Richmond Vale Rail Trail (RVRT) *Review of Environmental Factors* (*REF*) for Western Section of RVRT ("Stockrington to Kurri Kurri") – Lake Macquarie and Cessnock LGAs

Submission in Support of the Current Proposal by Richmond Vale Rail Trail Inc. (the RVRT Supporters' Group)

(To Cessnock City Council: recreation@cessnock.nsw.gov.au)

July 2nd 2022

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Richmond Vale Rail Trail Inc.

President: Billy Metcalfe (0417 453 152)
Secretary & Treasurer: Leigh Gibbens (0433 570 920)
Vice-President: Terry Lewin (0404 439 616)
Email: rvrt.inc@gmail.com
Website: https://www.richmondvalerailtrail.org.au/
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/richmondrailtrail/

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Thank you for providing an opportunity to comment on the *REF* for the Western Section of the RVRT, which is currently on public exhibition (May 12th to July 3rd, 2022).

1. RVRT Inc.

This submission has been prepared by members of Richmond Vale Rail Trail (RVRT) Inc., the RVRT Supporters' Group. Our members have long-standing interests in developing the RVRT as a key Hunter Region shared pathway and resource, promoting a broad range of lifestyle, recreational, environmental, cultural/heritage, business and tourist activities.

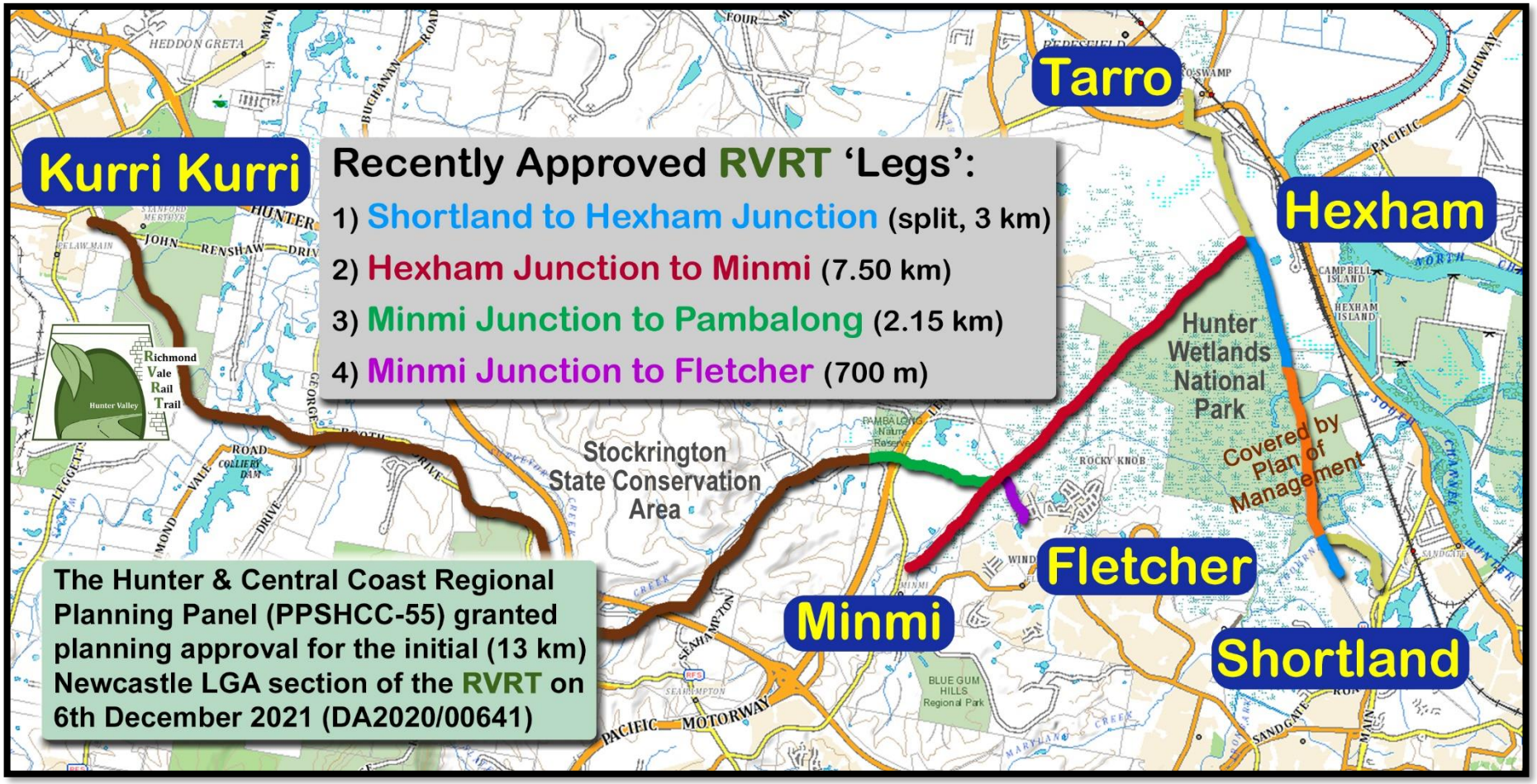
Collectively, we have detailed knowledge about the RVRT, other cycleways and trails, their associated benefits, and the community's views and expectations. RVRT Inc. is committed to working with local communities, other organisations and stakeholder groups, to help promote and deliver this important regional initiative.

2. The Current Proposal

The 32km RVRT (40km with connections) will be a continuous **off-road shared pathway** running 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, as well as utilising Hunter Water Corporation pipeline corridors (e.g., Shortland to Tarro segment and Fletcher connection). It will be a multi-purpose trail, supporting a **broad range of user groups**. The Hunter and Central Coast Regional Planning Panel (PPSHCC-55) granted planning approval in December 2021 for the initial 13km (*coastal wetlands*) Eastern Section of the RVRT within Newcastle LGA ('*Shortland to Hexham Junction and Minmi/Fletcher*') – see **Figure 1**.

Current Proposal for Western Section: The 17km Western Section of the RVRT within Lake Macquarie and Cessnock LGAs ('*Stockrington to Kurri Kurri*') is identified as a 'road infrastructure

Figure 1. Western Section of Richmond Vale Rail Train (RVRT) [Brown line] and recently approved 'Legs' within Eastern Section (December 2021)



facility' under clause 2.107 of the State Environmental Planning Policy (Transport and Infrastructure SEPP, 2021) – see **Brown Line** in **Figure 1**. Consequently, a Development Application is not required, with a comprehensive *Review of Environmental Factors (REF)* considered to be appropriate, under Division 5.1 of the EP&A Act.

The *REF* [March 2022] that is currently on exhibition presents Concept Design Plans for the Western Section (Appendix A), together with key trail features and benefits, environmental assessments, legislative and management considerations, and potential mitigation measures. Based on the feedback received and other considerations, the two Councils need to separately determine whether this current RVRT proposal should proceed largely as outlined in the *REF*.

Western Section Trail Features (Preferred Options):

- Typically, the path within the Western Section will have a **3m wide flexible sealed pavement** (e.g., granular material overlaid with asphalt or concrete), primarily following existing **disused rail alignments** (Lake Macquarie LGA: 2.7km; and Cessnock LGA: 14.4km).
- Restoration and repair of **three Historic brick Railway Tunnels** (two in Lake Macquarie LGA).
- **Improved access to conservation areas** - As the majority of the trail is on publicly owned land (Crown Lands, NPWS), over time, there will be enhanced public access to Pambalong Nature Reserve, Stockrington & Werakata State Conservation Areas; **appropriate access agreements and operational plans** will also be negotiated with all landowners, together with **mitigation measures**, where required (e.g., fencing, screening, signage, management measures).
- 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 (illustrated in *REF* **Figure 3-1**), together with some **exploration of additional access locations** within Stockrington State Conservation Area (e.g., Mid-trail Precinct).
- Plans to build a **high quality shared trail** will also be advantageous from a variety of perspectives: 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.
- **Potential negative impacts** on the local environment and adjacent properties are also considered to be relatively minor and manageable, mainly because the RVRT uses **existing embankments and previously cleared areas**.
- Importantly, initial development approval for this trail section will **add to previous approvals** within Newcastle LGA, helping to facilitate **integrated trail development** across the Hunter Region; after all, the many regional benefits of the trial will only be fully realised when all of the key segments are in place.
- A trail **construction timeline** of approx. 12-18 months is currently anticipated (after receipt of required funding).

3. Unique Features (Whole Trail)

In evaluating the merits of the Current Proposal, consideration also needs to be given to the **unique features** of the whole trail, and to the **opportunities and benefits that will arise** from developing the **whole integrated 40km trail** – and for **all user groups** (not just cyclists) – both in the short- and the long-term.

As detailed below, there are several inter-related aspects of the RVRT that **set it apart from other rail trails and greenways** - and which, over time, are likely to contribute to increased patronage, return visits, and a stronger sense of community and regional ownership.

Landscape Diversity:
The RVRT traverses a wide variety of landscapes and ecosystems, over a relatively short distance. Visitors will be able to travel from coastal wetlands, through nature reserves and conservation areas, visit historic tunnels in forested semi-mountainous areas in the vicinity of Mt. Sugarloaf, and then travel through rural locations to visit regional towns. According to Callum Vizer's research report in the 'Towards the Richmond Vale Rail Trail' book (2017, Tom Farrell Institute for the Environment [TFI], University of Newcastle), the trail '… passes through **sixteen distinct vegetation communities**, the majority of which are dominated by intact native vegetation', which add significant value to the RVRT through its '… scenic beauty, biodiversity values and provision of opportunities for conservation related recreational activities'. These features stand in marked contrast to many other Australian rail trails, which, while they might be longer, tend to travel through more uniform and cleared landscapes, often along disused public rail corridors that once connected relatively remote towns.

Conservation Conduit:
Related to the above, and as noted in Appendix G (page vi), '… Establishment of the RVRT will provide a unique conduit for accessing the region's varied ecosystems, … which will encourage longer-term development of other local walking trails, further social/recreational infrastructure investment, and associated educational and environmental programs. It will also stimulate long-term development of related recreational, educational and environmental programs'.
The critical aspect of this conservation conduit is that '… the RVRT passes through or nearby to several high conservation value areas that have **previously been largely inaccessible to the general public**'.

Most of the Newcastle LGA section of the trail traverses land with high conservation value, including coastal wetlands, national parks and reserves; the only exception being the urban component within Shortland. Indeed, there are at least **five regional resources** in close proximity to the Eastern Section of the RVRT: Hunter Wetlands Centre; Hunter Wetlands National Park; Pambalong Nature Reserve; Stockrington State Conservation Area; and Blue Gum Hills Regional Park. The Western Section of the trail is equally as well endowed with high conservation value areas, including Stockrington, Mt. Sugarloaf, and Werakata State Conservation Areas.

Corridor Blend, Community Connections and Other Linkage Opportunities:
Another unique aspect of the RVRT is its blending of railway alignments and pipeline corridors to **maximise potential community connections** and trail use opportunities. More importantly, as

noted in Appendix G (Section 2.2.8), the trail 'links both old and new suburbs with varying characteristics', providing '**equitable access** for residents with varied socio-economic status'.

Unlike most Australian rail trails, the RVRT also **links metropolitan and rural areas**. There are also substantial opportunities for the RVRT to become the hub (centrepiece or spine) within a **network of regional community pathways**. An extension along the Minmi alignment to the popular Blue Gum Hills Regional Park is proposed, together with connections to planned housing estates and onwards to Lake Macquarie LGA. To the southeast, future connections can be made to the University and the wider Newcastle Cyclesafe Network. To the northwest, a variety of connections can be made to locations within Maitland LGA. Westerly extensions further into Cessnock LGA are also contemplated. For example, the Cessnock Trails Strategy (May, 2020) includes a '***Cross-region Connectivity Map***' and a '***Trails Network Vision Map***'. The latter includes five overlapping zones: Heritage and Conservation (which the RVRT sits within), Hunter Gateway, Wine Country, Outdoor Adventure, and Wilderness Zones. Local connections from Log of Knowledge Park to Kurri Kurri town centre will also facilitate exploration of attractions such as the town murals, Col Brown Rotary Park, and the new Pit Pony statue. **Ten Points of Interest** within the Western Section of the RVRT are further highlighted in **Figure 2** on the next page.

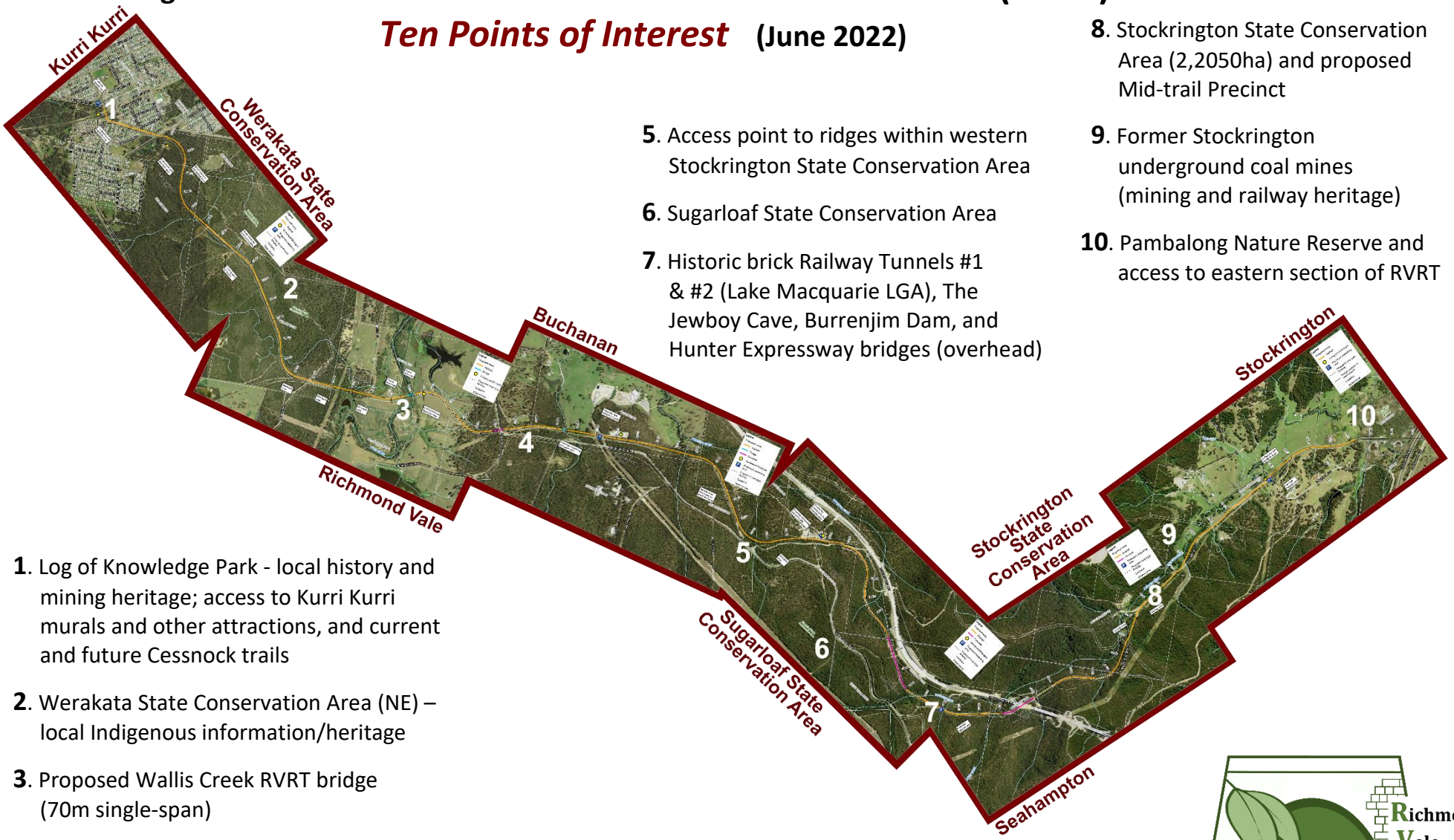
Decades of Preparatory Public Infrastructure Spending:
Preparation of the EIS and *REF* (for the Eastern and Western Sections of the RVRT, respectively), and the numerous supporting studies, have taken considerable effort over the past 5 years, and cost several hundred thousand dollars. However, as detailed below, this is only a fraction of the **tens of millions of dollars** of Federal and State monies that have effectively been spent on preparatory public infrastructure during the past three decades - just to **ensure that the trail and its environs were protected** and that the RVRT remained a real possibility.

- The substantial tunnels under Lenaghans Drive and the M1 Pacific Motorway were expressly built to **protect the Richmond Vale railway alignment**; with that section of the M1 opening in November 1998. Likewise, Pambalong Nature Reserve (gazetted in December 2000) comprises 'former farmland acquired by the Roads and Traffic Authority' (Pambalong's Plan of Management 2006) and thoughtfully protected and improved.
- Extensive work was also undertaken during construction of the Hunter Expressway (opened in March 2014) to **protect two of the Historic brick Railway Tunnels** (Tunnels #1 and #2), including laser monitoring.
- Providing access to the eastern and western sections of the Stockrington State Conservation Area (SCA), and concurrently to the RVRT and its affiliated walking tracks and facilities, necessitated construction of a **bridge over the Hunter Expressway** at Seahampton Road (to access the eastern SCA section) and a **tunnel under the Expressway** to allow continued use of the ridge road off George Booth Drive (which previously serviced Daracon's Buttai quarry, but which will become a major entry point to the western section of Stockrington SCA).
- Twin viaduct bridges within the Mt. Sugarloaf range section of the Expressway (40m above the forest floor) also serve to protect flora and fauna, as well as **facilitating ongoing walking access** to these areas and to the RVRT.
- Recent State Government planning for the M1 Extension to Raymond Terrace and the Lower Hunter Freight Corridor (LHFC) has also **actively protected the RVRT route** (*see next section*).

With all of this preparatory public infrastructure spending, it is essential that we **draw on the decades of positive RVRT related planning** and finish the job off by making the RVRT a reality!

Figure 2. Western Section of Richmond Vale Rail Trail (RVRT)

Ten Points of Interest (June 2022)



1. Log of Knowledge Park - local history and mining heritage; access to Kurri Kurri murals and other attractions, and current and future Cessnock trails

2. Werakata State Conservation Area (NE) – local Indigenous information/heritage

3. Proposed Wallis Creek RVRT bridge (70m single-span)

4. Historic brick Railway Tunnel #3 and proposed Surveyors Creek RVRT bridge (15m two-span)

5. Access point to ridges within western Stockrington State Conservation Area

6. Sugarloaf State Conservation Area

7. Historic brick Railway Tunnels #1 & #2 (Lake Macquarie LGA), The Jewboy Cave, Burrenjim Dam, and Hunter Expressway bridges (overhead)

8. Stockrington State Conservation Area (2,2050ha) and proposed Mid-trail Precinct

9. Former Stockrington underground coal mines (mining and railway heritage)

10. Pambalong Nature Reserve and access to eastern section of RVRT

Richmond Vale Rail Trail
Hunter Valley

4. Assessment Findings

An array of assessments are reported in the main body of the *REF* and in the 11 Appendices. We briefly reviewed these assessments from a non-professional, community perspective. The *REF* and its supporting documents appear to be **well-crafted and sufficiently comprehensive** for this current approvals stage. In aggregate, they identify the RVRT project's key benefits, impacts and required mitigation strategies, as well as demonstrating that a **reasonable balance can be achieved** between protecting local environments, minimising impacts on affected stakeholders, and developing a unique, shared community pathway. We also strongly support the conclusion that '… the proposal as described in the *REF* best meets the proposal objectives. On balance the proposal is considered justified' (Executive Summary, page v).

Some brief information is provided below about selected assessments:

- **Design Drawings** (Appendix A, Lake Macquarie and Cessnock LGAs): The Concept Design Plans for the Western Section of the RVRT provide a **good overview of where the trail segments will be located** and associated key features, as does *REF* **Figure 3-1**. It is also acknowledged throughout the *REF* that, while this is a critical stage in RVRT approvals, it is only the beginning:
  - A broad range of trail features will be '***determined/confirmed during detailed design***' (e.g., pavement type, parking & amenities layouts/inclusions, fencing, landscaping); together with some exploration of additional access locations within Stockrington State Conservation Area (e.g., Mid-trail Precinct);
  - 'Extensive **ongoing consultation** is and will be undertaken during the future design, construction and operational stages of the proposal. This would include negotiation with affected landowners, other stakeholders and the community' (*REF*, page 48); and
  - 'The final design and management of the Richmond Vale Rail Trail on National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) managed lands will [also] be required to comply with **relevant NPWS standards and policies**' (*REF*, page 19).

- **Hydrology and Hydraulics Assessment** (Appendix B, whole trail): Recommends hydraulic modelling during the detailed design stage to help maintain 'the existing hydraulic response' along the trail (including provision of suitable scour protection measures to protect downstream environments), together with operational procedures to protect trail users during flood periods [although flooding is clearly less of a concern within the Western Section of the RVRT].

- **Geotechnical Assessment** (Appendix C, whole trail): Geohazards/opportunities are summarised in Table 5-3 and potential project constraints in Table 5-4. **Drainage** in and around the railway tunnels, and **access constraints** during the construction stage, appear to be the major constraints, due largely to the narrowness of the pathway corridor. Tunnel repair is 'likely to comprise repointing of brickwork, removal of overgrown vegetation and installation of stainless steel bars across cracks'.

- **Phase 1 Contaminated Site Assessment** (Appendix D, whole trail): '… the overall risk of significant contamination being encountered during works that disturb the ground surface or

by future site users is **considered to be low**'. A Contaminated Soil Management Plan (CSMP) is required to manage any contamination encountered.

- **Traffic and Transport Assessment** (Appendix E, whole trail): Recommendations include: investigation of **some intersection upgrades** (e.g., Woodford Street, Minmi; Blue Gum Creek access road off George Booth Drive); controls during construction to reduce impacts; and appropriate signage '… at all locations where the proposal interacts at grade with a road … or school zone'. Approximately 2.1km of the Western Section of the trail will be **located within the road reserve of Seahampton Road** (at Stockrington, within the Stockrington State Conservation Area), which will necessitate consideration of **some additional safety features**. Likewise, the Quarry Access Road off George Booth Drive has previously been identified as a possible area of concern; however, Daracon's Buttai Quarry no longer uses this road for quarry haulage (with substantial upgrades currently underway along their Old Buttai Road northern haulage route). A Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) is required to guide any construction activities that impact on roads. It is also worth noting that State Government plans for the **M1 Pacific Motorway Extension to Raymond Terrace** (Major Projects - Application SSI-7319, exhibited: July 28th, 2021 to August 24th, 2021) and the **Lower Hunter Freight Corridor** (LHFC; Project No.: PS124841, exhibited: July 12th, 2021 to September 13th, 2021) were both exhibited during 2021. However, importantly, both of these projects **actively take the RVRT into account**, and do not impose any major external constraints on trail planning or construction. Cycleways and associated access routes are also considered in these plans, including recent revisions to fit better with future RVRT connections at Tarro (June 2022 Response to Submissions, Appendix C).

- **Flora and Fauna** (Appendix F, Lake Macquarie and Cessnock LGAs): The potential impact on coastal wetlands habitats within the Eastern Section of the trail (in Newcastle LGA) contributed to the requirement for a comprehensive Biodiversity Development Assessment Report – which was evaluated as part of that approval (DA 2020/00641). For the Western Section of the trail, a Flora and Fauna Impact Assessment was considered sufficient. **Flora:** 'Eight threatened flora species listed under the BC [Biodiversity Conservation] Act and seven under the EPBC [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation] Act were assessed as occurring or having potential to occur within the proposal site', with the assessments undertaken leading to the conclusion that: '… the proposal was **unlikely to result in significant impacts** to these species' (*REF* page 94). **Fauna:** '… 44 threatened and migratory fauna species, including a range of threatened microbats and threatened and migratory birds, could potentially occur transiently in the proposal site on occasion'. However, '… given the disturbed nature of the vegetation to be removed, location along the edge of the existing cleared rail corridor, and transient nature of the species' occurrence', the proposal was '… considered **unlikely to result in any significant impacts** to these species or alter the suitability of the habitat' (*REF* page 94). A Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) is also required specifying environmental safeguards to be implemented.

- **Socio-economic Impact Assessment** (Appendix G, whole trail): Extracts from this comprehensive assessment are reported throughout this group submission.

- **Visual Impact Assessment** (Appendix H, whole trail): This assessment divided the trail into 10 visual zones, with zones 1 to 4 in Lake Macquarie and Cessnock LGAs. Of the 18 views

assessed within the Western Section of the RVRT (Table 13 and also *REF*, page 102), 13 were low/negligible, 3 were moderate, and 2 had high visual amenity impacts, both of which were in Zone 2 – namely, on the Eastern approach to Wallis Creek (View point 2), and on the Embankment of Wallis Creek (View point 3). **Signage, vegetation retention, and screening** (if required) should help protect the privacy of rural dwellings in this area.

- **Aboriginal Archaeological Survey Report** (Appendix I, whole trail): 'Despite the high archaeological sensitivity of these natural landforms, … the level of ground disturbance caused by construction of the former Richmond Vale Railway … means that the level of archaeological potential across the whole of the study area is **considered to be low**'. Impacts on two sites of moderate archaeological potential should be minimised.

- **Statement of Heritage Impact** (Appendix J, whole trail): A variety of heritage listed items of local significance were identified. Recommendations and mitigation measures are presented in Table 8-1. Previously, we have also commented on the *Heritage Issues Response* (date August 27th, 2021) that was provided for the Eastern Section of the RVRT, which included some **practical and achievable** 'heritage treatments' (e.g., some re-usage of recovered materials from along the former rail line; and heritage interpretation strategies). A similar approach could be adopted for a representative component of the Western Section of the trail (*see below*).

- **Strategic Options and Engineering Heritage Assessment Report** (Appendix K, Cessnock LGA): As noted in this Appendix, the 'Surveyor's Creek and Wallis Creek Bridges are in **very poor and dilapidated condition**'. Moreover, '… ultimately, new bridges require significantly less ongoing maintenance than either the rehabilitation or renewal options which require costly and ongoing routine repairs and preventative maintenance'. Indeed, it was estimated that '… new bridge replacement options would be about one third the cost of rehabilitation and about half the cost of renewal [i.e., complete like-for-like reconstruction to today's standards]'. We support the conclusion that **new bridges, using modern materials, provide the only viable solution** - with the Wallis Creek Bridge still anticipated to cost approx. $2.91m and the Surveyors Creek Bridge approx. $2.02m. We also support the suggestion in the *REF* (page 115) that '… appropriate recognition of the timber and masonry elements of the bridges should be either incorporated into the new designs or developed as a standalone aspect, for example interpretive signage'.

As noted in the *REF* (Section 8): 'The potential impacts of the proposal are **considered minor when compared to the identified benefits**' (page 130) [these include minor (temporary or potential) impacts on visual amenity, water quality, water flows, vegetation, habitat, heritage, and landowners (*REF*, Executive Summary, page v)]. 'Mitigation measures are provided in the REF, which would avoid, reduce or mitigate any impacts' (page 130).

Notwithstanding, many of the **100 Conditions of Consent** associated with the initial Development Approval for the Eastern Section of the RVRT within Newcastle LGA (DA 2020/00641 approval, dated December 8th 2021) will have relevance here, as will the **32 Conditions of Consent** for the small coastal wetlands section of the trail within Cessnock LGA (DA 8/2020/20463/1 approval, dated April 26th 2021).

5. Likely RVRT Benefits: A Community Perspective

Based on long-term engagement with local communities, more recent discussions about the *EIS* and *REF* (for the Eastern and Western Sections of the RVRT, respectively), and our collective knowledge and experiences, we have compiled a list of 23 likely **RVRT benefits from a community perspective**, grouped into five categories. Our awareness of community sentiments and expectations, and RVRT opportunities and constraints, is drawn from multiple sources, including: over two decades of RVRT involvement; membership of various cycling, conservation, and other groups; numerous planning submissions; and experiences with other developments and rail trails.

A. Health and Lifestyle Benefits

The RVRT …

A1 … **promotes active lifestyles**, which will have positive physical and mental health benefits;

A2 … will benefit a **broad range of users**, across all age groups - including walkers, cyclists, runners, bird watchers, reduced mobility users, family & other groups; and

A3 … encourages locals and visitors to actively **explore an array of Hunter Valley landscapes and attractions.**

- It is the **potential magnitude** of these health and lifestyle benefits that needs to be highlighted – arising from the broad mix of potential trail users and the multiple and varied occasions on which people are likely to access the RVRT.
- Appendix G (Socio-economic Impact Assessment) notes that the region is likely to experience **significant population growth** in the coming decades. It also provides a profile of the Hunter's health, suggesting that the region has 'high rates of **behavioural health** risk factors' (Section 2.3). Consequently, there is a pressing need to develop and promote community-building regional infrastructure such as the RVRT.
- The estimated direct 'health benefits' in Appendix G (Table 6-9) equated to $43.2m, or **56% of the estimated overall trail benefits** (of $76.6m).

B. Community Access and Connection Benefits

The RVRT …

B1 … provides a **safe, pleasant pathway between communities**;

B2 … thoughtfully considers **users with reduced mobility**;

B3 … **strengthens Hunter recreational opportunities** and promotes connections between **metropolitan and rural communities**; and

B4 … will foster **precinct development** and a **mixture of cycling and other activities for families** (encouraging return visits).

- Improved cycleway connections **between and within local communities** will benefit individuals, families and a variety of groups, including local schools.
- The range of potential RVRT 'trip types and users' is well illustrated in Appendix G (see Table 5-2). **Twenty-one potential RVRT experiences are presented**, including sample trips for people with reduced mobility [… and many other trail exploration opportunities await].
- Opportunities for community connections, and links to varied landscapes and regional attractions, will also be substantially greater when the RVRT is **fully-completed**.
- In addition to providing safe, pleasant connections between local communities (e.g., Tarro and Shortland; Fletcher, Minmi and Stockrington), the RVRT will enhance the attractiveness of the Hunter Region and NSW as a **rail trail tourism destination**.

C. Cycling-specific Benefits

The RVRT …

C1 … **increases safety** via alternatives to road network usage;

C2 … **facilitates daily bicycle commuting**, reducing emissions and road congestion;

C3 … will promote increased **recreational cycling** by casual riders, as well as those who enjoy a longer group ride;

C4 … will improve the Hunter's **image as an active lifestyle and cycling destination**;

C5 … will add to the other dedicated local cycleways (e.g., Fernleigh & Tramway Tracks), encouraging **multi-day regional cycling visits**; and

C6 … will **expand the Australian rail trail network**, which already contributes positively to many communities.

- It is anticipated that the RVRT '… will draw much use from cyclists who are already very regular cyclists (daily or weekly) in the region' (Appendix G, Section 4.2.5). However, a **32-40 km off-road shared pathway** (with a variety of distinct segments) will also facilitate safe recreational cycling for different groups of casual riders as well.
- There is also evidence that 'the disruption created by COVID-19 … has significantly changed people's perception of walking and biking' (World Bank Group), with **increased involvement in walking and cycling** observed in many Australian cities and towns.
- The estimated benefits from 'improvement in cyclist safety' in the economic analysis (Appendix G, Table 6-9) equated to $24.7m, which, when combined with congestion, vehicle operation, transport, pollution and emission savings and benefits (totalling $3.8m), equated to **37% of the estimated overall trail benefits** (of $76.6m).
- Appendix G also highlights a range of **other cycling related opportunities**, such as enhanced connections with local mountain bike networks, automated bike hire services, cycling events, and Ride to School Days.
- Rail trails and greenways are **becoming important tourist attractions**. In Australia, Victoria has a variety of well-developed trails, while NSW currently has a limited number, many of which are relatively short.
- National and international evidence also clearly shows that **rail trails work** – providing a 'valued community amenity that promotes healthy exercise and well-being', whilst 'providing a **platform to grow new businesses**, create essential jobs and provide economic benefit' (Northern Rivers Rail Trail Association Inc.).

D. Environmental and Heritage Benefits

The RVRT …

D1 … improves accessibility to a **host of environmental attractions** adjacent to the RVRT (e.g., coastal wetlands, nature reserves, and national parks);

D2 … includes well-constructed **bridges and boardwalks**;

D3 … promotes **biodiversity and habitat protection** (through education, specialised groups and community participation);

D4 … increases access to local environmental, **cultural and heritage features**, promoting **community appreciation** (including indigenous, mining and rail heritage); and

D5 … **minimises potential negative impacts** on the local environment, by using previously cleared areas.

- The RVRT will be a community resource that can be **explored and enjoyed at many different levels**, and by a wide variety of groups - both local and visiting.
- User-friendly **resource materials** will be needed, which can be referenced in funding applications and also serve promotional purposes. The 4 min. TFI trail video from 2017 is a straightforward example of such a resource. Multi-layered RVRT educational and virtual resource materials should also be produced, which would enhance visitor experiences.
- There is **substantial heritage value** along the proposed route, including: indigenous, mining and rail heritage (e.g., the Pambalong clan lived in the local area, after whom the Nature Reserve north of Minmi is named; more recently, 100+ years of coal extraction/transport).
- By increasing access to local environmental and heritage features, the **community's ownership and appreciation grows**, contributing to greater long-term protection (which, for example, has happened at Blue Gum Hills Regional Park).
- Local facilities (such as the Hunter Wetlands Centre) may also benefit substantially and financially by **combining the educational and experiential aspects** of the RVRT.

E. Economic, Tourism and Other Regional Benefits

The RVRT …

E1 … is **clearly cost effective (BCR = 2.40)**, so the sooner we build it, the better;

E2 … will **support local businesses and new initiatives** (e.g., trail side coffee shops, bike hire, fun-runs, guided walks);

E3 … will further stimulate **local economic growth and diversity**;

E4 … will provide the **spine for future regional network connections** (e.g., to the University and Newcastle Cyclesafe Network, Blue Gum Hills Regional Park, other Maitland and Cessnock cycleways and trails); and

E5 … has such **obvious merits**, it should have already been built.

- As detailed in Appendix G (Section 6.5), the **benefit cost ratio** (BCR) for the project is **2.40**, which '… indicates that the level of expected benefits provided by the RVRT is close to two and a half times the level of expected costs'. This more than justifies the economic value of the proposal.
- The estimated **net present value** (**NPV**) for the project in March 2019 was **$44.7m** (i.e., the amount that is generated [Benefits minus Costs] over the 30-year evaluation period calculated in today's dollars).
- We need to **set the RVRT up on the right course** from the outset. For example, the estimated infrastructure capital cost (Appendix G, Section 6.3) of $33.2m equates to about $830,000 per km, which is consistent with NSW IPART's (2014) guidelines for shared cycleway/pedestrian pathways.
- **Compromising safety or accessibility** (e.g., by reducing rest points, community access points, associated facilities, or surface quality, etc) will only decrease usage, and generate ongoing and maintenance costs, which local Councils may not be able to afford.

Consistency with Regional Strategies and Council Shared Pathway Plans:

In effect, development approvals for the Eastern and Western Sections of the RVRT **implement key goals** from the *Hunter Regional Plan 2036* (HRP, 2016) and the *Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036* (GNMP, 2018), and they also represent **'stage one' in the implementation sequence** for several Lower Hunter Council's longer-term walking and cycling strategic plans.

The RVRT is **much more than a cycleway** and it will contribute to at least three of the identified strategic Actions within the HRP: creating **healthy built environments** (Direction 17); enhancing **recreational facilities** and connecting **open spaces** (Direction 18); and **growing regional tourism** (Direction 9). Likewise, within the GNMP, the RVRT is recognised as an important component of regional plans to expand the 'Blue & Green Grid' [waterways & open spaces links], with identified strategic Actions including: improved 'access to open space, **recreation areas & waterways**', enhanced 'nature based tourism through **protection and promotion of natural assets** such as … the Hexham Wetlands' (Action 12.1); 'improvements to **active transport networks**', and provision of 'unobstructed well-connected pedestrian paths and a **network of off-road separated cycleways** to key destinations, including: schools, employment hubs, shops and services' (Action 20.1).

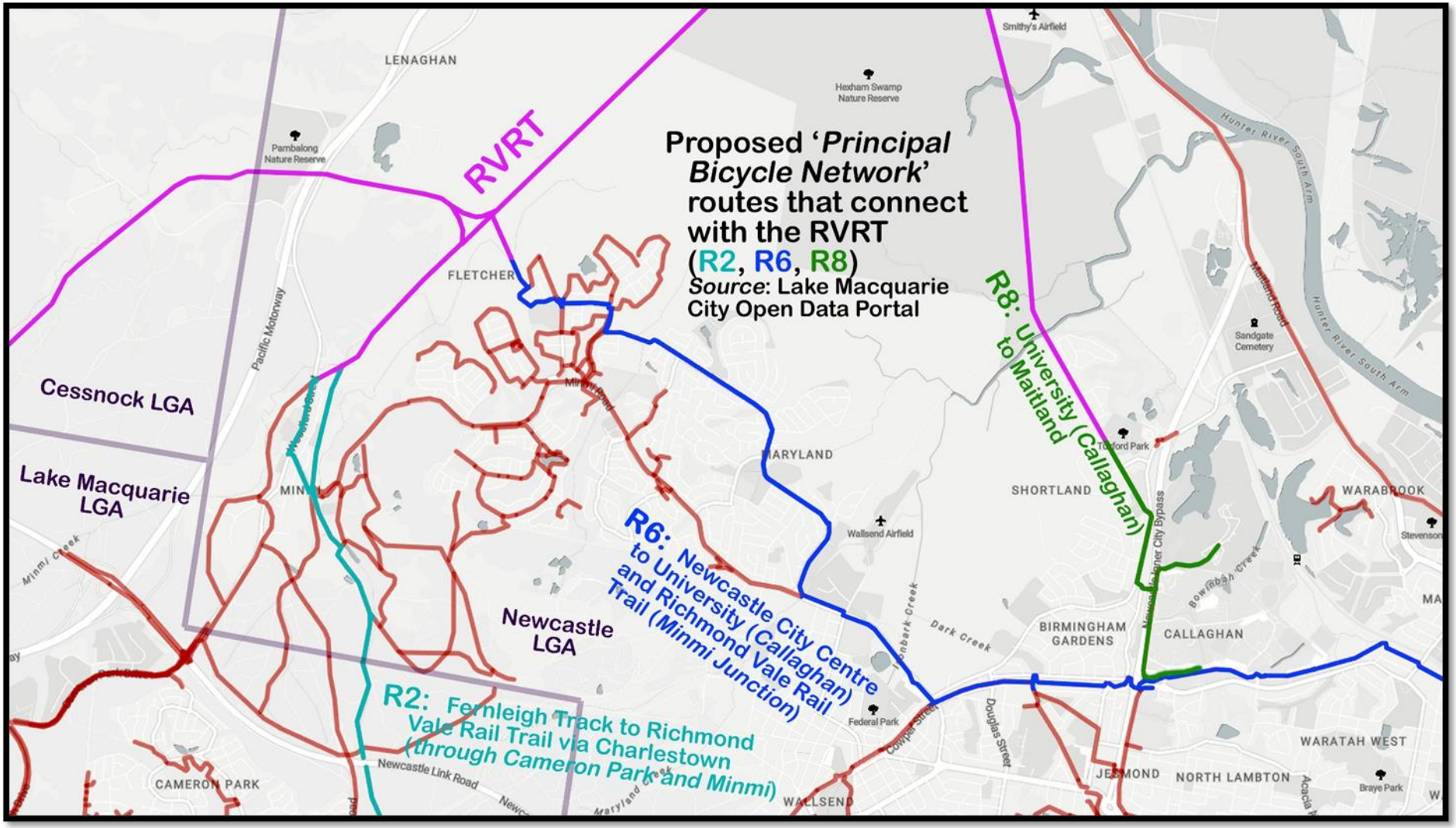
Several newer **local government plans also include the RVRT**, such as: the *Newcastle Cycling Plan 2021-2030* (2021); Cessnock City Council's *Cycling Strategy* (2016) and *Trails Strategy* (2020); and Lake Macquarie City Council's *Walking, Cycling and Better Streets Strategy 2031* (2021). Moreover, it is now much easier to see **where the RVRT fits within proposed regional cycleways networks** than it was when the original design work and documentation for the RVRT was produced.

Combining the recent Newcastle and Lake Macquarie City cycling plans and strategies, there are actually **three proposed '*principal bicycle network*' regional routes that will access parts of the RVRT**: the "*Fernleigh Track to Richmond Vale Rail Trail via Charlestown* (**R2**)" route (primarily within Lake Macquarie LGA, and which passes through Cameron Park and Minmi); the "*Newcastle City Centre to University (Callaghan) and Richmond Vale Rail Trail (Minmi Junction)* (**R6**)" route (via Maryland and Fletcher); and the "*University (Callaghan) to Maitland* (**R8**)" route, which will utilise the Hunter Water pipeline corridor between Shortland and Tarro. These proposed route connections with the RVRT are illustrated in **Figure 3** on the next page.

RVRT Access from Lake Macquarie LGA:

- At first glance, the 2.7km section of the RVRT within Lake Macquarie LGA may appear to be relatively remote and of limited interest to Lake Mac residents. However, that short section is **packed with interesting features**, including: two Historic brick Railway Tunnels (#1 and #2), The Jewboy Cave, Burrenjim Dam, and Hunter Expressway bridges (overhead) – see **Point of Interest 7** in **Figure 2**. It is directly accessible from the **Blue Gum Creek access road** off George Booth Drive – which will also provide trail access for those with reduced mobility.
- The **Seahampton Road bridge** across the Hunter Expressway (at Seahampton) is also likely to provide future access to the Stockrington State Conservation Area, the Mid-trail Precinct, the RVRT, and to the other walking trails that will develop in that area.
- In the longer-term, Principal Bicycle Network **Route R2** will probably provide a connection between the Fernleigh Track and the RVRT, via Charlestown, Cameron Park and Minmi (adjacent to Blue Gum Hills Regional Park) – see **Figure 3**.
- Likewise, in the longer-term, Principal Bicycle Network **Route R6** will probably provide a connection between Glendale and the RVRT, via the Tramway Track, Wallsend, Maryland and Fletcher - see **Figure 3**.
- These future connections from Lake Macquarie LGA will **enhance the appeal of both the RVRT and other shared pathways and attractions** in Lake Mac. Indeed, it will even be possible to cycle or walk the 50+km distance from Murray's Beach to Kurri Kurri or Tarro (via the Fernleigh Track extensions, the R2, and the RVRT).

Figure 3. Proposed (future) 'Principal Bicycle Network' route connections with the RVRT at: Minmi (Route R2), Fletcher (Route R6) and Shortland (Route R8)



5. *REF* Endorsement

The RVRT presents a **unique opportunity for positive regional planning and co-operation** between communities, local councils, State and Federal governments. Moreover, it will be extremely wasteful if we do not **build on the decades of concerted effort** that has already gone into RVRT planning (as well as on the two recent RVRT approvals).

We also know that there is **strong community support** for the RVRT – from local residents, community groups, cycling and rail trail enthusiasts, small businesses, and government and tourist organisations. Indeed, at least 80% of the public submissions about the Newcastle LGA section of the RVRT in August/September 2020 were categorised as being 'in support' – although, unfortunately, subsequent documentation tended to focus solely on 'concerns raised'.

Given the **change in terrain** from the Eastern to the Western section of the trail (e.g., from coastal wetlands to the Mt. Sugarloaf ranges), and from largely **metropolitan to semi-rural/regional** communities, it was anticipated that there could have been some different issues and opportunities to consider and resolve. However, based on our assessment of the comprehensive *REF* and supporting documents, it is clear that there are **no RVRT 'show stoppers'** – that is, nothing that should impede or delay planning approval from both Cessnock City Council and Lake Macquarie City Council for the Western Section of the RVRT.

> We firmly believe that the Current Proposal and associated *REF* assessments successfully **meet the primary goal** of providing 'a high quality rail trail facility' for the Hunter Region and we **strongly endorse** their approval by Council.

The matters that still require resolution (*see below*) can either be **addressed during the detailed design stage**, together with associated ongoing stakeholder and community consultation, or appropriate actions implemented during the construction stage.

Notwithstanding, we also feel the need to acknowledge that there is **considerable RVRT-related community frustration** – about whether community members' views are actually valued, about the lack of submissions feedback, and about **the long delays in RVRT project approvals**. It should be recalled, for example, that the initial 'Community Information Sessions' about the RVRT (and pending EIS, at that time) were held in November, 2016. So, to most community members, progress towards RVRT approvals appears to be painfully slow.

All we ask is that when decisions are being made about the Current Proposal, and in subsequent funding applications, it needs to be borne in mind that **most members of the local community are strongly supportive** and, ideally, would have liked the RVRT to have been built 'yesterday'!

6. Matters Requiring Resolution (After *REF* Approval)

As noted earlier (Section 4), the detailed design stage will **determine and/or confirm a broad range of trail features**, including: pavement type, parking & amenities layouts/inclusions, fencing, and landscaping, and any additional access locations/facilities (e.g., provided in conjunction with the proposed Mid-trail Precinct); and will involve: **further negotiation** with affected landowners,

other stakeholders and the community; and final design and management **consultation with NPWS** (for the trail segments on NPWS managed lands).

We have some **specific suggestions below about access points and facilities**. However, we also have some general observations about **overall design principles and management strategies** that should preferably be followed during the detailed design phase:

- **As broad a range of trail users as possible** should be accommodated (when finalising each design decision), including those with reduced mobility;
- **Practical, sustainable materials** should be utilised (preferably from local sources), that **minimise ongoing trail maintenance costs** and also **reduce impacts** on adjacent landowners or other stakeholders;
- An overarching goal should be to simultaneously **showcase and protect local environments and trail features** (as usage will typically promote community ownership, appreciation and long-term protection);
- Priority should also be given to access points and facilities that are **likely to develop as destinations in their own right** and/or to those that are close to key trail features or other regional attractions (see Destination Considerations in next section);
- **Engagement with stakeholders, community groups and other agencies should be ongoing**, to optimise the trail's long-term benefits – including development of **shared resources** that are of mutual benefit to multiple agencies (e.g., trail users, Councils, NPWS, community groups, providers of educational and tourism resources, etc);
- **As many connections as possible** should be included/planned - to local communities, schools, nearby attractions/facilities and other cycleways/shared pathways; and/or allowance made for future connections and upgrades.
- The former 'railway assets' that the RVRT utilises were **privately owned** and do not trigger the need for any NSW legislative amendments. However, lessons can nevertheless be learned from **two recently released Rail Trail reports** by Regional NSW (June 2022): *Rail Trails for NSW Evaluation Summary* and *NSW Rail Trails Framework*. For convenience, some 'operational guidance' from the latter document about Rail Trail **surface design, staging, management, resourcing and branding** is reproduced in **Table 1** on the next page.

Mid-trail Precinct:

For some time, members of the RVRT Supporters' Group (including two members who were also community representatives on the Donaldson Conservation Trust) have **advocated strongly for a Mid-trail Precinct** – adjacent to Seahampton Road and within Stockrington State Conservation Area – to be **progressively developed as a valued destination** in its own right. If you walk or ride along the longest segment of the RVRT, from Shortland to Kurri Kurri via Hexham Junction and Minmi Junction, your journey would be approx. 29.8km in length (12.6km within Newcastle LGA and 17.2km within the Western Section). The **provisional location** for a Mid-Trail Precinct is approx. 15.3km to 15.8km along the RVRT from Shortland (i.e., at approx. mid-trail). **Figure 4** broadly illustrates the type of precinct that we are recommending.

The Donaldson Conservation Trust (DCT) provided a small grant ($257k) to the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) to explore and plan for the development of a Mid-trail Precinct (Stage 1) adjacent to Seahampton Road "… to enhance and promote **integrated regional development** of

Table 1. Some 'Operational Guidance' – Extracted from *NSW Rail Trails Framework* (Regional NSW, June 2022)

Considerations for Rail Trail surface design

- Rail trail projects should incorporate **universal design principles** to ensure accessibility for people with disability and the broader community.
- Rail Trails with a **sealed track are more versatile** than other surface types as they are more suitable for prams, walkers, manual push and power wheelchairs.
- While they are initially more expensive to construct, sealed tracks require **less ongoing maintenance** than other non-sealed surface options.
- Sealed tracks provide a **practical option** for people with disability and those with limited mobility to participate in recreational and exercise activities while being able to connect across their broader community.
- A sealed track also has the added benefit of attracting a **broader range of users** and increasing community engagement. This supports the business case for investing in sealed infrastructure compared to non-sealed surface options, which have fewer health and community engagement benefits.
- Other considerations include the combination of sealed and gravel tracks and the use of **sustainable materials**. These should be suited to the terrain, conditions, weather, proposed use, traffic volume and width of the Rail Trail.

Taking a staged approach to Rail Trail design and delivery

- A staged approach to project delivery of a Rail Trail can allow more time to build community support and **increase opportunities for the community to be involved** in the construction.
- A staged approach also allows time for community conceptualisation and the creation of **supporting trail attractions and experiences**, such as sculptures, vegetation growth and place-making aesthetics to enhance the trail experience.
- Partnering with **volunteer groups** for major and minor works can also be cost-effective.
- The use of **local contractors and sub-contractors** enables an agile approach to construction and helps reduce costs in many ways, including changes in the construction program not resulting in increased costs or fees, and local contractors can be resourceful in procuring equipment.

Rail Trail planning and resourcing

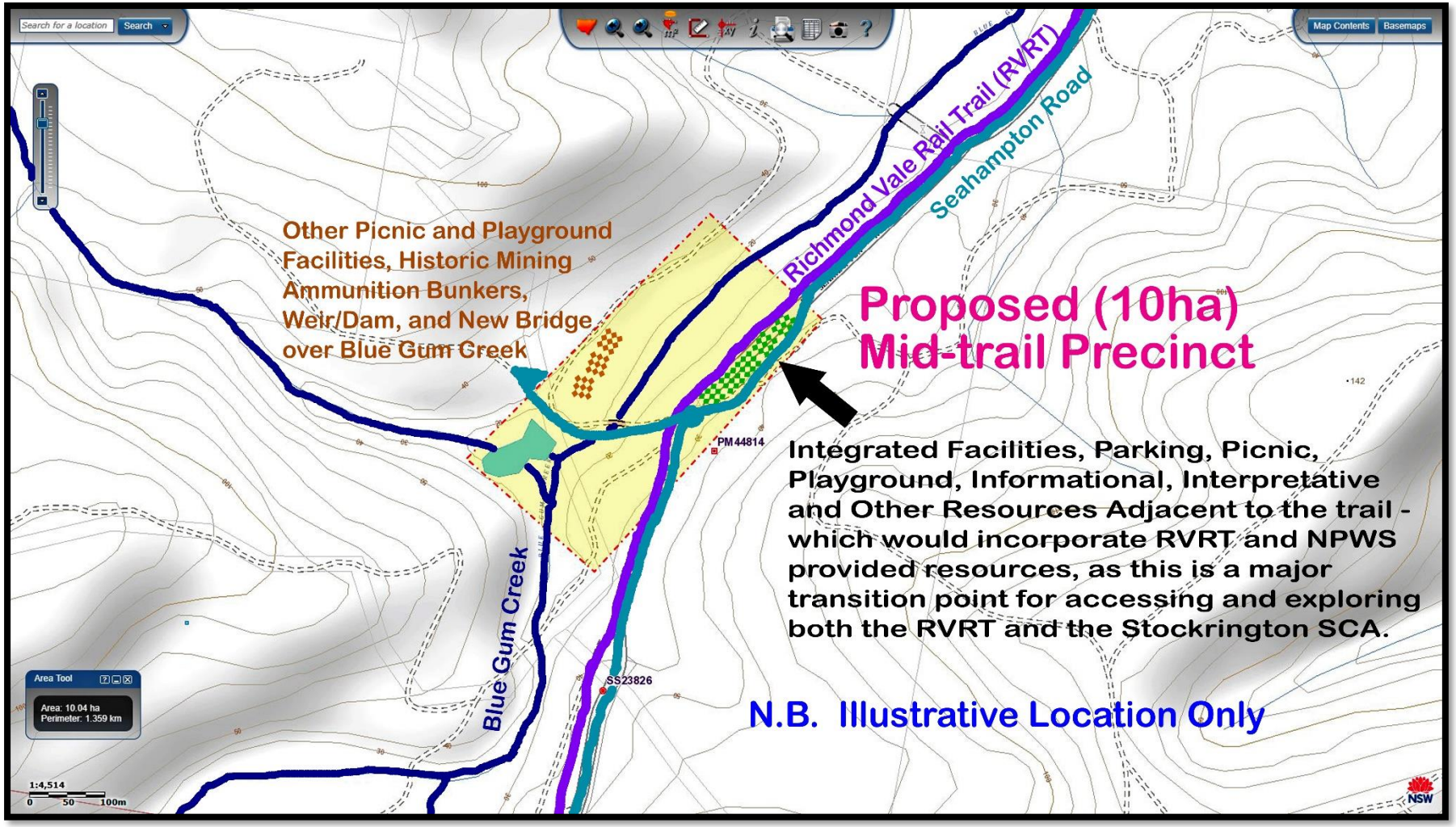
Rail Trail Strategic Plan and/or Plan of Management

- The experiences of Australian and international operators shows a Rail Trail Strategic Plan or **Plan of Management** provides a useful blueprint for developing and operating a Rail Trail.
- The plan should identify tourism, funding and marketing initiatives that can be used by all members of the operational entity (**particularly when a Rail Trail covers multiple local government areas**). A Strategic Plan or Plan of Management outlines the roles and responsibilities of all participating stakeholders and can provide a **clear and transparent decision-making framework** that can be communicated to the community and other stakeholders.

Brand Guidelines

- Brand Guidelines provide a **consistent brand strategy** that can be applied to all sections of the Rail Trail (this is particularly useful when the Rail Trail covers multiple local government areas).
- Brand Guidelines can outline the vision for the Rail Trail, the **look and feel, and intended visitor experience**. This can include guidance on signage and facilities, as well as information materials, marketing assets, public relations, social media and the promotion of community and fundraising events.

Figure 4. Illustrative Mid-trail Precinct within Stockrington State Conservation Area (SCA), adjacent to Seahampton Road – to enhance and promote integrated regional development of the RVRT and SCA



the Richmond Vale Rail Trail (RVRT) and the Stockrington State Conservation Area (SCA)" [Original Agreement: 29th March, 2019; Revised Agreement: 27th August, 2021]. This funding was for background planning and studies, and some 'on ground' works, but not for any RVRT related infrastructure, as such; with the overarching, longer-term goal of establishing "… a valued destination in its own right … as a major transition point for accessing and exploring both the RVRT and Stockrington SCA". The timing of any Mid-trail Precinct 'on ground' works initiated by NPWS will now depend on broader RVRT approvals and detailed design work, as well as on ongoing consultation with Cessnock City Council.

More broadly, while longer-term timelines for development of the RVRT and the Stockrington SCA may differ, we would like to encourage all of the local Councils to work constructively with NPWS and other agencies to **maximise the joint benefits from co-located public facilities** such as the RVRT, SCA and Mid-trail Precinct; similar comments also apply to the interface between the Eastern Section of the RVRT and Hunter Wetlands National Park, which is also managed by NPWS.

Proposed Access Point Changes:
On various occasions, we have discussed **relocating two RVRT access points to more optimal locations** (e.g., with staff from Newcastle and Cessnock Councils, and NPWS), to better protect proposed facilities, improve integration with the Stockrington SCA, and to help create additional attractive (future) destination points in their own right. Everyone has been **generally supportive of these proposed access point changes**, but they still need to be clarified and confirmed in future RVRT documentation [with the argument being put to us that such changes could be more efficiently made after public exhibition of the Western RVRT Section].

The **specific access point changes** that we propose/request are:

1) From Dog Hole Road to Seahampton Road (Mid-trial Precinct) – essentially moving the parking and other facilities currently shown in *REF* **Figure 3-1f** around the 13.70km point by approx. 1.5km to the west and **integrating them more fully** with (future) Stockrington SCA and related facilities – including a larger parking area;
2) Providing only a **moderately-sized parking area** near the former H.E.A. Entry Road (Surveyors Creek) - shown in *REF* **Figure 3-1c** around the 23.00km point [which would still facilitate exploration of Historic brick Railway Tunnel #3 and the Surveyors and Wallis Creek bridges]; whilst **expanding the parking area and other facilities** near the Quarry Access Road off George Booth Drive - shown in *REF* **Figure 3-1d** around the 20.30km point [near Survey Marker PM129959] – this is a **larger and much more appropriate location** for (future) picnic, sporting and playground areas, etc, and it would also effectively serve as the **major access point for exploring western sections of Stockrington SCA**, given its proximity to the Ridge Road (that goes under the Hunter Expressway). As noted earlier, Daracon's Buttai Quarry no longer uses this Ridge Road for quarry haulage.

We also continue to advocate strongly for a **drop-off parking area on the Blue Gum Creek access road** off George Booth Drive (with several Disabled Parking spots) - shown in *REF* **Figure 3-1e** around the 18.00km point, which would facilitate access to Historic brick Railway Tunnels #1 and #2 by individuals with reduced mobility, as well as by families with infants in prams.

As Stockrington and Werakata SCA's continue to develop, it is also anticipated that there will many more walking tracks and other facilities that become accessible via the RVRT.

7. Optimising the RVRT's Benefits

While we are all keen to see the RVRT constructed, building a workable Rail Trail is only one of the tasks that needs to be accomplished. **Optimising the trail's usage and longer-term benefits** will require **ongoing collaboration and careful attention to detail** – e.g., focusing on factors that: promote the trail, attract a broader range of users, increase visitor experiences, encourage return visits, value add to other Hunter region attractions and destinations (and *vice versa*), encourage tourism and multi-day stays, minimise maintenance costs, and encourage development of both on-trail and off-trail local businesses.

Finalising Remaining Approvals and Preparing Funding Applications:
If approvals for the Western Section of the RVRT are obtained from both Cessnock City Council and Lake Macquarie City Council, there will still be at least three other sets of approvals that are required for the main segments of the RVRT: for the Hexham Junction to Tarro segment (involving additional opportunities for connections to the M1 Extension to Raymond Terrace); for the part of the trail that actually crosses Hunter Wetlands National Park; and, ideally, for the Tuxford Park end of the trail and related linkages to the Hunter Wetlands Centre. **Securing all of these approvals in the near future is highly desirable** – which will ensure that the whole of the RVRT is functionally '***shovel ready***' – at least from an external funding applications/opportunities perspective.

Ideally, from that point onwards, the participating Councils will need to pursue **joint funding applications for the detailed design work and construction stages**, building on the decades of RVRT effort. It is, of course, highly likely that the RVRT will actually be **constructed in stages**. Even so, if joint funding applications are not possible, the participating Councils will need to **pursue co-ordinated funding-related actions** that present a united front and **promote an integrated RVRT**.

Destination Considerations:
Business cases and funding applications for community-based developments such as Rail Trails are clearly enhanced by careful consideration of current and future '**destinations-related opportunities'**. Indeed, collaboration with local tourism organisations and agencies such as *Destination NSW* is now an essential component of such applications.

With respect to the RVRT, there are several locations that could potentially be developed as **destinations in their own right**, or are already becoming well known (largely by locals), including:

- The Tuxford Park area, Shortland, and potential links to the Hunter Wetlands Centre;
- Hunter Wetlands National Park and nearby coastal wetlands;
- Minmi/Fletcher links to Blue Gum Hills Regional Park, the Tank paddock, and Pambalong Nature Reserve;
- The proposed Mid-trail Precinct and associated links, heritage and other (future) walks within Stockrington State Conservation Area;
- Blue Gum Creek access road and exploration of Tunnels #1 and #2 and their environs;
- Longer walking trail linkages from the RVRT (and the western section of Stockrington State Conservation Area) to Sugarloaf and Werakata State Conservation Areas;
- Log of Knowledge Park, Kurri Kurri, and associated playground facilities and connections to local communities, as well as the wider trails network and other attractions within Cessnock LGA.

We **strongly recommend that some additional funding is sought** within the major RVRT-related external funding applications **to support planning for, promotion, and further development of some of these identified 'destinations'** – with the primary goal of optimising the regional benefits from the RVRT. Importantly, while there may be some opportunities for support from the commercial sector, most of the RVRT is on or adjacent to publicly owned lands, managed by agencies such as NPWS. Consequently, 'destinations' development in close proximity to the trail will also largely involve grant applications and public expenditure. Our preference would be to focus any additional 'destinations-related funding support' initially on the **trail end points** (i.e., upgrading the Tuxford Park area and Log of Knowledge Park) and on the **Mid-trail Precinct**.

Local Cycleway/Trail Connections:
Related to the above, local Councils also need to **foster and actively pursue the various other proposed cycleways and trails connections** to the RVRT that have been suggested – again, with the major goals of optimising the RVRT's regional benefits and further promoting active lifestyles and transport. These include **direct connections** to: the University of Newcastle (and the wider Newcastle cycleways network); the M1 Extension to Raymond Terrace; shared pathways within the broader Maitland community; the proposed Winten subdivisions and other residential developments around Minmi; and Blue Gum Hills Regional Park; together with **safe local connections to adjacent communities** within the Western Section of the RVRT, including: Kurri Kurri, Pelaw Main, Stanford Merthyr, and Avery's Lane.

Similar sentiments were expressed in the *REF* (page 90), in which it was noted that there are a range of 'social infrastructure developments' near the proposed trail end point at the Log of Knowledge Park in Kurri Kurri, including Pelaw Main Public School and heated pool, the Kurri Kurri Sports Ground, and Pelaw Main Colliery (part of the Richmond Vale Rail Museum) – and '… there is potential for **further activation and use of this area by trail users**'. In this regard, Cessnock City Council's recent success in attracting funding to develop a **shared pathway between Bridges Hill and Wine Country Drive** in Cessnock (CPW-2022-004) may provide a useful template for similar **RVRT-related extension projects** in and around the Kurri Kurri district – including linkages to the recently upgraded Col Brown Rotary Park in Kurri Kurri.

Ongoing Community and Stakeholder Consultation:
Ongoing engagement with Hunter communities and other stakeholders is **central to the success and sustainability of the RVRT**. Moreover, each public exhibition of an RVRT segment further heightens community expectations. We need to continue to **mobilise this momentum** in productive ways – to help resolve any remaining community or stakeholder concerns, to identify additional RVRT opportunities, and to support funding, promotional and educational activities.

Put simply, what the community actually wants to see is **orderly and timely progress** in the securing of the remaining required approvals and commencement of actual trail construction. However, it also makes sense to try to build into these refinements and funding processes the trail ingredients and management structures that will **optimise the RVRT's longer-term viability and regional benefits**.

Regional RVRT Planning and Management Committee:
Given the progress towards RVRT approvals that has occurred in the last two years, and the desire to optimise the RVRT's longer-term regional benefits, **now is probably a very good time to**

establish a representative Regional RVRT Planning and Management Committee. This should probably be co-ordinated through the Joint Organisation of Councils and include some representation from community groups and other stakeholders, together with all tiers of Government. Such a recommendation is also consistent with the 'Advanced or multi-council' operational entity governance structure and benefits outlined in the recent *NSW Rail Trails Framework* (Regional NSW, June 2022). Adding further weight to this suggestion, recent Mayoral Minutes from Newcastle City Council (Item 6, LMM 22/03/2022) and Cessnock City Council (MM8/2022, 20/04/2022) both highlighted the **regional importance of funding the RVRT** [whilst commenting on Federal Election priorities and funding priorities more generally].

8. Conclusion

- The Current Proposal for the Western Section of the RVRT is **consistent with Regional Strategic Plans** (e.g., *Hunter Regional Plan 2036*; *Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036*) and Lower Hunter Councils' walking and cycling strategic plans and is **overwhelmingly in the public interest**.

- We are also aware that the RVRT enjoys **strong community support** from within the Hunter Region and elsewhere. **Appropriate levels of community and stakeholder consultation** have been undertaken during preparation of the *Review of Environmental Factors* (*REF*) and the RVRT is also **demonstrably cost-effective** (BCR = 2.40).

- Based on our detailed RVRT knowledge, experiences with other cycleways and trails, and our assessment of the comprehensive *REF* and supporting studies, we firmly believe that there are **no major barriers to finalising approvals for this section of the RVRT**. The *REF* also details multiple deviations from the original railway alignments, which will generally reduce environmental impacts, increase safety, and reduce both initial and ongoing trail maintenance costs.

- Furthermore, any matters that still require resolution can be **appropriately addressed during the detailed design stage** or during **subsequent trail construction**.

- Importantly, opportunities to build **such a positive piece of public regional infrastructure** do not come along very often.

- As we have demonstrated throughout this submission, the RVRT's benefits will occur at multiple levels, with **direct benefits for trail users** as well as **economic and tourism benefits** for Hunter businesses [e.g., trail side coffee shops, bike hire, guided walks, community events, local accommodation and eco-tourism businesses].

- Likewise, from an environmental conservation perspective, **opening up controlled access** to previously inaccessible State Conservation Areas and Nature Reserves will ultimately lead to **greater community appreciation and environmental protection**.

- Approval for the Western Section of the trail will also provide **added momentum for future approvals** and for other RVRT-related developments and initiatives.

- We expect that the three participating Councils will now begin to **actively search for potential State and Federal funding opportunities** and initiate co-ordinated RVRT funding applications for the remaining detailed design work and for the construction stages.

- Local community groups, such as ours, can also help to **further mobilise community support** and to lobby for these funding opportunities.

- We would also like to take this opportunity to **encourage Cessnock City Council to take more of a regional leadership role** in planning, developing and seeking funding for the RVRT – given its regional and long-term strategic value – how much of the trail actually falls within Cessnock LGA - and to maximise the value of the trail for Cessnock LGA residents and surrounding regions.

- Moreover, the Cessnock LGA would probably benefit from **offering a wider variety of attractions**, including ones that promote active lifestyles and transport, like the RVRT, which would complement the region's existing vineyards and accommodation related tourism, and promote longer stays.