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Barossa Wine Train lost to the Valley?

Any chance of resurrecting the Barossa Wine Train to provide a much needed shot in the arm to the region's tourist industry seems to have evaporated with strong rumours that the Wine Train's carriages are to move interstate.

The Barossa Wine Train engines and carriages - 3 in total - currently languish at the National Railway Museum at Port Adelaide, where they've been left to rust for some ten years.

Despite rumours earlier this year of a 'renewed push' to get the Wine Train experience back on the rails, rumours in SA rail circles now have it that the train will leave South Australia, possibly to be based in New South Wales.

The Barossa Wine Train is currently owned by John Geber, formerly a Teaist with Tetley Teas and renowned for buying Chateau Tanunda in 1998 on a whim after having ridden past the (then) run-down Bavarian-style Chateau on the outskirts of Tanunda township.



The Wine Train in the barossa in happier times

While Geber transformed the decaying Chateau into the outstanding wine and tourist icon it is today, his commitment to the Barossa Wine Train has not been as productive.

The on-again, off-again train experience has been dogged by indecision (and often a lack of decision-making) compounded by a lack of interest by the State Government, despite the expenditure of countless hundreds of

thousands of dollars on tourist campaigns, culminating in the '*Barossa. Be Consumed*' campaign featuring a woman carrying a slaughtered chook across a yard before writhing in Barossa dirt to a Nick Cave ballad relating to a father of three who murders his family. Very South Australian.

A further complication is the physical rail line the train has and would run along (should it be resurrected) is effectively a 'mothballed' railway line from Gawler to Chateau Tanunda (and beyond to Nuriootpa and Angaston, potentially) - formerly a line designed to carry limestone and marble from the abandoned Penrice Mine, north of Angaston.

To further complicate matters, the line is under the control of Genesee Wyoming Australia (GWA) which took over rural SA rail-lines, having purchased them for a song from Australian National Rail which itself inherited the rural lines back when the then Dunstan Government sold all non-metro SA rail lines to the then Whitlam Government in the mid 70's.

So what does this all mean for the Barossa Wine Train?

Barossa News Online understands the three Wine Train carriages - the iconic Bluebird class trains capable of carrying up to 150 tourists in a style akin to the prestigious and popular Kuranda Tourist Rail line from Cairns to Kuranda in Qld - are in pretty good nick internally, but need some relatively minor work externally. There is also a question whether the toilets have been upgraded to a 'retention' system (after all, no-one wants crap on the tracks as was the case for all rail across SA in years past!).

Barossa News Online has attempted to contact John Geber but his office tells us that he is 'out of contact' as he sails the Mediterranean on a yacht (his yacht presumably). This despite the fact that modern telecommunication is ubiquitous these days.

Barossa News Online has also contacted the Minister for Tourism Leon Bignell (...we're still waiting for a response), **and the Minister for Transport Steven Mullighan**, who responded: *"All queries should be directed to the owner, Mr John Geber. The government has no investment in this issue – the train is owned by Mr Geber and the track is under a 99-year lease to GWA"*.

Yes, we know that, Mr Mullighan. It should be noted however that the State Government, under the terms of the lease of railway lines to GWA, CAN and SHOULD demand the return of mothballed lines to the State, at no cost to the State. Under the terms of the Lease (which governs GWA's control of mothballed and currently non-functioning SA rural rail lines), those lines must be kept in a condition by GWA ...**THAT THEY MUST BE READY FOR USE WITHIN 14 DAYS OF BEING SO REQUESTED by the State or other potential user.**

This is clearly NOT the case with mothballed or 'out of use' rail lines in Rural SA (including the Barossa line) - and the SA Government is failing in its fiduciary duty by not insisting that GWA meet its lease conditions.

Barossa News Online further understands that Geber has been told that it would cost his organisation 'at least \$2 million' to bring the Barossa rail line to a point where it could be used again. This despite the fact that the track was designed to carry heavy ore trains of a weight, dimension and length far beyond that presumably needed to run an occasional light passenger train.

This also ignores the fact that it is GWA's responsibility as stated previously to keep the track in running order - at its expense. As stated above, in the event of non-performance by GWA, the State should and must insist the line be handed back to the State at no expense to it. The State and Geber could then negotiate to have the line brought to running standard (which, given it was built to 'industrial' standard, should not be that onerous or expensive.)

Is this why the Barossa Wine Train is doomed? Has Geber just given up trying after seeking Government assistance to get the train up and running again over recent years? Is this an example of the State Labor Government thumbing its nose at a rural electorate (of the wrong political colour) because there's no votes in it for Weatherill?

Is the State Government too scared to take on GWA by insisting non-functioning rural rail lines be returned to State control (as it is clearly its duty under the Contract)?

Barossa News On Line further understands that at least one potential buyer has inspected the Barossa Wine Train at the Port Dock National Rail Museum in recent times.

Tourism experts Barossa News On Line has spoken to are distressed to hear the latest news about the Wine Train, but are, in a sense, resigned to losing the Train. They shake their heads that the State Government has done little to resurrect or otherwise support the tourist service, despite, for example, its 'in spirit' and financial support for that questionable tourist attraction, the rusting hulk known as the 'City of Adelaide', now withering at Port Adelaide (incidentally, Labor's heartland).

For a modest investment (dare we say far less than the millions spent on the flash-in-the-pan 'chook' TV campaign whose influence did cause something of a 'blip' in tourist numbers, but whose effect is now very much on the wane), the Barossa Wine Train can become a vital part in increasing *sustainable* tourist numbers to the Barossa.

Does the Government have the will, the gumption - the VISION - to do something tangible for tourism? What leg-up can it give to a project potentially worth millions to the State?

When will we hear of the fate of the Barossa Wine Train? Check www.barossanewsonline.com frequently. **We're still on the case.**