

Dear Rail Supporters,

I haven't seen the minutes yet but here's my account of last night's proceedings. Happy to receive feedback or corrections from others present.

Earlier – In Public Access session, speakers against the motion representing Northern Rivers Rail Trails (NRRT) were Byron Cllr Sol Ibrahim & Greg Meehan. Speakers for the motion were Northern Rivers Railway Action Group's (NRRAG's) Beth Shelley & Phillip Hill. Open Questions were put to Cllr Ekins, mostly from the RT lobby.

Later - Cllr Ekins put up her well intentioned 'rails with trails' motion to help reconcile the groups competing for use of the rail corridor. The only person she could find to second it, so that the motion 'got up' was Cllr Simon Clough (Sustainable Futures?) who then, very oddly, spoke against the motion.

It left the way open for Cllr Glenys Ritchie (who had earlier declared her interest as sitting on the NRRT board) to offer up an amended motion (allowed at the discretion of the Chair, Jenny Dowell). This, from our point of view, utterly changed the intention of the original motion by allowing for only rail trails in the corridor. It was in effect giving the Council's blessing to ripping up and removing the rail tracks.

There was some dissent from Cllr Greg Bennett who offered another amended motion that only supported rail transport in the corridor. The Mayor directed that his was a 'foreshadowed' motion (as it changed the subject matter) and could only be debated if the others did not get up.

Cllr Neil Marks basically spoke against the original and the amended motions, pointing out his concern over contamination issues – asbestos in the ballast, arsenic residues in the sleepers. He pointed out that it would be a huge undertaking and cost to have this contamination removed (it would all need to be carted off to Newcastle).

Cllr Gianpero Battista spoke in a rambling way against rail transport's future prospects. He even misquoted a section from a TOOT email sent to him that said TOOT was against Light Rail services in the corridor.

It seems the general consensus was that here is an opportunity - there's \$75 million up for grabs for Rail Trail development with no hint of anyone in Sydney backing trains into the foreseeable future so let's go with it before the offer is removed.

The Mayor called for a vote for the amended motion (as it seems to be the protocol to vote on amendments before the original motion) and most Councillors gave it their support. The result was 8/3 with Cllrs Ekins, Bennett & Marks opposing.

Then it was all over and the audience of mostly rail trail supporters and some rail supporters left the chambers.

Personally, I left feeling quite confused and angered by the very dubious process, though I was not too surprised by the outcome. It seemed that Vanessa had been used as a patsy, and had offered up a well worded motion on a silver platter that the opposition (voting as a block) could easily reword and amend to suit their ends which were the opposite of the intention of the motion.

With hindsight it would have been better if Vanessa had not put this motion up at all. It did not have a single backer to argue for it. It allowed the RT lobby to opportunistically change the wording and get this amended motion through quickly. Otherwise it would have meant they would have had to put up their own Notice of Motion and wait till the February meeting to debate it.

Oh well, it's a done deal now. LCC will be writing to NOROC, neighbouring Councils, Thomas George & Don Page's office to say that RT plans have their full support.

Two positives are that Cllr Greg Bennett seems now firmly on side (I just received an email from him this afternoon offering support to NRRAG) and Neil Marks through a sizeable spanner in the RT works and this has been taken up by media.

Deflated but not Defeated,
Garth Kindred