

NRTF Budget Submission 2008 - Executive Summary

NRTF co-ordinates a community network and campaign called Trains On Our Tracks (TOOT) within the seven local government areas that make up the Northern Rivers Region, which is covered by the Federal electorates of Page and Richmond.

TOOT is a broad based voice for communities, businesses, working families and individuals across the region who support the refurbishment of the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line ('the line') and the introduction of commuter services. Tens of thousands of people across the region have demonstrated their support for this outcome through participation in TOOT campaigns and events since rail services were discontinued in 2004.

It is our submission that there are significant economic, social and environmental benefits for Northern Rivers communities as well as the national economy of refurbishing the rail infrastructure and introducing commuter services in the short term and connecting the line between Murwillumbah and Coolangatta Airport (at the Qld border) in the longer term.

Currently the Queensland government is extending the Gold Coast line southwards with plans to reach Coolangatta Airport some time around 2018.

It is our submission that the proposal is a worthy candidate for Federal funding to assist regional communities overcome infrastructure lags, support tourism development and improve cross border transport links where an emerging bottleneck is developing within one of the country's most important transport corridors.

Recent history of the line

Rail services on the line were suspended in May 2004. At the time the only service was a single night service to and from Sydney.

An Upper House Inquiry by the NSW parliament in 2004 recommended the reopening of the line for commuter trains.

Research produced by Southern Cross University indicates that 72% of people would use commuter rail services at least once per month. This rises to 91% if the line is linked to Queensland and equates to considerable unmet demand.
(http://www.scu.edu.au/news/media.php?item_id=866&action=show_item&type=M)

In 2006, the NSW government offered \$75 million if the Federal government would agree to fund an equivalent amount so as to completely refurbish the line and thereby extend the life of the base infrastructure by up to one hundred years. The offer was not matched by the Coalition government.

Social, economic and environmental benefits of commuter services

86% of residents within Lismore and Byron LGAs live within 5 kilometres of the rail line (ABS 2006).

The town centres of 8 of the 10 largest population centres in the region are directly linked by rail, 9 of 10 if the line is extended to Coolangatta/Tweed Heads.

The centrality of the line provides major opportunities to link localised public transport services across the whole region thereby expanding travel options and boosting the viability of private bus, taxi, ferry and other operators. Similarly the line links the growing number of cycleways and walkways across the region providing environmentally friendly alternatives that help to reduce the numbers of cars on the road. A significant regional contribution to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is possible.

Many marginalised groups such as the young, elderly, disabled and others without access to private transport can benefit. Stubbornly high unemployment rates stand to be reduced and labour market linkages to strengthen leading to productivity boosts for local economies. With climate change and peak oil, there is an opportunity to provide an integrated public transport

system as an alternative for working families, retirees and tourists. Access for mums with prams, the frail in wheelchairs and others needing to get to health and education services will benefit, reducing the strain on community transport schemes. Young people will no longer be marginalised in the search for work or a safe night out.

Traffic congestion, loss of amenity and safety issues are increasing problems in many of our communities due to the lack of non road based alternatives and very significant tourist numbers. Iconic tourism dependent towns such as Byron Bay (1.7 million tourist visitors a year) are now gridlocked with delays of 30 minutes to travel less than 2 kilometres. Commuter rail provides the only alternative that can reduce the numbers of vehicles within our growing communities.

A strategic approach to tourism management is to promote an environmentally friendly way for visitors to experience the region especially with the recent expansion of Coolangatta Airport into one of Australia's busiest. A rail link between Murwillumbah and Coolangatta Airport would allow for Brisbane, Sydney and Coolangatta Airports to be directly linked by rail and thus opening up an east coast tourism rail corridor.

There are also significant opportunities to open up hinterland pathways for tourism that help to revitalise many hinterland economies such as those hit by the recent floods. In doing so they take the pressure off coastal communities and share the economic benefits.

Economic benefits of nation-building infrastructure

The Auslink Sydney-Brisbane Corridor Strategy (DOTARS, 2007) identified sections of the corridor between Brisbane and Byron Bay in NSW as currently facing congestion and capacity constraints that are likely to become 'increasingly severe' (p. 23).

The line is located within the Casino-Gold Coast corridor and the proposed extension of the line to Coolangatta would provide significant scope to ease current and future road capacity constraints identified by Auslink by providing an alternative to road vehicles for commuters and tourists travelling within the Casino-Gold Coast and east coast tourist corridors.

Tourism is our region's number one export industry, which is based on the outstanding natural beauty of the region and community concern for the environment. This image is increasingly threatened by traffic. Resilient regional economies can be built by protecting and promoting a clean green image that is less dependent on the motor car. In turn the protection of iconic locations such as the Byron region help protect a key national export industry.

Rebalancing regional transport funding

The deficiencies of the regional and cross border transport links are in part, a symptom of the need to rebalance transport funding. Many of the impacts described are due to expansion of the Pacific Highway as the main artery through the region without considering transport issues away from the highway and in particular from encouraging an over-dependence on the motor car.

In the last fifteen years over \$1 billion has been spent upgrading the Pacific Highway between Bangalow and the Queensland border. A PriceWaterhouseCoopers feasibility study (<http://www.toot.org.au/dmdocuments/FeasStudyDr12.pdf>) into commuter services on the line concluded in 2004 that 'catch-up' maintenance would cost about \$4.1 million a year over seven years and then reduce to an annual average of about \$2.5 million.

Even allowing for some cost increases, the 2006 estimate of \$150 million to completely refurbish the line and extend its life by up to one hundred years, is a comparatively small investment. This is especially so as the benefits from investing in rail infrastructure are spread evenly throughout the Page and Richmond electorates.

Supporting documents (attached)

Connecting Communities, Linking Regions - A discussion paper on cross border transport links.
TOOT Now! - A plan for sixteen trains a day.

See also www.toot.org.au for further information and downloads