

# The FRIENDS of the NORTHERN RAILWAY Inc.

P.O. Box 319, Armidale, NSW 2350. [www.fonr.org.au](http://www.fonr.org.au)

Presentation to Mr Jim Glasson

31st October, 2007

Director-General, Ministry of Transport

at Armidale

## CountryLink Passenger Train Services

### Armidale and Moree

The decision of December, 2003, to maintain the Xplorer passenger train service to Armidale and Moree in the wake of the Parry Inquiry was vital to the maintenance of adequate public transport for this region.

The Friends of the Northern Railway maintains a monitoring role and notes that despite our various complaints from time to time about details of the service, the trains continue to be well used and are appreciated by a significant cross-section of the community.

This presentation concerns the way the Armidale and Moree Xplorer service relates to the whole of the CountryLink Network as it now operates and considers whether improvements in the network service could benefit the marketing of this train and others.

The FONR looks forward to an era of renewed investment in regional passenger trains to meet the public transport needs of the future and to provide good environmentally friendly transport policy.

### Examples of CountryLink Network Problems

- **Timing.** There has been a series of small increases in travelling time for Countrylink trains over the past 15 years, sometimes in response to fears about danger at level crossings, resulting in timetables that look slow. The Armidale to Sydney XPT in 1987 took 7 hrs 50 min. The same travelling time was used for the Xplorer when it was introduced in 1993. Today the Xplorer takes 8 hrs 13 min to do the same journey, an increase of 23 minutes. This is not really acceptable in 2007. Other lines have been affected in a similar way.
- **Connexions.** Since the abolition of the overnight regional trains (mail trains) in 1988, followed by various cuts in service on some lines and the incremental slowing down of trains, it has become increasingly difficult for passengers to make connexions from one line to another, via Sydney or Strathfield or Broadmeadow, in an efficient manner. Those wanting to make journeys of moderate length between lines find they have to break their journey overnight at great expense. This eliminates CountryLink trains as a transport option for many would-be passengers.
- **The Canberra Cut-backs.** In mid 2003, the three trains per day Sydney to Canberra Xplorer services were cut back to two trains per day, apparently because of staff shortages. These services were only partly reinstated, so that on some days there are two trains and on others there are three. The ability to connect with trains on other lines varies from day to day. It has effectively eliminated train travel for students between Armidale and Canberra. This desultory provision of trains between the capitals of NSW and Australia is an embarrassment and needs urgent attention.

- **The Lismore Cut-back.** It is only 31 kilometres by rail from Casino to Lismore. This makes the decision of 2004 to terminate the former Murwillumbah XPT at Casino and leave the important university city of Lismore with no train seem very strange. The short Casino-Lismore segment is not burdened with bridges needing costly repairs and could easily be brought back into service. The passengers who use the connecting buses to get to Lismore and the Northern Rivers are subjected to a daily insult by CountryLink. Their coach does not leave Casino until after the train actually reached Lismore under the 2004 timetable. This kind of treatment leaves once-loyal customers angry and disaffected. It has a debilitating flow-on effect to passengers in all parts of the CountryLink network, including on the Armidale and Moree Lines. There is an urgent need to restore passenger train services to Lismore.

## Suggested Actions

1. Ministry of Transport to conduct a review of CountryLink timetables, obtaining from RailCorp advice on opportunities to reduce travelling times.
2. Ministry of Transport to conduct a review of arrangements for passenger connexions between CountryLink services and obtain independent advice and advice from RailCorp on proposed improvements.
3. In item 2. above, consideration should be given to provision of special seasonal overnight and evening trains similar to the Armidale overnight Xplorer that ran on weekends from 1993 to 1995.
4. Ministry of Transport to commission a study into the restoration of full 3-trains per day services to Canberra, including whether any additional rolling stock would be required and make recommendations.
5. Ministry of Transport commission an urgent detailed study with recommendations for the restoration of the XPT passenger train to Lismore.
6. A further wide-ranging study be carried out, with independent advice on how CountryLink services could be improved and extended with various options of minimum or no capital expenditure, moderate capital expenditure (say 2 new Xplorer units) or significant capital expenditure (say \$50 million).

## Other minor issues

1. The Telstra payphones were removed from CountryLink stations in 2006 and replaced with Siemens phones that do not take "Phonecards". They are also blocked against making Telecard calls. This should be rectified for customer convenience.
2. Many elderly passengers appreciate the booked luggage facility on CountryLink trains. It would be good if this were maintained in as convenient a way as possible with later cut-off times and less "discouragement" of its use.
3. The interior of Xplorer carriages needs to be better cleaned and maintained to keep the goodwill of customers.

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### Contact details:

#### Matthew Tierney

President

Tel: 02 6771 1678 (work)

Tel: 02 6771 1405 (home)

email: president@fonr.org.au

#### Paul Ashley

Vice-President

Tel: 02 6773 2348

Tel: 02 6772 8293

email: vice-president@fonr.org.au