



Cross Border Transport Taskforce

– Discussion Paper

Issued 27 February 2007



■ Background

Passenger rail services between Casino and Murwillumbah, consisting of a once-daily return XPT service, were suspended in April 2004 due to the high cost of ongoing maintenance to the line in the face of Federal funding cuts to NSW. The daily return train was replaced by more frequent road coaches, which continue today.

In June 2006, the NSW Government sought Federal Government support to jointly fund the \$150 million restoration of the rail line on a dollar-for-dollar basis. The Federal Government rejected the proposal.

At the same time, the NSW Government announced the formation of a Cross Border Transport Taskforce to investigate transport issues facing the border communities and to investigate the potential for a heavy rail link between Northern NSW and South East Queensland.

Specifically the Cross Border Transport Taskforce has been requested to:

- Review existing transport links between Northern NSW and South East Queensland and identify short term options for improved coordination;
- Identify other transport initiatives to meet the future needs of communities on both sides of the border;

- Investigate potential rail links between Northern NSW and South East Queensland;
- Identify infrastructure requirements, costs and delivery timeframes for any proposed rail link; and
- Undertake consultation with key peak bodies and stakeholders, including local government representatives.

The Taskforce is made up of senior representatives from the NSW Ministry of Transport and Queensland Transport. Its first move has been development of this paper to promote discussion and the exchange of information and ideas regarding a rail link.

The paper examines measures to better meet the existing and future transport needs of the region with a view to building a strong public transport commuter base which will sustain a future rail service from South East Queensland into Northern NSW.

2 ■ Consultation

Senior officials of the NSW Ministry of Transport and the Queensland Transport will meet with the NSW Northern Region of Councils and the South East Queensland Region of Councils in March 2007 to brief them on the issues paper and commence the stakeholder consultation process.

The ROCs would be asked to work with their constituents and local interest groups to develop consolidated comments on the paper with submissions due to either the NSW Ministry of Transport or Queensland Transport by 25 May 2007 – allowing approximately 12 weeks for this consultation to occur.

The issues paper will also be available on the Ministry of Transport and Queensland Transport websites and comments can also be made directly to these agencies by 25 May 2007 from members of the public and other stakeholder organisations.

Following the receipt of all submissions the Cross Border Transport Taskforce will meet with each of the ROC's to further discuss issues raised in their submissions. This will occur in early June 2007.

The issues paper and submissions will then inform advice to both Ministers, recommending a way forward to address the transport needs of the two regions. A formal submission to the Ministers will be made by the Cross Border Transport Taskforce by 30 June 2007 for consideration and submission to the respective Cabinets by 31 July 2007.

■ Introduction

South East Queensland and Northern NSW are neighbouring regions whose populations and growth are becoming increasingly integrated, particularly around the border region of Coolangatta / Tweed Heads.

Planning studies suggest that future growth will increasingly consolidate economic and social links between the two

regions. Planning forecasts and community representations to government suggest a transport corridor from Northern NSW to South East Queensland to cater for regional and inter-regional commuter travel will best cater for the transport needs and economic growth patterns of the border region.

However, the regions are defined by different patterns of growth and different planning approaches to future growth. While growth in Queensland has occurred largely within a corridor along the coast, the NSW side of the border remains a 'region of villages' dispersed widely along and inland from the ocean.

By way of comparison, there are approximately 250,000 people in Northern NSW and approximately ten times that number, 2.6 million, in South East Queensland. This means the consolidation will in the short term make sense in the far northern border region of NSW and over time be appropriate to the entire northern coastal area of NSW.

Projected growth rates for South East Queensland are around 55,000 people per year. On the NSW side, growth rates are estimated at around 2,500 people per year. However, the NSW side of the border may grow faster than current estimates predict if the region becomes an attractive residential option for people intending to work or study in South East Queensland.

A "Bridging Strategy" is therefore required which addresses existing travel needs and fosters patterns of growth and local travel patterns that would potentially sustain a future rail service. Such a "Bridging Strategy" would need to encourage widespread use of what will eventually be the corridor of local travel connecting the Northern Region to South East Queensland. This "Bridging Strategy" could be developed as part of the implementation of rural and regional bus reform in the Northern Region.

The development of improved bus services will enable better linkages between dispersed communities, encourage travel between them and foster travel demand that would potentially sustain an eventual heavy rail service.



■ Current Transport Services

The State and Commonwealth Governments are currently upgrading the Pacific Highway to dual carriageway standard. The Pacific Highway extends for 140 kilometres through Northern NSW, of which 56 kilometres has been upgraded to dual carriageway and a further 20 kilometres approved for upgrade or under construction. The remaining roadway is currently being project planned for upgrade.

The main Sydney–Brisbane rail link passes through the western side of the region linking Casino and Grafton to Brisbane. A rail corridor exists from Casino to the coast and back to Murwillumbah. Passenger services on this line were replaced with more frequent coach services in 2004.

When the final extension of the Queensland line to Coolangatta Airport is complete the bulk of population on that side of the border will have access to rail services. Regular route bus services currently operate between centres in South East Queensland.

On the NSW side of the border regular school and community bus services are available in and between some towns on the NSW far north coast. These services are provided under contract to the NSW Ministry of Transport. Under current arrangements commercial contract holders have exclusive rights to operate bus services in their contract region.

In the Casino – Tweed area there are 12 commercial contracts and 119 non-commercial contracts (largely providing school services along specified routes) held by 31 operators in the Tweed area and 32 operators in the Casino/ Lismore area.

A number of improvements to existing bus service provision in Northern NSW have been identified. For example, the transport needs of Aboriginal people at Casino, Coraki and Cabbage Tree Island are not well catered for and there are instances where existing service networks do not enable

Population Growth

Northern NSW

- Population grows by around 2,500 people each year.
- In the next 25 years the region's population is expected to grow more than 26% to 289 000.
- By 2031, based on current trends, the population of the NSW Far North Coast will have grown by 60 400 people.¹
- The NSW Government's 25-year land use plan is preparing for an additional 60,400 people, 51,000 homes and 32,500 extra jobs by 2031.
- Under the NSW Department of Planning's regional strategies, the NSW side of the border is intended to remain a 'region of villages'.
- The community is widely dispersed across the regional centres of Tweed Heads, Lismore and Ballina; the five towns of Murwillumbah, Casino, Mullumbimby, Byron Bay and Kyogle; 36 rural and coastal villages; 110 small villages and numerous rural communities.
- Around half of the Region's people live in major towns and half in coastal or inland villages, smaller communities, hamlets and rural areas.

South East Queensland

- Over a shorter period, South East Queensland is projected to grow by 1.1 million people – constituting 22% of Australia's total population growth.
- Since the 1980s, South East Queensland has been growing by more than 55,000 people a year.
- The estimated resident population of the region in 2004 was 2,666,600 people.
- The region's population is concentrated in coastal urban areas between Noosa and Coolangatta.
- Ninety per cent of the region's population is in metro local government areas while only 4.3 per cent reside in the rural shires.
- Current Queensland government estimates indicate the population of the region will reach 3.5 to 4 million by 2026, requiring an estimated 575,000 new homes.

These forecast population increases in South East Queensland and the upgrades to the Pacific Highway may influence population growth on the NSW side of the boarder.

¹This forecast is derived from the NSW Government's Transport and Population Data Centre, NSW Department of Planning.

passengers to easily access key destinations such as TAFE colleges. These problems are to a large extent the result of the existing contractual framework which has not facilitated a coordinated network approach to meeting community needs. Rural and regional bus reform provides the opportunity to address these issues by developing and implementing new contractual, planning and funding arrangements for areas like Northern NSW.

The South East Queensland Regional Plan 2005–2026 identifies the future extension of the Gold Coast rail link to Coolangatta. In light of the Queensland government's commitment, the NSW North Coast Regional plan recommends, "As the Gold Coast rail extension is planned, investigate whether demand warrants the route extending into NSW".

■ Future Challenges

The Opportunities of NSW Bus Reform

In response to various inquiries which identified a number of issues with the delivery of bus services in NSW, in 2004 the NSW Government embarked on a program of bus reform in NSW.

The result in the metropolitan regions has been that more financially viable, customer focused and transparent contracting arrangements have been introduced. Arrangements for outer-metropolitan bus services have also recently finalised, with a similar outcome being achieved for commuters in these areas.

The reform process for NSW rural and regional areas commenced in late 2006 with the establishment of a joint working party comprising Government and bus industry representatives. The unique characteristics of rural and regional bus services has meant that the structure for bus contracting in these areas must be different to those applied in metropolitan and outer metropolitan NSW. The NSW Ministry of Transport is working to trial and finalise suitable contractual, funding and service planning models by late 2007 ready for progressive implementation across NSW commencing in 2008.

Amongst other things the proposed reform package for rural and regional NSW will include better planning of services to reduce duplication/underutilisation and to develop a network approach that better meets local needs.

The development of an appropriate "Bridging Strategy" as proposed above could be accommodated as part of the Government's bus reform program for rural and regional areas.

While the large number of bus operators and contracts suggest opportunities exist for rationalising and integrating

services in this area of Northern NSW, the number of commercial contracts and operators involved will mean that negotiations for reform are to likely to be lengthy and challenging.

The "Bridging Strategy" would be progressed as a first step towards delivery of a heavy rail commuter service that links into South East Queensland and provide the opportunity to maximise the potential for integration of NSW and Queensland public transport services. The objective will be to provide more frequency to both markets resulting in higher patronage and fare revenue.

Aligning Transport Services with Population Growth

The NSW Department of Planning's regional plan notes that, "Due to its proximity to the high growth area of South East Queensland, the urban coastal areas of the Tweed Shire have demonstrated the strongest growth in the Region over the past decade. The greatest future population growth pressure is around the regional centres of Tweed Heads and Ballina and within the other coastal settlements east of the Pacific Highway".

However, the towns scheduled to become regional centres are Ballina, Murwillumbah and Casino, two out of three of which are inland. Of the 'support' towns Mullumbimby, Byron Bay and Kyogle again only one is coastal and two are inland.

In order to settle on an alignment for a future transport corridor, the current pattern of coastal population growth needs to be reconciled with growth projections under the regional plan. Arguably 'natural growth' is more likely to occur on a continuum of the coastal corridor, flowing south from the border. However, coastal and hinterland alignments should both be considered as options in the development process.

Northern NSW has an ageing population with 41,200 people currently aged 65 years or more. It is expected that the number of people in this age group will have more than doubled by 2031. The proportion of young people is projected to decline to 14 per cent, leaving just 54 per cent of the population at working age. Without any change in transport services this trend will impact the demand for intra regional and cross-border travel as older people tend to travel less and stay closer to their residential area. Except for potential travel to Queensland to major health facilities, their travel requirements are more like to be for community and local health transport rather than rail links.

The provision of a more frequent commuter service via bus services and eventually a heavy rail service throughout the region and up to South East Queensland may encourage young people in the region to stay in Northern NSW while working in the larger centres in South East Queensland, thereby reversing this trend. The potential for this will need to be further investigated by the Taskforce.

Securing the Corridor

The landscape represents a further challenge as the region is covered in rivers and waterways. Any potential rail alignment will likely involve a considerable number of bridges, adding significant expense. In addition, the area has engineering challenges, in particular the number of rivers and large areas subject to flooding which require consideration before a final alignment can be suggested.

The currently dispersed nature of the Northern NSW population – 50 percent live outside the regional centres – means that a heavy rail line will not serve the majority of residents well for intra-regional travel. Three of the four major regional centres identified by Department of Planning are inland towns. Only Ballina is on the coast so a rail service through the major population centres is likely to be of limited use to tourists.

However, based on the growth rate of the total border region, it would be prudent to secure a heavy rail corridor for the future. The determination of an alignment will need more detailed work to determine the optimum configuration of a corridor that would connect centres of maximum growth.

In the short term a patronage strategy needs to be adopted that develops the patterns of uptake required to underpin a sustainable long term transition to heavy rail. This interim strategy should have as a goal the development of patronage for a future intra-regional and cross-border service.

A Way Forward

Community representations and planning forecasts indicate that the requirements of Northern NSW are for intra-regional transit and connectivity to South East Queensland.

In the short term, the bus service network needs to better respond to existing needs, while supporting planned and sustainable regional growth as forecast. A networked approach to local transport services should be sufficiently flexible to respond to and facilitate patronage growth in and between the regional centres which will eventually comprise the rail corridor.

In the medium to longer term, growth will likely warrant a mass transit link, ie heavy rail to South East Queensland. The timing of such a large piece of regional infrastructure will be

influenced by both the rate and configuration of regional growth and the associated demand for travel.

The adoption of this approach requires that transport services be increasingly complementary between the two states. Improved consistency should be sought between regulatory responses to taxi, bus and other transport operators. An integrated approach should be taken to local, community and health transport planning.

Corridor preservation is warranted in the short term, particularly in light of the pace of development in the northern border region of Coolangatta -Tweed which will proceed more quickly than growth in the rest of the Northern NSW area, creating technical and amenity challenges for corridor preservation. Given the complex geography, flooding and land acquisition challenges, it would be useful to begin work now to determine both an interchange site and a corridor for preservation.

In the first instance a structure should be established to take responsibility for this project, including identification of corridors and preservation and to participate in development of the bridging strategy.

■ Recommendation 1

A senior officer working group comprising representatives from relevant Queensland and NSW agencies and reporting to the Cross Border Task Force should be formed to take long term responsibility for the establishment of viable regional and cross border public transport in the Northern NSW/South East Queensland region. That group should immediately begin to identify a potential corridor.

Once a corridor is identified, it would make sense for it to be brought on line in a way that reflects the growth of population and economic activity in the region. This could be achieved by staging construction from the end of the Queensland line south through Tweed – Coolangatta and eventually to Casino. This would allow services to begin earlier for those in close proximity to the South East Queensland high growth corridor and over time extend to the larger town centres in NSW which are slated as centres of regional growth under the Far North Coast Regional Strategy.



The incompatibility of train gauges between the two jurisdictions must be considered as part of this process. The implications of continuing narrow gauge rail down through Northern NSW must be considered by the Taskforce.

■ Recommendation 2

The Working Group should also begin to identify an appropriate interchange location and preserve capacity to build such a facility.

The Taskforce must also consider the need for an interchange to allow for the hubbing of commuter buses – the NSW/ Queensland border provides a natural point at which this should occur. This would also allow for the NSW bus service to run into the southern most point of the Queensland rail network (once complete) until the NSW portion of the rail line is delivered. Securing the site for such an interchange should not be delayed although the eventual date of construction will be determined by growth trends.

An opportunity for interchange on either side of the border appears to present at Coolangatta Airport. Given the density of surrounding development, similar opportunities are unlikely to present in future.

■ Recommendation 3

That planning for a rail line should be premised on it being staged southwards from the Queensland border.

Having determined the long term configuration of transport connectivity, patterns of transport use in the region should be developed to meet existing local needs and, while a mass transit mode will not be appropriate in Northern NSW until densities increase, these patterns of transport connectivity should be sufficiently flexible to encourage growth and development consistent with the eventual configuration of the train service. This approach will support people to make choices about where they work, live, study and recreate which will reflect the eventual configuration of the future train service.

Unlike the former XPT service, or any other Sydney – oriented train option, a local commuter network should facilitate multiple daily return journeys between all major centres on the future alignment. Services should include late night options, particularly at times which encourage young people to substitute public transport for private vehicle use.

The speed with which these services are taken up and the density of demand should inform the eventual timeframe for transition to a heavy rail service.

■ Recommendation 4

That as part of the rural and regional bus reform process, new planning, funding and contracting arrangements be introduced in the Northern NSW Region as a matter of priority.

These arrangements must take into account the need to:

- reflect travel demand and connect people with key patronage generators in the region.
- recognise patterns of population growth and the need for greater connectivity and service coordination with South East Queensland
- facilitate growth and development around the corridor identified for a future rail service
- ensure a consistent approach to policy and regulatory issues concerning public transport on both sides of the border to enable an integrated approach to service provision

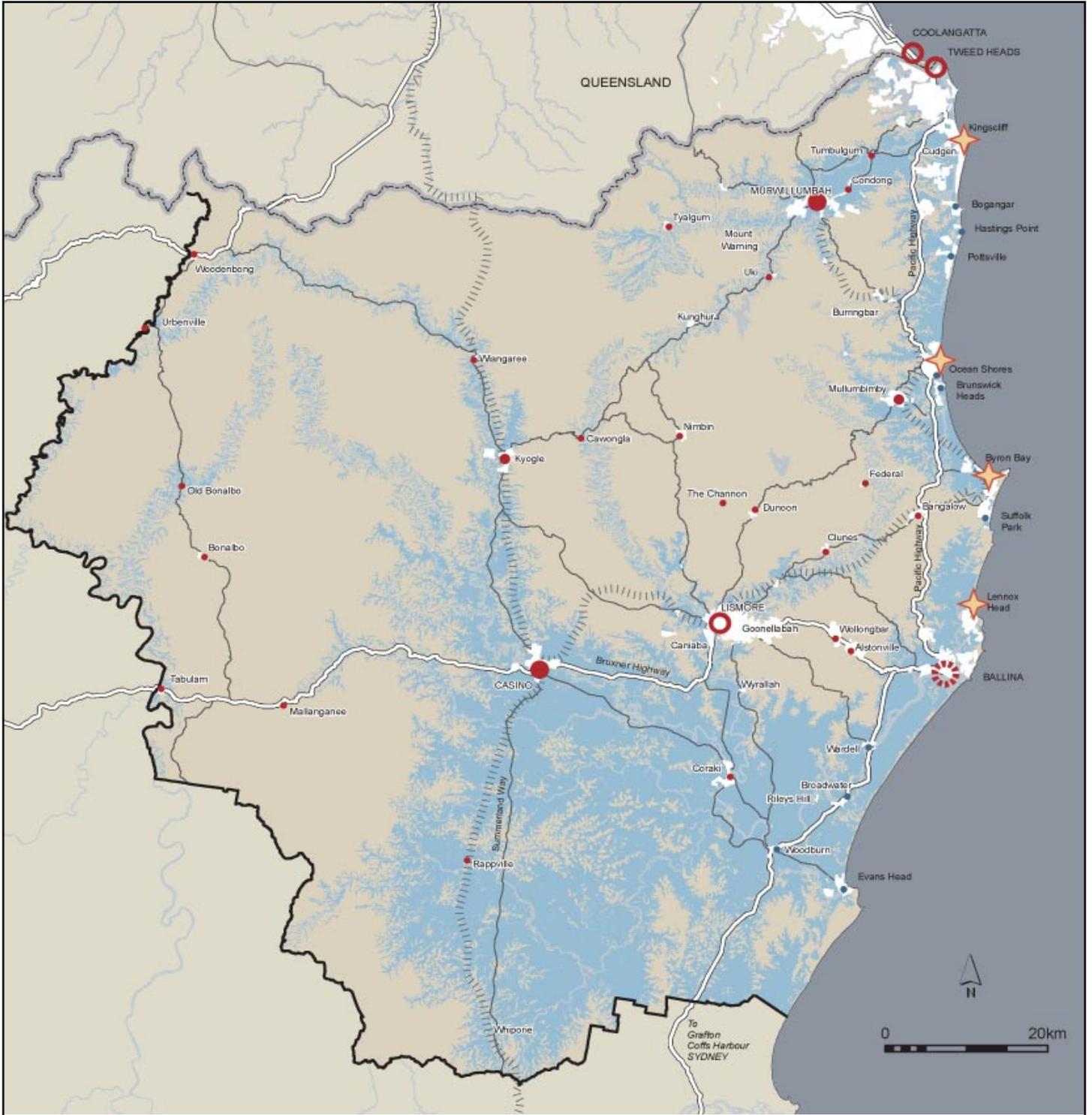
■ Recommendation 5

That a cross border consultation capacity be established at the local level between the two states to achieve over time a more consistent planning and regulatory approach for the cross border region.

Together with this recommended approach, measures should be taken towards developing consistency in policy and regulation of public transport on both sides of the border to enable integrated and increasingly complementary service provision between the two states.

Improved consistency should be sought between regulatory responses to taxi, bus and other transport operators. An integrated approach should be taken to local, community and health transport planning and its direction be informed by local stakeholders. This process will need to be coordinated with consultation arrangements established with the bus reform process in the Northern NSW Region.





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| | Major Regional Centre | | Region Boundary | | Land potentially subject to Inundation |
| | Developing Major Regional Centre | | State Boundary | | Areas of known Major Coastal Erosion |
| | Major Town | | Highway | | Existing Urban Footprint |
| | Town | | Main Roads | | |
| | Village - Inland | | Rail Line | | |
| | Village - Coastal | | Rivers and Creeks | | |