

NEWCASTLE URBAN RENEWAL STRATEGY

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Executive Summary

While the report makes many sensible points about the benefits to be gained from increasing residential density and public transport usage, and contains a few pleasing proposals to make central Newcastle more attractive (Cottage Creek green link, wider footpaths and dedicated bicycle and bus lanes along Hunter Street, and a cap on car parking), removing the rail line would be a retrograde step making access to the city centre and waterfront more difficult and hence the city a less desirable place to live, work or visit.

An enormous amount of development has already taken place in central Newcastle with the railway line continuing to provide a valuable service to an increasing number of passengers.

Connectivity between Hunter Street and the waterfront can be achieved by the installation of attractive, bicycle, pram and wheelchair friendly pedestrian overbridges at all the connection points nominated in the report.

Rather than wasting a minimum of \$120 million on removing the railway line and building an unnecessary transport interchange at Wickham, the Government should have Gordon Avenue designated as Highway 1, build a railway overpass, at the end of Selma Street and then continue the roadway along the old railway right of way on the eastern side of Wickham Park, emerging at the roundabout at the intersection of Hannell Street (Industrial Highway) and Cowper Street (bridge to Carrington

This solution would cost less than ripping up the railway line and building a transport interchange at Wickham, would leave the railway line intact and allow people to continue to travel right into Newcastle by train, would not require the purchase of new buses or the need to find somewhere else to stable the trains, and would give through car traffic a quicker route than Stewart Avenue.

Good points that the report recognizes

- Cars are a problem and not a solution and that there needs to be a switch from car travel to either public transport or active transport (bicycle and pedestrian traffic) – in particular see page 72 and the reference to a study by Tolley that demonstrates that reducing the percentage of land devoted to cars actually increases economic activity per hectare.
- Housing density needs to increase. This not only saves the cost of supplying infrastructure to greenfield sites but also makes public transport and active transport more viable – public transport because there are more people clustered

around each node, and active transport because the distances to be travelled are shorter because everything is closer together.

- Newcastle CBD has become a residential area - something to be encouraged.
- A variety of housing options are needed. Many people have had a gutful of gardening and want the opportunities to do other things in their leisure time that high density residential areas enable.
- Newcastle has valuable heritage buildings that should be preserved.
- Urban/suburban sprawl threatens/removes valuable horticultural and agricultural land (already a major problem in the Sydney basin).
- Time spent travelling to and from work by car is wasted time.
- Cycling and walking have health benefits (and consequent reduction in Government expenditure on health services).
- More people on the street (particularly after hours), increases individual safety.
- Placing bus stops close to intersections makes them easily accessible to passengers approaching from 4 directions rather than 2.
- Views and vistas are important and should be preserved and enhanced.

Desirable proposals in the report

- Planting deciduous trees along Hunter Street to shade buildings in summer and hence reduce energy usage.
- Wider footpaths in Hunter Street for increased pedestrian and economic activity
- Bus and bicycle lanes in Hunter Street thereby reducing the space available for cars and increasing active and public transport usage.
- A cap car parking spaces in Newcastle CBD (page 128). **However the cap should be set at a lower rather than a higher figure than the number of spaces currently available (particularly if as stated not all current car parking space is actually used).**
- Increased car-parking fees. Parked cars are effectively renting road and other space and denying use of that space to others and should be charged accordingly.
- Bus priority measures and increased bus frequencies to increase the attraction of

public transport.

- Cottage Creek green link. The removal of 681 Hunter Street will also have flood mitigation benefits.
- Discussion flood risk in Newcastle West and ways to build to avoid flood damage.

Report deficiencies and other points to note

- Newcastle CBD will never return to being the only retail hub in the Newcastle-Lake Macquarie area (recognized and then immediately ignored on page 116). Any increase in retail activity (or even maintenance of the existing retail activity) in Newcastle CBD will be driven by an increase in residential population.
- Multi-storey shopping centres such as Marketown at West End not only use space more efficiently but they are also more popular with shoppers because the shops are clustered closer together than the strip retailing along Hunter Street.
- Wheeler Place is not the largest civic space in Newcastle – Civic Park and the Foreshore Park are both larger and that is why they are used for more community activities than Wheeler Place e.g. Mattara Festival activities,
- Park and ride facilities should include bicycle parking as well as car parking. (Incidentally the nominated site on the corner of Northcott Drive and Pacific Highway is actually in Adamstown Heights.)
- Any strategic road upgrades should benefit buses and bicycles only. (refer page 64)
- The name of the large co-operatively owned shop at the western end of Hunter Street was **The Store** not the Stores. It was still operating when I arrived in Newcastle in 1978 and it is a very significant part of Newcastle's history.
- **The aerial photos on pages 1 and 7 of the report are out of date and give a deceptive impression of the amount of urban renewal possible.** Since the photo on page 1 was taken Royal Newcastle Hospital has been replaced by apartment buildings and a hotel, the Aventine apartment complex in Church Street (in which we own an apartment as a place for my husband to live during the week and for us to spend weekends together) has been built, Regency Gardens has been built just off Darby and Tyrell Streets, and the large area of empty land on the waterfront in Honeysuckle has been largely filled with office buildings. Similarly the photo on page 7 was taken when work on the Azzura Apartments was just starting. **All these developments have taken place while the railway line remained in place.** Indeed we bought our apartment in Church Street because it is within walking distance of Newcastle Ocean Baths and Newcastle railway station.

- The pairs of current and future photos/illustrations in Newcastle M.P. Tim Owen's February 2013 Newcastle News newsletter to constituents are similarly deceptive. In each pair, the future illustration from the report shows plenty of human activity on the street or thoroughfare while great care has been taken to get a current photo with no or as few as possible humans as possible.
- Hunter Street Mall has improved significantly since GPT pulled out. It is now thriving and there is no need for wholesale changes to it. There is no need to "declutter". It is not a place for mass meetings but rather a place for a myriad of informal activities.
- There is no need for any changes to Wheeler Place. The proposal for a large shallow water feature introduces a drowning hazard for small children.
- The report fails to look at the option of constructing buildings over the railway line as is done in many Japanese and European cities.

Termination of the rail line at Wickham

The worst aspect of the report is of course the decision of the State Government to remove the railway line between Wickham and Newcastle. One wonders whether the writers of the report actually support this decision or whether it has been foisted on them by the State Government, the Hunter Development Corporation who need a reason for their continued existence, and the developers who are itching to get their hands on the valuable land along the rail corridor. (Note that page 124 talks of the need to investigate uses of the rail corridor and landscaping in the short term).

Reasons for retaining the rail line include

- Rail passengers would be forced to change mode at Wickham causing inconvenience and increased journey times. According to the Hunter Development Corporation's Newcastle City Centre Renewal Report to NSW Government of March 2009, rail is the quickest means of travel between Wickham and Newcastle as shown on page 30 of that report – 4 minutes as compared to 4.75 minutes by car and 6 minutes by bus. Bus time doesn't include the time to make the connection between train and bus at Wickham for those forced to change modes.
- 71% of CBD jobs are east of Wickham (37% Civic, 27% Hunter Street Mall, and 7% Newcastle East – see page 30 HDC Report of March 2009). While increasing the percentage of CBD at jobs at Wickham, by building on vacant land there, will increase the number and percentage of passengers alighting at Wickham, and will also increase total rail patronage, it will not necessarily decrease the number of people travelling to Civic and Newcastle. Indeed the current report notes that the largest concentration of employment land is towards the east end of the city, Civic and Honeysuckle precinct (page 38).

- The additional 6500 new residents and 10,000 new jobs targeted by the Newcastle City Plan (see page 15) or the 6000 new dwellings and 10,000 new jobs envisaged in the report, will require transport and rail is the most efficient form of public transport. Hopefully there will be a large overlap between the new residents and new jobs with the new residents walking or cycling to their new jobs in the city. However for those commuting to new jobs in the city from areas served by rail transport a change of mode at Wickham would be very inconvenient.
- New residents in the city will on occasion want to travel to Sydney and other places outside Newcastle and rail is the most efficient means of doing so. Rail is not just a means of getting into the city – it is also a means of getting out.
- University students attending a Civic campus of Newcastle University, particularly those living on the Central Coast and up the Hunter Valley, require public transport **all** the way to Civic by train. Some students also need to travel between the Civic and Callaghan campuses by train and indeed already do so.
- University students and staff living in the inner city use the train to travel to the university. Changing modes at Wickham would be a serious inconvenience. Increasing the number of students living in central Newcastle (see pages 109 and 115) will increase the demand for rail travel to the university.
- People using the legal precinct can get there by public transport and will still want to travel beyond Wickham by train when the legal precinct moves to Civic. The NSW Department of Attorney General & Justice has a long established policy of not supplying parking for clients and so those attending the new Court House will need to use public transport. There is a multi-storey car nearby on the opposite side of the railway line but presumably it is already fully utilized. Currently Court clients can use the Bolton Street carpark so moving the Court House will actually lead to a greater demand for public transport.
- Cyclists and pedestrians currently use the path along the foreshore. It is unlikely that they will prefer to cycle or walk along a path in a concrete canyon between high-rise buildings on Wharf Road and Hunter St.
- The report proposes installing bicycle lanes in Hunter Street (an excellent idea) and wider footpaths along Hunter Street to increase pedestrian activity there (also highly desirable) so there is no need for a further cycleway and walkway along the railway corridor (but is this what is really planned for the railway corridor?).
- Increased petrol prices (due to decreased supply and to the introduction of the carbon tax) will lead to increased use of public transport. This is already occurring in Sydney with complaints of insufficient rail capacity.

- Passenger traffic on the Hunter rail line is increasing. According to New South Wales Transport patronage increased by 20% or about 227 journeys between 2001 and 2011 (see <http://www.railpage.com.au/f-t11370843.htm> and widely reported in the media at the time). Cityrail now uses 4 car trains between Maitland and Newcastle during peak hour and Singleton residents are campaigning for more train services to their town, as many passengers have to stand all the way from Newcastle to Singleton on the trains to Scone.
- Reported passenger numbers only include those who have paid for tickets. On the Hunter line there are no ticket machines at Scone, Aberdeen, Muswellbrook, Singleton, Branxton, Greta or Lochinvar Stations and the ticket offices at Muswellbrook and Singleton are not open after 5.30 p.m (the other stations mentioned don't have ticket offices). As 3 of the 4 trains travelling down the Hunter Valley from these stations depart at times before or after the ticket offices are open most people travelling from these stations are not counted in the passenger numbers. From our observations travelling by train between Scone and Newcastle, this is well in excess of 50 passengers per day.
- Rail moves the greatest number of people a given distance in the shortest period of time. Consequently it should be given priority. People need to get into the city before they can walk around it and rail does this most efficiently.
- Rail travel costs 48c per passenger kilometre including both private and public costs as compared to 57c per passenger kilometre for bus travel and 84c per passenger kilometre for car travel (Dr Garry Glazebrook, Senior Lecturer in Urban Planning, University of Technology, Sydney quoted in the "Sun-Herald" Sunday 19.4.2009).
- Buses are noisier and more polluting than trains. Passenger and freight trains emit one third of the pollution emitted by cars or trucks providing the same transport service. (Brian Buckley, public policy consultant writing for/to the business pages of "The Age" 25.6.2009)
- The permeability of a grid (page 196) can be provided by bicycle, pram and wheelchair friendly ramps over the railway line. There is no need to remove the railway line in order to encourage workers from Honeysuckle to visit Hunter Street during their lunch break or after work (page 4) – all that is required is strategically placed pedestrian overbridges. Similarly there is no need to remove the railway line to give Honeysuckle workers better access to bus stops along Hunter Street.
- Newcastle already has a good rail-bus-ferry interchange at Newcastle Station. Rather than building a new interchange at Wickham buses should continue to pass close to Civic and Wickham stations for the convenience of those who wish to change modes at those stations.

- Removing the transport interchange at Newcastle particularly disadvantages Stockton residents who already have to use two modes of transport (ferry plus either train or bus). Those who currently change from ferry to train would be forced to use 3 modes of transport to get to where they want to go.
- There is no need to cut the railway line at Wickham in order to have cross-city bus routes to suburbs such as Merewether. These routes can simply be added to the existing public transport system.
- Trains are more wheelchair and pram friendly than buses. They can also accommodate surfboards and bicycles unlike buses.
- One of the unique features of Newcastle is the ability to travel to the beach by train and the glimpses of the harbour one gets from the train on the way there. Many young people use the train for this purpose. The logistics of surfboards on buses has not been addressed in the report.
- Rail is the quickest and easiest way to get to tourist accommodation at Civic and Newcastle East particularly for those coming from Sydney.
- Rail is the quickest and easiest way to get to waterfront entertainment venues.
- Removing the railway line also removes the train stabling facilities. There has been no thought given to where the trains would be stabled and how much disruption this would cause.
- There has been no thought given as to how the buses will get in and out of the Wickham interchange and how much disruption this will cause.
- There has also been no thought given to how many extra buses will be required.

The proposal to remove the rail line is a half-baked solution in search of a problem. The best use of the rail corridor is in fact as a rail corridor, transporting people quickly and efficiently to the places they want to go. At a time when other cities around the world are re-instating rail and light rail infrastructure ripped up half a century ago it makes no sense for Newcastle to be deprived of this valuable piece of public transport infrastructure.

The report wants to see increased use of public transport while taking away the most efficient public transport option !!!!!. Principle no. 6 of the Guiding principles on page xix is “Maximize accessibility and convenience of public transport to and within the city centre, and prioritize a **range** of transport modes to reduce private vehicle use” and “Support infrastructure and public domain improvements to attract people to the city centre.” Removing the rail line reduces the range of public transport modes and is more likely to lead to an increase in car use. It also reduces the attraction of the city centre

because the centre becomes less accessible.

It doesn't require the construction of a new transport interchange at Wickham and the cutting of the rail line to Newcastle in order to support a new CBD at Wickham (see page 94). All that is required is that there are places for all modes of public transport to set down and pick up passengers. This can include rail continuing on to Newcastle just as the buses continue on along Hunter Street.

Proponents of cutting the rail line at Wickham have the myopic view that the rail line is in some way a barrier between Hunter Street and the foreshore. The buildings along the north side of Hunter Street and either side of Wharf Road are even more of a barrier as they block views and can't be built over the top of. The simplest and cheapest solution is to build a series of pedestrian overbridges over the railway line. Not only would these pedestrian bridges provide connectivity between Hunter Street and the waterfront but they would also provide better views than ground level connections. Students in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at Newcastle University could be given the design of the bridges as an assignment. Alternatively the appropriate level of government could run an international competition for the design of the bridges that might then become tourist attractions in their own right.

The report proposes constructing 3 pedestrian overbridges just to the west of the proposed Wickham Interchange (page 186) so why not leave the railway functioning all the way to Newcastle station with pedestrian overbridges at all points proposed for improved connectivity between Hunter Street and the waterfront? This would be a much cheaper and more desirable option than what is proposed.



Pedestrian and bicycle bridge over the canal next to Paddington railway station, London

The report refers to the new transport interchange at Wickham allowing for an improved flow of north-south traffic on Hannell Street and Stewart Avenue (page 126). However the Stewart Avenue level crossing is just one of FOUR delays to traffic travelling from Stewart Avenue to Industrial Highway – the other three being the King Street traffic lights, the Hunter Street traffic lights and most importantly the long queue of traffic waiting to turn right into Honeysuckle Drive (particularly during the morning peak). How many of these right turning cars contain a single occupant? How many of these people are travelling to workplaces in the Honeysuckle office precinct? Presumably these are the very people that the report aims to persuade to switch to using public transport or to living in central Newcastle.

For through traffic from Highway 1 to Industrial Highway there is a much cheaper solution to the Stewart Avenue problem (a problem caused by the fact that an overbridge wasn't built when Stewart Avenue and Hannell Street were connected). Instead of this wasteful proposal to cut the rail line at Wickham, the Government should have Gordon Avenue designated as Highway 1, build a railway overpass, at the end of Selma Street and then continue the roadway along the old railway right of way on the eastern side of Wickham Park, emerging at the roundabout at the intersection of Hannell Street (Industrial Highway) and Cowper Street (bridge to Carrington). Inspection of this route on GoogleEarth suggests that the only building that would need to be acquired for road widening is the triangular shaped building bounded by Branch, Railway and Albert Streets, Wickham. Traffic headed for Honeysuckle could also take this route doing a right hand turn at the Cowper Street roundabout and then a left hand turn into Honeysuckle Drive.

Estimates of the cost of building a railway overbridge on the New England Highway at Scone prepared by Roads Maritime Services, NSW Transport range between \$65 million and \$75 million depending on the precise configuration chosen. This is less than two thirds of the amount that the NSW Government proposes to waste ripping up the railway line between Wickham and Newcastle and building a new interchange.

Instead of wasting at least \$120 million ripping up the railway line and building a transport interchange at Wickham (some estimates of the cost are much higher), the Government could build a railway overbridge at Selma Street and continuation of that road to Industrial Highway, build pedestrian overbridges over the railway line at all the proposed connection points between Hunter Street and the waterfront and even have some spare change left over to pay for two more trains to Singleton and other worthwhile public transport improvements. This would leave the railway intact and allow people to continue to travel right into Newcastle by train, would not require the purchase of new buses or the need to find somewhere else to stable the trains, and would give through car traffic a quicker route than Stewart Avenue.

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(Husband works at Newcastle University and wife works in Scone and we use the train to commute between our residences.)