

**TO:** Legislative Council Government Administration Committee 'B'

**FROM:** Mark and Sarah Hirst, Leaning Church Vineyard

**RE:** North East Railway Corridor Inquiry

**DATE:** 1 November 2018

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Dear Hon. Rosemary Armitage, Hon. Robert Armstrong, Hon. Ivan Dean, Hon. Craig Farrell, Hon. Jane Howlett, Hon. Tania Rattray and Hon. Jo Siejka,

As the owners of the multi-award-winning Leaning Church Vineyard in Tasmania's North East, we are extremely passionate about strategic and sustainable opportunities to increase visitor numbers and visitor spend in the region.

For the past decade, we have investigated and implemented a number of initiatives to boost profitability of tourism businesses in the North East, including collaborative marketing, development of a foraging food and beverage trail and the need for a large-scale investment to underpin a "hero" attraction.

After travelling to more than 40 countries around the world and visiting endless tourism businesses, we came away 100% convinced that a recreational trail offering a safe, secure and unique walking and cycling experience along the North East Rail Corridor was the best possible option for NE Tasmania.

We rode rail trails in New Zealand and South Australia, and interviewed business owners and regional leaders about the benefits of cyclists visiting their towns and businesses. We were immediately convinced, and remain convinced, that a rail trail will deliver the greatest regional, economic, social and environmental benefits.

The principal reason is that rail trails are considered "slow tourism", enabling every walker and cyclist to visit every attraction along the way, whether an art gallery, a cellardoor, an olive oil tasting facility, a berry farm, an antique store or a supermarket.

New businesses will open to service the cycling market, such as more cafes, pubs, B&Bs, bike hire and bike servicing facilities and more.

Our vineyard is located about 200 metres from the rail corridor just off Lalla Road on Brooks Road. There is no doubt that we support the option of an estimated 30,000 cyclists meandering towards our vineyard with the opportunity for each and every cyclist to visit our cellardoor for tastings and for lunch, ensuring that we are able to employ more locals and offer a unique and memorable visitor experience.

These cyclists will then stay at local B&Bs, eat in local restaurants, purchase wine to be shipped home, enjoy local beverages at the local pubs, hire bikes from local businesses, and importantly share their amazing experiences with the world to grow word-of-mouth brand awareness of our region.

They spend their money in the region over three to five days as they cycle along the corridor, not on a train ticket that results in a quick one-day visit to the region (no accommodation, maybe one meal, maybe a visit to three selected businesses).

We do not support one train per week travelling past our – and many other small businesses – that only stops at pre-determined businesses (which by coincidence happen to be owned by the heritage train supporters).

For the Lalla Road Art Gallery, the Rhododendron Gardens, Leaning Church Vineyard, Cherry Top Accommodation, Plover's Ridge Accommodation and the Pear Tree Accommodation – we all miss out as the train hurtles past to only stop at Providence Vineyard owned by Stuart Bryce.

Trains are not a solution to maximise spend and visitation in North East Tasmania.

After working in the Tasmanian rail industry, I have accumulated an enormous level of respect for the high levels of complexity, compliance and cost associated with managing a freight rail operation – let alone a passenger rail service.

The stringent requirements of the Office of the National Rail Safety Regulator, as well as the Australian Transport Safety Bureau and all state and federal legislation, are incredibly onerous. The cost associated with a \$250 million public liability insurance policy, engaging electrical engineers to be on call 24 hours seven days a week to manage and prevent level crossing failures, asset management teams to monitor track irregularities, vegetation management teams, compliance, risk management and safety, and much more is astronomical.

And in the case of an unplanned mainline derailment, who has the funds and expertise to secure the site, manage the crisis, deal with all relevant authorities such as ONRSR and ATSB, bring in cranes, repair locomotives, passenger carriages and track, and cover an insurance excess of up to \$1 million?

We love the romantic notion of passenger trains traversing Tasmania. However, the reality is that our population and level of tourism visitation does not sustain a profitable passenger rail enterprise – as proven repeatedly around the world.

Rail trails, on the other hand, have proven business models in terms of development, ongoing maintenance and economic impact.

Northern Tasmania Development completed a demand and economic benefit assessment for the North East Rail Trail between Launceston and Billycock Hill, showing \$6.8 million per year of economic benefit and the creation of 40 new jobs, growing to \$11.2 million per year after 15 years.

A Rail Trail Manager from New Zealand's Central Otago Rail Trail spoke to business owners in North East Tasmania a few years ago. She reported that pubs located along the rail corridor that had been closed for 30 years were now serving 100 meals three times a day seven days a week.

The township of Clare in South Australia's Clare Valley now has three bike hire and bike service businesses and local wineries and cafes say they have more visitors arriving via bike than car.

An Economic Analysis of Rail Trails in Victoria, Australia (by Sue Leeton from La Trobe University) concluded by saying:

***“Rail Trails offer enormous economic, social and environmental benefits to the wider community as well as the visitors (and other users) themselves. They need to be supported, but also better understood in terms of what they actually contribute and for whom, as it appears that we may have severely under-estimated their importance.”***

In the United States, the Rail to Trails Conservancy (RTC) who supports the development of Rail Trails through providing advice, assistance and advocacy, says: "Across the United States, trails and greenways are stimulating tourism- and recreation-related spending. Trail and greenway systems have become the central focus of tourist activities in some communities and the impetus for kickstarting a stagnating economy."

A Wisconsin study reported by the RTC found that lots adjacent to the Mountain Bay Trail sold at an average of nine percent higher than similar properties not so located, and that the trail-based lots sold much faster.

The Maine Report, a study examining the economic impacts of bicycle tourism in Maine, estimated that self-guided bicycle tourists spent US\$55 per day, while guided tour cyclists spent around US\$115 per day.

Sustrans, in the UK, recognises the social benefits of developing cycle tourism as being environmentally sustainable, reducing excess traffic (providing rural traffic-calming), making use of existing, under-utilised or redundant resources (such as disused rail lines), improved facilities for local people and enhancing personal health, fitness and wellbeing (Sustrans, 1999).

The international and national evidence is overwhelming that rail trails will deliver the social, environmental and economic benefits that North East Tasmania deserves and craves.

We have waited more than four years for a decision to be made about the future of the North East Rail Corridor. When Dorset Council submitted a funding application to the Federal Government for funds to construct the trail, the submission included a letter from the State Government signed by former Infrastructure Minister Rene Hidding confirming that the corridor would be handed to Dorset Council 'as is'. A second letter from TasRail confirmed that the state-owned Company had no immediate plans to reinstate freight on this line and it would hand its lease of the corridor back to the Crown.

On this basis, the submission was successfully awarded the funds to construct the rail trail.

The lack of decision making, the political interference and the dirty tricks that have resulted have been appalling.

And the biggest loser from this four years of indecision – all North East businesses.

Once the State Government passed the Strategic Infrastructure Corridors (Strategic and Recreational Use) Act 2016 and appointed Dorset Council as the corridor manager under the Act (enabling the rail trail to proceed), we, along with four other northern Tasmanian couples, invested significantly in freehold land and a business to service the anticipated cyclists.

We are devastated that this investment has cost our group more than \$160,000 (and significantly more in lost revenue) due to the inability of our State Government to make a decision on this project.

We are prepared to invest. We are prepared to have a crack in Tasmania. We are prepared to expand our business. But we can't under this ongoing uncertainty.

We are sick of inquiries. We are sick of the State Government making a decision and then launching another inquiry. We are sick of our business being boycotted by misinformation being spread by heritage train enthusiasts. We are sick of our business being given one-star reviews on social media sites by heritage train enthusiasts who openly write "we will never go to this business and we

encourage others to not go there because the owners want to rip up the railway line". We are sick of our family being personally vilified on social media.

And I am not prepared to spend another night crying in front of our children because of the horrendous personal attacks that have been written about us on community facebook sites. All because a decision has not been made.

This issue has divided the community, and negatively impacted on businesses and people's lives. And it will continue to do so until the State Government makes a decision based on fact and economic prosperity - and enforces it.

At the end of the day, we just want to see more people visiting and spending in our region.

If the decision is trains, then we just have to face that there will be little or no benefit for our businesses and many others.

But we will accept the decision and move on.

However, we urge the Legislative Council to make an urgent decision based on what is best for North East Tasmania, its residents, its businesses and its prosperity – and that is clearly a recreational trail that will enable locals to exercise; tourists to access a simply stunning part of the world to sip, savour, spend and enjoy; and local businesses to grow and employ more people.

We also urge the State Government to ensure that Dorset Council is able to meet its strict milestone reporting requirements to the Federal Government so that the funding grant is not lost, including that the project funds must be spent by the end of 2019.

While our preference remains that a rail trail extends from Inveresk to Scottsdale to meet the existing rail trail from Scottsdale to Billycock, opening up 100km of world-class walking and cycling track, we are open to supporting a shared option.

However, we do not want trains along Lalla Road where a number of businesses, including Leaning Church Vineyard, will be by-passed.

We are very happy to provide any additional information to support this written submission.

Yours sincerely



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