

MEETING TO DISCUSS TOURIST AND HERITAGE RAILWAY OPPORTUNITIES

Meeting on 25th January - between the General Manager following the presentation by Mr Brett Whelan from Yarra Valley Railway

Present:

Mr Michael Stretton (General Manager),

Mr Robert Ravens (Bridestowe Lavender Farm - investing \$10m into accommodation, as well as having 85,000 tourists per annum),

Mr Chris Martin, Structural and Civil Engineer and President of Tasmania Tourist and Heritage Rail (at present 8 operating organisations),

Mr Stuart Bryce, (Owner of Providence Vineyard and President of the North East Residents and Farmers),

Ms Erica Cabalzar, (business representative and investor in rolling stock)

Ms Wendy McLennan, Community Engagement Officer for Launceston and North East Railway and member of the North East Residents and Farmers Association.

It was appreciated that you were able to fit us into your extremely busy schedule. As events have unfolded with the state election a deferral of our meeting for two months would have meant that you and Councillors would not have been informed about

- the progress of the North East Rail Corridor
- the need to retain the \$40m rail infrastructure (43kms in the Launceston Municipality)
- the future benefits for Launceston Council.

Our group was also able to inform you about the Labor Party Policy and the thrust to have tourist and heritage railway experiences throughout Tasmania with passenger access to the main lines.

In 2006 a decision was made by TasRail to cease passenger access to the main line. The reasons for this have never really been clarified. Tasmanian Railway lines are the most underused in Australia and no valid reason has been put forward as to why these lines cannot be accessed by tourist and heritage rail.

As demonstrated to Council in the address given by Brett Whelan, tourist and heritage railways in Victoria had over 800,000 visitors in 2017. They are run largely by volunteers and bring economic viability and jobs to the regional areas where they operate. He stated that initially the Victorian government invested in these operations but after an establishment period they are self-sufficient. There is also a high percentage of tourists from Asia using those heritage rail networks.

This directly correlates with the high visitor numbers from Asia to Tasmania and the development of the \$260m Launceston City Deal which is touted to attract more overseas students. As Prof Calford stated it will turn Launceston into a university city. The investment of \$5.4m of Launceston Council Funds into this project means that it would be pertinent for your Council to look at the flow on effects from the increase in visiting families and friends and how they will be entertained while they are here. The tourist and heritage

railway experience will assist to fill that niche.

The future development of several hotels in Launceston with at least two directly catering for the Asian market is another reason to consider tourist and heritage railway experiences. As Brett Whelan stated - these tourists spend only 2-3 nights in one place and are taken in large groups with an interpreter to each scenic spot. The railway would cater for these large groups and provide for their special cultural requirements.

As Robert Ravens pointed out there is a disconnect between attractions in Launceston and the North East. In Launceston the three main hot spots are - The Cataract Gorge, the Tamar River and the Penny Royal. The Dorset region has three significant tourism drawcards - Bridestowe Estate, Barnboughle and Lost Farm golf courses and Derby mountain biking. Tourists come to the North East to experience one of the three and there is no connectivity or synergy between them. Maybe some B&B's, Woolworths and fuel sellers got some benefit but as a whole the respective groups come and go without a trace. Robert also pointed out that the township of Lilydale is slowly going backwards due to government indecision.

The tourist and heritage rail has the power to link the three because of its intrinsic charm and the ability to "bundle" tours.

It was stated that the major factor as to why tourist and heritage railways have not received a high profile in Tasmania is due to access to the mainlines. With this obstacle removed with the Labor Party Policy, (see attached), there is no impediment to having tourist ship commuters from George Town to Launceston as well as to the North East link services. There would also be the potential in future to have special event trains to bring passengers from the South or the North West.

It is disappointing that the Tourist bodies in Tasmania have totally excluded tourism and heritage rail experiences from the T21 paper, despite there being 8 operating bodies around the state.

Mr Hodgman in April 2017 stated that he was open to diversity. It is now time for the tourist product for Tasmania to be more inclusive of this opportunity which will not only provide new experiences but enable the traveller to move around the state without having to be dependent on bus or car services and do so in the knowledge that their safety is being considered.

The following paper was prepared in relation to the Tourism situation in Tasmania.

Tourism Boom

Tasmania is in the middle of a tourism boom. In a recent poll - 45% said the best thing was the scenery, 31% nature, 13% heritage and history and 11% food and drink.

Major attractions are groaning at the seams. Well-known attractions are heaving with visitors, airports are experiencing their busiest days ever and even our roads

are packed with visitors who sometimes don't seem too sure exactly where they are heading.

The risk is that some of our key attractions are being loved to death. Already Port Arthur has raised the issue of visitor flow through the site on days when cruise ships are visiting.

High levels of visitation place additional pressure on visitor infrastructure. If we are to remain a destination valued for its unspoiled nature and relaxed lifestyle, these are issues to be mindful of.

Brigid Heywood - University of Tasmania Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research - stated that Tasmania needed to take a collaborative whole-of-state approach to maintain the tourism boom and expand it to some of the state's areas that haven't necessarily felt the tourism boom. Tasmania needed to ensure that the benefits of the boom are spread around the state. There are ample opportunities for growth in many areas of the state currently not firmly on the tourism circuit.

Tasmania Brand

The brand is the place, its not Cradle Mountain that is the place. Tasmania is the brand and it is important that we sell the whole state. David Adams Professor at the Australian Innovation Centre said the key was looking at areas of strength and building on them.

Strong theme by most Tasmanians that overdevelopment and too many visitors will affect the Tasmanian Brand. People visit to see wilderness not a dumbed down version of a theme park for the wealthy. Development in National Parks and Wilderness areas will destroy the very thing that people are coming to see.

The brand is liked because 70% are here for second visit. Skyscraper hotels, increased runway lengths and promise of charter flights put this at risk.

Mass Marketing

The state should position itself as a high-end tourism destination rather than trying to pitch to the mass market or to backpackers. We should not be seeking to continue the boom but rather manage and maintain it sustainably so the quality of experience that Tasmania offers - for luxury and budget travel remains top notch.

There are currently pressures from government and parts of industry to create a mass influx of visitation.

Mass tourism is a poor alternative to small specialised facilities offering high quality and world leading design with high-yield returns to the state and complementary to our established values. Small specialist tourism benefits Tasmania while mass tourism is fickle and can disappear as quickly as it comes.

The Challenge

CEO Tourism Chief John Fitzgerald said the tag line 'go behind the scenery' offers tourists a mix of heritage and culture. Allowing people to smell the roses.

The challenge is how we are going to manage our future rather than just letting it play out. focus on quality over quantity.

Future Needs

What is called for is careful, inclusive and long-term strategic planning to ensure our tourism industry remains the best in the nation. We cannot afford to become complacent.

We need to focus on training and ensure staff are trained to the highest standards and given the skills they need to provide a high-class welcome to visitors

We need to make sure that visitor facilities are modern and able to cope with the numbers of people using them.

It is important to make sure that we make the most of our popularity, present and in the future. We need to ensure that all Tasmanians have a chance to benefit from increased spending and visitation and that every part of the state has a chance to showcase its charms.

Investment in the Regions

Tourism industry council of Tasmania Chief Executive Luke Martin said there were still areas of tourism in the state that had not be properly looked at. We would love to see some really good investments in the regions.

We should be focused on backing original ideas which play on our ample strengths. Our best assets are already well known and in danger of being loved to death. Building the viability of tourism in our regions makes sense as a source of continued growth and as a way of encouraging people to linger longer and spend a few nights off the well-worn path.

We have the chance to capitalise on some of our lesser-known attractions. Better and more strategic marketing is a good first step, but more can be done. It needs to be supported with long-term investment in tourism infrastructure, business support, development and training.

Giving our tourism industry a broader base will enhance sustainability and provide some insulation against the sometimes fickle nature of the market.

Funding

Federal politician Darren Chester wrote in the Australian on 3rd January – that he was stunned by lack of long-term financial commitment to the regional development portfolio for the last 20 years.

There has been a history of short-term grant programs, largely rolled out as election sweeteners with no certainty of funding for the public or private sector from year to year. The lack of transparency surrounding some regional development funding allocations further erodes community confidence in the political system. Regional development programs rely on the annual lobbying efforts of MP's and minister of the day.

We need a 10 year rolling program of regional development funding that would allow local councils, state governments and community organisations to develop strategic plans, safe in the knowledge that a dedicated federal funding stream would be available to partner their investments. Locked-in, on-going funding is needed if we are serious about driving regional growth and taking congestion pressure off our cities.

The place to start is the untested Regional Growth Fund, which has \$270 million in unallocated funding waiting on a decision on the eligibility criteria and funding guidelines.

As the new Minister McVeigh should target the visitor economy in regional areas and allocate the entire funding package to improved infrastructure to support tourism growth outside capital cities.

Regional Australia is blessed with outstanding natural attractions but the infrastructure to drive the visitor economy forward is often poor or non-existent.

Launceston Council Consideration

Liaise with the Tourism advisors on the future direction of tourism around the North of the state and ensure that heritage rail opportunities are included in the mix of tourism products offered. At present there is a strong push for cycle tourism to the exclusion of the North East line. Heritage rail opportunities on this line would not only broaden the tourism base, but would link into the whole-of-state approach.

Support the establishment of a State Government working group to put forward an economic assessment and detailed study into the establishment of tourist and heritage railway services on the mainline and other disused/closed areas of the Tasmanian Rail Network: This study to include the West Coast Wilderness Railway and resource sharing to aid the development of mainline tourist/passenger rail.

To work with the State Government to target funding from the Federal Regional Growth Fund to ensure the continued viability of tourist and heritage rail for the state over a ten year period.

Prepared by Wendy McLennan
12 Jan 2018.