Rival bid threatens Darwin rail link

By Political Editor

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A rival competitor has launched an intensive campaign to thwart a bid by South Australia and the Northern Territory for a rail link between Alice Springs and Darwin.

And it has prompted an angry response from the Premier, Mr Olsen, who claims it is an attempt to undermine the joint bid.

“They haven’t even done a feasibility study...” he said.

“We have prepared a business plan and undertaken a feasibility study and both the State and Territory governments have introduced legislation.”

It has been revealed the Australian Trunk Rail Corporation has been lobbying federal ministers and backbenchers to support a Brisbane-Darwin rail link.

The ATRC’s executive director, Mr Barry Donaldson, has launched a blistering attack on the SA-NT bid, saying it is “handout-dependent” and “economically feeble.”

He also believes it cannot stand up to other more strategically planned rail proposals.

The ATRC plans a 4070km line from Cootamundra, in central New South Wales, to Darwin, via Brisbane, using high-speed trains on a double track.

The other competitor is Asian Express Rail Service, which wants to build a 3850km track from Melbourne to Darwin, via Goondiwindi in southern Queensland, using a train capable of 260km/h.

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The Prime Minister, Mr Howard, is expected to indicate next week at a meeting in Sydney whether the SA-NT project will receive anything from the $1 billion Federation Fund.

Mr Olsen confirmed that those behind the Queensland project were making a late bid to attract Commonwealth funding.

He flew to Sydney yesterday afternoon for a series of business meetings at which he plans to shore up support for the Darwin-Alice Springs proposal.

He said the Queensland consortium was trying to thwart the work the SA and NT governments had done “and the merit of the case we have put together”.

“We are prepared, well down the track and ready to go, should we get Commonwealth support,” Mr Olsen said.

“On a commercial basis, we would have to accept their proposal hands down.

“We have been working closely with federal bureaucrats and I have had a number of discussions with the four Cabinet ministers from SA.

“They are, to their credit, all backing this project solidly.”

Mr Olsen said the SA Government had not had any indication from Mr Howard that there would be a decision on funding.

“This is a joint building a project which is in the national interest and completing the rail grid in Australia to every capital city,” he said.

Mr Olsen said he was heartened by previous comments by Mr Howard that he was attracted to the SA-NT proposal.