

Lachlan Regional Transport Committee (LRTC) Submission to the New South Wales Transport Master Plan Discussion Paper

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. LRTC has many times raised the concerns of regional people about the need to make optimum use of transport infrastructure and maintain standards of transport services. Five member councils have been working with the State Government, other local councils in western New South Wales and industry in an attempt to have rail services on the Blayney-Demondrille cross-country line reinstated. This submission addresses issues raised in the Discussion Paper which are of concern to LRTC members now and have been in the past.

Disused railway lines

LRTC agrees that these corridors could be put to more productive use. As the experience of our members is currently showing, there could be significant potential for the redevelopment of some lines for rail traffic. It should not be assumed that any line has no such potential without thorough investigation. All analyses of freight and passenger potential should apply triple-bottom line criteria. Consideration of the futures of the corridors should be done with a view to the geological characteristics of the areas served, not just current mining activities.

In our recent experience, local knowledge has been applied, possibly for the first time in New South Wales, to accurately test regional industry's interest in rail freight and how it might contribute to regional economic development. When one industry shows interest, it makes a line potentially more viable for other industries, by way of growing traffic and increasing economies of scale. This can have a snowballing effect. We also believe that there is potential for local rail businesses to emerge, and that such operators will be well-placed to develop local rail traffic. We note that small local airlines receive protection, without direct subsidy, to ensure that local potential is exploited and local needs are met. Perhaps those same principles could be applied to local rail operations.

The most important principle to be applied when considering the future of disused railways is that the rights of way be maintained as a State asset. That is, no land which might serve a future regional transport purpose should be lost to the corridors. The proceeds of sale of any parcels of land, being those the loss of which does not damage the continuity of rights of way, should go into a fund to pay for ongoing maintenance of disused corridors where no revenue-earning capacity is available.

Country Link

The Discussion Paper notes that CountryLink train services are uncompetitive with road coaches. This may in places be true with respect to some journey times, but trains provide a far better standard of service and amenity than coaches. Any subsidies should be considered in that light. The Discussion Paper also notes the ageing regional population and its needs for access to services. We agree with that observation, but 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, when travelling. Relatively short distances in coaches may be manageable for many people but longer distances often are not.

The practice of operating public passenger trains on tracks which are primarily, or almost entirely, devoted to freight is very common and in principle should not be an issue. As all the relevant tracks are in public ownership in Australia, the Australian people have a substantial stake in them and an interest in the facility they provide. If freight operations are constrained, then the infrastructure should be expanded to increase capacity.

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 rapidly growing areas like Mudgee.

Roads

LRTC understands that extending the use of higher mass vehicles will increase transport efficiency. But it may also increase road improvement and maintenance costs as traffic increases. Increasing use of heavy vehicles where there are viable, if currently disused, railway alternatives, would be expensive in economic, social and environmental terms. It would also represent a sad neglect of opportunity presented by an existing public asset.

LRTC believes that increased funding for local and regional roads is essential. We agree that it may be possible for the pricing of road use to become an effective and equitable means of raising essential funding. We would support road pricing by means which allow the revenue from heavily vehicles which use local and regional roads to be returned to those roads in the form of maintenance funding.

Railway regional and branch lines

As we noted in our recent submission to the IP ART inquiry into grain line access charges, the operation of these lines presents some anomalies which simply upgrading lines does not address. While we support the upgrading to class 3, and to class 1 for significant lines, we note that there are inefficiencies in the grain rail system arising from the use of very inefficient and relatively polluting low axle load locomotives when it should be possible to use heavier locomotives which are within axle load limits.

We also suspect that the repeated consideration of branch lines as 'grain lines' is masking their potential to carry other traffic. All industry should be given the opportunity to gain the considerable advantages which can be offered by rail freight. Local communities should be able to enjoy higher levels of safety and environmental amenity in transport corridors which growth in rail freight can provide.

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