

Proposed Truncation of Newcastle Rail Line

Submission

Background:

I have been commuting to Newcastle from Lake Macquarie for the past 13 years. Originally this commute was by private motor vehicle, however the time for this 54Km round trip has progressively increased up to around two hours per day as the roads have become more congested, despite significant road works being undertaken.

Additionally, full-day parking in Newcastle is distant from the majority of workplaces and is scarce.

Approximately two years ago, I began to travel to Civic station by train from Fassifern station. I thought I would not contemplate regularly commuting by car again, however this proposal, if carried through, would force me back into my car.

From daily commuting over the past two years, I believe I have reasonable knowledge about the use of the rail line. This is outlined in the observations below;

Observations:

1. Peak time services are well patronised. Around 150 people alight from my morning train Civic station. We can assume a further 50-100 people continue on the train to Newcastle.
2. Maitland/Hunter trains are fully occupied from Civic station during the afternoon peak. That is, they are filled from the Newcastle/Civic patrons alone.
3. PM peak trains to Sydney on a Friday are around 50% full from Civic, with a plethora of suitcases, back-packs and other luggage. Presumably these passengers are travelling to Sydney for the weekend. Passengers continue to board the train at Hamilton and Broadmeadow.
4. Civic station services;
 - The three largest employers in Newcastle (Australian Taxation Office (ATO), Council and Telstra),
 - Civic Theatre,
 - Newcastle Museum,
 - Library,
 - Art Gallery
5. A new Court complex is being constructed within 200 metres of Civic station. This complex has no public parking.
6. People who reside in Newcastle and don't use the service are those who want it closed. People who use the service generally live in western Lake Macquarie, Central Coast and Maitland.

Discussion:

In relation to point 1, I estimate four busses will be needed for the passengers of this ONE train. To prevent delays in travel, these busses will need to be available immediately from

the new terminus (Assuming between Hamilton & Wickham). I would be amazed if this actually occurred – during recent trackwork Cityrail supplied two busses per train from Broadmeadow. That was a resounding failure. We must assume there will be an additional 30 – 60 minutes travel time required daily.

This interruption to travel will add to commuting time with a corresponding cost in productivity and/or family life.

To any reasonable person, this interruption is at odds with statements in the various strategy documents, such as *“Bus services from the new interchange will ensure smoother journeys to the city centre...”* I would be very pleased if this statement could be supported with a description of how alighting from a train, walking to a bus stop, waiting for a bus, getting on a bus, travelling on a bus with multiple stops and traffic signals then alighting from the bus will “ensure a smoother journey”. I do not wish to use emotive language, but this does not even pass the “Political Spin 101” exam – it is a complete fabrication and denies obvious facts. In fact, I am insulted by this statement.

Point 2 requires no elaboration – the service is used and valued and actually needs expansion, not contraction.

Point 3. Much has been said in letters to editors etc about people with prams and surfboards using the train. I do not believe there can be any claim that busses are suitable vehicles for these items, nor are they designed to carry passengers with luggage. There is simply nowhere to put these articles.

Luggage and items of this nature will, in my view, inevitably lead to arguments and potentially violent confrontations. The mere presence of these items on busses poses a serious safety risk (trips/falls/sharp projections) which cannot be ignored.

Trains are not an ideal mode of transport for these items either, but they do have dedicated luggage racks and space for items like prams.

Point 4. Terminating the line kilometres short of these large employers and cultural venues defies understanding. Large employers generally consider the methods of travel available for their employees. When leases expire on the Telstra and ATO buildings, there is a likelihood that these employers will relocate, thus taking a large customer base out of the city. More vacant buildings the city does not need.

Additionally, employees will look elsewhere for employment if their daily commute increases beyond a bearable time or comfort limit.

Point 5. The NSW Government is building a substantial, new Court complex in Newcastle and it will be very welcome. I recall there was considerable opposition when it was announced there would be essentially no on-site parking for this building. I also recall this was rebuffed by the NSW Government with words to the effect “It is opposite Civic station”. This alone demonstrates, at best, either a severe lack of planning or incompetence by planners.

Point 6. Again, this speaks for itself. The people who use the service have not been consulted. It also appears several highly credentialed transport experts have also been ignored. I have seen nothing from the NSW Government which shows support from

independent experts in transport. This alone has created a substantial credibility problem for the Government.

Suggestions:

Improving flow;

I acknowledge there are delays where trains and vehicles intersect, however I often note with amusement that >95% of the vehicles at level crossings contain only one person.

It is likely that the additional busses required (if provided), particularly at peak times, will cause greater delay to those motorists. Additionally, parking will become more difficult as many will abandon public transport in favour of their own vehicle.

I have noted that railway gates have considerable variability in closure. Sometimes the train reaches a red light near the crossing before closure, other times gates are closed for extended periods with no train in sight. From this, I assume they are manually controlled. If this was automated or better controlled, delays would be kept to a minimum.

Off-peak rail services could also be reduced in number. This would also reduce traffic delays.

Truncate at Civic;

If the line must be truncated (which I don't accept), the logical place would be Civic. Some of the reasoning for this is at points 1-5 above. Additionally;

- It is only one stop further along the line,
- There appears to be the same amount of land available for stabling trains etc,
- The vast bulk of the inner-city redevelopment could go ahead as planned,
- Far less people would be severely inconvenienced,
- The east end is within walking distance of Civic (just),
- Busses have direct access to Hunter Street and have a dedicated parking bay,
- Trains to Civic would likely be less disruptive to traffic flows at Stewart Avenue than the multiple busses needing to cross (one delay as opposed to 3 or 4).

Other options:

- "Cut & cover" the rail line – that is sink the line several metres and build over the top. Infrastructure is improved, range of new options for development. It is not a new concept.
- Ideally, the line should run underground to Nelson Bay and the airport in a loop. This would vastly increase the patronage and make the airport more accessible to a wider range of travellers. Central Coast passengers would, I suspect, travel to Williamstown rather than Sydney Kingsford-Smith. Again, tunnels of this nature are not a new concept and continue to be constructed in Sydney.

I note the renewal strategy documents indicate an expectation of marked increases in both workers (10,000 new commuters in all probability) and residents (12,000) within twenty odd years. It also notes an expectation of thousands of students at a university campus.

How on earth are we going to transport these people? Busses? Would that be an acceptable approach in any other city? Would it be acceptable in the greater Sydney area? Would it be acceptable in Gosford?

On one hand we are saying we are taking away the only viable mass transport option and on the other we are saying we want more people to live and work in this area. Words fail me – illogical decision making on the grandest scale.

In sum, this Government can and must do better than this. This proposal is short-sighted in the extreme and will be detrimental to Newcastle and the greater Hunter region. It will have a great social cost and no-one (seriously – no-one) believes this decision has been made with the betterment of Newcastle in mind. Some individuals will gain considerably, but the community will lose. We recall that legislation passed several years ago allowing the sale of disused rail land. Factors such as this do not go unnoticed.

The political change in this area has been refreshing, but this move is **not** seen as a bold and fearless statement, it is seen as selling out to a powerful minority and it is disenfranchising.

To paraphrase Greg Piper,

“The rail line did not cause Newcastle’s problems. Removing it won’t solve them.”

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this feedback.

Regards,

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