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### Support for Bicycle NSW Submission to NSW Bike Plan

Dear Elizabeth

Railtrails Australia is the national organisation promoting the use and development of rail trails throughout Australia. All over Australia former railway lines have been converted into multiple use trails providing a safe health promoting corridor between communities for locals and visitors alike. Please refer to our website [www.railtrails.org.au](http://www.railtrails.org.au) for more information.

Development of rail trails in NSW has been very limited to date compared with other states in Australia and around the world. This lack of development is not through a lack of potentially successful rail trails or communities wanting them. (By successful we mean well used justifying their construction cost and ongoing maintenance costs.)

The lack of development is due to the way in which railway land is managed in NSW, and also the lack of initiatives by the State government of the last decade or so to pursue the opportunities that have arisen. The Premier needs to get behind these initiatives as often it needs a cross-departmental approach.

Given the benefits of rail trails we would urge that ministerial action to get rail trail construction underway in NSW be included in the NSW bike plan.

The benefits of rail trails, which make them particularly popular for cyclists, include:

- A wonderful car-free facility for people to walk or ride bicycles (horses on some trails) in safety to school and the shops, or just to enjoy the scenery, providing health benefits. Ideal for families.
- A great asset for visitors to come and enjoy touring the area away from cars.
- a pleasant experience even in hilly country because trains, like walker and cyclists, don't like steep gradients
- A long continuous natural heritage corridor to improve the biodiversity of a region (native vegetation rehabilitation and weed control is a major activity of committees of management). Biodiversity
- A central "backbone" to link other trails in the area together.
- A lasting and usable monument to the pioneers of the 19th and 20th centuries



Experience in other states has shown that communities, especially in regional areas, benefit twice from a successful rail trail. They provide the benefits listed above to local residents and are a significant factor in attracting visitors to a region. Along with some university studies we have hard evidence as over 19,000 copies of our rail trail guide books have been sold in the last few years and rail trails are regularly featured in travel and holiday segments in all forms of media. We are regularly contacted by families and groups that even plan holidays around a rail trail. Various formal studies and anecdotal evidence has shown that these visitors bring significant financial benefit to rail trail regions. A 2003 study by La Trobe University determined that on average each rail trail user contributed \$58 each day to the local economy.

There are numerous ways to enjoy rail trails ranging from a short walk or a several day bike tour or basing yourself at one location and exploring a different section each day. Towns on popular rail trails are seeing an increase in demand for accommodation with trail visitors wanting accommodation ranging from camping to luxury B&Bs. Some businesses in towns are also beginning to cater in other ways such as offering bicycle hire and even pick-up services for those that only want to go one way. One of the most established and promotion oriented trails, the Murray to the Mountains connecting Wangaratta, Beechworth and Bright, is even offering visitor touring packages.

### **Recommended Government Actions**

The support of the NSW government is essential to enable rail trail construction to progress in NSW. There are numerous actions the government can undertake and the most critical ones are “zero cost” involving very little direct financial support from the state government.

1. The most critical action is to amend legislation to enable railway land not currently required for rail transport purposes to be used for rail trails, perhaps through leasing the land to another government department or directly to local government. This would include allowing removal of the rails and sleepers to allow the rail trail to be built on the original formation. This is the cheapest option for construction of the trail and provides the highest level of experience for users. The great majority of rail trails constructed in Australia and overseas have been constructed on the original formation after removal of the rails.
2. Providing Ministerial direction for the use of the corridor. Rail agencies in the past have been reluctant, and indeed obstructive, when sensible, practical and safe proposals have been put forward. These include rail side trails alongside operating rail lines have been proven in NSW and in other jurisdictions to be a safe and effective means of building a cycling and walking network
3. Provide assistance to local governments for public liability through the department leasing the land. Public liability can be a deterrent to some local councils in establishing facilities.
4. Ensure planning coordination between relevant departments takes place.
5. Provide seed funding for feasibility studies into rail trails.

If the above actions could be implemented, many of the local governments and their volunteer community groups pushing for development of a rail trail in their area could build and maintain the rail trails with little direct financial support from the state government.

We acknowledge that there is some opposition to the development of rail trails in NSW, particularly from some adjacent landholders. However the genuine concerns of these people have largely been faced and then addressed successfully in other states that have developed rail trails. While it would be great if these concerned people in NSW were to look at this, that is the nature of people. As detailed in item 2 above it is essential to get a major rail trail built in NSW to demonstrate the benefits rail trails can bring.

We would recommend the Riverina Highlands Rail Trail proposed between Tumut and Batlow, and between Wagga Wagga and Tumberumba. A lot of the preparation for construction to begin on these rail trails has begun, including obtaining funding. It just needs the first two actions listed above to be implemented.

## Funding Options

A lot of rail trail building can be done with some simple economic solutions including:

1. Construct trails to a standard suitable for the environment and perceived usage. They do not all need to be to the RTA bicycle path standard. Many rail trails around Australia have different surface standards in different sections. Around larger population centres where usage, especially by locals will be very high, the surface may be bitumen or concrete. This allows all members of the community to enjoy the trail, even motorised wheelchairs and gophers. In less populated areas a relatively cheaper gravel surface for touring bikes may be sufficient. As usage of the trail increases the surface can be upgraded appropriately.
2. Look at other sources of funding apart from state government coffers. A lot of the rail trails around Australia have been developed with funding from various sources including:
  - Federal government
  - The private sector. Several trails around Australia have been constructed with a significant portion of the funding being from a business in the area.
  - Donation of labour and in-kind resources from other government departments and voluntary organisations, particularly in the conservation area.
  - Donation or at cost supply of materials from local businesses.

Local government and groups waiting to develop rail trails in NSW are certainly aware of these options and are including them in their strategies.

We thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and would be pleased to provide further information or clarification on any of the matters in this submission if required.

Yours sincerely



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