

Submission on Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012

Key Points

Urban revitalisation, precinct creation and connectivity between Hunter Street and the foreshore can be achieved without removing the rail line.

Connectivity between the foreshore and Hunter Street can be achieved at far lower cost than the cost of removing the rail line, freeing infrastructure capital for other much-needed regional transport projects.

Removing the rail line does nothing to improve public transport (and the strategy's objective of model shift from car to public transport). The funds earmarked for removing the rail line should be spent on the established infrastructure priorities in the Hunter. These priorities include:

- Provide additional pedestrian level crossings on Newcastle rail line to improve connectivity between Hunter Street and the foreshore. Priority locations would be Worth Place and Steel Street
- Construct Glendale interchange
- Scone rail level crossing removal
- Stewart Avenue and Adamstown rail level crossing removal
- Replacing existing Adamstown and Kotara stations with a new station at the Kotara retail district
- A new easy-access ferry pontoon at Honeysuckle (Worth Place) so Stockton Ferry can operate on a loop route Stockton-Queens Wharf-Worth Place-Stockton and provide commuter service to the emerging commercial area at Honeysuckle
- Extending some Telarah train services to Paterson and providing a new low-cost station at Aberglassyn to service this rapidly growing dormitory residential area.

This submission

I reject the direction that submissions on the strategy should not address the question of rail line removal. Given the total absence of consultation with public transport users and the general community before that decision was made, the consultation period on the strategy is the only opportunity for formal public comment on the decision. This submission therefore focuses on the issue of the rail line removal and its relevance to the revitalisation strategy.

The Fake Rail Line Issue

Over many years, it has been claimed that the existence of the rail line is the reason for the decline in the Newcastle CBD. However, the community does not agree. Many commentators, through letters to the Newcastle Herald have pointed to the far greater influence of other factors such as the closing of Newcastle hospital and the development and expansion of suburban shopping centres like Kotara, Charlestown, Glendale and East Maitland (Greenhills). If these commentators are correct,

removing the rail line will not prove to be the silver bullet solution that the small number of influential business and developer interest believe it will be.

The continued existence of the rail line does not prevent any of the key elements of the revival strategy being achieved. On the contrary improved rail access to the city and improvements to existing rail services, most likely, would enhance many of them.

Objective: Reshaping Hunter Street as main street.

The existence of the rail line is no impediment to this objective. As the rail line runs parallel and adjacent to Hunter Street, it has potential to bring people to any location along Hunter Street and enhance this objective.

Objective: Revitalising Hunter Mall

Improving rail use has potential to greatly enhance the achievement of this objective. The rail line brings people right to the mall doorstep. Encouraging better rail patronage would help deliver this objective. Ask yourself the Westfield group locates its Sydney shopping centres on rail lines? A little clever marketing by mall businesses could entice upper Hunter shoppers to travel to the Mall by rail, competing them away from the other centres.

Objective: Strengthen the Civic precinct

Like Hunter Mall, the rail line brings people seamlessly right to the centre of the Civic precinct. If the precinct is to be strengthened with a court complex and a university campus, it is simply absurd to consider removing rail as a long-term transport option. Rail access to Civic is a key to achieving the objective of strengthening this precinct. Rail also strongly services other Civic venues – the regional museum, the foreshore restaurants and bars, the town hall, Civic Theatre and playhouse, art gallery and conservatorium of music.

Objective: Positioning the west end as CBD centred of Birdwood Park & Cottage Creek

The current Wickham station more centrally services this precinct than does the proposed Wickham transport interchange.

Objective: Recognition of Newcastle's heritage as an asset

Important elements of the existing rail infrastructure serving Newcastle, particularly Newcastle station, are important regional heritage assets. Even if the buildings are preserved and put to alternative use, removing rail diminishes the value of these assets by severing their functional connection with their original purpose.

Objective: Creation of 10,000 more jobs and 6,000 more dwellings by 2036.

Improved regional rail services provide effective long-term transport capacity to support this number of additional workers and residents.

Objective: Promoting a university presence and education hub.

Anyone who regularly uses the Maitland line sees first-hand how effective rail is as a transport mode favoured by the student population of the Callaghan campus. Large numbers of students from Maitland, upper Hunter, western Lake Macquarie, the Central

Coast and, not by any means least, inner Newcastle travel to the Callaghan by rail using the station built in the 1990s at Warabrook. Rail is a much favoured transport option by students and, recognising this, removing rail as a means of transport to the new city campus is short-sighted and shows little appreciation of these student preferences.

Improving connectivity has not even been tried

The most common complaint is that the rail line is a barrier between Hunter Street and the foreshore and Honeysuckle. Regrettably, this recently has been fuelled by unfortunate, emotive and inappropriate comments from politicians, likening the rail line to the Berlin Wall and Newcastle to [war ton] Beirut.

Many commentators (especially in letters to the Newcastle Herald) have suggested that connectivity could be addressed by pedestrian only level crossings at Worth Place and Steel Street. The lobby group "Save our rail" has suggested these could be similar to one at Woonona and has a Youtube clip of it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=AU&hl=en-GB&v=2X7AcUEqkQc>.

There is also some suggestion that additional pedestrian level crossings cannot be installed because of safety concerns. Reliable technology for active level crossing gates has been in use since the late 1960s. Today, controlled by digital microprocessors, these systems are considered to be even more reliable. Every day, hundreds of pedestrians cross the Newcastle rail line at the existing level crossing at Beaumont Street Hamilton, Stewart Avenue Wickham and Merewether Street, Civic. To my memory, there has not been a serious pedestrian incident or fatality at these crossings.

Surely additional crossings are worth trying before there is any commitment to removal of the line. They will certainly require far less capital expenditure.

It is difficult to understand how the decision to remove the rail line because it is a barrier can be justified on both moral and economic grounds when adding crossings has not been properly evaluated or tried. Adding pedestrian level crossings must surely be possible at far lower cost than the proposed complete removal of the line and construction of a new bus rail interchange.

It is important to also realise that the rail line is not a barrier for access to the popular foreshore park in Newcastle East. On the contrary, rail delivers people right to that park and its role in doing so is well evidenced at major events such as New Year's eve fireworks and numerous other events each year such as music concerts.

Mode shift to public transport

It is almost impossible to comprehend how removal of the rail fits with the revitalisation strategy's objective of increasing mode shift from private cars to public transport. Certainly, rail transport in the Hunter needs some improvements and some are touched on briefly in this submission. With improvements like constructing the Glendale interchange, a new station for Kotara, better and larger station parking facilities and above all, active promotion, rail has enormous potential to provide an alternative to the car for a significant number of commuters to Newcastle.

I use the rail system to travel from Maitland to Wickham for work. It is reliable, fast, and with few exceptions, on time. I suspect its on-time running is better than in Sydney. From questions I am asked by non-rail users, I suspect many people do not really know how good it is - it's one of the Hunter's best kept secrets. Why? Because, unlike other State Governments, nothing has been spent by successive NSW Governments to actively encourage people to use rail – nothing has been spent on promotion. The observed growth in patronage over the last few years is occurring by some sort of autonomous osmotic process where people slowly discover rail and use it. Each morning as my new Hunter rail car train speeds across the Hexham wetlands, I look out the window at the bumper-to-bumper snail-paced traffic snarl on Maitland Road and wonder how many of those drivers could be on the train as well. One thing is for sure, I'm in town before them.

There is really something wrong with transport planning in NSW when the only answer to low patronage is removal of the service without even trying first to boost patronage. Struggling retailers don't just shut the door on the shop if sales start to decline, they try advertising and promotion first -ask Gerry Harvey. But in NSW if patronage is low, our planners and politicians just throw their hands in the air and say let's cut it (and this case let's spend somewhere between \$120m and \$600m doing so) when other transport improvements priorities have long been identified as priorities.

The strategy's proposal to provide better bus-rail connections for services to the western Newcastle suburbs, John Hunter Hospital and eastern Lake Macquarie is welcome. But it does not require cutting the Newcastle rail line, a new interchange at Wickham and additional bus services to service Newcastle east and the CBD to do it.

An alternative may be to create a bus interchange to service the western and southern areas at Hamilton using the railway land between Fern Street and the existing station. This would require removal of the existing demountable rail office. However, the site offers advantages such as use of existing rail land near the former Morrow Park bowling club as a bus layover, off-street connection to Industrial Drive via the disused rail corridor connecting with Branch Street Wickham and access across the existing Maitland Road rail overpass to Donald Street via Selma Street then connecting directly to the major western arterial, Griffiths Road. Such an interchange would provide a logical interchange point for to/from Maitland line and western Lake Macquarie and Sydney rail services. Trains would continue to connect these areas to Newcastle.

Cutting rail at Wickham will reduce rail patronage

I very strongly believe that when the Newcastle line is cut at Wickham, there will be a reduction in rail commuter patronage and the gains of recent years will be lost. I believe this is so because interchanging will add significantly to journey times, particularly on outbound journeys (bus to rail interchange). Bus to rail interchange always requires latitude or headway for the bus to be delayed in traffic hence extending interchange time. Further if the bus is delayed, the train cannot wait without disrupting other train paths. So there are generally two consequences of bus to rail interchanging, longer interchange times and possibly missing trains. I lived on Sydney's north shore for many years and relied on bus to train connections and found this very frustrating at times.

You only need to look at the current evening peak hour congestion on both Hunter Street and Honeysuckle Drive to see how likely it is that connecting buses will be delayed (and need long headways), even if bus lanes are provided. Besides, there is no capacity on Honeysuckle Drive for bus lanes.

There have been two shut downs of a week or more of the Newcastle spur line since 2010 for major maintenance. The alternative transport arrangements have been charter bus between Broadmeadow and the Newcastle city stations. Ralcorp is to be complimented about the organisation of these arrangements. The interchanging has been very slick with plenty of staff on hand to marshal passengers quickly between bus and train and very efficient bus operations. During these shutdowns, I have timed my journeys and the interchange times. Over 10 travel days, the average inbound interchange time – that is, train arrive to bus depart at Broadmeadow – was 4 minutes 40 seconds. By contrast, the average outbound interchange time - bus arrive Broadmeadow to train depart Broadmeadow – was 11 minutes 20 seconds, almost 3 times longer than the inbound interchange time. So even with a very well organised interchanging (and resource intensive in terms of marshalling staff), it adds significantly to the outbound journey in particular. It adds 50% to a journey between Newcastle and Thornton and 33% to journey to Maitland.

Overall, despite the slick operation of the Broadmeadow interchange, my journey times each way between Maitland and Wickham almost doubled over these 10 days. That is a significant disincentive to using public transport and certainly would not be sustainable long-term.

I believe any interchange arrangement so close to the destination of most commuters would be a significant disincentive to working commuters. Right now with the train only journey, you can train it from Maitland to Newcastle in the same time as (or less than) you can drive in a car. That will not be the case, if the rail line is truncated west of Wickham. Based on my experience above, interchanging is likely to add at least 11 minutes to the outbound rail journey, and introduce the possibility of missing a train connection if the bus is caught in traffic. These will be definite disincentives to working commuters using the train and stifle the current growth in rail commuter patronage. Commuters have only got to have a couple of bad experiences on cold, wet winter evenings and they will be back in their cars.

Why care about the working commuters. Working commuters are important because they are the core of the full fare paying customer base. If you reduce working commuter patronage, there is a more than commensurate reduction in fare box revenue and this could ultimately threaten the financial returns for the whole Hunter line.

I provided this information and further information previously in submission in October 2012 to the NSW Transport Master Plan. A copy of that submission is attached as Appendix A.

What's going to happen to the rail corridor?

There are political undertakings that the rail corridor will be preserved "forever" for public use. A popular suggestion is some sort of "green corridor" for cycle and pedestrian use. But does Newcastle actually need another cycle and pedestrian path just a stones throw from the still unfinished (and started in the 1980s) foreshore promenade? How will the businesses establishing along the foreshore promenade feel when a proportion of the pedestrian and cycle traffic past their businesses moves to the new "green corridor"? How inviting can this green corridor be made? Looking east from the Merewether Street crossing, it's hard to imagine it ever being anything but a sunless wind tunnel between the buildings.

Probably its most promising role is as a busway – highlighting the stupidity of the decision to cut the rail line. Get everyone to waste time transiting between trains and buses with buses that do exactly what the train did. And with several buses to meet every train, there will be just as many traffic delays as the train now causes.

Deceptive and fanciful imagery

Finally, I find the artist's impressions in the strategy document fanciful and, possibly, deceptive. As reported, recently in the Newcastle Herald, one participant at the recent Newcastle workshop questioned the number of images featuring street cafés and asked if that was what the vision for Newcastle is - "cafes everywhere". The images of an almost car-less Hunter Street are also fanciful and possibly delusional. With rail removed, traffic volumes are likely to increase, not diminish to the point where Hunter Street can be reduced to one lane each way. At appendix B, I have taken one of these fantasy-land images of the current and future streetscape at Bank Corner and added a recent photo of my own showing the true current weekday daytime traffic at that location. The contrast between the current (and likely future) week day traffic reality and the images from the strategy documentation is stark.

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15 March 2013

Appendix A - SUBMISSION TO NSW TRANSPORT MASTER PLAN – OCTOBER 2012
RE: CHAPTER 6 OF DRAFT PLAN

I realise submissions have closed but was disappointed in the commentary on Newcastle rail passenger services in Chapter 6 of the draft. I would be pleased if you would accept this slightly late submission on chapter 6.

Yes, there is an ongoing debate about the future of the rail line between Broadmeadow and Newcastle and that debate won't be stopped by removing the line. Even if the line is removed, the debate will continue for the next 20 or 30 years about reinstating it.

Earlier this year, statistics were released that showed a steady increase in patronage on the Hunter rail lines (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-09-05/strong-passenger-numbers-for-hunter-rail-line/4243686?§ion=news>). I personally use this service each day to travel between Maitland and Wickham to work and it is evident that more people than ever are using the train, particularly to travel to retail and commercial businesses around Civic station and Honeysuckle.

I very strongly believe that if the Newcastle line is cut at Wickham, there will be a reduction in commuter patronage and the gains of recent years will be lost. I believe this is so because interchanging will add significantly to journey times, particularly on outbound journeys (bust to rail interchange). Bus to rail interchange always requires latitude or headway for the bus to be delayed in traffic hence extending interchange time. Further if the bus is delayed, the train cannot wait without disrupting other train paths. So there are generally two consequences of bus to rail interchanging, longer interchange times and possibly missing trains. I lived on Sydney's north shore for many years and relied on bus to train connections and found this very frustrating at times.

There have been two shut downs of a week or more of the Newcastle spur line since 2010 for major maintenance. The alternative transport arrangements have been charter bus between Broadmeadow and the Newcastle city stations. Ralcorp is to be complimented about the organisation of these arrangements. The interchanging has been very slick with plenty of staff on hand to marshal passengers quickly between bus and train and very efficient bus operations. During these shutdowns, I have timed my journeys and the interchange times. Over 10 travel days, the average inbound interchange time – that is, train arrive to bus depart at Broadmeadow – was 4 minutes 40 seconds. By contrast, the average outbound interchange time - bus arrive Broadmeadow to train depart Broadmeadow – was 11 minutes 20 seconds, almost 3 times longer than the inbound interchange time. So even with a very well-organised interchanging (and resource intensive in terms of marshalling staff), it adds significantly to the outbound journey in particular. It adds 50% to a journey between Newcastle and Thornton and 33% to journey to Maitland.

Overall, despite the slick operation of the Broadmeadow interchange, my journey times each way between Maitland and Wickham almost doubled over these 10 days. That is a significant disincentive to using public transport and certainly would not be sustainable long-term. If an interchange is to be considered, locating it a Broadmeadow would certainly kill off working commuter patronage from the Maitland and the valley. I have the actual recorded timings on a spreadsheet and would be happy to provide that if it is of interest.

I believe any interchange arrangement so close to the destination of most commuters would be a significant disincentive to working commuters. Right now with the train only journey, you can train it from Maitland to Newcastle in the same time as (or even less than) you can drive in a car. That will not be the case, if the rail line is truncated west of Wickham (and the proposed interchange is not where the present Wickham station is – it is some distance further west). Based on my experience above, interchanging is likely to add at least 11

minutes to the outbound rail journey, and introduce the possibility of missing a train connection. These will be definite disincentives to working commuters using the train and stifle the current growth in commuter patronage. Commuters have only got to have a couple of bad experiences on cold, wet winter evenings and they will be back in their cars.

Working commuters are important because they are the core of the full fare paying customer base. If you reduce working commuter patronage, there is a more than commensurate reduction in fare box revenue and this could ultimately threaten the financial returns for the whole Hunter line.

One of the reasons for people suggesting that the Newcastle line be removed is the perception of low patronage and at certain times of the day trains arriving/departing Newcastle do have few passengers. Virtually nothing has been done over the last 20 years to promote passenger rail services in the Hunter. Some promotion to boost passenger numbers should be tried. I travel the trains every working day and am constantly asked by non-train users about the reliability of the service, where it stops, the frequency of trains, are they air conditioned etc. We now have the first class Hunter rail cars but nobody is telling the general public. It is a great service but is one of the Hunter's best kept secrets.

The "meet the managers" initiative of Cityrail where line managers regularly visit stations and talk to passengers is great. But in a way, they are preaching to the converted. Why not take the meet the managers concept to some regional shopping centres on Thursday nights or weekends and promote the service¹. At these stands, staff could also give away free "trial" weekly tickets to new potential customers. That's what retail businesses would do to get customers in, why not Cityrail? Similar promotion stands could be set up near Honeysuckle business district carparks to present an alternative to those driving to the Newcastle business area at Honeysuckle. What is there to lose?

The most common complaint is that the rail line is a barrier between Hunter Street and the foreshore and Honeysuckle. Many commentators (especially in letters to the Newcastle Herald over the last month) have suggested this could be addressed by pedestrian level crossings at Worth Place and Steel Street. The lobby group "Save our rail" has suggested these could be similar to one at Woonona and has a Youtube clip of it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=AU&hl=en-GB&v=2X7AcUEqkQc>. Surely these are worth trying before there is any commitment to removal of the line. They will certainly require far less capital expenditure.

Chapter 6 of the draft report states there has been "*virtually no expansion in the passenger rail network to support residential growth over the last 30 years*". There are some initiatives that could be considered in terms of expansion. These are:

A station at Aberglassyn. Aberglassyn is the fastest growing residential area around Maitland (which itself is one of the fastest growing areas in NSW) and the rail line runs right alongside it but there is no station. It does not need to be an expensive station, just a single 2 car platform and commuter parking. A complementary measure would be to increase the number of services on this section of the line. This would entail a shift from the steam-age thinking that trains can only terminate at Telarah or Dungog. Increased services to Aberglassyn could be achieved by terminating some services at Paterson. Paterson station has a rail loop so using it as a terminating station should not be significantly disruptive to freight traffic. Also an additional freight crossing loop has been installed between Telarah and Paterson further reducing the likelihood of disruptions to freight services. Additional services to Paterson would also enable additional patronage from this area, which is seeing significant rural residential growth and growth in commuter traffic to Maitland and Newcastle.

¹ Like Greenhills, Rutherford, Maitland, Thornton, Bonnells Bay, Morisset, Toronto, Glendale.

A new station at the Kotara business district. The present Kotara station is well away from the major business and retail centre, including the major Westfield shopping complex. This means the retail and business area is not serviced by rail even though the rail line passes through it. While space for a new station may be limited, it is not an impossible concept. One options may be to construct a station as part of the rail overbridge of Northcott Drive or adjacent to the St Pius College oval. The recently constructed bridges at Thornton, East Maitland and for the Newcastle road bypass at Shortland suggests there is plenty of engineering know how around to achieve this. Providing a station at the Kotara business area provides another commuter and business destination and thus serves to encourage an increase in patronage.

Ensuring rail transport is integrated in the Huntlee Development. The Huntlee development should be required to have adequate station and commuter parking facilities.

As chapter 6 comments, very little change has occurred in the Hunter transport scene in the last 30 years. Another possible improvement would be to change the route of the Stockton ferry. With the Honeysuckle development, much of the CBD office activity now occurs between Civic and Wickham station with the offices of Hunter Water, NIB, Sparke Helmore, GHD (and coming soon, the greater Building Society's HO and possibly the Newcastle University city campus) and others all located just west of Worth Place.

Perhaps now is time to think about the Stockton ferry running a triangular route from Stockton to its present city wharf then to a new wharf at, say, the Worth Place water front and back to Stockton. This would increase time for people journeying from the existing city wharf to Stockton but would also encourage use of the ferry for those working in the expanding office developments around Wickham. Possibly initially this route might only run in morning and evening peaks as a trial. It would require a new pontoon wharf to be installed at the end of Worth Place. This change would recognise the changing development of the city and the growth in destinations around Wickham.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a late submission. I hope the comments are helpful.

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Appendix B BANK CORNER – REALITY VS THE VISION

The vision has Hunter Street at Bank Corner at one lane each way with no traffic. It claims that this allows wider footpaths for cafes etc



The Plan deceptively shows a “today” photo with little traffic.



But the reality is that the traffic is much heavier on weekdays than the photo above suggests. The photo below was taken at Bank Corner (same location as above photos) at 1.00 pm on Friday 21 December 2012.



Pie in the sky “mode shift” initiatives will not result in this traffic disappearing to permit one lane each way. The more likely reality is that traffic volumes will be worse with the closing of the rail line and increased bus traffic to service the Wickham interchange.