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FRESH HOPES FOR NORTH COAST RAIL

by Bob Dooley

The swearing in of the new NSW Cabinet has offered a glimmer of hope for the re-establishment of the Northern Rivers rail line.

The Minister for Regional Development, John Barilaro has become the Deputy Premier, and has spoken passionately on ABC radio about helping regional areas.

His Regional Development Framework, launched in November, includes improved regional governance structures to facilitate regional development, building the evidence-base for investment in regional development, attracting investment and co-investment, and building regional workforce capability.

"We are committed to providing quality services and infrastructure in regional NSW, aligning efforts to support growing regional centres, and identifying and activating economic potential," Mr Barilaro said.

His comments, and the commitment of \$6 billion in this term of the government, has given heart to those who want to see the railway line in service again, since its closure in 2004.

Fellow NSW National, MLC Ben Franklin has become the Minister for Northern NSW, and also for Renewable Energy, and has put a call out for any community groups with local issues to meet with him.

Chairperson of Northern Rivers Rail Action Group (NRRAG), Beth Shelley said, "We are planning to get in touch with both Ben and John in the near future, to discuss how much rail services would be of value to the local economy."

The Member for Clarence, Chris



Demonstration at Murwillumbah railway station last year.

Gulaptis, has been appointed as Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Planning, providing another avenue for local lobbyists.

The NRRAG has produced a film which makes a convincing case for putting the railway line back into service, which it plans to screen across the region to clarify the costings and condition of the track, and show how it would benefit the whole region, economically and socially.

The 30-minute documentary 'Bringing Back Trains to the Northern Rivers' was launched to an enthusiastic audience at Lismore Workers Club in December, and has been screened with a similar response at Bangalow RSL Hall in January.

The Bangalow screening was timed to coincide with the close of public submissions to Byron council about future use of the Bangalow railway grounds. Tweed Council has already agreed to a rail trail, and Byron council is under pressure from rail-trail proponents.

"We're concerned about any rail-

trail proposals because we want to see a regular, commuter rail service for this area, and if the rail-trail legislation goes through the whole rail corridor will no longer be protected from being sold off," Ms Shelley said.

The NRRAG will be meeting with Tweed councillors and staff on the issue in February, and will also be screening the documentary in Murwillumbah.

Tweed council is currently exhibiting its Draft Community Strategic Plan 2017-2027 for public comment, with a series of community engagement events planned this month.

Mayor Katie Milne said, "It's important the whole spectrum of the community is represented in this plan and particularly in this final public exhibition period, so please have your say."

"The most effective strategies need to be identified so we can all flourish with our limited resources," she said, again giving hope to rail advocates.

Meanwhile, the Byron Bay

Railroad Company plans to have its solar-powered train in operation in April, running from near the Elements of Byron Resort, which the company also owns at Sunrise Beach, to the Byron CBD.

Development Director Jeremy Holmes told the Byron Echo that solar power will be collected from the roof of the train and from the roof of the train storage shed to charge sizeable batteries on the train, which will drive dual electric motors and, together with regenerative braking, will be sufficient for a number of return trips between charges.

"Technology has developed rapidly in this area," he said.

"The solar-charged batteries are designed to operate all systems including traction power, lighting, control circuits and air compressors," Mr Holmes said, adding, "The train will retain one of its two diesel engines so that in the event of prolonged inclement weather or other unforeseen issues it can still operate."

The proposal is by no means

unique. The Victorian government announced in January that Melbourne's tram network will soon be run on solar power supplied by the first large-scale solar plant to be built in the state, producing 75 megawatts of power, about double what the tram network requires, to be completed by the end of 2018.

Overseas, the Dutch rail network is now powered 100% by wind energy, and other European countries are also developing renewables for their rail services, weakening the arguments of some of the nay-sayers.

Byron Council is also investigating the feasibility of extending a commuter service on the existing line to connect the shire from Bangalow through Byron to Mullumbimby, Bilinudgel, and the North Byron Parklands festival site at Yelgun.

Already several companies, including Rail Explorers and Byron Bay Tramlink, have expressed their interest in using sections of the track.

With a number of promising developments, and armed with well-informed costings and railway engineers' track condition reports, both NRRAG and its sister organisation, Trains On Our Tracks (TOOT), are optimistic that a Northern Rivers rail service proposal will get a better hearing than it ever has before.

Beth Shelley said, "We need our railway line for the future because there are so many issues, climate change, air pollution, traffic congestion and road accidents that require a sensible solution and it all points to rail for passengers and freight."

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