



Northern Rivers Rail Corridor ISSUES PAPER

Submission to Rail Trail Feasibility Study December 2013

Key findings

- There are many benefits and opportunities around developing the rail corridor as a multi-purpose rail trail encompassing cycling, walking, horse riding, rail bike and light rail in strategic locations, while allowing for the incorporation of new innovative transport modes as they emerge.
- The rail corridor must be protected as a valuable community asset with high transport and economic potential. The current vulnerability of the rail corridor is recognised and emphasis is put on the need to retain the corridor and associated infrastructure in public ownership and to develop the corridor for the benefit of local communities. Ownership of the rail corridor and zoning of the rail corridor and adjacent land needs to be clearly defined.
- There is a high need for immediate action as delay is contributing to ongoing deterioration of the assets. A collaborative regional approach to development of the rail corridor is a key issue as conflict may result in further stalling of the project.
- There is a high need to identify leadership, resources and regional strategic planning around development of the rail corridor. The work of the Northern Rivers Rail Trail inter-sectoral group in taking on this role is acknowledged and this group forms a good basis for attracting further strong inter-regional and cross-sectoral support for the project.
- There needs to be detailed analysis and comparison of the costs and benefits of social, environmental & economic outcomes for development options.
- Any proposed uses of the rail corridor should increase transport options for the local community.
- Any proposed uses of the rail corridor should increase the likelihood that the rail corridor will be maintained.
- Any proposed uses of the rail corridor should be environmentally and commercially sustainable.

- It is highly recommended that the wider reserve roads network, and in particular how it links with the rail corridor, also be considered as part of this study, with a view to preserving these roads as public land.
- It is recommended that consultation with local history groups and Aboriginal Councils be undertaken to ensure protection of cultural heritage.
- There is unlikely to be a single solution, rather a range of interests and needs must be considered along the length of the corridor to accommodate diverse landscapes and differing social needs and cultural values.
- The feasibility study must include broad community consultation. Sustain Transport is well placed to organise and facilitate this process if required.

1.0 Background

Sustain Transport is a Working Group of Sustain Northern Rivers (SNR), a collaboration of 26 peak regional organisations working to address the impacts of climate change and to generate sustainable transport, food and energy outcomes in the Northern Rivers. Our transport goals are to reduce transport emissions, increase transport options, and to increase physical activity, social inclusion and resilience. Early in 2013 Sustain Transport surveyed SNR members to identify key transport projects for the next 12 months. The rail corridor and proposed rail trail emerged as a priority project, strongly supported by those SNR members who responded to the survey. Sustain Transport members then identified a key role for the group in organising and managing government, commercial and community discussion associated with proposed uses of the existing rail corridor. Following a presentation in September 2013 by representatives from the Northern Rivers Rail Trail group Sustain Transport undertook to prepare an Issues Paper for the rail trail feasibility study. Sustain Northern Rivers and Sustain Transport have expressed strong support for the rail trail but we are also aware that there are many other discussions going on about potential uses for the rail corridor. We thought it timely to bring a range of stakeholders together and put everything on the table to try to address and resolve some of the conflicting issues in preparation for the rail trail feasibility study. We strongly believe that the rail corridor is a valuable community asset with ongoing potential for a mix of innovative transport solutions, underpinned by a rail trail.

2.0 Methodology

As a regional body with direct access to the diverse organisations that make up the membership of SNR, Sustain Transport is well placed to undertake the preparation of this issues paper that aims to represent a range of stakeholder perspectives across the Northern Rivers. All SNR member organisations were invited to email a written submission for inclusion in the issues paper and a number of responses were received. In November 2013 Sustain Transport organised a stakeholder

workshop for SNR member organisations to facilitate innovative community-based ideas and solutions around the future of the Casino to Murwillumbah rail corridor and to workshop a range of issues as background to the upcoming rail trail study. The workshop was attended by twenty two people representing a diverse range of stakeholder organisations (see Appendix A for list of attendees). The workshop was facilitated by Sustain Transport and included presentations from Northern Rivers Rail Trail, Australian Long Forest Association and Trains on Our Tracks. Each person who attended then had an opportunity to present their perspective and raise issues of particular concern. Participants then worked in groups to explore issues in more depth, to identify potential synergies and conflicts and work towards mutually beneficial and innovative solutions. The submissions received from SNR members and the recorded outcomes from the workshop form the basis of this issues paper.

3.0 Discussion

3.1 Introduction

SNR and Sustain Transport recognise the potential of the rail corridor as a key transport route as well as the importance of retaining the corridor and associated infrastructure as community owned assets. We are aware that there are currently many ideas around potential uses for the rail corridor and would like to see a focus on working towards finding synergies and solutions that enable the maximum incorporation of all stakeholder perspectives and interests. There is a need for a collaborative approach to any development of the rail corridor as conflict has the potential to stall negotiations between stakeholders, potential funders and government as well as lead to negative representation in the media, resulting in reluctance by key stakeholders to engage with the process. The workshop highlighted the fact that there has been a lot of talk about development of the rail corridor and now is the time for leadership and action to move the project forward. However, this can only happen if a strategy is in place to include all stakeholders in a cooperative process that celebrates diversity and innovation and considers ways to add value through recognising synergies and working together. Key issues around the rail corridor include the extent to which any proposed use increases transport options for the local community, the extent to which any proposed use increases the likelihood that the rail corridor will be maintained and the extent to which any proposed use of the rail corridor is environmentally and commercially sustainable.

3.2 Environment

One of the key assets associated with the rail corridor is the natural environment, including native flora & fauna, unique landscapes and stunning views encompassing forests, mountains, rivers and oceans. There is high potential for the rail corridor to be developed as a part of a network of wildlife corridors or Greenways (see Appendix 2) and this should be taken into account in any discussion

around this development. Wildlife corridors are a critical component of strategies to protect koalas in this region. A rail trail exclusively for walking and cycling may be the best option for areas of high biodiversity and protection of these areas should have a high priority in any development of the rail corridor. It is also recognised that these areas are a major tourism asset and an important draw card for promoting the rail trail to visitors. There are also many environmental education opportunities associated with developing the rail corridor and these should be built into the planning for any project. There is an opportunity for development to enhance biodiversity along the rail corridor through fencing, weed management and revegetation in conjunction with avoidance of key intact areas of biodiversity. These biodiversity benefits could be used to offset any environmental impacts.

3.3 Health

Health

The development of the rail corridor as a rail trail has the potential to enhance many of the social determinants of health for the Northern Rivers community by creating employment opportunities, dispersing tourism beyond Byron Bay and encouraging social interactions and connectedness.

A rail trail would provide opportunities for physically active commuting, as well as active recreation and leisure. One of the key factors in people undertaking walking and cycling is the provision of a safe and pleasant space for these activities and a rail trail will significantly increase opportunities for active outdoor leisure activities in the Northern Rivers. In particular, safe cycling routes are extremely limited in this region and research shows that the key disincentive for cyclists is sharing space with cars. A rail trail could also provide a practical transport option for young people who cannot drive, but are generally fit enough to cycle relatively long distances with the incentive of travelling for educational, social and recreational purposes.

3.4 Economic

There is an enormous potential for economic benefits associated with development of the rail corridor as a multi- mode rail trail, particularly around ecotourism and locally based economies and small business. Stakeholders have noted that there is currently an underutilisation of natural assets in building local tourism and associated business opportunities. Development along the rail corridor offers a huge opportunity for local employment and enterprise particularly in villages where current employment opportunities are very low. The Northern Rivers region currently has some of the lowest average incomes in NSW, despite having some of the richest natural, agricultural and social assets. A rail trail has the capacity to capture and build these assets through boosting local food production such as paddock to plate initiatives, by connecting attractions and encouraging walking and cycle tour development and providing diverse opportunities for locally based, low impact, ecotourism.

3.5 Social

Development of the rail corridor has a key role to play in connecting communities and re-energizing regional east /west and cross- border connectivity across the Northern Rivers.

The project has strong potential to support community development and social enterprise and there is a high need to ensure that any rail corridor development benefits local communities. The workshop highlighted a need to educate the local community about the rail corridor-where it is, where it goes, what it connects, the geography it traverses- as many people have forgotten its existence. Education about the potential benefits for local communities of a multi -mode rail trail is essential in gaining wide support for any development of the rail corridor and a key component in the sustainability of any development and associated projects.

3.6 Collaboration

The workshop highlighted some potential synergies and opportunities for collaboration in the development of the rail corridor. Representatives from Southern Cross University (SCU) stressed that any development must be based on data and flagged a role for SCU in research, monitoring and data analysis to ensure sustainability of projects. Opportunities for partnerships and collaborations with the schools of engineering, tourism and law were suggested. EnviTE also expressed an interest in participating in the development of a rail trail from the point of view of conducting any necessary weed treatment, landscaping and bush regeneration. This could be assisted in future perhaps by Work for the Dole and/or Green Army teams (for which new guidelines are still pending). North Coast TAFE has also expressed interest in collaborations whereby students can contribute to the project as part of their training. The feasibility study for the rail trail needs to thoroughly consider potential collaborations with local and regional organisations as these will be critical in the success and sustainability of any development and associated projects.

3.7 Transport

The rail corridor is essentially, and historically, a key transport corridor for the Northern Rivers region and, as such, continues to be a critical public transport asset. It is important that any development of this corridor contributes to an integrated transport system for the region and helps to alleviate transport disadvantage. A multi-mode rail trail has the potential to enhance sustainability, decrease energy costs, reduce congestion and support 'park & ride' systems in some locations, in particular around Byron Bay. There also needs to be consideration of how a rail trail may best enhance connections to South East Queensland. By providing a cycleway between major towns and villages a rail trail has the capacity to greatly improve transport options for a number of people, in particular young people who are currently transport disadvantaged in this region,

however a number of factors will need to be considered to make this viable. The provision of some form of motorised transport that allows carriage of bicycles may be necessary in some sections, infrastructure that allows high speed cycling in some sections, and consideration of safety concerns such as provision of solar lighting and decreasing isolation by encouraging local enterprise along the corridor. The provision for people to take bikes on any light rail or other motorised transport utilising the rail corridor will create an integrated system and make the corridor usable for transport for people who live in the area. A multi-mode rail trail that encompasses cycling, walking, horse riding, rail bike, as well as light rail in strategic locations, and also allowing for the incorporation of new innovative transport modes as they emerge will be best placed to meet the transport need of this region into the future.

3.8 Heritage

Heritage is an important component of development of the rail corridor, as well as an opportunity to value add to visitor experience and as a basis for economic enterprise. Railway heritage in this region includes a number of stations with small iconic buildings, many of which are still in good condition, and a number of old wooden bridges that encompass spectacular scenery. It may be possible to consider diversion of the rail trail to lightweight pedestrian cycle bridges to enable preservation of some heritage bridges. It is critical that Aboriginal heritage & links to country receive high priority as part of the feasibility study. There are a number of history education opportunities, including Aboriginal cultural education, associated with the development of the rail corridor, many of which have potential as economic enterprises for local communities. Consultation with local history groups and Aboriginal Councils will need to be undertaken to ensure protection of cultural heritage.

3.9 Disaster management

The development of the rail corridor has potential benefits in providing access and escape routes in the case of disasters where roads are not accessible. The opening up and maintenance of the corridor also has a positive role to play in bushfire planning and management.

3.10 Management and infrastructure

The workshop highlighted a strong support for development of the rail corridor as a multi-use, multi-mode trail that can incorporate different infrastructure options for different sections of the corridor to accommodate diverse landscapes and differing social needs and cultural values. It is also acknowledged that there is high potential for conflict within a multi-use, multi-mode model and that a good strategy will be needed to ensure the compatibility of user groups and accommodate the differing requirements of walkers, cyclists, horse riders, segways/mobility scooters, roller blades,

as well as a variety of rail bikes and light rail (and possibly other motorised vehicles) in some sections. A strategy will also be needed around the use of the rail trail by motor bikes and trail bikes. There will also need to be consideration of a mix of surface types along the trail including sealed and gravel sections and possibly incorporating rail in some sections. The corridor can be shared on a permanent basis by having the bike tracks run beside the tracks.

There is also potential conflict between biodiversity impacts and desired tourism, economic and transport outcomes. A good management model based on community involvement will be necessary to ensure these outcomes can complement each other. It is recommended that the feasibility study examine other rail trail models where biodiversity is an issue.

As the rail corridor is a regional asset and crosses a number of local government area boundaries there needs to be a regional all inclusive strategy that involves regional bodies such as NOROC, SNR, and RDA-NR. Development of the rail corridor needs to have a regional focus, regional strategy and regional leadership with a view to managing the differing expectations of different stakeholders and communities. There is an opportunity to recognise and celebrate the environmental, cultural and historical differences within the region.

Land use planning will be critical to the success of a multi-mode rail trail and ownership of the rail corridor and zoning of the rail corridor and adjacent land needs to be clearly defined. Financing and long term maintenance are key issues and there needs to be equity of funding around ongoing maintenance. The workshop recommended consideration of a staged planning strategy whereby work starts in high impact areas that can demonstrate success and generate income for further development- a 'building block' model where each stage is self –sustaining.

3.11 Examples

During the workshop the following examples were suggested as relevant models:

- Centennial parklands - crosses 3 local government boundaries- ownership remains public, managed by a board of trustees
- SA trails network
- Noosa model
- Goulbourn Valley model
- Multi -mode rail trails in Tyrol, Italy

(See also Appendix 2)

4.0 Additional issue for consideration

4.1 Road reserves

There is a network of road reserves across the Northern Rivers which have been identified as having high potential to value add to development of the rail corridor. These hundreds of sections of unformed Crown roads, which are valuable existing infrastructure, are currently identified for possible sale, and many are currently leased or licensed to adjoining landholders. This network of reserve roads could contribute to a region-wide network of equestrian, hiking/trekking and cycling tracks and trails linking back to the rail trail, which would form the central key 'spine' of the whole network.

Such a comprehensive network could provide a Northern Rivers trekking experience comparable to tourist meccas around the world, maximising the spectacular natural features along many of these local routes. This network could allow safe and pleasant passage across the region by walkers, cyclists and horse riders. This network could also have benefits in relation to disaster management planning, biodiversity mapping and creating wildlife corridors, in particular for koalas. There are many good examples of where this has happened - most notably around Noosa, and also a very extensive network of trails in SA (see Appendix 2)

In Nimbin, the reserve roads have been identified since 2009 in the Sustainable Nimbin Community Plan as a key transport strategy, with some of the roads in current use and being maintained by community members. The Australian Long Forest Association (ALFA) are organised around the reserve roads issue and are heading up this issue in Nimbin. ALFA's pilot project will be to connect Nimbin to the rail trail at Bentley via a network of gazetted crown reserves. The route would be a stunning tourism drawcard as a 4 day/3 night trekking product traversing escarpment country, riparian zones and open woodland all with very strong ancient Australia themes. Other crown road reserves currently being investigated by ALFA may eventually connect Nimbin with the Border Ranges NP, Nightcap NP and the Tweed Valley.

It is recommended that the wider reserve roads network be considered as part of this study. These reserve roads are currently at risk due to the government seeking to divest ownership of them and inviting adjoining landholders to apply for ownership. It is possible for the control of these roads to be handed back to Councils or NGOs who are willing to take them on. There are already instances where sections of key routes have been lost through acquisition by adjoining landholders despite extensive community objection. One of the key issues is how to prohibit use of these trails (including

the rail trail) by motorised vehicles, especially trail bikes, which may cause disturbance to adjoining landholders and result in conflict.

It is important that state and local government recognise the opportunities that are available across the region and across the Queensland border through linking regional trails. If we lose the reserve roads network many future recreational, transport and economic opportunities may be lost.

Appendices

Appendix 1- Workshop attendees

Avigdor Zask	NNSWLHD
Douglas Jardine	RDA-Board
Kristin Den Exter	SCU
Natika Mishteler	SCU
Matt Lamont	SCU
Phil Preston	STEER
Arianne Reis	SCU
Catherine Macleod	EX-NHAG
Malcolm Wallis	Kyogle Council
Cameron Arnold	NRRT
Nat Meyer	NNIC/SNR/LCSA
Ben Riley	TfNSW
Jodie Hewett	Ballina Council
Miranda Williams	ALFA
Will Jeffrey	ALFA
Kate Geary	NRSDC
Ian O'Reilly	Tweed Shire Council
Pascal Scherrer	SCU
Glenys Ritchie	LCC
Karin Kolbe	TOOT
Patrick Knight	Tweed Shire Council
Linda Wirf	NRSDC

Appendix 2- Links to other resources

1. Greenways declaration
<http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/consultations/ddafe83e-ae2c-434a-8327-8af2da580a9c/files/australiangreenwaysdeclaration2011.pdf>
2. Central Otago rail trail in NZ
<http://www.otagocentralrailtrail.co.nz/>
3. South Australian Trail
http://www.kidmantrail.org.au/page_attachments/0000/0053/kidman_trail_management_proof_5.pdf

4. There are plans to clean up the railway tracks around the New England. A recreation trail could see the aged corridors used once again- see video:
<http://au.prime7.yahoo.com/n2/news/a/-/local/19108433/tourism-trail-video/>
5. Tweed Valley Integrated Trails - Stage 1
<http://www.calderainstitute.org.au/caldera-institute-projects/tweed-valley-intergrated-trails>
6. Southern Flinders Ranges Cycle Tourism Master Plan
<http://www.southernflindersranges.com.au/content/docs/MASTERPLANFINAL.pdf>
7. Ride the Range- A Mountain Biking Experience for All: Kyogle Report
http://www.kyogle.nsw.gov.au/cp_themes/default/page.asp?p=DOC-SXQ-25-10-81
http://www.kyogle.nsw.gov.au/cp_content/resources/CDistin_Final_report_1.pdf
8. Ride the Otways -a Regional Rail Trail
<http://www.ridetheotways.com.au/>
9. South Tyrol, Italy
<http://www.vinschgerbahn.it/en/554.asp>
10. Marin Sonoma Counties, California
<http://main.sonomamarintrain.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Project-Overview.pdf>
11. CENTENNIAL PARK AND MOORE PARK TRUST ACT 1983, which guarantees its public ownership and sets out how the Trust is to operate.
http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/cpampta1983362/.
12. 'Cross Border Transport Taskforce' discussion paper (2007)
<http://www.rail2trail.org.au/media/pdf/cross-border-discussion-paper.pdf>

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