

Question on Notice

No. 207

Asked on 1 March 2006

MR KNUTH asked the Minister for Transport and Main Roads (MR LUCAS)—

QUESTION:

As the Hughenden to Winton railway line has provided a wonderful service and has been a vital link for the defence of northern Australia for 100 years, will he guarantee that regular maintenance and service programs will be continued and that this vital railway line will not be closed?

ANSWER:

I thank the Honourable Member for his question-

The 212 kilometre track between Winton and Hughenden was opened in 1899 and is still substantially to the initial construction standards of that era: 21 kilogram rail (10.6 tonnes per axle load) with minimum formation and ballast. This line has progressively carried less and less freight over the past ten years. Freight levels have dropped from 1800 tonnes in 1997-98 to a mere 6-7 tonnes per week – 300 tonnes in the last year. Rail freight is now only economically viable when a full wagon load of goods is available for transport. The last wagon load of freight was transported on 1 September 2005. QLink currently runs a road freight service for freight loads totalling less than one rail wagon. Winton continues to utilise three rail general freight services per week through Longreach and Rockhampton. In addition, up to three livestock services per week are available when required by the industry and Queensland Rail (QR).

Maintenance costs on this line are approximately \$2m-\$2.5m per annum. Despite its low use, QR is contractually required by Queensland Transport to maintain this line as an operational line, and as such, a re-sleepering maintenance cycle was completed in July 2005 to ensure the line will operate to a safe standard for anticipated traffic.

QR has further advised that the current standard of the line is not sufficient to be utilised as an alternative to the North Coast Line due to the nature and weight of modern rollingstock. The North Coast Line has undergone major upgrades in the last decade to enable it to meet the growing traffic needs for freight and high speed passenger trains.

The decision on the future of the Winton to Hughenden rail branch line ultimately rests with the communities involved. Discussions are currently underway with Winton and Flinders Shire Councils and local communities to assess future options for the railway line.

These discussions will invite and consider ideas on how taxpayers' money can best be spent to ensure the best possible outcome for the local area. Local input is welcomed and valued.

The process being used follows very closely the example recently set with the closure of the underutilised Jericho-Yaraka rail line. Following consultation and negotiation with all stakeholders, funds that were previously absorbed in maintaining the rail line were diverted to practical alternatives such as road upgrades and maintenance.

Such local solutions are a shining example of what can be achieved when State and Local governments work together with local communities towards a better future.

If the community decides that the Hughenden to Winton line were to close, win:win options presently being considered for both local communities and the State include:

- track upgrades to improve rail haulage of livestock and other freight including a balloon loop at Winton; and
- selected upgrading of the road between Winton and Hughenden to improve heavy vehicle access in wet weather.

I have spoken with the Member about this issue and I would encourage him to play a positive role in the consultative process as did the Honourable Member for Gregory during consultation on the Jericho – Yaraka line.

This whole process is about involving the local community in a solution that provides a better transport outcome.