

## INQUIRY INTO INFRASTRUCTURE PROVISION IN COASTAL GROWTH AREAS

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### **The North Coast – growing population and dynamic tourism**

The north coast of NSW is experiencing a population boom and is an increasingly popular tourist destination. This should ensure that priority is given to infrastructure provision, services and environmental protection. A government cannot take all the economic and social benefits of population and tourism growth without giving something back in the form of infrastructure provision, services and environmental protection.

This submission primarily makes the point that the government should be developing the north coast rail network to meet the needs of this growing population and increased tourism. It needs to improve services and up-grade the north coast line, to decrease running times which currently average a miserable 60 km per hour between Sydney and Brisbane. Improvements to rail will also have the effect of increasing safety and load factors on the crowded roads of the north coast.

### **Railways – a north coast priority**

With its historic commitment to public services, state infrastructure and nation-building, Australia should be a nation that supports rail. Regrettably, policies of the federal and state government often perpetuate a cultural 'blind spot' in Australian public transport policy making, by underestimating the importance of rail to regional communities. This contrasts with Queensland, which spent more money up-grading its rail system during the 1990s, than was spent on the rest of Australia combined!

Efficient rail services contribute to the strength of the regional economy and offer a valuable alternative public transport option for communities. Efficient passenger and freight rail services should be supported by the NSW government as a vital part of the expanding north coast economy. The 2003 Inquiry into Public Passenger Transport (the 'Parry report'), states (page ix):

*There is no question that a vibrant, modern economy and society as in New South Wales demands an effective public transport system with an appropriate level of taxpayer subsidy.*

The Parry report also notes (section 3.1.5, page 29), 'community sentiment favours the retention and even expansion of rail services'. Regional residents prefer rail services. Not only old or poor people without cars, but middle class people who want a change from long distance car driving, or have an international plane to catch in Sydney and want to leave their car at home.

Anecdotal and empirical evidence indicates that most trains up and down the coast are very well patronised, with full or near full, loadings. I am told by one local agent that it is not unusual for her company to take \$9000 in one week on Country Link bookings.

Country Link regional rail services now cost the NSW government much less than they did in 1989 (a decrease from over \$200 million to the present \$149 million). By contrast, City Rail costs the government \$1.3 billion. This disparity is an understandable cause for resentment among the travelling public from regional NSW. Failure to invest in country rail services because City Rail costs so much only worsens the already considerable 'city and the bush' divide that is never far from the Australian psyche.

The omission of the north coast rail line from the list of possible future investments in transport infrastructure, (Parry report section 9.1, page 134), is difficult to understand, and should be a point taken up by this present Inquiry. There should be scope for inter-state cooperation with Queensland and funding from the Commonwealth Government for such an important strategic rail corridor, if this is made a policy priority. An urgent priority is for basic improvements in track alignment between Maitland and the Border Loop and up-grading of signalling and safe-working systems between Casino and the Border Loop.

The November 1998 report by the NSW Public Works Committee called for an up-grade of NSW interstate main line tracks and supported the introduction of high-speed tilt trains similar to that now used in Queensland, which travel up to 170 kph between Brisbane and Cairns. There has been little progress in implementing the Committee's 1998 recommendations and this needs to be addressed in the context of this present Inquiry.

### **An alternative plan - services**

The government should also consider alternative plans for passenger rail services along the north coast of NSW. Now is the time to start planning since the XPT fleet is ageing. To run all trains using the long-distance XPT up and down the coast is not the most effective and efficient way to achieve the best outcome of regular, well-patronised trains.

Instead, consider the advantages of introducing shorter-haul diesel rail cars, such as the Sprinter built in the UK, (or its contemporary equivalent). These are faster, more efficient and cheaper to run than the XPTs. They could be used to operate shorter routes, more often, and so serve the community better. Short-haul diesel units would build new links between thriving north coast centres, such as:

<b>FROM</b>	<b>TO</b>	<b>NOTES</b>
Newcastle	Coffs Harbour	And return, twice a day. Change at Newcastle for Sydney and at Coffs for the north.
Coffs Harbour	Casino	And return, twice a day. Change at Casino for Brisbane and at Coffs for the south.

Note: It is possible that Kempsey would provide a better 'half-way point' along the coast than Coffs, but the principle is the same – more frequent services, even if it means changing trains for longer journeys.

Such a proposal would be politically astute for the government. It would allow an announcement that XPT services are being phased out (the bad news), to be replaced with modern, fast, economically and environmentally-sound diesel units running between major centres (the good news). This would be a popular policy and strengthen the vote on the north coast for Labor in 2007.

## OTHER ISSUES

### The Pacific Highway

Federal and state governments spend ten times more on highways than railways. Despite this, the rate of progress in improving the Pacific Highway is disturbingly slow. Stretches of the Highway I drove thirty years ago when I first started work, for example between Kempsey and Nambucca, have barely changed in all this time. 60 km restriction zones are common and north of Kempsey there is even a 40 km school zone right on the Highway! This major arterial link between Sydney and Brisbane is often narrow, slow and dangerous.

The Highway is overcrowded and dangerous. In 2003, total fatalities on Pacific Highway exceeded 45. In just one month (October 2003), the following serious accidents occurred on the Pacific Highway between Newcastle and Coffs Harbour:

11/10	Taree	3 killed
13/10	Raymond Terrace (fatalities not known)	
15/10	Macksville	2 killed
16/10	Frederickton (fatalities not known)	

It is acknowledged that funding for the Pacific Highway is primarily a Federal Government responsibility. Local roads, however, are in need of better maintenance. The difference between the standards of up-keep of local roads at Armidale, where I was once a city councillor, compared with Port Macquarie, is quite noticeable, with poor surfaces and pot-holes frequent in the latter area.

### Environmental issues

Enjoyment of the coastal environment is under threat from large areas of dunes and adjoining beaches being over-run with Bitou bush. Funding to state agencies, Landcare groups and volunteers is essential to stop the further spread of this noxious weed. Failure to control it means a degradation of the major recreational resource that motivates people to move to the north coast.