

Rail union: time for innovative long-term thinking on Taieri Gorge railway

Rail and Maritime Transport Union media release
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The union representing workers on the Taieri Gorge railway is urging the Dunedin City Council not to rush into decisions about the future of the iconic tourist attraction.

51 staff are likely to lose their job under a mothball plan announced today by Dunedin Railways Limited Board Chair Kevin Winders.

Rail and Maritime Transport Union General Secretary Wayne Butson says the announcement is not a surprise, but is disappointing.

“The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented, and there have to be changes to operations. However those changes should reflect a broad, long-term view about the value of this iconic attraction.”

Innovative thinking was required around passenger/commuter rail operations using current staff and rolling stock, he says.

The Labour-led Coalition Government was moving fast on investment in infrastructure to offset the downturn, and the Green Party had just made an excellent case for new rail services for major centres in New Zealand.

“A forward looking council in Dunedin must work with the Government to explore any and all opportunities to prevent long term economic damage to the Otago region.”

The cost of restarting rail operations, especially finding skilled staff, would be considerable, says Mr Butson.

The longer mothballing went on, the greater danger the iconic brand would lose its profile, and company assets would inevitably degrade.

In the future, domestic tourism may increase and international visitors would return to some degree, he says.

The Taieri Gorge Railway was linked to the Central Otago Rail Trail and was a major attraction for the Otago region, and could not be viewed simply as a standalone business.

Dunedin Railways is now under the full ownership of Dunedin City Holdings Ltd, the business arm of the Dunedin City Council.

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