

The Northern Rivers Railway Restoration & Region Revitalisation Project Briefing Paper



**Report prepared for and on behalf of the: -
- Northern Rivers Railway Action Group and
- Trains On Our Tracks community group
Written by Rachel Quilty – Brand Consultant**

This Briefing Paper outlines the position and proposal of the Northern Rivers Railway Action Group and other parties for the proposed restoration and revitalization of the Northern Rivers Railway along the Casino – Murwillumbah branch line.

This is a summary of a larger Business Case Proposal Report which documents the findings, research and cost estimates of a large number of research papers, studies and related reports. This is intended to be a Briefing Paper on the significant issues surrounding the re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway and its importance.

In summary, re-establishing the Northern Rivers Railway is vital, given the growth in population and tourism in the region which is currently being under-capitalised and the loss of leveraged economic growth is compounded by under-resourcing of transport and affordable accommodation which in turn hinders business and employment potential for the region.

Prior to 1990, the Northern Rivers towns, villages and the city of Lismore had been served by two popular passenger rail services, the Gold Coast MotoRail and the Pacific Coast Overnight Express. They cost the government \$11 million a year to run while returning \$22.5 million in revenues, prior to timetable and route changes that ensured its closure. **These services on the Northern Rivers Railway were some of the most profitable in Australia,** before a change to the XPT in 1990 which led to a steep loss of patronage.

It was a brilliant case study in sustainable rail public transport supporting a region. Several credible and extensive studies at the time and since recommended its restoration, however due to misleading cost reports the State Government has been reluctant to re-visit the issue till now.

Today, Lismore is the only city in the world with two hospitals and a university on a well-constructed railway line that is not currently serviced directly by rail.

The region does not have a public railway system to provide adequate safe transport for its 4.5 million tourists and projected population of approximately 300,000 by 2022.

The Multi Use of Byron Shire Rail Corridor Study, commissioned by the Byron Shire Council, completed comprehensive Engineering Reports **recommending the re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway within the Byron Shire given the good condition and quality of the railway tracks, with a bike path beside it, at an estimated cost of \$67 million.**

After spending \$2 million on 3 kilometres (approximately \$660,000 /km) of the track to pilot and test the viability of the restoration of the Railway with the world class Solar Train a logical and progressive decision was made to determine the final costings to re-activate the entire Railway line within the Byron Shire. **It is anticipated with restoration cost of bridges and railway stations as well as railway tracks would be \$1 - \$2million per kilometre.**

This report recommends the re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway due to the enormous social, economic and environmental benefits. The report also identified that for **each dollar spent on a light rail system with a bike path next to the railway track, the cash injection into the community was \$1.50**, therefore estimating a \$67 million to restore the

Byron shire sections of the Railway would result in the economic injection of over \$134 million, without considering the flow on benefits to tourism to the region.

This is an effective project for stimulus funding going into a regional area to stimulate economic, social and environmental benefits.

For the cost of between \$150 - \$200 million the entire 132km Northern Rivers Railway could be restored and the Rail service re-activated, with direct economic stimulus of approximately \$200 - \$300 million into the region's economy as a result of this investment with further conservative projections of at least \$250 million as a result of approximately 500,000 additional domestic and business tourists.

It is also important to recognize the value of the existing railway corridor and railway tracks and structures is an estimated \$600 million asset preserving a railway corridor approved for rail, the ownership of all existing property and the existing rail lines and infrastructure which is easily able to be restored. Interestingly, **by investing \$150 - \$200 million into the restoration of this infrastructure a conservatively valued 1.32 billion-dollar asset is realized for the region.** This is a sound and exceptional return on investment. **By literally spending \$1 - \$2 million/km it would return a minimum capital gain of \$10mill/km, thereby creating an asset of at least \$1.32 billion.**

While to purchase and build the same Railway line from scratch would cost the public a minimum of 1.32 billion dollars recognizing 132 kilometres of railway line at the minimum cost of \$10 million per kilometre.

In Queensland it has cost \$59 million/km to reinstall a railway line previously sold off, including the high cost of new land purchase. And more recently in Sydney metropolitan it has cost \$75 million/km to build a new railway line.

And while the initial projections indicate the service would be cost neutral, the increased tourist stay and spending, economic stimulus, improved productivity and reduced labour costs would result in an **overall injection into the economy that would be over \$500 million to the entire region.**

It is also relevant to highlight that a vast majority of individuals prefer rail transport over bus services and increasing bus transport services is unlikely to increase the number of individuals relying on public transport.

Rail transport is a safer option for women, children, the elderly and the disabled and is 200 times safer than road transport. The current lack of adequate transport directly discriminates against these groups as well as the local indigenous community who rely heavily on public transport.

Within the Northern Rivers areas, rail transport would **reduce the number of low-socio economic and disadvantaged individuals sharing transport with our school children** as currently the bus services are largely limited to the school bus runs at 8am and returning at 3pm.

Services largely do not support the workforce and normal business hours within the region.

A small number of commuter light rail services, with re-direction of existing mini bus shuttles, would support all public transport passenger needs effortlessly without compromising safety and access.

Northern Rivers Railway Restoration & Region Revitalisation Briefing Paper includes: -

1. Proposal for the re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway
2. Addressing misinformation in relation to
 - Condition of Existing Railway Line
 - Cost of Re-activating the Northern Rivers Railway
 - Concerns of profitability and viability of the Railway
3. Destination: Northern Rivers
4. Regional Development
5. Support for re-activation of Northern Rivers Railway
6. Concerns with Alternative Proposals
7. Conclusion

Please note that the following is a summary position statement and briefing paper being developed in parallel with a full Northern Rivers Railway Business Case Report outlining a spectrum of social, economic and engineering research and detailed breakdown of actual costs and projected revenue and references approximately fifty (50) independent reports and studies on related issues.

1. Proposal for the re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway

The Northern Rivers is the home of some of the most valuable scenic land and seascapes in Australia attracting the second largest tourism population outside of Sydney to the iconic Byron Bay.

However, there is no question that the destination status of the Northern Rivers is compromised as a result of inadequate public transport and infrastructure to accommodate tourism demand and local community activities.

The following proposal has for some time seemed improbable. However, **the need for sustainable, priority focused government investment in public transport in the Northern Rivers region is now critical.** And the business and local community are now demanding solutions; not rhetoric, excuses or further road transport.

After a decade of research, review and reporting the Northern Rivers Railway Action Group and the other community groups have prepared this solution- focused, data driven summary proposal as a Briefing Paper for interested parties.

It is important to note that while one desktop report commissioned by the Road Transport Lobby Group recommended closure, several well researched Government or Government commissioned reports including the 'PriceWaterhouseCoopers' report recommended the non-closure and/or the restoration of the railway transport system 15 years ago. Subsequent reports have confirmed the same need and desirability for the restoration of the public railway system in the emerging region.

Multi-purpose Rail Corridor:

Re-activating the Northern Rivers Railway corridor with the restoration of the existing railway lines, utilisation of an existing railway corridor and dual purposing the rail maintenance roadways for a bike and walking track or rail trail **is an exceptional investment in the Region's transport network, and its reputation for eco-sustainable solutions, safety and health features including solar function, advanced filtered air conditioners and permaculture solutions.**

Given the great value and significance of the existing Railway lines and the existing Railway corridor; the multi-use and multi- function of this Railway corridor is sensible and vital given the urgent need for an adequate rail transport service and competition for limited government funding while reflecting an incredible value for the public.

The re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway line would introduce over 4 million patrons to the gentle meandering journey through the Bryon Bay Hinterland with scenic rainforest and Koala sightings on one side and the panoramic vista of the Pacific Ocean from the Tweed Coast to Byron beaches to the other.

The train trip has gentle curves that enable the train to travel between 80km – 110kms. A high-quality well-planned route with little or no sharp bends requiring the train to slow the journey is pleasantly safe and smooth reaching destinations generally in the same timeframes as motor vehicle trips without traffic delays and road accidents impacting the journey or the tourist's experience of the region.

World Leading Zero Emissions Rail:

Recognised globally as a world leading innovation in Rail and Public Transport, the Byron Railway Company Solar Train provides the blueprint for expansion of the Northern Rivers Railway, home of the new generation of trains with zero carbon emissions and a carbon neutral footprint with noise pollution being close to zero.

Recently aired on the internationally syndicated program, **Great Railway Journeys, the Byron Railroad Company's Solar Train has become a desirable destination** for tourists and rail enthusiasts around the world.

The Northern Rivers Railway Action Group (NRRAG) and other community groups would propose the utilisation of existing and new solar trains and the underpinning policy of using recycled and environmentally sustainable products, services and resources; further **enhancing the region's reputation as one of the world's leading communities in environmental consciousness and innovation. As indicated, this is an innovative concept for stimulus funding to revitalise economic, social and environmental benefits going into the regional area supporting value adding to a significant and valuable infrastructure asset.**

Opportunity exists for the Railway to extend environmental initiatives in line maintenance and weed control as well as support environmental and wildlife preservation programs. For example, replacing damaged railway sleepers with recycled plastic sleepers which have a life of 50 years and then are recycled; vegetation and weed control along railway lines using chemical free alternatives such as steam and/or electrical pulse weed eradication ensure the safety of the region's native bushland and rainforest. Multi-purpose railway tracks and bike path with Railway stations, Rail Observation Platforms with all the necessary amenities including toilets and waste receptacles to ensure nearby farmlands bio-security, and the region's vital agricultural industries are protected. The restoration of railway bridges, to accommodate where possible existing wildlife corridors would also be a consideration.

Dual purposing the existing railway maintenance tracks where possible allows the cost-effective extension of the railway corridor to include a rail trail network along-side the restored railway lines means value laden asset investment outcomes as witnessed by Rail to Trail pathways around the world. Where necessary the bike and walking trail could extend to boardwalks and viewing platforms along the line. Currently cost effective recycled plastic bike paths and board walks are available which raise the height of the trail, are light weight and easily moved in the event of flooding or changes in route of the pathway.

It is extremely pertinent to also outline that the removal of the railway tracks has been identified by the NSW Lands Department as likely to cause catastrophic environmental damage to the pristine rural pastures and in areas pre-historic rainforest and cost to remove are extremely significant, making the importance of leaving the Railway tracks undisturbed imperative.

Potential to create innovative eco-friendly industry pathways may also be advanced with the restoration of the Northern Rivers Railway service and corridor. For example, **the Northern Rivers region is the home of the Permaculture Research Institute of Australia which attracts students from all over the world.** With the world's leading Permaculture teachers, the region is globally known for its growing Permaculture ethos.

By transferring the maintenance of the 132 kilometres Northern Rivers rail corridor to the Permaculture Research Institute of Australia (PRI), to **overlay a Permaculture Design along the rail corridor this effectively creates the world's longest bio-safe food forest** integrating the hike & bike trail running parallel to the rail line, making it unique in the world and adding greatly to its beauty and tourism potential.

While **potential for a Bio-fuel Industry to support Bio-diesel trains and other diesel transport exists as the *Millettia Pinnata*** is an Australian native legume tree which is suited to the Northern Rivers coastal sub-tropical climate. The tree produces a significant quantity of large seeds which have very high oil content. The unprocessed oil from the seeds can be used to run some diesel engines.

Regional Ownership and Control

By pioneering the establishment of a Private- Public Trust; the Northern Rivers Region can facilitate the ongoing Railway and Rail Trail pathway maintenance and investment of profits and proceeds back into relevant community projects. These can include wildlife preservation projects, wildlife corridors restored, wildlife rehabilitation and habitat restoration, non-native and/or noxious plant and weed control programs funded which enhance the reputation of the region in terms of its innovation and importance as an eco-sustainable solutions incubator as well as the protection and preservation of the natural wonders of the region and promoting the trend in growth of environmentally conscious, clean tourism.

The Trust also ensures the protection of adequate funding for ongoing maintenance, growth, expansion and restoration of the Railway network, a lack of which has currently and previously resulted in compromise of railway in the region.

Precedent exists whereby the fees of the Recreational Fishing licence in NSW are used to fund government and community programs related to the protection and preservation of the fisheries, fish habitats and stock levels of iconic species such as Murray River cod.

Similarly, allocation of funds could be used to maintain the Railway and support and protect Koala and other native Australian wildlife such as the platypus habitats which are native to the Northern Rivers' rainforests and waterways among a number of other programs.

As such **we would seek the immediate establishment of the Northern Rivers Railway Trust and the re-direction of all Government funding allocated to the maintenance of the Railway Corridor to be allocated to the trust** as seeding capital and to ensure maintenance and restoration is carried out and the asset is protected.

Preserving and Protecting Our Natural and Culturally Significant Built Assets

Extending and expanding the existing Byron Bay train services along the Casino to Murwillumbah Railway network provides an opportunity to re-vitalise our public and tourism transport infrastructure using the existing rail corridor, rail tracks and formation assets at a greatly reduced cost in comparison to building a new railway or upgrading existing roadways.

The Northern Rivers Railway tracks are of historical significance and of cultural importance and their removal likely to be potentially criminal given the increasing recognition of the value and importance of heritage buildings and built structures and the growth in community views on **the need for the preservation and protection of significant landmarks and remarkable historical engineering feats such as our 126 year old Railway Tracks, Railway Stations and Railway Bridges.**

Our Railway lines and bridges were hand built through rough terrain and rainforest in the late 1800's and are incredible engineering works worthy of preservation and restoration, given the growth and acknowledgement of the positive economic impact of rail enthusiasts on tourism.

Significant evidence now supports the re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway and the existing Byron Bay service provider could extend services immediately to the broader region. Given the higher spend of domestic tourism, extending the current line to be able to access to the Gold Coast would be highly desirable.

It would be appropriate to extend the Railway network from Murwillumbah to Tweed Heads extending the opportunity for greater tourism to drift from Gold Coast and international flight connections as well as growth in stay vacations whereby families are electing to travel only short distances for 2-3 hours and holiday in their local regions.

Significant Infrastructure Asset Protection

It is noteworthy to identify the enormous potential of this Railway asset.

The current value of the railway infrastructure is approximately \$600 million, while in a re-stored state the asset is valued at \$1.32 billion. The calculation of the existing asset identifies the cost of preserving a railway corridor approved for rail, the ownership of all existing property for the specific use of rail and the existing railway lines, railway stations and infrastructure such as high quality historic railway bridges all of which is easily able to be re-stored to re-activate the Railway Corridor in a very short timeframe. This project if approval and funding fast-tracked could be completed by mid to late 2021.

With an investment of \$150 - \$200 million the projected value of the asset has an appealing return on investment with a realized value of \$1.32 billion.

It is vital that public assets are protected and not under-valued or compromised through naïve or corrupt actions.

A recent illustration of the Government short-sighted and potentially unconscionable conduct was the sale of a NSW Power station for approximately \$1 million which due to the known energy shortage was shortly afterwards valued at over \$700 million. This asset while under-capitalised and potential was unrealized due to short-sighted concern of maintenance costs, promoting the sale of a \$300- \$400 million asset for far below its commercial value. This represented an incredible loss to the public capital asset pool as well as significant loss of confidence in **the Government to protect the historically significant, preserve high value infrastructure assets and act in a financially suitable manner.**

Future Industry Potential for Northern Rivers

The Northern Rivers is home to a number of specialized railway and rail signalling engineers with the skill and ingenuity to design and manufacture an advanced industry defining train.

With sufficient seeding capital to build a prototype the region could re-establish its reputation as a leading Railway Intellect and Tourist case study destination.

The Region has the potential due to its strong eco-sustainable practices, image and policy direction to cultivate an enormous business tourism market around eco-conscious tourism, conscious- community living, urban waste management and food waste/rescue management.

The Northern Rivers region has the potential and capacity to become a world leading eco-tourism destination underpinned by the Northern Rivers Railway Solar Trains and/or bio-diesel alternatives.

2. Addressing misinformation in relation to

- a. Condition of Existing Railway Line
- b. Cost of Re-activating the Northern Rivers Railway
- c. Concerns of profitability and viability of the Railway

Misinformation has greatly hindered the vital restoration of the Northern Rivers Railway and misleading information resulted in the original cancellation of this important local and tourist service was inappropriate and devastating to the community.

It is time to set the record straight and clear the misleading propaganda circulating.

a. Condition of the Existing Railway Line

Questions have been raised in relation to the condition of the existing Railway lines and Railway Bridges **and the most accurate response is that the existing Railway lines are in very good condition and the original resources and materials were of a high quality and standard** that is not available today. The quality of workmanship and engineering in the Northern Rivers Railway tracks, bridges and stations is world class.

This outcome was also recently supported by **the Multi Use Byron Bay Railway Corridor Report which included comprehensive Social, Environmental and Engineering Reports to determine the feasibility of re-activating the Northern Rivers Railway and specifically the Byron Bay Shire sections of the rail network.**

This Report categorically supported and recommended the restoration and re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway within the Byron Shire Council. Both Local and State Government are working closely to ensure the full potential of the Byron Bay tourism market is leveraged and existing transport challenges addressed. However, local and state governments are yet to fully appreciate and leverage the need to expand tourism opportunities throughout the Region and add value to the existing regional tourism market which the restoration of the Northern Rivers Railway represents.

The Northern Rivers Railway tracks, bridges and buildings are some of the oldest historical built structures in Australia being hand-crafted and engineered in the late 1870's/early 1880's to open in 1894. These railway lines represent the innovative and progressive nature of the Early Settlers to Australia and the Northern Rivers region is historically significant to Australia's modern history.

The destruction of such historically valuable and significant assets would be criminal and an act of environmental and cultural vandalism.

The Railway tracks, bridges and buildings are masterfully engineered and preserve a quality of craftsmanship no longer regularly seen in the world.

Given the age and lack of maintenance of the Railway tracks, Bridges and Stations their condition are considered very good.

The Northern Rivers Railway Action Group and others have invited several Railway Track Managers, Engineers and Rail Construction Managers to inspect the line and all report that the Railway tracks while rusty are high quality, un-pitted due to the quality of the initial materials and in excellent condition. **These expert opinions have been confirmed and supported by the existing Byron Bay Solar Train restoration project as well as the Multi Use Byron Shire Railway Corridor Study and Report recently released containing an extensive Engineers Report on the condition of the tracks and the feasibility of re-storing the existing railway line.**

Any opinion which differs from these expert opinions is inaccurate, misleading and unsubstantiated.

Further these Engineering experts confirm that the likely cost of restoration is reasonable considering the age and lack of maintenance. More importantly, several reports now confirm the need and the viability of restoring the Northern Rivers Railway.

It is important to note the Northern Rivers Railway is likely to be the only railway in Australia that is not a cost impost on the public purse and estimates indicate an initial cost neutrality and/or low cost per capita well below the State average.

b. Cost of Re-activating the Northern Rivers Railway –

It is important to note that while the cost of restoring the Northern Rivers Railway would require a significant contribution and investment by all levels of Government, the projected costs are very different to those previously inaccurately reported by ARUP as being \$953 million (\$7.25 million/km) to reinstate the line for rail services again.

The Byron Railway Company recently restored three (3) kilometres of the existing Northern Rivers Railway line within a short distance of some of the most expensive and exclusive residential properties in Australia. The cost of restoring the existing line for the 3km Byron Bay Railway 'Solar Train' project was \$2 million, approximately \$660,000 per kilometre.

Accordingly, the cost per kilometre to restore the Northern Rivers Railway Line would be from \$1 million - \$2 million per kilometre with the need to rebuild some bridges and stations being a priority on some parts of the line.

The Multi Use Byron Shire Railway Corridor Study also provided indicative figures of \$67 million to restore the rail line with a bike trail beside it within the Byron Shire to the highest light rail standards. The Byron Shire Council section of rail represents approximately a third of the 132 km Railway network. As such to extrapolate these figures the cost to restore the entire Casino – Murwillumbah Railway Line would be \$200 million.

A moderate additional investment over time would ensure railway restored to the highest standard with the potential to carry heavy rail also, effectively future proofing the entire Railway Network should rail freight transport prove desirable in the future. Given the current, zero emissions commitment this eventuality is not unreasonable.

Importantly the Railway Network is likely to become a beacon of innovation and precedent to further increase business tourism to the region.

By using the existing railway corridor land and railway lines for their existing purpose allows this project to be extremely cost-effective, value laden to the public and an incredible opportunity to revitalise the region's public transport at a very reasonable cost.

If a new railway was built for this same section, the new infrastructure would cost up to \$1.2 billion with experts identifying that purchase of land and to build new railway lines can cost up to \$10 million per kilometre in rural areas and between \$59 million to \$75 million per kilometre in urban, city regions and high valued property such as is the case within the Tweed Coast and Byron Shires.

Therefore if \$200 million was spent on the restoration of the Northern Rivers Railway, the value of the capital asset would be at the least \$10 million per kilometre which would be a minimum of 1.32billion and due to land values within the Railway Corridor up to \$50 million per kilometre, valuing the asset at \$6.6 billion.

To build a new Railway from scratch, if the existing Railway corridor or tracks were destroyed, it would cost the public purse a minimum of \$1.32 billion rather than the currently estimated \$200 million.

Therefore, the potential to redevelop this Railway corridor at a fraction of the new cost is an extremely viable option and is a value for money alternative to expensive road transport costs. The Lismore City Council recently sought to upgrade a small by-pass from Wardell to Goonellabah a 20 km stretch of existing roadway with a forecasted \$220 million. For the same investment into the Northern Rivers Railway an entire public rail transport network from Casino to Murwillumbah could be reinstated.

Any alternative proposal would be extremely short-sighted and unconscionable as well as an inappropriate use of public funds when a viable project such as re-instating Railway transport to this high-demand tourist and existing population in this region exists.

The cost for each section of the line within each Local Government Area i.e. Tweed, Byron, Lismore and Richmond Valley, would be reasonable and well within the parameters of feasibility and viability and provide data driven transport solutions for the region.

The cost for each Local Government Area has been calculated in detail in the Northern Rivers Railway Business Case proposal report, which will be available in coming months.

Due to the eco-sustainable requirements of the Northern Rivers Railway network the train is able to self-maintain the Railway while weed and vegetation control is undertaken using the train as the delivery vehicle minimizing a large proportion of track maintenance and related costs and a decrease in the use of toxic pesticides affecting water tables.

It is also important to note that Federal and State Funding have also received an injection towards regional infrastructure and services as well as funding to support regional tourism. For example, currently Grants for Regional Infrastructure and Tourism include significant grants which all relevant LGA's would be eligible for.

Lease/Purchase of Trains

Currently the cost per kilometre incorporates a minimum cost of \$550,000 for the lease of five (5) light rail vehicles.

However, while several other options are available; the three preferred options being: -

1. Initially, lease light rail vehicles at the cost of \$110,000 per year
2. Re-purpose existing unused trains with aim of replacing with solar in medium term
3. Finally, invest seed capital into local rail manufacturing industry given expertise currently exists in the region to design and develop a world class rail vehicle.

Note that extensive costing and estimates have been undertaken by Railway and Train engineers and professionals and a more comprehensive break down of sleepers, train bridges, stations and other formation assets have been produced in the full Northern Rivers Railway Business Case Proposal Report.

The minimum cost of the project would be approximately \$132 million at \$1 million per kilometre as per the Byron Bay Solar Train, including re-building and repairing several railway bridges. When built to light rail standard to conform and remain consistent and connect with the Byron Shire Railway section the maximum cost of the whole line plus a rail trail is estimated to be a maximum \$260 million.

It is important to note the cost of building one (1) kilometre in Urban/ City areas is very high. For example the Gold Coast Light Rail cost \$59 million per kilometre and the Sydney Light Rail cost \$2.9 billion for 13 kilometres. A regional Railway of over 132 kilometres for just over the cost of 3 kilometres in the city represents exceptional value for the Government and public purse as well as a sound investment in the region's public transport system, tourism industry and a high growth population corridor.

Currently, the NSW Government pays \$750,000 for the maintenance of the Casino – Murwillumbah Railway corridor. This budgeted maintenance cost should be re-directed to the establishment of a Private – Public Trust to enable restoration works to commence.

Potentially Unlawful Removal of Railway Bridge and Tracks

It is important to note that the company contracted to maintain the railway corridor (John Holland) has not adequately done so and has merely removed railway bridges and railway tracks without a clear reason, rather than maintaining and restoring them.

We would question the lawfulness of the Contractor's actions in removing the railway bridges and tracks protected specifically under an Act of Parliament, the Transport Administration Act of 1988, section 99A.

These removals have enabled heavy road transport to access the scenic tourist drives along the Hinterland Way and Lismore/Bangalow Road, effectively taking heavy vehicles off a dedicated carriage way to access smaller rural roads.

It is possible to suspect a vested interest to increase road transport and the need for capital works and by removing railway bridges opens previously protected roadways from unnecessary costly maintenance due to truck use.

Sadly, the local governments with limited business experience have naively trusted these reports and the necessary removal of bridges rather than the inexpensive repair of them for which the contractor is being paid. Is it also a coincidence that the three railway bridges along the road way all were removed opening the road overnight to heavy truck usage?

Reports and studies indicate the cost of Road Transport in terms of safety, road maintenance and other factors is over one thousand times more costly than rail.

It is important to consider that this sum of \$750,000 earmarked for maintenance, not removal would restore almost 1 kilometre of the railway and protect the historically significant Railway Bridges from further destruction. These funds should be injected into the restoration of the track not contracts to parties who have a vested interest in the railway tracks not being maintained adequately. The funds could be injected into a Private – Public Trust for the region's Railway system.

It is important to note that the projected cost of removal of tracks and re-building of the Rail Trail has been estimated at between \$200 - \$250 million for the 132 kilometres. The same cost to restore the Northern Rivers Railway and dual – purpose the railway line maintenance road as a Rail Trail or pathway.

Therefore, the Northern Rivers Railway is proposing that with the same funds the Railways can be re-activated and the Rail Trail be established using the railway maintenance roadway beside the tracks and new paths where necessary. **Work can commence immediately as the Railway Corridor is currently protected by legislation**, which property developers and others are seeking to dissolve.

The Rail Trail Project Estimate could significantly fund both the reinstatement of vital public railway transport and a non-priority leisure path way for a small number of bike riders. It is important to note that where rail and bike tracks have been introduced in many

cities, there has been a reported increase in the number of people riding bikes from rail to workplaces.

As such, the Northern Rivers Railway would be looking to add carriages with a bike rack capacity to encourage cycling to and from the Rail which would have positive environmental and health implications. This bike rack capacity would also enable cyclists to be effectively rescued who may over-estimate fitness levels and experience heat exposure and fatigue along the long distances of the trails.

It is also important to note that Rail Trails are recognised as a short term 4-6-year asset. **Of the seventeen (17) Local Government Councils in Victoria who have endorsed Rail Trails, sixteen (16) of those have now ultimately become responsible for the expensive ongoing maintenance of the trail and many have discontinued** maintaining the bike track due to lack of use and lack of return on investment. Bio-security issues have also been identified as a high risk on Rail Trails.

Ongoing maintenance costs of the Railway tracks bridges and structures would be sourced from the Northern Rivers Railway Trust operation costs and revenue and proposes that there will be no ongoing maintenance costs incurred by the Local Government Authorities.

It is important to note that the ARUP report often cited was a limited desktop report which included no engineering reports and estimated maintenance costs were produced by un-qualified individuals who estimated the restoration of the Railway would be approximately \$953 million, with 50% included in the final amount for 'contingencies'.

The project was more accurately costed within the Report at the estimated cost of \$400 million for heavy rail and freight services which would necessitate the inclusion of freight handling docks and stations and excluding the immense contingency amount added to ensure the lobby demands of Road Transport and Motor Transport were met by the Government at the time. As such the additional expenditure of \$200mill to return the line to full freight transport would be highly desirable and further future proof the region in anticipation of its rapid population growth when baby boomers begin to retire into the region.

c. Concerns of profitability and viability of the Railway

It is also important to note initially that the Northern Rivers Railway was one of the most profitable railways in Australia, even though it was a regional branch line illustrating the significance of domestic tourism even then. This Railway service was decommissioned despite intense local opposition to the closure.

The Northern Rivers Railway services generated \$22.5 million a year and raised a profit of \$11 million per year. The revenue earned much greater than the \$11.5 million operating cost. The most recent Transport Report indicated that maintenance costs were expected to rise by \$9million over the next 20 years and therefore the train services were closed. This report failed to accurately estimate the maintenance costs and the most basic projections

without fare increases which still indicated the service would remain profitable and cost neutral to the LGA's and the State Government over that period.

It appears that the State Government's agenda was not to maintain the service but to re-direct funds to urban transport as evidenced in the cost per capita on public transport and /or directed to satisfy significant lobby groups supporting road transport, motor transport and property development despite the overwhelming evidence of the service's profitability, the needs of the community and its ongoing viability.

The Byron Railway Company Solar Train hosted over 100,000 tourists in their first year. It is anticipated by the Multi Use Byron Shire Railway Corridor Study and Report that this number would support and prefer to extend their journey beyond the current 3-kilometre route.

Therefore, it is appropriate to anticipate a similar number will support the services to Lismore and Murwillumbah with satellite tourism hubs being accessed and this number to be closer to 500,000 per annum with the existing 100,000 using the service primarily to access CBD and return to their accommodation.

An additional 400,000-day trips that are currently unavailable would be accessed as Byron continues to attract over 2 million tourists each year with a high proportion seeking to enjoy the local train ride. While 4.5 million tourists visit across the entire region bringing an estimated 2 billion dollars in tourism spending, the need to ensure the region can leverage and attract domestic and international tourism is vital.

Currently, **the Byron Shire Council has identified tourists are leaving the region earlier due to a lack of adequate public transport and limited access to nearby tourist attractions and outlying accommodation options.**

The Rail Trail report also anticipated a large number of individuals would access the proposed Rail Trail pathway of approximately 80,000 per annum and while we believe this is an over-estimation; research of Tourism ventures that combined Railway and Rail Trails i.e. 'Rail To Trail' double the numbers of individuals using the Rail trails and as such we would anticipate a similar effect on the Northern Rivers Railway line where local families and tourists alike would combine a railway ride with a bike ride or walk on the Rail Trail.

Therefore, we believe that with the combination of the Northern Rivers Railway and the Rail Trail that the projected numbers are highly probable and potentially 100,000 rather than 80,000; and likely to be less than half this number if the Rail Trail exists without the combined support of the Railway.

It has been reported that Lismore's population doubles each working day and that vehicles entering the city each day are approximately 50,000. We would anticipate that a large proportion of these individuals would support a commuter railway service during normal business hours of operation and would anticipate 2 million rail commutes per annum to Lismore.

Similarly, Byron Bay would anticipate strong commuter support from Lismore and other townships in the Hinterland and the Tweed region to supply Byron Bay's persistent labour shortage and assist in maintaining core workforces in this area as well as reduce pressure on housing and accommodation for locals in the area.

Given the strength of the tourism demand on this region and the population tripling in size each day to support the 2 million visitors we anticipate that approximate 4.25 million rides per annum would occur with the local environmentally conscious workforces electing to travel by rail.

We would also anticipate a number of parents electing to have their children commute on the safer option of Railway, which would be potentially an additional 25,000 commuter trips per annum. These trips are also heavily subsidized on the large buses and may be more value for public purse on the rail.

With the growth in stay vacations and supporting local services we anticipate at least a 500,000 weekend day trips in the region.

With access now available via the proposed Railway we would also anticipate a growth in trips to services in the region such as medical services, family commitment trips and accessing airports to create an estimated 100,000 additional trips.

It is important to also include Rail enthusiasts as a sizeable interest group which would add an estimated 25,000 rail trips to the region.

While rail connections to the Gold Coast or Tweed Coast would bring a significant number of day and weekend tourists from the Gold Coast to the Northern Rivers region and this could result in another 500,000 trips to the Northern Rivers region and approximately an additional 200,000 railway trips.

Therefore, **estimates of Rail travel on the re-activated Northern Rivers Railway would ensure the Railway was a feasible project and a viable and profitable business activity again.**

The estimated rail trips per annum would include the following:

Activity	Number of Rail trips per annum
Byron Bay Railway	100,000
Byron Bay Tourism Market	400,000
Combined Rail and Ride Market	100,000
Commutes to Lismore	1,000,000
Commutes to Bryon Bay	1,500,000
School Children	25,000
Local Tourism	500,000
Access local services	100,000
Rail enthusiasts	25,000
Gold Coast & Tweed Coast	500,000
Total Number of Trips	4.25 million trips per annum

Please note **these are conservative estimations of approximately 12,000 trips per day which is for example 6,000 people per day commuting to and from work in Byron Bay, Lismore, Mullumbimby or Murwillumbah and from satellite townships along the line.**

It is foreseeable that a much greater number of commuters and day trippers will access the service however, it is appropriate to determine realistic numbers and projections to outline the true feasibility of the project as well as the potential profitability of the Northern Rivers Railway network.

Track Managers have estimated the operational cost of the Northern Rivers Railway with 5-6 commuter services a day along the entire 132 km service to cost approximately \$22 million per year.

To recover costs 4.25 million travellers could be charged between \$5 - \$15 per trip. With a basic fare the ongoing cost of the Northern Rivers Railway service remains cost neutral with a minimum of approximately 6,000 commutes to and from work per day.

However, we would propose 2, 3 and 5 day passes with weekend passes starting at a minimum of \$20 and week day commutes at \$10 per day.

Effectively, a commuter spending \$100- \$150 per week on fuel would save between \$50- \$100, by using the railway each day; allowing this additional disposable income to be injected into the local economy and not to multi-national fuel companies.

Vehicle movements between Byron and Lismore is 9,000 vehicles per day, while Casino to Lismore is over 10,000 per day and over 40,000 vehicle movements per day into the Byron Bay precincts: it is anticipated the Railway will gain a larger number of fuel saving and eco conscious commuters than the 6000 actual numbers required to ensure the railway is cost neutral.

Additionally, the Byron Shire Events and Venue businesses have collectively identified over 250,000 visitors and guests attending the various festivals in the area. With minimum ticket sales of \$10 per trip with half travelling by public rail transport the potential revenue would be \$125,000 at \$20 **which equates to a revenue stream additional to commuters of \$2.5million effectively supporting the concession fares of the low-socio economic, disabled, elderly and children.** While a minimum \$2 fares for bicycles would recover cost of dedicated carriage with bike-racking.

Currently, maintaining the Railway corridor costs the Government almost \$1 million per annum with no return on investment or injection of funds into the community and an existing \$264 million dollar infrastructure asset not being utilized.

While investigating the option of a public trust to repair and manage the railway involving the use of tourism funding and private investment we also suggest Transport NSW could fund the railway restoration as a public railway using stimulus funding.

3. Destination: Northern Rivers

While the Northern Rivers is recognized as a popular tourist destination for both international and the local tourism market, several, if not all of the Local Government Authorities within the region have identified within their Strategic Planning and Prospectuses the need to cultivate a greater tourism market to their council shire regions.

The Northern Rivers Railway will ensure greater domestic tourism occurs within the region.

It is recognized around the world that the inclusion of train travel in tourist itineraries boost the region's popularity and this view is supported by studies included in the NRRAG full report.

Byron Bay is an iconic Australian tourist destination: in NSW it is second only to Sydney.

The Byron Bay tourist hub attracts 2 million tourists a year which injects \$1 billion dollars into the local economy each year. While the Northern Rivers attracts approximately 4.5 million tourists with a tourist spend of approximately \$2 billion.

The Far North Coast is the number 1 tourist destination in NSW. Importantly, recent Tourism studies confirm **that domestic tourism is far more valuable than international.** With the region sitting within 2-3 hours' drive from Brisbane and 1 hour from the Gold Coast and with a shift in tourism to domestic and stay vacations, the Northern Rivers needs to be positioned to capitalize on this trend. It is important to note that domestic tourism is 4-5 times more valuable than international tourism.

However, the Byron Shire Council has recently reported that **the number of nights that tourists are staying in the region are falling as a result of lack of public transport**, lack of transport to outlying tourist attractions, lack of infrastructure to support tourism and lack of availability and affordable accommodation for locals during peak seasons which extend from September to April.

As a result of these issues the Byron Shire Council recently commissioned an independent company Arcadis to undertake the Multi Use Byron Shire Rail Corridor Study and Report to determine the feasibility of extending the train service to Mullumbimby. Importantly, this Study and subsequent Report categorically supports and recommends the re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway and carried out extensive Social, Environmental and Engineering research and studies to arrive at this conclusion.

Other Local Government Authority's strategic economic plans for their shire indicate the need to leverage the Byron Bay tourism load yet have made little inroads to achieve this due to lack of public rail transport.

The Northern Rivers Railway will ensure that the Byron Bay tourism load is disbursed more equitably throughout the region. Byron Shire Council has taken decisive action to support and accommodate their tourism demand. The Byron Solar Train has reduced some traffic and has the potential to reduce much more if extended further along the line to Tyagarah or Mullumbimby.

Outlying accommodation options have also been supported with private investment by the local resort Elements of Byron by creating the Byron Railway Company.

Upgrading and extending the regional airport and localized transport services for the tourism market, re-directing flights and ancillary services from the Gold Coast to the local region, will also add to the positive local mix that provides better service to the public.

Each local government authority understands the importance and value of attracting tourism to the region and clearly defines how much tourism injects into their local economies.

Re-activating the Northern Rivers Railway extends the tourist spend to destinations they are unlikely to discover without the railway public transport system, activating increased mobility within the region.

While naively some local councils and governments may believe that a number of locals may access services further away, thus reducing local expenditure in their region. However, the reverse is true with more people visiting than leaving, particularly if they focus on being an appealing destination in line with their Strategic Planning and Development reports. Importantly, due to increased access to public transport, individuals who become trapped in their towns due to unemployment and poverty are able to find work and in turn inject greater money into their local economies than previously.

An attractive and environmentally conscious Railway network will bring unequalled public transport to the region which currently does not support tourism or the workforce.

Disburse the Byron tourists throughout the Region

For example, events and local attractions are now accessible for locals and tourists alike.

Enhanced event appeal and greater attractiveness to travellers results from having a reliable and safe public transport system. As a result of the reactivation of the Northern Rivers Railway, the following events and tourist attractions and destinations would or could be supported more readily:

Casino – The Beef Capital of the World and home of the world’s best steaks - locals and tourists could travel more easily to the Casino Beef Week enabling more patronage and a much stronger Country Music event with the potential to become a Country Music destination for Country music fans similar to the Gympie Muster, Tamworth Country Music Awards and the Gold Coast Groundwater country music festival.

Lismore – The Cultural & Sporting Hub - hosts a significant number of the region’s galleries and theatres, the City Hall, museum and sporting events. Public transport to and from these events and venues is extremely limited, if available at all. Events such as The Lismore Lantern Parade, Eat the Street and many local and interstate sporting events including cricket, baseball and Indigenous football are regular attractions in Lismore but hard to attend for many without transport.

The re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway would open the potential of these sporting fields and venues to a much greater audience. Existing events such as the Tropical Fruits visitors would now have reason to stay longer and spend more in the area if railway transport opened up the potential to day trip to Byron Bay rather than leave the region completely.

The artisan communities near Bangalow would attract greater numbers from Byron and surrounds; **Mullumbimby could showcase a thriving environmentally conscious community**, while Eltham and Billinudgel pubs could spirit tourists back into the past with a visit to these historical railway villages and potentially railway history museums.

Railway enthusiasts would visit the region to experience the world's only solar train network, while visiting Casino's mini -railway and the beautifully maintained Railway Station and historical rail museum with a stop-off at Eltham's Railway Village.

The Railway could also support regional musical events similar to the Blues train that travels from Brisbane to the Sunshine Coast Hinterland, hosting entertainment **while passengers disembark at the Blues Festival or North Byron Parklands for Splendour in the Grass or the Falls Festival or a Blues night at the legendary Billinudgel Pub or folk festival hosted at Bangalow village or Eltham Pub.**

The Northern Rivers hosts Australia's largest population of professional and amateur artists and **an annual Artisan Fair in the regional city of Lismore would be leveraging the talent and location of Australia's largest artist community** similar to the Byron Bay Writer's Festival if the audience could easily travel to and from Lismore on a comfortable rail service.

Existing festivals such as Splendour in the Grass, the Blues Festival and the Writer's Festival would draw a greater number of day trippers both from the region and further afield if adequate and safe public rail transport was available to support these events and provide affordable accommodation alternatives in nearby townships of Bangalow, Mullumbimby, Murwillumbah and Lismore.

Train services would enable hassle free week day shopping trips to Lismore re-vitalising the Lismore CBD while the young and young at heart can enjoy a day trip to the beach or drink friendly dining experiences at Byron Bay supporting needs for connection and community.

Reducing isolation and increasing connectivity within families and communities, a family or community group day trip to Byron beach or to visit Kyogle's eclectic little stores open for business every weekend with a rainforest visit as well would be popular if these routes opened up in line with the re-activation of the existing railway lines. A rail stop off on the XPT at Casino connecting through to the iconic Byron Bay would open the whole area to much more tourist interest.

4. Regional Development and Innovation

As mentioned, there is also enormous and exciting potential to create innovative eco-friendly industry pathways which maybe advanced with the restoration of the Northern Rivers Railway service and corridor, including: -

a. World First Unique Permaculture Food Forest

The Northern Rivers region is the home of the Permaculture Research Institute of Australia based at The Channon. Students come from all over Australia and the world to study with the world's leading Permaculture teachers. Permaculture is a mature proven design science that is founded on simple ethics: Care for Earth - Care for People - Share the Surplus or return it to the earth for which the region is globally known for.

We would propose to transfer the maintenance of the 132 kilometres Northern Rivers rail corridor to the Permaculture Research Institute of Australia (PRI), with the work being supervised by PRI which would provide reduce ongoing maintenance costs.

To overlay a Permaculture Design on the rail corridor to create the world's longest food forest integrating the hike & bike trail running parallel to the rail line, making it unique in the world and adding greatly to its beauty and tourism potential.

b. Potential for Bio-fuel Industry to support Bio-diesel trains and other transport

Millettia Pinnata is an Australian native legume tree which is suited to the Northern Rivers coastal sub-tropical climate. The tree produces a significant quantity of large seeds which have very high oil content. The unprocessed oil from the seeds can be used to run some diesel engines. With minimal refinement, the bio-oil can be made into a very high quality bio-diesel which can be used in any diesel engine including trains, trucks, buses and farm machinery.

Potentially, this would make the Northern Rivers railway unique in that all of its trains could run on locally grown and produced bio-diesel from trees that give richly back to the environment also.

The Northern Rivers region has the potential and capacity to become a world leading eco-tourism destination underpinned by the Northern Rivers Zero Emissions Railway.

Regional Economic Development hindered, according to Economic Development Strategy:

The Northern Rivers Regional Economic Development Strategy 2018-2022 includes issues identified as **central risk factors to the economic future of the Northern Rivers Region such as Connectivity, Resources, Live-ability, New Ideas Risk, and Other Risks.**

Many of the risks identified can be minimized by being addressed directly through the re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway system. For example, connectivity risks and high levels isolation were identified.

The Report states, 'Despite a high standard of built infrastructure, some poor-quality transport links constrain access to markets, with freight having to travel along congested commuter routes.'

‘A lack of Transport services means communities, precincts and places of the Region are less integrated and productive than they should be. Road constraints damage local productivity and limits opportunities to distribute Byron Bay visitors across the Region.’

Extract - Northern Rivers Economic Development Strategy 2018 –2022 – Page 16
Connectivity Risks.

Central to the region’s growth are the identified Human Capital and Resource Risks; which the Report claims, **‘Due to inadequate public transport between town centres, labour shortages inhibit the degree to which the Region realises the benefits of growing demand for population’s services.’**

And, ‘Finding affordable housing and appropriate work in some parts of the Region can be difficult. With traffic into Byron constantly so bad and with huge delays, it’s not possible for casual workers to live out of town and commute in, it just takes too long due to vehicle traffic.’

Furthermore, stating that ‘During peak season, many workers in Byron are evicted so their property can earn more Air B&B dollars for the Landlord. This leaves the Byron businesses short of staff during peak season. Workers could easily and more economically live out of Byron and catch a train into town, if there was one.’ - Extract - Northern Rivers Economic Development Strategy 2018 –2022 – Page 16

‘Liveability risks also undermine the region’s economic growth due to the current inability to de-centralise housing due to inadequate or no public transport. High cost housing hampers the rate of increase in the Region’s populations and internal markets.’ While, noting that for Local Councils, **‘Sports infrastructure and ROI is under realised due to inadequate transportation and social infrastructure.’**, rather than lack of interest.

The Report also states, ‘Amenities for residents and productivity for business is hampered by limited integration in and between services precincts.’

And disappointingly, the Report pinpoints Government as a majority bottleneck to the Region’s development and growth, stating, ‘While, slow and unpredictable development consent outcomes increase risks and makes development infeasible. And traditional problems with inter-governmental relations (lack of coordination, blame and cost shifting) are sustained, reducing the growth of the Region’”

The following Environmental and Societal Risks were also identified in the Northern Rivers Regional Economic Development Strategy 2018-2022 which indicates continued population growth and the associated environmental and societal risks, claiming ‘population growth places pressure on the local environment.’ Particularly with the current high reliance on road transport.

As evidenced above the Northern Rivers Regional Development Report 2016 nominated a significant number of risks were likely to prevent the area from thriving. **Underpinning a large number of these risks was the lack of an adequate safe public rail transport system throughout the region.**

The Northern Rivers Railway would ensure that a safe public transport network was available to promote opportunity and capacity of the region and reduce the high number of risks challenging the region's growth and sustainability.

It is imperative for the economic sustainability and growth of the region that a rail transport system be re-established. Restoring and re-activating the existing railway corridor and railway tracks and structures is an enormous cost saving and revenue-generating resource for the community.

For example, Lismore City Council recently agreed to the repair and upgrade of a stretch of road to create a more attractive truck by-pass from Casino to Goonellabah for \$110 million matching funding for the \$220 million project. For this same investment, the entire 132 kilometres of Northern Rivers Railway could have been restored and re-activated to support over 4 million public transport commutes for locals and tourists.

The Need to Prioritise Public Railway Transport Now

Byron Bay is the only major tourist destination in the first world not supported by a sophisticated railway network.

Lismore is the only city in the world to be the home of two major hospitals, a university and a dozen schools with a railway line running through it, not to have a railway service.

The Northern Rivers has the highest number of road fatalities in the state. It also has the highest level of drinking under the influence records.

As well as including the second highest low-socio economic population in NSW, many Northern Rivers' locals are experiencing deep poverty as they cannot rely entirely on a public transport system and escape the unemployment or underemployment cycle. Given the lack of adequate transport accommodating normal working hours, employment in the area for many welfare recipients is unavailable. **To say the government's management of public transport in the region is negligent and their actions unconscionable is an understatement as unemployed, elderly, disabled and disadvantaged are directly discriminated against through the intentional resistance to providing adequate railway transport.**

The region also has a disproportionately high aging population meaning the need for safe user-friendly rail transport is increasingly important, as without exception the vast majority of the elderly prefer rail to bus transport.

It is also a confirmed statistic that property and business valuation within similar railway corridors improved considerably in correlation to adjacent rail services being made available, further supporting the economic growth and the region's revitalization.

Spending money on promoting venues, events and community activities while failing to provide an adequate safe method of public railway transport is incomprehensible and irresponsible. Most of the region's events are under-supported not due to lack of interest but a lack in ability to obtain safe public transport to and from them.

Increasingly the region is gaining a reputation within the tourism market as difficult and unsafe to navigate, failing to deliver the care-free, deeply satisfying experience marketed, as well as the breeding ground for predator behaviours as locals and tourists alike are forced to hitch-hike or travel in an unsafe manner after dark due to no public transport or affordable alternatives being available.

Global media in relation to the dangers of travelling independently and rising concerns of Ivan Milat inspired 'copy-cat' serial **murders in the region is starting to impact on the region's reputation and the desirability to visit the iconic Byron Bay destination.** Sadly, the region also has a growing reputation for large trucks on the Hinterland Way and the Lion's Road avoiding major safe carriageway to save a few minutes making the leisurely scenic Sunday drives and day trips through the region dangerous and unnerving.

According to the Department of Environment and Energy's June quarter update for Australia's greenhouse emissions, transport represented 18.9 per cent of the nation's overall emissions in 2018-19 – second only to emissions generated by electricity-generating power stations. Indeed, the transport sector has experienced the largest increase in emissions of all sectors in the past three decades – up 63.5 per cent from 1990 to June 2019. **A single train is estimated to be able to replace up to 800 cars during peak hour or around 110 trucks moving freight. (Deloitte report 2017)**

The 2019 Byron Shire Council Rail feasibility study states the plan is to have light rail services running throughout Byron Shire for locals and tourists and a rail trail beside the track. This option would cost less than \$67 million and reduce carbon emissions and traffic congestion by getting cars off the roads and produce health outcomes from active transport.

The study states the track is in good condition and the repairs very affordable. **The light rail system taking people to festivals and markets could potentially remove some 700,000 vehicles off the road.** The economic benefits include; reduced crash costs and road maintenance, reduced congestion and pollution, benefits of ticket revenue. The social assessment in the study found the need for public transport and connecting to health, family and education for the elderly, disadvantaged and young people was essential.

Traffic congestion is now a major issue on our roads. Trucks in the Northern Rivers are predicted to double in the next 10 years. The accident cost associated with road freight transport is more than ten times that for rail freight. Trucks make up 2.5% of vehicles on the roads and cause 20% of emissions, and 20% of fatal deaths on the road.

The Northern Rivers has the highest number of road fatalities in NSW. The cost of these 15 deaths per annum has been calculated by the Federal Government to cost the region \$2.4 million per death; totalling \$36 million and for each tourist death figures as high as \$5 million have been reported as friends and family no longer wish to visit or remain in the area costing the region indirectly through related tourist spending loss. Rail transport would dramatically reduce this loss of resources and revenue to deaths in the region.

This is a situation that cannot be ignored by the state government any longer. Rail transport saves lives, emissions and communities' resources and revenue.

The continued population growth in the Northern Rivers region is not stopping or slowing. In fact, the expected growth is significant and the call from the community is to put the best interest of the collective communities of the region over the self-interest demands of road transport companies, multi-national civil construction companies and property developers.

It seems that Government funding ear-marked for regional development and building stronger rural communities has previously been re-directed to urban centres and cities and to support motor and road transport over rail. In the Newcastle region the interests of property developers were seen to be given preferential treatment within the rail corridor which is a highly valuable property area.

A similar outcome is potentially possible in the Northern Rivers where, in the Byron Bay Hinterland and Tweed Coast, if current rail corridor protections are lost and returned to Crown land, it can then be sold off to developers. It is no surprise then that known local Byron Bay Property Developers have expressed a very strong interest in the corridor's return to Crown Land via a 'Rail Trail only' outcome, which specifically excludes rail and the protection of the rail corridor for rail or a multi use corridor.

As such Members of Parliament and Councillors must be transparent in their activities and identify areas of conflict or where they or a company they have an interest or shares in is likely to profit the road transport funding or property development of the area.

The over-riding effect of a resumption of rail will be to reunite the widely dispersed community of the Northern Rivers, increase regional prosperity and improve community connectivity and trust in governing authorities. It will do this by: -

1. facilitating safe, energy-efficient travel to work, medical treatment, social interaction and sporting events;
2. opening up learning and skilling opportunities by providing easier access to the region's educational institutions including TAFE, SCU, high schools etc;
3. reducing the community's reliance on fossil fuels and dangerous rural roads, thereby reducing accidents and our carbon footprint;
4. enabling efficient decentralisation and increasing the viability of smaller communities;
5. providing the basis for a comprehensive regional public transport system based on need;
6. expanding tourism by linking current busy centres with places of interest, encouraging thousands of coastal visitors to venture to inland towns and villages;
7. connecting the region with major centres both intra-state and interstate;

8. promoting decentralisation by encouraging people to escape crowded cities;
9. attracting new immigrants with improved infrastructure and low-cost housing.

5. Support for re-activation of Northern Rivers Railway

In recent years over 20,000 individual residents have signed petitions urging the region's government and politicians to support the resumption of commuter rail services.

Over 16,000 individuals actively protested the loss of the Railway over a decade ago and over 90% of local businesses, employing well over 100,000 employees throughout the region, express support for the re-activation of the Northern Rivers Railway.

The largest employers and event hosts in the region representing the interests of over 250,000 seasonal workers and tourists have expressed support and are willing to formalise that support.

There is urgent need for an inter-urban transport system to address community fragmentation and ensure economic stability and sustainability which is well understood by employers in the region.

Currently there are a large number of interested parties including:-

- a. The Northern Rivers Railway Action Group
- b. Northern Rivers Business Industry Sector
- c. Northern Rivers Tourism Industry Sector
- d. Northern Rivers Parents and Citizens Groups
- e. Far North Coast Tourism Sector
- f. Trains On Our Tracks (TOOT)
- g. School and University communities
- h. Disability and Social Services sectors
- i. Health care, Mental Health and specialised medical care professionals
- j. Groups representing low-socio economic and the disadvantaged

6. Concerns with Alternative Proposals

Primarily there are two alternative proposals to re-activating the Railway which are short-sighted and loaded with vested interests. These are (a) the proposed removal of the Rail tracks to create a short-life asset with no tangible return and (b) the continued reliance on dangerous road transport. As such, many seem to believe that in the absence of an alternative proposal these measures are adequate, while inertia, delays, excuses and lack of vision and strategic focus seem acceptable.

A viable and innovative multi use alternative exists – the Northern Rivers Railway with ‘Rail Trail’ bike and hiking pathways

Given the level of misleading commentary and misinformation of costs on the condition and viability of the Casino – Murwillumbah railway line the Northern Rivers Railway Action Group has developed this Briefing Paper. However, it would be remiss not to identify concerns with the alternative proposals and urge individuals to be open-minded to more accurate information with no agenda other than **improving the Northern Rivers Public Transport system** which clearly is not the interest nor mandate of the alternative proposals.

a. Rail Trail Proposal Alone

It is important to note that the **‘Northern Rivers Rail Trail’ proposal involves the removal and tearing up of the existing railway line and tracks. This means the destruction of an extremely valuable infrastructure asset valued over \$600 million dollars and exposes the area to not only hazardous substance waste management issues but a potential billion dollar bio-security threat to our agriculture and primary industry.**

Catastrophic Bio-security Hazards Threat to Northern Rivers Agriculture Industries

The Northern Rivers region including the Tweed Coast Shire, Byron Shire, Lismore Shire, Kyogle Shire and Richmond Valley Shire has nutrient rich soil ideal for its primary source of revenue which is agriculture and other primary industries. Tourist revenue for the region is also significant.

A ‘Rail Trail’ Only option, independent of a Railway Services network incorporating essential facilities such as toilets and waste receptacles poses an incredible economic threat to the region’s development and principal income source. It is important to note that the railway line extends 132 kilometres throughout the region’s main rural, pasture and agriculture corridor also.

This has been reported also in the Tweed Shire Council investigation of the feasibility of the Tweed Shire Rail Trail.

The risk assessment carried out by NSW Land Services on behalf of Tweed Shire Council for the rail trail investigated the Bio Security issues and risk of contamination from food and body waste. The risk assessment did not include a risk rating for fires on the corridor which are likely to become high once the trail is left unmaintained.

The risk assessment rated the introduction of exotic animal diseases by way of contaminated soil on footwear and importation of prohibited foodstuffs as HIGH, both before and after mitigation or control measures were put in place. The consequences for these two occurrences are 'catastrophic'.

The 'Rail Trail only' proposal should not be able to go ahead, following standard practices for risk assessments for the protection of the bio-security of the region, unless safe environmental hazard control measures are put in place. In any areas, including agricultural land, it would seem advisable to have rail services beside a rail trail in order to scrutinise any breaches of bio-security.

The Tweed Shire Council would be solely responsible for any negative bio-security events as they could be seen as ignoring two high risk findings.

MP Adam Marshall, NSW state minister for Land Services was, in communications with the Northern Rivers Railway Action Group, surprisingly unconcerned about the potential impact of bio-security breaches for the Region. For the Tweed Shire Council to proceed would be corporately irresponsible and a breach of several acts of Parliament. It is potentially unconscionable conduct for our State Government not to be extremely concerned and taking any necessary action to ensure parties can provide adequate management guidelines and/or recommendations, particularly now that we have seen the financial impact and results of pandemic level viruses in both humans and livestock.

The Northern Rivers Railway Action Group is extremely cognizant of this issue to address bio-security and hazardous substance considerations with adequate and well signed facilities as well as educational observation platforms highlighting the importance of safe bio waste management.

Hazardous Substance Waste Management Issues along the Casino – Murwillumbah line:

Removal of the Railway tracks would also cause catastrophic environmental harm if hazardous substances and waste management issues for safe removal of asbestos are not managed successfully or thoroughly due to cost imposts.

While the ballast survives from the era that the railway was built, independent test results from soil samples provided to Southern Cross University show elevated asbestos levels. It is inconceivable that any official documentation from the NSW Government, Tweed Shire Council and Northern Rivers Rail Trails would omit such a significant issue.

The safest method to minimize the risk of environmental harm is to leave the railway tracks in situ, unmoved and restored.

It seems clear that the agenda of the Rail trail is to open the Railway corridor to development rather than protecting the Railway Corridor for a public rail transport system. This is what has occurred in Newcastle and other locations.

Given the desire of groups to pull up these valuable assets and remove the current protection to replace with a bike path. This would enable the railway corridor to be opened

up to development and possibly enlarged to incorporate a roadway, as has been proposed as a replacement to the Byron bypass.

The Northern Rivers Rail Trail Report identifies the pathway asset has only a basic 4-6 year life. This is considered normal with many Local Government Authorities reports on bike path usage around Australia dropping away after 4-6 years when independent of a Railway and other community activity centres so the exercise becomes an enormous expensive mistake.

Brisbane City Council openly reported on this outcome and renewed promises to invest in real infrastructure and capital assets.

There is no sound reasoning to spend nearly \$100 million on a non- revenue generating asset which is little more than a footpath that is unlikely to be used by the general public.

More possible is the aim to remove railway tracks and open the corridor to road transport and property development at the expense of the public capital asset pool.

Sixteen (16) out of seventeen (17) Local Government Authorities in Victoria are now responsible for maintaining an asset with no return on investment. With many LGA's unable or unwilling to spend \$300,000 - \$400,000 on maintaining the trail; many of these trails have quickly returned to neglected wastelands of noxious weeds and safety hazards. Like the local Mooball bike track, these rhetoric-based projects are disused and neglected and quickly become weed infested and misspent money traps.

Along the Casino – Murwillumbah railway corridor it is costing \$750,000 per year to maintain an asset which is illustrative of the likely outcome of the short-lived Rail Trail pathway. It is weed infested and hardly maintained by John Holland for that cost. They have been paid this amount since 2004, which is almost \$10 million in that time but the rail line and corridor have continued to deteriorate. **The recent Multi Use Byron Rail Corridor Study noted that the majority of the deterioration of the line has been as a direct result of the weeds being allowed to proliferate.** Our region is particularly susceptible to infestation of weeds and woody plants as we are in a sub-tropical region, which is more prone than those areas in more temperate regions to this problem.

Within 4-6 years the unused Rail Trail will have no intrinsic value with no revenue, no community services enhancement or no enhanced and much needed public transport. Currently the \$750,000 maintenance costs protect a \$600 million Railway asset.

b. Road Transport Only Is Not The Solution

Buses are not the answer to the region's transport needs. It is also relevant to highlight that a vast majority of individuals prefer rail transport over bus services and increasing bus transport services is unlikely to increase the number of individuals using public transport. Rail transport is a safer option for women, children, the elderly and the disabled.

The current lack of adequate transport directly discriminates against these groups as well as the local indigenous community who desperately need public transport.

Within the Northern Rivers areas, rail transport would reduce the number of low-socio economic and disadvantaged individuals sharing transport with our school children as currently bus services are largely limited to school bus runs at 8am and returning at 3pm. Services largely do not support the workforce and normal business hours within the region.

A small number of commuter rail services would support all public transport passenger needs effortlessly without compromising safety and access.

Sadly, the State Government has continued to categorise the Northern Rivers as a rural backwater with a declining economy and aging population. That is far from the case.

The Northern Rivers region is an urban growth corridor with a large expected population growth as Baby Boomers retire to the Coast or Coastal Hinterlands and Rainforest regions. Land valuation within the region has escalated as business owners and professionals start planning retirement.

Companies such as Qantas and Virgin have both recognized the region as their services shift from economy only to full service.

The Northern Rivers has a viable infrastructure asset in the Railway Corridor and Railway line, bridges and stations that has been preserved and protected for this future transport use. And the time to re-activate it is now.

With an operating cost of \$11 million and revenue of \$22.5 million the Casino – Murwillumbah Railway Line was one of the most profitable in Australia at a time when the population was a fraction of the current local and tourist numbers. This positive and progressive alternative to road transport has been ignored.

Within Australia, **the cost of public transport per capita** is high with the Northern Rivers region costing governments only one tenth of the national average, **indicating the lack of investment in public transport in the region and the re-direction of infrastructure funding to roads, funnelling funds back to the city and subsidizing private bus companies that do not service the communities satisfactorily**, leaving rural cities and populations to go without adequate transport to work, schools and universities, health and hospitals.

Byron Bay is the only iconic tourist destination in the world to not have adequate public transport.

Better public transport systems exist in third world countries with the Government and Community recognizing the incredible importance of tourism for the economy.

Lismore is the only city in the world containing two first class hospitals, a top ten university with no public railway system. Even more ludicrous is the fact that a \$600 million railway asset sits dormant within the Council boundaries.

More importantly, the region has the second highest population of low socio-economic and disadvantaged citizens who primarily rely on public transport so many elderly, young,

indigenous and disabled people live in isolated conditions, unable to travel to see relatives, attend health care appointments, support community events or go for a journey of their choosing.

The Northern Rivers also has the State's highest road fatalities as a direct result of its reliance on road transport and trucks bi-passing main routes as a result of Railway Bridges being removed ironically, due to alleged safety concerns by the Road Transport civil contractor engaged to maintain the Railway corridor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Northern Rivers Railway re-activation is a viable opportunity to leverage existing tourism and promote both economic and employment growth within the region.

With each station along the 132 km Casino – Murwillumbah railway route likely to also receive a boost in local, national and international tourism, this would support existing businesses and afford new and exciting employment opportunities.

With an investment of \$150 - \$200 million a \$1.32 billion dollar asset is created.

Byron Shire Council are currently looking for government and private investment to extend their railway service for the benefit of locals and visitors to the region. The Byron Shire Council has identified the urgency and importance of protecting Byron as a desirable tourist destination while giving their visitors day trip options to increase their stays. The Byron Shire Council recently voted to support the repair of the Mullumbimby to Byron section of the line.

The question is whether the NSW State government is willing to fund the Northern Rivers Railway restoration and Region re-vitalisation and gain a much-needed public transport system as well as the valuable drift of the Byron tourist load to the broader region.

The promise and potential of the region can only now be realized with the restoration of the Casino – Murwillumbah Railway line which is both an innovative sustainable solution but also an exceptional investment in the infrastructure and capital assets of the region.

This could be a valuable and much needed boost to the economy of the Northern Rivers and support the social, environmental and employment needs of the local communities.

We urge you to support the Northern Rivers Railway restoration and the Region's Revitalisation with the immediate commitment of financial support from the current stimulus funding for regional infrastructure.

This is intended to be a Briefing Paper on the significant issues surrounding the reactivation of the Northern Rivers Railway and its importance and the larger Business Case Proposal Report with more detailed information will soon be forthcoming.

Contact Details:

Northern Rivers Railway Action Group

Co- Secretary

Lydia Kindred

Mobile: 0422 007 724

Email: nrrailwayaction@gmail.com

Convenor

Beth Shelley

Mobile: 0423 030 346

Email: nrrailwayaction@gmail.com

Report Prepared By:

Rachel Quilty - Brand Consultant

Mobile: 0420 411 372

Email: r.quilty@bigpond.com