

# FONR Newsletter

from The Friends of the Northern Railway

No. 13 September 2009

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## Xplorer service

We continue our core business of monitoring the performance of the Xplorer train. The FONR Committee has noticed some matters (for example the standard of meals seemed to deteriorate for a time but now seems to have recovered) but no major problems have come to our attention. The train is often full to capacity between Sydney and Tamworth, and patronage appears to be pretty good between Tamworth and Armidale which of course includes passengers for places north to Tenterfield, and also Inverell on Tuesdays.

In the absence of new freight developments, which remain elusive, the Xplorer is the sole user of the line from Armidale to Tamworth. Unfortunately, Shell recently announced its decision to stop using rail to bring petrol to Tamworth and use road tankers instead from November. This will reduce the freight support for the expense of maintaining the track and signals north of Werris Creek. On the other hand, more track improvements are being made in the Hunter Valley, which should lead to more separation of passenger and freight trains on dedicated tracks and, we hope, more reliable timekeeping.

Concession fare arrangements for pensioners and students were recently altered slightly: see later in this newsletter for more information.

The FONR Committee and the citizens of Armidale have fought hard over the years for the retention of the Xplorer train to Armidale, and we continue to value the important service it provides.

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## North-South Rail Corridor (again!)

We are still keeping an eye on the proposal for a northern inland rail route between Melbourne and Brisbane, coming up through Parkes. A letter from the FONR committee calling for commitment to the route and arguing for the superior national network it would help to establish was sent to the Prime Minister, the Federal Transport and Infrastructure Minister, Queensland and NSW Premiers and Transport Ministers, and our local State and Federal Members. Replies were received from all, mainly pointing to the inquiry being conducted by the Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC). A paper by our President, Greg Smith, outlining the rationale for public investment in rail in general and the need for investment in a northern inland rail route in particular was published in the April 2009 issue of *Railway Digest*. To our disappointment, however, the northern inland route did not figure in infrastructure disbursements in the Federal Budget. The July issue of *Railway Digest* summarises the state of play associated with the ARTC Report: the report clearly envisages problems, e.g. with crossing the Toowoomba Ranges, but there also seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge superior transit possibilities compared to the already-congested coastal route. When interpreting ARTC's reluctance to proceed with the project it is worth bearing in mind that they already have a major commitment of funds in the North Coast Route and any additional route would mean more expenditure. They would need to be convinced that the additional return in revenue would be greater than the additional costs of maintaining the two routes.

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# CountryLink concession fares

Concession fare arrangements were recently altered slightly (changes in *italics*):

**Pensioners holding Centrelink or Veterans' Affairs cards:** Four "travel vouchers" each calendar year, that is, four *free* single *economy* class journeys within NSW. A "single journey" includes changing trains, as long as you continue your travel on the same day. You can take these voucher journeys as first class instead of economy, but you then pay \$10, or 15% of the full peak season fare, whichever is higher, as previously. After using these four journeys, you travel at half fare.

**HOLDERS of Seniors cards:** You travel at half fare. So do people receiving various non-pension commonwealth benefits, such as unemployment.

**Students:** Various categories of school and tertiary students (including international tertiary students) travel at "student fare"; this seems to mean half fare, but CountryLink's website is not always clear. *Fulltime Australian and international tertiary students who do not fit into one of the categories receive a 15% discount from the full fare.*

**Bookings** for most kinds of concession fares, as well as full fares, can be made online at [www.countrylink.info](http://www.countrylink.info). But the website says "if you wish to book travel using Pensioner Travel Vouchers you will need to register for online booking beforehand by taking your concession card to a Countrylink travel centre, booking office or authorised travel agent and showing your card to a member of staff."

Besides booking online, you can book at the CountryLink Travel Centre at Armidale Railway Station (phone 6774 8630) or any manned station, or the CountryLink booking call centre (phone 132232).

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## A Message from the President, Greg Smith

### Public Liability Insurance

As I previously informed members, the New England Credit Union has offered to pay our next premium to an agreed insurer. This support is much appreciated and greatly assists us in maintaining our presence into 2010 and beyond.

### The FONR Committee

The committee retains largely the same membership it has had since the inception of FONR. It has been pruned down by some departures but there has been very little new blood (there are currently some vacant positions). New FONR members and new committee members in particular would be very welcome. We have thought about a presence in Markets in the Mall, but product liability insurance as well as public liability insurance is required for that. Perhaps we could just run an independent stall in the Mall on a weekday; it's a bit of a chicken and egg problem in that we need an infusion of support to give us the capability of building more support overall! So if we want FONR to continue its role as a rail advocacy group, now is the time for members to introduce others to the idea and perhaps contribute with the committee to stall and other activities.

### Lastly, a vote of thanks

The loyalty of the membership has been FONR's great strength; as a voluntary group we have a pretty long history and with a bit of fine tuning we may have quite a bit of history to experience yet.