



RESPONSE TO SNOWY MONARO REGIONAL COUNCIL FEASIBILITY STUDY ON MONARO RAIL TRAIL. FEB 2020

[Document subtitle]

1 Summary

The committee for Monaro Rail Trail Inc supports the findings and recommendations of the consultants to the feasibility study of the Monaro Rail Trail proposal.

The major finding that the boost to the region's annual economy is projected to be \$25m is significant. But, understated is the fact that each of the villages and towns along the corridor could potentially have an almost equal share of that \$25m. (Very few projects to stimulate a regional economy would have the same impact.) For the existing business operators in the smaller communities of Michelago, Bredbo, Nimmitabel and Bombala this is an exciting opportunity.

We encourage the Snowy Monaro Regional Council to endorse the report's recommendations.

We would also like to suggest that the Snowy Monaro Regional Council proceed to:

- Seek advice from the NSW government to clarify the progress and the release of the report on the rail service feasibility study.
- Elevate the rail trail proposal to a regional matter encompassing the three key stakeholders – the shires of Snowy Monaro Regional Council, Queanbeyan Palerang Regional Council and the ACT government.
- Request that the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet facilitate a number of community consultation events to gauge community sentiment for a rail trail and to explain the role and responsibility of government in a rail trail project. This has been done for three other rail trail proposals in NSW.
- Build a business case that establishes the cost benefit ratio, the economic marker that can be used by NSW government and Federal government planners to assess funding the proposal.

In this document we have focussed our comments on several key areas:

- The Start point
- Trail Maintenance
- Construction costs
- Comments on the report recommendations

2 The Start point - Queanbeyan or Michelago?

We believe it is important that the Queanbeyan to Michelago section be developed for the following reasons.

2.1 Marketing

Initially the largest group of users of the trail will be from Canberra and Queanbeyan and it is logical that the trail begins right at the front door of these people. It will extend the time users are on the trail by an extra day. The full trail from Queanbeyan to Bombala is 213 km and if built would be the longest trail in Australia and give riders a trip of four or five days. This is no deterrent to users - it is an attraction. What is important is that the trail can be marketed as a week-long venture, very compatible with current holiday patterns characterized by more frequent breaks of shorter duration. Up to five days of riding and with a day before and or after for travel to and from the start or end point is an ideal time frame. One of Australia's larger cycle tour operator, U-Tracks Pty Ltd in Sydney, currently has 29 cycle rides listed in Europe, 23 of these are packaged as either, a seven-day trip or an eight-day trip. Amongst the 22 Great Rides in NZ, six are of length greater than 150km. The newer Alps to Ocean trail of 306km, takes 5-7 days, is very popular and in time may surpass the Otago RT in terms of numbers of users.

2.2 Benefits for Michelago

The rail corridor from Queanbeyan to Michelago is a very appealing section. It passes through the scenic eastern and rural Tuggeranong valley. From Hume the corridor climbs gently through pine plantation, traverses a huge bend, passes through deep cuttings and along high embankments and in a timbered and hilly landscape before reaching the more open farming country just north of Royalla. This is superb country for day trippers wanting a ride to Michelago. Residents of the new southern suburbs of Queanbeyan together with those from southern Canberra will have easy access to the rail corridor and will be in perfect position for day rides.

These day trippers will be of significant worth to Michelago business. The village is only 49 km from Queanbeyan station, less if riders picked up the trail at say Hume or southern Tuggeranong. On a sealed surface, allowing faster travel, cyclists will use Michelago as a destination point for a day ride (out and back). Other riders may only ride out and then use a shuttle pick up service to return to Canberra. Also, the increased use of electric assisted bikes makes this a very easy ride for many and for those who would not undertake the trip on a conventional bike. Day trippers into Michelago will be seeking meals and refreshments. Given that there are currently only two possible providers in the village, this additional level of business activity is very significant, see Table 1.

The report suggests that shifting the head of the trail from Michelago to Queanbeyan will have little impact on user numbers. This is debatable. Build this section with a sealed surface and Michelago will have an in-flux of day trippers as well as riders embarking on the full trail and overnighting. A sealed section from Queanbeyan to Michelago opens up a

whole new segment of the user market by providing a safe off highway experience for cyclists who would otherwise use sealed roads. These cyclists are faster moving and use specialist bikes suited only to a sealed surface. Canberra road cyclists have developed many routes using public roads e.g. Canberra to Collector on the Federal Highway but all have been roads with fatal accidents for cyclists. Road cycling groups will certainly be keen to advocate for use of a 49km sealed off road trail such as from Queanbeyan to Michelago. These riders alone will make up the suggested visitation of day trippers shown in Table 1.

We also believe that forcing potential users to drive to Michelago to begin an outing will be a deterrent to some. The rail corridor is right on the door step for many Queanbeyan and Canberra residents and many riders will want to begin their ride from their home. Others only want to drive a short distance before beginning their ride. The ACT government should be encouraged to extend the existing ACT bike pathways to link with the rail trail corridor and this would give many Canberrans easy access to the rail trail. Also, “park and ride” areas for cyclists who drive to access the rail trail near Canberra would be ideal for these day trippers.

Number of possible day trippers	Per person spend per trip	Daily spend in village	Per person spend per trip	Daily spend in village
75	\$10	\$750	\$15	\$1125
100	\$10	\$1000	\$15	\$1500
125	\$10	\$1250	\$15	\$1875

Table 1. The table below indicates the possible user numbers, day trippers only, and their impact on daily business activity in Michelago if there is a sealed trail from Queanbeyan to Michelago.

2.3 Establish early success

The final point to consider is that of demonstrating very early that the rail trail is a success. Queanbeyan to Michelago section will unquestionably attract a large number of users whose presence and expenditure pattern in Michelago will indicate that the trail is a winner. This early success can be leveraged to promote the next extension of the trail to Bredbo and Cooma. At a later time, the successful use of the Queanbeyan to Cooma section will be the driver to extend the rail trail south to Nimmitabel and Bombala.

3 Trail Maintenance

The report has stated that actual information on maintenance costs is hard to obtain and the authors have therefore used information from the USA to derive an annual maintenance cost of A\$4000 per km. The authors do consider this to be a high-end estimate. We have obtained data from, firstly a NZ government report on maintenance of the top 22 NZ cycle

trails ¹, and secondly from budget data of the Otago Central Rail Trail Trust ². This information suggests a much lower cost may be possible, perhaps in the order of A\$1500 per km.

Data presented in Table 2 below clearly illustrates that there is a big difference in estimates of maintaining cycle paths. We believe that the data for the Otago Rail Trail is accurate in its collection and is relevant to the MRT because of similarities of climate. The low rainfall environment in particular contributes to less erosion of the trail surface. The Otago Trail has a number of large bridges whereas the MRT has more bridges of shorter length, so an allowance may need to be made for upkeep of the timber bridges on the MRT corridor. Nevertheless, the real-life Otago Rail Trail data does suggest that maintenance on the MRT could well be much less than \$850,000 suggested in the feasibility study report.

Source of data	Nature of data and date of report	Cost per km	Total cost per year for MRT of 213 km
Draft feasibility report SMRC 2019	USA, data not necessarily specific to cycle trails 2005	A\$4000	A\$852,000
NZ Government ¹	Data averaged for 22 cycle trails 2015	A\$1258	A\$267,954
NZ Government ¹	Data specific to Otago Rail Trail 2015	A\$1110	A\$236,430
NZ Government Dept of Conservation. ²	Budget for Otago Central Rail Trail 2019/20 Note 1	A\$1560	A\$332,280

Table 2. Comparison of trail maintenance costs using data from different sources. Note1. This maintenance cost covers; trail surface, amenity and structure maintenance, weed control and structural inspections by qualified staff.

Possibly overlooked in the report is the potential income that can be used to offset trail maintenance costs. Budget data for the Otago Central Rail Trail Trust² shows an income of A\$92,000. This is derived from; supporting business purchasing advertising space on the Otago RT website and in brochures, sales of passports to trail users and finally income from grants and donations. There is no reason to think that the management trust for the MRT would not be able to do similar or better. For example, there is a potential income stream from the advertising billboards in the rail corridor near Royalla and Michelago.

4 Construction costs

4.1 Surface type

The general choice of surface is, sealed or compacted gravel. A sealed surface is more expensive to lay but has lower maintenance costs and allows for a greater range of user types and a greater travel speed. The compacted gravel surface is cheaper to build but more expensive to maintain and restricts users to mostly hybrid mountain bikes. These cyclists travel slowly and a day of riding is 35 to 50 km and this means riders need to stay over in each of the villages and towns along the corridor. A gravel surface is embodied in the concept of “slow tourism” and should be the standard surface type, but with some exceptions.

- We suggest the construction of a sealed surface from Queanbeyan to Michelago. This will open up the user market to the maximum and include; faster travelling road cyclists, hybrid bike cyclists, families with children on small bikes and disabled people with motorized and manual wheelchairs. Within the residential areas of Queanbeyan, the sealed surface creates a pathway for commuting and recreation. Canberra residents will also be big users, especially if the pathway is integrated into the ACT cycle network.
- At Cooma, a sealed surface should be provided for a section to the north (Chakola) or south (Rock Flat). Residents would certainly use the trail for multiple recreational purposes.

4.2 Bridge refurbishment

The consultants point out the major bridges on the corridor are a drawcard but come with the penalty of being expensive to repair.

We believe that key bridges such as the heritage listed bridges at Ingelara, Bredbo and Chakola must be retained and refurbished to a standard suitable for cycling and foot traffic.

The bridges over Micalago Road, Bumbalong Road, Polo Flat Road and Old Bombala Road could be replaced with cheaper prefabricated steel span bridges but the local communities are known to value the original bridges and would seek to have them retained. Michelago residents in particular have fought hard to ensure their bridge is not demolished.

We would suggest that the one major bridge that has a questionable need for full rejuvenation to rail trail status would be at Chakola where the corridor crosses the Numeralla River and flood plain. This large structure is in very poor shape but does have heritage values and meaning to the Chakola community and many others on the Monaro. We believe that the actual bridge over the river is structurally sound (refurbished in 1988), provides character and creates appeal. It must be maintained but the lesser structures over the flood plain are in poor shape and a special effort need be made to retain them in the long term. Initially perhaps a bypass trail is built until funding is available. The timber spans and the built earth islands give great character to trail as it passes over the floodplain

5 Report recommendations

The following comments refer to the recommendations as produced in the report on page 17. We endorse all the recommendations and have chosen to comment only on several.

5.1 Recommendation 1: Train service resumes

We agree that if a train service is in place, the rail trail proposal would need to be reconsidered depending on the route for the rail service. Should the corridor remain disused by train then the rail trail is an attractive alternative use activity that will preserve rail heritage infrastructure and promote economic activity especially in the small villages.

5.2 Recommendation 2: Queanbeyan Palerang Regional Council position

5.2.1 QPR

If there is no direction to restore a train service then we support the recommendation that the QPRC be involved in planning of the rail trail from an early stage for two reasons.

- As the Queanbeyan station will be the trail head, then the rail trail will create numerous small business opportunities in Queanbeyan for providers of services such as accommodation, shuttle transport, refreshments and bike hire. Tour operators will have the opportunity to coordinate these services.
- A 6km section of the trail is within the Queanbeyan residential area and could be developed for its residents. The new suburbs of Jerrabomberra and South Jerrabomberra adjoin the rail corridor and residents of these areas would value the commuting and recreation opportunities offered by the facility.

5.2.2 ACT

Another key stakeholder that should not be overlooked for many reasons is the ACT Government. The western fence-line of the rail corridor is the NSW and ACT boundary for approximately 35km, making the ACT Government the adjoining landholder. Also, the rail corridor is within several kilometres of ACT residents in Tuggeranong suburbs (less than 500 metres for Gilmore residents) and these residents will be big users of the trail if given connections between the ACT cycle paths and the rail corridor. Day trippers to Michelago from these suburbs would be considerable.

5.3 Recommendation 4: A management committee or trust is required.

Fully supported by the MRT and we believe the model for this has already been established by state and local government working on the Tumbarumba – Rosewood rail trail.

5.4 Recommendation 5: Links with rail history groups

a. The MRT committee believes that the rail history groups such as at Cooma and Bombala should be included in early discussions. These groups have significant vested interests in preserving and showcasing rail history in the stations and freight yards. Also, they have long term plans to retain active use of short sections of the rail line for tourist train/trike activities. These activities are compatible with a rail trail and will add to the attraction. On

the Bellarine Peninsula near Geelong a multipurpose corridor exists and historic rail and cyclists share the rail corridor without barrier fencing.

b. The consultants have seemingly overlooked the value of the rail trail in preserving major structures such as the NSW State listed heritage rail bridges at Ingelara and Bredbo. These continue to decline in structural integrity and there is no obvious move from the relevant agencies in the NSW Government to reverse this decline. Other bridges that are part of community landscapes are seen at Michelago, Chakola, Cooma and near Nimmitabel with the McLaughlin River bridge. These bridges add great interest to the Monaro landscape and using them for the rail trail means they will not be lost.

Along the corridor there are numerous smaller structures that are important to local communities e.g. the sidings at Tuggeranong, Royalla, Chakola, Jincumbilly and Bukalong and the station and yards at Nimmitabel. The rail trail will help focus attention on maintenance of these structures and again we recommend that local rail history groups are involved in early discussions on their involvement in helping to preserve these and other items of rail history infrastructure.

5.5 Recommendation 8: Community consultation

MRT strongly supports the concept of adjoining landholders having the opportunity for one on one discussions with planners. Another option that should be explored is, the possibility of community forums hosted by the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet, this has been done on three occasions - Tweed River, Armidale and Goulburn. The purpose of these was to outline the overall development process and how it worked. A key learning from these sessions was that, the opportunity for community groups to be involved was sometimes more important than the actual issues being discussed.

5.6 Recommendation 15: Trail maintenance

The notion of community involvement in this activity is very important, community involvement strengthen community links along the corridor. Friends of MRT will certainly help the corridor management group.

6 Section 5 Issues page 60

The report has identified potential issues and the MRT committee agrees with the consultants that none of these are insurmountable. Here we make some brief comments on several of the issues.

6.1 Landholder concerns.

It is easy to understand that landholders with properties adjoining the rail corridor and no experience of rail trails will perceive issues including prevalence of litter, impediments to farm management, trespass and biosecurity. Although the evidence from existing rail trails in Australia, NZ, Europe and USA suggests that these concerns can be easily addressed what

must be done is to give landholders more information and the opportunity to express their concerns. The MRT committee endorses the consultant's suggestion to have more meetings with landholders. At this stage they need not be one on one. But small meetings could have the purpose of discussing solutions to perceived problems and how other rail trails have provided these solutions. Revealing existing examples of solutions such as fencing, private road crossings and stock crossings are good starting points to breaking down perceived issues. Opportunity to discuss a problem can be more important than the eventual solution.

6.2 Extremes of temperature.

Cycling is an outdoor activity and certainly the Monaro does have variations in weather that could place cyclists in testing conditions. But there are a number of reasons this should not be a deterrent to trail construction.

Firstly, the most popular season for riding will be autumn, a period of fairly stable and predictable weather. Certainly, there will be trail users at all times of the year and it is normal for these people like other outdoor adventurers to carry weather protection clothing. And indeed, it is often said there is no such thing as bad weather, it is bad clothing that is the problem.

Rest stations that also provide shelter will be needed between stopover points. These might provide protection from the summer sun and or winter wind and they can also serve as lunch spots with toilet facilities. These might be located between each village and at a point of natural interest eg bridge or rail siding or could coincide with an existing point such as the Colinton Rest station on the Monaro Highway.

Users of the trail will have ample opportunity to receive weather updates. It should be noted that in NZ most tour operators advise clients on appropriate clothing and accommodation providers give riders updates on the trail and weather conditions ahead. Weather forecasting in Australia is highly accurate and projected out for a period longer than the duration of the 4 or 5 day ride along the trail. Trail users would not set out in ignorance of coming weather patterns.

Informal comment has been that the trail goes to remote areas and this presents a problem in the unlikely event of an accident. This is not a real issue. Between Queanbeyan and Cooma, the rail corridor is not only close to the Monaro Highway but crosses it on four occasions and also there are side roads that cross the corridor. Between Cooma and Nimmitabel, access to the corridor can be via The Springs Road, The Peak Road and there is one intersect with the Monaro Highway. Between Nimmitabel and Bombala there are many side roads intersecting the rail corridor e.g. The Old Bombala Road, Mt Cooper Road, Holts Flat and Bukalong siding roads and the Gunningrah Road. Furthermore, the use of mobile phones has removed much of the element of remoteness and a cyclist on the trail is at no greater risk of isolation than a farmer in a distant paddock on the farm.

6.3 Other users

Incorporating the interests of rail historians into the project is important as there are significant pieces of rail infrastructure that need protection. There are, the NSW state listed



heritage rail freight yards at Michelago, Cooma and Bombala and rail bridges at Ingelara and Bredbo. Lesser pieces of infrastructure such as bridges or sidings at Chakola or the station of Nimmitabel also are important to local communities. Some of these interests are organized into groups such as the Cooma Monaro Rail and Friends of Bombala Rail. These groups and the informal community interests need to be brought into the discussions.

Both the MRT and rail history groups share a common wish of preserving rail history and wanting to help stimulate tourism. Preserving the rail history adds interest for users of the MRT and the subsequent increased visitor numbers would help strengthen the case for in funding of rail infrastructure maintenance. A vintage rail history trip from Cooma to Rock Flat would be a great drawcard to users of the MRT and would be well supported. The popular Bellarine multipurpose rail/cycle corridor near Geelong illustrates just how easily this can be done and without the need for a separating fence.

As with the case for landholder involvement, the earlier these groups are brought into discussions the less the opportunity for misbeliefs to grow and fester.

7 References

- 1 Ngā Haerenga, The Great Rides of the New Zealand Cycle Trails: Some Benefits in Relation to Costs. A report prepared for the NZ Government Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment by Antong Victorio 5 August 2016.
- 2 New Zealand Government Dept of Conservation; Otago Central Rail Trail work forecast June 2019.