



# Northern Rivers Rail Trail Proposal

(One Awesome Ride)

Sketch by Steve Martin  
Images courtesy of Rail Trail Australia  
Map by Victoria Alis of Northplan

**Northern Rivers RailTrail Inc**  
An initiative of  
**The Sourdough Group**  
Vision To Action  
**May 2013**

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NORTHERN RIVERS RAIL TRAIL PROPOSAL



NSW Transport Study Area	<i>Proposed:</i>
Existing NSW Rail Network	High Speed Rail Proposed Route
Sydney to Brisbane Passenger Line	Gold Coast Light Rail (under construction)
Rail Trail Corridor	Proposed Extension of Brisbane to Gold Coast Line to Gold Coast
<i>Existing QLD Rail Network:</i>	
Brisbane to Gold Coast Rail Line	

**Plan 1**  
**21st May 2013**  
**EXISTING AND PROPOSED**  
**RAIL NETWORK**

Source: High Speed Rail Phase 2, Figure 4.8; Google Maps, Viewed 22.04.2013

## **1 Introduction and our Proposal**

### **The Idea**

To use all or part of the rail infrastructure along the Casino to Murwillumbah rail line and corridor as a rail trail.

### **Who From**

The Sourdough Group. A Northern Rivers based group of business executives and an extended network of volunteers who are engaged in philanthropic work to contribute to the growth of the economy and jobs in the region. This of course built on work developed by many people in the region such as Will Jeffrey and others who have pioneered the concept of a rail trail.

### **Our Proposal:**

That the NSW Government institutes a modest follow up project to the current Transport Study (utilizing much of the data which would have been analyzed) to consider the feasibility of a cycling and walking trail, being established using the path of the existing railway line.

That the Government and/or the Project Team works with a local volunteer Steering Committee to coordinate and scope the overall development of a rail trail as an exemplar project showing NSW Government-Regional Volunteer engagement. The Development of rail-trails globally has accelerated and there are many case studies that can be drawn from in Australia and overseas.

It is also proposed that if in the future it is identified that a rail service should return to the Northern Rivers and that the current corridor in whole or in part is suitable then the rail would return to the corridor and the rail trail incorporated elsewhere within the corridor.

## **2 Whole of Government Benefits**

### ***Employment and jobs***

The Northern Rivers needs a substantial growth in new business. An RDA Committee Northern Rivers report indicated that we have to create 59,250 new jobs by 2027 (*RIEP 2009 Page 30*) of which 16,000 need to be "export jobs", i.e. income from outside of the region, just to remain stable. In reality without new business development this is unlikely to happen and the region will go backwards in employment and prosperity.

Government reports show that the growth industries in the Northern Rivers are virtually all paid for by Government: Education, Health and Services. We need innovation that will support new entrepreneurial activities. It needs to be genuinely commercial to bring in real dollars to create sustainable jobs. As such a little support from Government can have a substantial multiplying effect.

*A rail trail project will positively impact a wide range of jobs, provide new business opportunities, contribute to tourism and give exposure to local businesses, food products and similar to visitors from Australia and overseas.*

### ***Attracting people from cities to regions***

We have a fast ageing population and work for tree and sea changers is hard to come by.

There are not the jobs for people in their 30's and 40's wishing to return to the region.

The Northern Rivers is well away from Sydney and this can cause it to be ignored, e.g. it is going to be a late NBN area, creating disadvantage versus other regions.

*A rail trail gives the potential to create new jobs to attract younger families to move to and work in the area. The experience of rail trails elsewhere is they can become a generator of a wide range of entrepreneurial businesses. This is the type of relatively low cost initiative that enables considerable new business development.*

#### **Utilizing the rail track asset and corridor**

The rail track and corridor exists. Should it be left unutilized? Some parts might be purchased for other uses, but much would continue to deteriorate requiring either spending to make it safe and secure, or being just left to rot.

It is better to use such an asset for an industry sector (rail trail development and tourism) that is rapidly growing around the world.

*The Murray to the mountains Rail track as an example attracts 20,000 people per annum, bringing in over \$1M revenue already per annum. We are at the very early stage of "early adopters" using rail trails and it is expected this will grow exponentially in the next decade. This proposal would utilize an existing asset for minor cost compared to returning the rail service at this juncture.*

#### **Health, tourism and environment**

The awareness of health and exercise is likely to grow substantially in the next decade or more. Rail trails provide an easy way of exercise and enjoyment based holidays or day trips.

Tourists are looking for new and different experiences. Rail trails give this, and it is very likely that users will recommend to each other, trails they visit.

Those looking to experience more of the environment and rural regions can do so from the easy journeys on rail trails. They also suit family, recreation groups and other "collectives" to have a holiday together such as sporting and interest groups.

*A Rail trail allows low impact and higher yielding tourism and a growing range of health related activities.*

#### **Utilising regional expertise**

The Northern Rivers has an excellent mix of experienced local business people plus many executives with extensive national or global expertise who have moved here. Already this mix has created innovation in business support ventures as many of them understand the urgent need to create or build further businesses that create jobs.

This is an opportunity for the NSW Government to create an innovative way of working with groups of experienced people to bring about a major project.

It would be possible to mobilize many people in the region who could assist this project in a wide variety of ways. They could be involved and listed in a feasibility study.

*Government needs new ways of tapping into the resource of 55+ successful people moving to regional NSW. This can provide an excellent case study example of how it could be done.*

### **3 The Northern Rivers Regional Rail Trail**

#### **What is it?**

A rail trail is a combined bicycle and walking trail developed in a rail corridor using the rail infrastructure as appropriate.

Numerous rail trails are being developed around the world and are growing in popularity. (see for instance: [www.railtrails.org.au](http://www.railtrails.org.au) )

They are used for walking and cycling. In addition some trails or parts of trails are used for horse riding and some, where small parts of the track can be left, have "rail-cycles" that run along the track.

Normally a range of businesses grow to service rail trails and local accommodation and cafes are utilized. In addition services such as cycle hire, visitor and luggage transfer services (move between accommodations) are developed.

Rail trails encourage a wide range of businesses and services to cater for users and visitors. The advantage is they can be developed in stages as the popularity of a rail trail develops. Some studies have been completed into the economic benefits of some rail trails, but the whole innovation is in its early growth phase. Macro trends suggest that rail trails are going to be increasingly popular in the future.

Currently Victoria and WA lead the way with huge potential for the NSW Government to catch up and overtake in this low impact and high yielding tourism sector.

As of February 2010

	<b>OPEN</b>	<b>PROSPECTIVE</b>	
New South Wales	54 km	1323 km	Open trails mostly in Newcastle and Blue Mountains
Northern Territory	23 km	25 km	Darwin and Katherine
Queensland	168 km	929 km	Open trails mostly in south east
South Australia	116 km	1876 km	Open trails of high standard. 1300km of prospective is Old Ghan line
Tasmania	129 km	163 km	All over state but most only for walking or mountain bikes.
Victoria	663 km	1819 km	All over state, many of high standard
West Australia	753 km	1580 km	A lot of this is the Munda Biddi trail. Most trails only for walking and mountain bikes
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1437 km</b>	<b>6274 km</b>	

For the most up to date information and details of each trail visit [www.railtrails.org.au](http://www.railtrails.org.au) or contact Railtrails Australia. Other countries have a lot of high standard rail trails.

A rail trail that could be used as a model for the Northern Rivers is the Otago Rail Trail in the South Island of New Zealand. The Otago trail is 167km long and runs through quite mountainous landscapes. There are 13 villages and towns along the line that have accommodation and another seven locations close to the rail trail that also offer accommodation.

The local communities formed the Otago Rail Trail Trust to create the trail.

The Otago Rail Trail offers a booking service which coordinates bike hire, accommodation, luggage and shuttle transfers. See [www.otagorailtrail.co.nz](http://www.otagorailtrail.co.nz).

#### ***Can the infrastructure be changed from a disused railway line to a safe cycling and walking trail?***

The answer is quite simply yes, because many rail trails have already been established with State and local governments and local community involvement and all barriers overcome. The solutions to all issues have been found.

***Where would it run?***

While the line runs from Casino to Murwillumbah it is anticipated the most suitable/viable sections to convert at first to a rail trail would be Bangalow to Mullumbimby, or possibly Lismore to Mullumbimby.

However, once the concept is established the rail trail could be developed further with sponsorships, grants or possibly business revenue to run the entire length subject to the condition of the infrastructure such as earthworks and sub-base, bridges and other crossings and tunnels. If this could be achieved it would link up with the Sydney to Brisbane rail service at Casino and give easy access from Gold Coast airport and South East Queensland generally.

***An established tourism infrastructure to support it and grow it.***

The Northern Rivers is a unique setting with small towns and numerous villages each with their own character. As such it is an important asset of NSW for attracting tourists. Whilst successful there is considerable room to build further its tourism, food, export and creative industries with strong benefits economically to the region and to NSW. A total of 23 villages, towns and communities would be **directly** connected between Lismore and Murwillumbah with access to many others. Many are already hosts to events, thus spawning starting points for cycle tours and walks.

***Bangalow to Mullumbimby Section***

- Bangalow\*\*
- Byron Bay\*\*
- Belongil Beach\*
- North Beach Byron [Writers Festival]\*
- Byron Bay Industrial Estate\*\* [tavern coming]
- Tyagarah [Blues Festival]
- Mullumbimby\*\*

***Lismore to Bangalow Section***

- Lismore\*\*
- Woodlawn
- Bexhill
- The Channon [near by]\*\*
- Eltham\*\*
- Booyong
- Nashua
- Binna Burra
- Bangalow\*\*

***Mullumbimby to Murwillumbah Section***

- Mullumbimby\*\*
- Ocean Shores [near by]\*\*
- Billinudgel\*\*
- Yelgun [Splendor in the Grass at North Byron Parklands]
- Moobal\*\*
- Burringbah\*
- Stokers Siding\*
- Uki [near by]\*\*
- Dunbibles
- Murwillumbah\*\*

\*Denotes towns and villages that currently have permanent accommodation and eating venues

\*\* Denotes towns or villages that currently have a pub or tavern with or with the possibility of accommodation in addition to the facilities above.

Clunes and similar villages can be linked in via Eltham and other towns.

Of the 24 pubs in these towns and villages, eight have a close relationship with the rail in that it was the construction of the rail line or the operation of the rail service that gave the pubs their start.

The development of a rail trail would bring many new visitors to the area, whilst at the same time encouraging existing visitors to stay longer for the attractions and experiences the rail trail provides or connects.

Importantly, all these additional visitors would be considered to be “most appropriate” visitors and be not just willing to respect, but be endorsers of the area’s community values. In other words, very compatible with the visitor type and markets the region wants to attract.

#### ***Other Attractions on or close to the route***

- The Tyagarah site hosts the East Coast Blues Festival and will host the Indigenous Music Festival that have approval for 10 years and they are seeking approval for more events.
- North Beach Byron hosts the Byron Bay Writers Festival and has an application in to hold 7 more similar events annually.
- North Byron Parklands at Yelgun hosts the Splendour in the Grass Festival and 2 other events per year with approval for up to 10 event days annually.
- This means that these three sites alone, all on or close to the rail corridor host between 7 and 16 major events annually depending if they utilize their approvals. Three of these events are the biggest of their kind in regional Australia.
- Bangalow, Byron Bay, Mullumbimby and Murwillumbah and their surrounding area have many regular markets:
  - Farmers Market - six a week
  - Large Cultural Markets - four a month

Each of these villages has many small festivals and events. Bangalow alone hosts between 70 to 80 events a year if the markets are included.

#### ***Possible side journeys***

There are many attractions close to the rail trail that provide more options for tours. Some examples are:

- Newrybar village
- Crystal Castle
- Macadamia Castle
- Tropical Fruit World
- Brunswick Heads village
- Several National Parks, World Heritage Areas and Nature Reserves
- The Richmond, Tweed and Brunswick Rivers with connecting boat tours.
- Many prominent and famous surf and swim beaches.
- Food, art and history trails.

#### ***The rail trail as a connector***

The issue of the region not having unity is mentioned later. The rail trail could improve this by providing a physical or conceptual link north to south and east to west.

#### Physical Links

Richmond, Brunswick and Tweed Rivers

National Parks, WHA's and Nature Reserves including Gondwana Rainforest World Heritage Areas

Beaches and surf hot spots

Walking trails in the different shires

Tweed Beach to Rainforest Trail

Bridle trail system being developed

Cycle tracks in different shires

An alternative to using busy and narrow roads or the Pacific Highway for cycling

Various tourist trails, e.g. food trails that different shires are developing

Business Networks and Conceptual links

Heritage places and history

Local food outlets, cafes, markets and growers

Industries such as food, agriculture, timber and rail itself, meet a farmer

Wellbeing, alternative health, spiritual health etc

Music and the arts

Biodiversity and other aspects of the natural estate

**4 Marketing the Rail Trail**

The Northern Rivers Rail Trail could be marketed by a program unique to the trail and associated product. This would centre on a dedicated website with reverse links to the many tourism, leisure and recreation websites in the Northern Rivers, New South Wales, South East Queensland and some national sites.

The website would provide a booking service which could coordinate all activities associated with the rail trail in particular bike hire, riding gear, accommodation, luggage and shuttle transfers.

There is potential for the Northern Rivers Rail Trail to be a major part of developing the Northern Rivers brand. The area has an ongoing “brand” issue in determining a name, the idea of the region being a destination in itself and what destinations within to focus on. Because the rail trail could be such a powerful delineator of the name Northern Rivers and because it “links” so many towns and villages, product and natural assets, if marketed successfully it could firmly establish the Northern Rivers as a brand name.

***Printed and digital collateral services***

Along the route food outlets (cafes, restaurants, markets, food producers – e.g. cheese maker), accommodation (B&B, farm stay, guest lodges, rural cabins, pubs, motels, luxury tents and camping grounds) could be sign posted and supported with digital collateral such as a web portal, apps, etc.

A range of flow on business development occurs such as:

- Printed guides and interpretative brochures and maps
- An App for use on various digital devices to guide tourists
- An App for experiences along the route including the history, views, ecological, cultural and landscapes
- QRs for key points of interest
- Web portal
- Interpretative and directional signage

**5 The Market for the Rail Trail**

The advantage of the development of the rail trail is that there is both an existing market and a potentially very high growth market.

***The existing market comprises:***

- Tourists and visitors to the region extending their stay to explore the hinterland via the rail trail
- Short stay visitors or visitors from across the border (a growth area)
- Local and regional residents
- The growing market of rail trails tourists who holiday on rail trails who add the Northern Rivers to their travels.
- Visitors attending events who use the rail trail as a way to access the event

***The growth market comprises:***

- Those attracted to the region to walk, cycle or ride horses
- Special walking and cycling holidays related to environmental and heritage studies
- Student and educational groups
- Groups specifically interested in holiday cycling (including overseas tourists)
- The quality of the experience along the route has positive impacts such as:
  - Quality and diversity of the landscape and views
  - Quality and accessibility to heritage and cultural attractions
  - Accessibility to other attractions and villages
  - Access to a diverse range of food and accommodation services, etc.
  - Ecological and agriculture diversity

**6 Likely Economic Impact of the Rail Trail**

The impact of the rail trail will be both to help existing and encourage new businesses. Seasonal and casual employment will increase as well as new business ownership. The benefit of a rail trail is that businesses develop as popularity increases, thus reducing risk. It does not all have to be there at the start.

We anticipate as a first analysis that between 800 to 1200 jobs could be eventually created.

We have a large group of business mentors available (60+) who can also assist new ventures.

***Key impacts include:******Existing Businesses gain from the Rail Trail:***

Example: There are approximately 200 traditional tourism businesses (i.e. not tangential tourism business such as pharmacies and service stations) in Bangalow, Byron and Mullumbimby alone. There exist 20 or so food, accommodation and attraction businesses along or close to the Bangalow to Mullumbimby route that are not in villages. All these businesses stand to gain immediately from the rail trail depending on where it starts.

***Accommodation Businesses:***

Accommodation and also services such as rail trail tours - where they take your luggage between accommodations, will benefit and grow. Some accommodation will expand into café and al fresco spots for a drink as walkers and cyclists relax in the late afternoon for example.

Example: In some rail trail areas the average stay has increased from 2 days to 4 or 5 days. Also it is anticipated that the average spend of the users of rail trails who join a tour is considerably more than the current average of the Byron area, possibly two to four times higher. While these figures are anecdotal they are based on considerable knowledge of this area and other rail trails. They serve to provide a guide as to what research will be needed.

***New Services:***

Bike tour operators

Walk tour operators

Rail memorabilia outlets such as museum, gifts, etc

Cycle services such as bike sales, rentals, repairs and gear

Examples:

Conducted tours (1 to 3 days - where a guide travels with the group to articulate and interpret the experience)

Escorted tours (2 to 6 days - where a company rents the bikes and gear and transports the group's luggage from accommodation to accommodation)

As an example:

**Businesses that Serve the Otago Rail Trail** [most established since the rail trial was first planned]

Accommodation on the rail trail	102	
Accommodation near the rail trail	22	
Transport providers	11	
Tour operators	19	mostly in addition to transport providers
Bike hire outlets	6	
Booking services	2	
<b>Total</b>	<b>162</b>	

## **7 Our Proposal**

*That the NSW Government institutes a modest follow up project to the current Transport study (utilizing much of the data which would have been analysed) to consider the feasibility of a walking and cycling trail, be established using the path of the existing railway line.*

*That the Government and/or the Project Team works with a local volunteer Steering Committee to scope the overall development of a rail trail as an exemplar project showing NSW Government-Regional Volunteer engagement. The Rail-trail development globally has accelerated and there are many case studies that can be drawn from.*

*It is also proposed that if in the future it is identified that a rail service should return to the Northern Rivers and that the current corridor in whole or in part is suitable then the rail would return to the corridor and the rail trail incorporated elsewhere within the corridor.*

### **We suggest the following tasks for a feasibility study:**

- Review and summarize the literature concerning the economic and related benefits of existing rail trails
- Utilise the current transport study data to create a cost estimate of the work required to open a substantial section of the rail track, and an outline cost of further sections.
- Summarise the planning work from d) below

And nominate a NSW Government Executive or Project Leader to :

- Work with a steering committee of volunteers in the Northern Rivers region to develop a plan for the successful planning, marketing and business involvement in a rail trail venture, including any necessary local consultation. In addition commence exploration of potential sponsors and commercial partners for future stages.

### **Staging**

It would be best to construct the rail trail all at once. However if necessary due to repairing infrastructure or funding, it could be staged.

## **8 Rail Trails as Valuable Community Infrastructure**

The Northern Rivers Rail Trail would traverse through 23 villages and townships between Lismore and Murwillumbah alone and it can help serve the movement and access needs of local residents within their immediate communities. For example, the rail corridor in Byron Bay links Lilli Pilli, the close-in residential areas to the north and south of the CBD, the CBD, Sunrise and the Byron Industrial and Arts Estate providing a safe, cost free transport route. Children living in Sunrise, or the soon to be expanded residential zones within the industrial estate, could safely and quickly ride their bikes to Byron High and the adjoining St Finbarr's Primary School on the opposite side of town. Residents of Suffolk Park and Baywood Chase

would be able to use the existing bike path to the Lilli Pilli rail crossing, and then proceed on to the industrial estate where many residents now work.

Additionally the new regional multi-purpose sporting facility on Ewingsdale Road can be accessed from most of Byron Bay and the rural areas to the north and west along the rail trail.

People could ride between Bangalow, Mullumbimby and Byron Bay for work. Mullumbimby to Byron on the rail route is approximate 14km and Bangalow to Byron is approximately 12km. These are not large distances. Workers in cities ride this distance and longer at slower speeds through heavy traffic.

In Bangalow new housing developments are extending the township westward, yet there is no safe and level way for the many children living in these new estates to get to school. The rail line runs directly to the Primary School and the large sporting facility on the eastern edge of town. Parents would be able to walk their children and push prams to town and school.

The future needs of our aging communities will require the provision of safe and level local transport corridors. Rail trails offer an ideal solution for many elderly residents.

These benefits apply to different degrees to many other towns and villages along the corridor.

Local Councils are increasingly reliant on State and Federal Government to assist with the provision of essential community infrastructure. The rail trail will save local, State and Federal governments considerable funds by providing an extensive alternative transport route along with added fitness and health benefits.

#### **Some Initial Criteria for Determining What Section [stage] to Begin With**

1. Condition of the track base, bridges etc.
2. Cost to convert it to a safe and 'comfortable' cycle and walking trail.
3. Number of villages along the section as well number of rail stations, sidings and other access and "attraction" points.
4. Existing tourism product and infrastructure along the route and near the route.
5. Quality and diversity of landscapes and other existing points of interest.
6. Support from the local government that the route runs through and what the local government can do to facilitate such as:
  - a. Encourage enterprises along the route
  - b. Facilitate planning approvals
  - c. Getting access to the route
  - d. Signage
  - e. Maintenance
  - f. Capital support
7. The level of community and tourism industry support along the route and in the region generally for any particular stage or section.
8. Accessibility at macro [to the area generally] and micro level to the route and product] i.e. plane, bus and coach, private car, foot, horse etc.
9. The quality of the overall visitor experience.

## **9 Who Are We?**

The Sourdough Think Tank has put this submission together as we believe it would assist both the region with its current economic problems and the State Government as an effective solution to the rail track asset. We ask you to accept that it is volunteers who have put this together in a short period of time.

***The Sourdough Group***

The Sourdough Group, with the support of a number of prominent community and business leaders has set up the Northern Rivers Rail Trail Project to organize this initial concept proposal.

The Sourdough Group is dedicated to delivering actionable ideas from creative thinking. It is philanthropic and made up of prominent business leaders who live in the Ballina - Byron area who give their time pro-bono. Its aim is to foster and sponsor innovative economic growth in the Northern Rivers that respects community values and recognizes the distinctive landscape, ecology and community characteristics of the region.

The members of The Sourdough Group and the proposal's supporters contain a wide mix of Australian business leaders, local community, business, tourism industry leaders, experienced planners and designers, local government leaders and expertise in regional development. Many have strong global and corporate experience. Between us we know the local area and its community extremely well, have a depth of experience in business generally and in particular the tourism industry and understand how the region works.

Its members are:

Paul Bennett  
 Dr James Cowley  
 Phil Daley  
 Pat Grier AM  
 Paul Jameson  
 Ian Oelrichs OAM  
 Murray Richardson

***Examples of major projects OF The Sourdough Group***

- Business Pathways - stewardship of the Business Pathways Program that offers mentoring, coaching and business development services to start-ups and growing business in the Northern Rivers. We have negotiated with NORTEC to operate the program.
- Specific mentoring of medium sized businesses by Sourdough members.
- IT Hub - initiation of the idea and accompanying research to establish a local IT hub and technology incubator to take greater advantage of the regions only NBN connection at present.

***Initial supporters of the concept and need for a feasibility study***

We have approached a wide cross-section of people with this initial proposal to ascertain the level of support. All those contacted gave their support.

The following have given unqualified support for this initial concept proposal.

Cameron Arnold	President of Via Byron [Byron's tourism body] **
Martin Brook	Founder and Director of Brookfarm
Greg Crump	President Bangalow Chamber of Commerce
Stephen Connelly	Convenor Private Practice Planners Network
Cr Sol Ibrahim	Councillor Byron Shire Council**
Geoff Morgan	Ex Morgan Banks, Founder and Director of Talent2
Mat Morris	GM North Byron Parklands
Belinda Novicky	CEO North Coast Destination Network
Ian Oelrichs	President Design Access Panel of Nth Rivers**
Lyn and John Parche	Managers of Byron@Byron Resort and Spa
Kim Rosen	Convenor Brunswick Heads Tourism Group**
Paul Waters	President Byron United
John Welch	Director Optus Business Centres Northern Rivers

Qualified Support:

Cr Simon Richardson\*\*, Mayor of Byron Shire would prefer to see a return of a rail service immediately however if this does not occur he supports this concept and sees it as a viable Plan B

\*\* Current or past members of Byron Council's Tourism Advisory Committee

***What we collectively bring to it***

- Business acumen and experience at many levels
- Bringing together many parties in the region
- Strong leadership
- Planning and design skills
- Local experience and knowledge
- Understanding and respect for community's values

***Support Group***

The Steering Committee has a support group of over 250 members as of May 2013.

**10 Some Further Notes about the Region*****How a rail track could support existing initiatives***

Ever since the Nature Based and Ecotourism Plan for the Far North Coast was completed in 1995 the sub-region of Lismore to Ballina to Byron Bay, and west to Kyogle has steadily been consolidating as one of the most significant nature based destinations in Australia. Byron Bay is by far the most significant destination and while highly recognised it is still an underdeveloped brand in itself. It is internationally recognized, is steadily growing its visitor numbers, product has become more sophisticated and it is NSW's second most important gateway after Sydney.

An important objective for the regional tourism body is to have the benefits of tourism to flow west into the hinterland but at best it has had sporadic success. Bangalow is the notable exception having created its own character and market.

Regarding tourism, the rail trail could boost the tourist and the food industries, and in particular create a genuine hinterland tourism framework.

***Eltham Pub***

Last year the Eltham pub just won the best use of local produce category in the statewide pub food awards in the SMH.

This is a good example of the link between the rail trail, tourism and food industries and regional brand.

Overall it is believed the rail trail could give the area the great leverage for the strong brand it seeks.

The twin goals of attracting tourists who stay longer and spend more per day [higher yielding tourists] could be greatly enhanced.

The other real benefit of the rail trail is that it is a year round activity thereby offering tourism greater consistency and reliability.

Another objective not yet achieved is developing a brand that incorporates Byron Bay, Lennox Head, Bangalow, the hinterland towns of Mullumbimby and Lismore and generally the agricultural and conservation areas in the hinterland. Part of the problem is finding something to build a brand upon that both encapsulate the distinctive characteristics and diverse qualities of all these areas while giving them unity. To a degree the huge growth in the sub-region's food industries has helped. The food industry incorporates agriculture; value added

products, farmer markets, many shops selling high quality local food products, cafes and restaurants and the food served in accommodation.

Products such as coffee, macadamia nuts, tea, beef, muesli, oils, jams, spice mixes, artisan cheeses and breads and cookies and a lot more, mostly with an organic or natural imperator, now abound. However, while food is an evocative theme it is difficult to become one of the top few food regions with a well-defined geo-economic boundary without a wine industry.

The growing of grapes and producing wine is a powerful mix of romantic landscapes and lifestyle with numerous product and attraction opportunities and usually come with large marketing budgets. This region needs something else that unites all the generators of brand and the rail trail could deliver this. It connects so much; the food, the beaches, the festivals, the events, the natural areas activities, the history and existing communities. The activities on the rail trail and around it are all highly compatible with what the area is already doing.

The rail trail could help cement the brand that is slowly emerging. It would be something to capture the imagination of both visitors and locals; it brings them all together and generates a captivating group of products to promote. It could be a major case study showing how the NSW Government together with local volunteers and businesses can create a new economy in a region.

For the NSW Government the region is a globally known producer and tourism region but over the last decade it has dropped behind in global competitiveness. Support now from Government could provide for a relatively modest cost a unifying project which acts as a pivotal energizer of a wide range of business initiatives which could start to impact the economy and jobs.

## **11 Northern Rivers Rail Trail Steering Group**

Cameron Arnold  
 John Bennett  
 Dr James Cowley  
 Pat Grier AM                      Chair  
 Cr Sol Ibrahim  
 Paul Jameson  
 Pat Knight  
 Mitch Lowe  
 Steve Martin  
 Ian Oelrichs OAM

### **Contact persons**

Pat Grier	0411 476 477
Steve Martin	0434 940 568
Marie Lawton	0434 552 283