

New Hunter cycleway brings \$5 million benefit

By Matthew Kelly

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A MAJOR new regional cycleway running between Shortland and Pelaw Main would inject more than \$5million into the regional economy a year, a feasibility analysis has found.

The 32 kilometre Richmond Vale Rail Trail would traverse the Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and Cessnock local government areas and showcase Lower Hunter wetlands, the Coalfields and Pokolbin.

The project would run through five former rail tunnels and bridges between Hexham and Pelaw Main.

A draft feasibility analysis, which has been distributed to stakeholders, says the project would result in a dramatic increase in visitors to the region, many of whom would stay overnight.

“The trail offers a range of new business opportunities and the opportunity for existing businesses to extend their offerings. The trail has the potential to improve the sustainability of businesses reliant on tourism,” the analysis says.

An unsealed trail is estimated to cost \$9.3million while a fully sealed trail would cost \$13.4million.

Green Corridor spokesman Brian Purdue said the Richmond Vale Rail Trail would further enhance the Lower Hunter's portfolio of natural tourism assets.

"We have worked very hard to get these green corridor lands into national park, but have also worked hard so the public could access them and enjoy their unquestionable beauty," he said.

"The rail trail is an ideal way for this to happen and will be a great tourist drawcard and I personally can hardly wait to ride on it."

A Newcastle City Council spokeswoman said the feasibility analysis would not be submitted to the elected council for consideration until staff had revised the report and developed a recommendation.

"Because the report is only a draft, we are not yet at a stage to have enough information about potential costs of the project to discuss possible funding options," she said.

"When the study is further progressed, we will consider presenting it for grant applications. We hope to have a final draft of the feasibility study completed early next year."

Minmi's hidden lifeline

By Mike Scanlon

January 9 2015 - 5:00pm



CYCLE TRAIL IDEA: Cyclists pedal through the modern, but unused, concrete rail tunnel on the former Richmond Vale Railway line, now proposed for reuse. Picture: Marina Neil

SURF'S up at Minmi Breakwater!

That was a popular cry among surfers in the 1970s when Newcastle locals wanted a leg pull of gullible outsiders asking where the best surf breaks might be.

The outer residential suburb of Minmi, of course, is nowhere near the sea, although the tiny hamlet of Hexham close by is beside the Hunter River.

As the crow flies, Minmi is diagonally across the giant Hexham wetlands (or swamp as it was once called).

And that's where the mysterious joke about the great surf at Minmi Breakwater originated. For almost 160 years there's been a solid earth embankment cutting across the wetlands from the old coal mining township of Minmi towards the main Maitland-Newcastle railway at distant Hexham.

On top of this impressive man-made earthwork once ran a railway over the low, boggy ground and sea of rustling reeds.

An extra bonus of this five-kilometre swamp railway was that it was flood-free, although in times of heavy rain water did rise on either side of the causeway. That's when, especially during winter fogs, it resembled Stockton breakwater, isolated and spearing into the sea.



LOST RELIC: The Surveyor's Creek timber bridge hidden on the old railway line.

But the former swamp railway section is only a teaser. This now defunct steam-era railway line is part of an abandoned, once great rail line pushing 26.5 kilometres into the hills through three heritage tunnels towards the former Hunter showpiece colliery of Richmond Main, outside Kurri, and Pelaw Main.

This long hidden historic rail route snaking into the Mount Sugarloaf range was the brainchild of the autocratic coal baron John Brown. He died in 1930, but not before setting Newcastle up to later become the world's biggest coal export port.

The whole extended railway from Hexham to the Coalfields became known as the Richmond Vale Railway (or RVR). And in 1987, when the last section of line was closed, the RVR was regarded as the last commercial steam train operation in Australia.

Now fresh eyes are looking at recycling the deserted RVR line, but this time as a new regional cycleway (once linked with Shortland to make it 32 kilometres). This then might inject more than \$5 million into the Lower Hunter economy each year.

Newcastle City Council has already compiled a draft feasibility plan into the idea but is seeking more information about potential costs, according to a recent news report by Herald colleague Matt Kelly.



IN DECAY: The Wallis Creek timber trestle bridge on the old abandoned Richmond Vale Railway (RVR) line.

At this point, a fully sealed trail would cost more than \$13 million without, presumably, the cost of rebuilding two large decaying timber bridges and restoring two ageing, brick-lined rail tunnels.

Members of the Newcastle cycleway fraternity have applauded the idea as a tourism venture, comparing it to the highly successful Adamstown-to-Belmont Fernleigh Track.

With money from grants, anything is possible. One major hurdle, however, to any shared pedestrian/cyclist trail into the hills, might be a large modern, concrete rail tunnel (pictured) near Stockrington, near Minmi.

Never used, it was constructed 11 years after the last coal train ran on the RVR steam railway.

It was built as part of a \$59 million, four-lane extension of the then F3 Freeway (now M1) between Minmi and Beresfield and parallel to Lenaghans Drive opened in late 1998.

Back in 1995, the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) designed the spacious new rail tunnel to allow State Rail's largest train to pass through beneath the freeway. Provision of the tunnel, measuring 83.5 metres long, 6.5 metres high and 8.4 metres wide, was one of the approved conditions attached to the environmental impact study for the whole road project there.

Someone was safeguarding a future transport corridor for coal freight trains should the idea ever be needed.

And back in 1999 there was indeed a major proposal for a special freight line to exploit a North Wyong coalfield. A new dedicated line would have linked Fassifern with Hexham, but it never happened.

Meanwhile, that particular 5.5-kilometre section of F3/M1 highway between Minmi and Beresfield became an engineering marvel as the swamp posed a real challenge requiring an ingenious, high-tech solution.

An innovative method, consisting of high-strength polyester geosynthetic reinforcement, was used to make sure the national highway (or anything else, like a tunnel) did not sink into Leneghans Swamp.

Combined with recycled power station ash, BHP blast slag and deep vertical wick drains to allow water to escape, it was estimated the scheme would reduce the road/earth settlement period from 300 years to three.

And long before European settlement occurred, the Pambalong tribe had occupied the region around Minmi. It was around here that scraping and grinding tools and 37,000 spearhead barbs and other artefacts were uncovered by freeway builders.

The extended, steam-era RVR from Hexham to Pelaw Main opened for coal traffic in 1906 and walking along its route today shows what a grand vision "Baron" Brown once had.

The original, short line from Hexham to Minmi across the swamp probably opened in early 1857 and was conceived by famous Hunter pioneer John Eales and his partner John Christian who had opened coalmines at Minmi.

John Brown later took over, ambitiously pushing his private line westwards, towards Kurri, around 1900. Then about 1909, taking advantage of a coal strike, he had workers double the width of the Hexham-Minmi swamp railway.

Pelaw Main Colliery closed in 1962 and Richmond Main in 1967. The rail lines west of mines at Stockrington were lifted soon after.

So, what might future cyclists and bush walkers expect meandering through bush on the old Richmond Vale line, Australia's last commercial steam railway?

Today the abandoned line west of Minmi includes the neglected and dangerous timber bridges at Surveyor's Creek and Wallis Creek and the three still impressive, now disused brick tunnels.

Two of them are often flooded, but considering there's been no maintenance, all tunnels appear to be in good condition. In style, all resemble the once unwanted brick rail tunnel at what is now the popular Fernleigh Track at Adamstown Heights.

Oddly enough, much of the original, colourful history of the RVR line, especially around Hexham, may never be known because it was never written down.

There's only intriguing hints about Chinese labourers helping build the line in 1854, but having to sleep on the unfinished track as they weren't allowed into Minmi itself.

The same tale is told about Russian navvies and up in the hills a Welsh Town, or Welsh Valley, is said to have sprung up. It's also claimed that in World War II, an Italian POW camp was located nearby. All in all, any future walk or cycle through bushland here would be full of interest.

Newcastle City Council to move forward with plans for Richmond Vale cycling and walking trail

By Amy de Lore

Updated March 23 2016 - 2:54pm, first published March 22 2016 - 10:00pm



Richmond Vale Rail Trail gathers steam

The much-vaunted \$14 million Richmond Vale Rail Trail is a step closer to reality, with Newcastle City Council agreeing on Tuesday night to complete a concept design and environmental impact statement.

The proposed 32-kilometre cycling and walking track, which follows the alignment of the former Richmond Vale railway line between Hexham and Pelaw Main, has been spruiked as a significant community asset and tourist attraction.

The \$480,000 design and impact assessment project awarded to GHD, has been funded primarily by Newcastle council, along with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Services, Cessnock City Council and the Donaldson Conservation Trust.

Lord Mayor Nuatali Nelmes said the project would “open up this unique natural environment to thousands of locals and tourists, allowing people to enjoy an area that would otherwise remain hidden from view”.

The total project is estimated to cost \$14 million, with economic analysis undertaken as part of an independent feasibility study predicting it will bring \$5.2 million per year into the region through day trips and overnight stays.

The trail incorporates three brick-lined rail tunnels and crosses Wallis Creek, Surveyors Creek, Fishery Creek and Ironbark Creek.

“I’m excited to see this project move ahead,” Cr Nelmes said. “This project will highlight both the conservation effort and mining history of the Lower Hunter, while delivering substantial economic and social returns to the community.

“The Richmond Vale Rail Trail presents an exciting opportunity to open up the stunning Hunter Wetlands National Park to the public, allowing pedestrians and cyclists enjoy this world-renowned natural feature.”

Would you use the Richmond Vale Rail Trail? Let us know in the poll below.

Would you use the proposed Richmond Vale Rail Trail? (Poll Closed)

- No **62.93%** (219 votes)
- Yes **37.07%** (129 votes)

Total Votes: **348**

Rail Trail to open up an eco playground

By Nuatali Nelmes

March 29 2016 - 10:00am



PROGRESS: The Richmond Vale Rail Trail presents an exciting opportunity to open up the stunning Hunter Wetlands National Park to the public.

Last week we advanced the 32-kilometre Richmond Vale Rail Trail walking and cycling path along old railway corridors to the concept design phase.

This exciting project will offer a unique adventure eco-tour for off-road cyclists and hikers and provide an economic boost for the Hunter.

Contingent on future funding, the Richmond Vale Rail Trail (RVRT) will run from Pelaw Main near Kurri Kurri to Minmi and across to Hexham, where it will link with another path stretching from Shortland to Tarro.

Newcastle City Council has appointed a consultant to undertake concept design and environmental impact assessment of the RVRT, which would trace the former Richmond Vale Colliery railway from Kurri to Minmi.

The Richmond Vale Rail Trail presents an exciting opportunity to open up the stunning Hunter Wetlands National Park to the public, allowing pedestrians and cyclists to enjoy this world-renowned natural feature.

The next \$480,000 planning stage will take around 12 months.

Tim Roberts | Walking and cycling cemented in region's plan

October 24 2016 - 5:00am



Walking and cycling cemented in region's plan

I was delighted to read in the recently released *Hunter Regional Plan 2036* that recreational walking, cycling, green grids and ecotourism were on the drawing board for our region over the next 20 years.

One can never know the full story as to why a particular project gets up and another does not, but this plan does include three that are dear to my heart.

An extensive, connected and dedicated network of safe paths for cycling and walking will finally fan out across the Greater Newcastle area, connecting 90 kilometres of existing cycle paths with a 140-kilometre network of new construction. This will mean more people looking after their health through active transport.

Related to this development will be the laying down of the second rail trail, think Fernleigh Track but longer with tunnels. The Richmond Vale Rail Trail will run from Hexham to Minmi, through the Tank Paddock, Pambalong Reserve and on to Kurri Kurri.

The plan will also develop a network of green across the region and grow the links to the Great Eastern Ranges, a plan for a continuum of green from the bottom of Victoria to Cape York.

Congratulations to Planning NSW for producing a blueprint for the next 20 years. Congratulations to the CycleSafe Network for all those hours spent that have put the plan into the map. Congratulations to Richmond Vale Rail Trail Inc, the Donaldson Conservation Trust, the three councils, the Green Corridor Coalition and the TFI for doing the groundwork to bring this visionary ecotourism rail trail nearer to fruition.

Congratulations to the Green Corridor Coalition and all those other individuals and organisations who continue to work to form a 'green grid' across the region.

Time to get on your collective bikes and get all this done.

Professor Tim Roberts is the director of the Tom Farrell Institute for the Environment, University of Newcastle