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Submission re the New South Wales Draft regional service and infrastructure plan to 2056 from the Lachlan Regional Transport Committee Inc

The Lachlan Regional Transport Committee Inc (LRTC) 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, the Port of Port Kembla and individuals.

The **Draft regional service and infrastructure plan to 2056** was acknowledged by the LRTC at its meeting held of 4 November 2017 at Wollongong but considered to be in need of major revision to adequately address the challenges facing regional and rural NSW.

This submission shall address freight, and then passengers. Our conclusions follow.

1. Freight

LRTC would like to acknowledge work in recent years to upgrade the Country Rail Network (including the use of more steel sleepers), Grain Corp's project regeneration and the Fixing Country Rails program.

We also note the initiative of the Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) in "Paddock to Port." in improving rail access to the Port of Newcastle. As noted <http://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2017-01-03/mainline-loading-at-moree/8157480> a farmer in north west NSW is saving both time and money by streamlining the rail transport of his grain.

The ARTC initiative has also allowed for longer trains with heavier axle loads from northern NSW to the Port of Newcastle.

LRTC sees a need to improve rail access to the Port of Port Kembla, and for further initiatives to get grain and other agricultural products in the Central west and south west of NSW onto rail. This would include completion of the Maldon Dombarton rail link, and reopening of the Cowra lines.

LRTC also notes that external costs, including those of rail and road accidents, air pollution, noise and greenhouse gas emissions, along with reducing oil vulnerability, should be considered in any regional transport plan. External costs for road freight were calculated by IPART in their 2012 report *Review of Access Pricing for the NSW Grain Line Network* to be more than 6 times greater than rail in urban areas and 10 times greater in rural areas.

1.1 Maldon-Dombarton

In February 2017, the Illawarra Mercury noted that "The Maldon-Dombarton rail line has received a big setback, after Infrastructure Australia recommended it not receive federal funding."

Infrastructure Australia in earlier publications had noted the potential of completing the 35 km Maldon-Dombarton rail link to improve access to Port Kembla. However, in a February 2017 evaluation, Infrastructure Australia (IA) was quoted as finding that the line "would not justify its costs".

This brief evaluation appears to understate the congestion on the existing Sydney to Wollongong railway line. It also overlooked the increasing road congestion on the Mt Ousley highway.

In 2014, the NSW Department of Planning gave approval to Boral to increase road haulage of quarry products from its Dunmore quarry, and stated that *"Boral is unable to increase the amount of product supplied by rail ...as it is unable to gain access to additional rail paths or utilise longer trains;..."*

The South Coast line linking Sydney to Port Kembla is now operating at near full capacity during the day and for some of the night. Indeed, in October 2017, Wollongong people were informed that there will be no extra trains for the South Coast line in the new timetable to commence on 26 November 2017 as there is no room for them. See the article for 18 October 2017 <http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/4995650/theres-no-more-space-for-trains-on-south-coast-line/>

This article notes advice from a Transport for NSW spokesman: *"Currently, it is not possible to add more services on the South Coast Line due to a number of network constraints, both on the South Coast, and within the Illawarra shared suburban corridor. To enable more train services for our customers, a significant investment would need to be made to upgrade existing infrastructure."*

In August 2017 the Illawarra Business Chamber released a report whose main recommendation was for the completion of the Maldon - Dombarton Line (35km) with duplication of track outside of the Avon Tunnel and Nepean Viaduct, together with electrification of the new line and the 7 km Dombarton - Unanderra section to form a South West Illawarra Rail Link (SWIRL). The report calculated a Benefit Cost Ratio of 1.56 (central case with discount rate 4% which is considered appropriate by LRTC over 50 years).

However, TfNSW reaction in October to the report was that there was adequate spare capacity on the Illawarra line. This is clearly at odds with the October statement.

The 2006 - 07 Sydney Wollongong Corridor Strategy released by the federal Department of Transport and Regional Services with the support of the NSW Government as part of the former AusLink programme identified many transport issues. This strategy noted that the Illawarra rail line faces an effective restriction on freight train operations during peak periods (600 to 900 and 1500 to 1900hrs) and that the Maldon Dombarton line may be able to play a future role and could "remove bulk freight from the Illawarra rail line and some other parts of the Sydney passenger rail network...."

The strategy noted that the Mount Ousley Road is already at capacity in the morning peak. In the intervening ten years to 2017, traffic on the Mt Ousley Road has increased, and it is congested for more hours of each week day than it was in 2007. From an RMS website, this road now has over 50,000 vehicles per day. Of these, some 6900 are heavy trucks.

The Moss Vale Unanderra line has severe speed-weight restrictions and extra distance for freight moving between Port Kembla and Western Sydney.

In response to the Infrastructure Australia decision, LRTC wrote to the Federal Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, the Hon Darren Chester, MP, seeking his support for Infrastructure Australia to undertake a revised review of the benefits and costs of completion of the Maldon Dombarton rail link. LRTC was advised that this is a matter for the NSW Government.

Given the congestion on the south coast line as noted in October 2017, the NSW Government should now proceed to formulation of an improved business case for the completion of the Maldon Dombarton rail link. The next version of the regional service and infrastructure plan to 2056 should give a higher priority to completing Maldon Dombarton.

1.2 Cowra lines

In 2009, maintenance of the rail line between Blayney to Demondrille (175 km with a 25 km branch from Koorawatha to Greenethorpe) was suspended. Following this suspension, the councils of Blayney, Cowra, Weddin, Harden and Young undertook an independent review that strongly supported the reopening of these lines.

In 2014 the NSW Government invited private sector proponents to submit tenders on how they would restore, operate and maintain the Cowra Lines on a commercially sustainable basis with an expectation that "that

the successful bidder will fully fund restoration and recurrent capital works." Four tenders were received by April 2015 but no tender was selected. As noted by TfNSW and RailExpress, an estimated investment of more than \$30 million would be required to restore the infrastructure.

The reopening of these lines should be advanced, with NSW Government funding. As an interim measure, tourist trains should be able to be operate on the lines near Cowra.

1.3 Hunter Valley freight bypass

This proposal for a line between Fassifern and Hexham has been around for over 20 years and was noted in a 2007 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport report *The Great Freight Task: Is Australia's transport network up to the challenge?*

As noted by Infrastructure Australia in 2017, the issue of corridor protection is in urgent need of addressing.

1.4 Short lines

In the report *"The Great Freight Task: Is Australia's transport network up to the challenge?"* Committee Chairman Paul Neville MP noted that: *"Broadly speaking, the role of branch lines remains unresolved. The closure of such lines and the movement of grain to road transport, solves one problem but creates another – the capacity and upkeep of country roads. Revealing evidence from Canada presents an opportunity to revive these lines if an Australian framework can be developed."*

Ten years later, and as recognized by the grain industry, these issues now need addressing. Quite simply, many grain lines now need rehabilitation. Attention is also needed to be given to the option of short lines used in Canada and the United States. There, governments move to support rather than overregulate short line operations and gauge questions were sorted out decades ago.

This report also noted that 'the concept of local businesses and authorities arranging to take over the short regional lines, with some help from the State or Australian governments, could be a useful way of keeping the [rail] infrastructure available'

As noted in a Railway Digest December 2016 article, *The prospects for short line operations in New South Wales* by Gray, Laird and Montague, Support has also recently come from another parliamentary source. The Chairman of the Western Australian Parliament's Economics and Industry Standing Committee stated that 'Western Australia could do worse than look to the United States and Canada where governments have realised the importance of railway, including short or branch lines, and provided a number of programs to facilitate increased capital investment and encourage their use'.

A policy framework which explicitly supports investigation of the potential for a short line type of system in NSW would be a starting point, especially if it gives due consideration to the means by which such systems can be established

1.5 Inland Railway

The Inland Railway linking Melbourne, Parkes and Brisbane was advanced in the May 2017 federal Budget. It was considered by the LRTC at its meeting held of 5 August 2017 at Parkes as an important piece of economic infrastructure for Australia's freight network that will assist regional development and growth.

Technical issues for the new line were debated at a "Melbourne to Brisbane Inland Rail Symposium" held 21-22 June 2012 at Parkes and convened by the Parkes Shire Council and the NSW Local Government and Shires Association. The Symposium issued a communiqué (at www.inlandrail.com.au). The communiqué called for "... a modern, high standard railway from Melbourne to Brisbane that will be able to transport freight in a highly efficient way. A railway built to "future-standards" will serve the nation for centuries."

The LRTC strongly supports this approach, but has concerns with some aspects of the current service offering of the Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC). We note that the construction of new sections will be "future-proofed" to allow for heavier 30 tonne axle loads and longer crossing loops. However, we would like to urge that new sections be constructed to allow for fast moving freight trains, with a minimum radius of curvature appreciably higher than the 800 metres proposed by the Inland Rail Alignment Study 2010, and preferably

matching the Queensland standard of 2200 metres.

Some guidance as to desirable speed standards was provided by Transport Ministers of the Federal, State and Territory governments at their meeting on 10 September 1997 as a special Rail Summit of the Australian Transport Council. The meeting agreed that in the longer term the national network should have for axle loads up to 21 tonnes, a maximum speed of 125 kph *loads up to 21 tonnes, a maximum speed of 115kph and an average speed of 80 kph (kilometres per hour)*; and an average speed of 100kph; and at axle loads between 21 and 25 tonnes a maximum speed of 100 kph and an average speed of 80 kph.

An average speed of 80 kph would allow for a transit time of about 21 hours and 15 minutes.

The LRTC has asked the ARTC if consideration could be given to longer passing lanes. The current ARTC standards of 1500 metres for the North South line, and 1800 metres for the East West line were in fact noted by the September 1997 Rail Summit. Some 20 years later, and with the experience of passing lanes on the Main South railway of NSW, it should be possible to aim for something better than 1800 metres, with future proofing for 3600 metres. Would it be possible for all new crossing loops to be say 2700 metres, with future proofing for 3600 metres?

2. Passengers

It is noted that the current fleet of XPT trains and the Explorer fleet will be replaced.

However, it is sobering to think that thirteen years have passed since 2004 when with the help of the NSW Local Government and Shires Association, Assoc Prof Ian Gray of Charles Sturt University, published the report **"A future for regional passenger trains in New South Wales."**

The report raised a number of basic improvements that could be made to improve regional trains. No progress of significant dimensions has been made at all.

Three states now have regional trains that operate at speeds of up to 160 km/h. These are Queensland (with electric and diesel tilt trains, the electric ones since 1998), Victoria's Regional Fast Rail on four lines since 2006 and in Western Australia between Perth and Kalgoorlie.

On many lines, in each of the three states of Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia the new trains when introduced have been accompanied by track straightening.

It is of note that the Victorian Infrastructure Plan, released in October 2017 has a real and immediate commitment to regional Victoria over the next five years. Further details are at <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/infrastructure-plan-provides-certainty-for-victoria/> Moreover, indeed, over \$1.5 billion has already been allocated in June 2017 for further track upgrades on five regional Victorian lines.

NSW regional cities clearly need a much better rail deal than they are getting at present and as outlined in the draft strategy out to 2056.

This includes track upgrades to both NSW Government track and the ARTC leased track in NSW.

NSW is also in need of improved rail corridor protection. Queensland is some way ahead of NSW in corridor protection for regional rail upgrades; including a Toowoomba Rail crossing, a Beerburrum to Landsborough rail corridor (for duplication on improved alignment) and a CAMCOS corridor from Benewah to Maroochydore. In addition, a study has been completed, and importantly put on the public record, by Queensland Transport and Main Roads for duplication of the Landsborough to Nambour track.

2.1 Main South line serving Goulburn and on to Albury and Canberra

The Main South line between Sydney and Yass had deviations in the early 20th century to assist steam train operations that added length and many tighter radius curves. Such track alignment whilst suited to steam trains now slow down the more powerful diesel trains. The extra length between Picton and Goulburn was 16.5 km, and the extra length between Goulburn and Yass was 8.5 km.

In the early 1990s, Bill Wentworth (former MHR who in the 1950s successfully advocated mainline gauge standardization) urged consideration of a new route between Marulan and Mittagong to run near the Hume Highway (modern section opened c1980). This would reduce the route length and save trains an average (in both directions) of 20 minutes.

This proposal was noted by the Hon Tim Fischer AO at the TRAX TO THE FUTURE forum held 9 November at Thirlmere and hosted by Wollondilly Shire Council.

These options, like those of High Speed Rail between Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne, have been often investigated by the authorities. The studies include those by the ARTC in its 2001 Track Audit. However, since taking up in 2004 the NSW long term lease of the Main South line and other track, the ARTC has shown little inclination to construct deviations on the Main South line, despite the gains to Sydney Melbourne and Sydney Cootamundra Perth rail freight operations.

The NSW Government via TfNSW should be prepared to work with the ARTC to see an upgrade of the Main South track and other mainline track in NSW.

The Wentworth deviation would also allow for quicker trains between Sydney and Canberra. The need for a better trains service has been subject of ongoing comment, (see for example.:<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/the-slow-slow-work-to-speed-up-the-canberrasydney-heavy-rail-line-20170302-guorv3.html>)

2.2 NSW North Coast line

The NSW north coast line from Maitland to Casino is basically branch lines strung together and has excessive curvature imposing severe speed restrictions on train operation. It also has undue excess length of about 90km, as follows.

Fassifern - Hexham	10 ± km
Hexham - Stroud Road	30 km
Taree - Bonville (6 sites)	50 ± km

By way of example, the Sydney - Coffs Harbour 608 km current rail distance would be reduced to 518 km. Along with faster passenger trains, there would also be faster and heavier freight trains

The railway line from Casino to Murwillumbah could usefully be re-opened to Byron Bay, at the very least to Lismore, which is a University City and would be a better place for coaches connecting to the Gold Coast/Tweed Heads than Casino.

2.3 NSW Western line

The Bathurst Bullet train has been appreciated by users. There are two issues: for the daily 'Bathurst Bullet' train service departing from, and returning to Orange; and, realignment of western rail track as per ABC News item Tue 18 Nov 2014, so as " ... to get sections of the rail track between Blayney and Lithgow straightened to speed up the trip to Sydney."

It is of note that regional rail issues were noted in the run up to November 2016 by-election for the seat of Orange.

3. Conclusions

LRTC acknowledges the draft Draft regional service and infrastructure plan to 2056 but submits that it should be substantially revised and much improved. Taking a long term view requires consideration of the full breadth of the transport issues facing regional New South Wales. These include strategic rail infrastructure like the Maldon-Dombarton and Cowra lines, as well as improvements to existing lines serving the north, north coast and western and southern inland areas and the Melbourne-Brisbane Inland Railway currently under development. More attention is also needed to rail corridor protection in NSW. LRTC notes Queensland is currently more advanced in this regard than is NSW. Corridor protection requires a commitment in principle to preserve potentially valuable corridors.

In the shorter term, LRTC suggests that a five year outlook as used by the Victorian Infrastructure Plan, released in October 2017, is needed for NSW. Having such a plan can be included as part of a long term strategy.

In the case of the Cowra and Maldon-Dombarton lines, NSW Governments have promised a lot but have not yet delivered anything despite a long history of proposals and studies. This indicates a policy vacuum in which the case-by-case approach has failed. A regional development policy is required: one which acknowledges the strategic role of rail freight and passenger services and looks to innovative ways, including the short line model, to deliver those services with industry participation.

Getting more freight onto rail is often stated as a government objective and is no doubt well received as such in the community. Improving the efficiency of rail freight operations is also needed in a regional transport strategy to achieve this aim. Improving rail infrastructure can also benefit passenger services and consequently the prospects for regional population growth and economic development. It would be unfortunate if the current replacement program for the XPT fleet were not accompanied by an infrastructure program which would allow maximum benefit from this investment. A strategic approach to infrastructure which acknowledges the potential of rail passenger and freight services should provide a basis for long term planning to deliver positive development outcomes for the people of regional New South Wales.

Member Councils

Lachlan
Young
Parkes
Blayney
Oberon

Weddin
Cabonne
Dubbo City
Cowra
Lithgow City

City of Blue Mountains
Wollondilly Shire
Lachlan Valley Railway
Port Kembla Port Corporation
