

Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

Submission on behalf of the Newcastle Branch of the Australian Labor Party

Newcastle Branch of Australian Labor Party is a group of rank-and-file members of the ALP, covering the inner city of Newcastle, NSW, including the CBD of Newcastle. This is our response to the *Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy*, published on the web in December 2012, at

<http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/HousingDelivery/UrbanRenewal/RevitalisingNewcastle/tabid/613/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

Major issues

Much of the public discussion of the report has been about closing the Newcastle railway line west of Wickham Station, the report takes that as a given decision of the State Government, and actually proposes other things. We would support many of these proposals, such as:

- Revitalising the Hunter Street Mall
- Supporting the city's heritage
- Strengthening and diversifying the city economy
- Attracting new retail uses and residents to the city centre
- Promoting public transport, pedestrians and cyclists
- Managing the impact of car parking

However, we believe that many of these are compromised by the decision to terminate the railway line to Newcastle, since that will discourage use of public transport and increase dependence on cars to reach the CBD.

Termination of rail at Wickham

The report's executive summary (p. xx) says:

The findings and outcomes of this urban renewal strategy support the government's recent decision that bus services will replace rail services from a new transport interchange at Wickham and this will allow for new and improved movement around the city.

So, the decision to cut the railway and have a new station and transport interchange at Wickham is not a recommendation of the report, but is supported by it. (Some parts of the report seem to have been re-written to be more supportive of a decision already made by the state government.)

The main reason for the decision to terminate rail at Wickham is improving north-south connectivity across the rail corridor, particularly the Hannell Street to Stewart Avenue connection (where the existing level crossing would be eliminated).

However, the report itself, on p. 44, illustrates why the railway line should not be terminated.

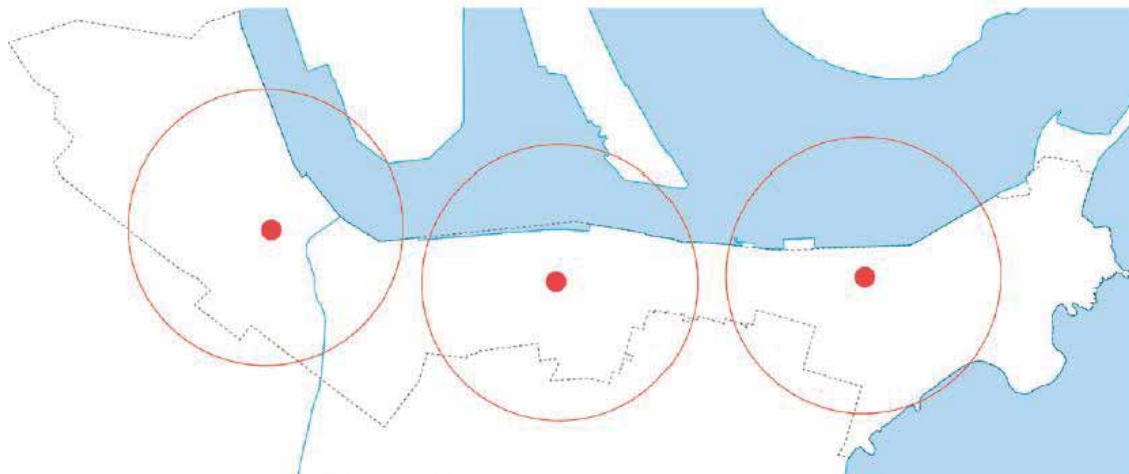


Figure 3.2 Walkability 400 m radius from public transport nodes

The “public transport nodes” in this figure are the existing three railway stations (Wickham, Civic and Newcastle) although the accompanying text refers to “bus stops on Hunter Street and Wickham station”.

Page 45 of the report refers to “Activity hubs”:

In parts of the city centre, these clusters have amalgamated into distinct activity hubs. Principal amongst these hubs are:

- in the east end on Hunter Street
- in Civic focused around Wheeler Place
- in the west end.

And page 68 of the report refers these three hubs as “primary activity centres”:

Three primary activity centres have been nominated based on:

- the existing activity nodes where business and development is occurring more strongly, which are supported by public transport and existing or potential open space
- areas that exhibit distinctly different characteristics
- areas that are likely to experience the most change
- areas that present significant opportunities for built form and public domain changes and improvements.

Figure 4.6 (on p.69) shows that these “activity centres” are the current locations of the three railway stations:

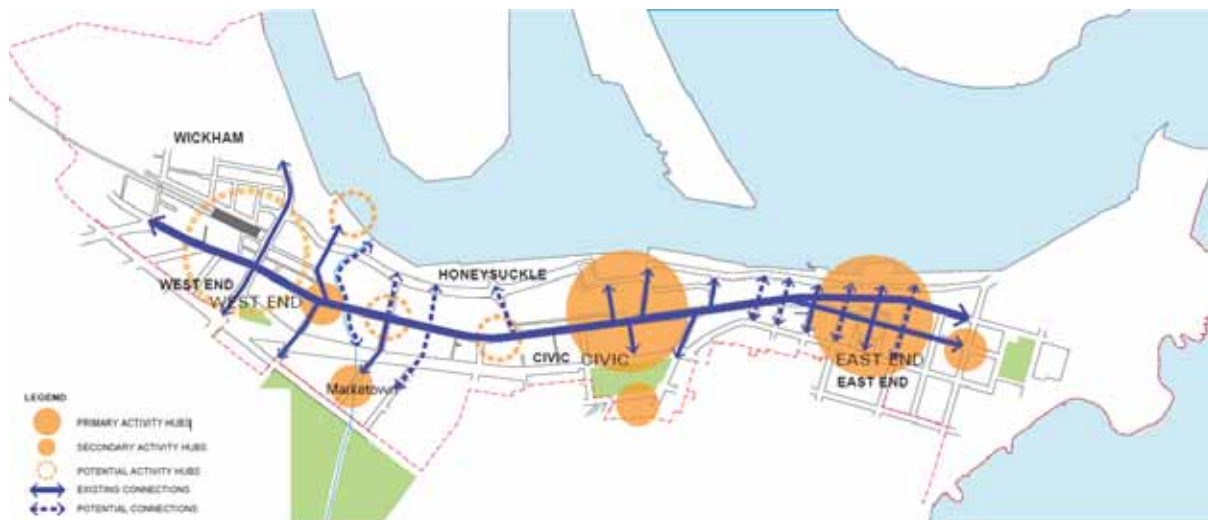


Figure 4.6 Existing and proposed activity nodes with key connections

So, removing Civic and Newcastle stations would remove public transport infrastructure that supports the proposed renewal of the Civic and East End precincts.

It also conflicts with some of the goals of **NSW 2021**, published by the current state government in 2011, i.e.:

TRANSPORT

7. Reduce travel times
8. Grow patronage on public transport by making it a more attractive choice
9. Improve customer experience with transport services

The report talks about establishing a university campus in the city centre, and there will be a new courthouse near Civic Station. Removing the rail connection to Civic will make these less accessible, especially since limited car parking space will be provided.

Other cities around the world, including Sydney, are extending their rail networks. It does not make sense to cut Newcastle's network back.

There are alternatives to cutting the railway line which are not considered in the report, but which would improve north-south connectivity:

- Building a road bridge to connect Hannell Street with Stewart Avenue.
- Completing the inner city bypass between John Hunter Hospital and Jesmond, and so reducing the traffic on Hannell Street and Stewart Avenue. (In addition, the new Hunter Expressway will see the vehicle numbers for Hannell Street dropping.)
- Building pedestrian aerial access across the railway, with provision for escalators to facilitate seamless connectivity, e.g., at Steel Street and Worth Place.

In addition, the report does not make it clear how a new railway station east of Hannell Street / Stewart Avenue and a new transport interchange would fit in. The plan on page 187 of the report, of the vicinity of the new Wickham station, shows a station that is far too small to handle the 8-car Sydney trains, together with the Maitland trains. It also does not provide any space for the transport interchange that the state government's decision requires.

We believe that the decision to close the line has been badly thought out, would discourage the use of public transport, and would cost money that would be better spent on connectivity infrastructure and improvements to the Newcastle CBD.

The new West End CBD

The biggest recommendation of the report is for a new CBD for Newcastle at the West End, centred on the Store building and including neighbouring blocks. It includes a proposed 90-metre height limit for the Store site and for the block enclosed by Hunter Street, King Street, National Park Street and Stewart Avenue. (To make that clearer, Latec House, the tallest current building in Newcastle, on that second site, is just 45 metres high.)

This proposal may be a continuation of existing trends, e.g., the renovation of Latec House and the expansion of Marketown. However we do need to ask:

- Should the Newcastle CBD move from the Newcastle Mall area to the West End?
- Are the proposed heights of buildings excessive, even if the CBD does move?

A new CBD would probably be at the expense of the existing CBD (from the East End through to Civic), and would make it harder to revitalise those areas.

Car parking

If the strategy is successful, it will draw more workers, students and residents into the Newcastle CBD. On page 128 the report says:

With an estimated 10,500 existing spaces, the city centre is currently well-provided for with on and off-street carparking. ... Surveyed and modelled demand (GTA, 2006) shows that despite this provision, daily parking peaks at 7,500 spaces.

What this ignores is the fact that commuters spill into the neighbouring suburbs such as Cooks Hill and Hamilton East in search of free all-day parking spaces, rather than pay to park their cars. If the Newcastle CBD expands, this problem will only get worse. The report does not have any proposals to discourage car use or commuter parking near the CBD, or to really encourage the use of public transport.

Reference

NSW 2021: A plan to make NSW number one. Department of Premier and Cabinet, September 2011. ISBN 978-0-7313-3999-0
http://www.2021.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/NSW2021_WEB%20VERSION.pdf