

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 4

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

At Lismore on Wednesday 9 June 2004

The Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. Jennifer Gardiner (Chair)

The Hon. Peter Breen
The Hon. Jan Burnswoods
The Hon. Catherine Cusack
The Hon. Kayee Griffin
Ms Sylvia Hale

CHAIR: Ladies and gentlemen, I declare this public hearing of General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4 of the New South Wales Legislative Council open. This is the second hearing of the Committee's inquiry into the closure of the Casino to Murwillumbah rail service. The inquiry has received widespread media coverage and has aroused considerable feeling in the communities. The depth of that feeling is perhaps well indicated by the large attendance at the meeting today. I would like to thank everyone for coming to observe this public hearing of the Committee.

I would like to take this opportunity, though, to emphasise that although this is a public hearing, today is not an open forum for comment from the floor. We have a large number of witnesses, and we want to make sure those who will give evidence at the end of the day will have the same opportunity to put forward their case on behalf of themselves or their organisations as will witnesses who appear earlier in the day, so I will be adhering rather strictly to our timetable. I welcome all members of the public to this hearing and ask you to make sure that the witnesses get a fair opportunity to present their evidence without interruption.

I would also like to comment on the large number of submissions that the Committee has received for this inquiry. As of yesterday, the Committee had received more than 250 submissions. Again, on behalf of the Committee, I would like to commend people for the time they have taken and the interest they have shown to present those submissions. In addition, local members of the Parliament of New South Wales and the Federal Parliament have received from their constituents a large volume of correspondence in relation to the closure of the rail service. We appreciate that.

The evidence to be given to the Committee by witnesses is protected by parliamentary privilege. That means that witnesses are given broad protection from action arising from what they say, so that the Parliament has the power to protect them from any action that would disadvantage them on account of the evidence they give before the Committee. I also remind anyone that the giving to the Committee of false or misleading evidence may constitute a contempt of the Parliament.

We prefer to conduct our hearings in public. However, if there are matters that any witness wishes to discuss with the Committee in private, we will consider that request. A transcript of the evidence presented today will be available next week on the Committee's web site, www.parliament.nsw.gov.au.

I would like to welcome now our first witness, the State member for Lismore, Mr Thomas George, and simultaneously we will hear from the Mayor of Lismore City Council, Councillor Merv King. We welcome Mr George and Mr King. We appreciate your attendance here today.

THOMAS GEORGE, New South Wales member for Lismore, and

MERVYN HERBERT KING, Mayor, Lismore City Council, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee?

Mr GEORGE: As the member for Lismore.

Mr KING: As Mayor of Lismore.

CHAIR: I presume you are both quite happy to give your evidence in public.

Mr GEORGE: Yes.

Mr KING: Yes.

CHAIR: Mr George, do you have an opening statement that you would like to make to the Committee first?

Mr GEORGE: Yes, Madam Chair. First of all, could I, as the local member for the seat of Lismore, take this opportunity to thank you and your Committee for coming to Lismore as part of its inquiry. I extend a very warm welcome to you all, and trust that you will have a very interesting day.

I realise that a lot of letters have come forward to my office and that they have been forwarded to the respect Minister and the Premier. Today, with the authorisation of the authors, I table some more letters, with the approval of the authors that they be tabled here today for your information. Furthermore, I table a further submission by Mr Brian Bugden. It was dropped off at my office this morning. Whilst it was too late for these details to be forwarded to you, I table them also. They are personally addressed to each and every member of the Committee.

Documents tabled.

In December 2003 the Minister for Transport Services, Mr Michael Costa, announced that the line would be kept open until December 2004, but, seemingly five months after making that statement the Carr Labor Government cancelled the service. The train service has been catering to not only the needs of students, elderly citizens and disabled persons but also tourists and the general public.

Political representatives of all persuasions joined in the campaign to keep the railway line open. They include the mayors of the local government areas in my electorate—Merv King and Charlie Cox—together with Warren Polgrase from the Tweed, Jan Barham from Byron, Phil Silver from Ballina, and Ernie Bennett of Kyogle, who is also the President of the Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils [NOROC]. Irrespective of the side of the political fence that the mayors represent, they have led the community in attempts to retain the rail service.

The community feeling about the loss of this rail service is unprecedented during my term in Parliament. Everyone has been firmly behind the campaign to retain the rail service. Even the Country Labor Northern Rivers secretary and Lismore councillor Jenny Dowell stated:

The announcement to cut the service has effectively meant that the Government has lied. We are all disgusted at this.

As I said earlier, the cessation of the CountryLink service between Casino and Murwillumbah on 17 May has caused an unprecedented level of concern and alarm in the Northern Rivers community. The history of rail service in the northern part of the State has come to an end, but the people of the Northern Rivers will continue to fight and draw attention to the economic and tourism importance of the line to development of the region, as well as the significant social benefits derived from the service by elderly and disabled passengers and young people. The rail service will never be fully replicated by a replacement bus service. There are significant environmental benefits associated with the retention of the rail service. The committee which has been promised by Minister Costa will continue its efforts to substantiate the future and economic advantages of the Casino and Murwillumbah rail link.

The region's population continues to grow rapidly. The rail line is an important piece of infrastructure both now and for the future. The social and environmental advantages of having the line connected to the Queensland rail system has been a dream of this community for so long, and I am disappointed that this decision has been taken. I am a past president of the Casino Chamber of Commerce, and over time we have well and truly made representations to have this line extended to Robina, to offer the people of south-east Queensland the opportunity to visit the Northern Rivers by rail, and vice versa. It would have a tremendous effect. The benefits that this rail link could have brought to our community are immeasurable.

Other statistics that have been of interest, and which I should reinforce, are: the fact that we have now axed the train means we have 3,600 more bus movements on our local roads. This road infrastructure is already overtaxed. It cannot cope with the vehicles using our road system now. The effect that it has had on the six families in Lismore alone has been severe. Those staff, sadly, were not able to come and make representations to this Committee. I believe that is a very sad day for their livelihoods. They have been advised that they will be offered redeployment to other suitable State Rail positions. Also, they have been offered the opportunity to register with the work force management centre. All have been offered voluntary redundancy. These are very sad days. When you see those employees and their families in tears, this decision has had a devastating effect on them.

I want to speak about the closure of the CountryLink office in Lismore. I will speak about that because it is in my electorate. That service has been provided to this community. We have a magnificent building which I believe more than \$90 million was spent on in the nineties. It is to be closed. Admittedly, Minister Costa has agreed that the station will be kept open in the interim and that people will be offered convenient places to catch the bus service.

The freight load in Australia is forecast to more than double in the next fifteen years. We need to get some of this freight off road and onto rail. It is rather ironic that I am here protesting against the closure of the Casino to Murwillumbah rail link. As a stock and station agent in my previous life, I led the fight against the doing away with transporting livestock on rail. That livestock transport was taken off rail some years ago. Wouldn't we love to have that back on rail today? So, with the benefit of hindsight, I am here seeking to have this service re-established.

CountryLink rail services return 32¢ in the dollar, compared to 28¢ for CityRail. But is this all about the almighty dollar? Next thing we will be closing public toilets because they do not pay! We have to provide infrastructure, especially in country and regional New South Wales. It is needed not only by the disabled and the aged, but also by the young people, the general public and the tourists who visit our area. Transport is virtually non-existent in this area. We have very little choice, and people with specific health needs or disabilities rely on this service being availed to them. This minor section of the community might not mean much to the Government in Sydney. I have a constituent who is very disabled and cannot get out of her wheelchair. She has been to see me because she must go to Sydney for major dental treatment; to get on a bus and then get off the bus and onto a train is not manageable for her.

In relation to the terms of reference, the savings of \$5 million may be savings in dollar terms. However, the social cost to the communities affected is immeasurable. People will not move to rural areas unless the historic access to and infrastructure of services are in place. There are rail bridges that need attention but it just has not happened. This has been needed for years now. As I understand it, there was already work allocated to take place on these bridges. Maintenance savings are immeasurable. Neglect due to the government not maintaining over the term of its office is certainly shown out now. It has been indicated to us that the cost is \$188 million over the next 20 years. But what have we spent over the past 10 years? Let us look at the figures we have spent here, which show neglect by the Government, which has not carried out its responsibilities.

As for the social and economic impact: Government has made too many cuts in this area. Community expectation is that centralisation is Carr's agenda. Rural New South Wales has simply lost and will continue to lose with the magnitude of cuts of basic services to remote rural areas. As for the future of the rail line, once infrastructure of State rail—employees and CountryLink staff—is lost, I do not know how we will re-establish. It will be a substantial risk and a substantial task. Any other matters: The flood access to towns has only been by rail in some areas. The history of the line: We had the Ritz rail here, which promoted and encouraged tourism to the area and youth access to the area. That is in the past trains used to travel to Byron Bay, youth are becoming ever more isolated because of a lack of these services.

I want to assure the Committee that the community has contributed to a wonderful community effort in fighting for this service that has been aimed at the retention of the line. The fight is not over yet. The community feels shattered by the closure of the rail service. I use the words of our local editor of the *Northern Star*, Russell Eldridge, who summed up the community's attitude and feeling when he wrote, "Mr Carr, you have taken away our train, not your train."

CHAIR: Councillor King, do you have a similar opening statement that you would like to make on behalf of the council?

Mr KING: Not a written one, but I would like to make a few points. The councils in this particular area have put in a combined submission, as well as individual ones. The combined one was done through our Northern Region Organisation of Councils [NOROC]. I will not go into that; I will leave it for you to peruse at your leisure. However, I would like to make four points. Following on Mr George's remarks about population, we have been told by the experts that by about 2020 there will be a quarter of Australia's population living within the area from Harvey Bay to Coffs Harbour. By my estimation that would be somewhere around a conservative 5 million people. It could well be more.

This is also a very important tourist area, and all towns, cities and councils are trying to improve their tourism. Tourism and things for people to see to get people to come here. Tourism is a growing industry in this area. Put 5.5 million people plus the tourists here in 2020 and governments at all levels will be looking at every avenue they can find to get people not only in and out of our area but around our area as well. I think it is tremendously important that our government should be so shortsighted as to want to close a rail link that in 16 years time may well be a very important corridor in this area.

The second point is that I have been one of the leaders of the campaign to try to save our rail service and to save our line and our corridor. It is not a job I particularly wanted but it is a job I got, and I took it on and I have been delighted. One thing that has been wonderful is the fact that so many people have been involved. It has been a community effort, and all sides of the political fence have been involved. It is not a political effort, not one party against another. This is all parties against the closing of our CountryLink service and the closing of our rail line. I thank the people very much for their support.

I am 71 years old and I have lived here all my life. In that time there has never been a more unpopular decision by a State government in relation to this particular area and I have lived through a few of them. I was part of the dairy industry back 30, 40 years ago, and this has been the most unpopular decision made by a State government. The third point I would make is that I was one of the group that talked to Mr Costa in Sydney on 13 May. Mr Costa made a number of points, but one point he made was that he was concerned about the number of pensioners and people with concession cards using these services and not paying the full amount.

It is in the Government's hands to get a return from the railway line. It is not the pensioners who are going along and saying, "We will go on, we will not pay you anything." It is the Government's decision to do that, to decide what will come out of the coffers of those people. But the point is that while millions of dollars are being invested in Sydney services and Newcastle and Wollongong services, but particularly Sydney—I refer you to the point that these days NSW means Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong; it does not mean anything else to the people here—they are taking away our service from the people up here. If that is not discrimination, I do not know what it is. I believe it is blatant discrimination by this government.

My fourth point is that as mayor of this town I firmly believe that our economic future lies as part of south-east Queensland. We need more links with Queensland, not less. We have a capital city that is two hours up the road. Sydney is half a world away to us. Brisbane is a couple of hours away up the road. All our supplies, our services, come from Brisbane. Why would we remain as a far flung outpost of a Sydney centric empire when we can be part of Queensland? I believe that is very important, and I believe that will be the next battle. If we lose this one, that will be the next battle.

I am reflecting the views of the people out there because in the time that this campaign has been waged the number of people who have come up and spoken to me and said we should be part of Queensland, we should not be part of Northern New South Wales, has astounded me. A lot of people think that these days, and I am reflecting the views of those people. I believe it myself; I have believed it for a long time, but I am reflecting the views of a lot of people out there who believe we have lost any links we would have had with New South Wales—Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong. We should be part of Queensland.

CHAIR: You both mentioned the importance of tourism to this part of New South Wales and obviously its potential as well as population growth but a lot of visitors to this area. Can you perhaps expand on how important tourism is and its relevance to the infrastructure, particularly rail?

Mr GEORGE: As to the importance of tourism, if we do not have the tourism dollar come to this area we have nothing. I speak of the towns in my electorate—the Casino-Lismore area. We depend on the overflow and we encourage the overflow from the coastal areas. The tourists who come to the coastal areas look for something to do, and the inland towns, such as Casino, which has just had a very successful beef week promotion, encourages people to come for a day trip from the coastal areas. Let us face it. People might want to come to the coastal areas but they look to do day trips away, and if we do not have the facilities to provide rail services to and from this area we cannot encourage tourists because a lot of our tourists travel by train. We should encourage that even more, to get them to come. They not only fly but they do come by trains. There are a lot of them who come by trains and we should keep encouraging that. But without our rail service, how do you encourage that?

Mr KING: I support those remarks. I think the scenic attractions of this particular area make it a very important tourist area. That is the whole of south-east Queensland, the far North Coast of New South Wales area. The scenic attractions are tremendous and it is an area that we must promote as a tourist area. I think it is an area that is being promoted by so many councils, as I said earlier, just for that very purpose. Of course, we have been told that we should look at other ways of attracting people and getting income into our areas, and tourism is the big dollar earner presently and also well into the future.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you outline the regional significance of Lismore? I understand that Lismore now becomes the only major city without a rail service, but I believe there are services like health and the university where people can access those from a range of other centres by coming potentially by rail.

Mr KING: Yes, that is true. Lismore is a regional centre and it has the sort of things you are talking about, which is very important to us here. I suppose I would take another tack. We have had losses in services from the State Government over a period of years. Even only last Monday an announcement was made that our business enterprise centres—six of them in this area—are going. No word to the people involved; just a press announcement on Monday that we all read in the paper, and we read it at the same time as the people who work in those centres. That is another kick in the teeth to the people up here, I believe. But it is a regional centre and we want to retain it as that. It makes it so much more difficult if we do not have a rail services.

Mr GEORGE: It is very important to the city link in terms of providing a link to this city. People travel from the south to come to this area, especially students, as you have just mentioned. It is the head office of the Northern Rivers Area Health Service. A lot of people come to the area not only for business reasons but for education purposes as well, and it is vital that a city such as Lismore has a rail link.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: I am looking at a submission from Mr Warren Rackham from Lismore council. He suggests that in fact the services and the condition of the line have been allowed to run down over time. Would you like to comment on what impact you think the timetables and service have had on patronage over time?

Mr KING: Yes, I think that is very important, and I think the service that has been offered by CountryLink here, while it was a service to get people to Sydney for whatever reason, medical appointments, to visit people, but it went through Lismore at 11.30 at night. That is not a service that encourages people to use it as any sort of daily service. That is one of the things we would like to get back on this line here, commuter, passenger, tourist type services that are running at a time when people would and could use them. We believe there is a great potential there to tap into that market. The services here have been run down over a number of years with a succession of governments, and I think people have just been prepared to say, "The Government says it cannot afford this". But when the line itself was going, the service was going completely, that is when they turn around and start to kick . You have seen what happened with the sort of protest meetings we have had here. If we can get tourist passenger commuter services back on that line in whatever form, just to provide that service through the day, to get either a workers' service, a service to go to the beach—that is something that used to be very popular here many years ago, to go to Byron Bay for the day—those are the sorts of things we are looking at in this area, and I think it is very important.

Mr GEORGE: Previously I had made representations to the previous transport Minister, the Hon. Carl Scully, on behalf of private operators in the area who were trying to secure what they termed a DEB set, which is a light rail to service this line. Sadly, every time one became available it went to a historical museum type of railway place. The private group tried very hard to get one of those sets to service between Casino and Murwillumbah with a light rail service and provide more trips per day but we have not been able to secure one of those sets.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Mr George mentioned that freight movement in New South Wales over the next 10 years is likely to double. If the line were open from Murwillumbah to the Gold Coast or to Robina would there be an increase in the freight services on that line?

Mr KING: I strongly believe that is a good possibility. It would be something, especially if the line were open because there would also be a connection to Brisbane. It would encourage industries to develop along the link and to use rail as their mode of transport.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Are you suggesting the establishment of the line would encourage and cause industry to move in rather than the other way around? There is no existing freight service, for example, that would tap into that line if it were open tomorrow.

Mr GEORGE: There is no service available for industry now. If that link were put in, I am sure we would see a lot more development along this link for industries to look at in terms of using rail for transport.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Have you seen any studies on that link? I understand that least one detailed study has been done.

Mr GEORGE: I believe a study has been done. That was raised at the meeting with Mr Costa. We asked for that to be brought forward for tabling and for the working group that Mr Costa promised. We would then look at that as well.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Would a Coalition Government re-establish the train service between Casino and Murwillumbah?

Mr GEORGE: That assurance has been given. However, as the local member I would be concerned about how much infrastructure will go in the meantime and what condition it will be in when we take Government. If the infrastructure is dismantled and if it is as bad the State Government leads to us believe, I have concerns.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: We would have to restore the infrastructure.

Mr GEORGE: Yes.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: You talked earlier about the people who find it very difficult to access services and who have used trains perhaps because they do not have a car or do not drive. What is your comment about the extra range of services, particularly in the community transport area, that the Government is putting in place and do you think those services will be of benefit to those people?

Mr GEORGE: If the community transport services available to date are any indication it is not sufficient. I know it has been indicated that community transport services will be made available. However, it will have to be a big improvement on what we have now.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: I take on board your comment that you are concerned about existing community transport and whether they will be improved, and the comment that there are a number of extra villages and towns being serviced by buses that had not received those services in the past. Do you have a comment?

Mr GEORGE: This is where I have a difference. I believe that the CountryLink buses are servicing the same areas that buses already service. That will be indicated later by a representative of a bus organisation who is appearing. During discussions I have had with bus owners and operators in the area they have highlighted that CountryLink services are doing the same routes serviced by bus companies. No extra services are being provided by the CountryLink buses as I understand it.

CHAIR: It was stated at the hearing in Sydney that very cheap airfares are attracting passengers away from rail services. Does that apply to Lismore? Do they get the same sorts of discounts?

Mr GEORGE: We have airports at Lismore and Casino. It is competitive at the moment. Lismore is serviced by Rex Airlines and Ballina is serviced by Qantas Link and Rex, and Virgin will be operating there soon. Naturally, the introduction of a third airline will create competition. However, we must keep in mind that the people with benefit cards of any description will not get any further reduction in airfares, but with public transport they do. I do not think that the airlines will be able to take all the business from the State Rail.

Mr KING: I agree with that. There are people who cannot use airline services. I would like to table a photograph of a person who has traditionally and regularly gone to Sydney by train and who cannot use buses and airline services.

CHAIR: I thank both of you for your time today.

(Witnesses withdrew)

CHARLIE COX, Mayor, Richmond Valley Council, and

ERNIE BENNETT, President, Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you for the very substantial submission from the Northern Rivers Organisation of Councils Inc. [NOROC]. Would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Mr COX: I represent 21,000 residents and the council's headquarters are at Casino, which has a population of 11,500 people. We are at the junction of the Sydney to Brisbane line and the branch line to Murwillumbah. That connection began 100 years ago. At its opening it was hailed as an important milestone in the linkage of communities in the region socially and economically. That link is now threatened. My people have demonstrated through petitions, public rallies, letter writing and in the media that they are strongly opposed to the closure of the Casino to Murwillumbah line. I have conveyed these feelings to Minister Costa and other politicians in written form and by personal representation to Minister Costa at the recent mayors' delegation meeting at Parliament House on 13 May. I would like to correct Mr George. There is no operational airport at Casino.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: I think Mr George meant Lismore when he said Casino.

Mr BENNETT: Thank you for the opportunity to appear. As I said, we have put together a substantial submission for the committee covering many areas from NOROC's point of view. We represent all the councils in the Richmond, Tweed and Clarence. We are all astounded by the closure of the line, especially after the promise made by Minister Costa in December 2003, when he said that it would stay open for 12 months to allow time for an inquiry into the feasibility of keeping it open. We see this as a community service, not a fee-for-service, and it should be treated as such. If the Government wished to look at this as a fee-for-service, we do not understand why it would close a CountryLink line over a CityLink line. In return for their dollar spent CountryLink returns 32 cents and CityLink returns 28 cents. It does not add up.

We all agree that it is a community service that not only should stay but should also be expanded to get the full benefit. To do that the Government needs to look how that can be done, and there are many suggestions. For a start, timetables do not match the need for service in many cases. The extension of the line into South-East Queensland is vital to the viability of the service into the future. It is very seriously needed for the growth of our region. We do not understand where the Government is coming from with this need to close the line, and there are many answers. We are not sure why the Government is not prepared to be open and to allow the local employees to appear before this inquiry to give evidence. That raises doubts in their minds as to what is being hidden in this process.

Mr COX: Richmond Valley Council has surveyed its community in relation to rail services. The results contradict claims that rail services are not utilised in this area. In fact, 33 per cent of respondents stated that they travel the branch line and 60 per cent of them indicated that they would utilise this rail service if the timetables and the frequency of services were adjusted. Clearly, we feel there is strong support for a light rail commuter service operating on a schedule that can move our residents throughout the region on a suitable and convenient timetable. Our community needs transport options to cater for the aged, frail, disabled, workers, students, family groups and the disadvantaged. Richmond Valley Council area has a low socioeconomic profile—much lower than the surrounding areas.

There is definite link between vehicle theft and limited public transport options. On the basis of safety along, the retention of the railway line and the subsequent development of a light rail commuter service makes sense. Increased the traffic resulting from the closure, coupled with population predictions, will impact on traffic accident statistics. There seems to be some contradiction in the State Government's policy. Just last week, at the annual shires conference, Minister Scully stressed the need to improve road safety and to reduce damage caused to road surfaces. Increased traffic on our roads will also impact on council's road maintenance costs.

In Richmond Valley Council's written submission, reference is also made to other issues, such as for a looped rail system to link the region to Brisbane, the environmental efficiency of rail and the importance of a flood-free rail link throughout our region. I believe the decision to close the line is contrary to the Government's move towards regionalisation. For example, the recently formed catchment management authorities promote regionalisation. The encouragement for local government bodies to form regional and subregional co-operative

groups indicates a leaning by government towards community taking a broad regional view of their affairs. In this respect, Richmond Valley Council has adopted a regional perspective on the threatened closure. Our community has a collective view on the importance of the Casino to Murwillumbah line, and we are opposed to its closure.

We have been forthright and active in our opposition in a manner not often seen in country areas, and that action has taken place over a long period. The State Government's axing of the XPT and the closing of the line are seen as one of the most unpopular, divisive and short-sighted decisions seen in our region in recent times. In my movements throughout our community I find it difficult to find a supporter of the Government's decision. The support given to the campaign to save the rail line has the support of members of Parliament and every mayor, and this is virtually unprecedented in its solidarity. Clearly, the decision to close the line has no popular support and shows a sad lack of understanding of this part of country New South Wales. Thank you.

CHAIR: Many of the submissions seem to be saying that perhaps the rundown of the infrastructure may be part of an agenda to make this a self-fulfilling prophecy if it was problematic in terms of cost of maintenance. Do you think there may be any validity to that?

Mr COX: I certainly would agree with that. This is a situation that has been allowed to deteriorate for a good number of years. I have personal experience within my own family. An employer who worked for State Rail had himself transferred out of this region because he no longer wanted to have any feeling of responsibility for potential damage to property and accident to human beings.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: NOROC's submission mentions that less than 2 per cent of the work force in this region travel to work by public transport. Employment, obviously, is a huge issue in the area, particularly in outlying towns. Would you like to talk to us further about that?

Mr BENNETT: That is true, it is less than 2 per cent. That is mainly due to the unavailability of services. One of the easiest ways to justify taking a service away from the community is to either run it down or put the service on at a time that does not suit the community. They then do not use it, and then that is the excuse used for taking away a service. There is also an insufficient government subsidy available. A lot of people could use the service if it was on a timetable that suited people going to TAFE, or in so many other areas that it could be used for. I think that is a task that the Government should have taken on some years ago: to look at how it could better use the service and get the patronage up even higher. I do not say the patronage is not high enough at this point of time to justify this decision.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Are you aware of any public transport plan for this region?

Mr BENNETT: No, I am not. I think there should be a really good study of what is available, and where we can improve on the service. There is definitely room for a rail service in that process. It is all about putting the service on at a time that suits the needs of the community. A lot of our community, as I understand it, are non fare-paying passengers. It is not our fault or their fault that they happen to be in a situation where government does allow them to travel free of charge, whether they be age pensioners or people who are receiving social security. That is part of the reason given for not having enough income from this line. I have not seen anywhere throughout Sydney where the Government has said, "Sorry, but we have too many pensioners living in that area using out rail service for nothing, so we must close it as well."

Mr COX: I believe a feasibility study is to be commissioned, and that it is almost signed off on by the sustainable regions. I am not sure whether they would have in that a component that would look at a total transport profile for the region, but I should imagine that they would be taking that into consideration—just to see where the rail infrastructure fits into the whole transport picture.

CHAIR: I think we will be able to check on that in the next day or so.

Mr COX: Thank you.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: One of the reasons that the Government advanced for amalgamating councils was that that would make them more efficient and save residents money. What impact do you anticipate the closure of the line will have on council finances?

Mr BENNETT: It will have a huge impact on our road infrastructure. The extra cost will come back to local government—not to the State or Federal government but back to local government, to keep up the road infrastructure. I think the figure is round about three thousand extra buses that are going to be on our roads, and that is going to have a huge impact on the road infrastructure. So, yes, amalgamation is another story, but that is going to have a huge impact.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Councillor Cox, in your opening remarks and also in your submission you mentioned the idea of a loop line from Casino, Lismore, Murwillumbah and the Gold Coast. Then you said "Brisbane". I assume by that you are talking about linking into the service that comes down to Robina.

Mr COX: Yes, we are. Our vision is that while there is an existing line that runs from Sydney to Brisbane, the branch line does not have any way of connecting along the coast. Earlier, there was mention made of the tourism potential. My council, being mainly based inland from the coast, is quite keen to attract tourism. We feel that a lot of people who are being attracted to the Gold Coast and to the coastal scene probably have seen that quite often and that, in the case of international tourists, they want to see not only the coast but we think that there should be an experience for them to get to the inland, to do the rainforest walks, to do the farm stays, to look at rural New South Wales as well as coastal New South Wales.

It was also mentioned that the main freight runs along the main line. But there is also the potential for it to branch off at Casino, so that there could be two pathways into Brisbane, which would certainly ease a lot of the traffic that is currently on the main line.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: For that to happen, though, the branch line at Casino that takes freight would then go back into the same line that the original freight was on. Is that not the case?

Mr COX: It would link up at Brisbane, yes. But we see it as important for our people to have the possibility to link up with Coolangatta, and that is what the loop—

The Hon. PETER BREEN: I think Coolangatta is where the emphasis should be placed. Development of that line from Murwillumbah to Coolangatta, in my opinion, is where the potential lies. Are you aware of any study that has been done on a proposal for a link between Murwillumbah and the Gold Coast?

Mr COX: Not as such. I cannot identify a definite study. But the long-term vision would have been, in my opinion, to link the rail corridor with the proposed road corridor, so that the two could run parallel to one another.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: The fact that agreement has now been reached on a proposed road corridor west of the airport seems to me to offer the potential also, in that development, to consider a rail line perhaps adjacent to the road.

Mr COX: I think that would be good planning.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: The cost of adding the extra eight to ten feet that is needed for a rail line, given that they are going to build the road, in overall terms cannot be that much greater.

Mr COX: It seems a logical thought just to widen the verge.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Mr Bennett, you indicated I think that there was some difficulty in relation to the witnesses that have been called to give evidence. Would you be able to expand on those remarks?

Mr BENNETT: It was reported in the local media that two local employees who were willing to give evidence were told, I believe by Minister Costa, that they were not allowed; that somebody else would be available on the day, I presume someone out of the Minister's office. I am not 100 per cent sure on that, but it was in the local media that they were not allowed to give evidence at today's hearing.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: It does arise from time to time where people who work for the government want to provide information to our committees, and they often do it through a third person or another party. So I do not think too much significance should be placed on that. I am sure that if they have got information, we will get it.

Mr BENNETT: I would hope so.

CHAIR: We will certainly be trying to.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: Councillor Cox, it seems that one of the big difficulties we face is essentially how to get people back into public transport and out of cars, and particularly get them onto rail, given that buses are also on the road. It seems to me we all have to admit that is very difficult. For instance, the Federal Government's pre-election announcement gives five times as much money to roads as to rail. What I really want to ask is: If you look at the figures—and I think we had 2½ hours with the rail people in Sydney on our first day of hearings, and of course we have another whole day on Friday—the figures we were given are that, in relation to vehicles on the Bruxner Highway, there are currently 5,000 a day between Casino and Lismore, 6,500 between Lismore and Bangalow, 18,000 between Bangalow and the Gold Coast area, et cetera. So they are very big figures. That is in both directions; so halve those. But there are only 34 people, on average, on the train between Casino and Lismore. So, comparing 34 people with say 2,500 vehicles, I am wondering what advice you can give the Committee as to how we should all work to change that balance?

Mr COX: I do not think that the timetable encourages people to use rail. Basically, people want to use rail during the daylight hours, and it seems to me that the timetable wants those people to do either night shopping or visit their surgeon or medical practitioners at night time, and I do not think too many of them work at that time. What we are talking about here is a light rail service that would operate at convenient times—during daylight, preferably—and would run the full length of the track, so that it would connect—

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: Do you think that would get people out of their cars?

Mr COX: I think it would, because I think it is included in the NOROC report that it has been proven on overseas figures that once you close a rail line, people do not necessarily go to coach services; they go to private vehicles. I think that would exacerbate the traffic problems that we are experiencing now.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: But there is still a huge difference between 2,500 vehicles, with I don't know how many people in them, and 34 people.

Mr COX: In the present circumstances. But I do not know whether the Rail Corporation, or whichever names it goes by, has been making the service either attractive in its timetabling or attractive in the actual accommodation that they provide on trains.

CHAIR: What about sectors where the timetabling is better in terms of daylight and so on?

Mr COX: Well, I have no experience of that.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: But the percentages as a proportion are very similar for every sector.

Mr COX: I would be hoping that the overall strategy would promote use. So that it would not be an instant success, of course. It is something that people would have to promote, and it would have to prove itself. Could I diverge for a moment? This weekend Casino is going to be visited by a rail motor that is coming out of the Paterson museum. A rail motor, of course, is light rail. The people who are coming on that are coming up because they are rail buffs. They are stopping at Casino, and they are going up to the border loop on Sunday, I think it is. They very much want to visit the stations along the branch line. But they have to do that by coach. That light rail cannot go on this line. Yet the line is quite capable of taking it. We thought this might have been an ideal way to prove to the State Government that that sort of service is not only possible but also attractive to people.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: I think I misled people. Of course, there are 194 people on the train but 34 of them get off at Lismore. I did not want to appear to give the wrong figure.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Just to clarify it, that is the northbound train. There are 212 people on the southbound train. So I think the figures need to be put together. There are about 400 people using that branch line.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: When I said 2,500 I was halving the figures to make them comparable. So 184 is comparable to 2,500.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Anyway, it is not 34.

CHAIR: Obviously, Councillor Cox, to get a better balance we have to have a train.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Councillor Cox, in your submission—and you spoke about it again today—you comment that there is also a higher crime rate related to transport by car in the Richmond Valley area, and the lack of rail services is likely to accentuate that issue. Is there already, judging by your submission, an issue about stolen motor vehicles and can you relate them to the issue of transport?

Mr COX: These are figures obtained from the local area command, which definitely establish that a lot of car thefts in and around the Richmond area command are a short trip. The vehicle is actually stolen for convenience and that has been related to a lack of suitable public transport.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Do you know whether that is also an issue in other local government areas in this region?

Mr COX: Richmond area command would cover, as I understand it, Richmond Valley, Lismore, would extend into Ballina as well. So you are looking at a population perhaps of 80,000, 90,000, probably even more.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: When you were talking about the issue of the timetables, one thing I think you mentioned was students using TAFE and so on. In terms of your proposal for light rail, how many services a day would you be looking at to provide the services to students and also those people you were talking about who needed to have medical appointments and so on? What would be appropriate in terms of the number of services and the times?

Mr COX: I think that would be something for the feasibility study to look at. I would not like to throw a figure into the middle. I think it is beyond me. I just do not have the capacity to do that.

Mr BENNETT: If I could just add, we have a very large university here in Lismore. I would not even like to guess how many students attend the university from other parts of the region, whether it be Casino, Murwillumbah, Byron Bay, et cetera, who would utilise a cheap service. These people are trying to live on a shoestring and need to get to university. It is not just TAFE. The university would probably be the biggest draw card and then there are the young kids who live outside any of these towns who wish to get to work, their first job, when they do not have a car. So there is a huge demand as long as the services are put on at an appropriate time.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Luncheon adjournment)

PETER SHEPHERD, General Manager, Kirkland's Coaches, Pty Ltd, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee today?

Mr SHEPHERD: As the general manager of Kirkland's Coaches.

CHAIR: Kirkland's Coaches has made a submission to this inquiry, which we thank you for. Would you like to highlight some of the main points that you would like the Committee to note?

Mr SHEPHERD: It is an opportunity for us. We are very concerned about the consequences of the action of the withdrawal of the services as they affect the stakeholders of Kirkland's, the passengers, our drivers, our people, and the viability of our business. As you said, I did make a submission. Perhaps if I could draw a number of points from that submission and highlight them, would that be appropriate?

CHAIR: That would be great.

Mr SHEPHERD: As a local business we have been providing services in the region for 60 plus years and particularly through to Brisbane from this region for 20 plus years. We are no strangers to competition. We compete with air, cars, other coach companies daily. It is the environment we live in. What we do not compete with, and have not had to to date, are government subsidised coaches operated under the CountryLink banner, which unfortunately for our customer base do not provide the equity of fares and concessions that we are only able to provide under our Ministry of Transport guidelines. In other words—and good luck to the passengers of CountryLink—the passenger return fare is as low as \$2.20, which to a commercial operator who has to live in the real world without taxpayer subsidy, is below cost. It is something we just cannot provide.

The consequence perhaps is that while ever CountryLink is running its coach services on the routes that we operate, and have done for 20 years, we will see our patronage diminish severely. That will impact on jobs, and it will obviously impact on the viability of the services we provide. We have a real concern about it. I think at the outset it is fair to say—and we have some correspondence that I would like to table—that indicated that CountryLink really did view the introduction of the coaches as a rail replacement activity. Somewhere between that intent, if that truly was its intent, and the commencement of the services, we find that they are not only rail replacement; they are an enhancement of rail replacement. That is where it brings them into conflict with other bus and coach operators, not only Kirkland's.

We hold and abide by contracts with the Ministry of Transport, and we depend on the regulator, the Ministry of Transport, to make sure that those conditions are met not only for ourselves but for our passengers and for other operators. CountryLink appears on this occasion to have introduced its services without any regard for either the Ministry of Transport or consultation with them, as far as I can judge, and certainly none with any other local bus operators.

CHAIR: Can you tell us how many employees Kirkland's has?

Mr SHEPHERD: On our Brisbane services we operate with six drivers, and Kirkland's in total over 110 employees.

CHAIR: You have a document that you said you wanted to table.

Mr SHEPHERD: Yes, I have that document, which implies that in fact RailCorp—and I will just quote from it—it is an internal RailCorp document that sets out the proposal for introducing coaches. One paragraph states:

It should also be noted that the Ministry of Transport have a contract with Kirkland's to supply services from Lismore to Brisbane and return. However, RailCorp's proposed service is seen as a rail replacement coach ...

I assume that is not an enhanced service.

CHAIR: Can you perhaps explain to the Committee what that means in legal terms, the difference between rail replacement and enhancement of rail replacement?

Mr SHEPHERD: I cannot in legal terms.

CHAIR: I appreciate that. I am not asking you to be a lawyer, but perhaps you could elaborate.

Mr SHEPHERD: The way we would read that document, we would see it as being primarily aimed at ensuring that passengers that were previously carried by rail from Murwillumbah to Casino were in fact now catered for by coaches. I am sure that is the intent of it, but they have gone an extra step or steps to that by introducing a lot more services than we would believe are required and promoting those services beyond rail replacement to passengers, in other words, those who would normally have perhaps been expecting to travel on Kirkland's or our competitors' services. With the use of some of the wording and some of the full-page advertising I do not think we are far wrong from that assessment.

We raised that concerned with CountryLink and in fairness also with the Ministry of Transport, and CountryLink has agreed to enter discussions with the Ministry of Transport and Kirkland's. We had two such meetings and as an interim measure they have agreed to comply with the Act until the outcome of discussions are resolved. In short, that should give us and other accredited bus operators in this region the comfort that they will not pick up and set down for distances less than 40 kilometres, which is one of the requirements of the Act. So they will not be providing substitute village to town services and cut across existing services which we have contracts in place to maintain.

CHAIR: One would think they should comply with the Act anyway, not as an interim measure but full stop.

Mr SHEPHERD: That is our concern.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I understand one of your services is from Tweed to Lismore. If I started my own bus company would I be allowed to start servicing that route?

Mr SHEPHERD: No. You have to apply to the Ministry of Transport to be an accredited operator. You would then be granted an approval to operate and you would have to comply with certain standards as a requirement associated with that right to operate.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Is it fair to say that CountryLink does not have to meet the same requirements that any other bus company would be required to meet?

Mr SHEPHERD: In our view they should but part of our complaint is that they have either been ignorant of the requirement or have ignored it.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: When did you find out about the new bus services that were going to be provided?

Mr SHEPHERD: I cannot be specific about the date but it was when the advertisements appeared in the local newspapers.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That must have come as something of a shock.

Mr SHEPHERD: It did, particularly as it immediately raised our concern as to the viability of our operations and the inequities that perhaps arise and subsequently appear, whereby our passengers are not able to obtain the same concessions and fares as CountryLink passengers are able to for the same distance of travel.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: As I understand it, the CountryLink bus is subsidised by the taxpayers. So irrespective of whether there is anybody on the bus or not, the company operating that CountryLink bus will receive a flat payment, is that correct?

Mr SHEPHERD: I do not know the terms of payment but that no doubt would be true. We are a commercial operator. We are subject to return on investment pressures. The fares and concessions that CountryLink is able to operate at are below our costs. We could not operate those concessions.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So you are subsidised according to the number of passengers you take.

Mr SHEPHERD: On our coach services we have to pay our own way according to the number of passengers who travel.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So you really only have the revenue from operative these routes.

Mr SHEPHERD: Yes, that is correct. Bus services are a different field, and they are subsidised within the SSTS system, which is another issue.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But it would be your view that these CountryLink buses are providing a service that goes beyond rail replacement.

Mr SHEPHERD: That was one of our core complaints that we registered with them, and we are endeavouring to get some resolution to that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: When you contacted the Ministry of Transport were they aware of what had occurred?

Mr SHEPHERD: I do not believe so. They certainly did not acknowledge any knowledge of it. It just seemed to me that CountryLink had either assumed, because they still considered it to be rail replacement, that they may have had some ability to go ahead on that basis alone but of course it is not just rail replacement.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Given that you are providing similar services, and given that this seems to be about saving money—a lot of the discussion that the Government puts forward is that we are trying to save money—it might have been more efficient from the taxpayers' perspective to have consulted Kirkland's, which is providing an existing service, and explore whether there is a way in which you can provide that service.

Mr SHEPHERD: Indeed. In the two meetings we have had with CountryLink we have pointed out a number of services that we operate that are fairly close to their services and could have been utilised or may still be able to be utilised by them to carry their rail passengers. It is not only bus services; there is a taxi service scheduled between Lennox Head and Lismore which runs within 25 minutes of an existing Kirkland's service.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Are you aware of any plan for public transport in the Richmond, Tweed and Northern Rivers area?

Mr SHEPHERD: What do you mean?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Is there any concept of more public transport in the region?

Mr SHEPHERD: There are a lot of things happening in the bus transport world in New South Wales. There has been the Unsworth inquiry and other things. Legislation has just been passed to enact some of the changes that the Government wishes to make. With regard to our specific region, the only comment I can make is that there is an advertisement running and I believe interviews are taking place for regional co-ordinators of transport on behalf of the Ministry for Transport. That is community transport. One of those positions would be based in Lismore. That is the way the advertisement reads.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have you been consulted?

Mr SHEPHERD: We know it is happening and the industry association that would have provided that information within our industry.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: From the evidence given to the committee in Sydney sometime ago, I gained the impression that the use of taxis was to be only in extraordinary circumstances when there was no bus service. You are saying that they are being used on a regular basis.

Mr SHEPHERD: Yes, it is complex. I think that is correct. On an emergency basis an unscheduled taxi service has a role to play. However, in the current timetable operated by CountryLink the taxi service is used on a scheduled basis. That is in conflict with the present Act and contracts. If that were not enough, we have a bus running with ample capacity about 20 or 25 minutes later that could get passengers into Lismore on time and there would be a net saving for the community.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Are those passengers not using taxis because they are disabled or are there special conditions that prevent their using a bus service?

Mr SHEPHERD: Not that I am aware of. CountryLink would have to provide that information.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: I assume that servicing these areas is one part of a broader network of operations that you are running.

Mr SHEPHERD: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: If the rail service is not retained and CountryLink continues to operate, will that threaten the viability of your entire operation or would you withdraw services in one area and concentrate on other areas?

Mr SHEPHERD: After operating for 20 and 60 years respectively we would be terribly reluctant to withdraw services. We are in the business of providing services. However, the commercial reality is that if we were competing with taxpayer-subsidised supplier of the same or similar services we would not generate enough funds to pay wages or to maintain the investment. We would have to look at the viability of that section of our business.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Do you have any idea how long that process would take? Would you find it a strain within 12 months?

Mr SHEPHERD: We would know within 12 months. It depends on the outcome of CountryLink's deliberations and the requirements the Department of Transport places on it to conform with the Act and regulations. Once CountryLink knows the outcome, it would then either withdraw to rail replacement activity only or become entrepreneurial and market its services and concession fares. If the latter were the case, we would experience that almost the next day.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: If a person went to the Kirklands depot to buy a ticket to Brisbane would that service have been affected by the introduction of CountryLink buses?

Mr SHEPHERD: Yes. CountryLink buses extend through to Brisbane. That is our concern. It is not just a New South Wales concern.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: The point of the question was that if CountryLink buses replace trains, presumably they would only go to Murwillumbah.

Mr SHEPHERD: I think they run services to Surfers Paradise and if not Brisbane then to Robina.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Where do they operate from locally?

Mr SHEPHERD: Casino.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: You mentioned that CountryLink has introduced services without consultation with the ministry. I presume you mean the Ministry of Transport.

Mr SHEPHERD: Yes, as best I can tell.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: From your observations the way they operate now is outside the guidelines you operate under and presumably outside the legislation.

Mr SHEPHERD: That is true. Although they (CountryLink) have confirmed with the minimum distance of 40 kilometres on an interim basis pending the outcome of discussions with the ministry. That would be the only exception. When they first announced their services they had no limitation.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: They are operating on the same routes as you but at a cheaper price.

Mr SHEPHERD: Yes.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: How much cheaper?

Mr SHEPHERD: The minimum fare is a pensioner concession at \$2.20 return. I can compare that with a Kirklands fare from, say, Lismore to Tweed Heads of \$10.90.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Is that a return fare?

Mr SHEPHERD: Ours is a one-way fare and the CountryLink fare is return. That is the best price we can offer a pensioner. Passengers can buy a CountryLink return ticket and tear up the return part of the ticket and still be in front.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Has that operated only since the train service ceased?

Mr SHEPHERD: I assume it was available on the train. It has confronted us only since CountryLink introduced coaches to supplement train services.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: As far as you aware that fare was available on the buses before the train service ceased?

Mr SHEPHERD: Correct.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: Were you here this morning?

Mr SHEPHERD: Very briefly, just to see the lie of the land.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: We had quite a bit of discussion about this issue this morning. Everyone probably agreed it was a good thing to enhance public transport, how ever we define it. Much of what you are saying confronts us with a dilemma. I recognise that you are representing business interests, but in essence you are against an enhancement of rail replacement. If the Government sets out to make more services available, leaving out the question of whether they are bus or train services, running from a greater variety of towns and villages and so on, in effect you are saying that you are opposed to that and are looking at legislation to cut that back because it is a threat to your business interests. It is a bit of a dilemma.

Mr SHEPHERD: It may appear that way, but the core is equity of fares. Why should passengers who choose to travel with Kirklands have to pay a higher fare than that available on a Government-sponsored and operated coach service called CountryLink? My proposition is that the same fare should apply for the same distance.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: The trouble with that argument is that a very big taxpayer subsidy has been provided for generations to people to travel by rail. The bus services we are talking about and the fares you have quoted are in fact the same fares that the same people have paid to travel by train. I respect your right to make a dollar, but you are saying that you do not mind taxpayers subsidising people travelling on trains, but you object to the subsidy for buses.

MR SHEPHERD: I do not object to the train subsidy. My objection is that they are not subsidised on the buses as well as the trains. Why discriminate between passengers travelling on a bus over the same distance? It would concern me about the taxpayer situation, but that is a bigger issue. There is no equity at present between passengers who choose to travel with Kirklands as opposed to CountryLink. Why should they not be charged a similar fare or enjoy the same concession?

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: The option would be for everyone to pay \$10.90 instead of \$2.20.

MR SHEPHERD: For a pensioner.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: Either everyone pays that or the taxpayers provide enough subsidy out of the budget to cut Kirklands' prices to the \$2.20.

MR SHEPHERD: Not only Kirklands.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: I am sure you understand the dilemma.

MR SHEPHERD: I understand, but I cannot subscribe to anything that does not provide equity for passengers travelling the same route over a similar distance. Why should they not access the same or similar fares?

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: You are not complaining when they travel on the train.

MR SHEPHERD: No, because they were not competing with us.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: Was CountryLink not providing the bus service connecting from Casino to Murwillumbah?

MR SHEPHERD: Yes, but it was only carrying train passengers.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: Yes, but that was 84 passengers roughly out of the 184—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I must correct that. There were 400 passengers using the branch line a day—

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: I am talking about one way and there are 184 people travelling from Casino to Murwillumbah and of them 80-plus then went on by coach from Murwillumbah to the Gold Coast. The train-bus thing was integrated. It seems to me that you are saying that everyone should pay Kirklands. The Government is trying to enhance —

MR SHEPHERD: I do not think I said that. If that fare is good enough for CountryLink passengers, other people travelling the same distances should be entitled to the same fare.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: You just said that you won a concession from the Government in terms of the old Act that protects private bus operators in that the services will not be provided because they compete with yours.

MR SHEPHERD: I am not aware of that.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: I am referring to the 40-kilometre limit.

MR SHEPHERD: That is an interim agreement that apparently CountryLink has conceded pending the outcome of the meetings with the ministry.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: But that is a concession in your interest against the passengers.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The Government is breaking the law.

MR SHEPHERD: It is not our requirement; it is a requirement for everyone. It is a legislated requirement that any operator of a coach service carries people for more than a minimum of 40 kilometres. CountryLink is simply conforming with the requirement, which it should have been doing all the time.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: As I said, I sympathise with your position, but it seems that what you have said creates a real dilemma for potential passengers and the taxpayers.

MR SHEPHERD: Perhaps it does. However, it is creating in our relatively small world a dilemma with our employees and passengers, and I need to respond to that.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Point n. in your submission relates to cross-border competition issues. Does that penalise New South Wales operators?

MR SHEPHERD: It is an issue for bus and coach operators and other businesses operating so close to the border. Queensland-based businesses enjoy lower levels of payroll tax, lower workers compensation premiums, lower fuel costs and, I believe, lower award wage levels than similar operators in New South Wales, not only bus and coach industry operators but also meat works and transport operators generally. So, there is a

real cross-border issue that becomes apparent when you are so close to the border, as we are. That is the point I was raising.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: In the second-last paragraph of your submission you talk about costs. In the last part of that paragraph, where you are talking about IPART approval, you use the term, "despite the fact that private bus operators operate at half the cost level of government buses". Could you expand on that?

Mr SHEPHERD: It is to do with bus reform. Our industry association, the Bus and Coach Association of New South Wales, has done some analysis and has tabled the comparative costs of private bus operators providing similar services in Sydney and external to Sydney, versus the government buses operating in Sydney and, I think, Newcastle. The government bus cost of service is \$6 a kilometre. The private bus cost of service is \$3 a kilometre. It is a dramatic difference.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: I recall, from debate in Parliament about the bus legislation, similar figures that Daryl Mellish provided to the Parliament. I think one of those figures was that every private bus on the road saves the government \$180,000.

Mr SHEPHERD: That may well be right. The \$6 and \$3 comparison comes from Daryl Mellish and the Bus and Coach Association. I am not privy to that other comment.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Did that legislation have any adverse effect on your operation?

Mr SHEPHERD: Not insofar as CountryLink is concerned, but it certainly has concerns for the industry. I guess it all comes down to how the legislation is applied. The concerns are that, in particular, it enhanced the powers of the Director-General for Transport. We, as operators under his control, were concerned that there was so much power being concentrated in the director-general that was unchallengeable. There were no checks, no balances, no legal redress. I believe that to be the case. So we have a concern there. There were other concerns.

CHAIR: Mr Shephard, you mentioned the discussions with CountryLink and the Ministry of Transport in relation to interim arrangements, so that the Act is being complied with. Have you got an indication of the timetable for the conclusion of those discussions?

Mr SHEPHERD: We have had two meetings. There is a timetable, but I do not have the details with me. I will get them to the inquiry.

CHAIR: We would be happy to hear from you as to how they are going, so that we can monitor that.

Mr SHEPHERD: I will pursue that.

CHAIR: That draws that segment to a conclusion. I would like, on behalf of the Committee, to thank you for your submission and for your time here today and answering our questions.

Mr SHEPHERD: Thank you. I hope it was helpful

(The witness withdrew.)

HAROLD JAMES PARKER, President, Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association, Lismore,

JILL BRENNAN, Association of Independent Retirees, and

KEN JOSEPH GUDMUNDSEN, Medical Practitioner, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee today?

Mr PARKER: On behalf of the Lismore Combined Pensioners Association.

Mrs BRENNAN: I appear here today on behalf of the Association of Independent Retirees.

Dr GUDMUNDSEN: I wrote a letter to the *Northern Star* and put a few points about patients and the railway.

CHAIR: I will ask each of you whether you would like to highlight the main points that you would like to make to the parliamentary inquiry, and then we will ask you some questions. Mr Parker, would you like to put your key points to the Committee?

Mr PARKER: The Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association, Lismore, is a non-profit non-political association, with a membership of 160 aged between 70 and 80-plus years of age. We are affiliated with the Combined Pensioners and Superannuants Association, New South Wales, with a total membership of more than 30,000 people.

Being a group of old people, some of our members have mobility problems and they depend on the train to visit family and friends in all parts of the State. They find it is more convenient and comfortable to travel on the train, as it has facilities for people in wheelchairs or using walking frames, plus it has toilet facilities with easy access. We feel these people will not be able to use the buses because of their steep steps and narrow aisles, and with no access for wheelchairs, therefore limiting their ability to travel. We also use the trains when we go on group outings. I feel that without the train a lot of our members will not be able to have their social outings, as we had before.

A lot of our members have worked for over 50 years and have paid taxes for the provision of public amenities in their latter years. But now the New South Wales Government has taken away our train, which was the only public transport we had in the far North Coast area. We believe the existing infrastructure belongs to the people of New South Wales and must be retained for use by present and future generations.

We feel that replacing the XPT service with buses is a backward step as we already have an overloaded road system, and with many more buses using the road each day the potential for a major road accident is increased considerably. The train is much safer and is more environmentally friendly, and there is less damage to our roads through not increasing the number of heavy vehicles on it, and there is less pollution. Let us get the train back on the track.

Prior to the election of the Carr Labor Government pensioners and concession card holders paid a surcharge of \$10 per trip to travel by train, but the present New South Wales Government decided to remove this charge, and in doing so has forgone an estimated \$1.46 million income per year on the this one train service alone. The members of our association agreed that they would not object to the reintroduction of the \$10 surcharge if it helps to retain our XPT train service.

We would also support the upgrade and the extension of the rail system to link up with the Queensland rail system. This would allow easy access to the Gold Coast and Brisbane, where specialist medical services are often required. It would also open up our region to the tourist industry. The far North Coast is one of the fastest growing population growth areas in the State, and is a major education centre for the far North Coast, with a major university and TAFE college. The students need transport for study and relaxation. The introduction of a commuter service on this branch line would serve all those people.

We are concerned about the loss of employment opportunity for the present CountryLink employees and staff in our region. Their service has been of the highest quality. To lose the services of those people would be a

huge loss to our community. In conclusion, all we ask is that we be given equal consideration and that equal rail and other public services be provided to the people of this area. We are still a vital part of New South Wales.

CHAIR: Mrs Brennan, would you like to give us the key points from your submission?

Mrs BRENNAN: I have an expanded submission, and it will take me about five minutes to read that. It is that acceptable?

CHAIR: That is fine.

Mrs BRENNAN: I would like to address the various terms of reference. We cannot understand how they Minister for Transport Services, Mr Costa, and his predecessor Mr Scully, and indeed the Premier of this State, can be so short-sighted in their decision to close down this section of the railway network of this State in such a salutary manner. I would like to refer to section 5 of the Transport Administration Act 1988, a matter I commented on in my submission. Parts of that include: to exhibit a sense of social responsibility by having regard to the interests of the community in which it operates; and to exhibit a sense of responsibility towards regional development and decentralisation in the way in which it operates. Another part of the Transport Administration Act 1988, section 99A, has been breached, because it says that "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 wish to make it quite clear that in the event of the closure of rail services to this area, the Government must not, in any circumstances, attempt to remove infrastructure, that is, track on a bridge, or removal of a bridge in its entirety, or removal of any other infrastructure pertaining to the possible future reintroduction of the rail network, which has functioned so successfully for the past 110 years. We find it quite incomprehensible to understand why this Committee is sitting at this time, when everyone with any commonsense would know that it was not a sudden decision by the Government of the day to close this very essential, indeed vital, mode of transport for the far North Coast of New South Wales. Why was this Committee not convened some 18 months ago? That would have been good business forward planning.

We refer to the contracts that were canvassed for the supply of buses. How was this decision to "call for expressions of interest" initially made? Was it just a whim, a chance remark made somewhere by a member of the Minister's staff, or was it in response to an inquiry by the then Minister? Or was it as a result of a direct request from the Minister's office? If this was so, when did he request this process to take place? The community is naturally wary of these processes seemingly taken behind closed doors and then presented to them as a fait accompli.

My association is concerned about the impact of the loss of this essential service and their ability to access reasonable transport services when they are required for, as has been previously mentioned, specialist medical treatment, business, entertainment, universities and visiting their children in far away places, both north and south. We are not the only ones affected. Other travellers include railway employees, students, the disabled and the unemployed.

Has the possibility of the Queensland Government being a partner in this railway conundrum by extending its railway network south been canvassed? Past studies into this very question suggest that it is a viable concept to pursue. In fact, some \$50,000 was made available from the sustainable region allocation for this study. We believe that the existing corridors, lines and infrastructure must be kept intact so that a government of vision in the future can upgrade and extend the railway line to connect to the Gold Coast-Brisbane line. The opportunity for extending and enhancing tourism in both New South Wales and Queensland is a definite possibility if this option is pursued.

You will no doubt be of the opinion that the members of my association are all able to pay for alternative methods of travel. I can assure members of this panel that this is not the case. About 15 per cent of our members are part pensioners and about 60 per cent are living on very restricted incomes. So there is a very real worry among them that they will not be able to access rail transport when required. All members of our association have worked very hard during their lifetime in the work force to ensure that they would not be a cost on any government or agency of it. Sadly, this has not been the case for a large number of them, and now they are in a position of requiring access to public transport.

As for the next term of reference, this area has been and still is a very important part of New South Wales both in an economic and a social sense. The potential impact of this summary decision is, of its very nature, a threat to the future of the far North Coast of New South Wales. In an economic sense, the loss of jobs for the many people employed by and within CountryLink, State departments and agencies. These employees at all levels are dependent on their incomes. These incomes support their families in all its many contexts and needs. Their ability to purchase their homes or pay rents, pay their electricity bills, pay for their groceries, green grocery needs, pay for their clothing or their sporting needs, or pay for their simple entertainment needs. Nor can they pay for any necessary repairs to equipment by tradesmen of all callings.

This in turn impacts on all the people who have established businesses to provide all of the above. Businesses and their owners are inevitably affected by decisions of this kind. It also impacts on those who produce the products and services. I refer again to my submission regarding traffic. It has been reported that we will now be subjected to an horrific increase in the volume of heavy vehicle traffic, B-doubles, semitrailers, buses, et cetera, not only through our towns and villages but in most towns and villages as they go about their business of delivering goods and services and passengers to their destinations. Termination of the rail service will mean that approximately 3,650 more buses will be travelling on our local roads and highways each year.

We have also heard that there is the intention of dismantling a bridge near Casino. I ask the question: Why? Is it because it is one way of ensuring that the future reinstatement of the railway be consigned to the waste basket. There is also the inconceivable matter of the delivery of 8,000 sleepers to Casino. Again, why? The Minister has commented that it is an organisational matter. The Minister is not dealing with children. There had to be prior knowledge of the closure of the line, and if he knew this he should have put in place the winding down of all delivery of goods needed to repair the line.

It is a well-documented fact—it has already been commented on but I would like to do so again—that the CountryLink service has a 32 per cent cost recovery, whereas the cost recovery of CityRail is now only 28 per cent. The subsidy for CountryLink is \$148 million, whereas the CityRail subsidy is \$1,435 million. Surely this is a gross case of city versus country. The Government of today seems to be completely focused on the city of Sydney instead of knowing and understanding that most of the sustainable part of their working income comes from the country areas of this State.

I was not aware of the impact of greenhouse gases on the community until I started looking into it. When I was told about the harm, I am definitely not a greeny but when this possibility was pointed out to me it made me feel that it was about time I reconsidered my opinion. There is also concern about the possibility of more road accidents. Our region's population continues to grow rapidly and the environmental impact will be considerable. In the past 20 years since we first moved to this area the increase in population and in traffic has already been horrific. We are now told that it will increase about three times this much. We might as well go back to the city.

Our freight load in Australia is also forecast to be more than double in the next 15 years, and serious consideration should be given to carrying as much of this as possible by rail. Remember that rail is the most environmentally friendly form of transport, and this form of transport needs a reliable, well-maintained and easily accessible rail network to perform their tasks. My members are concerned about this fact as they will now be forced to drive their own vehicles on these inevitably busier roads. The mere fact of more heavy vehicles of all genres is a definite worry. The Pacific Highway, the Bruxner Highway, the Summerland Way and the many other roads which supply access to the residents of this area are, to put it politely, not of a standard which gives drivers of all ages the confidence to drive on, especially in a scenario of bad health needs or family crises.

The noise factor also needs to be addressed. Older people, shift workers, for instance, small children. Have you ever tried to get a little kid to go to sleep when there is noise going on outside? It is hopeless. I have had six so I know something about it. My members are also concerned, and rightly so, about the social impact of this summary. The closure will impact heavily on ability of families that live in far away places and have limited incomes of having ready access to their parents at holiday time, or when the need arises to ask for assistance in times of illness within families, or when elderly parents met their assistance. And we must not forget those with disabilities of every category.

At the same time, the closure will impact heavily on the ability of retired people travelling to their families to assist in times of need or even to have a holiday. The train has also been used by students and staff of the numerous schools and universities in this area who commute each day to pursue their quest for higher

education which is deemed vital to their success in life. How will they now be able to take advantage of this method of travel? The majority of the students are on very limited incomes, barely able to provide for their day-to-day living requirements, and this will mean that they will have to access a bus, if one is available, at a very increased cost; thus it will impact on their family's ability to help them cover the extra costs.

I have endeavoured to present a balanced view of the situation and not a political one. That is certainly not my intention, nor the intention of the association of independent retirees. I urge the Premier and indeed the Minister for Transport Services to re-evaluate the decision they have made, in our opinion, without any real investigative strategies in place. We find it incomprehensible that it could be said by the Government that the decision already put into effect is being opposed on a political level. We can assure those who have made the decision that it impacts on residents of the far North Coast of New South Wales of all political persuasions. We are speaking with one voice on this matter, and I ask the members of this Committee to take note of this fact. Thank you for your indulgence.

CHAIR: I simply want to make it clear for the record that this is a committee of the Parliament. We are not a committee of the Government, although we have some Government members. Dr Gudmundsen, would you like to highlight the points that you would like to make to the Committee today?

Dr GUDMUNDSEN: I will start with some general statements. Lismore is what we call the capital of the Northern Rivers area. It is the main town and from my point of view it is the location of the area's specialist health services as well, for which the Government spends a large amount of money each year on hospital and other specialist services. So it is rather ironic that the major town in this area has been stripped of its rail service. Someone made the point that maybe down in Sydney they do not even know where Lismore is and think it is on the main rail line and did not know what they were doing. That would not surprise me, such is the stupidity of the decision.

I must reinforce what Jim was saying that this area has the fastest growth rate in rural New South Wales. A large number of retirees are moving to this area. It is very attractive. It is warm and environmentally beautiful. I am quoting here from the Northern Rivers Area Health Service annual report. They report that this area has a higher than average number of older residents and Aboriginal people who require greater health care input and that is what Lismore provides to the area. Without good public transport, particularly rail, that promise is compromised.

So there are two aspects. The people in the area need to get to Lismore to access the services, and then there are the people in this area who need to leave the area to go to the major cities to reach specialists who are even more specialised than what we have here. I am an example of the people who work here. I am a dermatologist. They are pretty few and far between. I am the only one between Port Macquarie and Tweed Heads. There are people who need to access me for their skin complaints and they come from as far south as Coffs Harbour and Murwillumbah, Byron Bay, Casino, the whole area, Grafton. I feel that cutting off the train service will limit their access to me and to other specialists.

There are specialists in orthopaedics, general surgical, breast cancer surgery, paediatrics, kidney, gastrointestinal, just to name a few. They do not exist in all the towns in this area. As I said, a large amount of government funding has gone into providing these services, especially the base hospital which is the hub of all these services. They have spent money on a pain management clinic. They spent \$400,000 on that recently.

[Interruption]

Excuse me, I am talking. I would like you to hear what I am saying, particularly being the member from the ALP.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: We are listening. We are discussing the questions that we will ask you.

Dr GUDMUNDSEN: Thank you. They put in a high-tech imaging department at a cost of several million dollars. Again quoting from the Northern Rivers Area Health Service annual report, the surgical service increased by 7 per cent in 2002-03, which means that there were an extra 1,370 surgical procedures done in Lismore Base Hospital. That reflects the growth of the area and the increased need for services.

Lismore needs good public transport. We cannot provide all specialists services. I spoke to the paediatrician in town. The specialists often have to send children with severe disabilities to Sydney because we do not have comprehensive specialist services. The main mode of transport is train. It is a long distance by bus; that is the second best way of travelling for these poor kids, who already have major health problems. If they lived in the city there would not be this discrimination. If you live in Byron you have to get a bus and change at Casino. That is an extra inconvenience and hardship that they should not have to bear. I refer people to the Gold Coast and Brisbane. People who have extensive skin cancers require radiotherapy go to John Flynn Hospital because the service is not available here. They often require an extended stay. If they could access the service by rail they could travel up and back quite freely and that would not be an inconvenience. Many people have to ask relatives to drive them up there and stay there.

That is another form of discrimination if they have not got optimal public transport. I send people to Brisbane and the Gold Coast who need major surgery for large skin cancers. Again, investment in a rail network connecting our area to the Brisbane area, which is really our capital city in geographic terms, would be a boon to the area. I also consulted the Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme. Whenever they can they send people by train given the long distances we have to send them and the comfort. They cannot send people by plane unless it is for particular reasons that have to be justified in each case. This is applies to everyone 200 kilometres outside the zone of the nearest specialist.

I agree with Mrs Brennan on another point. From a medical point of view, we must consider the environmental impact of putting on the road more buses and trucks using mega litres of fuel and thousands of rubber tyres that must be disposed of each year and the inevitable increase in accidents. There is no way the Australian Labor Party can put 3,000 more buses on the road and force more people into private cars, which is what will happen, and say there will not be an increase in accidents. The is inevitable and unarguable. It is a backward step and heartless decision for the patients of the area.

This is a large country. Travel by rail was put in place by our forefathers because they knew that rail transport was the best mode of transport for our huge distances. If we have not learnt from our forefathers that is sad. For the elderly, infirm, sick and young rail is the best travel option for the reasons outlined. Having to change mode of transport—bus to train and train to bus—is a large stress for these people. I hope that some members travelled up by road or rail to get to this meeting. I am not sure because of the pressures of time whether they did. If they did they would appreciate where we are. The issue is more than the closure of the railway line. I agree with the last point in the submission. The real issue is the extension of the railway line or the re-opening of the rail and its extension to the Gold Coast and Brisbane network. That will ensure its viability and stop the same arguments about closing this line in another 50 years.

(Witnesses withdrew)

KARIN KOLBE, Convenor, Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc, and

JACOB BALDWIN, President, Community Awareness Task Force, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Would you like to provide a statement?

Ms KOLBE: I represent a community group formed at the end of 2002 specifically to lobby for train services in this region. At our meetings, rallies, market days and even at pub, I have spoken to hundreds of people in this area and they are all angry about that state of affairs. My group campaigns on four issues. Firstly, to retain the line. We argue that the infrastructure is owned by the community and that it needs to be maintained. It has been deliberately left to fall into disrepair and now the cost of repairing it will be exorbitant, but it must be done because it is our line. Roads in the country are dangerous and crowded. You do not understand what that means until you have lived here for a while. I have lived in the area for two years; I came from Sydney. All the near misses I have experienced have occurred in the last two weeks on a short stretch of road between Byron and Bangalow, which is covered by the railway line.

I would like to bring the committee's attention to the recent AusLink report. It states that road and rail infrastructure is essential for Australia's economic and social future. It must be efficient, reliable, safe and secure. We are talking about road and rail. To be successful in Australia, rail freight needs links around the countryside, not just between Sydney and Brisbane, or Sydney and Melbourne. It must be everywhere. This is a fast-growing region, we are producers of things such as vegetables that need to be taken to market on trains. That is why we need a rail freight system and the line open.

Secondly, the XPT service must be maintained. Buses and planes do not serve people with disabilities, medical conditions or those with young children. That point is made repeatedly. Planes do not support people wanting to go to places other than major city airports. Trains serve not only the local community but also people up and down the line. If people want to go from Newcastle to here they catch the train. Otherwise they would have to go to Sydney and catch a plane and fly up here. We also talk about cheap fares. As someone who has used the service a lot, I have found that those cheap fares are available only if you book well in advance or if you go to Coolangatta, which is a good hour's drive away. Sure, you can get a fare from Ballina, but that is \$250. It is not reasonable to say that people can just catch planes.

The XPT timetabling is also a key point. The train leaves Sydney during the day and comes through Casino, Lismore Bangalow, Byron and Murwillumbah, and arrives there at 10.00 p.m. Then it turns around and comes back. The only people who can catch the train are those prepared to be out very late at night or very early in the morning. This should not be compared to people driving on the road during the day. This is a night service. A key point about timetabling is that the night service does not allow tourists to see this incredibly beautiful place. I do not think you will have a chance to see it. There is a place called St Helena that is very high. You get a stunning view of the hinterland and the coastline. It is gorgeous. It is similar to the journey from Sydney to Wollongong and train journeys in other parts of the world. It reminds me of the Amalfi coastline in Italy. It takes your breath away. It is a train journey that tourists would love to enjoy. There are 1.75 million tourists coming to Byron each year. That is a lot of people. Those people would love to use other forms of transport. The bus services are disgorging people on the main street of Byron every day. Many people come by car or plane. Many of those people are used to travelling by train in many parts of the world.

If we can accept that train is the most sensible way for people to travel, we cannot simply say that people like sitting in their cars and they will use them. As a community we can decide that we are not prepared to put up with the cost of cars in our society. An example of changing community attitudes is the drink-driving campaign. About 20 years ago it was socially acceptable to say, "I will just have one for the road." That is now completely frowned upon. It has been a mixture of carrot and stick approaches—higher penalties and people becoming social pariahs if they are convicted of drink-driving. There is an example of how we as a community can say: We are not prepared to have everyone sitting in their own cars, creating a lot of pollution, and clogging up the roads, when rail is a much more efficient way to travel.

The third platform is a commuter service in this area. Public transport in this area is a joke. It is expensive, it is not integrated, and it takes hours. I know this because people cannot come to our meetings; they tell us, "We would like to come to your train meeting at Bangalow at 2 o'clock on Thursday afternoon, but it would take me three or four hours to get there and get home, so I simply cannot come." There used to be a train service running from Lismore to Byron Bay. It was known as the surf train. Everyone here tells me that the kids

would get on the train with their surfboards, go to Byron Bay, have a day at the beach and come back home. Now, they catch a bus or hitch to Byron Bay of a Friday night, then hang out at Byron Bay for the weekend, causing all sorts of trouble down there. It is well known that a lot of kids are just hanging around Byron Bay because they cannot get home to Lismore. On the commuter service, I might say that at the moment the Federal Government has put \$55,000 into a study regarding the viability of a commuter service.

Our fourth point as a group is to extend the line to Queensland. This is really where it brings everything together. We are already linked to Brisbane in many ways—far more so than we are to Sydney. I have been here for two years, and it has taken me a while to realise this. Geographically, that is where we are connected; that is where we go for services; that is what works for us.

Rail is the environmentally sensible way to travel, especially in these days of rising petrol costs. People say to me, "I cannot afford to put petrol in the car; sorry, I cannot come." We thoroughly reject the narrow financial focus that has been used to evaluate our line. But even if a narrow financial focus is to be taken with regard to the line, please can we have correct figures. We have had incorrect passenger figures stated, and we have seen incorrect figures for the maintenance of the bridges of this area. It is just not good enough to keep giving us the same wrong numbers again and again.

On behalf of all the groups that I represent I would like to say that we are very angry. We are particularly angry that we spent time at the end of last year responding to the Parry inquiry, and putting together submissions, only to have that decision overturned. Clearly, this decision was made four months ago. So it was a bit of a joke to go through the Parry inquiry.

CHAIR: Mr Baldwin, would you like to give the Committee the highlights of your submission?

Mr BALDWIN: I am going to concentrate on what it is like to be a traveller with a disability. I am 53 years of age. I have travelled right round Australia. As a matter of fact, "Have wheels, will travel" could be a nickname they will give me when I am dead and gone! I am representing the Community Awareness Task Force. We are an organisation that started in 1977. When I moved up to the North Coast, the organisation came behind me.

We have been involved in creating awareness of the needs of people who are classified as disabled. I use this term because I do not think I am disabled. It is you, the public, that makes me disabled. It makes a lot of people disabled. The decision to cut this rail service on the North Coast has been a really disabling decision. You are disempowering people who are already disempowered by your attitudes.

I guess there is no consideration given to the stress or the inconvenience that we as people with special needs have to go through. For example, to get to this meeting I had to go up two flights of stairs on boards which, as far as occupational health and safety is concerned, would be considered quite outrageous. I did that because I wanted to come here and give my evidence. But that could deter any other person in a wheelchair or any person who has mobility problems.

Relating that to rail, in my submission I stated safety as the number one reason; that I think cutting the rail service is going to affect the safety of people in the area who are disabled. I travelled down to Sydney and I came back in the very week that the train service to Lismore was closed. So I had to go down to Casino. I had to wait half an hour to get onto the special coach, which is fantastic, and for it to get out of the queue. There were five coaches, so we had to wait until every coach was ready and clear. That was at nighttime, and therefore it was cold. There were a lot of elderly people on that trip. They too had to wait in the cold. Oh, yes, they could have waited at the station, but they chose to get on a bus because they thought the bus would leave and they would still be waiting. So they had to persevere, knowing the inconvenience of that mode of travel, but they also had to endure the cold. They also had to deal with steps getting onto the bus. Many elderly people have disabilities. Unfortunately, when you get older you do get some disabilities. The decision to take the rail service from us did not take into account the occupational health and safety factor.

The other point I made in my submission was about access and equity. I would like to add something else to my submission. The Government is discriminating against people who have classified disabilities, under both State discrimination laws and Federal discrimination laws. True, the rail authority is providing some kind of transport, but in a rural area it is not equitable. In other words, we have to put up with more stress and more inconvenience than someone who does not have a disability. Therefore we are being disempowered.

People who have disabilities have been disempowered for centuries. People might think that people like me do not have a disability. That is okay for you to think that. But in fact I do have a difference. My difference means I have to put up with a lot of things in society that normally you would not have to put up with. You cannot hope to understand how it feels to be on the other end of this thinking. The effort that I put in to come here today, the effort I have put in to participate in the community, and to give back to the community in return for the lot of support that I have got from the community, reflects my philosophy that if I get a lot of support I give back. That requires a lot of effort. If we are not going to consider circumstances that are outside the norm, circumstances that apply to 20 per cent of the population, which when you add the aged population equals almost 50 per cent of the population, you can see how many people you are disempowering by not providing this service.

Also, are you aware that by the year 2015 a quarter of Australia's population will be on the North Coast? Therefore it seems rather idiotic to take away a service that could ease discomfort and facilitate participation and ease the cost of living of a large percentage of the population. I feel also that a lot of people are not really aware that people with disabilities, like mine, spend a lot of money on transport. To go from here to Byron Bay in a taxi costs \$100, even with transport subsidy. If you take away the train, you force people to stay in one place, and that creates psychological problems, creates stress and creates health issues.

When you make a decision without considering all these factors, you are going to be faced with protests. You obviously have had a good many people protesting. Even if the railway authorities provide some form of transport, say a special taxi service, like every major town has, those taxis can only be accessed at certain times of the day or certain times of the night. If you have a group of people who have classified disabilities travelling by taxis, that creates a problem because only one or two cabs in an area can service these people. Again, that limits groups going out to places that normally would be accessible but because they have to go off rail and go on another mode of transport it makes it impossible. So you are again discriminating.

CHAIR: Thank you for that extensive rundown from your perspective. We appreciate your efforts.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Ms KOLBE, you mentioned that a number of events had been organised by Northern Rivers Trains for the Future. Can you give the Committee an overview of the community support for the events that you organised?

Ms KOLBE: Since the possible closure of the XPT last year we organised two rallies, one in Lismore and one in Byron Bay at the end of last year. There was also a fairly extensive letterwriting campaign to Minister Costa and Premier Carr. Also in the *Northern Star* there was a "what do I want for Christmas from Mr Carr" coupon which a number of people filled out and sent in. We then thought, "We are okay, we can now put our emphasis on other things." With the recent decision we then had to organise many, many rallies. I think I put the dates in my submission. They were all very well attended. We have Lismore railway station, 26 April; Mullumbimby, 28 April; Casino, 29 April; the protest train, 28 April; Murwillumbah, 5 May; Byron Bay railway station, 13 May; there was a vigil at Lismore and there was also at Murwillumbah on that last day. So we have been either the leading force or active in supporting those campaigns. Hundreds of people have attended those, and we will continue with our action.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: I have a question about the train figures. I think you said you have seen incorrect figures to keep the line open and also to maintain the bridges. The first term of reference is the question about whether the Government's figure of \$5 million is the right figure. What is your understanding of that figure, and what are the incorrect figures you have seen?

Ms KOLBE: First, the rail line was fit enough to stay open at the end of last year for 12 months. So what has suddenly changed between now and then? Secondly, I am not a bridge expert but when you look at the costs to replace bridges, it is one thing to say we will replace the bridge completely and utterly; it is another thing to say that some small amounts of repairs need to be done here and there. Another thing I will say is that bridge repairs have not been done in a timely manner. Therefore money that has supposedly come to this line has not been spent on this line. We all know that if you have a small problem and you ignore it for years, it gets bigger and bigger and bigger, until it is a very expensive operation to fix. We all know the statistics—lies, lies and damn lies. So some of those numbers have not been correct. I will also say that in the Parliament—and it was corrected—that the passenger figures were at one point stated incorrectly and then they were fixed by Don Page. I do not have the dates with me.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: There is a question in my mind about this figure of \$5 million as being the cost of maintaining the line. I have heard that that is the figure of running it in terms of labour costs, but the actual cost of maintaining the bridges, the railway lines, the sleepers and the other infrastructure is much higher than that. Do you have any figures on that?

Ms KOLBE: Not with me at the moment. I do know other people who perhaps might be speaking this afternoon who have specific figures on those ones.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: I think Mr Baldwin might be the best person to comment on this. This is another example of figures but we hope it is correct. The number of passengers on the line from Casino to Murwillumbah, the rail infrastructure people have said, has fallen by 36 per cent since 1998. Can you give us any indication of why that is so? Has the inconvenient timetable that you mentioned, for instance the change since 1998, been a factor? What other factors would you identify, because it is a pretty big drop in patronage?

Mr BALDWIN: That would be a reason because if you consider most people, from the task force perspective, most people classified as disabled do not like to travel at night. Therefore, if we are saying that there is a drop in patronage it is because of the timetable. If you had a local service you might actually see a rise in patronage. But the times that the train goes and comes, it is important to the health of people who are classified as disabled because not everyone is healthy like me or they do not have the opportunity to go in those times because it costs to have a carer. There are a lot of other factors which are involved that prevent a person who has a classified disability from travelling early morning or late at night.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: Would there be any other reasons that you would suggest for that drop in patronage?

Mr BALDWIN: I guess motivation. If you have those hours, the motivation goes down. Everyone who uses this service has a reason for using it, and if you are disempowered by a timetable you are going to be less motivated to use the service.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Ms KOLBE, in your submission you do a very extensive analysis of transport needs within the region and you suggest that what needs to be looked at is not the re-institution or potential of one particular railway line but rather the integration of other public transport services. Can you briefly enlarge on what you had in mind?

Ms KOLBE: Train clearly just is in a very fixed place from point A to point B and you need to have a way for people to get to point A. So that would be integrated timetables for buses, commuter car parks, bicycle racks and taxis where required. An integrated system means that people can move from one form of transport to another form of transport and be able to move in various ways around the area. So just looking at a train system without the feeder buses for the small outlying communities clearly is a silly idea.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Do you believe that if there was this proper integration it would enhance the patronage of the rail line?

Ms KOLBE: Definitely. I live in a suburb outside Byron Bay. For instance if there was a bus that would pick up from my place and then drop me into Byron Bay just at the time that the train is leaving to come up to Lismore to go to the university, for example, that would be perfect. That is the sort of thing we need. Then you need to have a return trip that evening or that afternoon to go home, not the next day. You do not want to stay overnight in Lismore. I have nothing against Lismore but if I live at home I want to go home.

Mr BALDWIN: Also, if I may interject, I have run a number of community consultations and the number one point that comes up in these consultations is that we need a local train service. The consultations go from Tweed to Lismore, to Byron Bay, to Coffs Harbour and Grafton. That comment is on the North Coast.

Ms KOLBE: When the train ran during the day it was used by people as a commuter service. People could catch the train in the morning, get to work and come home. With it being a night service it cannot be used like that at all, and that is one of the reasons why the patronage figures will be down. It is only serving long-distance passengers now.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: When did it become a night service?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can I just clarify something? The service had a number of changes during the Olympics, when the XPT was reduced by one carriage and there was a delay concerning the timetable that made it slightly later. They were temporary changes to the service that were never restored. So that loss of a carriage meant, for example, that when the train was full it was never able to carry all the passengers. I think that would have been a major factor.

(The witnesses withdrew)

SCOTT HANCKEL, Richmond Tweed Division Controller, State Emergency Service, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Are you appearing in your capacity as the division controller?

Mr HANCKEL: That is correct.

CHAIR: The Committee is interested in the question of the relevance of the rail link and the flood plain here in this particular area but also in the region. So that is why we are very interested in your perspective. We would like to have a handle on those sorts of issues. Are you happy if we proceed straight to questions, or would you like perhaps to give us an overview?

Mr HANCKEL: I have received formal questions on notice, for which I have prepared some comments. If you are happy, I can talk to those questions and then respond to any questions the Committee may have.

CHAIR: That would be fine, if you would like to give us a rundown of the issues.

Mr HANCKEL: The first question on notice was issues of transport access during periods of major floods, including the relevance of the railway line. First, I will explain a little about floods on the North Coast. I do not know exactly how much knowledge the Committee has about flooding on the North Coast. Floods on the Richmond, Wilsons, Brunswick and Tweed rivers are characterised by very rapid onset times, measured normally in hours, with the Brunswick River being officially identified by the Bureau of Meteorology as a flash flood catchment, that being less than six hours notice from the start of rain to major flooding.

The weather events that cause these floods are often severe weather events, such as the event we had in March this year. It had destructive winds with gusts of more than 135 kilometres an hour, five metre waves in the surf zone and rainfall averages of between 150 and 313 millimetres for 24 hours—that is six to 12 inches on the old scale. Most of that rain fell in a 12-hour period so it is a bit deceiving that there is a 24-hour period. This event caused moderate level flooding on three rivers, resulting in major disruption to all transport access in the area. In addition, considerable storm damage was sustained, with more than 140 requests for assistance due to storm damage.

We have three categories of flood: minor, moderate and major, minor being of nuisance value. It means that generally rural areas or localised roads, low-level crossings, are affected by flood waters. Moderate flood generally describes where the major transport routes start to become affected by flood waters, and major flooding is normally characterised by large-scale evacuations being required.

Roads can close with little or no notice, with many local roads affected by localised flooding well before riverine flooding causes their closure. The decision to cease rail service during a flood is an SRS management decision. The SRS is kept advised by the SES throughout flood events. The SES does request that services cease if a major flood is occurring to prevent the direct risk to travellers in a severe weather environment and to avoid the potential of having to manage additional stranded travellers in an already difficult situation. Air services in the region are also generally curtailed during the early stages of flood events due to dangerous flying conditions. This is before the full impact by floodwaters is felt. Access into, out of and around the region is routinely severely restricted during floods and this applies to all transport modes. It can take a number of days for transport modes to return to normal assuming no damage has occurred to transport infrastructure.

The second question related to pedestrian access through Lismore, especially for residents in the Woodlawn area, during flooding. The SES does not encourage anyone in flooded areas to attempt to move around by any means, as it is inherently unsafe. Therefore, evacuation from such areas is sought before inundation occurs. The SES maintains a strategy to evacuate people living and working directly in the path of floods and to resupply communities that are isolated because normal road links are cut by floodwaters. The service is aware that it is not uncommon for community members to walk, swim, paddle or even drive through floodwaters against our advice. This includes the use of raised sections of rail lines. The SES has no effective way of monitoring these behaviours and does not condone them, again primarily from a safety standpoint. It is notable that railway lines may not be in the floodwaters they can collapse if they are structurally unsound. That was the case in the 1954 flood, when two railway embankments—one near Casino and one near Kyogle—collapsed.

The third question relates to the number of people who benefit from the railway line during floods. Unfortunately the SES is unable to monitor pedestrian or rail passenger use during floods. So I have to refer that question to State Rail, which may know the numbers in the lower level floods when the rail service is still operating. The fourth question deals with SES disaster planning for the Northern Rivers area and whether there is any potential for rail in those plans. Floods on the northern rivers are rapid onset—hours not days—and are difficult to predict severity well in advance. On the positive side, they are generally of relatively short duration—seven to ten days even in the major or extreme flooding events. As a result, flood planning is based upon ensuring people are warned in enough time to evacuate their homes or businesses safely.

The short notice between initial warning and closure of rail infrastructure generally precludes the use of trains as a means of transport for the large-scale evacuations that can occur. The prevailing dangerous weather conditions at the time of evacuations generally means it would be unsafe to dispatch large groups of evacuees long distances by any means of travel—road, rail or air. If there are 135-kilometre-an-hour winds and driving rain—these events often occur late at night—it would be unsafe to send people anywhere without any guarantee. Centres like Murwillumbah or Lismore are large enough to cope with the evacuees in their communities and they have ample high ground. Trains are not helpful in moving evacuees to that high ground. It is a long-distance rail service, not a commuter network.

The situation at Grafton is quite different. The SES is not against using trains per se; they are part of part of the evacuation policy where there is a lack of high ground for evacuation. As a matter of routine, all resources available on the day of events are considered as part of the response. That is a standard all-agency approach to emergency management in New South Wales. There is an SRA representative at the district level with whom the SES routinely consults during floods. If SRA resources are available on the day they are generally provided as quickly as possible.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: I refer to the question about the high ground and rail services. Is the situation in Lismore peculiar, with all the services all low lying?

Mr HANCKEL: No, not in the Northern Rivers area. The same applies at Murwillumbah. Railway stations tend to be on flat ground in those towns. The flood plains are relatively small compared with elsewhere in the State. That is why it is repeatedly flooded. We have small catchment areas and high rainfall, but the railway stations are all on flat ground in Lismore and Murwillumbah. The issue of the high ground does not come into that. We can get people out of the flooded areas of Lismore, but the railway line does not come into it—it is all done by road.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: You said the situation in Grafton is different. Apparently the railway line is higher.

Mr HANCKEL: It is more to do with where we are taking evacuees. There are no large areas above flood level other than Junction Hill, and it would be hard to fit 12,000 people on that hill. The high ground available in Murwillumbah and Lismore is capable of handling the number of evacuees we need to remove from the flood plain.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You mentioned the case of washout during the 1954 floods. Does more damage tend to be done to roads than to railway lines in times of flood?

Mr HANCKEL: I have no idea. I would have to leave it to road engineers to answer that. However, floods damage all infrastructure severely—road, rail or anything else. We take a view that until someone who has the skills to confirm that the infrastructure is safe we will assume it is not. We do not like to dispatch trains, buses or any other vehicle carrying large groups of people unless we can guarantee that the route is safe.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: I am not familiar with the geography of the area, but are roads cut more frequently than rail lines in times of flood?

Mr HANCKEL: It is difficult to quantify. I need more specifics. The onset of flooding varies significantly with the different types of rivers. We have five rivers, including the headwaters of the Clarence, which is part of my responsibility. They each have distinct and complicated flood problems. I could characterise it by saying that road, particularly local road networks, are quickly impacted by flooding. That can be the riverine flooding or localised flooding. Probably because we have fewer, the rail lines are less impacted as quickly. As far as being able to quantify that, I would have to defer it to people who look after roads and rail.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: I refer to the local disaster plan. What area does it encompass here—just the Lismore City Council area or does it go further?

Mr HANCKEL: Each local government area has its own disaster plan and each has a sub-plan for local flooding. Lismore's has been updated recently. We update them routinely after every flood. Every five years there is a major review of every flood plan. The Tweed flood plan has just been passed again by the emergency management committee. We take the view that planning is a non-stop process. They are constantly under review and upgraded as we learn about floods and how to respond.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Is the flood plan a subset of the local disaster plan in each local government area?

Mr HANCKEL: That is correct. There is also a district disaster plan and sub-plan. That is the same at the State level. There are three tiers of disaster plans: the State disaster and flood plan, each emergency management district has a disaster, including the flood plan, and each local government area has a local disaster plan, including a flood plan.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: What does the district encompass?

Mr HANCKEL: It is loosely based on police districts. It is a grouping of all agencies that come together routinely to plan for emergencies.

(Witness withdrew)

JENNIFER DOWELL, Lismore City Council and member of the Lismore branch of Country Labor, affirmed and examined:

SUE DAKIN, President, Country Labor State Electorate Council and former Ballina Shire Councillor, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms DOWELL: I could not believe this decision. The Country Labor branch has been actively involved in the continuation and extension of country rail services for a long time. In fact, the motion put to both the country and State conferences last year on the maintenance and extension of country rail services—I stress "rail"—came from our branch. At both those conferences, those motions were carried. To my mind, that becomes part of Labor Party rules in a loose way because it is the wish of the majority of Labor Party people in this State that country rail services be preserved. The decision on 10 December last year to give our rail system a reprieve and gave us some confidence that we had time to bring about a change in the Government's heart. Just before Easter we were told that that 12-month commitment was broken. That caused great distress, not only in the broad community but also in local Labor Party ranks.

I have been collecting the local media reports over that time. This is the wad of reports from our daily paper the *Northern Star* and from our free-weekly the *Northern Rivers Echo*. This has been the biggest issue in our community in all of the 13 years that I have lived here. You heard the mayors speaking this morning, and I think our local member Thomas George said it was the largest issue he could recall. This has united our community like no other event ever has. In the intervening period since the decision was made, just before Easter, I have stood on street corners, and I have spoken and listened to hundreds of people. This has become a huge issue.

In the very week that the protest train, which I travelled on, went to Sydney we were further insulted. That was the week that it was announced that more Sydney trains would be air-conditioned and that a light rail system would be instigated for Sydney. It seemed this was just another example of country New South Wales being ignored. As a member of the Labor Party, that was doubly galling. On the protest train I spoke to lots and lots of people.

I met a young couple who, I would guess, were in their early twenties. They were travelling with two preschool children. They had travelled on the train from Hervey Bay with these two little toddlers. They had travelled on the famous tilt train from Hervey Bay to Brisbane. They proudly told me about the standard of that train. They then got on our train. The seat that the man had did not go back. The pockets on the seat of the train in front were torn off. They could not believe the standard of our train. They were travelling to Sydney, spending eight hours in Sydney before they got on a train to travel to Melbourne. They were staying with family in Melbourne for four days, and then doing the whole return journey again. I think they deserved a medal for bravery. That family could not have travelled any other way. They certainly would not have anticipated going all that way by bus with their children, they certainly could not have afforded to fly, and they did not have a car.

When I went to Sydney I took 500 letters, which I intended to give to Minister Costa. Minister Costa was not there, but I met with Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Minister for Transport, Mr Joe Tripodi. I gave him those 500 letters. Four of us spoke for over an hour to Joe Tripodi and representatives of CountryLink, RailCorp and Community Transport. It all came down to money. The worst insult was when I was told: You have to look at this as like the difference between sending an e-mail—that is, that is how good buses are—or writing a letter, that is, going by train. If I had been quick enough, I would have said, "Does that mean that we should close Australia Post and force everyone to send e-mails?"

Transport is about choice. It is about having access, and it is about affordability and equity. That means a range of choices for people—not just forcing everyone onto alternative transport, under a one size fits all model. I have spoken to lots of people, and I could tell stories that would make you cry, as they have brought tears to my eyes: about a daughter who tucks her elderly mother into a sleeper at night in Sydney, and the other daughter who untucks here in Casino or Lismore early in the morning the next day. There is no way that that family could put mum on the bus. Those sorts of things you hear about all the time when you are out there talking to people in the community.

I became a member of council in the past couple of months. Now I see the incredible pressure that council has on funding our road system. Any move to put on more buses, light transport or freight on our rail would cause an increased burden on local councils. I heard someone from the trucking industry saying on ABC World on 6 June that freight was set to double in the next 15 years. This morning on radio John Anderson said freight was set to treble in 15 years. The thought of all those B-doubles on our roads, while our people are forced to use cars and buses, instead of having a viable and safe alternative of train, just gives me the shivers.

In conclusion, I would like to say I also heard Greg Combet, Secretary of the ACTU, speaking at the Press Club luncheon on 2 June. He made an impassioned plea for investment in the future. To quote him, "This is fiscal conservatism gone mad!" I would equate that to both the Federal and the State governments. Infrastructure investment is the key plank of the investment in the future, and we need to borrow money to invest now in our rail transport infrastructure, not in a 15-year plan, which I know the Federal Government has, because our rail infrastructure needs attention now.

CHAIR: Ms Daikin, would you like to give us your highlights?

Ms DAKIN: I am very grateful to the Committee for allowing me to address the hearing on behalf of members across Northern New South Wales and Northern Rivers Country Labor people and constituents and citizens in this area. I do not take my position here lightly as my involvement in public transport committees, and my work with regional country areas, both with private enterprise and local government, in trying to secure a more integrated public transport approach, has seen me working for 4½ years for the development of the best public transport policy for the shire of Ballina.

While that was received with a tacit, positive letter from the government of the day, it is very sad that, while we are working hard in country and regional New South Wales, while we are given letters of positive response on issues, we are given negative kicks in the head when it comes to actually delivering the goods. The general, tacit response evokes concern from members, because the argument coming back to us is the cost of maintenance and infrastructure. Members have asked me to express that deferral to local government, with the supported introduction of section 94 development contributions to public infrastructure, is just one of the ways to go.

The political decision on rail is one of concern, as it is indicative of a void of misunderstanding of what we need in public transport, and what is perceived by city officers advising Ministers as to our needs in this area. State Environmental Planning Policy 66, Public Transport, relates to the integration of land use decisions with public transport decisions. Sadly, for our Government, this reflects a city-only policy. No policy exists for regional or rural New South Wales. Sadly, too, the director-general in Mr Costa's department addressed a shires conference just after he took on the portfolio of Transport Services. We and the public were told by the delegates there: Face it, people in country and regional New South Wales drive cars; they won't change regardless.

Support by Country Labor members has come not just from townships on the lines of Lismore, Byron Bay or Murwillumbah. I have had numerous telephone calls calling on me to support the cause and take action, and we launched the protest train rally to Sydney. Those calls have come from Mullumbimby, Ballina, Alstonville, Ocean Shores, Tumbulgum, Lennox Head, Wardell, Broadwater—I could go on. All of those people, believe it or not, use the train service. Sadly, in 2002 the CountryLink bus service was withdrawn by the State Government and replaced, after much lobbying by the Public Transport Group in Ballina, with a maxi-taxi service, so that we would be able to get people to Lismore, to be able to catch the train in the middle of the night. We are told the bus service is good, so why isn't it good enough to continue a bus service to get people to the train?

As President of Ballina Country Labor SEC, I have worked with local government and private enterprise sources and individual organisations which have put forward positive options, which all support user-pays services. The difficulty they have with this particular decision is that they see that the reason that the service patronage numbers decrease is that successive governments—and we are not just talking current government—keep reducing or removing services. Need I remind people that back in 1988 the motor train service through from Byron Bay was removed by the Greiner Government.

Of course, numbers will decrease. Blind Freddie can work that out. If you do not have a service, you cannot use it. This decision takes away a service, when it could be made better. In my position, I do not have a choice as to what information I present; I must present the views of people as they have requested. Their

requests are as follows: Please, number one, do not make promises that you cannot keep. It does not matter what side of government we are on, promises are very important to and are an integral part of life. Be you a child, a mother, a working person, or an elderly person, you do rely on people's words for most of your life.

You gave us a twelve-month reprieve. We are asking for the reactivation of that twelve-month reprieve. When you gave it to us, we had a number of groups working in conjunction with each other to put together a list of viable alternatives. We have heard today from pensioner groups and independent retirees that their members would be happy to pay for a service that they rely upon. You have heard it from those in development situations. I have been there first hand. When you are working on land use integration with public transport integration, developers are happy to pay. They are happy to pay; they are happy to take the money.

If local government can work with State government on responsibility for resources, and with private enterprise systems, like our public transport providers—not only buses, not only trains, but also other forms of public transport, including cycles and that sort of thing—we will see a better use of our money. But if you take away our services, look at what has gone already. And, please, think about this when you think about Casino to Murwillumbah: we have already lost the CountryLink bus service running between Ballina, Alstonville, Lennox Head, through to Lismore. Maybe you will say the train is not worth it, that you cannot catch the train there anyway. We relied on that service.

It is impossible for young people to go to Byron Bay beaches by what were called surf trains. Look at the number of hitchhikers who have surfboards? This is not a culture for our Australia. We need to provide for our children transport that is safe and responsible. We are asking, too, for a change in government and ministerial attitude. We are asking for thinking outside the square. If you can get us to think about reducing speed limits to 50 kilometres an hour in city areas and to 40 kilometres an hour near schools, Country Labor members have asked me to request you to think about a change in attitude—from the imposition of what you think is good for us and telling asked what to do, to advocacy on portfolios. In other words, when Ministers take on portfolios, I have been asked to express the view that we would like to hear a champion for the cause—in this case, a champion for public transport. As a ministry, we would like to hear what you could do for us.

We ask you to start with the challenge of putting forward the motion. We can face revitalisation of the Casino to Murwillumbah train line. This can be done in partnership with local government. It can be done with integration of the SEPP 66 principle extended to rural New South Wales and the support of contributions to the section 94 development funds for government. That is a challenge. But never start with anything easy.

We also ask you to work with the groups that have volunteered that they are happy to have a situation where they are prepared to pay. Everyone is facing user-pays and understand their responsibility for redemption of a service on which they rely. Please do not tell us we do not need it. We are the people who live here, and we understand better than anybody else what we need and what we do not need. The imposition of foreign thoughts do not sit very well with us, because these days anyone can get a degree, and anyone these days can tell anyone else what is wrong, but if you guys had to pay for the opinions that you force down the throats of the people of northern New South Wales, your opinions might be light on.

I am asked to thank you on behalf of Country Labor members and other interested citizens across northern New South Wales for taking aboard the positive submissions that they wish to make, and will be keen to submit in future, to support this rail service. stop I also thank the Committee for your indulgence, because many personal feelings have come out in the hearing today. Yes, mine have too. I trust that you understand that I am putting to you the views of a number of people. I do not have a choice when I take on this role to represent the public and Country Labor Northern Rivers, but I am proud to be a member of that party, and I am sure people are listening to what we have to say.

CHAIR: Councillor Dowell, you mentioned 500 letters that you presented to Mr Tripodi. Have you had any response to those submissions as yet?

Ms DOWELL: No. I took down, I suppose, 500 letters and most of those would have had the people's names and addresses on them. Some were duplicated letters in individual envelopes. There were also lots and lots of little cards. Red cards traditionally were used when a train had a defect. They were called "not to go" cards. The bag I took down was a red pillowcase. As you can see, red was the colour of our protest, and that pillowcase was three-quarters full. It was very heavy. So all of those were delivered but as far as I know no-one has told me they have received a response, and I have not yet either.

CHAIR: Earlier today one witness suggested that perhaps this could have been seen to have been coming, that it was not a surprise. However, I think you are saying that it really did come out of the blue as far as you are concerned.

Ms DOWELL: Most definitely out of the blue. We believe a government promise. When we are told we have a 12-month reprieve we believe it. So when the announcement was made, I think about the Wednesday before Easter, it was a shock. Certainly there was no warning. We had believed--in fact I have the front page here where Minister Costa had told us we had a 12-month reprieve to work on ways and to consult with the local community. So this was a shock. I have not spoken to anyone who saw this coming.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Councillor Dowell, you were a candidate at the last State election for Lismore?

Ms DOWELL: No.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have you been a State candidate?

Ms DOWELL: No.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: A Country Labor candidate for council, is that correct?

Ms DOWELL: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Ms Dakin, you were a candidate for Ballina at the last State election?

Ms DAKIN: Correct.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But as I understand it you have been willing to work with all parties on this particular issue.

Ms DOWELL: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I just want it on the record.

Ms DOWELL: I congratulate the local people. Everyone here at the local level, including the mayor, who is a National party member, and Thomas George, the local National party person, you and Mr Breen, everyone has worked together. I would not say that people slightly outside of this area have always kept it non-party political, but this has definitely been a non-party political thing. It was only when we got to Sydney when we found that there were a few extras jumping on the bandwagon and turning it into a party political thing. We are proudly members of the Labor Party but we do not like this decision.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have you experienced that cross-party experience on an issue before?

Ms DOWELL: No.

Ms DAKIN: I would like to add to that. Comments are made about "Sydney Labor" and Country Labor toeing the line. I think this should show you as an example that regardless of political parties people have a voice and we operate in a democracy. If you are part of Country Labor you have the right to speak up if you truly believe that there is something wrong with party policy. We are not punished for that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I congratulate you both on the passion with which you have presented your evidence today. What recommendations would you like to see this Committee make?

Ms DAKIN: Can I go back to the list in point form? One was for reinstatement. They have asked for reinstatement of the 12-month moratorium. They have asked for a ministerial change of attitude to thinking about an advocacy towards the portfolio to regional or country transport in general as to what can be done, not what can be cut. The other part was to work with community consultation; instead of telling us what will be good for us, to work with the community groups which, once they got that moratorium, went into action and

started to formulate plans for how they could make the service better. They were the requests that I was asked to bring forward today.

Ms DOWELL: The message that we gave when we met down there was reinstate the moratorium and work with local groups because we can find solutions to our own problems with common assistance from the Ministry of Transport.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Would you support the extension of the rail line through to Queensland?

Ms DOWELL: Most definitely. There is a 22 kilometre gap, that is all. We have lots of youth unemployment in this area. The southern Gold Coast is a short hop and step away. If we had that rail corridor right through, then our young people could access employment and educational opportunities there, and the people from that area can access wonderful Lismore. There are lots of people who do like to stay in Lismore.

Ms DAKIN: There is a point I would like to add to that. Members in branches have already started to put forward motions considering the further progression of the railway service as it used to be so we are operating through the townships that some people have not heard of like Booyong and other places so that we make this an integral part of the approach to travel around in a community.

CHAIR: Will those motions go to the Country Labor conference, or where do they go to?

Ms DAKIN: They have already gone.

CHAIR: So you will be going there—

Ms DAKIN: There have been cut-off dates, as in place for all sort of conferences but with the passion that has surrounded this particular issue our party is not averse to taking on serious issues and listening to them with a matter of priority.

Ms DOWELL: Can I make an additional point?

CHAIR: Yes.

Ms DOWELL: Something that has arisen today--and I know that on my request New South Wales heritage has proposed or they have told me that they have put in a submission to the inquiry. Out of the seven sites that are of significance to New South Wales heritage on the North Coast, in this area we are talking about, five of them are railway stations or bridges. We have a wonderful heritage. Those sites are listed as historically, scientifically, archaeologically and socially rare, and the words that are used in the description of these are "unusual features", "excellent", "very fine example", "high significance and importance". So it is not just the rail lines we are talking about; it is the actual stations, the water tanks, the buildings, the overbridges. We have a wonderful asset here that needs to be built on and I think in years to come could be a tourist asset as well in their own right.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Councillor Dakin and Ms Dowell, you two are obviously very active participants in this State and this country's political system. What impact--and here I am thinking of the broader implications--do you think it has on the broader community when a party ignores its rank and file and when a government turns its face to the wishes of the community? What impact do you think that has?

Ms DAKIN: The aspect of people disagreeing with other points of view comes up in every day life and it is regardless of governments, it is regardless of levels. To have an immediate decision to which we as members of a particular party are unhappy with to consider at this point in time that we are being ignored would mean that every single person in this room is wasting their time being here. It would appear at this stage that we are not happy and I think I state for both of us and for people that we represent that the speed with which the decision or the process is happening is not of a speed to our liking or of the public's liking. In fact, none of us wanted it to happen at all.

However, it is our duty, and if we truly believe in something, to continue that fight, and that is regardless of political parties. Hence that important bipartisan approach to an issue which is bigger and better than just coming from Labor or coming from The Nationals or being part of the Liberal Party. So from the people I

represent, they have not been frightened because of my Country Labor tag to discuss things with me even when they have the members of the National party.

Ms DOWELL: I see this decision as being out of step with Labor Party thinking. People have asked me how I feel being out of step with the Government. I think that Minister Costa, Premier Carr and Mr Egan are the ones out of step so I feel no problem with standing up to this decision and I have faith that people power will win through in the end and we will get our rail system back.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Do you feel that it tends to engender a cynicism about the political system and a turning off of feeling that people are perhaps just so not being listened to, that it is easier to do nothing rather than to protest?

Ms DOWELL: No, I cannot agree with that. I think certainly there is a cynicism but this decision has engendered a passion in this community that has brought so many people together. We had 1,000 people at the rally in Lismore on a rainy day, the day the train was pulling into Sydney there were 600 people at Casino and their service was not even being affected. So this has engendered a great deal of local passion. So on the one hand there is cynicism about Sydney but another thing locally it has been a very positive, that some positive has come out of it.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: When you talk about people power you are talking about the community, I think, but you are not merely talking about the Labor Party. The problem as I see it is that Country Labor is always going to have fewer members than city Labor and it seems to me that the Labor Party, being a democracy, the city will always override the wishes and the desires of the country members.

Ms DOWELL: I believe we have strong support in Sydney Labor as well and that is what I am hearing in the emails that are going backwards and forwards. I believe there is a great deal of dissatisfaction. It was on our news last week, a great deal of dissatisfaction from backbenchers, Labor Party people who are city based as well. I think that that is growing and with the impending Federal election it is coming from Federal MPs on the Labor side as well.

Ms DAKIN: The political front is now changing to where, if you are looking at politics where it should be is with the people and the decision-making process. A very good example of this is happening right now. The fact is that people do not really care whether it is a local government issue, a Federal government issue or a State government issue. If it is something that affects them and you are putting yourself in a position to represent people, then they want your help. They are not interested in whether you want to cut them off and say that that is in another realm because for them you are there as their representative, even if it just be for that ear. For that particular situation to happen now, and we see it with the populism with different people put into different seats and that happens because they are waiting for the people of the time and that is what people are doing. We are politicians at a time because we deliver what we say we can. If we do not, we are not there regardless of what party we are.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Will you ask Peter Garrett what he thinks about country trains?

Ms DAKIN: I am sure he has his own opinions.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: I make one other observations. We had a debate and a bill in the Parliament recently about buses. Barrie Unsworth produced a report which became the basis of the legislation. Barrie Unsworth's attitude to it was that this bus proposal suits city operators, it does not suit country operators but we will not be dictated to by one-third of the population that is in the country when two-thirds of the people who use buses are in the city. That seems to be a fairly cynical approach and I would hope that it is confined perhaps to Barrie Unsworth and that across the board the Labor Party would not take that attitude because it seems to me that the country areas, unless they are properly represented, will always play second fiddle to the city areas.

Ms DOWELL: I did not think that is a party political thing. I think that many years, well before this Government, this area felt neglected and we are too far—we are out of sight and out of mind. There are people who do not know even the names of some of the places in this area. Certainly they do not know the topographical layout of that area and the kinds of conditions we have had with the roads and with our rainfall. I think we are just too far away, and that is why there is a growing thinking that we would be better off as part of Queensland.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: Ms Dakin, you spoke about a number of things that you were requested to put before the Committee, and one of them is what can be done, not what is to be cut. One comment you made was the reinstatement of another line. Are there other things that in your discussions with other people that are included in what can be done? Are there other ideas that have been floated in terms of those sorts of things?

Ms DAKIN: Yes. I have heard through some of them today. Some of them have been presented by the individual groups that have off record approached me or through my communications with them just in the public transport integrated policy approach. Part of that was, the example is if we are offering to pay or we understand as pensioners that at the moment you are giving us two free trips but they are pointless if they are in the middle of the night and you are going to take them off us because we cannot use them anyway. So they are happy to work in discussions with how they feel that they can be responsive in contributing towards their travel. That was one of the things that has come up time and time again about more towards a user pays. The other part that came up was the fact of the dichotomy that it puts people into a position that in a situation like with local government many attitudes in local government areas, and given my last terms, we are forced to make better decisions when we work in conjunction with our public and also our public enterprise systems.

An integrated approach to the system tends to produce better ideas as all achieve benefits from that. For example for the bus industry and its support would be for the bus service to be reinstated in townships that do not have the train service to connect them to the townships like Lismore that does.

Discussions have been held by people with more experience I have about timetabling and scheduling to ensure there is a connection across the State so people can travel from Brisbane to Melbourne in the one day. Bus companies are aware of these things and have made attempts to manoeuvre in that way. A Number of groups, including the Combined Pensioners' Association and the Association of Independent Retirees, who are extremely supportive of maintenance or an increase in services, not reduction.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: You referred to local government and development contributions. How do you see that assisting in terms of what is happening in this region?

Ms DAKIN: It came about through the development of the best practice policy when I was chair of the public transport at Ballina, but it is not peculiar to integrate land-use and transport-use decisions. Local government can only levy in the development contribution area. If they have the development plan in place they can levy section 94 funds for public transport infrastructure. The difficulty for rural areas in trying to achieve this integration is that we need to work with private enterprise to get them on board because it involves in them. Ballina council does not have the policy that suggests that these decisions can be put forward only as recommendations to each of these developments, be they large subdivisions or commercial sites. We do not have a train in Ballina.

However, the committee has noticed that none of its recommendations about cycleways and paths and bus shelters has been knocked back. We realise that they saw that as important, and that is why we were trying to pursue the SEPP 66 policy and emphasise its seriousness. It is in the city and we have worked in the country, but it can be done. If the State Government works in conjunction with local government and sets benchmarks, developers will not reject these land-use and transport-use decisions. Local government authorities will put their hands in their pockets to support public transport.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: In calling for the moratorium and for all the proposals to be examined, how important is a connection to Queensland?

Ms DOWELL: It is vital and sensible. It is only 22 kilometres.

The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS: Is that 22 kilometres to the border or to Robina?

Ms DOWELL: That is to Coolangatta, but that line is not finished. That is the Queensland Government's plan. It is virtually nothing. If that is all it takes to link us to the Gold Coast and then on to Brisbane, surely that is a very logical step to take for now and the future.

Ms LINDA BURNEY: Do you think that would make the line viable?

Ms DOWELL: I am sure it would. The British experience in the 1970s was to close many branch lines. That meant the whole system suffered because the branch lines feed the main line, as does ours. With better timetables, even the branch line without the link would be much more viable.

Ms DAKIN: It should be realised that our best public transport users are schoolchildren. We travelled to Circular Quay and the kids were going on about the trains. I told them that they should be careful because after they cut the Casino-Murwillumbah train they might not be able to catch a train. They were in uproar. They are 18-year-olds and that is how they travel. Students from private schools and public schools travel on the train. On the way back they recognised our school uniforms. We stood out a little. They started to talk about the train being their transport to the coast, the Gold Coast, Byron Bay and Lismore.

I have also had calls from university students. Lismore University has many students from Sydney, and they use that service to get home to their families. A long-sighted Government will look forward. We know that the wealthiest cities in the world operate on public transport. If we can get this public transport message across to schoolchildren there is hope for us yet.

(Witnesses withdrew)

TOM McINERNEY, Former Inspector, and

NEALE BATTERSBY, Former Train Driver, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Would you like to highlight the main points of your submission?

Mr BATTERSBY: Railways first opened in this country in 1855. In about 1858 they enacted the Railway Act and appointed a chief commissioner in charge of the railway. The Act provided that there was to be no political interference in the operation of the railway. That was the case until about the mid-1930s. That was a very interesting time in this country—the time of the Great Depression. That could not stop this line operating, but what we are seeing now will. In 1973 this region saw the introduction of the Gold Coast motor rail. The rail cost \$11 million a year to operate and its annual average turnover was \$22.5 million. It earned double what it was worth to run.

The patronage just from Murwillumbah was 25,000 reservations in the first 12 months and seven years later—1980—those reservations were 56,000. That was just Murwillumbah. In 1978, because the train was so popular and heavily booked, a second service known as the Pacific Coast Overnight Express was introduced running from Sydney to Coffs Harbour and stopping at all stations through to Murwillumbah. Both services operated across the line until the introduction of the XPT in 1990. From then on it started to go downhill.

One thing they put about was the XPT's speed. They would lower the speed of the motor rail by five kilometres an hour and then raise it another five kilometres an hour for the XPT. In other words, the XPT was only travelling five kilometres an hour faster than any other train. It could do top speed of 160 kilometres in only limited locations between here and Sydney. There was only about an hour's difference in arrival at either end. The patronage started to drop after the novelty of the XPT wore off. It was then changed from a daylight service to a night service. The XPT it has been running in the past 10 years normally with five carriages, but at holiday time it has seven carriages. The figure of 184 people is wrong. They would be turning people away.

I refer to the briefing note that RailCorp supplied to the Government. I draw the attention of the committee to page 29 of my submission and the NRTF survey results from last year. The questions were: Would you likely the XPT service to remain on this line? The result: 98.6 per cent of people said yes. Would you like to see a commuter service on the line? The result: 96.85 per cent said yes. Would you use the service? The result: 91 per cent said yes. There is overwhelming support for rail in this region.

What is happening now is a total disgrace. I have more evidence that I received this morning. Page 4 of the speed restrictions document from the Rail Infrastructure Corporation dated 8 June 2004 states that there are 40 restrictions on this line and 152 bridges. The Blamey line has 32 restrictions, but it is not affected because it carries private freight on it, not State-owned freight. The State-owned freight operations were sold off on 31 January 2002. The taxpayers of the State pay for freight and passenger services. They sold off the freight and we get no tax relief. We are still paying for freight services despite our state-owned rail system. We have lost the XPT service for now, but we are still paying for it through taxes. The local ratepayers will now have to pick up the bill for road damages caused by these buses. One fully loaded bus is the equivalent of 4,500 cars in relation to road damage.

In one instance at Casino after 17 May I noted seven buses for one train. That is where the figures come into it. Part of the costing given for removal of this service was the operational cost of \$6,575 a year. If you equate that to \$24,000, it comes out at around a quarter of that amount. This line is only one-seventh of the distance that that train travels, not a quarter of it. In other words, this area was paying for operational costs for 16½ kilometres south of Grafton, not from Casino to Murwillumbah. That is the first point.

On population growth, if you look at page 35, you can see that the population growth of this region back then was 2.2 per cent—the fastest growing population area in the State. It still is. Another point that has missed is that townships like Bangalow, Billinudgel, Burringbar and Stokers Siding, which used to have a rail service, have lost those services since the introduction of the XPT. Another thing with the buses that are going round: on your trip to Murwillumbah tomorrow, have a look at Billinudgel. You have to turn off the highway to go into the township. Passengers are being dropped off on the highway, not in the township, by CountryLink buses. Is that a breach of occupational health and safety responsibility for those people? We are supposed to be providing a safe form of transport. It is not. There is not even a bus shelter there. So what is the risk of injury or loss of life for the passengers who are caught by this Government action?

On page 34, when it comes to regional flooding, the photograph at the bottom was taken from the 1989 floods. As can be seen, the track is nice and clear. The roads were cut, the line was still open. My biggest argument relates to page 39, where you will see an attachment "Transport New South Wales" by a gentleman by the name of Michael Degan, the director-general. It states that over the past five years they have spent \$25 million on this line, equalling \$5 million a year. Turn the page, and you will see an extract from a New South Wales Legislative Assembly question and answer paper, dated 18 February 2004, saying that in 1998 they spent \$1.7 million out of that \$5 million. In 1999-2000, \$2.02 million was spent, again out of \$5 million. When it comes to 2003-04, it states that \$3.4 million was spent. That is the figure that I really disagree with.

On pages 44 and 45 you will see the costing figures that were given for this line for this year. They come to a forecast of \$1.7 million. Where is the difference between that and the \$3.4 million? There is lie after lie, and deception after deception over this line. This line is a goldmine. It is being neglected and has been put away. It is a disgrace for those in charge of RailCorp, and it is an absolute disgrace that it has given the Government false figures to try to justify its own actions. The figures are extremely rubbery. I find it an insult to my intelligence, and to the intelligence of the people of this region.

In another part of the briefing note, at page 4, it spoke of the low-cost recurrent expenditure on track at \$3.5 million. Even that contradicts the first letter from New South Wales Transport at \$5 million. One department cannot communicate with another to get their facts straight. We have a whole community up here suffering because of this action. We are fighting not only for ourselves but also for the kids of the future. That fight will continue.

I believe Mr Graham has said that there are 169 wooden bridges on this line and 29 steel bridges. That is from the same briefing note. I would like to submit to this Committee, and table, a videotape of the line, from which I counted 152 bridges, some of them concrete. There are five concrete bridges on this line. That is a far cry from 169 wooden bridges. I actually wrote the bridge numbers down for the Committee. Between Casino and Lismore there are 36 bridges.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: What page are you on?

Mr BATTERSBY: Page 14. There are 33 wooden bridges, 2 steel bridges and 1 concrete bridge. Lismore to Bangalow, which seems to be the worst section, has 41 wooden and 3 steel bridges, a total of 44 bridges. As the list goes on, you can see it comes to 140 wooden bridges, 8 steel bridges, 4 concrete bridges, a total of 152 bridges—not 198, if you add the 169 and 29 together. So, again, those figures are wrong. I will give a photograph of this bridge to the Committee. It has a 20 kilometre an hour speed restriction on it, and lying right beside it in a paddock are the transoms to go on that bridge, and they have been there for more than 12 months.

Documents tabled.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: For the record, could you identify that bridge?

Mr BATTERSBY: This is the bridge over Byron Creek at Binna Burra. I have noticed that they have been working on the overhead bridge with no speed restriction. One 200 metres away, with a speed restriction, is not even touched. This is adding more and more to the dilemma of this line. In the long term, it is adding more to the cost. Some of the bridges that have speed restrictions on them have had those restrictions on them since 1989, and they have not been touched, and are not forecast to be touched until the year 2008. This is a clear indication that this is a deliberate act to allow this line to run down. It has been going on for over 10 years.

To get this work done would not take that long. If these gangs were being given \$5 million each year to maintain this line, the line would be a top line now; it would be the best in the State. But, because of a lack of funding, and misplacement of funding, it is not a good line. It has been allowed to decay. To me, New South Wales no longer stands for Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong; it stands for neglect, stupidity and waste.

CHAIR: I note, Mr Battersby, that you tabled a videotape that you would like us to look at, and a couple of enlarged photographs. Mr McInerney, would you like to highlight the main points in your submission?

Mr McINERNEY: I started on the railway when I was only a very young fellow. I spent all my life on the railway. When I first started on it I was told, "Do not take a job on the branch line, it will close." I worked

there for over 40 years and it still was not closed. I have finished now. I retired medically unfit on account of having my back operated on. It is roughly 10 years since I finished, on 9/4/95 officially. Over those years I have been a fencing ganger, I have worked in rerailing, did continuous welded rail on welded track, was fettling ganger, track supervisor, and was on tie gangs, mechanisation machines, and I was on call 24 hours a day. In 1990 I was doing upgrading and plate-laying, and I was highly awarded and commended for the job. I have the papers for that. I have built leads and crossings. We used to build them out of rails that you could get back in those days—not in the prefab style, already built to put in; we used to build them on the spot. I handled major washaways, floods and track upgrading, and all maintenance concerning the running track.

On the branch line, over the years before its mechanisation in 1977, we had 11 fettling gangs. They consisted of approximately 50 men, which was for the whole of the branch line. That is with yards, men and relief men. There were two bridge gangs, with 8 men each. They were permanently on the branch line. We had other gangs that came in to do re-railing and upgrading, and Plazzer machines would be doing spot tamping and that. There were fencing gangs on it. All those gangs went in 1977. There were two fettling gangs left, plus the bridge gangs. There was one fettling gang at Mullumbimby and one at Lismore, and I was the ganger when that occurred.

After that, on 26/11/79, I was appointed a second-class perway inspector. Over the years I did the whole of the South Grafton division, which covered from Wauchope through to Roma Street, Brisbane, and Casino to Murwillumbah lines—up until I finished. Over that period of time I have seen the North Coast Mail, which used to run through the branch line from Sydney to Murwillumbah. They were phased out. Then the motor rail came in; it used to carry the cars. There were two each day, one to Murwillumbah and one back. These trains were all in daylight hours. When they phased that out, they put the XPT on. When it came in, it came in with the unscrupulous hours that they ran with it.

I live from here to approximately that wall away from the running track. The figures that they have stipulated as being the running of those trains, it was always in daylight hours, and you would be out, and the drivers would be blowing and waving to you, plus people on the train. There were a lot more people who travelled on that train than what is anticipated and submitted by State Rail.

CHAIR: Is this in recent times?

Mr McINERNEY: This is recently. It was right up until they stopped running it pretty well. But it did drop off a little bit after the rumour got around that it was going to cease. I was told in late November—and this was someone that does the bookings—that they were not to book any more seats on that XPT after March. So this was planned before it came in. No more seats to be booked after May, I think it was 17 May he told me. I did write it down at the time. That was last November, before Christmas.

To stop this is one of the greatest travesties ever and it always has been, other than when we get heavy rains and floods, other than a bit of a wash away and a major thing on the railway, it is the only access through. Before the train goes through each time, that track is run and checked before the train goes over it every day. But now they gradually cut the checking of that track out by the track supervisor. They cut it back to every second day, then it got back to every third and fourth day. Now at the moment, although there is no train running, they are running it once a week. They blow and wave to me as they go past my place.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: What do they check it with? Do they have a trolley or something?

Mr McINERNEY: They have what is called a high rail vehicle. It is a motor vehicle that runs on the rail.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Mr Battersby, are you aware of a steel bridge that was in a semi state of being repainted?

Mr BATTERSBY: Yes, there is a steel bridge at Eltham. This bridge is in one of the photographs I submitted to you. I did not show it here. This bridge was sandblasted to be repainted to seal it against corrosion. About one-third of the job has just been done; it has just been left. It is still exposed.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What part of the job has been left? The part that has been sandblasted?

Mr BATTERSBY: The parts that have been sandblasted, they are quite easy to see in the photographs. It is just exposed to the atmosphere and if it is not sealed quickly it will start to decay very rapidly in this climate.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How much of the steel bridge is currently exposed without protection?

Mr BATTERSBY: At least three-quarters of it.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How long would you expect the bridge to survive unless something is done urgently to seal it?

Mr BATTERSBY: If we get any rain and sunshine and things like that the rust will eat in very quickly—I would say within 12 months you will have major troubles with it.

CHAIR: That is the bridge on page 13 of your submission.

Mr BATTERSBY: Yes it is.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you describe your view of the condition of the track between Casino and Murwillumbah? Is all of the track in a state of disrepair or are certain sections more viable than other sections?

Mr BATTERSBY: There is definitely viability in the line, even in its current condition. If track access was granted to a private operator on the line with a light rail motor rail you would have a service up and running now. That brings me to another point I failed to mention. Currently, they have turned around and said that the line is closed or should I say they are not carrying out any maintenance on the line. Under the Transport Administration Act 1988, maintenance of railway lines, a rail infrastructure owner is not required to maintain a railway line on which no service is operating. They have a freight service running past the home signal at Casino into the Lismore section twice a week now. That is still going on now. If the train has entered that section, the whole branch line is still open and should be maintained under the Act.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Perhaps I can break it down a bit more. As I understand it, the really challenging parts of the track in terms of maintenance are the bridges between Lismore and Bangalow.

Mr BATTERSBY: They are some of the worst ones, yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: And then maybe north of Mullumbimby there are more bridges that need a lot of attention.

Mr BATTERSBY: Yes, but some of the work that needs to be done on those bridges. A bit more expense now can eliminate the cost of those bridges for decades to come.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In terms of the Casino to Lismore section of the track, do you see any reason why the XPT should not terminating at Lismore rather than Casino?

Mr BATTERSBY: I will put it to you this way. As I said before, there are 36 bridges between Casino and Lismore. Only three have speed restrictions so it would be viable.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You would describe the track in good condition?

Mr BATTERSBY: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You have referred to freight. You believe that there would be a viable freight service. Are you referring to freight coming into the Northern Rivers, freight exiting the Northern Rivers, or both?

Mr BATTERSBY: Both.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you expand on that?

Mr BATTERSBY: Back in 1980 a gentleman by the name of Neil Morris, who was the marketing manager for this line, or I believe it was Taree right up to Brisbane, was sacked because he attracted too much business for the line. That gives you an idea of what has been going on. As far as freight goes, I have still been exploring a few possibilities. I was on a telephone conversation last night where I found that there is a macadamia factory that puts out 30 tonnes of macadamia nuts every second day. There is another factory that is a quarter of a size smaller which is churning out just as much. There is also other freight like tomatoes, timber. You have Herfords here. They are all prospects for rail freight, not road. You could combine the two of them together. Herfords get some of their timber from Kempsey and Port Macquarie. They not only import the timber; they export it out of the region as well.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Mr Battersby, I apologise for trying to traverse so much territory in such a short period, but I understand that you have seen 8,000 sleepers distributed up and down the track.

Mr BATTERSBY: I have noted that there are 8,000 sleepers. You are looking at about \$500,000 worth of steel sitting beside the track at the moment waiting to go in.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Are they in one pile?

Mr BATTERSBY: No. They are spread the entire length from Murwillumbah through to Casino. These sleepers, I believe, are dated 2004 and they are meant to be put in now.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What action would be required, because I understand that RailCorp has indicated that it wishes to retrieve the sleepers? What would be required on RailCorp's part to get those sleepers back?

Mr BATTERSBY: If they want to retrieve those sleepers they would have to send out a locomotive, not an 81 class—it is too heavy for the line. They would have to go out and pick them all up by hand. Can you imagine picking up 8,000 sleepers that are lying in swamp?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You mentioned that an 81 class would be too heavy for the line. Are you aware of the load restriction on the branch line?

Mr BATTERSBY: I understand that the load restriction on the line is about 15 tonnes axle load. The axle load for the 81 class locomotives is about 21 tonnes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What would happen if an 81 class locomotive traversed the track to Murwillumbah and back?

Mr BATTERSBY: I would say that some of the track could spread. Some of the bridges would be damaged even further and the locomotive would come off. It is referred to as being in the dirt .

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have you any reason to believe that an 81 class locomotive has used the track recently?

Mr BATTERSBY: I did a bit more investigation. I was told that they did allow an 81 up here but I did a bit more investigation and found that the locomotive was disconnected from the train at Casino and they used an interrail 423 class, which has the right axle load for the line, to bring those sleepers out.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What was the purpose of that trip? Was it to lay ballast on the track?

Mr BATTERSBY: This line was declared closed on 6 April. On 10 April a work order went out to put out 8,000 sleepers. On 21 April they arrived and were laid out along the length of the track.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Mr McInerney, I have a report prepared by the Ministry of Transport in August 2003. The title of the report is "New South Wales Rail Underbridges—Structural Safety Review, Interim Overview Report". In this report it talks about funding limitations for maintenance funding for the railway lines on the North Coast. I would like to read a small part to you and ask if you could give us your comments on the implications this would have had for our branch line. Are you familiar with the term "MPM funding"?

Mr McINERNEY: No.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I understand that that is for priority maintenance. The report states, "Reductions in the requested MPM funding levels for bridge upgradings raises several significant issues. 1. The backlog of work required tends to grow exponentially forming a bow wave that needs to be overcome. 2. The cancellation of MPM works requires a consequential increase in RM works and costs in order to maintain an adequate level of safety and operations. This places additional loads on already committed RM resources. These are different forms of maintenance funding." Have you heard the term "bow wave"?

Mr McINERNEY: No, I have not. That could have come in after I finished. They change all the time.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: A later section of the report refers to the fact that in order to allocate sufficient funding for the main line, "the RIC regional staff advise they have only been allocated 65 to 75 per cent of their request for maintenance funding for the 2003-04 financial year. When funds are not approved the region determines the maintenance work required to continue safe operation of the bridge and diverts funds from MPM to RM to enable the maintenance work to be carried out by regular maintenance teams at the expense of other works." In a later section it indicates that the concrete sleepering of the main line is the priority and that this came at the expense of bridges on the Murwillumbah branch line. My question to you is: If you stop all spending and all maintenance on the bridges and reduce maintenance spending on the track, what would be the effect of that over a period of years?

Mr McINERNEY: If they stop the maintenance on the bridges they would definitely deteriorate. Then they would have a reason to close the branch line, if there was no maintenance done at all and it was let go.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I have received an analogy that if you had a leak in your roof that cost \$25 to repair but you failed to repair that leak, you would soon find that you had a \$2,000 problem?

Mr McINERNEY: That is correct, and the same with the bridges.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Especially for timber bridges?

Mr McINERNEY: Yes, especially.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In your view is it necessary to replace all the timber bridges on the branch line?

Mr McINERNEY: No but they could have deteriorated a lot more since I finished on the job. My honest version of it is that when I finished they did not need replacing. All they needed was the ongoing maintenance with the bridge gangs, which they did over the number of years that I was there which kept everything up and kept the trains running. If a bridge got down a bit you would put a speed on it for safety and the train would go over it safely. The thing is that all bridges have a deflection in them. Deflection is up and down. The problem is with the bridge, if it goes with the supports and if it goes sideways then there are big problems if it starts to move sideways.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Would it be your evidence that regular maintenance spending is a more efficient way of doing it, rather than dropping maintenance funding altogether and then coming back and trying to repair the problems?

Mr McINERNEY: My word, and keep our XPT running.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So there could be more economical methods of maintaining the branch line than replacing all the bridges?

Mr McINERNEY: That is right, a little bit on each bridge as required at a time.

Mr BATTERSBY: May I add a little more about the bridges. If this track is left going, these timber bridges are left going too long, we will have white ants get in there and eat other things out. One thing that keeps white ants out of timber bridges is vibration. A train going over it gives enough vibration to keep those white ants out. Another thing on this rail infrastructure corporation listing 40 speed restrictions on this line, there

are 26 bridges that are listed under the term of TBUO, which is track and bridge under observation, not work. So the speed restrictions on some of the bridges are only there for observation, and there are 26 of them.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: We have received advice from RailCorp that "track maintenance expenditure for 2002-03 was \$3.7 million". Is that a figure with which you would disagree?

Mr BATTERSBY: The only one I have—what was that year again?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: 2002-03.

Mr BATTERSBY: That differs from the information given to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly on 18 February. The figure quoted then was \$2.5 million. I do not think these figures are correct. You could subpoena the records and get the truth. Some of the figures do not add up.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What is your understanding of the steel sleepers delivered over the past three years?

MR BATTERSBY: This year there were 8,000. Last year 12,000 were supposed to be delivered but they failed to appear. The year before that there were supposed to be 8,000. There are 20,000 steel sleepers missing.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Mr McInerney, is it necessary for every sleeper to be made of steel?

MR McINERNEY: One in four will hold the track, or stop the gauge going out and derailing. If timber sleepers have deteriorated they will carry the weight of the train.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Therefore, the proposal to replace every sleeper with steel is unnecessary.

MR McINERNEY: Yes. Their program always used to be to replace every fourth sleeper every four years. So after four years every sleeper was renewed. That was the policy when they started. I have here a copy from the *Northern Star* of Tuesday, 30 January 1978. It states that the Public Transport Commission officials rate the Murwillumbah-Casino line as one of the safest lines in the State after a recent reconditioning program.

CHAIR: Thank you for putting that on record.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Thank you for a very detailed submission. Unfortunately I have not had the time to give it the attention it deserves. It seems that the gist of what you are saying is that the maintenance expenses for the line have been exaggerated by the inclusion of the 16.5 kilometres of track to Grafton.

MR BATTERSBY: Yes.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: In fact, according to the figures on page 14, there has been an underspending in maintenance on the tracks taking into account what has been allocated and what has spent. You are saying it is unclear where that money has gone.

MR BATTERSBY: That is correct. It appears that between \$13 million and \$16 million is missing from the maintenance funding on this line over the past 10 years.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: It has been going downhill for 10 years.

MR BATTERSBY: Yes. I think some of the money has been syphoned off to the main line.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You have a very alarming photograph at the bottom of page 12 showing an overbridge, which presumably has been white anted, supported by steel jacks.

MR BATTERSBY: There are five steel jacks under that overbridge. It has been eaten out by white ants. Those jacks are hired—they are not owned by the Rail Infrastructure Corporation. That bridge is used by the regular school bus, every day.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: The point you are making is that the failure to maintain the bridges on a timely basis is designed not only to prevent use of the line but also that it constitutes a danger to road traffic.

MR BATTERSBY: Yes, especially for kids. Those jacks have been there for the past eight months and nothing has been done. You cannot blame the gangs; they are trying to do the work. They are only doing what they are directed to do and no more. I feel they are not allowed to do any more. The guys working on this track have the expertise to get the job done more quickly and more cheaply, but they are not allowed to do it.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: You make the point that there has been a decrease in the number of people in the gangs working on the line.

MR BATTERSBY: That is correct. In 1970, when I first arrived on the North Coast, there were 56 gang members. There were gangs at Murwillumbah, Burringbar, Mullumbimby and Byron Bay. Even Bangalow and Eltham had one. Lismore had two gangs.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Are you saying the decline in numbers is due to a reluctance to maintain the line rather than a reflection of any efficiencies that might have occurred because of better equipment?

MR BATTERSBY: No. These guys used to compete against each other to determine the best or most improved section. We have people working on this line who come from as far away as Wagga Wagga and Tamworth. When they travel away from their own depot they are paid expenses, which adds to the cost of the maintenance.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: Mr McInerney, from your experience would you care to comment about the situation with the gangs?

MR MCINERNEY: Yes. They cannot keep up with the maintenance. There are only 10 men left. The two bridge gangs and gang at Mullumbimby are gone. There is one gang at Lismore with 10 men to look after approximately 98 kilometres of track. They cannot do it. The Plazzer machines have been on the branch lines for two years. They lift, pack and line the tracks. They do a terrific job. I was an inspector in charge of them, too.

Ms SYLVIA HALE: There are 10 men for 98 kilometres. What should be the ratio?

MR MCINERNEY: The little gangs had four or five permanent men. It depended on how much yard they had. They looked after from four miles to approximately 8 miles. Each gang would compete against the others. There were awards for each month of the year. The ganger got two pounds and the men got one pound each. In fact, I have some of those certificates that I won myself when I was a fettler.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: I refer you to the bridge shown on page 12 of the submission. Where is that?

MR BATTERSBY: That is on the Bangalow to Lismore road. Are you referring to the one with the transoms in the paddock—the one with the jacks?

The Hon. PETER BREEN: The one below that with the jacks.

MR BATTERSBY: That is hidden away in the countryside at Nashua.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Did you say a bus goes over the bridge?

MR BATTERSBY: Yes, a school bus.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Is it a rail bridge or a road bridge?

MR BATTERSBY: It is a road bridge.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Why is it being maintained by the rail authority?

MR BATTERSBY: Because it is responsible for it and it goes over the railway line.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Regarding the question of the cost of maintaining the service, one of the terms of reference relates to whether the Government's claim that it will save \$5 million a year is accurate. Given your experience do you believe that is a reasonable figure to maintain the line?

MR BATTERSBY: Given that it is \$5 million from a multi-billion-dollar budget it is a pittance.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Is it sufficient to maintain bridges, the railway line and so on?

MR BATTERSBY: They are currently spending \$1.7 million out of a so-called \$5-million budget. They have been spending less than half.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Given that they have been spending less than the budget that must have a cumulative effect. Surely it is costing more than \$5 million given the condition of the bridges.

MR BATTERSBY: If the gang were let loose with the \$5 million the line would be up and running in no time. That is an honest opinion.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Does that include the wooden bridges?

MR BATTERSBY: Yes. If you give them the \$5 million they will get it done.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Mr McInerney, you indicated that when the XPT started you first saw a deterioration in the maintenance of the line. What year was that?

MR McINERNEY: I could not say.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: You became an inspector on the line in 1979.

MR McINERNEY: Yes. I retired officially in 1995, so it would have been roughly 1990. It was starting to drop off then. There were not enough maintenance staff to keep going. I used to bring the Plazzer machines in for anything from four to six weeks every Christmas, because the weather was hot and it was not welded track so it would not kick. I would go through the branch lines and do the worst spots and gradually catch up. After I finished, the machines stopped coming. Some of them go out west and some of them from out west are now brought in here. In the first place I had six machines and a lead clamping machine. These machines went over the whole division, from Wauchope south to Brisbane, to Casino, and to Murwillumbah. Over the hot period around Christmas, before they knocked off for their holiday, they brought them here and we kept up with that maintenance.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: You said there were eight men working on the bridges.

MR McINERNEY: There were two bridge gangs and each gang had eight members. Some times there would be one more. There was one at Mullumbimby and one at Lismore. Later they amalgamated them and then split them again.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: When did you first see a decline in the number of men?

MR McINERNEY: I could not say, it was so long ago.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: What about when you retired?

MR McINERNEY: There were still men working on bridges, but the number had declined.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Approximately how many were working on the bridges when you retired?

MR McINERNEY: About five to seven.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Was that across the whole line?

MR McINERNEY: That was the Lismore gang. I could not say about gang at Mullumbimby.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Mr Battersby, in your submission you mentioned that freight stopped running on the line in 2002. Is there a connection between the sale of the rail infrastructure and the ceasing of the freight?

MR BATTERSBY: There may have been a connection.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: The sale happened in about January and the freight stopped in about December.

MR BATTERSBY: That is correct. The sale of Freight Corp was combined with the sale of National Rail, which was owned jointly by the New South Wales, Victoria and the Federal Government. Mr Graham was at that stage the CEO of National Rail. He is now the CEO of RailCorp. Those two companies combined sold for a total of \$936 million, and I believe \$350 million was for the sale of FreightCorp.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: What freight was on the line in 2002?

Mr BATTERSBY: I believe during that stage they were still moving a lot of fly-ash around for the construction of the Pacific Highway. That was one of the main things being moved around. But, as I mentioned earlier, back in 1980 they got rid of the one man who was creating freight for the line. From then on it just started to drop off. Like I said when I went down with the parliamentary delegation, you actually priced yourself out of the market. It has been a deliberate act. That is why the freight has disappeared.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: If the line were extended to, say, Gold Coast airport would that provide a market for freight in the area?

Mr BATTERSBY: I believe it would. There are certain avenues that I am still looking at. The largest freight hauler here now using rail is Pacific National. It does not really get along too well, from my understanding, with InterRail, which is a Queensland Government owned rail identity in Casino. But it does have good standing with another company known as Silverton. Silverton already does this on a branch line further out west in the State, where it actually brings in the freight to the main line and Pacific National takes it from there. Currently, there are a heck of a lot of large super-freighters going between Sydney and Brisbane, and some of those containers are bound for the Gold Coast, and possibly even further south. Wouldn't it be a good idea to get Silverton up here to take the freight off at Casino, and haul it up the Gold Coast that way? You could take it to Murwillumbah right now and use large forklifts on the trucks. The consignees have got their produce two hours ahead of time, you are not tying up a major freight terminal at Acacia Ridge in Brisbane; it is freeing up their space; and that would start to generate more freight back on this line. Like I mentioned before, macadamia nuts, tomatoes, even sugar cane could come back onto it.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: Is there a problem with tonnage of freight on this line?

Mr BATTERSBY: At the moment, the way the line is, a 15-tonne axle load is your maximum. But once you fixed up those bridges and got that lifted, your tonnage is open again; you could have up to a 20-tonne axle load.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: But, at the moment, would you agree there is a potential problem in attracting freight because some freight would be too heavy for that line?

Mr BATTERSBY: When you look at a freight vehicle you take into account not its net but its gross weight. The truck itself may weight 45 tonnes, and you might have another 40 tonne of freight on top of that, so that is 80 tonnes. You divide that by four, because there are four axles on it, and that will give you the axle load for that vehicle. That is how you can get around it.

The Hon. PETER BREEN: On the example you just gave, it would be a 20-tonne axle load, would it?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It is a bit too heavy.

Mr BATTERSBY: Yes, that one is too heavy. I am not sitting here with a calculator to work it out for you. But that is the principle that it works on.

CHAIR: I would like to thank you both for your time and for the amount of effort that you have put into your submissions and for answering our questions. We really appreciate it, and thank you very much.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(The Committee adjourned at 5.05 p.m.)
