



press clip

Transport terrible in the north

Inquiry hears of high cost of travel for TAFE students

Chris Calcino
ARM Newsdesk

A PARLIAMENTARY inquiry into regional transport access has heard Maclean High School students who attend TAFE are forced to spend almost \$25 for a return bus trip to Grafton.

The Northern Rivers Social Development Council's submission said extending regional concession tickets to more groups could solve the issue.

"Students attending Maclean High School and other high schools in the area who wish to study a single subject at TAFE in Grafton are forced to have private transport or pay unsubsidised transport fares because their bus pass does not cover this journey and they don't meet requirements for alternate concession arrangements," NRSDC transport development officer Alex Lewers wrote.

"This fare can be as high as \$24.60 return.

"This cost is prohibitive and anecdotally has stopped

students from taking courses they are passionate about."

Northern NSW Local Health District health promotion manager Jillian Adams told the inquiry the North Coast had "significant transport disadvantage", with households on average earning a third less than their city counterparts.

Several people called for the rail line between Casino and Murwillumbah to be reopened, including Milton Trott, who recalled the line's closure in 2004.

"I can see Casino becoming a rail transport hub for passenger rail," Mr Trott said.

"It's already becoming a freight hub.

"There is room near the intersection of the Sydney-Brisbane line where it meets the branch line to build the necessary infrastructure to stable rolling stock for a localised rail car service.

"At the other end at Murwillumbah, the same can be constructed there.

"Not only will this enterprise call for local employees to staff the passenger rail service, it will provide a raft of allied hospitality business opportunities for the towns."

Mr Trott said the "elephant in the room" was

whether investment should be made to extend the line to the Gold Coast Airport at Coolangatta.

"It seems incongruous that a major airport some 23km away can't be accessed by rail serving the North Coast," he wrote.

"If the line were to be extended past Condong with a bridge over the Tweed River, the service could then engage patrons in Tweed Heads and deliver people from as far away as Casino, to the airport."

Robin Spragg, a former Tweed Shire Council officer in charge of local transport for seniors, said substituting the Casino-Murwillumbah trains for a coach service in 2004 was a major backward step.

"Many older people cannot get into coaches, and once in they cannot move around, stretch their legs, get to a toilet or to a buffet," she said.

"The coaches were sold as serving more stops en route; however these stops amount to a bus stop, without the services, information, safety and comfort that comes from a railway station.

"The patronage of the services immediately declined, and I am not aware

that it has ever recovered.

"With such policies, the service usually declines to a token bus service, and then is closed finally for lack of use."

Northern Rivers Guardians president Scott Sledge advocated for a move towards light rail to reduce fossil fuel reliance.

"We believe that light rail is a viable and safe option for the future of transport in our region," he said.

"Please accept that government is needed to provide services for the whole community, not only for the wealthy investors here and overseas."

The inquiry is ongoing with a report due to come before Parliament by November 30.

“This cost is prohibitive and anecdotally has stopped students from taking courses they are passionate about.”

— Alex Lewers