

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

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Subject:

Summary



COMBINED PENSIONERS AND SUPERANNUANTS ASSOCIATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES INC.

Founded 1931.

Representing pensioners, superannuants and low-income retirees.

Consumer Protection Awards – 2002, 2003

4 June 2004

Our Ref: ITP.004

Submission

INQUIRY INTO THE CLOSURE OF CASINO TO MURWILLUMBAH RAIL SERVICES

Legislative Council, General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4

Introduction

Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association of NSW Inc (CPSA) is a non-profit, non-party political membership based association representing the interests of pensioners of all ages, superannuants and low-income retirees. It has around 150 branches and affiliates with a combined membership of over 12,500 throughout NSW.

Because CPSA has a membership and constituency of mostly older people (who are frequent rail users) and people with disabilities, the association takes a great interest in the NSW Government's decision to replace the daily Casino to Murwillumbah XPT service with a coach service, the possible economic impact this decision could have on the area and the implication the decision has for rail services in the rest of the state.

This submission will address the four points as per the terms of reference from the perspective of our members and constituents who include older people, people with disabilities and their carers.

- (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.**

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This decision has a range of implications. According to the Northern Rivers Area Health Service (NRAHS) 19 percent of the population served by NRAHS will be aged 65 or older by 2011. Already the percentage is 16.3 – in contrast to the rest of NSW at 16 per cent. In Lismore alone, 13.7 per cent are 65 years or more (Lismore City Council data). This is likely to grow as the area is a popular retirement destination.

Because of this increase (not to mention the fact that the Northern Rivers region, like other parts of NSW, is home to people with disabilities) it makes no sense to cut rail services in view of the fact that both older people and people with disabilities have particular problems that need to be taken into account when using public transport. They include:

- The usage of wheelchairs or walking frames;
- Susceptibility to blood clots;
- The need to take medication;
- Arthritis or osteoporosis;
- Other mobility restrictions.

For some people, such as those who have a condition requiring them to use a wheelchair, it is very difficult to get on a bus let alone travel a long distance. Train travel is a far easier option than travel by coach.

It has now become common knowledge that the longer one stays still sitting down for a long period the more one is likely to develop a blood clot. Blood clots can be life threatening. This may not be an issue for a healthy person (although some people who never thought they were susceptible can develop them for the first time) but it is an important consideration for those with restricted mobility. It is much easier for passengers to get up and move in a train than a coach. Via Kyogle it is 150 kilometres from Murwillumbah to Casino. This is a long distance for passengers who find travel by coach difficult due to age and/or disability.

There are some conditions such as diabetes which require people who suffer them to use the toilet at inconvenient times. Again, this is a more difficult exercise on a bus than on a train.

It is worth pointing out that people with the conditions previously mentioned will be discouraged from travelling if it is going to be an unpleasant or painful experience. This is likely to lose Countrylink revenue and create

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further health problems if older people and people with disabilities do not travel to the services they require.

(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 Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) estimate in their submission to this inquiry that:

“The total number of full-time jobs lost is 40, and total number of part-time jobs lost is 4. At an average income of \$45,000 per year for a full-time job, this adds up to a regional income loss of \$1.89 million per year...the indirect impact of 42 equivalent full-time job losses is 87 further jobs.”

This loss of jobs will impact on services in the region. People will have to move to larger cities like Brisbane and Sydney in order to find work. This will mean an economic loss for regional centres such as Lismore and smaller towns. Conversely, it means Sydney and Brisbane will be under greater population pressure if this trend in slashing services and attendant loss of jobs continues. Country towns will be places only for those who can't move on and find other work. In other words, although the immediate impact may appear negligible, it is likely to be part of a trend if the NSW Government continues to run with these sorts of “cost saving” policies.

No doubt the loss of jobs will mean a short term saving for Transport NSW. But for the taxpayer it is not really a saving at all. Leaving aside the upheaval it will cause for the workers made redundant and their families, there will be costs associated with the provision of unemployment benefits and, in some cases, family problems if these redundancies go ahead.

(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.

CPSA is of the firm opinion that the rail line between Casino and Murwillumbah should remain and be upgraded to serve the growth area of the NSW North-East corner. It would be ludicrous to start eliminating rail services in this area. According to Byron Shire Council on their website (www.byron.nsw.gov.au):

“The Byron Shire, covering an area of 566 square kilometres, is located at Australia's eastern-most point, 180km south of Brisbane, 800km north of Sydney.

There are a number of towns and villages in the shire, which has a population of 29,083 (Source: ABS, 2000), 30% living in rural areas. The annual growth rate is 2%, with a rate base of 13,134.

Income is sourced largely from tourism and agriculture. An estimated 1.7 million tourists visit each year. Thriving home-based businesses focus on alternative, cultural and knowledge industries, with a growing population of artists, writers and filmmakers.”

Railway services in that area should be expanded to meet demand rather than be slashed to meet a short term gain. It is acknowledged that buses will replace rail services for the area affected. However, apart from the difficulties faced by older people and people with disabilities (mentioned previously), buses (and cars, for that matter) have a serious impact on the roads system. The RTBU states:

“The decision to close the XPT rail service will mean some transfer of passengers to cars, as well as to the buses, on the Pacific Highway, and this will be an increasing trend over time. This will add to the costs of the highway and main road maintenance in NSW and add to the costs of accidents, injuries and fatalities which occur on the roads at a higher rate than on the railway.

A recent [RTA] report (May 2004) found that traffic volumes on the Pacific Highway have surged 80 per cent since 1990, with freight vehicles a big part of the increase.”

This is one of the NSW Government's own agencies saying there is already a huge increase in road traffic heading to the area served by the Casino to Murwillumbah line. It would be counterproductive to exacerbate the

problem by getting rid of rail services and replacing them with more road traffic. More than counterproductive, it would be cost shifting and the NSW Government would have to foot the bill. There is also the question of fatal accidents that tend to happen more often on roads than on the rail system – Glenbrook and Waterfall notwithstanding.

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

It is often argued by governments that particular rail services or services of other forms of public transport must be terminated on the basis of fiscal unsustainability. The logic seems to be that public transport services should operate on a full cost recovery basis. It is difficult to think of many public transport services that are able to do this. Private companies operating public bus services must be subsidised by government funding in order to continue running. Public transport is a service first and foremost – not a profit making venture. This is even the case in that bastion of capitalism the United States. This is one of the main features public transport has in common with emergency services and the fire brigade.

CPSA does not argue there should be no cost recovery. However, like the ambulance service, we should accept that railway lines and other public transport modes should operate at a “loss” and need to be publicly funded to make up the shortfall. This is why we pay our taxes. It would be unthinkable to reduce ambulance services to a particular suburb or town just because a period of time has gone by when they weren’t being utilised. The same goes for the Casino-Murwillumbah and other rail lines that may not be operating at full passenger capacity at the moment.

We fear that if this rail service is taken away the NSW Government will be tempted to do the same thing with the next service – literally down the track. Eventually Countrylink will have no railways.

Railways move large numbers of people in a way buses cannot. A single rail carriage can hold more passengers than most buses. They can move people more quickly as well. Try getting a bus to any Sydney suburb that is served by a train and the advantages trains hold become obvious. Yet, despite the advantages of rail systems, successive NSW Governments appear to have developed an anti-rail mentality. Compared to road and freeway development we have seen little in the way of rail development. In

Sydney the Bondi Junction line was truncated (it was supposed to go to the University of NSW then onto the airport). The line that now goes between the airport and the city was constructed long after the opening of the Bondi Junction line – the previous major railway initiative. On the other hand, freeways seem to be constructed with little consultation and with unseemly haste.

Finally, it is essential to mention the impact on the environment. Although improvements have been made in bus and car engineering to minimise pollution, the same has happened in train construction. Trains are still the most environmentally friendly form of surface transportation. It makes economic sense, as well as environmental sense, to maintain and extend rail systems in NSW.

Recent price rises in oil have made it difficult for Sydney drivers to find petrol less than at least a dollar a litre at the time of writing. Some research appears to indicate that an oil crisis may come a lot sooner than we think – regardless of the availability of reserves in Iraq and Central Asia (see Radio National's program *Australia Talks Back* 25 May on oil prices). One way of softening the blow of such a crisis is to build electrified railway lines. This cannot be done yet with cars and road systems. In other words, to circumvent any possible oil crisis it is wise to undertake a massive investment in public transport, particularly rail services, and to provide the people of NSW an attractive alternative to the use of cars.

So, if the NSW Government wants to maintain a livable environment, prevent the overuse of vehicles and keep relatively isolated people – such as older people and people with disabilities – participating in society then it needs to seriously rethink its agenda when it comes to rail services.

Therefore, we recommend keeping the Casino to Murwillumbah rail service open and call for more not less spending on rail services statewide.

Yours faithfully

Bruce Hutton,
State Vice-President