

## Submission : Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

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### Overview

- 0.1 The need for revitalization of Newcastle CBD/Hunter Street is agreed across the community. The Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy (NURS) should be the long-awaited vehicle to achieve this, but this Draft Strategy needs substantial revision before it is sound, balanced, financially sustainable, and able to win broad public support.
- 0.2 This Draft Strategy has **many positive features**. Its greatest strength is the attempt at a *holistic approach* and the *differentiation of Hunter Street into a strip of linked precincts*, each with its own rationale, character and placemaking strategy.
- 0.3 Nevertheless, in crucial respects, this Draft **does not meet the test of contemporary best practice urban planning** and is *internally contradictory, weak on evidence, and below professional standard* as a binding, long-term planning document for sustainable renewal over a 23-year time horizon.
- 0.4 The **conceptual and structural weakness** of the Draft Strategy is the awkward implicit compromise between *best-practice 21<sup>st</sup>-century ideas of community-based placemaking* (Jan Geyl = Cities for People) and, on the other hand, *the outmoded mid-20<sup>th</sup> century approach to urban renewal as a government-driven strategy of urban consolidation and high-rise redevelopment* (cities for buildings and traffic).
- 0.5 This conceptual and structural incongruity is compounded by *clumsy application of DPI's template of the 'urban activation precincts' foreshadowed for suburban Sydney without due regard for differing local circumstances*: this shows up in the inflated 90M high-rise aspiration for Newcastle West and the associated Wickham interchange.
- 0.6 The **Draft Strategy** has been subverted by the *perceived political imperative to quickly build an uncosted transport 'interchange' at Wickham in advance of more than a sketch design, without demonstrated operational feasibility, without regard to the impact on the loss of public transport access to Civic and Newcastle East, and without any proper costing or budget. Cost blow-outs and the consequent operational and public transport impacts are very likely to destroy the well-conceived placemaking for Civic and Newcastle East, leaving Hunter Street in disarray and compromising the success of the heavy-handed, old-style high-rise urban renewal proposed for Newcastle West.*

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- 0.7 This political imperative has also set the **timing** of the Strategy back-to-front. A *Discussion Paper* on revision of the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy (2006) has only just been released (March 2013) and the Hunter Regional Transport Plan (awaited since the 2006 Regional Strategy) is still in the very early stage of preparation. Yet this Renewal Strategy seeks, without context and on the basis of ridiculously inadequate evidence, to make pre-emptive decisions that will constrain those regional strategies. This is not integrated planning. Integration is in the doing, not the saying.
- 0.8 **Notwithstanding short-term political imperatives, it is important to the future of the city between now and 2036 that this Strategy be well conceived and well received at the outset.**
- 0.9 **Drastic revision** is recommended to address professional and community concerns. As employees, residents, consumers and even investors, the community is the key to renewal and should be the key stakeholder in line with international best practice – and DPI’s own recent Discussion Paper! Unfortunately genuine consultation has so far been missing from the bulldozing of the Draft Strategy and the condescension of the half-day public consultation in February 2013. Matters that demand to be more thoroughly addressed include **Culture, Heritage and Public Transport**, i.e. all ‘people matters’ (as opposed to ‘hard’ infrastructure) and fundamental to the ‘people-friendly city with unique attributes’ as set out in the Vision.
- 0.10 The **Hunter Development Corporation (HDC)** has a fundamental conflict of interest in being both the *prime property developer* and the *planning agency of the Department of Planning & Infrastructure (DPI)*. *HDC is not at arm’s length from DPI and there are no Chinese walls*. Such a conflict of interest would not be tolerated vis-à-vis the private sector and it does not disappear simply because HDC is a statutory authority. It has fatally compromised the *integrity of the planning process* and *community support* for the Urban Renewal Strategy. This **failure of governance** should be addressed before revision of the Draft Strategy.

## SPECIFIC WEAKNESSES

1. **The Vision does not link through to the Strategy**. Newcastle CBD is to be the ‘Hunter region’s capital’ and a ‘regional hub’ but the Draft Strategy has no regional context. This deficiency is most apparent in its disregard of the *urban hierarchy* and articulation of the *transport system*. Newcastle CBD is treated in fine detail but as an oasis without a hinterland. *This is not integrated planning*.
  - On 8 March (9 days before the submission deadline on the Draft Strategy), the Minister released a *Discussion Paper* on revising the *Lower Hunter Regional Strategy* but without explaining how it informs and links to the Newcastle CBD Strategy. Determining micro plans without linkage to the urban and regional context is *back-to-front planning* and an insult to the wider urban community.

2. No explanation is given of how **funding and implementation** of the Strategy for Newcastle CBD will be balanced against the needs of outlying centres/nodes in Newcastle LGA and adjacent LGAs, most notably **Lake Macquarie** and **Maitland** (whose Councils both object to the transport elements of the Strategy). Is the distribution of growth of the Lower Hunter urban region to be market driven or directed by planners to the benefit of property interests in Newcastle CBD? These complexities are raised in the Discussion Paper but not reflected in the Draft Strategy. This is **dis-integrated, not integrated planning**.
3. **Demand projections** for *employment* (10,000 new jobs by 2036) and *housing* (6000 new units by 2036) are inflated and highly optimistic on the evidence of the accompanying Economic Assessment (Appendix 2). The updated figures in the Discussion paper have not been incorporated, nor revisions made accordingly.
4. **No sensitivity analysis** of demand projections and gross under-assessment of downside risk and the consequences for project sequencing and sustainability.
5. **The 90M revised building height** is out of all proportion to the likely take-up rate. *There are no good grounds for expecting a significant switch of national and international firms from Sydney* (where Barangaroo will greatly increase the supply of AA office space). The Discussion Paper (p.17) states that Newcastle is only the 16<sup>th</sup> largest office market in Australia. Experience at Honeysuckle over the past 20 years is that buildings of 5-6 stories are optimal for steady urban renewal in Newcastle CBD, whether commercial buildings or apartments. While the 90M height is only a limit, this scale will create unrealistic expectations of land values and thereby create an obstacle to sensible development.
6. Yet to be designed and costed, the **Wickham interchange** has become the fulcrum of the Draft Strategy in the face of all *public transport logic* and *comparative experience*. It has **distorted the strategy** in three crucial ways:
  - Logically, a **genuine inter-modal interchange** would be located as close as possible to **Hamilton**, i.e. *adjacent to the north-south/electric-diesel rail junction, more central to the population of Newcastle LGA; with enough room to allow efficient circulation of traffic, and adjacent to train stabling facilities.*
  - Wickham will be highly inefficient, i.e. not enough space for two-way off-road access or for turning around and stabling trains (i.e. likely to make intercity and Maitland services less reliable);
  - The *extra circulation of traffic at Wickham* will WORSEN the congestion at Stewart Avenue/Hunter Street that the Strategy claims to relieve!

*These are not mere 'operational matters' (as claimed at the Public Forum) but fundamental to the feasibility of and justification for the project and the proper use of public monies. It is poor engineering analysis and poor project management.*

7. Termination of all trains at Wickham will *undermine the modal shift to public transport that is a key initiative of the Strategy as to reduce road traffic congestion*:
  - Wickham is not where most Newcastle CBD passengers wish to alight and there is **NO PUBLIC TRANSPORT BENEFIT** to an *enforced* change of mode within such a short distance from the ultimate destination. This redundant and token interchange will a) *lengthen journey times*, b) reduce *reliability*, and c) increase the *inconvenience* of public transport vis-à-vis road transport.
8. Rail truncation at Wickham is highly problematic for renewal of the **Civic precinct** where existing employment is to be boosted by the *new law courts* and a much expanded *downtown university campus*. In no other city would planning for a new legal precinct and university campus of 8000 students and 1000 staff BEGIN(!) by removing rail access. It defies all public transport logic. It does not meet the principle of integrating land use planning with transport (Discussion Paper, p.9).
9. The consequence that termination of trains at Wickham will require **many more buses to run along the ‘urban spine’ of Hunter Street**, thereby undermining the amenity of Hunter Street as a ‘people precinct’ has been completely ignored by the Draft Strategy. Indeed, the Draft’s artists’ impressions of cyclists and pedestrians in quiet streets (e.g. Figure B on page 4=Vision) are *utterly deceptive as to the actual conditions that will be created*.
10. There is an engineering challenge of *improving pedestrian and traffic access across the rail line*, as also in open sections its *aesthetics*, but there are multiple cheaper engineering solutions that do *not in the short term* involve costly removal of the rail line and shifting more traffic (including buses) onto Hunter Street (also a barrier to the Foreshore). Ironically, Figure B (p. 4) shows very few people using a very wide Steele Street connection.
11. **Cultural infrastructure** is almost completely ignored, not least the need for extensions to the **Newcastle Art Gallery**, *a truly extraordinary omission* in a Strategy that identifies Civic as an ‘educational and cultural precinct’ and in *a city that has won recognition for the role of the Arts in inner-city renewal*. The \$7m. NSW Government share of budget for extensions to Newcastle Art Gallery is less than 2% of the \$400m. sought by the Art Gallery of NSW. While the omission is undoubtedly political, it reflects no credit on DPI and does not inspire community confidence in the Strategy.
12. **Heritage** is paid lip service, *not integrated with renewal*. There is no recognition that
  - Newcastle is the 2<sup>nd</sup> oldest continuous European settlement in Australia, or archeological evidence of *30,000 years of aboriginal settlement*;
  - increased building heights will damage the city’s unique skyline.
  - *authenticity* means streetscapes and precincts, not just a few buildings/ facades. *The absence of any serious approach to heritage is in fundamental conflict with the*

*Vision that proclaims the city's 'unique attributes' and suggests that the placemaking components of the Strategy are mere tokenism, not the core of the Strategy.*

13. **Funding is open-ended** (especially the Wickham interchange and associated transport liabilities) without earmarked sources from the NSW government (\$120m), NCC (\$16.7m) and s.94 contributions (est. \$58m) covering more than *a fraction of the exposure*. NCC is financially hamstrung. S.94 funds are especially vulnerable to the take-up rate falling below estimates and will not become available in time to fund up-front infrastructure. The Draft Strategy does not address the financial aspect and makes no assessment of the consequences of retarded or stalled implementation. These consequences are likely to include a *disrupted (public) transport system, impeded commercial development and renewal*, and perhaps stagnation. *Prudence, and the experience of previous project failures in NSW, dictates that the downside risks be carefully considered.*

## CONCLUSION

1. This draft Strategy is a **BIG BANG approach** that relies in *blind faith* on pretty artists' impressions and the contentious, undersigned and uncoded Wickham interchange to generate a *snowball effect* by removing under-valued public transport infrastructure as a *political imperative*.
2. This Draft Strategy is *not validated by sound urban planning principles*, is *not evidence-based*, and is *internally contradictory*, both between Vision and Strategy and within the Strategy itself. On all three counts it falls below professional standard.
3. The pseudo-interchange at Wickham WILL worsen the traffic bottleneck at the entrance to the CBD and along Hunter Street, thereby discouraging consumer and investor demand in Civic and Newcastle East and undermining a best-practice placemaking approach.
4. The operational feasibility of the Wickham interchange is *yet to be established*.
5. The biggest risk of the Wickham interchange is that it will *DRAIN SCARCE FUNDS from more important place-making infrastructure within the CBD, perhaps also from surrounding urban centres in Newcastle and adjacent LGAs*.
6. The ADVERSE CONSEQUENCES of overestimated demand, poorly targeted infrastructure, and shortfalls in financing may well be not urban renewal but URBAN BLIGHT as vacant sites and sparsely occupied high-rise towers testify to the hubris of planners who ignored critical professional and community advice.
7. **This unsound Draft Strategy fails the tests of integrated, evidence-based, best practice urban planning and does not yet justify the poorly costed and budgeted use of taxpayer funds.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The DRAFT Strategy must be revised to *support its strengths and eliminate its obvious weaknesses*. It should be brought into line with *best-practice urban and transport planning* and, more specifically, the *Lower Hunter Regional Strategy*, the forthcoming *Hunter Regional Transport Plan*, commercial and financial realities, and community concerns.

In particular:

1. **GOVERNANCE.** *The Hunter Development Corporation should be removed from any further role in planning and be treated at arm's length as a commercial stakeholder.*
2. Decision as to the **best location for a MULTI-MODAL INTERCHANGE** should be reserved *pending proper engineering study and be integrated with the Hunter Regional Transport Plan.*
3. In the interim, the limited funding available should be used to improve the city-scape (including a thriving **Cultural Life** and respect for the city's unique **Heritage**) to make the City centre *a busier place and attract private investment, not least small business*, thereby building *sustainable momentum for urban renewal* as supported by the business improvement association **Newcastle NOW**. This *placemaking strategy* has worked in Copenhagen, New York, Melbourne and Fremantle. It WILL work in Newcastle and has strong public support.

It would be reckless for the NSW Government and Newcastle City Council to persist with an *over-ambitious, poorly informed, internally contradictory strategy, and underfunded strategy that will be counter-productive in terms of its own vision and goals and very likely stymie a more practical placemaking approach.*

*Community support for renewal, including the support of adjacent Councils, would be enhanced by a more inclusive approach that was evidence-based and did not obfuscate, and privilege property interests (including the HDC) over other stakeholders.*

The *Discussion Paper* (p. 9) states:

The most sustainable and effective way to plan for the Lower Hunter is to incorporate a process of strong community and stakeholder engagement.

**The best way to show that this statement is not empty rhetoric is to apply the approach to a thorough and professional revision of the *Draft Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy*.**

**LESS HASTE, MORE SPEED**

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