



Submission to

Northern Rivers Rail Trail Association Inc.

for the Murwillumbah to Stokers Siding Section  
of the Rail Trail

# “Gallery to Galleria”

Prepared by: Stokers Siding and District Community Organisation, Inc.  
*Celebrating Nature, Cultivating Community*

Submission: April 2015

## **1 Introduction**

This submission supports the use of the existing rail infrastructure along the Murwillumbah to Stokers Siding rail line and corridor as a Rail Trail, and specifically the development of a leg of the Rail Trail from the Tweed River Art Gallery to the Stokers Siding Galleria<sup>1</sup> - hence the label "Gallery to Galleria".

The submission has been prepared by the Stokers Siding and District Community Organisation on behalf of, and in consultation with business owners (current, past and prospective), residents and community members of Stokers Siding and Dunbible. It is supported by members of other, surrounding village residents and groups who see the potential for growth to the economy and networking of communities in the wider area.

## **2 Background**

The village of Stokers Siding grew around the railway line built in 1894. As more farmers came to settle around Dunbible Creek (as it was originally known at the time of the first freehold land purchases during the 1880s), this line provided a vital transport link for farmers carrying timber and crops out, as well as access to markets, services and entertainment for the growing population. The train stop was called Dunbible Siding, but by 1905, when a gantry was built to load the timber, the name was changed to Stokers Siding, after Joseph Stoker who bought the first 650 acre lot for sale in the area.

Over time, and through social and economic need or opportunity, lands were purchased and/or donated for the building of community buildings and business enterprises and the infrastructure to support them, including the coach road connecting Byron Bay and Murwillumbah that ran alongside the railway and Smiths Creek Road that came to the middle of the Village and connected Stokers Siding with Uki and other settlements to the West.

By the mid-1920s, as well as the railway buildings, Stokers Siding included a Post Office, a Church, a Hall, a School and a two-storey general store. All of these buildings remain today, set on the original Pacific Highway and the disused railway, against the backdrop of beautiful rural landscapes, old growth forest, rainforest, and meandering creeks.

The history of Stokers' growth as a village - the pioneering spirit of its earliest settlers, the initiative and creativity of farmers and their families, their appreciation and wonder at the area's natural beauty, and the sense of community and stewardship - remains at the heart of the village today.

## **3 Key Attractions**

### **Stokers Siding Galleria – in progress**

In the 1920's, Reg Johansen erected a two-storey building on what was then the Pacific Highway. It operated as a General Store until the early 1970s, and variously included hardware and farm implements, clothing and haberdashery, groceries and fresh produce, a bakery, a butcher, and courier service. The building was in the heart of the village, and for some years was the community place.

In 1978, Stokers Siding Pottery opened its doors and showcased the ceramics made onsite in the backyard in the old wood fired bakery building by Bob Connery, Laine Langridge and Andrew Stewart. Also exhibited over the years were arts and crafts from many local and Australia-wide artisans. The building was revitalised, and once again found itself at the heart of the village, though now as a popular tourist attraction rather than a community service centre. The building also came to be synonymous with Bob Connery, the local who became an internationally renowned Master Potter. Stokers Pots were made 'out the back' until the pottery closed its doors 34 years later in 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> The Stokers Siding Galleria is currently under development

Today, visitors to this Heritage-listed building can enjoy the retail outlets of **Vintage Soul** – a wonderful world of antiques, collectables, art and wearable art made by owner Priya and other locals - and **Moo Moo Stitches** – haberdashers and quilting specialists, who moved to Stokers Siding from the Kelly Bros. Post Office and Store in Mooball, and who engage daily with the community to produce quilts and crafts for charities, as well as to provide a motivating and friendly place to work on UFOs (unfinished objects).

In addition, spaces within the building are currently being refurbished to house the following:

- **Stokers Siding Art Gallery.** In the near future, local resident and printmaker Phillip Gasson will open a new gallery of local and interstate art works, including indigenous art. Phillip, who moved to the area in the late 70s and lived in the Pottery building in 1979, has been involved with the Community Printmakers (CPM) for over a decade, and sees the potential of this gallery as another outlet for CPM printers to exhibit to a wider audience, as well as offering studio space for workshops, mentoring programs, artists in residence programs and the like. As well as the exhibitions of new artists, Phillip will show works from his private collection.
- **In-House Museum.** Since her arrival to Stokers Siding in the 70s, Julie Rainow, current owner of the building, has been amassing information, histories and artefacts of the Tweed Valley generally, and the Stokers Siding-Dunbible region in particular. The Museum that is currently being planned, will house photographs, anecdotes and artefacts of the locals throughout the years, providing visitors with a truer sense of where they are in place and time, as well as a wealth of information and reference point for past residents and descendants. Also on view will be a detailed history of the Stokers Siding Pottery.
- **Stokers Siding Community Centre.** Julie has offered a space within the building for office equipment and information for community members and visitors. The centre will include computer and printing facilities, as well as local tourist information and merchandise.

The building will be renamed **Stokers Siding Galleria**, and will return a beating heart to the village, as did Johansen's store and Bob's Pottery. It will be a reason for visitors to travel off the highway, for locals to drop in and participate in a range of activities, and for communities to flourish within the broader Stokers-Dunbible community.

### **The Old Railway Station (Post Office, Tea Rooms and General Store)**

The Old Railway Station Building was moved from its original location on 9 June 1995, as a result of an upgrade to the intersection of Stokers Rd and Smiths Creek Rd. The building houses the local Post Office, General Store and Tea Rooms, and is of heritage value because it is one of only a number of this architectural style in the Northern Rivers Area. Of interest to many visitors is the story of its bull nosed verandah, attached to the building after being salvaged from The Australian Hotel, which burnt down in 1981.

Alongside this building is a small park, including picnic area and playground, proposed by the Community to be erected on land leased to the Council by the Railway. It's a peaceful spot to enjoy a great Devonshire Tea during a break between here and somewhere else.

### **Stokers-Dunbible Memorial Hall**

The Hall is located between the church and the school. It was built in 1914, and was the venue for parties, weddings, games and dances, and other occasions, as well as community events and meetings. In 1947, the popularity of the local dances was such that it was decided to move the Dunbible Hall and attach it to the Stokers Siding Hall. The building, with its timber walls and original dance floor, is an important physical and emotional part of the community's heart. As a Memorial Hall, it houses the Stokers Siding Honour Roll for The Great War, and the Stokers Siding-Dunbible Roll of Honour for the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War.

Today, visitors to Stokers Hall can enjoy entertainment and a meal at the monthly Fifteen Minutes of Fame, a show of local musical and theatrical talents. The Hall is also host to the

quarterly Stokers Village Market, showcasing fine arts and crafts, local produce and bric-a-brac.

### **The Church**

The land on which the church was built was donated by one of the early settlers, and the church was built in 1911. Originally it was used by every denomination except the Catholics (who held their services in the Hall), but it became the property of the Church of England in 1936 and was named the St John the Baptist Anglican Church, Stokers Siding. The Church was closed in 1982 and sold as a private residence in 1983.

Today, the Church is run as a Bed and Breakfast and is one of a few around the area offering peace and quiet; a beautiful, creek-side location, and the picturesque rural views for which Stokers Siding is well known.

### **The Garage**

The Stokers Siding Garage was, at one time and until 2010, renowned for the servicing of VWs, in particular Combie Vans. The building lay quiet for a few years, but again houses a mechanic who services the cars, trucks, bikes and small machinery of Stokers' residents. Occasionally on Village Market Day, Roger will close up shop and reopen his doors to sell "Garagenalia" – paraphernalia that you might find in and around a garage.

### **Stokers Siding Café and Cycling Museum**

Next door to the garage is the recently opened Café and Cycling Museum. Col has been an enthusiastic cyclist, and has on display bikes that have toured France, Italy and elsewhere. He happily shares his stories while preparing light meals and coffees, and the café also has gear for sale, and offers bikes for hire.

## **4 The Physical Environment**

The road from Murwillumbah to Stokers Siding was described in the 1920s as a "relaxed country jaunt". Road improvements and the replacement of original timber bridges means that drivers need to consciously slow down to appreciate the environment they are entering. But those who do, are able to enjoy some outstanding landscapes, stop at several swimming holes and 'natural' picnic spots, drop a line into the creek to fish, or kayak along what were once the waterways that transported timber and crops from the early farms.

For the bushwalker, there are a number of tracks that can be followed. The most popular of these is to The Tunnel, a 90m tunnel built into the Burringbar Range and now home to micro-bats and glowworms. This tunnel is photographically significant, as it is one of the few long tunnels where one can see through it to the other side.

The tourist potential of the Stokers Siding district has been recently recognized with the announcement that a 40km nature trail beginning in the Stokers area is to be developed. Based on an old mail route, The Nightcap Trail is a coordinated proposal between the Tweed Shire Council, National Parks, Destination Tweed and the adjoining local residents association UKIRA. There is considerable potential for sections of the Nightcap Trail, as well as other disused tracks and trails around the area that need to be upgraded and reopened, to be accessible by pedestrians from various stages along the Rail Trail.

The upgrading of Stokers Road will, once again, bring cycling enthusiasts to the area. In the past, Stokers Siding has played host to a number of local, state and national road races, as well as casual cyclists who enjoy the Stokers – Murwillumbah – Uki route, or the Burringbar – Murwillumbah – Stokers route, or variations of these. Either way, once in Stokers Siding, riders can swap stories with the Col at the Café, locals and others passing through, pick up some gear, carry out repairs, or even hire a bike.

## **5 Conclusion**

Stokers Siding's story is one of a village that grew around a railway. The rail line is a physical feature of the Village. As with some of the old buildings and other original features, the fact that it is currently disused is a reminder that opportunities exist to rebuild, refashion, preserve and progress. The proposed Rail Trail is such an opportunity.

Visitors to the area will enjoy taking a leisurely trip slightly away from the familiar comforts of a large centre, somewhat slower in pace, with different features to look at, and different goods and services on offer that are particular to this place.

The local businesses and residents will benefit from a boost to the economy, including the increased potential for local work, through access to the massive tourism market of the Gold Coast to the north, and Byron Bay to the south. Residents will again experience a sense of pride in knowing that there is something of value to be seen and shared in this area, and a stronger sense of community, both within the Village and within the district as we engage with other communities, groups and villages along the Trail.

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