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Lachlan Regional Transport Committee submission to NSW 2018 Freight and Ports Plan

The Lachlan Regional Transport Committee Inc (LRTC) was established in 1983. It draws its membership from the outskirts of Sydney through the Central West of New South Wales to Dubbo, Parkes and Cootamundra. Members include fifteen local government councils, the Port of Port Kembla and individuals.

LRTC finds the Draft NSW 2018 Freight and Ports Plan to be very broad. Nevertheless, it raises issues of interest and concern to us.

Our submission refers to the section numbers and specific passages quoted from the Draft Plan as follows.

1.1

'This Plan will be guided by the 2013 NSW Freight and Ports Strategy, which was to be reviewed at five year intervals.' There is a progress report on strategic actions emanating from the 2013 plan in an appendix, but no mention is made of a matter of interest to LRTC, being the Cowra Lines. In 2013, the Cowra revival process was put up as a potential model, but no mention is made of it in the 2018 draft.

Also recalling the Cowra experience, this 2018 draft often mentions partnerships between industry and government, something that seems to have been unsuccessful in the Cowra case (perhaps because of the Government's \$0 contribution at the call for tenders). A revised plan should take account of this experience and lay a foundation for successful railway revivals.

In addition, although the 2013 Strategy gave some details about the option to complete the Maldon Dombarton rail link, there is no mention of the Maldon Dombarton link in the draft. This should be rectified in the final report along with recognition of the 2014 business case with its favourable benefit cost ratio and the increasing capacity constraints on the existing South Coast line as per TfNSW comment in October 2017 as to why the South Coast line would not be getting extra trains in the November 2017 new timetable, and recent comments made by Mr Lee Evans, Member for Heathcote in the Legislative Assembly. The final report could also include a note as to lessons learnt from the 2014 call for expressions of interest from the private sector which did not result in a bid acceptable to the NSW Government.

1.2

LRTC believes that safety should be the number one priority. Safety has taken on greater urgency recently with a rapid rise in the frequency of truck accidents, some of which have been spectacularly tragic.

1.8

Fixing Country Rail is said to 'eliminate connectivity constraints', but how successful has it been? A revised plan should be based on a thorough evaluation of Fixing Country Rail. There has only been one round of funding actually put into action and that was a pilot. The largest of the projects funded, the curiously ambitious Demondrille-Maimuru reinstatement, has not proceeded.

2.4

'Last mile' issues appear in several contexts through the draft. When labelled 'last mile' they exclusively address road freight issues. It may be worth pointing out that there are many 'last miles' preventing opportunities for rail freight. The Draft alludes to this issue when it refers to the lack of access (implying sidings and branch lines) for construction industry freight to use rail eg from quarries. Mention is also made of rubbish disposal in this respect.

On a related issue, the draft gives some attention to road freight productivity. It could usefully give some attention to improving rail freight productivity.

2.6

The draft sees intermodal terminals as having an important role in boosting rail freight, but there is no related policy and still no response by the Government to the Intermodal Taskforce Report, which has not been released.

2.9

The Melbourne-Brisbane Inland rail project is predicted to encourage the further development of intermodal terminals, but there is no plan to ensure that these are efficiently located and appropriate use is made of existing infrastructure, including branch lines. Serious questions have been raised about the long term viability of the Inland line given its service offering of 24 hours between Melbourne and Brisbane as opposed to 20 or 22 hours. This will require curves on new or upgraded track, with minimum radius of 1200 metres (as opposed to 800 or even 400 metres). The standard of 1200 metres was used in the 1910s (then 60 chains) for the construction of the Stockingbingal to Forbes line. The revised Plan should indicate the NSW Government’s position on that issue.

4.5

This section commits TfNSW to ‘work with industry to identify where specific regulations can be eased without impacting on safety or amenity, reducing the cost of moving goods in NSW’.

Here again safety should be a priority and the overall safety of the transport network should be the objective. There is a great disparity between the relatively low level of regulation applied to road transport and the very high level applied to rail. We would not wish to lower the safety of rail transport. However, when its potential to improve the overall safety of the transport system is recognised, it is time to look at models of regulation specific to rail operations which can increase the modal share of rail as they solve rail’s ‘last mile’ problems. At the same time as raising overall system safety standards, greater use of rail can sometimes be achieved using existing infrastructure without the cost of upgrading (as occurs under the short line model).

5.3

Fixing Country Rail is seen as productive upgrading, which is a good thing and has helped to increase grain on rail, but, as mentioned above, it is being delivered without apparent evaluation of its pilot and without a basis or commitment in policy.

LRTC commends the steps taken by the NSW Government to improve the efficiency of freight transport. We believe the revised Plan could become a platform for directing the further development of rail freight with more attention to heavy truck safety in particular. However, if it fails to address the issues raised above, opportunities will be missed and the Plan may quickly become irrelevant.

Thanking You

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LRTC Sec/Treas

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