



6 October 2022

Transport and Infrastructure Committee  
Parliament Buildings  
Wellington

Attention Greg O'Connor, Chair

Tēnā Koutou,

### **Enquiry into the future of inter-regional passenger rail in New Zealand**

Rangitikei District Council is very pleased that the Committee has established this enquiry. Like other local authorities adjoining the North Island Main Trunk, we have supported the preparation of NIRP – North Island Regional Passenger Rail Connector - a high-level feasibility study of regional passenger rail services, which was provided to the Minister of Transport last December. We expect that the Committee has been provided with this study, which we think sets the scene for a major transformation in how the rail network is used. The Committee may be aware that the Council has initiated a Plan Change to allow development of the Marton rail hub, which will both increase local jobs and the demand for travel to, and from, Marton from towns in Manawatū and Whanganui.

Marton, in particular, was (and remains) a key junction for the North Island railway network, being the link between the Main Trunk and the line through Whanganui to New Plymouth. When the passenger rail service ceased in Marton in 2012, it meant the loss of a connection for people in Whanganui and Taranaki. Council recognises that by then the number of passengers joining and leaving the train was very low. Passenger rail services to Taranaki had ceased, much earlier, in 1977.

Council considers that there are two critical aspects to positioning regional passenger rail as a viable and attractive service. The first is to make it competitive, given the number of alternative modes – in particular, road transport. The second is ensuring that freight by rail is not affected by increased non-suburban rail passenger travel: rail freight has been (and is likely to remain) the major contributor to railway revenue.

In 1962-63, there were just over 3 million non-suburban passenger journeys across the government railway network: this earned a revenue of just under £2 million. (By comparison there were 22.6 million suburban journeys earning £932,000.) But even then, the revenue from freight was ten times that for passengers.

At that time, the Transport Act 1962 was in effect which (under section 109) restricted the use of road transport for the transport of goods when a route using at least 40 to 75 miles of the Government railway network was available (the distance varying according to the nature of the goods being carried). Revenue from freight in 1962-63 was nearly £28 million, being just over 10 million tons, with farming products (23%) and forest products (19%) being the largest components. The bus services operated by New Zealand Railways Road Services were not restricted by these provisions.

By 2001, non-suburban passenger numbers on rail had shrunk to 513,500; suburban rail passengers had also reduced to 12.5 million, while total freight carried was 14.5 million tonnes – even though by 1989 the road carriage restrictions of 1962 had been repealed. Looking at the aggregated annual

report from KiwiRail, for the year ending 30 June 2019 (to avoid the distortions from Covid restrictions), freight volumes had risen to more than 19 million tonnes (which is calculated to be 36% of the freight, contributing 59% of the enterprise revenue; passenger rail commuters rose to 35 million. Non-suburban passenger rail numbers (essentially the three iconic journeys, promoted to tourists) were one million.

The objective of the NIRP (as with the 'Restore Passenger Rail' campaign) is to get more people using trains outside the metro services for Auckland and Wellington, and thus decrease the carbon footprint caused by private cars and the road network itself. NIRP does not suggest passenger number targets; Restore Passenger Rail suggests restoring passenger rail to the extent it was in 2000. However, as noted above, use of non-suburban passenger rail in 2000 was half that achieved in 2019. Council suggests that a more meaningful target would be to have non-suburban passenger numbers increased to three million by 2030.

We think it is essential to gather data about people's movements around the country. While Waka Kotahi (New Zealand Transport Agency) gathers data about vehicle movements (differentiating between heavy and light vehicles) and about travel for work and education, what is needed is a closer analysis of inter-regional journeys people take by car.

However, Council has considered information currently gathered by Waka Kotahi. One dataset shows that the average daily number of light vehicles on State Highway 1 north of Bulls and the Utiku Straights (south of Taihape) is 5,285. This dataset does not show the start or finish points of such journeys, but a conservative estimate would be that 50% (or 2,640) have travelled the full extent between Bulls and Taihape (and, of course, potentially starting to the south of Bulls and ending potentially to the north of Taihape). Nor does the dataset show the number of people in each vehicle, but assuming 1.2 people per vehicle would mean that there could be around 1.15 million journeys by people each year travelling into and outside the Rangitikei District in a year. The crucial question is what proportion of such travellers would opt for passenger rail if it were more accessible and affordable.

Council considers that the following points in the NIRP warrant highlighting:

1. The need for additional passing loops so that faster passenger trains can overtake slower freight trains travelling in the same direction or trains travelling in the opposite direction can pass without having to stop.
2. The potential for drive-on, drive-off service, i.e. car-train-services such as operate in Australia and Europe. This is a similar concept to what is currently provided on the inter-island ferry.
3. Ensuring comparative affordability and exploring funding mechanisms. It is essential that the costs to passengers are sufficiently attractive to motivate a decision to travel by rail rather than private car. As the NIRP suggests, there are a range of value capture options which go beyond the fares sought from passengers, so that those who broadly benefit from the extension of passenger rail services contribute to the costs.

Council suggests that it is feasible to begin a gradual extension of passenger rail service (at least in the North Island) quickly, taking advantage of the existing services:

- a. Capital Connection –
  - by extending its route to Marton, to provide the opportunity for people north of Palmerston North (including Whanganui) to connect with the train; and
  - by including a second round trip – i.e. leaving Wellington at (say) 8.00 am and returning from Marton at (say) 10.30 am) during each weekday – and having the

service run seven days a week (including public holidays) rather than the five weekdays (excluding public holidays) as present.

We think it is crucial that KiwiRail undertakes substantial publicity for this extended service, so that the wider community (and not just commuters) is aware of the service. The success which KiwiRail has had in increasing tourist passenger numbers suggests that it has the capability of providing successful promotions.

In addition, we suggest KiwiRail engages with passenger bus companies so that they include connectivity with the Capital Connection route, particularly to Marton. There is a useful parallel on the Wairarapa Line, where buses connect Greytown with Woodside (the nearest stop to Greytown) and Martinborough to Featherston.

b. Northerner

Council is pleased that the Northerner will resume, from 26 September 2022. However, we feel that it (like the Capital Connection) should be established as a seven-day-a-week service together with incorporating stops which have been suspended for the past decade – including Taihape and Marton.

We think there is an opportunity to have this service seen (and used) as an alternative for New Zealanders wishing to travel to and from intermediate points along the North Island Main Trunk. This will make the service more meaningful for rural communities near the railway as well as making it feasible for those travelling from the North Island's main cities to visit smaller towns. As with the Capital Connection, we think it is important to provide connecting bus services.

Alongside gradual extension of existing services, Council also suggests investigating the innovative approaches being developed internationally, and requests that plans for transport networks include providing access to underserved communities.

I would like the opportunity to talk with the Committee, please contact my Executive Assistant Karen Cowper to arrange a time to speak, she can be contacted at: [karen.cowper@rangitikei.govt.nz](mailto:karen.cowper@rangitikei.govt.nz).

Ngā mihi



Andy Watson  
**Mayor of the Rangitikei District**



*Making this place home.*