

Re: Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012

I welcome urban renewal of the city of Newcastle and opportunities that see it revitalised. I understand that there is a need for a strategy that sustains population growth. The renewal strategy states upfront the state governments decision to cut rail services between Newcastle and Wickham, however this is somewhat confusing because many of the 'guiding principles' mentioned actually support the retention of rail transport infrastructure. There is no rationale given in the strategy for cutting the rail, nor is a transport study provided to explain how the decision was made (using proper planning and transport principles). The strategy is not holistic, it is flawed, and an Environmental Impact Statement is urgently needed.

I am generally positive about many of the strategies in the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012, however the decision to cut rail services to the historic Newcastle Station seems to have been made without a proper transport and planning study.

The following are some statements made in the strategy that suggest that the rail should stay,

- Promote higher mode shift to public transport to reduce the number of cars in city centre and utilise existing infrastructure (xvii)
- Promoting a shift to public transport in the City Centre (xxiii)
- Encourage people to walk and cycle.
- A walkable and liveable city
- Making more effective use of existing infrastructure
- Reducing the cost of providing new infrastructure
- Reducing vehicle kilometres travelled and the consequent loss of worker productivity.
- Reducing negative impacts from car travel, contributing to a more comfortable environment and public domain.
- Encouraging use of public and active transport forms, which will contribute to reduction of green house gases.

The strategy suggests "Promoting a shift to public transport in the city centre". Instead of inventing a new transport strategy why not look at keeping existing rail that is fast and effective bringing people into the city from the region.

The absence of rail will have wide environmental and social ramifications that have not been addressed in this strategy and the above principle actually supports keeping existing transport infrastructure. The Great Northern Railway (GNR) is significant for its historic and social values at both a State and National levels. The railway line is socially significant because as well as providing transport for industry, it has been a vehicle for public transport for 1857. In March 1858, the Newcastle Railway Station was operational for public use.¹ It is used to get people to and from work, for recreational use, particularly among young people and enables them to access the beach and foreshore area of Newcastle.

¹ McKillop and Sheedy, *Our Region, Our Railway the Hunter and the Great Northern Railway 1857-2007*, p 22.

Other social values include on-going recreational use of the GNR in heritage festivals and 'Steamfest' events. Historic trains such as the famous 3801 steam train brings further significance to the line (particularly the Newcastle station end of the line) because of the association that early steam trains had with the historic line and stations. Newcastle 'Old Town' is a tourist destination for out of area organizations with the *Newcastle Flyer* re-enactments with the historic steam locomotive 3801 and 3830. Rail transport brings many backpackers to the city; cultural tourism is contributing to economic growth.

Rail transport is increasing in other parts of the world; it has the potential to bring more people directly into the city without increasing and causing havoc with streets leading to the peninsular city. Historically the corridor has linked people by providing a direct route from Maitland and other regions to Newcastle; to the beach, shops, and historic sites within the Coal River Precinct (such as Nobbys Beach, Macquarie Pier and Fort Scratchley). The end of the rail corridor at Newcastle station is a pivotal end access point to many of these other places. The rail corridor represents the foundations of the city; the artery, where buildings and infrastructure, social and cultural life have grown up around rail. Newcastle is a walkable city; the rail corridor has aided this.

The Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012 suggests that Hunter Street be narrowed to single lane in one direction; it is hard to imagine how the roads will cope with increased vehicles (particularly buses) if train cease to Newcastle. It will dramatically change the character of the street.

The strategy states:-

"The private car currently dominates journey to-work travel in Newcastle (refer to table 5). In 2006, the private car accounted for 77.4% of trips to the city centre in the morning peak. Importantly, a large proportion of these trips originated within a 5 km distance of the city centre. Correspondingly, only 14.3% of journeys were undertaken by public transport and 8.3% undertaken by active transport." p 48.

This argument is in favour of light rail or retaining the existing rail line and is far superior to buses in stimulating development. Bus routes may be flexibility, however rail offers certainty. It is less likely investors will favour a business next to bus stop (that can be picked up and moved in a day) to a light rail station that assures permanency.

Other observations:-

The strategy recommends that height limits be increased in the city centre from 10 metres to 24 metres, affecting Market Square area including King Street and the laneways beneath the Cathedral. This increase would have a detrimental impact on the skyline of the city, particular from the east. Sightlines to Christ Church Cathedral will be dramatically altered by increasing the height of buildings suggested in the plan. Protection of the historic sightlines is very important. I do not support the increase of building heights in that part of the historic city, particularly buildings between Laing and King Streets. Increase in heights will have a negative impact on the State Heritage listed Christ Church Cathedral. This is a significant change and should be reconsidered.

Recommendations

1. It is concerning that there is no comprehensive transport plan that discusses the rationale for removing rail from Newcastle Station. We believe that urban renewal can occur without the removal of the rail line from Newcastle Station to Wickham.

2. I suggest an Environmental Impact Statement be undertaken to assess the impact of removing the rail.
3. Height limits should not be increased in the historic heart of the city, including streets bounding Church, Pacific, Scott and Crown Street.

Yours sincerely,

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