



UPPER HUNTER SHIRE COUNCIL

MEDIA RELEASE

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Come on up!

Upper Hunter Country Rail Trail Development Plan on track

An independent feasibility study has recommended further planning toward a potential 38 km recreation trail on the disused railway corridor between Merriwa and Sandy Hollow, and possibly on to Denman.

Upper Hunter Shire Council agreed this week to the recommendation of the Upper Hunter Rail Trail Feasibility Study to undertake a Trail Development Plan, subject to financial support from Muswellbrook Council.

Upper Hunter Shire Mayor Wayne Bedggood said while a rail trail was potentially a great asset, much more investigation and consultation was needed and would occur through the Trail Development Plan.

"The complexity and potential cost of the project means that considerable planning will be required before a final decision is made," Cr Bedggood said.

"The results of this study were positive, although there is still work to address initial concerns from some landowners adjoining the disused rail line. The feasibility study recommends we go on to Trail Development Plan which will give us final costings and allow us to start seeking grant funding."

In 2014 the NSW Government announced funding for the development of rail trails in NSW. The feasibility study estimated the probable costs of constructing the rail trail from Merriwa to Sandy Hollow at over \$7million.

The feasibility study also estimated the economic benefits for the local area from visitors to a rail trail, at over one million dollars a year.

"The total injection of dollars into the local economies from local, day trip and overnight visitors may be of the order of \$1,182,814 per year (under a range of conservative scenarios)." (Upper Hunter Country Rail Trail Feasibility Study, 2015, p.15)

The feasibility study explored some of the challenges that would need to be addressed in the Trail Development Plan including:

- Clearing and revegetation, ensuring adequate drainage and the cost of removing the steel track and sleepers along the trail aside, excluding the area near the Merriwa Railway Station.
- Working with the Merriwa Railway Society to utilise their collection of historic railway artefacts and ensure the rail trail complements future museum activities at the old Merriwa Railway Station.
- The cost of reinstating or refurbishing several historic bridges along the trail with new decking and hand rails.
- Fencing the rail trail where it passes through farmland
- Working closely with farmers and other landowners whose properties are along the trail and negotiating access where required

The feasibility study by consultants, Mike Halliburton Associates and Transplan Pty Ltd, was jointly commissioned by Upper Hunter Shire Council and Muswellbrook Shire Council to explore the practical potential challenges and benefits from developing the rail trail.

Community information sessions on the potential rail trail were sought in August 2015 at 'open house' events in Sandy Hollow, Merriwa and Denman. When the Trail Development Plan is completed it will be on display for community feedback.

There are over 100 rail trails in Australia, built primarily on publicly owned land and popular for community events like fun runs. They attract non-motorised users such as cyclists, walkers, runners, parents pushing prams, horse riders and people in wheelchairs because they offer safe, flat routes away from dangerous roads and through a range of landscapes. The area between Merriwa and Sandy Hollow follows a path through farming land, creeks and rivers, gently undulating countryside and spectacular rocky escarpments.

Wayne Bedggood
MAYOR

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