a 32 percent cost recovery whereas the cost recovery for CityRail is only 28 percent. The subsidy for CountryLink is \$148 million, whereas the CityRail subsidy is \$1,435 million, 10 times more.

The government may well say that the patrons of the CityRail far outweigh the number of patrons of the CountryLink network but surely they, the Government

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members, realise that those of us who live in this isolated area of the state of New South Wales have urgent needs to visit specialists for medical treatment situated on the Gold Coast or in Brisbane.

There is a definite need for the extension of this railway line to link up with Brisbane or at least to Robina. The government is losing a wonderful opportunity to encourage tourism in this area which is one of the most beautiful in New South Wales.

It is also a fact that many of our residents are elderly and/or disabled and need to be able to access rail travel.

Our members are extremely concerned that the increase in road traffic with 10 bus services a day, that is, 3650 bus movements a year on the Pacific Highway. They are also concerned with the inevitable increase in heavy vehicle transport which is already at unacceptable levels. Surely this will undoubtedly increase greenhouse gases and so affect our living standards.

There have been indications that the Government are planning to dismantle a bridge at old Casino thus severing any hope of the Casino to Murwillumbah branch line from the main Sydney to Brisbane line. In effect, it would prevent the running of trains on that branch line. Already we have seen the departure of the Ritz Rail tourist train because the owner was told that the line was to be shut down and no trains would be allowed to use it after May 17. We have lost this wonderful Tourist facility to Lithgow. It is a very short sighted decision.

We also have been told that 8,000 sleepers were placed beside the line for maintenance scheduled to take place after the line was officially closed. One wonders how long ago the decision was made for this maintenance to take place? It certainly was not made at the last minute, was it?

Another part of the Transport Administration Act has been breached. Section 99A of this Act states:

- A rail infrastructure owner must not, unless authorised by an Act of Parliament, close a railway line.
- For the purposes of this section, a railway line is closed if the land concerned is sold or otherwise disposed of or the railway tracks and other works concerned are removed.

The members of the Association of Independent Retirees (A.I.R.) Limited wish to make it quite clear that if, as a result of the closure of rail services to this area, the Government must not, in any circumstances, attempt to remove infrastructure, i.e., track on a bridge, or removal of a bridge in its entirety or removal of any other infrastructure pertaining to the possible future re-introduction of the rail network that has functioned so successfully for the past 110 years.

If the government is serious about viable CountryLink services to the North Coast

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it should extend the branch line into south-east Queensland, which would increase Patronage, open us tourism and commuter opportunities, and help guarantee the long-term viability of the line. This is not a pie-in-the-sky idea. It has already been the subject of a technical feasibility study conducted in the early 1990s and was found to be feasible.

This branch of the Association of Independent Retirees (A.I.R.) Limited which has a considerable Membership which numbers nearly 400 who have worked all their lives in an effort not to be a cost of Government, nevertheless have needs of travelling by train to consultation and treatment and feel that they are being denied this facility. They feel that using private cars to access these facilities has become increasingly dangerous.

The increase in heavy vehicle traffic is of a particular worry to them all and this will undoubtedly increase over time, making the journey to the Gold Coast or Brisbane one of danger of major proportions. They did not choose to retire to this area of New South Wales to be treated as residents of a Third World area.

So many questions that need to be answered very honestly and quickly to satisfy the many hundreds of thousands of residents of this area who are not satisfied with the answers that have been given to this date.

For and on behalf of
The Association of Independent Retirees (A.I.R.) Limited.

Mrs. Jill Brennan
Member No. 17
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Far North Coast Branch.

3rd June 2004

