

# The Main North Line: Securing a Vital Asset for the Future

## Report on the Armidale public forum organised by Trains North

written by Karin von Strokirch

5.45 - 7.30pm Monday 7 August 2023



Photo by Maureen Heap

Dr Karin von Strokirch

Political scientist, Secretary of Trains North - *Opening remarks by Chair*

Welcome to the audience, Armidale councillors Susan McMichael and Jon Galletly, and to the Transport for NSW representative whom we appreciate coming to hear Trains North views. Apologies from Joan Gates, Margaret Makepeace, Associate Professor Elizabeth Ellis, Merryn Twemlow, Phil Mackenzie, Mia and Richard Cambridge, Robyn Newberry, Rick Banyard, Helen Mary Jones, Allen Crosthwaite, Val Sherwell, Jack and Kate Arnold and Sara McNeill, all of whom sent their support for this campaign. There were also apologies from state MP Adam Marshall & the Mayor Sam Coupland.

Dr von Strokirch said: 'Ten years ago the people of Armidale protested at their train service being cancelled. (See photo above.) Over 3,000 demonstrated at the station and won the battle to save our train. Guyra, Glenn Innes, Tenterfield and other towns were not so fortunate. Their communities have been without a train for over 30 years. We are here to advocate for them, but also to revitalise and secure the future of train services for our region, our state and the nation as a whole. This year is the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armidale station. At least 27 workers were killed during the 1880s construction of the Great Northern Railway line. The youngest, William Spillane, was only 9yo. Our once magnificent line was thus built with blood, sweat, tears and the ultimate sacrifice. We should cherish this nation building achievement. Instead the track north of Armidale is languishing and under threat. Join us in warding off that threat and reviving the Main North Line.'

Kerry Archibald Moran

Silver City Local Area Vice-President for Trains North and the Silver City Aboriginal Reserve

Jinda Dancers - *Welcome to Country* – honouring the great Wanglar Gee songline & train line.

Clr Margaret O'Connor  
Armidale Region Council – *Outline of Trains North campaign*

Clr O'Connor reflected on the central role of trains in the era she grew up. She emphasized the need for social equity in providing all members of our community, notably the disadvantaged, with access to public transport in the form of a passenger train service. Shifting freight from road to rail can also contribute to decarbonisation and meeting our national greenhouse gas reduction targets. She called for a national freight rail network. Restoring the rail service from Armidale to the QLD border is affordable at an estimated \$1 billion. This compares very favourably with the cost of the Coffs Harbour highway bypass of \$2.2 billion. For the same cost the Main North Line could extend all the way to Brisbane.

Dr Angus Witherby  
Economist, Geographer, Town & Transport Planner – *Critical rail freight infrastructure*

Dr Witherby argued that sceptics of restoring the railway line and service north of Armidale apply an unfair yardstick in counting both the capital and running costs. But this is mode discrimination as other forms of public infrastructure for transport such as roads are not expected to recover their capital costs. Nor should this be expected of railway infrastructure which provides an essential public service. He emphasized that freight needs are forecast to increase by 30%. Freight is key to the viability and strategic value of the Main North Line. There is a proposal to set up a processed food factory in Llangothlin but the investor is seeking rail freight to move their product efficiently. The Guyra tomato farm is struggling from increased freight costs and would benefit from the rail freight option as would other agricultural sectors. The Main North Line offers an attractive flood free alternative to the forthcoming Inland Rail. It would be money well spent to invest \$2 billion on this back-up insurance route for interstate freight to Brisbane.

Rob Lenehan  
Founder Save the Great Northern Railway Group Inc & Guyra V-P Trains North –  
*Major investment proposal for Llangothlin*

Mr Lenehan noted that when the New England Rail Trail (NERT) proposal was floated several years ago this quickly aroused strong opposition from the community and revived the campaign to restore the Main North Line and, in the meantime, to protect it from alternate uses. He noted that the petition to restore the passenger service on the line north of Armidale has garnered over 10,000 signatures and will soon be handed to Adam Marshall for submission to the NSW legislative assembly. Mr Lenehan detailed the major investment proposal for Llangothlin made by David Peters whom he met last year. Peters already has several factories and seeks to set up another one in Llangothlin. It would manufacture dried foods, health foods and meals with locally sourced fresh produce. The proposed new factory would employ 135 staff. A video was shown of the structures he plans to build for the project including a rail freight yard: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCPXuJnTC0> Peters has also offered to finance the cost of restoring the railway line from Armidale to Llangothlin to enable a rail freight service to support his business.

Jason Russell

President New England Railway Inc – *Restoration of trains & track study*

Mr Russell recounted the evolution of the New England Railway Inc (NERI) which has a ten year business plan to restore two historic train sets for use as tourist trains. NERI is based at the goods yard behind the Armidale railway station. He said the restoration work is five months behind schedule because it was plagued by vandals at a cost of \$7,000. Since NERI installed security cameras and other measures the vandals have been deterred and work is *back on track*. NERI obtained a grant from Heritage NSW of \$10,000 which has all been spent in the Armidale economy on tradespeople and materials to restore the first set. There are plans for the second set to be restored along the lines of the Byron Bay solar train which was the first in the world. By the end of the year NERI will mount a three day historic train tour to Lithgow. NERI also seeks to restore the railway line to run their historic trains all the way to the border town of Wallangarra. NERI is seeking financial donations and volunteers to assist in its work.

Matthew Tierney

President Trains North & Civil Engineer – *What do we expect of regional rail today?*

By 1888 the Great Northern Railway or Main North Line reached the QLD border. Passengers from NSW could change trains there and continue on to Brisbane. This service persisted until 1972. The North Coast Line is the only one with standard gauge all the way to Brisbane. Railways are in retreat globally, especially in the English speaking countries. This is very short sighted. The NSW rail network has taken a worse beating than any comparable countries. The NSW transport infrastructure map is currently dominated by the Inland Rail, a line which is as yet *non-existent*. The whole of the line north of Armidale to the QLD border has been *whited out* from the map altogether. Armidale thus appears to cling to the end of a minor branch line. Inverell, Lismore and Cooma, amongst others, are no longer served by trains. Even worse, the Lismore Murwillumbah line has been ripped up to establish a recreational bike 'rail trail'. Most of the NSW regional transport map, once populated by trains, is now served by buses. A fatal error was made 160 years ago when QLD opted for a narrower gauge, different to NSW, to save money. This gauge divergence caused a national catastrophe. Were it not for this we would have a vibrant, well connected, national rail network today. One critique of regional rail is that not enough people use it to be viable. But the urban rail network is not assessed in this way. For large parts of the day urban trains are virtually empty. They are readily subsidised by the government as an essential public service and no one would challenge this policy. Trains North advocates that the line be restored to the QLD border and then beyond. This is an eminently affordable project costing an estimated \$1 billion to the border and \$2 billion to Brisbane. This includes the cost of sleeper replacement, new bridges and refurbishment of stations.

Brian Flint

Armidale Citizen of the Year 2023, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation freight operator – *Embrace the future of rail*

For the residents of Armidale the 1883 opening of the station and rail service was a veritable marvel! Rail still makes a fantastic contribution to public transport and freight worldwide. Mr Flint outlined its countless benefits. Globally, rail services account for 8% of passengers and 20% of freight by land. The transport sector accounts for half of global oil demand and

creates a quarter of all carbon emissions. Yet rail contributes only 1% of global transport emissions. And those emissions are trending downwards as three quarters of passenger trains are now electrified. A freight railcar can carry up to 10 shipping containers and the whole train a few hundred, whereas a truck carries only three. Rail is far cheaper to build and maintain than roads. It is seven times safer to travel by rail than by car. 15% of emergency service call-outs are for road trauma. Each road death costs the community \$5 million. 50,000 life years are lost each year in road fatalities. For so many reasons – economic efficiency, convenience, tackling climate change, promoting health and safety - rail is the future.

- Jenny Hatte asked about scope for solar trains and the electrification of trains. Matthew Tierney replied that in the future trains could potentially tap into the renewable energy zone.
- A man who joined the railway in 1980s called for trains to be built here in NSW as they are in Victoria and QLD rather than buying them from overseas. We used to build them in this state.
- Clr Jon Galletly said a rail service would improve our region tenfold. The rail trail proposal provoked huge debate and call for trains but the government does not listen.
- Graham Patterson said faster trains would make rail trip to Sydney more attractive.
- Rex William said conditions are too tough for truck drivers and they are in increasingly short supply. The writing is on the wall to shift freight from roads to rail.
- Imi Bokor said Switzerland has four different rail gauges but has a successful national rail service. He remarked that four train carriages can take 180 cars off the road.
- Siri Gamage noted the NSW government is preparing an integrated transport plan for the region in 2024 with extensive community consultation. We need to call for greater connectivity by rail to the growth region of southern QLD.

**The Trains North forum of 120 people concluded by passing four strong resolutions supporting the Main North Line almost unanimously with only a handful of dissenters.**

**Resolutions voted on at Trains North public forum  
Armidale, 7 August 2023**

1. This Forum endorses the campaign for the reintroduction of trains to the Main North Line north of Armidale. (Passed with 2 votes against.)
2. This Forum seeks the protection of the railway track from Armidale to Wallangarra so that it remains available for use by trains. (Passed with 4 votes against.)
3. This Forum asserts that there has been no genuine community consultation about destroying the rail track for an alternative use and requests that such consultation commence immediately. (Passed with 1 vote against.)
4. This Forum requests that Transport for NSW immediately commission an independent, comprehensive cost benefit analysis of the renewal of the Main North Line to carry passenger and freight trains to and from Queensland and prevent dependence on single transport links. (Passed with 2 votes against.)



**TRAINS NORTH**



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## **Acknowledgements**

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