

Better Benalla Rail community group: www.betterbenallarail.com
Report on the ARTC Inland Rail - Beveridge to Albury Project June 2020

ARTC PROPOSAL

The Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) plan to run 1.8 km long, double-stacked freight trains from Brisbane to Melbourne. They will use the XPT standard gauge line in North East Victoria. This will require major changes to several station precincts, including Benalla where these trains will not fit under the existing overpass.

Benalla Station has been fraught with access and safety problems since the installation of the Sydney to Melbourne passenger XPT line in 1962. The installation of a 4-metre-high traffic overpass and small, dark, unsafe and flood prone pedestrian underpass were poorly designed. Today this underpass does not meet code standards for any user including the disabled (Equality Act 2010 replacing Disability and Discrimination Act 1995).

For nearly sixty years Benalla Station has endured inadequate public access with minimal carparking, no taxi rank, and an insufficient and unsafe bus turning area, now utilised by up to 40 coaches per day. Emergency service vehicles are not catered for at all.

The XPT line and passenger platform are well away from the main station platform which creates additional safety problems when pedestrians, coaches and cars all use the same confined space.

The XPT platform is too narrow and three carriages too short for the train necessitating that it stops twice. The step between train and platform is considerable. Many passengers, especially disabled, elderly and families with small children and baggage find this concerning and dangerous.

The ARTC now plan to also use this XPT line for transiting their long, high freight trains through Benalla and this would require a higher overpass.

The ARTC plan is to build a new 10-metre-high overpass, with access ramps running parallel to Mackellar Street. These ramps would be twice the existing configuration and have a 3m high concrete retaining wall. Alternatively, ARTC claim they would build a pedestrian only passenger underpass for access to the station but no details have ever been presented to the community.

Both options would compound the existing problems of access and safety by decreasing already limited parking and not resolving taxi and coach problems. Pedestrian access would be more difficult as car parking would be further away in residential streets. The visual amenity of the surrounding flat streetscape would be greatly impacted.

THE Better Benalla Rail COMMUNITY SOLUTION

The Inland Rail project provides an opportunity to fix the long-term problems at Benalla Station benefiting both freight and passenger needs.

The obvious and most simple solution is to relocate 1.3km of the standard gauge XPT line from one side of the Benalla station to the other. This would allow both lines to be on west side of station requiring one more crossover at each end of yard and no overpass. The new section would rely on crossing onto the standard gauge VLine track, already leased by ARTC, and using a small section of the Oatlands Line.

This will negate the need for a new overpass, allow demolition of the existing overpass and enable direct vehicle and pedestrian access to the station as originally designed.

It would improve parking, allow taxi facilities and resolve coach parking and turning problems. Reclaiming and landscaping the XPT line area would provide a sound barrier and create an attractive environment.

Importantly, it would enable freight trains to travel on a dedicated freight line straight through Benalla rather than use the existing loop. This would be quicker, safer and quieter.

It would also allow the main platform at Benalla Station to be used by all passenger trains whether traveling north or south because there is no conflict caused by timetabling.

The ARTC claims, without substantiation, that budgetary considerations will not permit this solution due to signal adjustments and their assertion that a new station platform would be required. Better Benalla Rail disputes these claims.

Is it reasonable that Benalla residents be expected to accept an even more inferior station just to accommodate freight progress?

The Benalla community believe their alternative proposal will meet freight needs. It would be a potentially cheaper, more cost-efficient option that also offers improved on-site shunting opportunities. Most importantly it would restore the amenity of Benalla's historic 1883 station precinct.

FLOOD IMPACT

The environmental issues listed in the ARTC Report (The Inland Rail Tottenham to Albury Project Consultation summary report 2017- Sept 2019) do not even address the major issue of flooding.

In the disastrous 1993 Benalla flood, the existing overpass acted as a 'dam wall' which impeded the flow of water. Waters entering Benalla from the north were unable to disperse and banked up behind the wall. This increased both the height and duration of the flood and caused inundation of many homes. The XPT eastern line was flooded but none of the western lines.

Subsequent reviews of this flood event recommended major drainage tunnels be built under the railway lines to correct this man-made problem. Only minimal action on these recommendations was ever undertaken.

The ARTC plan will double the length and height of the overpass and its supporting wall. The plan does not provide for emergency services vehicles in the event of a future flood, fire or rail accident.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

The Community Consultation claims by the ARTC (The Inland Rail Tottenham to Albury Project Consultation summary report 2017-Sep 2019) are significantly overstated and misleading.

The ARTC claims to have undertaken consultation with stakeholders to understand local needs and design options in Benalla. In fact, Benalla Rural City Council was not even briefed until November 2019 following Benalla resident group Bobcar calling a public meeting in Sept. 2019.

The September meeting was attended by an ARTC representative, some Councillors and sixty residents. The impact of the proposed new overpass was made clear. Bobcar also presented the alternative plan involving relocation of a small section of track that would negate the need for any overpass in Benalla.

Since then lack of forthcoming information or transparency by ARTC has led to the formation of a dedicated community group Better Benalla Rail (BBR) taking over from Bobcar and the initiation of a local Save Our Station (SOS) campaign.

BBR provides the community with accurate information and a platform for being heard through the webpage <http://www.betterbenallarail.com>, the Better Benalla Rail for Benalla Facebook page and Save Our Station campaign shop at 81 Nunn Street Benalla.

Better Benalla Rail group has constantly sought information from ARTC but has met continual resistance to accommodate requests. BBR has only received two drawings.

Mistrust by the community in ARTC is exacerbated when ARTC fails to even list Better Benalla Rail as an interested party or stake-holder group.

The ARTC Stakeholder Lead has only this month called for nominations to form a Benalla Working Group to find a solution within the scope and budget of the Inland Rail project. However, given that contractors are already measuring up for the new overpass there is community concern this will be but a token consultation.

ECONOMIC FUTURE

The current revival of interest in rail globally can provide an increased economic benefit for Benalla. As a major station on the Sydney/Melbourne route, Benalla has an impressive history and a strong claim to being the gateway to North East Victoria.

Benalla's renowned Art Gallery, Street Art, Silo Art, Ceramic Mural, Winery and Food Touring, Winton Wetlands, cycling and ecotourism plus the Ned Kelly trail are all economic keys.

Benalla's proximity to Melbourne allows for promotion of tourist day trips and increased desirability as a retirement hub as well as being within commuting distance for flexible work from home arrangements.

To realise this potential, an attractive, accessible and functional passenger railway station in the township of Benalla is essential.