Regional Rail Revival Seminar – the workshop

A working group was appointed to discuss the more significant issues arising from the seminar presentations and the background paper. The group met over lunch after the seminar, commencing at 1230. Those who participated in this workshop included local, state and federal government representatives and industry. Key seminar speakers including Mr Ed Zsombor, Mr Dom Figliomeni and Mr Frank Lander also assisted. Associate Professor Ian Gray led the initial discussion.

Participants were asked to identify the most significant issues from a list composed from those discussed in the background discussion paper. Rather than identifying any one issue in particular, the group discussed what emerges as the most significant underlying factor affecting the future of any regional railway: the volume of freight traffic which is placed on the trains using a line. This issue was raised under the concept of *sustainability* in the background paper, and also discussed under local economic development.

The prerequisite for maintaining freight volumes into the long term, ‘*sustainability*’, is an apparent and clear advantage offered to regional industry by the use of rail. Experience elsewhere has shown that this is achievable and it can come to be seen as natural given the cost advantages of rail freight. Central to all this are the ‘shippers’ – the railway’s customers – and all investors including shippers who have a stake in it. The governance issue is partly about obtaining the participation of all stakeholders in the processes of initial and ongoing development. Local government was seen as having a potential facilitating role.

All the issues discussed at the workshop, and raised in the background paper, were thought to have some significance but none was seen as prohibitive. Some were seen as unlikely to be impediments at all. For example, the *interface with main line operations* may have to be addressed but is something which can be managed by operators. The regulation issue was seen as significant. However, some interim steps, such as the ‘grandfathering’ of local operators by larger ones, which would be advantaged by regional railway development, might be considered.

After the workshop, Associate Professor Ian Gray reported to seminar participants that discussions had been positive and that the important issues facing regional railway revival could be resolved. Associate Professor Gray commented that there appeared to have been a change in the approach taken by several parties interested in regional railways. The need to abandon regional lines as painlessly as possible, apparent since the 1970s, might be replaced by an imperative to make use of what remains of them now in an efficient and sustainable manner.