

The Heritage Rail Gazette

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"BETTER THAN NOTHING" NOT GOOD ENOUGH

Infrastructure Minister Rene Hidding quietly announced the Liberal Party's 'Tourism and Heritage Rail' policy yesterday. Initial expressions of joy from rail proponents quickly died down upon closer inspection. What is really in it for tourist and heritage rail operators?

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Aside from access to disused lines and \$100,000 promised to heritage rail operators including TTMS, Don River and Derwent Valley Railways, the main feature of the policy is for TasRail to facilitate a 'rail weekend' once a year. This solitary event is supposed to "open up new and exciting tourism developments". Exactly how this effect is meant to be achieved or how the project is going to be funded remains a mystery.

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To put it bluntly, the policy is a cop out, something hurriedly cobbled together in response to Labor's most excellent plan. It is based on bad advice and a complete lack of consultation with stakeholders. The Liberals have had ample time to listen to all sides, yet they have failed. They have not done their homework and they have no vision; that much is clear.

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A once-per-year event will never encourage growth in the sector. While the policy may put a foot in the door of Government, it will mean a lot more hard work to get to where the industry needs to be in order to be viable.

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Furthermore, the fate of the North East line remains in limbo, with the continuing

threat of it being made into a bicycle trail; a proposal the rail community is vehemently opposed to.

DORSET MAYOR SPROUTS OLD HAT ON ABC

The Mayor of Dorset, Greg Howard, is a staunch supporter of cycling tourism developments within his jurisdiction. Much energy and resources have been invested in the North East to achieve his goals. Like his mates in the State Government, he too has refused to consult with any representatives of the railway community, dismissing the proposal outright.

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On February 19, in an interview with Leon Compton on ABC Radio, Howard stated: "Even if we thought, even for a minute, that the train would deliver economic benefit better than cycling, we would be on board. We just can't make the numbers add up. Its as simple as that."

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It is fair to assume he never even looked at his own figures, let alone either of the official reports commissioned for the railway. The bike proposal hinges on \$1.47 Million of Federal funding, which is to be matched by money from Council coffers. Where is that money going to come from? Mayor Howard is quoting figures that are by now several years out of date and the plan is so full of holes, unanswered questions and misconceptions, it is a miracle it ever was considered for a grant in the first place.

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It is evident, he is not seeing the potential of diversification and of integrating multiple

attractions. He has blinkered tunnel vision and does not want the railway. "...we [Dorset Council] don't think there is a snowflake's chance in hell of the train ever getting here..." he said on air; and with that, the case is closed.

TOURISM COUNCIL PURSUES A MISGUIDED AGENDA

In their own words, the Tourism Industry Council of Tasmania is the peak body for Tasmania's tourism industry. Their website states: "We are a not-for-profit organisation providing leadership for the industry and a strong voice for Tasmanian tourism operators."

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The sad fact is, the Council represents but a few ventures and has a heavy focus on cycling tourism. \$6 Million has been allocated to establish the Cycle Tourism Fund on its advice, however there is not one mention of tourist and heritage railways.

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Part of the brief of the T21 agenda is to enhance the visitor experience and to encourage travel to and within regional areas, yet no effort has been exerted to fulfil this requirement. Tasmania's tourism figures are at an all-time high; meanwhile, facilities and infrastructure to cope with the influx of visitors are years behind schedule. Other than the weaving of red tape, very little appears to actually be achieved.

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Heritage rail societies must no longer accept piecemeal offerings and inadequate promises at every election. Countless examples interstate and overseas are testament to what is possible. The time for big-picture thinking is now... or never.