

# Cycle rail trail to Fairlie mooted

By JEFF TOLLAN

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THERE are renewed hopes that the wheels may start turning again on the old Fairlie branch railway line, more than 40 years after it closed.

Turning it into a rail trail for cyclists is the latest talk on the block, prompted by Prime Minister John Key's plans for a nationwide cycleway.

With the success of the Otago Central Rail Trail entrenched around the country, some South Canterbury residents are looking at what could be done locally.

Already there have been informal talks between New Zealand Transport Agency, Timaru and Mackenzie district councils and calls of support from people who have done the Central Otago rail trail.

NZTA regional state highway manager Colin Knaggs said that while there had been no formal discussions, no reports or anything in writing, the concept of turning the former line into a bike track had the agency's total backing. "We would certainly support anyone putting forward a plan for that in a safe location." Mr Knaggs said the discussions that had taken place were at a road-safety forum about 18 months or two years ago.

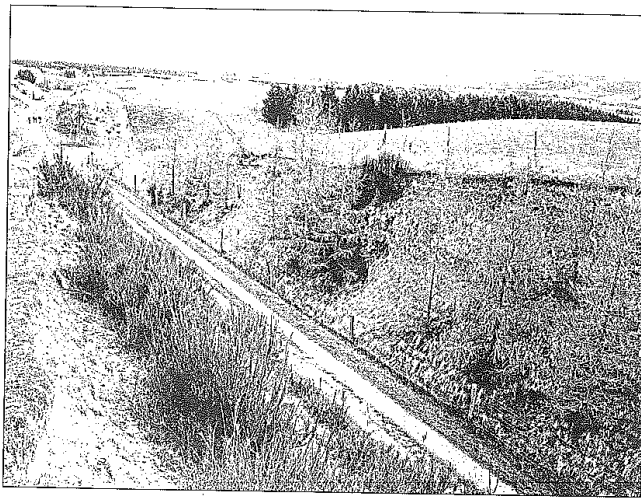
"There's been nothing discussed in terms of definitive plans, only ideas at the moment."

NZTA has not ruled out the possibility of a rail trail that follows the former line, from Washdyke to Fairlie.

While much of the rail corridor has been sold since the line was closed, *The Herald* understands about 30 per cent is still owned by the Crown.

The thought has also struck a chord with Russell Paul, the vice-president of the Pleasant Point Railway and Historical Society.

While it would take a bit of work, Mr Paul said, in his view a cycleway would be a worthwhile project. "Definitely. [To get to



**History hidden:** The former Fairlie branch line is a patchwork of private and publicly owned land, and there are hopes it could be a cycleway. One of the line's unique features is the Winscombe Cutting, near Fairlie.

Photo: JEFF TOLLAN

Fairlie], that would be the ultimate."

The Little River line had been closed and the rail corridor was privately owned, but it was now being developed into a rail trail, he said. "Biking seems to be all the rage today."

He admitted the route to Fairlie would not be as scenic as the Otago Central Rail Trail, though it did have its own unique attractions, like the secluded Winscombe Cutting.

Timaru District Council land transport manager Andrew Dixon said a South Canterbury rail trail would play a part in safety, giving cyclists another route other than the highway.

Cost, on the other hand, would be a problem.

He said the Little River track was going to cost about \$1 million to complete, \$600,000 to be borne by the Christchurch City Council. South Canterbury did not have that kind of money to spend on a rail trail, Mr Dixon said. There was also the fact it

would not provide a great point of difference from travelling on the road.

However, a former Timaru man believed there would be money to be made by the venture.

Peter Casey, now of Rangiora, said there would be an economic spin-off for small towns by bringing more tourists to the area. "It would be business for them. It would be great for [the towns], and people will use it. This is the new thing in the 21st century that people want to do."

Mr Casey said if needs be, issues relating to private land could be overcome, as they had been in Little River's case.

"They've overcome the problem with going to the farmers and talking to them."

There would be nothing stopping the same from happening for the Fairlie line, Mr Casey said.

"There's an awful lot that can be done. It's all good for South Canterbury."