

Tamar Bicycle Users Group

Submission

Legislative Council Government Administration Committee 'B'

North East Railway Corridor Inquiry

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North East Railway Corridor Inquiry

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This submission supports the development of the North East Rail Trail (NERT) on the North East Rail Corridor (from Launceston to Scottsdale – preferred option) and supports the State Government's initial compromise position of the Rail Trail from Scottsdale to Lilydale Falls and an off-road trail connecting Lilydale and Lilydale Falls.

Tamar Bicycle Users Group, (TBUG) is a community organisation with around 550 members and supporters across Launceston and surrounding regions. TBUG organises recreational rides, provides training, runs events and advocates for improved infrastructure and the development of a cycling culture.

Summary

The North East Rail Trail is:

- based on proven examples worldwide
- is shovel ready to go as soon as the necessary approvals are achieved
- has a backlog of pent-up demand
- has wide community support
- is solidly based on growing markets based on future demands rather than old markets based on nostalgia
- protects the physical and heritage values of the corridor
- is not dependent on high-level regulatory requirements or volunteer workforce
- is fully funded has very low ongoing maintenance costs
- will provide local health and economic activity with a strong multiplier effect and
- has been independently assessed by Infrastructure Tasmania and the Department of Treasury and Finance. *"Market trends, particularly increased tourism in Tasmania and the growing demand for cycling, support this proposal. The project has the potential to deliver significant local economic benefits, depending on the level of demand and investment by businesses, particularly local businesses"* (Tasmania's North east Rail Corridor. Assessment of the Launceston and North East Railway and Rail Trail Proposals, July 2018).

This same assessment has identified substantial and significant risks and underestimates of the initial and ongoing costs in the Launceston and North East Railway's assessment of the viability of a heritage railway to the level that we submit must rule it out as an alternative to the Rail Trail proposal.

Background

This development will provide a 68km off-road trail with gradients that are suitable for all levels of riders and walkers. These provisions will ensure that the trail meets the expectations of a Rail Trail and will guarantee its attraction as a world class trail.

Around the world and across Australia, local communities are taking advantage of disused rail routes to develop bicycle trails. Rail Trails are an experience that people associate with off-road well graded trails that are well serviced by local cafes, overnight accommodation and beautiful rural landscapes with historical and natural interpretation. Rail Trail riders tend to travel slowly, require a low-stress experience by being separated from roads, apart from the occasional road crossing, and require gentle gradients.

An introductory ride on the initial section of the Trail was conducted by TBUG on 30 September 2012 to provide feedback to the Scottsdale Rotary Club on the surface and facilities required for the trail. Formal feedback from the 200 riders who took part was highly supportive of the trail. TBUG has subsequently run rides on the trail and supported the Rotary Club of Scottsdale with joint biannual working bees on the trail.

Spending money in the local economy is an integral part of a rail trail experience.

There are multiple advantages of these trails:

- local contractors are engaged in construction and maintenance.
- local business activity is generated in hospitality, tourism and additional specialist support services such as bike hire, supported tours, maintenance and guiding.
- tourists looking for active holidays in new areas are attracted to the region.
- diverse economic activity is generated in regional areas, often disadvantaged, for relatively low public and private capital expenditure.



Cafe, Murray to Mountain Rail Trail

A 2009 study of the Murray to Mountains Rail Trail found that rail trail visitors spent an average of \$244 per day over Easter on accommodation, food, entertainment and other expenses in the Bright region of Victoria. (*Beeton S, Cycling in Regional Communities: A Longitudinal Study of the Murray to the Mountains Rail Trail, La Trobe University School of Management*). A survey in

2011 found that the 150 km Otago Rail Trail in New Zealand sustains 121 full-time equivalent jobs and contributes \$NZ12.28m to the Otago economy (*Otago Rail Trail User Survey 2011/12*). Since these surveys were undertaken, rider numbers have increased, thus increasing the economic benefit as new services are developed and existing ones expand.

There is a growing market for low impact, experience based tourism that also provides a healthy activity. Medium and long distance, supported and self contained bike touring meets these criteria. As the “baby boomers” retire, the market of “cashed up” active tourists and locals is increasing. Travelling nationally and overseas TBUG members have witnessed the increasing numbers of bicycle tourists around the world.

In 2009, the Scottsdale Rotary Club began working with the Dorset community to develop a multi-user surface along the Crown Land easement from Tonganah to Legerwood. Like the line from Launceston, the trail passes through beautiful State forest with a range of forest types, views and features such as spectacular granite cuttings of up to 20 metres. The development of the trail from Launceston to Scottsdale will be the vital link in creating a significant trail. The trail will then be of sufficient length to attract interstate and international riders in the same way as trails such as the Victoria’s High Country Trails and international Rail Trails such as the Otago Rail Trail in New Zealand, the Carilet in Spain and long distance touring routes such as The Way of St James across France and Spain and the EuroVelo network of routes across Europe.

Community Support

Tamar Bicycle Users Group fully supports the concept of the North East Rail Trail from Launceston to Scottsdale for the following reasons:

- The Trail will link with the initial section of the Trail from Scottsdale to provide a 71 km trail that will be iconic because of the experience it will be able to deliver.
- The Trail will provide a recreational resource for the North of Tasmania that will deliver health and fitness benefits to both the local and wider community through a safe and easily accessible off-road trail.
- The Trail will stimulate significant tourism based economic activity for the region as the trail becomes an internationally recognised Rail Trail.
- It will create significant start and end point economic benefits for both Launceston and Scottsdale. With Launceston as an entry point, the trail will more rapidly become an internationally recognised trail.
- There is also strong state wide and national support from Rail Trails Australia, Cycling Tasmania and Bicycle Network.

The *Cycling Strategy for Northern Tasmania 2016* quotes the National Visitor Survey (NVS) and International Visitor Survey (IVS) for the year ending September 2014 which estimates that nearly 3 million visitors (or 0.9% of all Australian visitors) participated in a cycling activity at least once during their trip. The percentage of cycle tourists has steadily increased since 2009, representing an increase in visitor numbers and visitor nights of 25% and 16% respectively from 2009 to 2014.

Locally, bicycle tourism is increasing as the world class mountain bike trails raise the awareness of Tasmania as a cycling destination.

The Cycling Strategy for Northern Tasmania is an important plan that quantifies the potential of cycle tourism in general and the NERT in particular. It identifies the development of the NERT from Launceston as a “High Priority”.

The NERT will provide a recreational resource for a wide variety of users. Typical users will be;

1. Local riders and walkers from communities along the Trail using mid-sections of the Trail for exercise and recreation.
2. Mid-distance riders and walkers who will use the full length of the trail for full day and overnight rides, riding the trail from the trail heads.
3. Long distance touring riders who will use the trail as a transit route to the North East and East Coast for longer bicycle tours.
4. Mountain bike riders accessing the new mountain bike trails at Holly Bank, Derby, the Blue Tier and around Launceston. The NERT will provide a family friendly ride that compliments the relatively more extreme experiences of the mountain bike facilities.



All these users will generate tourism and hospitality based economic activity in the region. The economic benefit of travel by bicycle is that the daily travel distances of 40-100km a day means that spending on accommodation, meals and snacks is widely spread across the region, not just at major centres. For example, on a typical five day bike tour around the region, TBUG members spent \$105/head/day. This spend was spread across 17 food, beverage and accommodation businesses throughout the North East. In 2016, seven members undertook a 200km 3 day tour in the North West of Tasmania. Average spend per head was \$265/head spread over 12 hospitality and tourist venues. In contrast, a tourism train would allow only restricted stops at predefined destinations.

The NERT has been assessed as having significant economic impact on the region. The Premier's North East Working Group chaired by then local MHR Brian Wightman identified 20 projects likely to contribute to the region's long term economic stability. The NERT project was ranked the fifth in terms of its potential to contribute to future economic development of the region and second out of 20 projects in terms of an immediately feasible project.

The strategic fit is well documented in regional plans and strategies for northern Tasmania. Scottsdale Rotary has been working with state agencies and government enterprises (Tourism, State Growth, Forestry and Sport and Recreation) to identify economic and tourism potential of the NERT and has identified strategic links such as the *Northern Tasmanian Regional Recreation Trails Strategy 2004*, *Trails Tasmania Strategy 2007*, *Tasmanian Mountain Bike Strategy* and *Tasmania's Innovation Strategy 2010* which emphasised promoting the 'livability' of the region.

North Tasmania Development commissioned an assessment of the conversion of the 90 km of disused railway line between Launceston and Billycock Hill into the North East Rail Trail. (*TRC Tourism February 2014 North East Rail Trail; Preliminary Demand and Economic Benefit Assessment*). It was concluded that five years after construction the North East Rail Trail could be expected to increase direct tourism expenditure in the region by \$3.5 million a year, generate flow on effects that added \$3.3 million a year to Tasmania's Gross State product and support 40 or more full time equivalent jobs. Greater economic and social returns could be expected over fifteen years of trail operation. Subsequently, funding was obtained to commence development of the Rail Trail.

Health Benefits

On May 5 2017 The Examiner reported the findings of the Social Health Atlas of Australia. This disturbing data showed that Tasmanians are overweight and do not exercise enough and that we have the highest levels of obesity in Australia. Two out of three Tasmanian's reported doing little or no exercise during the week. These statistics are alarming for the long term effects on Tasmanians' health and the cost of treating diseases brought on by life style choices that include insufficient exercise.

In New Zealand, the investment that the government has made in their network of 22 on and off - road trails has provided a social benefit calculated to be worth \$NZ 12m per annum. (*Evaluation of the New Zealand Cycle Trail, 2015 Estimates, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment*). These benefits were derived from reduced mortality benefits, commuting benefits and cost savings from diseases associated with physical inactivity.

The North East Rail Trail will provide an easily accessible facility for walking and riding. The surface and gently slope will allow for all abilities to start and continue taking up exercise. The free access to the trail at multiple points will allow individuals and families to travel to the trail or use it in their own local community.

Supporting Events

In August this year, the Rotary Club of Scottsdale held a two day Run and Ride event on the existing 26kms of rail trail from Scottsdale to the Billycock in which 266 local, national and international runners and 50 local riders took part. This event demonstrated the versatility of the trail for multiple users and its capacity to attract large numbers for events that have significant local economic impact.

The growing sport of Ultra Running uses long distance trails such as the NERT for events that attract runners from around Australia and overseas.

Rail/Ride and Shared Path Propositions

Various claims have been made by rail proponents, including Launceston Aldermen, for the rail to provide a "Rail-Ride" option for bike riders. These unsubstantiated claims have been made to justify a linkage between the rail and the Rail Trail. These claims are made with no evidence from market research or understanding of the desire for riders to ride bikes quietly through the environment, stopping at will, rather than be enclosed on a noisy rail car travelling from an isolated rail head. The Rail/Ride option would be more feasible if the rail journey was initiated in Launceston.

At its meeting on September 24th, the City of Launceston Council passed a motion recommending that the railway be extended past Lilydale to Wyena with some form of shared facility with the Rail Trail. The Motion appears to have been proposed as a response to pressure from rail supporters as it was not supported by any form of economic and engineering feasibility and is in direct contradiction to the Government's compromise decision.

Infrastructure Tasmania has investigated the possibility of shared use of the rail formation between the competing end-users, but found that excessive costs would be insurmountable (*Final Advisory Report October 2017, p 6*). This motion has caused further distraction and division within the community. Proponents of the Rail Trail had accepted the Government's compromise decision on the allocation of the corridor in order to progress the project and put an end to the community conflict. The proposal to discuss a shared facility that has already been dismissed as not feasible is a further example of unsubstantiated claims that have been made by the rail proponents.

In conclusion, TBUG trusts that this Inquiry take account of the many anomalies and unsubstantiated claims put forward by the rail proponents which have been exposed in the Infrastructure Tasmania report.

TBUG fully supports the Government's compromise decision and trusts that this Inquiry will also endorse that position based on the evidence of the success and potential of Rail Trails that has been provided.

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