



New England Visions 2030 Institute

Futurist Think Tank

Catalyst for Change

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0421961007 (Convenor)

The General Manager
Mr James Roncon
6th May 2024

Dear Sir,

Following the vote for an amendment to delay construction of the New England Rail Trail in Item 9.1 at the Council meeting on 24th April, there was a substantial outcry from Armidale Regional LGA residents. Social media became very active. Posts about the Rail Trail attracted a large number of comments, many from people who wanted to see the rail trail built and couldn't understand why some of our councillors were opposed to this transformational project. Despite being told several times that the grant could not be repurposed these councillors continued to argue for the grant to be put to other projects meaning that the grant money offer of \$5.4m would need to be returned.

Anecdotal support for the trail in our community was so strong that New England Visions 2030 Institute decided to start a petition to assess the numerical value of that support. We met on Tuesday 30th April to agree on the wording for our petition and then posted it on Change.org that afternoon. The next step was to use local social media accounts to advertise the petition and start the process of sharing across hundreds of Facebook pages. We also circulated a paper petition for residents who are not comfortable using computers. The petition will close on 19th June in time for the June Council meeting when we will make a final report.

Within a day we had gathered 1000 online signatures and we continued to advertise the petition. After two days we had gathered 2000 signatures, 3000 in three days and 4000 in four days. Our Think Tank team was amazed as we had not expected this. The petition reached the attention of television and was featured in both Channel 7 and Channel 9 news programs.

By today we have gathered **4514** signatures on our resident petition.

The Administrator from Rail Trails Australia, Mr Alan Abrahams, rang our convenor, Maria Hitchcock, on Friday 5th May to discuss the situation and advised her to start a second petition for non-resident support. They have 14,000 members across Australia and he felt that many would be eager to give their support. These cyclists are always looking for new cycling adventures, had heard about the New England Rail Trail and were keen to ride it when completed. The second petition was then posted on Change.org's website the same day. Rail Trails Australia subsequently included information about the trail and the petition on their website.

That national petition has gathered **139** signatures to date.

Yours sincerely

The Team

New England Visions 2030 Institute.

Mrs Maria Hitchcock OAM (convenor)

Dr John Nevin

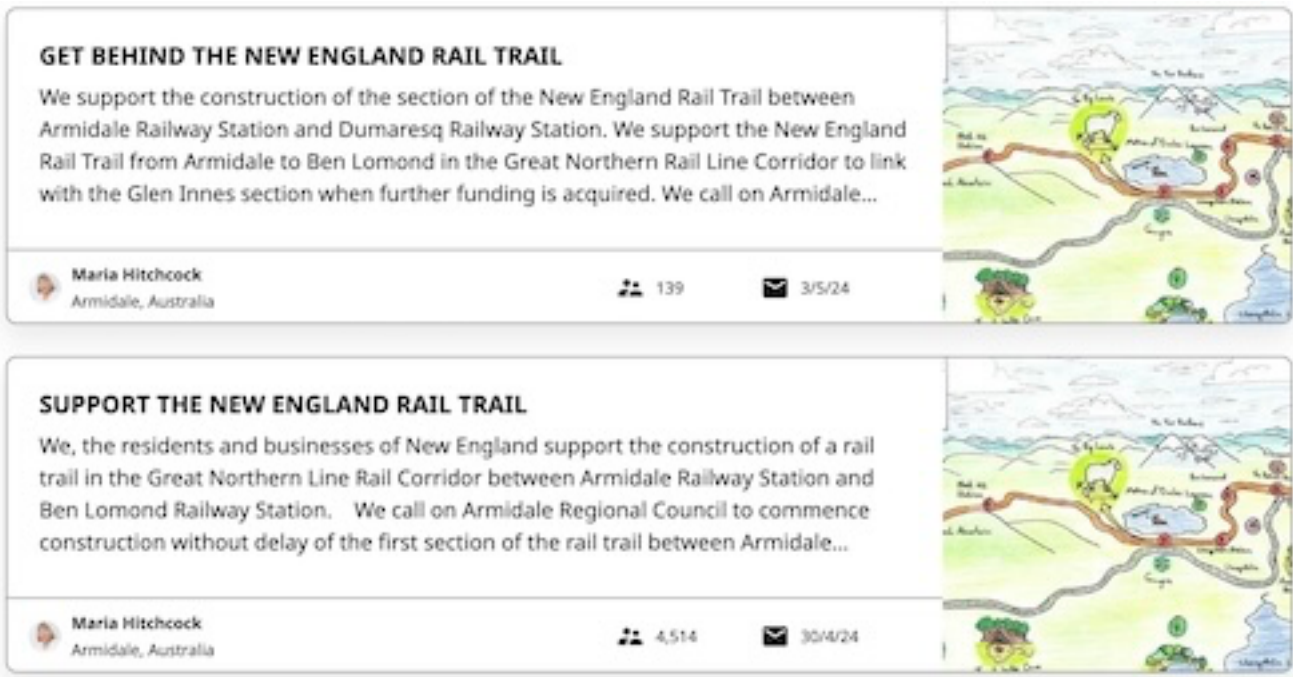
Dr John Atchison OAM

Assoc. Prof. Dr Juliet Roberts

Mr Martin Levins

Mr Peter Sniekers

Fmr Cr Andrew Murat



Selected comments taken from Change.org petition

- "We need tourism dollars for our village economies"
- "It'd be a fantastic community resource and attract tourism too. Such a short sighted decision from ARC."
- "It is great for tourism, local businesses, the economy but also for a beautiful way for families to enjoy the beauty that Armidale has to offer in an active way!!! We are so so excited for this!"
- "The Rail trail would be a great opportunity for Armidale's growth into the future."
- "Rail Trails work. I've been to New Zealand to do the Central Otago one. Their climate is harsher than ours. Their scenery similar in many parts. Lots of businesses benefited. If they ever want to bring trains back it can be returned to rail then, but there's already a line along the coast and the inland rail under construction - a bus service connects Armidale to Coffs."
- "The Rail Trail is a fabulous idea for the New England region. Let's all get behind this project to make it happen."
- "I live in Armidale and I believe this project is an excellent opportunity for our town. It will bring a lot of people to the region and I too would enjoy a ride on the trail rail."
- "So disappointed this project was rejected! This should be an absolute priority for Armidale Council to progress the region. Why as locals do we have to go elsewhere to access decent recreation."
- "It would be an economic boost, to say the least for the region. As a rider with a disability, I feel that it is imperative that the region surrounding Guyra has a safe area for riders of all ages and abilities to exercise. There are many drivers who do not take care and caution around riders, some almost to the point of dangerous driving. Please, Armidale Council, think of the safety of riders and capture the tourism potential as unfortunately the state of the railway is in such disrepair due to both its age and lack of upkeep that running trains on it in the future is unviable. Rail is my choice of transport, however the New England line north of Armidale will never run trains again."
- "I am so disappointed in the six naysayer councillors who scuttled the proposed Armidale to Ben Lomond rail trail 🚲 Such lack of vision 🙄 Let's make good use of the long-abandoned rail corridor to help revitalise tourism in the New England region and bring a redundant asset to life again."
- "Armidale has wallowed in the economic doldrums for too long. Time to start new initiatives to attract new visitors to the region. Rail Trails are not for a 'small elite group of super fit cyclists'. They are for tourists & locals who want a safe, interesting place to ride which is not too physically challenging. The cycling tourism market is growing rapidly (rail trails, mountain bike tracks, other bike trails) and Armidale to Glen Innes is perfectly positioned to get in on the action. Glen Innes Council have already unanimously voted to build their section. Armidale needs to get on board so the full 103km trail is built from Armidale to Glen Innes, so there are key anchor towns for visitors at each end, as well as smaller towns/villages along the way."

- "This is a great opportunity for a new enterprise for New England. It is being funded by a Federal grant and it would be lunacy to not take up this opportunity. The idea that trains have a future on the old great northern line is a mirage. If people want public transport to access QLD they should push for a bus service from Armidale to connect into the QLD rail system. This bus service should be subsidised by the NSW Govt giving New England residents access to subsidised transport similar to that provided to metropolitan areas. Such a proposal would not cost the millions that reactivating the railway would. Let's put a council in willing to advance the Tablelands - not keeping them in the 19th century."
- "This would be a great tourist attraction for people to see the beautiful New England! We need something to put Armidale back on the map and this would be a great start!"
- "I regularly travel to other areas to ride rail trails. Because of the low gradient, rail trails are accessible to almost everyone and can be shared with walkers and horse riders in some situations. Apart from the obvious tourist attraction benefits a rail trail has the potential to have significant positive health impacts for our whole community."
- "It would be great to attract people to Armidale. I have ridden on other rail trails and thoroughly enjoyed the experience."
- "I have seen the benefits other rail trails bring to their communities, and I would like Armidale to enjoy these ."
- "I signed this petition because I'm looking for a positive use of a currently dilapidated public asset."
- "The Rail Trail will bring tourism and funds to the region, is a brilliant use of the old corridor and is a proven success in other locations ."
- "I was so disappointed when I heard of the recent council decision. Rail trails are being developed with great success across Australia and many other countries as a tourism opportunity as well as a safe opportunity for locals to ride bikes or walk, away from traffic. Hoping that trains will return north of Armidale is completely unrealistic. We may find it very hard to secure funding for the rail trail in the future if the current funding is returned. It will no doubt go back to government revenue and be spent in another area."
- "I believe there will be economic benefits to the New England region and there is no way the state government will ever allow trains to run north of Armidale again"
- "These rail trails are a boon to the rural towns they run through. They are a no brainer."
- "We need to show case the beauty of the New England, bike trails are an icon throughout Australia, and we need to embrace what we have on our door step and join the myriad of trails that exists already."