

Richmond Vale Rail Trail Inc

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MEDIA RELEASE (by RVRT Inc.):

Planning Approval Granted for the Western Section of the Richmond Vale Rail Trail (RVRT) within Cessnock LGA (approx. 14.4 km) – Stockrington to Log of Knowledge Park, Kurri Kurri

At last night's Cessnock City Council Meeting (17/05/2023), Councillors **unanimously approved** the Review of Environmental Factors (*REF*) and associated reports for the Western section of the RVRT within Cessnock LGA (WI16/2023, Submissions and Determination Reports), subject to 44 Conditions of Approval.

In total, 27.5 km of the RVRT has now received initial planning approval - **adding momentum** to finalising approvals for the remaining short sections within Lake Macquarie LGA and across the Hunter Wetlands National Park (*see details below*).

Congratulations and Thanks:

We would like to take this opportunity to **express our thanks** to: Kate Harris (Open Space and Community Facilities Manager at Cessnock Council); the primary design consultant (GHD Pty Ltd, Newcastle); the other Council Officers and Consultants; and all our local Councillors - who have helped to **finalise Concept-level planning and consultation** for the Western section of the RVRT.

Thanks also to the 127 individuals and groups from across the region who provided written public submissions (**98% of which were supportive**), and to RVRT Inc.'s own members and supporters.

Terry Lewin, RVRT Supporters' Group Vice-president, greeted this Approval with cautious optimism:

*"This is **another important milestone** in the trail's development. There is also little doubt that the RVRT will be of huge benefit to Hunter communities, supporting a broad range of users and activities across all age groups, especially when it is combined with enhanced local community linkages to other facilities, parks and conservation areas, attractions, and shared pathways".*

*"However, with a growing appetite for rail trails and active transport in NSW, and increasing competition for government funding, we all need to **continue to work together** to finalise RVRT approvals and attract State and Federal funding - to help make the Richmond Vale Rail Trail a reality!"*

General Information about the RVRT:

- The **Richmond Vale Rail Trail (RVRT)** will be a multi-purpose, 32 km (40 km with connections) **continuous off-road shared pathway**, supporting a diverse range of activities and user groups (e.g., commuting and recreational cyclists, walkers, runners, bird watchers, reduced mobility users, family and social groups).

- The RVRT will run from Shortland (near the Hunter Wetlands Centre) to Kurri Kurri (*Log of Knowledge Park*), connecting four LGAs (Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Cessnock and Maitland). The trail runs primarily along the former Richmond Vale railway alignment [a private coal line that closed in 1987], as well as utilising Hunter Water Corporation pipeline corridors (e.g., Shortland to Tarro segment and Fletcher connection).
- In addition to active transport, cycling safety, health and lifestyle, and **substantial economic and tourism benefits**, the RVRT will: foster linkages between metropolitan and rural communities and their attractions; facilitate access to multiple high conservation value areas that were previously inaccessible; and provide opportunities for future regional network connections, effectively becoming **the spine that links an array of local trails, shared pathways and facilities**. The RVRT will also be a central element within the proposed broader (100+ km) ‘*Shiraz to Shore*’ Hunter Cycle Trail, an initiative of the Hunter Joint Organisation of Councils (Hunter JO).

Western Section of the RVRT:

- Most of the 17 km Western RVRT Section is identified as a ‘**road infrastructure facility**’ (Clause 2.107, State Environmental Planning Policy), with a comprehensive *REF* considered appropriate.
- Typically, the path will have a **3m wide flexible sealed pavement**, and primarily follow existing disused rail alignments.
- Restoration and repair of **three Historic brick Railway Tunnels** in the Sugarloaf Range (two in Lake Macquarie LGA).
- **Improved access to conservation areas**, such as Pambalong Nature Reserve, Stockrington and Werakata State Conservation Areas.
- Construction of **new concrete bridges** and demolition of existing dilapidated timber bridges (and possible repurposing): 15m two-span bridge at Surveyors Creek; 70m single-span bridge at Wallis Creek; and diverted short culvert crossing at Werakata Creek.
- Four at grade local road crossings: Dog Hole Road, Stockrington; Quarry Access Road and Hunter Expressway construction yard (off George Booth Drive), Richmond Vale; and Pokolbin Street, Kurri Kurri.
- Provision for **new car parks, other amenities** (e.g., toilet and shelter areas, bike facilities, water fountains, potential picnic sites), and construction related facilities (e.g., compound and stockpile areas) at various access points, together with some exploration of additional access locations within Stockrington State Conservation Area.
- Plans to build a **high quality shared trail** will also be advantageous: minimising ongoing environmental impacts; encouraging a wide range of users, including those with reduced mobility; and reducing longer-term maintenance costs to Councils and other stakeholders.
- With regard to consistency with strategic directions, the RVRT has been identified as a **regional priority** in multiple Hunter Regional Plans (October, 2016; December, 2022), in the Cessnock Trails Strategy (May, 2020) and other local Council plans, and in the recently endorsed Hunter Valley Destination Management Plan (March, 2023).
- Importantly, the 44 Conditions of Approval include **Communications Conditions** (e.g., Community Liaison and Notification Plans) – to ensure that “... *Cessnock City Council will continue to liaise with the community and other stakeholders as the Proposed Activity progresses through detailed design and into the construction phase.*”
- **Link to download documentation** associated with the recent Council Approval:
https://www.richmondvalerailtrail.org.au/uploads/1/2/0/4/120411157/rvrt-related_agenda_and_enclosure_documents_cessnock_council-meeting-17-05-2023.pdf

Where to From Here:

- A comprehensive ‘Feasibility Study’ for the RVRT was completed in 2014 (by Mike Halliburton Associates), followed by commencement of planning for the current proposal in 2016. All of the work done since that time has **only strengthened the arguments in favour of building the RVRT**.
- It is worth remembering that over the past three decades, **tens of millions of dollars of public money have already been spent** on making provision for the RVRT and protecting the corridor (e.g., building tunnels under Lenaghans Drive and the M1; monitoring and preserving two historic brick tunnels during Hunter Expressway construction; recent planning for the M1 Extension to Raymond Terrace and the Hunter Freight Corridor). It will be **extremely wasteful** if we do not construct the RVRT, after the decades of effort and planning that have already gone into it.
- It is also time to **accelerate RVRT funding and development** ... And there is probably **no better time than the present to encourage our Local, State and Federal elected representatives** to work together to secure the required infrastructure funding.
- As expected, there are **many practical decisions** that will need to be made during the detailed design and construction phases (including, finalising: pavement types, parking & amenities layouts/inclusions, additional access locations/facilities, fencing, landscaping, links to other shared pathways, further negotiation with affected landowners and other agencies, etc). There are also **broader considerations** - which relate to heritage/cultural promotion, consistent signage, tourism and marketing, user experiences, educational resources, and so on.
- It is also clearly time to establish **an active and representative Regional RVRT Planning and Management Committee** (drawing representation from Newcastle, Cessnock, Lake Macquarie and Maitland LGAs), with a particular focus on **integrated regional RVRT development**, securing funding, construction segments and priorities, and optimising the trail’s longer-term benefits for residents and visitors.
- **Prioritising detailed design work and construction of the RVRT** first is the best way forward, whilst being mindful of the future needs and opportunities associated with the broader ‘*Shiraz to Shore*’ Hunter Cycle Trail. Essentially, treating refinement and construction of the RVRT as the ‘development ground’ for the Hunter Cycle Trail.
- There is also an **imperative to act sooner, rather than later**, to try to attract external funding.
 - Firstly, the two pilot Rail Trail projects funded in NSW have been **extremely well received** (i.e., the *Tumbarumba to Rosewood Rail Trail*, and the *Northern Rivers Rail Trail*) – so, many NSW communities are now considering rail trail or related developments.
 - Secondly, the recent legislative changes within NSW [Transport Administration Amendment (Rail Trails) Bill 2022] have removed some of the planning obstacles; consequently, there will be **increasing competition** for the required design and construction funds – so, sitting back, is likely to be counterproductive.
- We simply **cannot let the current approval(s) sit in a box** gathering dust!

Summary of Current Concept-level RVRT Approvals (totalling 27.5 km):

(See Figure on next page)

- 1) **Cessnock LGA:** Short (100 metre) coastal wetlands section (**Green line** in Figure) adjacent to Pambalong Nature Reserve - approved by Cessnock City Council on 26th April 2021 (DA 8/2020/20463/1), subject to 32 Conditions of Consent.
- 2) **Newcastle LGA:** Initial 13 km coastal wetlands section (**Red lines** in Figure) - approved by Hunter & Central Coast Regional Planning Panel on 6th December 2021 (Ref: PPSHCC-55; DA 2020/00641), subject to 100 Conditions of Consent. This approval included four trail 'legs': a) *Shortland to Hexham Junction* (split section totalling approx. 3 km, **excluding** the section within Hunter Wetlands National Park); b) *Hexham Junction to Minmi* (via Minmi Junction) (7.50 km); c) *Minmi Junction to Pambalong Nature Reserve* (2.15 km); and d) *Minmi Junction to Fletcher* (700 metres).
- 3) **Cessnock LGA:** Review of Environmental Factors (*REF*) for 14.4 km RVRT Western Section (**Brown lines** in Figure) - approved by Cessnock City Council on 17th May 2023, subject to 44 Conditions of Approval.

Future Approvals:

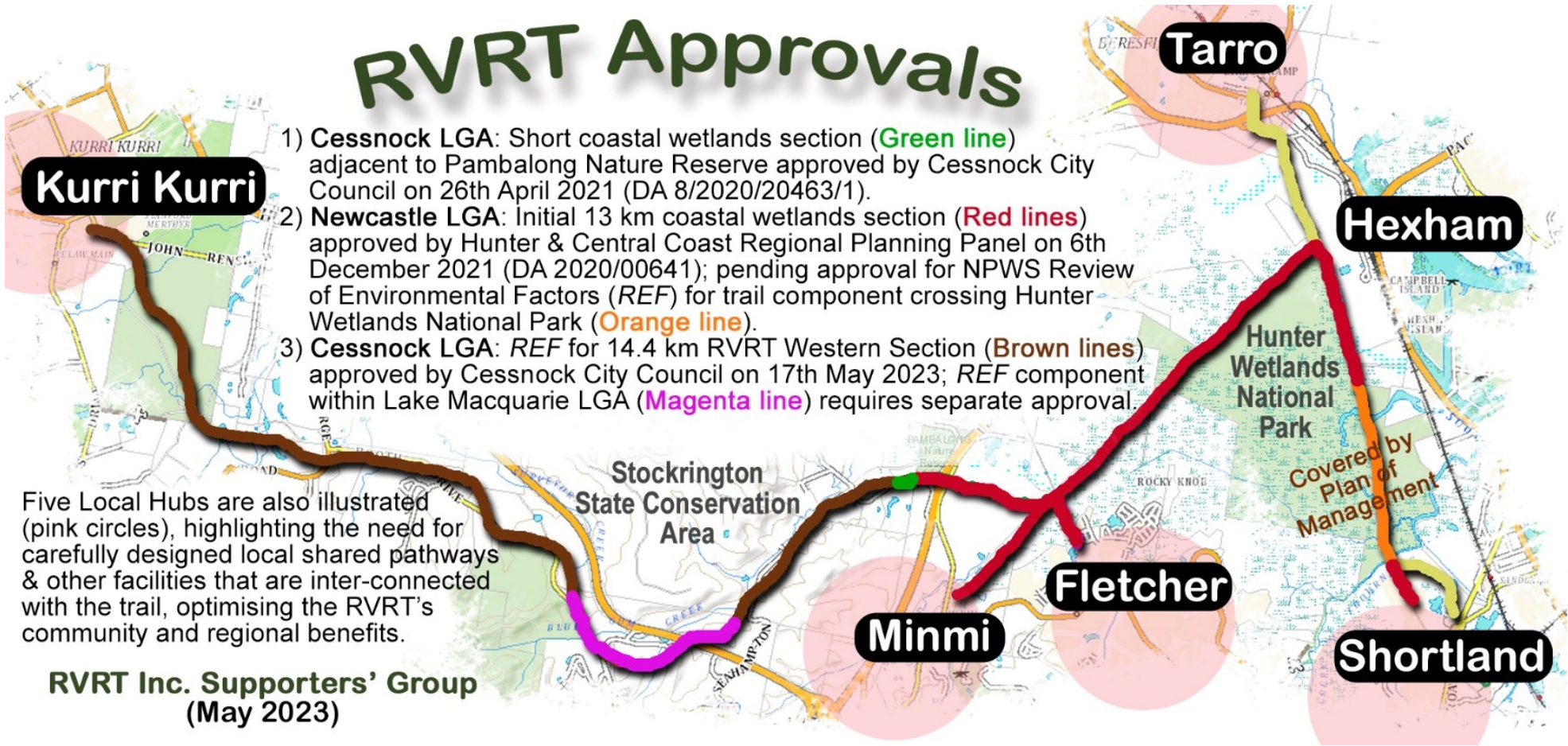
- Lake Macquarie City Council will need to separately approve their 2.7 km section of the current RVRT Western Section *REF* (**Magenta line** in Figure; which borders Cessnock LGA on both sides).
- A *REF* for the short section across Hunter Wetlands National Park (**Orange line** in Figure) will also be completed soon, in conjunction with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).
- A *REF* for the Tarro Connection (**Yellow Line** in Figure) is also required, which will need to be fully integrated with the recently approved & contracted Black Hill to Raymond Terrace M1 Extension.
- Anticipated future connections to: the University of Newcastle (and the wider cycleways network); proposed residential developments around Minmi; and Blue Gum Hills Regional Park.

Thanks for your interest in the RVRT.

Please contact our *Vice-president*, Terry Lewin, for further information or comment.

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RVRT Approvals



- 1) Cessnock LGA: Short coastal wetlands section (**Green line**) adjacent to Pambalong Nature Reserve approved by Cessnock City Council on 26th April 2021 (DA 8/2020/20463/1).
- 2) Newcastle LGA: Initial 13 km coastal wetlands section (**Red lines**) approved by Hunter & Central Coast Regional Planning Panel on 6th December 2021 (DA 2020/00641); pending approval for NPWS Review of Environmental Factors (*REF*) for trail component crossing Hunter Wetlands National Park (**Orange line**).
- 3) Cessnock LGA: *REF* for 14.4 km RVRT Western Section (**Brown lines**) approved by Cessnock City Council on 17th May 2023; *REF* component within Lake Macquarie LGA (**Magenta line**) requires separate approval.

Five Local Hubs are also illustrated (pink circles), highlighting the need for carefully designed local shared pathways & other facilities that are inter-connected with the trail, optimising the RVRT's community and regional benefits.

RVRT Inc. Supporters' Group
(May 2023)