

Inquiry Secretary
North East Railway Corridor Inquiry
Parliament House
HOBART TAS 7000

Ross Harris

30th October 2018

SUBMISSION TO LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL INQUIRY INTO NORTH-EAST RAILWAY CORRIDOR

Submission addresses the following terms of reference:

- The feasibility of the proposed Lilydale-Turners Marsh tourism railway.

I offer this submission to argue why the current compromise deal between the 'rail trail' plan and heritage railway plan offered by the State Government should be amended to incorporate the railway tunnel at Tunnel as part of the heritage railway segment of the North East Railway Strategic Infrastructure Corridor.

There has been much discussion and debate about the future use of the North East railway corridor between Coldwater Creek Junction and Scottsdale. The proposed demolition of the railway into a 'Rail Trail' (requiring permanent removal of railway track infrastructure), has not proven popular in the North East and has placed a divisive wedge between the community and its local council. The group Diesel Traction Tasmania, trading as 'Launceston and North East Railway', has sought to fulfill one of its aims of preserving heritage Tasmanian rolling stock and has proposed to reinstate a section of line as a functional tourist railway as an alternative.

In Tasmania the tourist and heritage railway sector attracts around 30 000 visitors per year (*Tourist and Heritage Railways in Tasmania, TATRAIL, 2012*). Dominant players include the Don River Railway and Redwater Creek Steam Railway in the northwest, and the Tasmanian Transport Museum in the South. I have not included the West Coast Wilderness Railway in this discussion as it is a commercially-run tourist attraction which is owned and operated by the State Government. There are major differences between this and tourist & heritage railways which generally rely on volunteers, the sale of tickets, and fund-raising to maintain and restore rolling stock and track infrastructure. Both types however, fall under National Rail Safety Regulations in terms of operating and maintenance requirements.

In March this year the Hodgman Government made a commitment to assist these groups in re-gaining access to the Tasmanian rail network, which they previously had until Pacific National withdrew access in 2006. The Government has stated that it recognises the potential for the sector to grow and this will occur when access to the network has been achieved. Unlike other markets, tourist and heritage railways do not compete against each other for business but rather, complement each other and

spread the visitor's dollar further. This is the case in Britain where numerous heritage railways attract international tourists who travel to a region and visit each railway and therefore spend much more money whilst visiting that region.

Earlier this year the Minister for Infrastructure announced a 'compromise deal' that would have both the Launceston and North East Railway and 'rail trail' proposal use separate portions of the North East Railway corridor. The railway segment is to occupy the line from Turners Marsh to Lilydale. Unfortunately the tunnel was not included in the heritage railway segment. This decision will have a detrimental effect on the Launceston and North East Railway's ability to develop a sustainable heritage railway product. The tunnel should be incorporated into the heritage railway first stage plan and the railway experience extended through the tunnel to the Golconda Road level crossing or to Wyena.

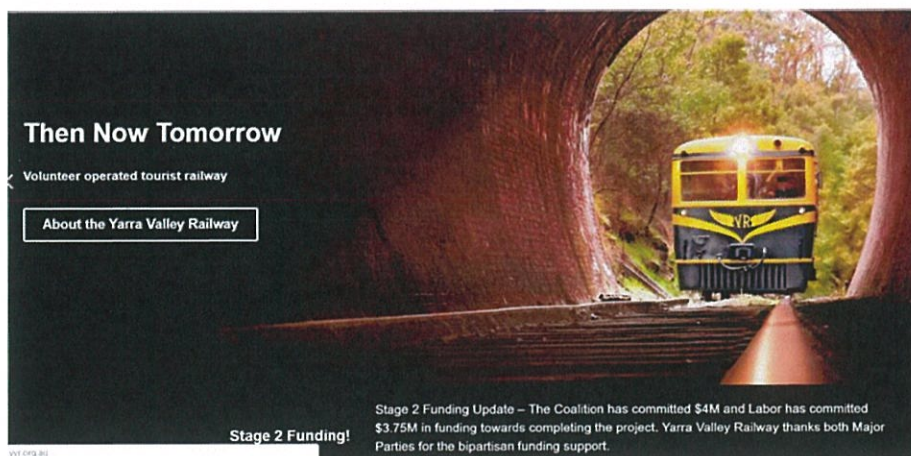
The Launceston and North East Railway proposal has the potential to revitalise the Scottsdale region, in much the same way as the Yarra Valley Railway has revitalised the Healesville region in Victoria. This particular railway is the model on which the Launceston and North East Railway can base its operational style. There are many things that both railways have in common. The Yarra Valley Railway is a single track railway that runs for approximately 7 kilometres between Healesville and the Tarrawarra Winery. The North East Line has been assessed as having as good as – if not better condition – of track as the Yarra Valley Line, for the purposes of running a diesel railcar over it (Venn, 2016). The Yarra Valley Railway attracts thousands passengers per year and makes a substantial contribution to the local economy. A single, light-weight diesel railcar is used to carry passengers. The railway passes through an historic tunnel which is a feature of the line. It has achieved the necessary National Rail Safety accreditation to perform its current operations and is presently working on expansion of operations with the support of the local community and surrounding businesses.



The Yarra Valley Railway operates a heritage diesel railcar along a 7 km section of railway between Healesville and the Tarrawarra Winery. There are many similarities between this and the Launceston and North East Railway's plan (O'Brien/Yarra Valley Railway).

For the Launceston and North East Railway's first stage proposal to be successful, it must incorporate the tunnel. There are only three other heritage rail experiences in Australia that feature a tunnel. These are located at Lithgow in New South Wales, the Kuranda line near Cairns in Queensland, and the Yarra Valley Railway at Healesville. Railway tunnels bring great pleasure and excitement - particularly to children, who are reminded about such fantasies such as the 'Harry Potter Express'. Adults recall stories featuring tunnels such as 'Murder on the Orient Express'. A tunnel can be an additional motivation for the visitor to ride the train. It can generate more interest than a train travelling over high bridges, and tunnels have a greater romantic appeal.

In Tasmania this was highlighted last year when the owner of the property on which the old Mt Rumney railway tunnel is located, advertised a public open day to showcase their primary production facility which incorporates the tunnel. With the amount of interest generated on social media, the owner eventually had to restrict the number of visitors to those who had a direct business interest in their facility, to help maintain crowd control within the tunnel. This was evidence that people always love a railway tunnel and the interest is best maximised when a train is allowed to operate through it. When the Derwent Valley Railway operated public excursions from Hobart to Parattah in the Tasmanian Midlands, many passengers noted the journey through the Rhyndaston tunnel as a highlight of their trip. The train crew would turn the carriage lights on a few hundred metres before entering the portal, and there was an air of excitement among passengers on approach to the tunnel and on an uphill grade with the locomotives working at full power.



The Yarra Valley Railway uses its historic tunnel heavily in its marketing. The tunnel is featured on the Railway's internet homepage (O'Brien/Yarra Valley Railway).

It is imperative that the tunnel is included in the Launceston and North East Railway first stage of development. It will guarantee the railway's maturity into a sustainable attraction and will be a substantive point of difference that no other heritage railway in Tasmania can offer. The tunnel width and height is suitable for the Launceston and North East Railway's diesel railcar. Indeed, the same railcar has worked tourist trains

through the same tunnel previously. The solid stonework lining the tunnel has remained untouched for 129 years and the only alterations to the loading gauge (tunnel capacity by width and height) took place in 1998/99 when the then-rail network operator lowered the tunnel floor to allow for greater height capacity for freight rolling stock.



The tunnel on the Yarra Valley Railway is a major feature of the journey (O'Brien/Yarra Valley Railway).

There are major issues with the proposal to incorporate the tunnel into part of the rail trail that have until now, not been addressed publicly. At 740 metres long, the tunnel presents a potential danger if converted to cycling/walking/horse riding use. Being dark, cold and slippery throughout, the tunnel could inhibit access for emergency services if a walker/rider/cyclist was to fall or sustain injuries whilst inside the tunnel. Both tunnel portals are located some considerable distance from roads and are themselves located in deep and long cuttings enclosed by thick vegetation.

With portions of the tunnel floor wet for much of the year, the surface presents a major health and safety risk regardless of how the surface can be treated. Weather it is concreted, bitumen sealed or provided with a gravel surface it will likely always be wet and slippery, presenting a real danger to those who walk, ride horses or ride bikes through it. With some bike riders travelling at speed into the tunnel, the potential for a head-on blind collision with walkers and/or horse riders is high, and given that most of these types of users do not wear high visibility protective clothing, the potential for such collisions is increased (*Horses, Bicycles Not A Good Trail Mix, Starks, 1997*).

Whereas if the tunnel is left as part of the railway corridor, all patrons will remain enclosed and seated within a 48 seat well-lit diesel rail car, travelling at consistent speed from one end of the tunnel to the other. The existing railhead sits on sleepers above the tunnel floor, and the wet conditions have no limiting effect on rail performance or the ride of a passenger railcar travelling over them. Railway engineers have informed the Launceston and North East Railway that the sleepers throughout the tunnel will remain in satisfactory condition provided they *remain* in

situ (Vanselow and Martin 2017). The tunnel will be off-limits to pedestrian access and will only be traversed by heritage diesel railcar or other railway rolling stock under normal railway operating conditions.

Converting the tunnel into the proposed 'rail trail' will mean only a limited and exclusive set of people will ever be able to experience it. That is, people with good mobility, people who are 'fit', and who have access to high-quality bikes, horses, or those who are fit for a long bush walk. This means it is a particular type of patron who generally has a high disposable income, not the more common demographic of those who visit Tasmania's regions (*Tasmanian Visitor Survey*). Maintaining the tunnel as part of the railway on the other hand will mean a much broader reach of people can enjoy it. With a tunnel experience and a direct link to the Bridestowe Lavender Farm, the Launceston and North East Railway has the potential to offer a superior product than other heritage railway attractions in Tasmania. At minimum there ought to be a moratorium on track removal until such time that the Launceston and North East Railway has not demonstrated an increase in tourism in the north east. This will be impossible if the track is removed. Future plans to extend the attraction would also not be possible if the track is gone from those sections.



A tourism project can generate on-going activity through the involvement of volunteer who gain skills in a broad range of areas. The involvement of volunteers is highlighted on the Yarra Valley Railway's webpage (Yarra Valley Railway)

Tasmania's north east is desperate for a tourist attraction that is not just a 'passive' attractor (like bike paths or 'rail trails') and one that does not heavily rely on good weather to be useable. It needs attractors that are 'active' or interactive with the visitor (*Tasmanian Visitor Engagement Strategy, DSG 2016*). An attraction where the visitor is given an experience that offers sensory stimulation and nostalgia. A heritage railway with a tunnel can offer just that requirement. Whilst the proposed rail trail would be free to access by the consumer (but at on-going cost to the rate-payer), it is completely dependent on the consumer's recollection of its existence, the consumer's need to use that particular facility (as opposed to using other established

paths and trails around the place), and a well-developed plan for entry and exit points (where to park the car, for example).

A short to medium length tourist and heritage railway experience on the other hand, can generate a 'spark' in the consumer's mind as they may drive by or cross a level crossing. They may see advertisements about it or mentions of it on social media, and they may be aware of friends and family who have experienced it. The consumer may be looking for activities to occupy the kids on weekends or school holidays, and will be looking for something that is affordable, accessible, and easy to get to. Tourists receive a greater experience when they partake in activities that they can experience and then share that experience with others i.e. friends and family, via social media such as sharing images on Facebook or Instagram. A passive walking/cycling track does not cut it for this type of interactive experience. The railcar has capacity to carry cyclists and their equipment once direct rail access to Launceston is available.



Heritage railways like the Yarra Valley Railway attract a broader cross-section of visitors (O'Brien/Yarra Valley Railway).

It is vital that younger generations, particularly in outlying regional areas such as the north east, have the opportunity to remain living in the region rather than moving to the cities such as Launceston or Hobart. Young people in the Scottsdale region who have an interest in pursuing vocational areas such as engineering, mechanics, panel beating, plumbing, painting, carpentry, upholstery, sheet metal work, tourism, hospitality, customer service, marketing, bus driving, train driving, desktop publishing, website building, can gain experience by involvement with or exposure to the Launceston and North East Railway project.

When younger people move to the cities in search of employment and work experience, it is a catastrophe for the region; it is yet another nail in the coffin for economic growth and community involvement (*Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003*).

The LNER proposal presents a chance to reverse that trend for the north east. The rail trail proposal on the other hand, offers no such opportunity for young people to gain experience in those vocations mentioned. It is merely a foot/cycle path that is passive, is completely dependent on good weather and is in the background of people's minds, not at the front of people's minds like the Launceston and North East Railway proposal has the potential to be.

Amending the 'compromise deal' to have the tunnel incorporated into the Launceston and North East Railway plan will give the Railway the appeal it needs to become established as the major visitor attraction for the North East. It will provide something unique and un-replicated elsewhere in Tasmania. Therefore the initial heritage railway stage should be from Turners Marsh to the Golconda Road level crossing or Wyena, as this section incorporates the tunnel.



A popular 'Meme' used on social media to demonstrate the economic activity a heritage rail attraction can provide a community.

I urge the committee to consider this once-only opportunity to ensure the heritage of the tunnel is retained and that its value for tourism is maximised for the full benefit of the region.

Ross Harris.