

Thursday 10th November 2022

SUBMISSION - Independent Review of the delivery of the Inland Rail Program

The opportunity to submit commentary on the delivery of the Inland Rail Program is welcomed by communities along the North East Victorian rail line. While there is widespread support for the development of rail freight there is also widespread concern regarding the processes adopted by the ARTC.

A serious imbalance of power and a refusal to consider local opinion has resulted in a lack of trust in the ARTC in many communities. Pop Up Shops staffed by public relations teams do not constitute meaningful consultation. Access to the real decision makers is shielded by this strategy, resulting to communities bypassing this process and dealing directly with the political system.

Better Benalla Rail is part of the North East Rail Alliance (NERA), embracing Euroa, Benalla, Glenrowan, and Wangaratta. While each community has differing needs and requirements, all share a common view that current ARTC plans and practices need a major overhaul.

Better Benalla Rail can make available specific and technical information about design issues, timetabling impact, passenger and vehicle movement, current non-compliance to passenger access and safety standards, unused rail line with potential opportunity and unsuccessful rail tack and rail crossing upgrades. Better Benalla Rail is also available to present to the Review upon request.

Detailed and researched heritage and design information about Glenrowan station is also available.

Euroa Connect plans to make a detailed submission to this Review.

A voice for local input is the key requirement for an outcome which meets the needs of the ARTC's freight ambitions as well as commuters and communities in each town.

It is with that ambition this submission is presented; with the hope this enquiry might open the door to a new round of discussions providing our communities with the chance of meaningful involvement in the process of designing unique solutions for each town.

Yours faithfully,

David Moore

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Secretary

Better Benalla Rail

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Better Benalla Rail

Better Benalla Rail (BBR) is a community group established in 2019 in response to the Inland Rail Projects proposed design plans for Benalla. The community of Benalla welcomes the transformation of the national freight network however has ongoing concerns about the lack of consideration given to the impact on the Benalla station precinct.

ARTC plans for alterations at Benalla station to accommodate the Inland Rail project were put forward in 2019 without a visit to the site and without any consultation with local Council, the local community or the station staff who have the on-ground knowledge. These plans compromised the Benalla Station regarding accessibility, passenger movement and public and vehicle safety.

Alternative plans were drawn by community representatives and presented to ARTC and wider community at a public meeting in June 2019. They involved relocating a small section of track, known as the XPT loop, negating the need for a vehicle overpass old or new. This was rejected by ARTC at a second public meeting in November 2019.

In 2020 following advocacy by the federal member for Indi, a site visit by the Dep PM Michael McCormack, a submission and presentation to the *Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport reference in respect of the management of the Inland Rail project by the Australian Rail Track Corporation and the Commonwealth Government* in 2021 and sustained activism by the local community, the alternate 'local solution' plan was eventually adopted by the ARTC.

The *Senate Standing Committee* was very critical of the ARTC lack of community consultation and some improvement by the ARTC has since occurred. New design plans for Benalla station have been provided to the community for comment and although some concept agreement has been reached the plans are still fraught with access and safety issues and lack suitable design compatible with Benalla's 1873 heritage station.

Better Benalla Rail continues to keep the community informed about ARTC, advocates on behalf of the community, provides a valued and effective means of community participation and has a Webpage, Facebook, and email exposure to most of the Benalla community. The Benalla Ensign assists too. The Benalla community considers the Inland Rail Project a once in a generation opportunity to have the station better function for both passenger and freight services, to be forward looking to economic and tourism opportunities and to rectify the serious access and safety problems created by the installation of the Sydney to Melbourne passenger XPT line through Benalla in 1962.

Disappointingly the current revised plans by the ARTC are still not adequate or acceptable and BBR will continue to work optimistically and cooperatively with local government, the ARTC and the state government until we *Get It Right* and set Benalla up for the prosperous future that can be ours.

North East Rail Alliance

The North East Rail Alliance (NERA) was formed in late 2020 and represents the local rail action groups, **Euroa Connect, Better Benalla Rail, Glenrowan Improvers,** and the **Wangaratta Rail Action Group.** The Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) plan to run 1.8 km long, double-stacked freight trains from Brisbane to Melbourne. The trains will utilise the standard gauge lines in North East Victoria. This will require major changes to several station precincts, including Euroa, Benalla, and Glenrowan where these trains will not fit under the existing overpass bridges, and Wangaratta Station affected differently. The Alliance was formed in response to seemingly impenetrable difficulties with the ARTC that have existed since 2018 and the lack of action by local Councils to ensure community views were represented in the Inland Rail Project planning process.

NERA was established with the following aims:

- To have a stronger and unified voice about the impact of the Inland Rail project on our local communities and station precincts.
- To garner the support of each Council to achieve better local solutions for each town and station precinct.
- For local Councils, State and Federal Governments to embrace the opportunity and synergy the inland rail project can provide for our towns.
- To provide our State and Federal MPs with a stronger case in representing community concern and involvement.
- To petition the State Government to take action about our station precinct design, amenity, and functionality.
- For State Government to provide the services of the Office of the Victorian Government Architect in the design process.
- To provide support to each community in dealing with the ARTC.
- For each town to continue independently with their own local community engagement, planning and activities.

In 2021 the North East Rail Alliance detailed issues and concerns about the Inland Rail Project in a submission* and subsequent presentation to the *Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport reference in respect of the management of the Inland Rail project by the Australian Rail Track Corporation and the Commonwealth Government.*

****A copy of the Submission by NERA to the Senate Enquiry has been forwarded by separate email to Assistant Director – Inland Rail Review Secretariat at IR.Review@infrastructure.gov.au***

A Postscript summarising developments since the Senate Enquiry has been added to the end of that submission.

Independent review of Inland Rail 2022 – Key Themes

The Independent review of Inland Rail has four guidelines for discussion, but these largely do not apply to North East Victoria where 12 major works were identified to enable proposed Inland Rail freight trains transit the region.

Of these, works at four regional stations Benalla, Glenrowan, Wangaratta, and Euroa will have profound impact on the respective towns, differently at each station.

Of relevance to these North East communities is Theme 4: *The effectiveness of ARTC's community and stakeholder engagement processes, and opportunities for improvement, including ARTC's approach to addressing community concerns.*

The Inland Rail project has focused on freight rail at the expense of passenger rail and arguably ignored how critical passenger rail is to the communities along the line. In North East Victoria passenger rail is essential for mobility and the railway stations are integral to our towns and to how our communities function. The stations form part of the townscape; they represent the town's history, and they are a gateway for tourism.

The ARTC has demonstrated no understanding of how to effectively engage with communities. They operate from a paradigm of having the power, being the ones in control, delivering design proposals to the community and reluctantly seeking community response. The ARTC demonstrates no understanding of real genuine collaboration with local government or the community.

With regards to Benalla, the ARTC ignored the local community from the beginning when the project designs were done remotely, and they later informed the Benalla council and community of the plans virtually as a 'fait accompli'.

Any subsequent 'community consultation' by the ARTC was a ruse. Claims made by the ARTC in *The Inland Rail Tottenham to Albury Project Consultation summary report 2017-Sep 2019* were overstated, misleading and substantially false.

This disingenuousness was exacerbated by the ARTC attempting to gain public favour by providing funding grants to local community groups and giving away promotional 'goodies'. The community feels it is being patronized and 'bought off'.

The establishment of a *Benalla Working Group* by the ARTC further imbedded mistrust in the ARTC. The process was tainted with interference in selection of members and the appointment of a Chair selected and paid for by the ARTC.

Following the report from the *Senate Standing Committee* in 2021 which was highly critical of the ARTC community consultation processes there has been more constructive active outreach to the local community, but it is still characterized by merely 'seeking feedback' rather than any true collaboration.

The ARTC have now produced a second design proposal for Benalla station which might be described as a CAD drawing and still does not meet the objectives of a safe and efficient station and has not benefited from any meaningful local input.

Better Benalla Rail believes the requirements of freight and passenger rail can coexist and commuter and community requirements can be accommodated within the Inland Rail project.

The Inland Rail project provides an opportunity for Benalla and we want to Get It Right. That will require cooperation, collaboration and being on the 'same side'. Five years of mistrust and animosity have taken its toll. It has seemed the ARTC have just 'strung out' the planning process waiting for the community to run out of energy to battle with them.

Key Theme 4 poses the question *How could ARTC improve its engagement with communities and stakeholders in responding to concerns?*

The answer does not just relate to the ARTC but to how government engages with and views community. The ARTC continuing to propose plans and seek feedback ignores the knowledge, skills and expertise that exists in community.

It has now been accepted that the Benalla community had a better engineering solution to accommodating double stacked freight trains than the ARTC. The Benalla community also has the best knowledge on how to now get the new design right.

Euroa has been proactive in commissioning their own detailed and creative plans premised on knowledge of their town and its future.

Glenrowan is seeking a design plan that doesn't obliterate defining national history – the Kelly siege site and the Glenrowan Inn, the story of the female publican Anne Jones and of the 'black trackers' and their camp.

The answer is one that Better Benalla Rail has been seeking for many months, as yet to no avail - a seat at the table with the ARTC, VicTrack, VLIne, and Transport Victoria to determine the design brief for the Benalla Station. This requires the shift in power, practice and process that must be embraced by government in order that the best knowledge, the best interests, the best minds can create the best future.