

**SUBMISSION :**

To: Infrastructure Australia  
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Dr. Peter Westheimer:

A recent councillor and past Deputy Mayor of Byron Shire Council between 2004 to 2008..  
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## **Rail Services for the NSW Northern Rivers Casino – Murwillumbah - Coolangatta**

The rapid growth of the Northern Rivers, the most densely populated rural region in the country, and its inclusion in Tourism Australia's marketing as the Green Cauldron, means the long term social, economic and environmental sustainability of the region requires immediate services on the existing rail line between Casino and Murwillumbah, and development of a corridor link from Murwillumbah to Coolangatta Airport.

Immediately to the north is the fastest growing urban region in Australia, South East Queensland. There is disparity between the levels of transport links servicing the Northern Rivers compared to those in South East Queensland. The current NSW government is not responding adequately to regional infrastructure needs.

The existing transport corridors are congested and mooted to increase significantly. The safety, efficiency, amenity and viability of business, freight movements, tourism and residents are at risk and worthy of infrastructure improvements.

Tourism is a major industry of the area.

The Minister for Tourism, Martin Ferguson, and Minister for the Environment, Peter Garrett, recently announced the Australia's Green Cauldron's inclusion in the National Landscapes program. This area stretches from Byron Bay to the Gold Coast and west towards the Great Dividing Range and has been included in this program because of the area's unique and distinctive natural and cultural experiences; including the world's second largest shield volcano crater; immense environmental

biodiversity; and the World Heritage-listed Mount Warning, which has special meaning for Indigenous communities. Martin Ferguson , said: "Attaining National Landscapes status means this special region will benefit from increased exposure in Tourism Australia's significant global marketing initiatives."

The populations surrounding the Northern Rivers are increasing. It is estimated that by 2025, one quarter of Australia's population will live within the coastal region from Hervey Bay Qld to Coffs Harbour in NSW.

Brisbane and the associated South East Queensland region have experienced long-term population growth and this trend is projected to continue to a point where Brisbane will become Australia's second largest city with an increase of more than one million people to around 3.7 million in 2026. (Sydney-Brisbane Corridor Strategy)

The current population of South East Queensland is 2,680,000.

The AusLink *Sydney-Brisbane Corridor Strategy [SBCS]* describes objectives for managing traffic flows on the three inter-capital transport links between Sydney and Brisbane that are part of the AusLink Network. The three routes are the inland road route (New England Highway), coastal road route (Pacific Highway) and the North Coast rail line between Sydney and Brisbane (*SBCS*, p 3). As a region, the Northern Rivers fits entirely within the Corridor. The Federal govt has a responsibility in solving the NSW/QLD Cross- border transport issue.

A Casino-Gold Coast transport corridor [the busiest east-west transport route between the Hunter and the Queensland border according to AADT figures] runs east-west from Casino along the Bruxner Highway and Lismore-Bangalow Road to the coastal shires of Byron and Ballina. These east-west traffic flows in and out of the region integrate with the traffic flows travelling to and from South East Queensland along the Pacific Highway. Limited public transport services exist at the local level to varying levels and there are few useable services connecting regional centres on a regular or affordable basis.

86% of residents in the Lismore and Byron Shires live within 5 km of the Casino-Murwillumbah line (ABS, 2006).

I know from the widespread community surveys undertaken that there is huge community support for reviving train services and infrastructure on the Casino to Murwillumbah rail corridor. The line is generally in reasonable order although there is a landslip to be repaired near St.Helena and a number of bridges require upgrading but some sections of the line eg between Mullumbimby and Byron Bay are in good order. Unfortunately maintenance has not been carried out recently such that

there are many weeds including young slash pines growing on the line. Removal of these asap to prevent damage to the line is urgent.

The narrow coastal corridor at the NSW /Qld border is under increasing pressure with the concentration of 90% of cross border traffic flows within the Sydney-Brisbane corridor using the Pacific Highway through the Tweed and Byron Shires.

151,000 vehicles per day are projected for the Pacific Highway at the NSW/Queensland border by 2026. (SBCS, p 23 citing Pacific Motorway Upgrade, Smith St to Tugun Bypass, QDMR)

Heavy vehicle use on the Pacific Highway is expected to increase by 3.4 per cent every year to 2025 (Working Paper 66, BTRE p 60).

'Interstate freight between Sydney and Brisbane is expected to almost triple in the next 20 years' (SBCS, p 1).

'76% of all interstate freight carried in the Sydney-Brisbane Corridor was carried by road freight in 2004' [Rail 11%,Sea 12% and Air 1]

The higher energy efficiency of rail and therefore lower greenhouse gas emissions compared with other modes of transport provides significant scope to make a regional contribution to reducing National greenhouse gas emissions.

Each regional road based passenger trip that can be converted to rail will stop up to 80% of greenhouse gasses from being emitted for that trip

In the case of the Casino-Murwillumbah line, most of the infrastructure is in place saving resources and energy in repairing the line to an operating standard.

Rail connects 8 of the 10 largest population centres within the Northern Rivers.

In most cases the line runs through the centre of the towns it connects making the line well adapted for commuter and tourist services.

The future development of freight services and facilities would provide further opportunities to reduce congestion within the Pacific Coast corridor, especially with a rail connection between Murwillumbah and the Gold Coast.

Economic and social linkages between communities along the Casino-Murwillumbah transport corridor and current patterns of regional and local freight movements through the corridor suggests that a viable market may exist for the transport of goods to towns and centres within the corridor by the introduction of hybrid commuter/tourist/parcel services even if that is by light rail in the short term.

Sufficient land and sidings for the development of freight handling facilities exist at most centres along the line including Casino, Lismore, Byron Bay, Mullumbimby and Murwillumbah. Casino in particular, provides the opportunity to develop as a regional freight hub to encourage freight

movement through the inland transport corridors. Casino is already a hub for road transport and a high level of road/rail integration would be achieved with sidings, land and maintenance facilities suited to the development of freight handling facilities.

This hub would connect road and rail between the inland road transport route (New England Highway) via the Bruxner Highway, a road and rail link through Casino-Gold Coast corridor to the Pacific Highway and the North Coast rail line between Brisbane and Sydney.

Many locations connected by rail in the Northern Rivers are also 'gateway' locations to world heritage and other parks and the line itself provides spectacular views of the Wollumbin /Mt. Warning caldera and the sweeping coastline views on the line between Byron Bay and the thriving village of Bangalow. Rail services would provide huge possibilities to move people between towns, and serve the large numbers of tourists attracted to the Coast, the hinterland and the large festivals. The Splendour in the Grass festival consortium have provided me letters of support to open up the Yelgun railway station adjacent to their new site.

### ***Costs***

May 2004 - New South Wales State Government claims \$188 mil over 20 years is required to restore the line to a Class 2 heavy rail standard.

Although funded for 20 years, the investment in below rail infrastructure would extend the life of the line out to at least 50 years.

September 2004- Report (Feasibility Study for Passenger and/or Commuter Services On The Murwillumbah To Casino Line) by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) finds a railcar commuter service could be viable and that the operation of lighter axle load railcars would mean that the cost of repairing the line to a safe operating standard was considerably less

\$30 million was identified as needed to redevelop the line to safe operating standard plus an annual \$2-3 mil operating subsidy. Further staged redevelopment of the line could include complete restoration to Class 2 freight standard.

*Please note that this PWC Study remains the most comprehensive study of the costs of restoring the Casino-Murwillumbah rail line to a safe operating standard and as such provides a solid base from which to estimate actual costs.*

I support its proposal of a program of works over seven years to restore the line and introduce rail car commuter services, while simultaneously planning and constructing a rail link to Coolangatta Airport.

The essence of the PWC plan was to initiate a program of 'catch up' repairs and maintenance over seven years. After this the cost of ongoing maintenance would fall back to regular levels.

It remains an option to bring forward the most significant works or to identify sections of the line to be opened gradually.

September 2004 Federal Election - two proposals were put forward by competing candidates. Federal Labor offered \$150 million to restore the line to a Class 2 heavy rail standard and operate an XPT service for 10 years.

The Coalition offered \$30 million over 2 years to fund the redevelopment of the line based on the PWC findings, but the offer was not taken up by the NSW Government.

Nov. 2004 - NSW Legislative Council Inquiry recommends a commuter service be developed based on PWC findings (Inquiry Into The Closure Of The Casino-Murwillumbah Rail Service).

June 2006- NSW state government offers to provide \$75 million if matched dollar for dollar by Federal government funding. Proposal is based on the proposal put forward by the ALP at the Federal election in September 2004.

A recent Southern Cross University (SCU) survey finds that 72% of respondents would use a commuter service at least once a month.

This translates into an estimated 2,875 passenger trips per day.

If the line was extended from Murwillumbah through to the Gold Coast, then 91.2% of respondents indicated they would use the service at least once a month.

**Summary:** the long term sustainability of the NE NSW region requires immediate work on restoration of new rail services on the existing rail line between Casino and Murwillumbah, and development of a corridor link from Murwillumbah to Coolangatta Airport.