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South Australia's peak regional and rural rail lobby has cautiously welcomed the announcement by Transport Minister Stephan Knoll to seek 'expressions of interest' via tender for the future use of the Barossa rail corridor - but warns that the line must be utilised only for rail-passenger purposes.

The call for caution comes from the South Australian Regional Rail Alliance (SARRA), whose Convenor, Paul Henley, says the Barossa rail corridor, while currently dormant, is a vital tourism and rail-passenger train link into the heart of South Australia's premier tourist region and must not be given over to other uses.

"SARRA has long campaigned to reinstate rail services along this corridor to serve the growing public transport needs of the Barossa - and to provide tourist access to the wineries and other delights of the Barossa Valley," Mr Henley said.

"While the Minister is to be commended at finally looking at options for the corridor, we remind him that as the Lower House Member for Schubert (which takes in the Barossa), his constituents have long and loudly called for a return of rail services to the Valley.

"In the few days since his announcement of this latest initiative, Mr Knoll's own social-media page and those of the Barossa's local media have been bombarded with Barossans calling for a return of rail to the region.

"To echo that iconic TV series 'Yes Minister', it would be very ...brave... of Mr Knoll to ignore his electorate's wishes.

"The alternative hinted at by Mr Knoll - that of selling off sections of the line piece-meal - or to turn it into trendy 'multi-use tracks' (whatever that means) - cannot be allowed to happen.

"This is not what the vast majority of his electorate wants.

"Thus we call on Mr Knoll to ensure his 'Expressions of Interest' documentation makes it clear that ONLY submissions which see a return of rail services to the Barossa will be entertained.

"And we caution intended tenderers to the Minister's EOI call that SARRA will oppose with all its might any other use for the corridor.

"Prospective tenderers pushing any other use for the corridor need to be aware that they will be wasting their shareholders' money, as the real owners of the corridor - SA taxpayers - will resist your every turn.

“Unless it is a rail solution, don’t even bother. It will get very messy.

“Anything other than rail will fail,” Mr Henley said.

SARRA says a further complicating factor in any tender deal is the control over the ‘above ground’ rail infrastructure on the Barossa line, currently in the hands of Genesee Wyoming Australia (GWA).

“The Minister says GWA would be prepared to ‘roll over’ and hand back its Barossa line holdings to the State - but under GWA’s binding Lease agreement with the SA government, the Minister must insist that the line be restored to operational order prior to that hand-back so that any incoming tenderer wanting to return rail-passenger services can do so on a line in operational condition - and not have to pay for GWA’s negligence.

“That’s in the Lease, in black-and-white.

And SARRA says, there’s yet a further complication which Minister Knoll either hasn’t been advised of by his DPTI mandarins - or which his government is conveniently choosing to ignore.

GWA, the owner of the Barossa line’s above-ground infrastructure, is about to be sold-off to a Dutch Pension Investment Group (PGGM) and Macquarie Infrastructure and Real Assets (MIRA) as part of the sale of GWA’s parent American company, Genesee Wyoming, to Brookfield Investments, a Canadian investment group.

“GWA - the entity holding the Lease with the State - will apparently no longer exist as a legal entity - and as a result, its control over SA’s regional and rural rail lines is drawn into sharp focus.

“At the very least, the Lease - and GWA’s control over regional and rural rail lines - must be renegotiated - and it must be renegotiated publicly so that SA taxpayers can see what will happen to their regional and rural rail assets, prior to a new deal being struck.

“In the absence of GWA meeting that Lease condition prior to it being sold, the State must sue GWA for failing to meet its Lease obligations,” Mr Henley said.

“This will all impact on the Minister’s announced EOI.

“We can only say to any prospective tenderer..’buyer beware’....

“Do your due diligence - and tread very carefully,” Mr Henley said.

This digitally enhanced image is the sort of train SARRA would like to see running through the Barossa.

