Rival rail idea quickens pace of SA-NT bid

By Political Editor
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The South Australian and Northern Territory Governments will step up their bid for federal support for the Alice Springs-Darwin rail line to counter threats from a rival project.

The Premier, Mr. Olsen, and the NT Chief Minister, Mr. Shaine Stone, will meet the Prime Minister, Mr. Howard, in Canberra on Monday to talk on the $1 billion project — which is under pressure from a proposal announced last week for a $10 billion, high-speed line between Melbourne and Darwin.

Both leaders, who will be in Canberra for the Premiers Conference on the Wik native title decision, have been granted a special meeting with Mr. Howard to discuss the project.

Mr. Olsen outlined Government plans for the project to a meeting of Liberal MPs on Thursday.

He said he had written to the Prime Minister about two weeks ago outlining additional information in support of the SA-NT bid.

He said yesterday he could not yet reveal the details but he and Mr. Stone would be putting their case very strongly on Monday.

Mr. Olsen said he had serious doubts about the commercial viability of the alternative project.

The Opposition Leader, Mr. Rann, has called for a summit meeting with Mr. Howard on the proposed project — extending the Adelaide-Alice Springs railway line to Darwin.

Both the SA and NT governments have pledged $100 million towards the construction of the Alice Springs-Darwin line.

The Federal Government already has announced it is prepared to hand over, without cost, the existing Adelaide to Alice Springs rail line to any private operator involved in building the remaining link to Darwin.

Legislation establishing a special rail authority to help in financing and planning the project has been passed in both parliaments.

Pressure on the SA-NT bid is mounting with a new consortium unveilling plans last week for a $10 billion, high-speed line between Melbourne and Darwin — a line that would bypass SA.

The Australian Inland Railway Expressway group plans a line which would run from Melbourne through the mid-waist of New South Wales, Queensland's Darling Downs and major mining areas and then on to Darwin via Katherine.

The consortium has claimed it could have trains running as early as 2005.

The $10 billion Melbourne-Darwin bid has some strong support at federal level with the federal Industry Minister, Mr. Moore, referring to it in a speech on Wednesday.