

TOOT Now! Summary

TOOT Now! is a plan for our region's future. We are calling for

- sixteen local passenger train services per day on the Casino-Murwillumbah line
- an Integrated Transport Plan for the Northern Rivers
- planning for a rail link from Murwillumbah to the Gold Coast to commence immediately.

TOOT Now! is a plan to link buses, planes, taxis, cycleways, walkways and cars throughout the region in a user-friendly transport system, with the railway as the backbone.



We want people who don't have a car—and this includes thousands of tourists—to have greater mobility throughout the region. And with rising petrol prices, we want alternative transport options for people with cars.

Hinterland areas stand to benefit from increased tourist traffic through their towns.

The scenery along the line is breathtaking and would be a valuable tourist attraction.

The current buses running to and from Casino are unpopular and expensive to run. We estimate the net operating cost to the community of 16 trains a day to be \$1.6 million annually. It costs \$2.8 million annually to run four unpopular bus services and maintain an unused rail line.

In addition, the TOOT plan identifies further savings to the community from less road upgrades, and reduced pollution, noise and greenhouse gases.

A link to the Queensland rail system will greatly enhance these benefits. Planning for the link to Queensland must begin now.

Getting trains on our tracks is also the first step to getting trucks off our road.

Our community's resolve to get trains on our tracks is strengthening—everywhere we go people tell us how much rail means to them.

We encourage all groups in local communities across the region to join in a public dialogue and comment on our plan.

TOOT Trains on our Trains Campaign
is run by Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc, a non-profit community group.
www.toot.org.au

**The TOOT NOW! Plan is presented by
Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc as part of the
TOOT (Trains On Our Tracks) Campaign.**

Overview

NRTF is a self-funded community group with wide spread community support.

The NSW government axed the daily XPT service in May 2004. The tracks are rusting while our roads are full and getting busier due to population increase. There is no integrated transport plan for this area.

We propose a sixteen-service per day commuter rail service to commence immediately, with a link to the Queensland rail system to follow.

Our figures show that it costs less to run a sixteen train per day commuter service (\$1.6 mil pa.) than it costs to run the unpopular buses and maintain an unused rail line (\$2.8 mil p.a.).

ABOUT US

Who are NRTF?

Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc is a community-based non-partisan lobby group established in January 2003 in response to concerns over the under-utilisation of local rail infrastructure, and rumours of the impending closure of the Casino-Murwillumbah line.

Today, NRTF has firmly established itself as the recognised voice of the Northern Rivers community in the ongoing campaign for the restoration of rail services to the region.

NRTF's mission:

Working in partnership with governments, operators, regional councils and other interested parties, Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc. (NRTF) aims to be the recognised voice of the community in promoting the social, economic and environmental benefits of rail services as part of an integrated regional public transport system.

What is TOOT?

TOOT **T**rains **O**n **O**ur **T**racks is the name NRTF uses for its community campaign pushing for the restoration of rail services to the Northern Rivers region.

The focus of the TOOT Campaign is our call for the NSW Government to:

- a) Introduce a regular, affordable local passenger train service on the line,
- b) Commence planning for a rail link from Murwillumbah to the Gold Coast,
- c) Develop transport options that promote the expansion of rail freight, and
- d) Develop an integrated transport plan for the Northern Rivers.

The TOOT NOW! Plan calls for the introduction of a local passenger train service on the Casino-Murwillumbah railway line in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. The proposed sixteen services per day would provide a desperately needed transport option for a region that has suffered from a lack of co-ordinated transport planning. Longer term, NRTF would also like to see the return of a fast, modern long-distance train.

BACKGROUND

Geography of the area

The Casino-Murwillumbah rail line is a 130 km branch line that connects with the North Coast line (the main Sydney-Brisbane rail line) at Casino. From there the line goes to Lismore, a regional service centre with hospitals, schools, a university, courts, government offices and a large commercial and retail centre. The line passes through the historic towns and villages of Bexhill, Eltham and Bangalow. Next stop is Byron Bay, a tourist drawcard for 1.7million visitors per annum. Then through vibrant Mullumbimby and the villages of Billinudgel, Burringbar and Stokers Siding, before arriving at Murwillumbah, a service centre for the Tweed Valley, an area with a large retiree population. (A further section of line from Murwillumbah to Condong was closed in 1993).

Much of the scenery along the way is spectacular, such as stunning views from the escarpment into Byron and rainforest areas further north.

The population is one of the fastest growing in the state, with at least 60 400 more people by 2031⁽¹⁾.

History of the Line

The first sections of the line were opened in 1894, and in the early years it served as a major freight conduit for cedar harvesting and the dairy industry. Although the line carried local freight, particularly local produce for many years, it has mainly served as a passenger line.

Until 1990 a MotorRail service ran during daytime hours on the line and was popular for local as well as inter-regional travel. It was especially popular with young people in Casino and Lismore, who used it to travel to the beach at Byron Bay, hence it became known as ‘the surf train’.

In 1990 the Greiner Government replaced the MotorRail with the XPT. This move attracted widespread opposition throughout the Northern Rivers. The then Opposition Leader, Bob Carr, was amongst those who travelled on a ‘protest train’ to oppose the changes. The XPT’s daily service from Sydney to Murwillumbah arrived and departed from the region during the evening, making it completely unsuitable for travel between local towns. Nonetheless, this service was well patronised despite Countrylink’s poor state-wide punctuality.⁽²⁾

In December 2003 the Parry Report into Sustainable Transport prepared for the Ministry of Transport recommended drastic cutbacks to regional rail services, including the axing of the service on the Casino-Murwillumbah line. The Carr Government quickly announced that the service would continue for at least a year pending a more detailed review.

The Last Train

In the April 2004 mini-budget, the Government announced the XPT service would cease the following month, and be replaced by a twice-daily coach service. According to the Ministerial press release, this move would save around \$5 million per year.⁽³⁾

The hasty decision surprised everyone – some new steel sleepers had just been delivered to the area and were waiting to be installed. Rail workers were directed to retrieve the sleepers.

On 16 May 2004 the last XPT departed Murwillumbah station. Huge crowds gathered at local stations as the train made its final journey, part of widespread community opposition to the service's axing. The NSW Opposition also opposed the closure, announcing that they would restore the XPT if they won the next election.

Five Buses Replace One Train

Since May 2004 the Casino-Murwillumbah line has been officially disused. The XPT service terminates at Casino, where passengers are forced to board one of five coaches to continue their journey. The coach service has been noticeably under-patronised, and there are many stories of people travelling from as far as the Tweed to Casino by private car to collect friends and relatives from the train.

Inquiries

The decision to cancel the train was very hasty: just four months prior to the announcement, we had been told the service was secure for a year. Due to widespread community outrage at the decision to cancel the train, there was a NSW Legislative Council inquiry in 2004.⁽⁴⁾ The report made several recommendations, including the immediate introduction of a local passenger rail service connecting with the XPT at Casino.

A feasibility study by PriceWaterhouse Coopers⁽⁴⁾ found that a regular local light rail passenger service between Casino and Murwillumbah was financially feasible. The Federal Government subsequently offered the NSW Government around \$30 million over two years towards the introduction of such a service, but the NSW Government has not taken up this offer.

INTEGRATED & SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL TRANSPORT PLAN

A regional transport plan is desperately needed for this region. Such a plan would consider where and how people and freight need to go over the next 10-15 years. The plan should detail what transport corridors and services will be needed, when they will be needed, and how they will be funded.

TOOT believes the following principles are vital to the development of a sustainable regional transport strategy.

- **Local and Regional needs** should be paramount in the design of transport infrastructure and networks, however it will still be important to consider how regional networks connect with systems outside the region.
- **Multi-modal approach** where buses, taxis, cycleways, walkways, wheelchairs are considered as this will maximise alternative transport options.
- **Integration** of all transport modes that link with each other is essential to the success of a multi-modal approach that delivers social outcomes and economic viability.

Planning for an integrated regional transport system has long been neglected and has led to the development of localised and isolated public transport services that become marginalised and unattractive to potential users. The excessive dependence on road based private transport in our region cannot be successfully challenged unless serious planning for an integrated regional transport system is undertaken.

Preparing a Transport Plan

TOOT strongly believes that a sustainable transport strategy for the Northern Rivers is urgently needed. TOOT and many other groups have condemned the failure to incorporate such a strategy in the NSW Department of Planning's recent Draft Far North Coast Regional Strategy.⁽¹⁾

Peak regional groups in the region are also lobbying for an integrated transport plan, including Northern Rivers Regional Development Board (NRRDB), Northern Region of Councils (NOROC), Byron Shire Council and Northern Rivers Social Development Council (NRSDC). Recent conferences such as the Roundtable *Towards a Northern Rivers Sustainable Regional Transport Strategy* held in February this year confirmed this view.

To assist the preparation of an integrated transport plan, we have prepared a ***Needs Analysis*** profiling the characteristics of the region's population centres, and detailing their unique transport needs. This analysis will be available from the TOOT website (www.toot.org.au)

OUR PROPOSED TRAIN

The TOOT Campaign is calling for the introduction of a regular local passenger train service on the Casino-Murwillumbah line. This is a service that will cater to a broad range of the transport needs of local residents and visitors to the region alike. Some services will connect with the XPT at Casino, and services will be integrated with other local transport such as buses, taxis, cycleways and commuter car-parking. The train will carry bicycles, surfboards and all types of luggage.

With up to sixteen services per day this train will meet many more of the region's transport needs than the old nightly XPT did. Being a light rail service rather than a heavier train like the XPT, repair and maintenance costs on the line will be significantly reduced.

This service will not only provide a very necessary regional transport option for those without a car, but will also provide a safe, reliable, affordable and environmentally friendly alternative to car travel. The service can take kids to the beach, patients to medical appointments, tourists on day trips, the elderly to visit friends and family, students to school, employees to work, shoppers to markets, and much more. Cyclists will be able to put their bikes on the train. Where feasible, we envisage bike tracks alongside the rail tracks.

A future extension of the rail line from Murwillumbah to the Gold Coast will greatly expand the usefulness of this service, allowing the services to link with Queensland Rail's CityTrain inter-urban rail system. This line is currently being extended south to Reedy Creek, and will eventually terminate at Coolangatta.⁽⁵⁾

The Benefits of Rail

TOOT's sixteen train per day proposal has the following major benefits:

- Use of existing infrastructure that links most major centres in the Northern Rivers and acts as the spine of an integrated transport system.
- Improves the viability of existing bus services.
- Environmentally friendly.
- Reduces need for infrastructure development that disrupts communities.
- Provides links between local labour markets expanding job opportunities and promoting vibrant local economies.
- Part of a sustainable tourism strategy that moves visitors and tourism dollars around the region.
- Links the region to XPT services to Sydney, Brisbane and elsewhere through connection with the main line at Casino.

Future developments that may increase the range of benefits significantly include:

- Build a rail link between Murwillumbah and the Gold Coast to provide a regular passenger rail link between the Northern Rivers and South East Queensland
- Development of new light rail infrastructure linked to the existing line and servicing major growth corridors, such as a Lismore-Byron Bay line via Alstonville, Ballina and Lennox Head, and a Tweed Coast line, possibly an extension of the Gold Coast Light Rail project.
- Develop freight services and create a freight hub at Casino with the potential to reduce the level of heavy road transport using local roads.

Our New Rail Service – What We Need

Track & Infrastructure Assets

- Retain all existing track, sidings, loops, stations, yards, facilities infrastructure and communications along the whole 130kms route.
- Develop land and buildings included in the route corridor for community or profitable use, where this does not compromise possible future rail operations, and where possible, complements future operations.
- Any road bypass of the Byron Bay CBD to use a rail overbridge to allow unimpeded rail operations.

Rolling stock, Service Levels & Stations

- Provide at least two railcars, each with a minimum of 100 seats, to enable a reasonable choice of departure times, and reasonable guarantee of seat availability.
- Commence with a minimum of four services in each direction per day and progressively increase this to eight services in each direction per day within five years.
- Initially Casino, Lismore, Byron Bay, Mullumbimby and Murwillumbah stations to be serviced, with work to commence immediately on reopening stations at Bangalow and Billinudgel. Further stations at Bexhill, Eltham, Burringbar and Stokers Siding to be added later, with consideration given to establishing further stations in the Byron Bay area (Sunrise and Lillipilli), Myocum, North Lismore, and any other suitable areas.
- Planning of rail link to Qld to commence immediately, including planning for suitable stations and other facilities to serve the future extension of the service to the Gold Coast.

Safety

- Enable safe rail operation with infrastructure maintenance adequate for use of lightweight railcars over the initial five years.
- Enable safe rail operation with infrastructure maintenance adequate for use of inter-regional passenger and local freight trains from the fifth year onwards.

Patronage & Revenue

- Implement a timetable that includes services at peak and off peak times, plus on weekends and public holidays, with provision for additional services for special events.
- Base estimates on seat utilisation of 35%-50%, and assume 50% of passengers will pay full fare.
- Provide for appropriate pensioner and student concession fares at approximately 50% of adult fare level.
- Employ staff at larger stations, and provide on-train fare collection at smaller stations.
- Cease CountryLink bus services where the train provides an equivalent service.
- Retain the line revenue to offset operational costs and improve local assets and infrastructure before any contribution is made to other NSW rail deficits.
- Develop and implement a marketing plan aimed at maximising service patronage.

Maintenance Responsibility

- NSW Government to restore the line status to 'operational' under the Australian Rail Track Corporation management agreement, whether ARTC or another entity takes over management.

Management

- Appointment of a Line Manager based in the Northern Rivers Region with semi-autonomous management authority, in view of the remoteness of this operation from other regional or central State Rail management centres.

Value for Money

Many people believe that re-opening the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line will cost too much. The reality however is that running a light rail service would cost less than the government currently spends on an unpopular bus service and an unused line.

Even without trains running, the government spends money on the line. Money is spent on the rail over bridges – these are the bridges that carry roads over the rail. Also, there is a minimal inspection and maintenance program (e.g. spray for weeds and termites).

The current bus service costs the government at least \$1.4 mil. (The current bus contract was awarded to SunState, a Queensland company, for an undisclosed figure.) We have also included the cost of the road maintenance due to five buses travelling twice daily.

Our figures show that it costs less for a sixteen-service commuter train (\$1.6 mil pa.) than the total costs for the unpopular buses and unused rail line (\$2.8 mil p.a.).

Current Bus Costs (per annum)

	\$ Mil
Cost to NSW Government	
Replace road over rail bridges (overbridges)	0.23 (i)
Minimal maintenance of line	0.80 (ii)
Buses	1.40 (iii)
	2.43
Cost to RTA and Councils	
Road maintenance due to buses	0.37 (iv)
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Costs for buses & unused rail line	2.80

Additional Costs

Taxis are used when buses miss the trains.
Promised \$1.5mil for Casino rail-bus interchange

TOOT's Train Proposal (per annum)

	\$ Mil
Cost to NSW Government	
Net operating cost	2.76 (v)
Savings by councils, RTA, health etc	
Road maintenance	1.15 (vi)
Reduced accidents	0.03 (vi)
	1.18
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Cost to run sixteen trains a day	1.58

Additional Savings & Community Benefits

Reduced air pollution	0.11 (vi)
Reduced noise	0.02 (vi)
Reduced greenhouse gases	0.05 (vi)
Social benefits	Not yet costed
Economic benefits	Not yet costed
Road upgrading costs	Not yet costed

Notes

(i) Govt figure. (ii) Ref (4), page xii. (iii) Ref (3), page 19. (iv) Tweed road engineer estimate. (v) Ref (4), page ix: divide 55.254 by 20 for a single year. (vi) Ref (4), page x.

Track Costs

The track and bridges require approximately \$22 million worth of repairs over the next five years to run the commuter service.^(4, p.53) This is after many years of neglect.

In 2004 the Federal Government offered \$30 million to the State Government for the maintenance of this line. To date the NSW government has not accepted this money.

What about the \$188 million claim?

Upon the axing of the Murwillumbah XPT the NSW Government repeatedly stated that continuing the service would have cost \$188 million over 20 years due to line maintenance and upgrading requirements. This figure included the replacement of all timber bridges, and would have provided the region with a high standard rail line that would service the region's needs for up to fifty years.

Government Costings over 20 years	Million
Replace of timber underbridges	92
Replace timber sleepers for steel	32
Repair & paint steel bridges	2.2
Geo-technical repair	12.5
Replace rail overbridges (Needed regardless of trains running)	4.5
Routine Maintenance	19
Periodic Maintenance	26
	188.2
Extrapolate Government Costings for further 30 years	
Routine Maintenance	28.5
Periodic Maintenance	39
	67.5
Per annum cost over next 50 years to maintain 130km of rail	5.1

So even using the government's inflated figures, it would cost only \$5.1mil a year for 50 years to have a first-class 130km rail system. By comparison, it costs \$160 mil to build 9km of Pacific Highway⁽⁶⁾.

Trains Without Borders

The Queensland Government is extending the Gold Coast rail line south from Robina to Coolangatta Airport⁽⁵⁾. Work is currently under-way on the first section from Robina to Reedy Creek. There is only a further 22km from Coolangatta to Murwillumbah. The original Gold Coast line, which ran all the way to Coolangatta, was pulled up in the 1960s.

TOOT believes that the NSW Government should immediately commence the process of identifying potential routes to connect the Casino-Murwillumbah line with the Gold Coast. TOOT believes that extending the Casino-Murwillumbah passenger train service to link with the Gold Coast rail system would ensure the long-term viability of the line. The concept of a regular local passenger train service linking Northern NSW with South East Queensland is immensely popular throughout the region and would provide enormous benefits economically, socially and environmentally.

A Community United

TOOT's polling has consistently indicated that support for the restoration of local rail services averages around 90% of those surveyed across the Northern Rivers region. Strong levels of support have also been recorded in the electorate of Tweed, the most marginal Labor-held seat in the state, even though the new electoral boundaries do not include the rail corridor. Residents of Pottsville, Kingscliff and Tweed Heads have joined their counterparts in other regional centres in strongly supporting the introduction of local train services on the Casino-Murwillumbah line.

The axing of the XPT service in 2004 drew massive public opposition, with huge angry crowds attending a series of rallies and other events in Casino, Lismore, Byron Bay, Mullumbimby, Murwillumbah and other centres. Grass roots anger over the loss of a local service is ongoing, and is translating significantly into calls for the introduction of a new local service along the lines of TOOT's proposal.

Even in 2003, prior to the axing of the XPT, a survey of people from across the region saw 886 out of 929 respondents indicating their support for a commuter rail service, with 844 saying they would use such a service.⁽²⁾

TOOT's new petition, launched in February 2006, is being distributed widely throughout the region, and consistently attracts signatures from more than 75 percent of persons invited to sign. The TOOT Campaign and the community have shown that this will be an ongoing issue in the countdown to the March 2007 state election.



Rally at Lismore Station, April 2004. Photo courtesy: R Cahill

References

1. Draft Regional Strategy for the Far North Coast, May 2006, NSW Department of Planning.
2. Gray, I, *A Future for regional passenger trains in New South Wales*, Charles Sturt University, October 2004.
3. *Closure of the Casino-Murwillumbah rail service* Report by NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4, November 2004.
4. *Feasibility Study for passenger and/or commuter services on the Murwillumbah to Casino branch line* produced by PriceWaterhouse Coopers on behalf of Tweed Shire Council, September 2004.
5. South East Queensland Plan, Qld Office of Urban Management, 2006. See chapter 12 'Integrated transport'.
6. Based on a headline on Page 1 of the *Northern Star*, May 11 2006, which claimed that \$160 million would pay for approximately 9kms of the Tintenbar-Ewingsdale 'upgrade'. Source not given.

GETTING ON BOARD

TOOT NOW! is a call to action, demanding that the NSW Government ACT NOW to restore rail services, rather than leaving communities waiting and hoping until after the next election.

Get started NOW!

- There is still plenty of time for the NSW Government to ACT NOW and at least commence preparatory works towards the introduction of this service before March 2007.
- Urgent repairs and maintenance should commence IMMEDIATELY.
- As a minimum a demonstration service on one section of the line should be operated prior to March 2007, with detailed plans laid out for the introduction of the full service in the short-term thereafter.

Every person who supports the TOOT Campaign helps us to force the Government to act.

You can help the TOOT Campaign by signing a copy of our **petition**, and by helping to collect more signatures. Copies of the petition are available for download from our website, where you'll also find more information and the latest news.

TOOT Campaign public meetings are held at the Bangalow Bowling Club on Wednesday evenings from 7:00pm to 9:00pm roughly every six weeks. All interested people are welcome to attend. See our website for details.

You can also become a member of Northern Rivers Trains for the Future Inc – it costs just \$3.00 and an application form can be downloaded from our website.

Visit TOOT's website at www.toot.org.au for more information and useful links.

For the latest news, information and announcements, you can subscribe to our email list. Simply email NRTF Secretary Nick Casmirri – secretary@toot.org.au – and ask to be added to the mailing list.

We are always looking for volunteers to help at markets, collect signatures, create banners and posters, raise funds, serve on sub-committees, organise meetings, maintain the website etc. If you can lend a hand please contact us.

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