

A VIABLE LIGHT RAIL OPTION FOR FRASER ISLAND

A FIDO BACKGROUND PAPER

The environmental benefits of a light rail on Fraser Island in reducing surface disturbance and relocation of sand more than justify the establishment of a light rail system on Fraser Island. However, there are wins also for the comfort and amenity of the light rail users. The marketability of a light rail system which has many historic precedents on Fraser Island as well as the economies offered to the tour company which currently carries about half of the 350,000 visitors to Fraser Island each year makes it an even bigger attraction. A rail service would allow the Queensland Government to devolve itself from the expensive and increasing intractable problem of maintaining two major cross island roads.

The increasing use of large buses on Fraser Island has led to widening of the roads. This has led to loss of canopy, desiccation, and erosion with rain. Heavy axle loading also results in rapid deterioration of the road surface resulting in rougher rides for passengers and increasingly expensive maintenance and repairs for the buses. The resulting sand flowing into waterways and lakes is unsustainable.

The Great Sandy Region Management Plan rules out the hardening by bitumening or gravelling of any more of Fraser Island's roads because the resulting environmental impacts have been assessed as untenable for the environment and management.

FIDO has advocated light rail on Fraser Island since 1974. Light rail transport is historically relevant. It offers a better tourist experience. It is also environmentally more sustainable. On the basis of preliminary studies, rail transport is likely to be more financially viable than replacing the aging buses especially if rail access becomes the major tourist access to some of Fraser Island's most popular icons.

Short History: Three different major east-west light rail networks have operated on Fraser Island:

1905 — A line to carry timber ran from Urang Creek to Bogimbah Scrub and the Valley of the Giants.

1916 — A timber line ran from Wanggoolba Creek to the Tallowwood patch, just east of Lake Birrabeen.

1918 — a line went from McKenzie's Jetty to just west of Wabby Lakes, a link from the "720" (the highest point of McKenzies line) to run down through Pile Valley to the Central Station-Eurong Road.

The Queensland Forestry Department then operated this line from 1925 to 1935. It was only discontinued as the timber near the tracks ran out, timber demand fell during the Depression and motor trucks began to replace bullocks.

THE PROPOSAL

To address all of these problems FIDO now proposes a light rail route which hasn't yet been considered by any transport studies on Fraser Island. This proposal follows the bringing of Kingfisher and Eurong Resorts under the same management. It involves:

1. The main line from Kingfisher to Eurong:

This would start at the Kingfisher Jetty and terminate at Eurong. It would require a long bridge along the beach from Kingfisher Resort to McKenzie's Jetty, From McKenzie's Jetty it would follow the old McKenzie tramline route past the old McKenzie's Sawmill site and up to the 7-20. From the 7-20 it would follow the branch down to Pile Valley.

A rail interchange would be established to allow the transfer of passengers between Central Station and Lake McKenzie and the main line. From Pile Valley the main line would follow the old route through the Eurong Scrub (the existing west east road) to Eurong. There would be virtually no earthworks along this route to this point. A new alignment may be required from the eastern end of the Eurong Scrub to provide the most suitable grade at the eastern end of the grade into the Eurong terminus.

2. The Lake McKenzie — Central Station Shuttle:

The second (but crucial) part of this proposal involves integrating the main line with a light rail operating a shuttle service between Central Station and Lake McKenzie. The line between Central Station and Pile Valley would need to be reinstated

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and a new line from Pile Valley to Lake McKenzie built. There would be virtually no earthworks following the current road to the eastern edge of the lake. An elevated rail line following the contour around the north-eastern edge of the lake to the current day use area would avoid any steep grades. This elevated line could provide scenic vistas of the lake.

Implications for other traffic: This proposal does not exclude buses still operating on the Moon Point, Happy Valley or other roads or on the eastern beach. Rail passengers would disembark at Eurong and be dispersed in buses to various destinations such as Wabby Lakes, Eli Creek and the coloured sands.

Loading: Preliminary studies suggest that a light rail on Fraser Island would be viable carrying 80,000 passengers per year. Currently about 180,000 passengers annually are estimated to be carried by large buses between Wanggoolba Creek or Kingfisher and the eastern beach. Most of this could be better serviced by this rail route.

Freight: Because of the destabilisation of the banks of Wanggoolba Creek due to heavy traffic, this proposal also envisages the light rail becoming the principal means of carrying all freight across the island. This will require some form of containerisation and special freight and fuel wagons to carry loads between Kingfisher Resort and Eurong. This would be a significant saving for the company and facilitate supplying Eurong.

This proposal is being advanced by the Fraser Island Defenders Organisation to promote public discussion of its merits to address a most difficult management issue.

POTENTIAL DIFFICULTIES

Level crossings must be avoided: A key and critical part of the introduction of a light rail on Fraser Island would be to prohibit any road level crossings. This would be done in the interests of public safety and maintenance. Sand disturbance at level crossings could clog up the rail tracks and adversely affect the rail operations. Thus there would be a risk to both rail and 4WD users. This would implicitly change the patterns of recreation of free and

independent travellers (FITs) and may be opposed by some.

Avoiding level crossings would have two most significant consequences.

(1) Traffic Reduction at Central Station and Lake McKenzie: Avoiding level crossings would significantly reduce the volume of FIT traffic to Lake McKenzie because it would only be able to be approached from the south west (Wanggoolba Creek). Central Station could still be reached from Ungowa or the Wanggoolba Creek ferry landing, there would be only one road between Central Station and Eurong (the east to west road). Neither destination could be reached from the north. 4WD traffic at both would be reduced. To visit Lake McKenzie tour operators could either place their passengers on the light rail or take a big detour.

Alternatively, they could be directed to Lakes Boomanjin or Birrabeen. This would ease the pressure on Lake McKenzie. Prohibiting level crossings would still enable vehicles to travel east and north from Kingfisher Resort via Cornwalls Break or the Northern Road. Removing buses from Cornwalls Break would make it much easier to maintain for smaller private vehicles. However, such 4WDs would have no direct access to Lake McKenzie.

(2) Increased viability: The other major consequence of no level crossings would be to make the route financially viable for the rail operator. To avoid the longer drive, many FITs would choose to travel to Central Station and Lake McKenzie by rail rather than drive there.

The Central Station Lake McKenzie loop is the key: Previous studies showed that the Kingfisher Resort to Eurong route should be viable on its own with a minimum of 80,000 passengers. By incorporating the link to the Lake McKenzie - Central Station link, line would make the whole light rail network would be a much more financially attractive and resolve a major management problem.

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WIN, WIN, WIN

Environmental wins:

- (1) A light rail would reduce vehicular traffic and demand for parking at both Central Station and Lake McKenzie.
- (2) It would enable a better focus for visitors to be developed including the use of boardwalks between platforms and the main features of these icons.
- (3) It would help ease the environmental and maintenance problems created by the unsustainable use of the two most heavily used cross island routes - Cornwalls Break and Eurong.
- (4) It would significantly reduction of wash and down-cutting of the roads (and consequential sedimentation of lakes, creeks and lower ground).
- (5) It should mean entirely an end to the alluvial plume extending into Lake McKenzie.
- (6) More people will be encouraged to walk one way between Central Station to Lake McKenzie because they can travel the other way by train.
- (7) A light rail would encourage more people to seek accommodation at either Eurong or Kingfisher Resorts and this has the effect of reducing the demand for camping which has demonstrably a much heavier environmental impacts than well used and well designed accommodation.

Visitors win: From a visitor's viewpoint light rail is more attractive. Light rail would provide visitors with much greater comfort and safety. Light rail on Fraser Island has cultural and historical significance. It would enable visitors to learn more about Fraser Island through a much better interpretation. It would be able to operate on a more reliable timetable.

Tourist Industry wins: The development of Skyrail near Cairns shows how patterns of recreation can be changed and the tourism experience enhanced through a constructive

partnership between private industry and natural resource managers. For more than three decades FIDO has strongly supported such a partnership for Fraser Island.

Government Wins: A light rail could resolve what has been the most difficult management issue on Fraser Island since the removal of the extractive industries of sandmining and logging. It also has the capacity to increase the sustainable carrying capacity of Fraser Island. Currently much of more than \$800,000 is spent annually on island road maintenance. Removing heavier traffic from the two cross island roads could free up the budget to be applied to developing better infrastructure and facilities to make visitation more sustainable on Fraser Island such as the installation of more boardwalks.

IMPLEMENTATION

To achieve this desirable outcome four steps are needed:

1. The Queensland Government needs to complete a basic feasibility study to establish the option's viability.
2. It should then set the parameters, route and conditions under which it would consider allowing a light rail to be established on Fraser Island.
3. It would then call for expressions of interest from proponents who could proceed with some element of certainty.
4. The Queensland Government will be able to assess whether to proceed when it reviews any expressions of interest.