

20 December 2023



6 Parliament Place
East Melbourne
VIC 3002

Mr Stephen Jones

Acting Director Communications and Stakeholder Relations
Inland Rail Project

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Re: Benalla Railway Signal Box

Dear Mr Jones,

The National Trust of Australia (Victoria) (National Trust) writes to you again, to express our concerns regarding the future of the Benalla Railway Signal Box.

We have been contacted by community members in Benalla concerned about the future of the locally significant signal box proposed for demolition as part of the Inland Rail project. Upon review of the available information and communication on the project, the National Trust also has concerns over the lack of engagement and justification provided in determining that demolition of the building is the only option.

The National Trust is the state's largest community-based heritage advocacy organisation actively working towards conserving and protecting our heritage for future generations to enjoy, representing 40,000 members and supporters across Victoria.

As Victoria's premier heritage and conservation organisation, the National Trust has an interest in ensuring that the wide range of natural, cultural, social, and Indigenous heritage values of the state are protected and respected, contributing to strong, vibrant and prosperous communities.

The Railway Signal Box at Benalla Railway Station was opened in 1890 as a 35 lever rocker machine and recommissioned in 1914 as a 51 lever cam and tappet machine. Benalla Railway Station is classified by the National Trust (B2478) at the regional level of significance and the signal box in particular is protected by local heritage overlay under the Benalla Rural City planning scheme (HO63). The heritage overlay citation for the Signal Box states,

Benalla "A" Box is locally important as a prominent railway building recalling nineteenth century train control.

We note that in 2022, as part of the community consultation period, the historic Signal Box was identified as being retained as part of the works, as described on page 21 of the ARTC Consultation Addendum:

Does the Signal box have to stay?

While Signal Box is not impacted in the current proposal, Removal of signal box can improve track alignment and overall sight distances, which will be subject to appropriate

*heritage approvals if required. **The track re-alignment concept presented including the upgraded pedestrian crossing can be delivered without impacting the Signal Box.***

Will the signal Hut be impacted at Nunn Street?

*The design allows for the existing signal hut in its current location with **no impact on the signal hut.** [Our emphasis]*

However, the *Benalla Signal Hut Building Inspection Report* (1 September 2023) by Sterling conflicts with these statements,

Australian Rail Track Corporation (ARTC) have advised that as part of the Inland Rail Program, significant track realignment work will be required, and as such the viability of the Benalla Signal Hut (signal hut) is in conflict with future rail and pedestrian infrastructure due to clearance and sight distance issues.

We also note that the scope of the report mentions only “Assessment and recommendations regarding potential re-purpose of components of the signal hut,” and does not address whether the Signal Box could be relocated to elsewhere on the site, intact.

The National Trust is concerned that the decision previously made during the consultation period has significantly changed, with demolition now proposed rather than retention of the Signal Box. This substantial change in the proposal without consultation has not allowed important input from community stakeholders who have been involved in the process up to this point.

We also note, this case is extremely similar to the series of events surrounding the Euroa Goods Shed, which the National Trust recently wrote to you on. The key difference in these situations, is that the Benalla Signal Box already has heritage protections in place under the local planning scheme, which justifies its local significance of the Signal Box and need for retention.

Additionally, we are concerned that there has been no exploration of options to seriously consider retention of this significant historic feature of the site. Especially as the *Inland Rail Benalla Station Precinct - Concept Plan Report* (25 July 2023) states,

*The signalling building will be **relocated** and/or reconfigured, where possible, to allow for important assets to be included in the new precinct.*

In addition, the *Benalla Signal Hut Building Inspection Report* prepared by Sterling, while identifying dilapidated elements of the building (including some structural elements) does not sufficiently justify that the building is beyond repair and should be demolished. While it identifies elements that are currently unstable and unsafe, there is no evidence to suggest that these elements cannot be repaired/replaced and additional bracing installed to bring the building back to good condition. The report should also have been undertaken in conjunction with a heritage professional.

The significance of the Benalla Signal Box is irrefutable due to the established heritage overlay. As such this locally significant building deserves a more thoughtful and innovative approach.

The National Trust requests that ARTC meaningfully explore the potential for retention of the building in situ or relocation intact to elsewhere in the site.

This dismissive approach to a culturally significant building and lack of consultation demonstrates disrespect towards the Benalla community who have campaigned for the conservation of this building, and a lack of vision and creativity in seeing the value a significant heritage asset like the Signal Box can add to the Benalla Station Precinct Project.

In conclusion, the National Trust calls on the Australian Rail Track Corporation and the Inland Rail Project team to reconsider the proposed demolition of the significant Benalla Signal Box and explore options for conservation and retention of the building while once again opening up this process for community consultation.

For any enquiries regarding this submission, please get in touch with this office on 9656 9818 or with me directly at samantha.westbrooke@nattrust.com.au.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S Westbrooke', written in a cursive style.

Samantha Westbrooke

Conservation and Advocacy Executive Manager
National Trust of Australia (Victoria)

Cc: Millicent Lang, Benalla Rural City Council