



## Northern Rivers Social Development Council Response to the '*Cross-Border Transport Taskforce – Discussion Paper*'

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### *Background*

The Northern Rivers Social Development Council (NRSDC) advocates on behalf of vulnerable and disadvantaged communities in the Northern Rivers and provides peak representation to the community and social welfare sector within the region.

NRSDC has auspiced the Public Transport Development Project (PTDP) since 1994. The PTDP has linkages with a broad cross-section of the transport sector; including transport operators; Local Government; non-government organisations and community representatives.

The PTDP works within a consultative, community development framework and has developed an in-depth knowledge of community needs, the operating context for Government and the benefits and constraints of service provision.

NRSDC welcomes the opportunity to respond to this discussion paper. The *Cross-Border Transport Task Force – Discussion Paper* provides an exciting opportunity to formally progress several recent planning documents, including the State Infrastructure Strategy (SIS); Action for Air; both the Far North Coast and Mid-North Coast Regional Strategies and the NSW State Plan.

### *Deadline for submissions*

NRSDC is aware that discussions between the NSW Ministry of Transport (MoT), Queensland Transport (QT) and the Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils (NOROC) have only recently commenced. We understand that the timeframe for submission of responses to the discussion paper has been extended to enable proper consultation to take place as outlined in the discussion paper. NRSDC is submitting this interim response prior to more thorough consultations taking place.

This interim response does not address the specific recommendations of the discussion paper as further consultation around the recommendations is required.

## *Response*

NRSDC supports the taskforce's premise that there is a need for better planning to meet the transport needs of both the North Coast and South East Queensland population. We note that planning for transport within these regions should address freight to ensure an integrated approach to transport and mobility. NRSDC is pleased that the Taskforce has clearly recognised that heavy rail has a key role in providing appropriate transport infrastructure within the two regions.

NRSDC supports several key concepts within the discussion paper. These include:

- Developing a bridging strategy to address existing transport needs, support population growth and ensure travel pattern are developed that will sustain future public transport options such as a rail service.
- Strengthening linkages between Land-use planning, demographic projections and State and Local Government transport tasks.
- Ensuring that transport planning for the two regions is integrated and promotes a strong connection between Northern NSW and South East Queensland.

Through the consultation process, NRSDC will expand upon these concepts to ensure that on-the ground and community identified needs are included in decision making regarding the region's future transport needs.

## *Population*

The population growth projections used to inform planning may need to be re-examined. Current projections based on the last census figures indicate that the Northern Rivers Region (NRR) annual growth rate is substantially higher than the 2,500 stated in the discussion paper. For example, the Northern Rivers Regional Profile (2003) indicates that the Tweed LGA alone had an average growth rate of 1,500 additional people per annum between 1996 and 2001<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter Valley Research Foundation (2003), *Northern Rivers Regional Profile – A socio-economic profile of the Northern Rivers*, Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources, NSW.

## *Rail Corridor*

NRSDC agrees that action should be taken to quickly secure a rail corridor for a future intra-regional and cross border service. Identification of this corridor should form the basis for future transport and land use planning. Planning for future social and community infrastructure, including health, employment and educational facilities should also be based around the corridor.

Whilst it is agreed that the highest growth rates are projected to continue in the Tweed LGA along their coastal strip, the Far North Coast Regional Strategy has developed mechanisms to reduce coastal population pressures and develop inland settlement and employment centres.<sup>2</sup> As such, it is recommended that the bridging strategy focuses on the existing rail corridor between Murwillumbah and Casino rather than looking at an alternate coastal alignment.

NRSDC recommends that the section between Condon and the Queensland border should be identified and planned for at the outset of this strategy in conjunction with planning for the existing corridor.

## *Integrated Transport Planning*

The issues paper highlights the need to develop an Integrated Regional Transport Plan. NRSDC agrees with the view that the current bus reform process provides an opportunity for service integration that has not presented before. It is imperative that the Regional Bus Reform process is an integral part of an Integrated Regional Transport Plan. NRSDC considers that the Plan should primarily aim to decrease private vehicle usage and road based freight.

NRSDC recommends that the Integrated Regional Transport Plan should include:

- Long distance container and smaller local freight movements
- Commuter rail, coach, bus and taxi services; including equitable fare and ticketing options
- Local accessibility action planning
- Active transport options – pedestrian, cycling

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Planning (2006), '*Far North Coast Regional Strategy*', <http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/plansforaction/northcoast.asp> accessed 6/6/2007.

- Robust Land-Use & Transport Planning principles and
- Cross-departmental service delivery planning.

NRSDC believes that this approach, when undertaken through collaborative, developmental processes, has the greatest potential for increasing public transport patronage. It is also noted that adoption of an integrated transport planning approach when developing the bridging strategy will reduce costs associated with the development and maintenance of road based infrastructure to service a growing population.

### *Further Considerations*

NRSDC urges the MoT to consider some factors that will influence a regional transport plan, such as:

- The large number of tourists that visit the area. In 2001 it was estimated that between 1.2 and 1.75 million people visit Byron Bay alone per year<sup>3</sup>. It was predicted that this figure would rise with the up-grade of the Pacific Highway and present an increase in day-trippers. Due consideration needs to be given to those towns that are major tourist destinations that are sited along the rail line – Murwillumbah, Mullumbimby, Byron Bay, Bangalow and Lismore. A large number of airport shuttle services currently run between Ballina and Byron Bay to cater for the tourist population which indicates a legitimate option between integration of rail and bus transport modes.
- Significant risks associated with continued reliance upon road based transport as the primary transport mode within the region, including:
  - Costs to local Councils and RTA for road maintenance, up-grades and realignments
  - Decreasing viability of private vehicle usage in the medium to long-term in light of the 'peak oil' scenario and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and
  - Problems regarding accessibility of CountryLink coach stops on rural roads.
- A proactive approach to transport corridor provision to ensure that

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<sup>3</sup> Tonge, R; Fletcher, S & Concept Tourism Consultants (2002), 'Byron Shire Tourism Management - an options paper for consideration', Byron Shire Council, NSW, [http://www.byron.nsw.gov.au/archive/docs\\_exhib/tourism\\_options\\_paper.pdf](http://www.byron.nsw.gov.au/archive/docs_exhib/tourism_options_paper.pdf) accessed 6/6/2006.

population centres and services continue to be based around transport infrastructure. This will support the FNC Regional Strategy's commitment to maintaining the 'region of villages' characteristic without further complicating transport provision within the Region's dispersed settlement pattern and

- The socio-economic disparities between the Northern Rivers' coastal and inland areas and the affordability of private and public travel options for more economically disadvantaged areas. The Ministry's Corporate Plan<sup>4</sup> states its intention to '...deliver equitable and accessible transport to match community needs' p7. To this end, accessible and equitable provision of transport options needs to be considered within a social justice framework.

### *Summary*

NRSDC supports, in principle, the concepts included within the discussion paper. However, NRSDC urges the Taskforce to include the above considerations when developing their advice to both Ministries. Additionally, NRSDC urges the Taskforce to allow adequate time for local consultation with Regional Organisations of Councils, community groups and peak bodies.

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Transport (2006), 'Corporate Plan 2006 – 2010' Parramatta, <http://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/publications/corporate-plan-2006-10.pdf> accessed 7/6/2006