



Submission to the 'Inquiry into the Investment of Commonwealth & State Funds in Public Passenger Transport Infrastructure and Services' – Executive summary

Northern Rivers Social Development Council (NRSDC) is a community-based not-for-profit organisation that promotes fairness and social inclusion in the Northern Rivers Region (NRR) of NSW.

We seek to ensure the transport context of rural & regional Australia is included in this inquiry. While NRSDC is primarily focused upon the NRR of NSW the responses can be transposed onto other rural & regional areas, particularly those with high growth coastal centres.

Unfortunately, the NRR has a range of indicators that point to high regional disadvantage, such as low incomes, high mortgage and rent payments, more single-parent families and families with no working parent than average, high general levels of unemployment, high levels of income support and pension payments¹. These factors in combination with low levels of passenger transport provision, low Government investment in transport services and infrastructure all contribute to the area being highly transport disadvantaged.

The Commonwealth has a large role in ensuring affordable, accessible and efficient transport systems at both a national and local level. The current reliance on private vehicle use as the primary mode of transport is not viable over the medium to long term. Declining oil reserves and the need for action to combat climate change will require all communities to shift towards greater use of passenger transport. This role is in line with the Commonwealth's position on climate change and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, increased levels of social inclusion and community participation and the reduction of obesity levels.

The Northern Rivers Social Development Council strongly recommends the Federal Government addresses transport at a national level by:

- The development of a National Transport agency that that would include all land, air and water based transport and roads funding and would be responsible for the development of a National Passenger Transport Strategy that includes mechanisms for Regional Integrated Transport Planning, Integrated Land Use & Transport Planning and Accessible Transport Action Plans for rural and urban Australia
- Significantly investing in transport infrastructure and services particularly in regional areas by both State and Commonwealth Governments. Failure to do so will greatly increase the disadvantage and economic vulnerability of regional and rural communities.
- Facilitating the development of supporting passenger transport infrastructure such as, information and communication technologies that support demand responsive transport, internet and telephone based transport information services
- Ensuring any future economic stimulus packages also support the building & maintenance of passenger transport infrastructure, particularly for those areas that have experienced chronic underinvestment.

¹ S Baum, K O'Connor & R Stimson (2005), *Fault Lines Exposed: Advantage and Disadvantage across Australia's Settlement System*, Monash University ePress.



Submission to the 'Inquiry into the Investment of Commonwealth & State Funds in Public Passenger Transport Infrastructure and Services'

Background

The Northern Rivers Social Development Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into the Investment of Commonwealth & State Funds in Public Passenger Transport Infrastructure and Services.

Northern Rivers Social Development Council (NRSDC) is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation that promotes fairness and social inclusion in the Northern Rivers Region (NRR) of NSW. NRSDC represents and strengthens communities and services by:

- Providing opportunities and services to alleviate disadvantage
- Engaging in advocacy and promotion
- Informing and educating people, organisations and government
- Encouraging partnerships
- Undertaking research and planning for future needs.

Our work is grounded in our community and seeks to identify and strengthen the many community resources of our region. NRSDC runs a range of programs and projects in response to the needs of the community, such as the Transport Development Project (TDP).

Transport Development Project

The Transport Development Project, funded by the NSW Ministry of Transport, is a regional initiative to improve access and opportunities for all residents of the Northern Rivers region by developing relevant, effective and publicly available and accessible transport services and infrastructure. This submission is guided and informed by the consultative and collaborative work carried out for this submission and also by the generated knowledge the project has accumulated after 16 years of community development work.

Preface

The submission's main objective is to ensure the transport context of rural & regional Australia is also included in this inquiry. Whilst NRSDC is primarily focused upon the Northern Rivers Region (NRR) of NSW the responses can be transposed onto other rural & regional areas, particularly those with high growth coastal centres. This submission is based upon the premise that a strategic, bi-partisan, cross-sectoral approach to passenger transport and associated infrastructure will increase community well-being. Increased opportunities for passenger transport options will promote social inclusion, reduce green house gas emissions and provide increased opportunities for physical activity.

The Northern Rivers Regional context

The NRR contains high growth coastal centres, regional cities and a rural population dispersed across towns,

villages and agricultural settings. The region covers approximately 21,000 square kilometres of the north-eastern corner of NSW with its immediate northern neighbour; South East Queensland noted as Australia's fastest growing region. The NRR includes the local government areas of Ballina, Byron, Clarence Valley, Kyogle, Lismore, Richmond Valley and Tweed. Approximately half the population is concentrated in the town centres of Tweed Heads, Murwillumbah, Ballina, Lismore, Yamba and Grafton while the other half reside in the 300 small villages and localities within the region.

The NRR The region has a population of 267,475 (2006 Census) with a population growth rate significantly higher than the NSW growth rate of 1.1%. The age structure of the region's population varies from that of the State with a smaller proportion of the working age group 25-54 years (38% compared to 42%) and a larger 65+years age group (18% compared to 13%). According to Department of Planning projections, this older age group will form 32% of the region's population by 2031. Median household incomes in the region are 62% and 69% of the median household incomes for Sydney and NSW respectively. Unemployment levels are significantly higher (7.8%) than the NSW average and only 51% of the region's labour force is employed full-time (Evans 2008)¹.

The above demographics coupled with the dispersed population are indicators of high levels of transport disadvantage this highlights the need for an increase in resourcing and planning for passenger transport provision in rural areas.

Submission scope

This submission deals predominately with bus and rail transport. Taxis in rural and regional areas have become more common for shorter trips within towns but the cost makes them prohibitive for longer or more frequent trips.

TOR 1 An audit of the state of public passenger transport in Australia

By comparison to metropolitan areas, there is a very low level of passenger transport available in the Northern Rivers. Services are relatively infrequent, expensive and do not service all areas of need. Many centres do not have a scheduled services and rely on school bus services as the only passenger transport option.

Across the Northern Rivers a variety of passenger transport options are available; taxi, bus, long-distance coach services and an inter-regional rail service with supporting coach service. The local bus network is predominantly hail and ride service, which allows passengers to be picked up or dropped off any where along the route. The use of bus stops or markers are more common within town areas. This type of 'hail and ride' system has its benefits as well as some detrimental aspects.

'Hail & Ride'

The 'Hail & Ride' system offers flexibility as passengers do not have to go to a particular point along the route. This is particularly helpful when the service is running through rural areas and when travelling between towns. However, this also means there is low awareness of when and where services run as there are few identifiable

¹ Evans T (2008), *'Northern Rivers Region of NSW Summary Profile'*, Northern Rivers Social Development Council, Lismore.

bus stops along the way.

School bus services

A secondary aspect of rural and regional passenger transport is the use of school buses to cross subsidise the scheduled services. School bus services do take public passengers and are utilised by rural communities but only run during term times. This leaves a large number of areas across the NRR without passenger transport for three months out of twelve.

Long distance services

There are a number of long distance services running through the NRR between Sydney and Brisbane. Whilst this is useful they cannot provide the same type or level of service as a scheduled town to town bus service. Unfortunately, the decisions of both State Government and private operators can reduce service levels. For example, a recent sale of a bus route between Lismore and Brisbane has left a large number of main towns between Lismore and the coast with only school buses operating.

The NSW Government provides a long distance rail and coach service from Sydney to Brisbane. CountryLink rail operates from Sydney through Grafton, Casino & Kyogle to Brisbane. The branch line from Casino through Lismore, Bangalow, Byron Bay to Murwillumbah ceased to have CountryLink rail in 2004. The NSW Government provided a coach service in its place. There has been widespread dissatisfaction with this decision from many areas of the community. The current coach system cuts through a number of contracted bus areas and as such has some restrictions on its service provision. A CountryLink coach cannot offer travel for under a 40 kilometre distance, whilst this does ensure it does not compete with private bus services it limits its effectiveness along those routes that do not have a schedule service running.

Unfortunately, the Northern Rivers region lost its rail service a few years ago. The region has subsequently lost any opportunity to use this important piece of transport infrastructure in a more effective manner. As the line runs through the majority of the main centres across the Region it has the opportunity to capture a share of the commuting traffic between towns if an associated bus transport network and equitable fare structure was in place.

Accessibility

In an audit of passenger transport the adequacies and compliances to the *Disability Discrimination Act (1994)* and the *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (2002)* must also be taken into consideration. Local Councils are the principal providers of transport infrastructure; predominately through the State Government's Country Passenger Infrastructure Grants Scheme (CPTIGS). At times local Council transport committees have recommended that new large retail, community or other developments provide bus bays or taxi ranks at their expense. As there are no legislative requirements regarding passenger transport infrastructure these recommendations are not always accepted by the developers or the Council's planning departments. Currently, local Governments across the Northern Rivers are struggling with compliance in a number of areas, for example:

² Council of Social Services (2007), 'A Growing Divide?' Submission to NSW Ministry of Transport on Bus Fare Affordability in Rural and Regional NSW.

³ NSW Government (2004), 'Review of Bus Services in NSW'.

⁴ North Coast Area Health Service (2008), 'Staff Travel to Work Survey'.

- Lack of concise and comprehensive guidelines for accessible bus stops, leading to non-compliant infrastructure being installed
- Lack of action planning that means less than 25% of infrastructure was compliant by the 2007 deadline and the current installations of non-compliant infrastructure
- Limited funds are available to local Councils to carry out the planning processes and identified work.

Fares

An audit of passenger transport should also include fares, ticket products and concessions. In rural NSW fares are almost double that of Sydney metropolitan and outer metropolitan areas. The Council of Social Services NSW (NCOSS) analysis of metropolitan and rural fare disparity demonstrated a large gap between fares of similar distances:

“...a 36 minute journey from Glenwood Park Drive to Blacktown in Sydney’s western Suburbs will cost \$3.90 in fares. An equivalent journey time in a country area is substantially higher. A 40 minute trip from Casino to Lismore on the NSW North Coast attracts a fare of \$8.90.” (p3 2007)².

A Review of NSW Bus Services noted that the premium placed on rural fares “is a disincentive for potential bus users. A reduction of these fares may attract additional passengers in these areas” (p74 2004)³. A recent travel to work survey undertaken by the North Coast Area Health Service’s Health Promotion Unit (2008)⁴ has also shown a link between perceived value for money and the potential for a shift from private vehicle usage to passenger transport.

TOR 2 Current and historical levels of public investment in private vehicle and public passenger transport services and infrastructure

Across rural and regional NSW it is felt that there is low State Government commitment to the provision of transport services and infrastructure. This is evident in the Northern Rivers with the degradation of the rail service and infrastructure over a number of years leading to the eventual cessation of services (PriceWaterhouseCooper 2004)⁵.

The levels of investment in rural and regional services is negligible in comparison to metropolitan areas. This is quite apparent in the State Plan; State Infrastructure Strategy and the Ministry of Transport’s Accessible Transport Action Plan for NSW Transport, Roads and Maritime Agencies. Examples of this inequity are:

The provision of “accessible information on public transport services, the Ministry of Transport administers the contract for the 131500 Transport Info call centre, website and TTY facility (1800 637 500). Transport Info enables the provision of feedback in accessible formats and a search and trip planning facility for accessible services is now being trialled”.

These services are not available for transport services across rural and regional NSW

⁵PriceWaterhouseCooper (2004), ‘Feasibility study for passenger and/or commuter services on the Murwillumbah to Casino branch line’.

“In the Sydney and Outer Metropolitan areas, the Government is funding the purchase of accessible buses under new contracting arrangements which require operators to comply with disability legislation and produce action plans of their own. An average of 36% of all buses in the Sydney and Outer Metropolitan areas are wheelchair accessible and operators are committed to timetabling those buses on at least 25% of services.” (Ministry of Transport 2007)⁶.

Investment in passenger transport and infrastructure has declined with the rise of the private vehicle. Local, State and Commonwealth Government expenditure on road building has also facilitated this shift in mode. Patterns of urban and infrastructure development have acted as barriers to a move back to passenger transport. The high fuel prices encountered over the last year has seen a substantial increase in passenger transport patronage in all capital cities across Australia. The opportunities for passenger transport in rural and regional NSW are limited and so leave residents exposed to this increase with limited transport alternatives.

TOR 3 An assessment of the benefits of public passenger transport, including integration with bicycle and pedestrian initiatives

Social inclusion

Access to adequate, accessible and affordable transport options has been identified as a key social priority for this region. Communities across the Northern Rivers experience very high levels of transport disadvantage.

It is well documented that transport disadvantage is one of the key precursors to social exclusion. Transport disadvantage is particularly prominent in the aged, youth, Aboriginal and low-income population groups. Social exclusion can be defined as a set of variables that, acting alone or together, can form a barrier to participating in activities that produce positive life chances and improve quality of life. Social exclusion increases poverty; decreases emotional, mental and physical well-being; reduces educational attainment and employment opportunities, and can impact upon a community's overall health, prosperity and progress. By addressing the issue of limited passenger transport provision in rural and regional areas transport disadvantage will decrease allowing more access to services such as employment, training, health and other services. Increased access will increase social inclusion for individuals and ultimately the wider community.

Climate change & greenhouse gas emissions

Unfortunately, private vehicle usage been built into urban design, land-use planning principles and Local, State & Federal Government policies and decision making processes. Transport, including private car travel, is the third highest emitter of greenhouse gases in Australia. Road, rail, shipping and aviation produces nearly 22 million tonnes of greenhouse gases annually. Motor vehicle usage accounts for 8% of all national emissions. If the average car travels 10kms to the litre and averages 10kms per day that would be over 18 tonnes of greenhouse gases per year. Using public transport instead of driving will also have positive health spin-offs. Walking or cycling 1km to the railway station or bus stop saves 0.2-0.3kg greenhouse gas emissions, other air

⁶ Ministry of Transport (2007), 'Accessible Transport Action Plan for NSW Transport, Roads and Maritime Agencies', accessed 2009 <<http://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/abouttrans/access-trans-action-plan.html>>

pollutants and fuel costs.

Health & active transport

By walking to the railway station and climbing the steps, a person would meet a third to half their daily exercise requirements. Brisk walking for 30 minutes a day is recommended as enough exercise to provide significant health benefits. Physical activity reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, osteoporosis and colon cancer. The most effective, and enduring way of increasing our physical activity is by using 'active transport' rather than driving (NCAHS & NRSDC 2008)⁷.

A recent journey to work survey undertaken by the North Coast Area Health Service has shown a very high private vehicle dependency:

"77% of all the trips in a typical week were done solo in a car. As well as concerning from the point of view of greenhouse gas emissions, this transport pattern is obesogenic: evidence shows that for every thirty minutes spent in a car each day, the likelihood of obesity is increased by 3%" (NCAHS 2009 p1)⁸.

Road crash trauma

A shift from private vehicle usage to passenger transport will mean a decrease in vehicle kilometres travelled per person, which according to the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB 2007) would translate to lessened exposure to the risk of road trauma. The ATSB estimates the economic cost of road trauma to be at least \$18 billion. This cost is distributed across the community but places a particular burden, not only on crash victims and their families but the health system⁹. Any increase in passenger transport and travel behaviour change will correspondingly decrease vehicle kilometres travelled and the associated risk of road crash trauma.

TOR 4 Measures by which the Commonwealth Government could facilitate improvement in public passenger transport services and infrastructure

There are some immediate measures the Commonwealth Government could take that would have long term benefits for all Australian residents, especially those in rural and regional areas:

- The development of a National Passenger Transport Strategy that includes Integrated Regional Transport Plans & Local Area Plans. This strategy should include a timeframe and budget for investment in passenger transport infrastructure
- An Australia wide internet and telephone passenger transport information service, similar to those found in all Australian capital cities
- The development of a Sustainable Transport Agency that would include all land, air and water based transport and roads funding. New priorities for funding should be developed within this agency that include sustainable transport planning principles. This agency could also include subsidies for passenger transport services and infrastructure for Councils and State Government agencies

⁷ North Coast Area Health Service & Northern Rivers Social Development Council (2008), 'Media Release Moving People '08' Daily Examiner.

⁸ North Coast Area Health Service (2008), 'Staff Travel to Work Survey'.

⁹ Australian Transport Safety Bureau (2007), 'National Road Safety Action Plan 2007-2008', ACT.

- Any additional economic stimulus measures should focus on passenger transport infrastructure. This financial strategy would provide immediate and long term benefits across Australia. The provision or improvement in passenger transport infrastructure would in the short term increase employment during the construction and maintenance phase. The long term benefits would increase social inclusion through increased access to employment, training, education and other essential services; opportunities for travel behaviour change that will improve health, decrease greenhouse gas emissions and the risks of road crash trauma. These measures should be focussed on those areas, such as the NRR, that have suffered long term underinvestment in passenger transport services and infrastructure. It would also assist local governments in compliance with the *Disability Discrimination Act (1994)* and the *Accessible Passenger Transport Infrastructure Guidelines (2002)*.

As a longer term strategy the Commonwealth Government should develop Commonwealth State Government Agreements on passenger transport infrastructure and operational subsidies.

TOR 5 The role of Commonwealth Government legislation, taxation, subsidies, policies and other mechanisms that either discourage or encourage public passenger transport

There are a number of areas that the Commonwealth is currently active in that, if refined, could act as incentives to passenger transport patronage:

- A reinvigoration of the Commonwealth funded travel behaviour change project, Travelsmart, to facilitate change and reduce the private vehicle as the primary method of transport. A commitment needs to be made to ensure the program is available in rural and regional areas
- Broad environmental planning policies that reset passenger and active transport as priorities, such as mandating parking requirements for urban developments based on maximum spaces rather than minimums
- Policies on congestion taxes, parking levies and other mechanisms should also be applicable to regional centres. However, any income should subsidise transport options and opportunities for parking outside of the urban centres.

All environmental policies and legislation must ensure a process that supports sustainable passenger transport options; provides disincentives for private vehicle ownership; and supports a reduction in private vehicle kilometres travelled. For example changing the current fringe benefits tax (FBT) arrangements that create incentives for private vehicle usage and high kilometres travelled. As stated by NCOSS "...the current Australian Government tax incentives promote increased car usage, and work at cross purposes to government and community efforts to encourage more environmentally and socially sustainable forms of transport" (p 2006)¹⁰. To support this the FBT rules should be altered to prevent employers from providing vehicles to individual employees in employment packages.

TOR 6 Best practice international examples of public passenger transport services and infrastructure

There are a variety of best practice transport models that offer improvements or alternatives to regular scheduled services.

Integrated transport planning

The purpose of Integrated Regional Transport Plans (IRTP) are to guide transport investment in a region through providing a balance between a region's future needs for public transport, freight (including rail, road, air

¹⁰ Council of Social Services NSW (2006), '*Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's Future Oil Supply and Alternative Transport Fuels*'.

and sea), general motor traffic, walking and cycling (Queensland Government, no date)¹¹. IRTP also incorporate integrated land use and transport planning processes that facilitate the design of healthy urban developments that integrate cycling, walking and passenger transport opportunities.

Land use and transport planning has a key role to play in delivering social, economic, and environmental sustainability. ...by shaping the pattern of development and influencing the location, scale, density, design, and mix of land uses, planning can help to facilitate an efficient transport and land use system by reducing the need to travel; reducing the length of journeys; making it safer and easier for people to access services; reducing the impact of transport on communities; improving freight access to key terminals and improved freight flows; providing for the efficient distribution of goods and services to business and community; providing a choice of travel modes; and ensuring flexibility to meet the demands of a changing economy and market environments (Australian Transport Council 2003)¹².

Integrated transport planning offers a sustainable approach to travel behaviour and facilitates the establishment of active and passenger transport for both the long and short term. This type of planning also educates a range of key players, such as planners, engineers and developers in the importance of healthy, inclusive communities.

Transport orientated developments

Transit Oriented Developments (TOD) are mixed use medium to high density residential, or commercial developments that integrate walking, cycling and are focussed around a passenger transport hub. A TOD aims to reduce private vehicle usage in a liveable community setting. The 'Reconnecting Perth' TOD won awards for excellence from the Planning Institute of Australia in 2005 and 2006 (Department of Planning & Infrastructure 2008)¹³.

Demand responsive transport & telematics

Demand responsive transport (DRT) provides flexible transport via a booking service. The main driver of the service is passenger need. DRTs are a mix between a taxi and a scheduled bus service as they service areas but do not always follow the same route. Telematics are a combination of information and communication technology and mobile devices. Telematics are more commonly used in the transport industry for communications between dispatch and drivers, and the organisation of routes. The Federal Department of Communication, Information Technology and the Arts – ITOL program has already provided funding to develop DRT software for Great Community Transport's SmartLink transport project¹⁴. NRSDC encourages the Commonwealth Government to investigate a more general application of the service and associated

¹¹ Queensland Government (no date), 'South East Queensland Integrated Regional Transport Plan', accessed 4/3/09 < http://www.transport.qld.gov.au/resources/file/ebca09452f643ff/Pdf_irtp_part01.pdf>

¹² Australian Transport Council (2003), 'National Charter on Integrated Land Use and Transport Planning', accessed 3/3/09
<http://www.atcouncil.gov.au/documents/pubs/National_Charter_ATC_MAY_03.pdf>

¹³ Department of Planning & Infrastructure (2008) 'Transit Oriented Development', accessed 3/3/09, <<http://www.dpi.wa.gov.au/cityregionalplanning/15677.asp>>

¹⁴ <http://www.smartlinktransport.org.au/>

¹⁵ VicRoads (2009), 'Park and Ride', accessed 3/3/09 <<http://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/Home/PublicTransportAndEnvironment/PublicTransportOnRoads/ParkAndRide.htm>>

technologies. DRT and telematics, in conjunction with IRTP, can provide increased benefits to rural and regional communities by facilitating higher frequency corridors between towns with supporting DRT systems for localised and connecting transport systems. A properly implemented demand responsive transport system can overcome the shortcomings of current schedule based systems – and make greater investment in passenger transport more viable in the future.

Park & ride

As supporting infrastructure park and ride facilities provide efficiencies along transport corridors by facilitating the use of rail or bus transit networks through the provision of parking. This transfers parking demand from inner city to outer suburban locations (VicRoads 2009)¹⁵