

Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc.
(NRTF)

Response to the

Draft Far North Coast (FNC) Regional Strategy
produced by the
NSW Department of Planning

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Contact

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1. Overview

Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc. (NRTF) is a community organisation advocating the maintenance and upgrading of the infrastructure of the Casino-Murwillumbah Railway, the operation of a commuter rail service and freight services on the line, and the extension of the line across the Queensland border. The group has wide support throughout the Northern Rivers.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the DoP's DRS plan.

Overall, we find the plan to be limited in that it only suggests rather than mandates most policies. We do not believe that the settlement planning is conducive to better infrastructure and transport planning. We are disappointed that underlying research for the formulation of this plan has not been publicised. We assert that there is insufficient attention to climate change and our role in it.

Specifically on the transport plan, the words 'protect the corridor' are grossly inadequate. We applaud the plan to link to Qld, but would like to see a specific timetable and commitment to a public investigation. We call for the immediate integrated transport planning. We would like to see adequate understanding of the social needs of transport – aged, youth, disabilities and low-income. Finally, we call for a fairer method of responding to tourism demands.

2. Who are NRTF?

NRTF is a group formed in November 2002 to campaign for rail services in the region. We have been acknowledged as representing the community's interest in both the 2004 reports on line, namely the NSW Upper House and PriceWaterhouseCoopers Inquiries (see References).

We are an independent self-funded community based organisation.

NRTF's aims

Our aims are as follows.

1. Advocate the establishment of commuter rail services on the Casino-Murwillumbah line.
2. Promote the long-term maintenance and upgrading of the Casino-Murwillumbah line.
3. Negotiate the return of the XPT (or similar inter-regional) service to the line.
4. Advocate the extension of the Casino-Murwillumbah line to Queensland.
5. Work with operators, regional councils, governments, the community and other interested parties to return freight to the Casino-Murwillumbah line.

3. Critique of the Draft Regional Strategy (DRS)

In this response we are only commenting on sections that relate directly or indirectly to transport.

The Plan Overall

Suggestive rather prescriptive

The DRS is largely suggestive rather than prescriptive. This means that while the goals are laudable, there is no guarantee or assurance that they will be met. This has flow-on effects in that it is difficult to use the plan as a basis for more detailed planning. For example, the DSP only suggests that housing should be concentrated in certain areas. There is nothing to stop development in other parts. This means that planning for infrastructure such as transport, water, schools, health services, etc is very difficult.

Recommendation: Establish a mandatory framework to ensure that the strategies are implemented at a local and regional level.

Underlying research has not been made public

We know that DIPNR has undertaken some research on transport needs for the area, but that none of it has been made public. Without access to this information, our response cannot be fully informed.

Recommendation: Publish all preparatory work done for the DRS.

Infrastructure Planning

From page 1, “The draft Regional Strategy does not identify future regional infrastructure needs.” Thus to properly assess this document we need access to the State Infrastructure Strategy, and/or any regional specific infrastructure strategies. We question how the DRS can be properly evaluated without the accompanying infrastructure plans. Indeed, the DRS says exactly this: “Planning for commercial and industrial land uses must be integrated with the supply of infrastructure and transport.” (p. 24).

Recommendation: Publish all relevant infrastructure strategies, and provide mandated links between the regional planning and infrastructure plans.

Settlement Patterns

While the DRS quotes a population increase of 60 400, in reality the zoning of much land allows for future development.

Without clustering of housing into well-defined villages and towns, adequate infrastructure cannot be build and maintained.

From appendix 1, the Threshold Sustainability Criteria For Any Proposed Development Site Outside Designated Areas In Regional Strategies, states:

- > Development is consistent with Far North Coast Regional Strategy, any sub-regional strategy, regional infrastructure plan and relevant section 117 direction.
- > The provision of infrastructure (utilities, transport, open space, and communications) is costed and economically feasible based on Government methodology for determining infrastructure development contributions.

We are very concerned that this will allow far too much development without due regard to proper transport planning.

Recommendation: Clearly define where development (residential and commercial) can occur. Ensure that sufficient space is allocated for the projected population increase, but do not add more.

Climate Change and Energy Needs

The DRS mentions climate change only in passing, and only as a requirement of councils to prepare Floodplain and Coastal Zone Management Plans. In reality our total energy consumption is *adding* to climate change and there is no attempt to address this in this plan to change. The NSW government has committed to achieving a 60 per cent cut in year 2000 greenhouse gases by 2050, and the DRS does nothing to assist that commitment.

Recommendation: Include energy outputs in all planning and strategy documents to ensure that climate change is not exacerbated

Transport Plan

While we applaud the plan to “protect the Casino to Murwillumbah corridor” we are most concerned that there is no mention of the words *rail* or *services*.

The 2004 PWC report found that a commuter service of sixteen trains per day is feasible. As previously stated, the DoP has not released any of its underlying research to refute this. We have used the ABS 2001 Census data to show that a light-rail commuter service would be very viable. We present these figures in Appendix 1.

Recommendation: Commit to recommencing rail services on the Byron – Murwillumbah section immediately, and the remaining sections over the next year as bridgework is completed.

Integrated Transport Planning

The region requires an Integrated Transport Plan. We understand that NRSDC, NRDB and NOROC, in consultation with community groups such as ourselves are working on such a plan. We see that rail will provide a back-bone to such a plan, with feeder buses, demand management systems, taxis, walking, cycling, community transport and private cars all adding.

The current DRS mentions bits of these transport options, but there is no integration to create real transport options. For example, DRS mentions that bicycles *should* be supported. But there is no mention of how cyclists can travel between towns. We argue that cyclists can use a train to

move between towns. In some sections, particularly from Byron north, the terrain is flat and the rail corridor could be expanded to include a bike path for tourists and residents to use.

In appendix 3 we present a preliminary needs analysis.

Recommendation: Immediately commence detailed integrated transport planning in proper consultation with stakeholders.

Reliance on the Pacific Highway

The emphasis throughout is that the Pacific Highway will solve most of our transport needs. In reality the Pacific Highway is most used by people and freight moving *through* the region rather than around it.

Three towns are identified as commercial hubs: Lismore, Murwillumbah and Tweed. Two of these towns, Lismore and Murwillumbah, are not on the Pacific Highway, but they are on the existing Casino-Murwillumbah rail line. The third town, Tweed, would be connected if the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line were extended to Qld.

The roads into Lismore, particularly from Bangalow, are already at capacity. Traffic congestion is a major problem during peak periods in all the towns of the Northern Rivers, and on the regional arterials between the towns, including the Pacific Highway.

Appendix 2 Pacific Highway and its impacts looks more fully at the costs and issues surrounding the highway, including safety.

NRTF has concluded that a significant reduction in traffic during peak periods would be achieved simply by the operation of a rail passenger service between regional towns. This would permanently reduce traffic volumes in the busiest periods, as well as save millions of dollars in road upgrading costs.

Recommendation: Analyse and publish road use figures and maintenance costs for the entire region. Ensure that *all* costs (accident, land use opportunity costs, water supply contamination, etc) are properly accounted for in assessing road effectiveness.

Extension of Rail into Qld

From the DRS: “As the Gold Coast rail extension is planned, investigate whether demand warrants the route extending in NSW.”

While we strongly agree with the need to link out rail with QLD, this statement concerns us for several reasons. There is no timetable for when the investigation is to start and finish. And we fear that only a very narrow view of ‘demand’ will drive the answer. That is, we believe that the government should be *leading* the provision of sustainable transport rather than building more roads and then trying to assess if rail should be added to the mix. The more the government encourages private road transport, the more this is used to justify not providing rail.

We also invite the DoP to look at the advantages of a rail link for an area. For example, Robina in SEQ is becoming a boom area with a lot of development. This in turn creates more demand for rail services. So we advocate that any assessment of 'demand' looks at the whole picture.

Recommendation: Immediately start a public investigation on the link to Qld to report by end 2006.

The Social Context of Transport

Lack of cheap transport is already a problem for anyone without the funds or ability to own and drive a car. Affordable and reliable transport is needed by workers, especially those on low-incomes. The housing shortage has been noted by others, including the NRSDC, is likely to worsen, and thus create even more disadvantage as people move further away from transport links.

The population is aging and so the need for public transport will increase. The Community Transport schemes will require greater and greater resources. Community Transport could provide for many more people if there was a train service to carry many people long distances.

Recommendation: Ensure that all planning adequately addresses the needs of the entire community.

Transport for Tourists

The coastal strip of the FNC has a large numbers of tourists – 1.4 mil per annum in Byron Bay alone. Tourists require

- transport to and from the area
- transport around the area..

These tourists add greatly to the NSW economy as a whole, so the state as a whole should provide for their needs, and not rely solely on the local rate payers.

Recommendation: In consultation with local, regional, state and federal governments and stakeholders, explore methods of providing tourism infrastructure.

Recommendation: Ensure that all planning models that use population figures adequately account for tourism numbers.

5. References

Closure of the Casino to Murwillumbah rail service, NSW Parliament's Legislative Council, General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4, Nov 2004.

Feasibility Study for Passenger and/or commuter services on the Murwillumbah to Casino Line, Price WaterHouse Coopers, Sept 2004.

Appendix 1 – Commuter Rail for workers

We have used the ABS 2001 Census statistics for travel to work by employed persons between local government areas. This provides the number of workers originating from each area, and the number who travel into each area. Five of the local government areas are linked by the rail line, and two others are connected to the line by bus services.

Even in 2001, nearly 10,000 workers travelled to jobs in other towns, providing enough work travel (apart from other types of travel) to justify a train service, even if only a small proportion could get to a station. As an example, 2096 workers travelled from Lismore to other areas, and 4671 workers travelled into Lismore each day. If 25% used a train, there would be 524 travelling out and 1167 travelling in.

NRTF estimates that during the busiest 6 hours in the morning and afternoon when workers travel, each town could see 3 trains in each direction using the Price Waterhouse Feasibility Study of possible train operations on this line. Assuming a two-car unit carrying around 150 people, there could be 450 rail trips to each town and 450 trips from each town, or 900 less cars on the streets and in the parking spaces! And it would be quite easy to double the train capacity if there was more demand. This calculation does not include workers travelling within the same local government area, such as Byron to Mullumbimby.

Even if all the rail bridges were replaced, the \$200m over 20 years would be small compared to the cost of road upgrading required for a growing population in the five municipalities over 20 years, and the associated accident costs.

Appendix 2 – Needs Analysis

Looking at the main centres currently linked by the rail line, it is possible to demonstrate profiles of likely users. Integration with local feeder bus services potentially expands service to cover a wide area where little or no public transport currently exists.

Description –Casino

- Closest to typical rural profile
- Rail and road transport hub able to connect passengers and freight with Sydney-Brisbane rail services
- Agricultural service town drawing workers and students from surrounding area.
- Strong labour market linkages with Lismore and region generally.
- Primary and Secondary schools.

Current unmet needs -Casino

- Employees traveling to work in Lismore and other locations on the line
- Students traveling to University, TAFE and schools in Lismore.
- Jobseekers wishing to expand access to employment opportunities across regional labour market.
- Young people, families and others without access to private transport traveling to coastal locations for sport and recreation
- Aged and disabled travelers
- Providing access to retail and services (including specialist medical)in Lismore for anyone without access to private transport.

Description –Lismore

- Regional hub for retail, financial services, education, health, aged care and government services
- Draws large numbers of workers, students and consumers from surrounding areas particularly Richmond River, Byron and Ballina shires.
- Base hospital, St Vincent's hospital and various aged care facilities
- Primary, secondary schools, TAFE and University.
- Centre of regional labour market with linkages to Casino, Byron Shire and Ballina local labour markets as well as the Tweed/Lower Gold Coast regional labour market.

Current unmet needs -Lismore

- Mainly inbound traffic as described from other centres with especially high numbers of students, workers, tourists and consumers.
- Jobseekers, particularly young and/or without private transport to expand employment and training opportunities to all locations on the line.
- Young people, families and others without access to private transport traveling to coastal locations for sport and recreation.

- Aged and disabled travelers.
- Inability to access retail and other services (including specialist medical) for those in other locations without access to private transport.
- Potential to link services throughout Lismore City covering suburban and outlying areas of Nimbin, Coraki, Goonellabah and surrounding districts.
- Connection for local tourism features including Nightcap ranges, Rainforests, Lismore and village markets, sporting and cultural events and historic villages.

Description -Bexhill

- Village approx.8 km east of Lismore with potential to connect workers and students from Corndale, Numulgi and Rosebank valleys with all points on the line.

Description -Eltham-Booyong

- These locations provide considerable scope to connect workers, students and others with all points on the line through one of the busiest corridors on the line.
- Potential to service Clunes, Nashua and surrounding districts.
- Booyong was previously a junction for a spur line to Ballina.

Description -Bangalow

- Market town popular with tourists for its restaurants, shops and monthly markets.
- 10 km from Byron Bay.
- Geographic centre for overlapping local labour markets of Byron Bay, Lismore and Ballina.

Current unmet needs –Bangalow

- Worker and student travelers to Lismore, Byron Bay, Mullumbimby, Brunswick Heads, Ocean Shores and Murwillumbah,
- Jobseekers, particularly young and/or without private transport connecting to all points on the line.
- Aged and disabled access to Lismore and other points on line.
- Young people, families and others without access to private transport traveling to coastal locations for sport and recreation.
- Potential to service Brooklet, Fernleigh, Newrybar and surrounding districts.
- Potential for integrated bus services to connect Ballina and district communities for passengers traveling to Lismore or Byron Bay and beyond to all points.
- Providing access to retail and services (including specialist medical) in Lismore for anyone without access to private transport.

Description -Byron Bay

- Coastal tourist town with over 1.2 million staying visitor and 500,000 'day trippers' a year.
- Significant proportion of international tourists are backpackers usually without

- private transport.
- Limited potential to expand access to town by development of roads due to geographical proximity to wetlands.
- Strong labour market growth with linkages to surrounding local and regional labour markets
- Primary, secondary schools as well a diverse range of private training establishments.
- Centre for arts and light industry
- Gateway for coastal tourism operators and events.

Current unmet needs -Byron Bay

- Inbound and outbound workers, travelers, students and consumers to/from all points on line with most commuter traffic between Lismore and Byron Bay.
 - Students and jobseeker traffic accessing training and labour markets at all points on line, particularly Lismore.
 - Aged and disabled access to Lismore and other points on line.
 - Potential to connect with buses servicing Lennox Head and Ballina.
 - Providing access to retail and services (including specialist medical) in Lismore for anyone without access to private transport.
- Huge untapped potential to develop services to transport visitors to other points on line to link with inland tourism providers and thus help share the wealth effect of Byron Bay 's tourism boom. Murwillumbah, Mullumbimby, Bangalow and Lismore are all potential destinations for such traffic. Tourist services would provide subsidies for local transport services.

Description -Mullumbimby

- 'Biggest little town in Australia '
- Main service centre for Brunswick valley
- Location of Byron Shire Council Chambers and offices.
- Primary and Secondary schools

Current unmet needs -Mullumbimby

- Inbound and outbound workers, travelers, students and consumers to/from all points on line with most commuter traffic between Murwillumbah, Byron Bay and Lismore.
- Students and jobseeker traffic accessing training and labour markets at all points on line, particularly Lismore, Murwillumbah and Byron Bay.
- Aged and disabled access to Lismore and other points on line.
- Potential to increase tourism visitors (especially from Byron Bay)through rail 'experience '.
- Providing access to retail and services (including specialist medical)in Lismore for anyone without access to private transport.
- Potential to service communities in upper Brunswick Valley and at Brunswick Heads.
- Connection point for tourism operators servicing the Brunswick Valley.

Description -Billinudgel

- Service town for Pocket area
- Potential to provide rail access for significant population at Ocean Shores.

Current unmet needs –Billinudgel/OceanShores

- Worker and student travelers to Murwillumbah, Mullumbimby, Byron Bay, Lismore and other points on the line.
- Jobseeker and youth travelers accessing training and labour markets in Murwillumbah, Byron Bay, Lismore and other points on the line.
- Aged and disabled access to services at all points on line, particularly Murwillumbah and Lismore.
- Provide access for Ocean Shores population historically isolated by lack of public transport.

Description -Brunswick Valley integration.

- As described rail access can be provided to Brunswick Valley communities, particularly main population centres of Mullumbimby, Brunswick Heads and Ocean Shores. This can be achieved through a southern access point at Mullumbimby and a northern access point at Billinudgel with integrated bus services linking the two access points and collecting passengers from Brunswick Heads and Ocean Shores. This could overcome major disadvantage suffered by these communities with generally higher needs (due to socio economic profiles) isolated by a lack of public transport options.

Description -Crabbes Creek-Yelgun

- Rural valley communities in high growth corridors with potential to provide access to students and commuter traffic, particularly to schools and businesses in Murwillumbah.

Description –Burringbar

- Tweed Valley town
- Dormitory suburb for Murwillumbah with increasing tourism development
- Potential student, worker, youth, aged/disabled passengers for training, employment and services access, particularly in Murwillumbah.

Description -Stokers Siding

- Hamlet in high growth corridor with student/commuter potential from surrounding Valleys
- Tourist potential

Description -Murwillumbah

- Main centre servicing Tweed Valley (currently fastest growing region in NSW)
- Terminus for branch line
- Primary, secondary schools and TAFE
- Hospital, health and aged care services.
- Potential to link rail transport with Gold Coast rail and bus services.
- Labour market linkages with regional and Byron Shire labour markets.

Current unmet needs -Murwillumbah

- Mainly inbound traffic as described from other centres with especially high numbers of students, workers, tourists and consumers.
- Jobseekers, particularly young and/or without private transport to expand employment and training opportunities to all locations on the line.
- Young people, families and others without access to private transport traveling to coastal locations for sport and recreation.
- Aged and disabled travelers.
- Providing access to retail and services (including specialist medical)in Lismore for anyone without access to private transport.
- Tourism potential as linking point for service providers throughout Tweed Valley, as entry point to a rail ‘experience’ drawing on the tourism hot spots to the north (Gold Coast) and south (Byron Bay). Connecting point for tourist draws including Mt Warning National Park, World Heritage Border Ranges rainforests and historic villages.

Description -Murwillumbah -Gold Coast (the missing link)

- Construction of the missing rail link between Murwillumbah and the lower Gold Coast would dramatically increase commuter rail traffic with Queensland centres, provide door to door connections with Coolangatta and Brisbane airports for tourists and others, further enhance integration with transport systems in surrounding regions, boost sustainable tourism in an area dependent on maintaining its natural beauty as well as being a sound investment in sustainable planning for future growth.

Appendix 3 – Pacific Highway corridor and its impacts

Our region is dissected by the Pacific Highway corridor where increasing levels of local and regional traffic have to mix with high levels of interstate freight and other traffic. This corridor now funnels the majority of cross border road traffic through our region creating a dangerous interface between local traffic and heavy freight at increasing environmental and social cost. Traffic flows are expected to increase markedly with growth in population, tourism, freight and commuter movements.

In 2001 over 31,000,000 vehicles used the Pacific Motorway (Brisbane to Tugun QLD) annually with increasing numbers using Tweed-Byron as an on/off ramp. (Department of Main Roads, Queensland). That was before the Chinderah-Yelgun motorway was opened and the restrictions on b-double access to the highway were removed.

Australian Transport Safety Bureau data shows that between 1991-2001,

- The number of articulated trucks (B-Double, semi-trailer, tanker) on our roads increased by 18%.
- Load sizes increased as demonstrated by a rise of 62% in tonne-kilometres even though total number of kilometres travelled by articulated trucks increased by a more modest 34%.
- The incidence of fatalities involving articulated trucks ranged between 38-54 per 10,000 registered vehicles compared to a range of 1.6-2.0 for passenger cars. Fatalities involving articulated trucks thus occurred at rates between 19 and 34 times higher than for passenger cars.
- 11% of all registered articulated trucks in NSW were involved in an accident each year compared to 3% of all passenger cars.

Road deaths in NSW have steadily fallen from an annual 1384 in 1978 to 561 in 2002, yet deaths on North Coast roads continue to rise reflecting the increasing impacts of the Pacific Highway corridor. Data from the Roads and Traffic Authority show that.

- Number of people killed on North Coast roads each year has risen by 60% since 1997 going from 55 in 1997 to 88 for the year ending 30 August 2004.
- A rise in Pacific Highway fatalities has been responsible for most of the increase with 2 out of 3 North Coast fatalities occurring on the highway between 1997-2001.
- Around one in five (18%) of all Pacific Highway fatalities between Sydney and the Tweed Heads occurred in Tweed-Byron between 1997-2001.
- Pacific Highway fatalities per year (1997-2001) rise as the highway approaches the Queensland border with an average 6.5 fatalities per year in Tweed-Byron compared to an average 5 per year in Ballina and an average 2.6 per year in the Richmond Valley.

The Bureau of Transport and Regional Studies (BTRE) has estimated the average cost of road crashes (in 1996 dollars) to be \$1.7 million for a fatal crash, \$24,000 for one involving injury and \$6,000 for a property damage only crash.

In Tweed-Byron between 1997-2001, there were 62 fatal crashes, 1,712 crashes involving injuries and 2,280 crashes involving property damage. The cost of crashes over the five year period is just over \$160 million in *1996 dollars*.

A comparison of these figures with similar figures for the period post-2001 would be quite interesting.

In our view, it would not be socially environmentally or economically sustainable for the rate of private transport use and building of roads to continue to grow proportionate with the projected population growth for our region (and South East Queensland). Given the projected population increases, it is clear that solutions providing alternatives to road transport movements within the only Pacific Highway corridor are the only solutions capable of moderating the impacts of the growth in total journeys.