



President's Report

Annual General Meeting November 2023

This year has been one of significant progress on our journey towards establishing the Monaro Rail Trail (MRT). Most significantly the year ends with strong achievements:

- Gaining Snowy Mountains Regional Council approval to apply for a grant to start the MRT at Bombala, albeit a short section. This demonstrates the Council's commitment and allows us to test the processes associated with funding and constructing the rail trail.
- Undertaking several plans, studies and reports that continue to flesh out sections of the trail in further detail, including detailed costing and more broadly provide information required to satisfy government grant applications.
- Aligning stakeholders who significantly influence our ability to move forward. This includes Federal, State and Local Government elected representatives and the key staff associated with each level of government. We have identified an appropriate funding source for our first stage of development.
- Completing the precinct trail in Bombala. This built goodwill with the Bombala community and increasing credibility with Council and the local community.

There is still much more work to be done before we can claim "financial close" on the first stage of development, but progress has been both net positive and material. But as the proverb goes "*there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip*"! So, MRT Inc's work in the next six to 12 months is critical.



MRT Inc's 2022 Committee

Let me start by thanking the members of the MRT Inc's Committee who have freely devoted significant time and energy to moving us forward, often travelling many kilometres in the process. I would also like to thank and acknowledge the staff of the two councils Queanbeyan Palerang and Snowy Monaro who have also devoted significant time and given priority to the project. MRT Inc and Council staff meet at least fortnightly to progress the development of the MRT.

When I was elected President, the MRT Inc Committee at that time was the first under a changed constitution, which expanded the number of committee positions to 13. Of the 13 members elected, three subsequently resigned for various reasons – I wish to thank them for their contribution.

At the end of the last AGM, we held a short meeting to discuss our goals for the next 12 months. Each committee member was asked for their view of what we wanted to achieve. Broadly, it was either successfully achieving a grant for Stage 1 or, more optimistically, funding and starting Stage 1. We came close!

The 2023 AGM is an opportunity to elect a committee with; the competence, the experience, and the time to see us through the next very important 12 months – hopefully leading to, completion of the first 3.5km of the MRT, starting at Bombala, and secured funding to start construction of Stage 1.



Building the Foundations for a Successful Grant Application - Progress in 2023

Reflecting upon the last 12 months, there has been significant work done to deliver the achievements listed above.

In mid-2022 the NSW Government published a “Rail Trails Framework” to guide and facilitate development of rail trails in the State. This gave a roadmap to the Councils and MRT Inc to develop a business case aligned with the Framework for a grant funding application. Snowy Monaro Regional Council, assisted by MRT Inc, applied for and was subsequently successful in receiving a \$273k grant to fund studies and reports to build upon those previously done to align with the Frameworks requirements. This work included:

- Continuing development of Trail Development Plans (TDP) for sections of the MRT not previously covered. This included Michelago to Cooma, which would complete TDPs from Queanbeyan to Cooma, and sections south of Cooma, almost completing all remaining sections to Bombala;
- Environmental studies – reporting on biosecurity and biodiversity along the MRT corridor;
- Economic study on potential direct revenue sources to fund operations and maintenance of the MRT. Additionally, to examine potential economic value of the MRT on the towns and villages on its route.

MRT Committee members have assisted consultants in the work listed above. This has included transporting consultants to and from the corridor; participating in information gathering workshops; and providing information to them in general. The feedback from the consultants and Council staff on our contribution has been very positive.

The consultants’ reports are all nearing completion and will be used in future grant applications. They will also be used to support Council staff seeking authority from Council to seek grants, which to date has been a challenging process. The main issues raised by SMRC Councillors have been the cost of ongoing operations and maintenance, and railway enthusiasts’ reluctance to agree to any use of rail corridor that involves lifting rails and/or limiting the length of rail used for potential use by tourist trains. I will expand on the issues of rail enthusiasts later.

The NSW Government “Rail Trails Framework” requires the Councils, through which a rail trail traverses – in our case SMRC and QPRC – to lease the rail corridor and associated assets from Transport for NSW (TfNSW) for a period of 30 years. SMRC staff have commenced negotiations with TfNSW for this lease. We are still at a very early stage in this process. Council staff have informed us that a “pro-forma” lease has been drafted (MRT Inc at this stage has not had access to this document) and discussions on the assets to be included have commenced. Notably, TfNSW has acknowledged the potential development of the MRT on the rail corridor and written to Council consenting to grant funding being sought for its development.



A start on constructing the MRT – Applying for \$1M Federal Election Pledge

Building upon the newly elected Federal member, Kristy McBain’s election pledge of \$1M, a grant application is being prepared under the Federal “Investing in our Communities” grant program. The proposed grant application required Council approval, which was granted at the September meeting. Given the challenging process associated with Council approval, it is quite an accomplishment. As the funding is quite small, the plan is to build approximately 3.5km of the 25km trail from Bombala to Jincumbilly. Although the length is short, it is an important achievement, as it demonstrates and re-enforces Council support. This is important when it comes to the much larger grant application for Stage 1.

MRT Inc has worked with Bombala community representatives to demonstrate community support for the MRT. This included a petition in support and ultimately culminating in a Bombala community spokesperson speaking in support of the MRT at the September Council meeting that approved proceeding with a grant application to commence MRT construction.

Bombala Precinct Trail

This project was funded by a grant from Boco Rock Wind Farm’s community grant program and largely led by MRT Inc. It entailed creating a loop through the township of Bombala for cyclists and pedestrians. Sections of new pathway were constructed, and loop signage and maps were developed. This loop is now actively used by both residents and visitors. In addition to the inherent utility of the loop, the project also increased credibility of MRT Inc and created good will with both SMRC and residents.

Queanbeyan Precinct Trail

The rail corridor from Tralee/Jerrabomberra to Queanbeyan Railway Station was removed from Stage 1 of the MRT’s development, as it was potentially to be used as part of a rail transport hub. In its place a new route was proposed using largely existing QPRC pathways. In May 2022 the Intermodal Freight Feasibility Study reported that the transport hub was no longer proceeding thus freeing up the corridor for alternative use. MRT Inc has now formed a small group to examine using both the pathway and rail corridor to create a loop around Queanbeyan offering; commuting, recreation and tourism options. Further, a Trail Development Plan for the rail corridor section has been undertaken with potential for the loop to be created and incorporated into a revised Stage 1 development. This is a very exciting prospect, increasing the appeal and use of the MRT at the most populous end of the rail trail.



Focus on Stakeholder Management – An Important Part of MRT Progress

The goal of MRT Inc is the creation of the Monaro Rail Trail, and with this in mind, a set of prioritised actions have been formulated. Top of the list is to secure funding for constructing the MRT. Within this objective there are several key stakeholders, and creating appropriate relationships with each of them has been a priority this year.

Councils – Capital grants to construct the MRT must be applied for by the local councils, SMRC and QPRC, who are then responsible for construction, operations, and maintenance. Within the Councils there is the governing body made up of elected Councillors and Council Staff.

levels of engagement, which have included:

- Formal updates at Council meetings – both SMRC and QPRC;
- Individual discussions with Councillors; and
- Regular meetings with Council staff, including our MRT fortnightly meetings.

Generally, these engagements have been both positive and yielded progress. The only material exception has been several SMRC Council meetings, where there has been vigorous and occasionally heated debate surrounding two issues – firstly, the potential cost burden on Council to operate and maintain the MRT and secondly, the potential for shared use of the corridor with rail enthusiasts. I believe, these issues are gradually being resolved.

- **Federal and State Governments** - Capital grants to construct the MRT will be allocated by State and/or Federal Government departments from established funding programs they administer. For the MRT, there are two key elected representatives and a small number of departments. Engaging with this group of stakeholders has been more challenging for a few reasons. That said, both our Federal and State representatives are positive supporters of the MRT, but more work is required to maintain their focus and appropriate level of support. At the State bureaucratic level, MRT has made considerable progress in engagement with several departments. For example, we have a senior officer from Regional NSW attend our fortnightly meetings with the two Councils.
- **Community** – MRT continued to engage with the local community to raise awareness and maintain support. For example, providing updates to Chambers of Commerce (CoC) and local services clubs. Discussions have commenced with Landcare groups to assist with re-vegetation and weed management along the corridor, thus benefiting the environment, enhancing the corridor for users, and reducing maintenance costs to Councils. A major focus has been at the southern end of the MRT, particularly Bombala. This was mainly due to the potential for the \$1M grant combined with strong and negative lobbying by the two active rail enthusiast groups. As a result, Bombala's CoC formed a group to lobby for the MRT actively and effectively.
- **Rail Enthusiasts – Cooma Monaro Rail (CMR) & Friends of Bombala Rail (FoBR)** – MRT Inc has on numerous occasions engaged with both CMR and FoBR. Unfortunately, with no positive progress. The challenge was to determine if there was a way in which the objectives of both groups could be met without disproportionately impacting either. MRT has proposed that a section of the MRT corridor – approximately 25km from Cooma south - could be used for tourist train activity in parallel with the MRT, whereas CMR have maintained their position of wanting to run tourist trains from Cooma to Bombala – approximately half the MRT, which we believe to be unrealistic. This would cause significant delays and increase costs to the point where it

threatens the viability of an MRT south of Cooma. Despite SMRC's former mayor attempting to broker a solution, none has been found.

CMR commenced a media campaign to elicit community support but this has not been based on any substantive business case. MRT has responded only where necessary, for example when mainstream media have sought our view. MRT has engaged with local ABC – both print and radio, the local newspaper “The Monaro Post” and local commercial radio.



The Future – Challenges for MRT Inc's Committee in 2024

I believe 2024 will potentially be a very big year for the MRT. Significant progress has been achieved and momentum has been built. Very briefly, having identified a grant funding source for Stage 1 (and potentially beyond) through the Federal “Regional Precincts and Partnership Program” (RPPP), in my view the key tasks will be:

- Review scope of Stage 1 and modify it appropriately e.g., Queanbeyan Precinct Trail.
- Prepare a draft grant application incorporating a business case incorporating the work recently undertaken – TDP, environmental reports and economic analysis and other information to align with the NSW Government Rail Trail Framework.
- Seek Councils' (SMRC and QPRC) authority for Council staff to apply for a grant, this will include:
 - assessing the cost for Councils to operate and maintain the MRT;
 - agreeing to acceptable Terms and Conditions for a lease of the corridor from TfNSW;
 - satisfactorily resolving any co-use of corridor with CMR and FoBR.
- To engage with various stakeholders, including
 - SMRC and QPRC Councillors and senior staff – as grant applicant decision makers;
 - Local Federal and State representatives for their support and influence;
 - Federal and state bureaucrats to ensure an efficient and effective grant application is developed to maximise

Carlo Botto

President MRT Inc 2023

