

Lachlan Regional Transport Committee (LRTC) Submission to the New South Wales Parliamentary Inquiry into how inter-regional public transport can better serve the needs of regional New South Wales

The Lachlan Regional Transport Committee was established in 1983. It draws its membership from the outskirts of Sydney through the Central West of New South Wales to Dubbo, Parkes and Cootamundra. Members include fifteen local government councils and the Port of Port Kembla. From its inception, the Committee has many times raised the concerns of local people about the need for sustainable inter-regional public transport. We have commented on many issues, including the importance of an efficient train service, with coach connections, oriented to local transport needs. We have also recently made submissions on broader transport issues, including freight, to Infrastructure Australia, the New South Wales Parliamentary inquiry into rail infrastructure costs, the IPART inquiry into grain line access charges and the New South Wales Transport Master Plan. Five member councils are currently working with the State Government for the reinstatement of freight, with potential for limited passenger services, on the Blayney to Demondrille inter-regional cross-country line.

LRTC views Country Link as providing generally good services between rural New South Wales and Sydney. However, these services have not kept pace with developments in road transport and some are not optimal for inter- and intra-regional travel. In some instances, train schedules have deteriorated as trains have been slowed. New South Wales contrasts noticeably with Victoria and Queensland where regional train services have been accelerated and very significantly improved. There have been ongoing debates about the suitability of timetables for regional needs, most notably with respect to the Dubbo XPT service and the absence of sufficient train services between the Central West and Lithgow/Sydney to meet demand. These issues, and the future prospects for CountryLink, have not been resolved. We thank the Inquiry for offering an opportunity to contribute to the process of resolution of these issues and finding a way forward which will bring inter-regional public transport provision up to the standards offered in the other states.

With respect to Country Link, LRTC would like to

1. affirm the value of efficient train services
2. encourage the thorough investigation of means of accelerating train services and increasing the utilization of equipment
3. suggest greater local involvement in the planning and management of inter-regional services.
4. recommend improvement of services between regional cities and their hinterlands

1 The value of trains

Trains remain essential to inter-regional public transportation. The State Government's recent Transport Master Plan Discussion Paper suggests that Country

Link train services are uncompetitive with road coach timetables. This may be true in places with respect to some journey times, but the issue is easily overstated. Moreover, trains provide a higher standard of service and amenity than coaches and they offer far greater potential for acceleration of timetables and consequent service improvements, as has occurred in other States.

This issue: 'coaches or trains?' is not a simple matter of either choosing between alternatives or competition between modes. As the Master Plan Discussion Paper notes, many regional areas have ageing populations with consequently greater need for access to services. We agree with that observation, and would like to add that train services provide a necessary level of accessibility which coaches do not. This is due to the needs of many people for easy access to vehicles, their seating and services like food and toilets. Relatively short distances in coaches may be manageable for many people but longer distances often are not.

Improvement in the infrastructure would benefit freight as well as passenger operations. If slow speeds are a problem, and there is obviously room for improvement in timetables, serious consideration should be given to raising track speeds and capacity. Such developments have been very successful in other States. When scheduling is examined, consideration could also be given to making greater use of Country Link trains for local services, such as commuter services between the large regional cities and towns in their hinterlands, and for services to growth areas like Mudgee.

2 Acceleration of services

LRTC believes that all options for accelerating services should be examined. As has occurred in other states, this may involve either infrastructure improvements (basically easing track curvature) or new equipment (possibly including tilt trains) which would also offer a higher standard of amenity and services, like internet access. By providing more time at regional destinations, acceleration of services could also offer opportunities for extended use of trains for local purposes, such as shuttles serving the hinterlands of the larger regional cities. Perhaps more importantly, there may be opportunities for timetables which enable day return trips to the coastal cities from inland towns, as well as from the coastal cities inland. There may also be possibilities for greater regional utilization of the interstate overnight XPT services, which currently stop at many regional stations in the small hours of the morning.

More modern equipment, in conjunction with faster services, could attract more business travellers and tourists. We are aware of the proposal for a Very Fast Train service between Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. Such a development would benefit only part of inland New South Wales, and there may be a reasonable argument that moderately fast trains serving inland New South Wales, in the manner of CountryLink but faster, would be more satisfactory and equitable for inland people.

3 Local involvement

LRTC suggests that greater local involvement with, and 'ownership' of, Country Link services especially trains, may lead to greater use of trains for a wider range of journey types, thereby contributing to the sustainability of inter-regional public

transport. While not directly applicable to New South Wales, the UK 'Community Rail' movement, and similar arrangements in European countries especially Germany, is notable for its success in growing the use of rural train services. It has done this by

1. ensuring that local input into service planning is obtained and respected
2. helping to attune services to local needs enabling more efficient use of infrastructure
3. obtaining the support of local people in drawing public attention to train services and making facilities more attractive

In the UK, much of the work involved has been done by volunteers, coordinated by local committees and involving local government, all supported by central government funding. Consideration should be given to developing the currently limited processes of consultation into the establishment, with State Government funding, of ongoing committees to facilitate coordination and support for local services.

4 Improvement of services between regional cities and their hinterlands

While Country Link coaches do operate some cross-country routes, such as those north from Cootamundra, there appears to have been very little attempt systematically to connect all the large regional cities with their surrounding communities. The regional cities like Bathurst, Orange and Dubbo have large 'catchments' for important services, especially health care.

The Mudgee area provides an example. A road trip to Dubbo, the nearest large city, takes about one and a quarter hours. To reach Dubbo by Country Link involves a journey of at least seven hours, with a change from coach to train at Lithgow. The journey from Mudgee to Tamworth by road takes two and a half hours, but by Country Link it takes 24 hours and requires an overnight stay in Sydney.

We urge that Country Link train and coach timetables be examined with a view to meeting the demand for travel to and from the larger cities, independently of travel needs between the country and Sydney.

We would be pleased to participate in further discussion on these and any other inter-regional public transport issues.