

Manager - Centres and Urban Renewal
Department of Planning & Infrastructure
GPO Box 39
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Friday, 19 April 2013

Dear sir or madam:

Draft Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

I am writing in response to the Draft Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy on exhibition until 18 April 2013.

Firstly, I would like to congratulate the NSW Government for taking an active interest in the future of Newcastle and hope that it is supported by funding to implement the revitalisation measures. The State's commitment to help revitalise the city centre is appropriate given that its demise was caused by a failure of Government to curtail the expansion of Kotara and Charlestown, thereby inviting retail out of the City Centre and its initiative to develop Honeysuckle ahead of revitalising the City Centre's commercial building stock.

I acknowledge that the decision to sever the regional train network at a new interchange at Wickham was a decision made by the State Government's rather than an outcome of this draft strategy. However, a strategy that proposes to reinforce the city centre's regional primacy by supporting up to 10,000 new job and 6,000 new residents is completely at odds with the decision to remove three stations that service the areas proposed for growth. The implications of removing the train line are the focus of this submission.

The strategy proposes to cap on- and off-street car parking at 11,000 which is only 500 more spaces than currently exists. 6,000 new residents equates to around 2,500 new households or 1 car park per 5 households. And this does not even consider the travel generated by the 10,000 additional jobs target. Supposing that this type of parking constraint was politically palatable (noting Newcastle's Lord Mayor's recent proposal for angled parking on Hunter Street – fortunately defeated), a key

implication for a car-constrained city centre is the need to install a high quality and extensive public transport that is multi-modal and integrated.

The suggestion that a frequent bus service is equivalent to the train service is flawed. A driver of a private vehicle weighs up many variables when deciding to drive or take a bus or a train. This includes convenience, safety, purpose, cost and ease-of-use. As soon as you require a person to change modes, the private vehicle becomes significantly more attractive and the threshold to modal change is deferred to some time in the future.

One of the most destructive perceptions of public transport is that it is unsafe. Despite being a sought-after media headline public transport violence is rare (0.3 incidents per 100,000 passenger journeys¹) and is a lot safer than driving, which remains the highest risk activity we participate in on a daily basis. Public transport violence at Newcastle stations is low, but significantly higher than many other of the State's train stations that average 0.04 incidents per 100,000 passenger interchanges. In comparison, Waratah Station experienced 3.2 incidents per 100,000 passenger interchanges in 2010, Newcastle 1.6, Civic 0.5 and Broadmeadow 0.2. The message is not that public transport is unsafe it is that public transport violence in Newcastle is more likely to occur outside a train than within it. The severing of the train line forces passengers to interchange with another mode and exposures them to greater risk of violence during waiting periods.

Newcastle has around 50% employment containment. This means that 50% of the population live and work in Newcastle. Therefore, 50% of our workforce travels into and out of the local government area (LGA) each day. Of that, around 14% or 12,575 workers come from LGAs that are directly serviced by the Hunter Line (Maitland, 6,645) and the Newcastle-Central Coast Line (Lake Macquarie – West, 3,683; Wyong, 1,628; Gosford, 619). In addition 4,216 Newcastle residents travel to those same LGAs for work. The train lines provide access to a regional labour market. In a time of rising oil prices and traffic congestion, preserving access to this labour market is important to ensure that the City's diverse economy remains diverse and healthy.

¹ [http://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/bocsar/ll_bocsar.nsf/vwFiles/BB64.pdf/\\$file/BB64.pdf](http://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/bocsar/ll_bocsar.nsf/vwFiles/BB64.pdf/$file/BB64.pdf)

On the day the Newcastle Herald headlined that the 'Rail is gone', the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald announced that trams were to be reinstated to George Street. No city in the world is removing functional public transport infrastructure. However, most cities in the world are devoting fantastic sums to install new means of mass transit. Even Australian big cities are now retrofitting, reinstating and augmenting public transport infrastructure. Perth is an international benchmark for transit oriented development. The Queensland Government and Brisbane City Council have expended millions over the last decade to create a network of dedicated bus ways, a green bridge, cycling network and additional rail crossings; the Gold Coast is reallocating part of the road to accommodate light rail (along a route that original had a rail line abandoned in favour of bigger roads for more cars), Sydney is restoring light rail and Melbourne, having retained its trams, is the envy of all Australian cities. There is no credible precedence, internationally or nationally, for such a decision. In fact, our own history illustrates that this decision will burden a future generation with the reinstallation of the train line.

I believe we should all be wary of the development industry. In particular, their capacity to influence the current political regime and to derail the planning process with emotive catch-cries like: "city centre revitalisation", "affordable housing" and "more jobs". The industry is qualified in delivering development at a profit. This is not a criticism. The industry is absolutely essential to provide housing and office and retail space, recreation and entertainment venues. However, a future city is not just housing and shops and offices. We need to create a sustainable city to ensure that Newcastle is a city that meets the needs of future generations. To this end, an altruistic and holistic perspective needs to be applied to future planning decisions relating to the city centre. A sustainable transport is essential to a sustainable Newcastle.

The suggestion that stagnation of the city centre is caused by the rail line because it creates an unbridgeable barrier between it and the foreshore is unsubstantiated and unlikely. Honeysuckle and the Kotara big-box and are thriving with activity that used to be exclusively in the city centre – Charlestown is not doing too badly either. In terms of urban design, it would be a bonus to improve connectivity between the city centre and the foreshore and it doesn't take a great deal of out-of-the-big-box thinking to suggest how this can be achieved. The problem is getting State Rail to agree. Increasing the number of level crossings and integrating rail and traffic signalling would vastly improve pedestrian and vehicle connections across the rail

line. There may even be a few more innovative ways to achieve this if efforts were focused on solutions to work with the rail line rather than against it. The biggest barrier to this is the State Corporation itself that is notoriously resistant to change.

The financial figure bandied about to remove the rail line and build a new station and interchange is \$220 million. It is offensive that so much money is so available for such a regressive project when the coffers are bare for the art gallery project. What improvements could be achieved if \$220M were used to improve the Hunter's rail system? And if revitalisation is the objective, \$220M would more positively be spent on street and building improvements and activating spaces. On that note, it is interesting that in the draft strategy photomontages, revitalisation is signified by more trees and more people and no cars. These post train, post-revitalisation streetscapes seem unlikely when Hunter Street is more likely to be dominated by cars seeking one of the capped spaces and buses battling for free run in the congestion.

Newcastle is the second largest metropolitan city in NSW. It is predicted to have a population of 180,640 by 2036 and remain as the Hunter's Major Regional Centre. Half of our workforce comes from outside the LGA and at sometime most of our regions residents come to visit. The predicted growth of city centre residents and workers is expected revitalise the centre as only more people can. To support this growth, the ensure accessibility, to protect our environment and streets Newcastle must have a comprehensive and efficient transport system. The rail line is an essential part of this.

If myopia persists and the decision to sever the rail at Wickham endures, the corridor must be protected in public ownership and free from development so when a more enlightened Government and bureaucracy is installed our children are only burdened with "putting back the tracks" rather than trying to retrofit a mass transit corridor onto a developed urban landscape.

Yours faithfully,

Robert Corken