

urbanrenewal - Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

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Subject: Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

Sir/Madam,

I am writing in response to the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012. This is not a particularly encouraging document. It has been promoted as the catalyst for urban renewal in Newcastle, but many of the proposals are not new and most of the document lacks any real substance. A nip and tuck here and there might be nice, but it won't suddenly draw the multitudes back to Newcastle CBD without some real underlying shift.

- The Civic precinct is already the cultural heart of the city with the Art Gallery, Newcastle Library, Conservatorium of Music and Civic Theatre located there. The document on display seems to add nothing more to this than a facelift to Wheeler Place;
- The University already has plans to establish a CBD campus. It does not need this concept, it needs funds to obtain the property and open the campus;
- Closure of the rail line is not necessary to make more connections between Hunter Street and the north. Rail crossings, viaducts and/or overpasses will achieve the same result without the loss of services and without the cost of construction of a new terminus;
- How this document can claim that terminating the rail line at Wickham will increase public transport use and improve connections is mystifying. It will probably do no more than increase congestion at one of the city's busiest intersections – Stewart Avenue and Hunter Street;
- There is already a trend towards more residential and mixed use accommodation in the CBD of Newcastle. I see nothing in this document that will significantly increase this trend;
- The document aims to make the west end the commercial hub of the city. Yet the west end has been promoted as the future commercial heart for some years with towers permitted there up to approximately 30 storeys. There has been no stampede of interest by developers and business to take this up and not a single tower of any substantial height has yet been built or even planned. The west end is mired in congestion and this will only serve to make it worse. Just who does the government believe will build the shiny new towers depicted in the video presentation?

Newcastle before the earthquake was a busy and vibrant place. Hunter Street was a sea of faces everywhere as people went about their business. The Newcastle of today is almost a sleepy country town by comparison. There has been **little acknowledgment of the root cause** of the malaise that has overtaken the CBD of Newcastle in the last two decades.

In my opinion **significant contributing factors** to the problem are:

- The **Newcastle Earthquake** was a defining event. It caused closure of the CBD for weeks. Many significant buildings were lost or damaged and many businesses relocated from the traditional CBD. There was sadly little help from either the state or the Commonwealth to restore the CBD to its pre-earthquake stature.

- The development of **Honeysuckle** was poorly planned and implemented leading to a wall effect along the harbour and a massive diversion of private investment from the traditional CBD to the harbour front. While there have been obvious benefits in the reuse of old railway and port land, it has been a disaster for the traditional CBD and a lost opportunity for attractive, open, harbour-side space. In the drive to sell off this land for profit to Treasury by the Honeysuckle Development Corporation there was no forethought by the Dept. of Planning as to how this should be managed, so as to integrate the old with the new in order to create user friendly space linking the precincts. Now we are faced with the horrible dilemma of how to address this massive oversight in retrospect and the finger of blame has wrongly been pointed at the rail line when it should be directed at the planning (or lack thereof) authorities.
- **NSW Government policy** in Newcastle has played a major role in the decline of the CBD. Royal Newcastle Hospital was closed and medical services were relocated from the CBD to John Hunter Hospital at New Lambton Heights. This has sucked thousands of workers and visitors from the CBD and caused choking to the residential area of New Lambton Heights where there is just one busy road into and out of the hospital. Head offices of significant enterprises such as the Shortland County Council used to be located in the CBD of Newcastle. That organisation no longer exists having been merged to form Energy Australia with head office jobs located in Sydney. Centralisation of services and administration in Sydney has badly hurt Newcastle and other regional cities.
- **Closure of services** over decades have also played their part in the CBD decline. Lost is the city's once extensive tram network (1950) and later, rail services that once linked the CBD with important regional centres such as Toronto, Wallsend, Belmont and Cessnock. Rail stations are no longer manned or manned with a skeleton staff. Each loss contributes to trend of making the traditional CBD of Newcastle more irrelevant.

This document, which promises nothing of any substance and budgets **a mere \$120 million is, quite frankly insulting**, particularly when compared **to tens of billions of our taxpayer dollars** being invested in Sydney on various projects including the south west rail line, the north west rail line, the inner west light rail line, the CBD and south east light rail line, the Darling Harbour redevelopment, the Sydney Opera House refurbishment, the Sydney Cricket Ground refurbishment - to name just a few. **Reversing decades of neglect in Newcastle will also require billions**. Since Newcastle's metropolitan population of 550,000 is about 1/8th that of Sydney, then the very least that should be expected is a similar proportion of capital investment - many times more than \$120million.

It is my opinion that Newcastle needs more – much more than this document proposes, to address decades of neglect. NSW has become obsessed and blinkered by the unhealthy “world city” fixation for Sydney and has largely ignored the needs of the remainder of the state and the Hunter in particular. Specifically, I believe that the following would provide a substantial injection of people and investment into the CBD of Newcastle and the Greater Newcastle area, diversify NSW and strengthen NSW position relative to the other states.

- 1) **A new Royal Newcastle Hospital** to be located in the CBD of Newcastle. John Hunter could remain the main emergency hospital while the new RNH could be the principal hospital for specialist services (eg. a burns unit for which there is astonishingly no such unit located between North Sydney and the Qld border).
- 2) **Relocate government departments** to the CBD of Newcastle. Obvious departments in contention for this would be the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Trade & Investment, Regional Infrastructure and Services. These departments should be geographically closer to the areas of interest.
- 3) **Diversification of the port of Newcastle** to reduce almost exclusive reliance on coal and provide another major container terminal for imports and exports to and from the north of the state.

- 4) **Grouting of old mine workings** in the CBD to reduce the disincentive to construct taller office buildings and help provide more A grade office space and residential short and long term accommodation in the CBD. This could and should be funded by the state from it's coal royalty stream and/or a new coal levy for the specific purpose.
- 5) **Upgrade of existing railway stations and construction of new stations** to provide rail access to more people and provide an incentive for rail use (eg. new stations at Glendale, Kotara East/New Lambton South, Hamilton North and Hanbury Junction).
- 6) **Provide additional rail crossings** at Bellevue Street, Worth Place, Steel Street and Perkins Street. There are few other places where it is feasible to add new crossings, regardless of whether the rail line is removed or not. Elsewhere, footbridges or underpasses could be constructed.
- 7) **Reopen and upgrade certain closed rail services** to restore passenger services from Newcastle CBD to important regional centres (eg. Cessnock, Belmont, Wallsend, Morpeth and Toronto). Also a new rail line to Newcastle Airport at Williamtown and eventually, on to Nelson Bay. Providing direct rail/light rail services between the CBD, the airport and north east would be of massive benefit to both the CBD and Newcastle's northern development. Tram/light rail services between Newcastle and suburbs along similar routes to those previously operated (eg. Merewether, Adamstown via Glebe Rd, Waratah, Mayfield, Carrington, Speers Point) would also efficiently deliver thousands of people daily by public transport to and from the CBD and encourage public transport use, making Newcastle a convenient and attractive city in which to live and work.
- 8) **Construct the Fassifern to Hexham freight rail bypass** as a matter of absolute urgency to divert freight trains from Newcastle's inner suburbs, reduce congestion at Adamstown and Hamilton North level crossings and free up the main northern line for better and more frequent passenger services through Newcastle's suburbs.
- 9) **Restore decaying public property** in the CBD as a matter of urgency. The state has been derelict in it's duty in Newcastle relating to public property. For example, the state acquired the historic post office and has allowed it to remain vacant and decaying with no timetable for restoration, or even a statement of intended use. The state also acquired the Empire Hotel site, demolished the building and has boarded up the now empty site, again with no apparent plan. The state has refused to provide just \$7 million of public funds to allow the Newcastle Art Gallery to proceed, placing a \$7 million Commonwealth grant in jeopardy and indeed the entire project. The state is planning to relocate the Court House to the Civic precinct but has not stated it's intentions for the existing historic court house building. There are also many other notable and historic public buildings that require the injection of public funds to maintain and restore (eg. Newcastle City Hall). This is incredibly galling while the state spends \$1bn on refurbishment of the Sydney Opera House and another one billion dollars on re-development of Darling Harbour.
- 10) **Create a major sporting precinct at National Park.** Newcastle City Council recently spent substantial funds improving Number 2 Sports Ground at National Park. Sadly, the city's main sports ground (Number 1), remains a relic of the early 20th Century and is totally inadequate for hosting major sports events of any kind. Substantial funds of the order of hundreds of millions of dollars are required to upgrade this facility, bring it into the 21st Century and allow the city and north of the state to again attract national and international cricket and other significant sporting events which otherwise go to Hobart, Canberra, the Gold Coast and major capital cities. Number 1 requires comfortable modern stands capable of seating up to 40,000 spectators, TV standard flood lighting, corporate and media facilities, electronic scoreboard, catering and spectator facilities. This is obviously beyond the capabilities of council and must be funded by the State along the lines of the SCG, the SFS and other major public venues in and around Sydney. Being in the heart of Newcastle, an upgraded National Park would be a major drawcard to attract visitors and events right into the

CBD. It also has the advantage of being within just minutes walk from Civic railway station so it is easily accessible by rail transport. With the aid of Commonwealth grants, this could be a superb gift to the city which will celebrate 225 years in 2029. This could be the cornerstone of a proposal to bid for the 2030 Commonwealth Games.

11) **Create a major entertainment/convention centre** in Newcastle capable of holding all the events that currently are only staged in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. Honeysuckle would have been the ideal location for such a complex. Unfortunately, this opportunity may have been lost as there is limited available land remaining there. If Honeysuckle is not an option then adjacent to the sports facilities at National Park would be a very good location. It would complement the adjacent sporting facilities at Number 1 and 2 sports grounds.

12) **Upgrade the main northern rail line.** It is almost impossible to believe that, in the 21st Century a train journey between Newcastle and Sydney takes nearly 3 hours at an average speed of just 60km/hr. This is more than half an hour longer than the Newcastle Flyer service of 40 years ago. A very fast train service is not required, just a service running at normal inter-city speeds of 130 km/hr would cover the distance between the states two largest cities in just 1 ¼ hours. Comfortable, fast and more frequent train services would encourage more travel between the cities and provide an enormous economic boost to NSW that is almost impossible to quantify.

These are just some public proposals that would in turn attract private investment and large numbers of people into the heart of Newcastle, helping restore it to a vibrant and desirable place to live, work and play. It would make a statement to the rest of Australia and indeed the world, that NSW is a diverse state with a diversified economy and there is a choice of major cities and venues when it comes to hosting business and events. This a marketing pitch that **no other state could match**, attracting more business and investment to NSW than could otherwise be achieved by marketing one city alone. It would see more business done in NSW and less business lost to Victoria and Queensland. It would not just advance Newcastle, it would help advance NSW in a way that a similar investment in Sydney could never do.

Truncation of the rail line

The truncation of the rail line at Wickham is an obvious and major issue of contention in the community. **I totally disagree with the proposal to cut the rail line** and I believe that it would almost certainly be counter-productive. It would not be well received by a large section of the Hunter community. It would deter many from making the journey from Maitland and the Valley to Newcastle. Changing modes of transport within just a couple of km of the final destination would increase travel times unnecessarily and disadvantage passengers who are elderly, young, disabled or carrying luggage, strollers and families. It would also cut off the CBD from rail access. Rail access to within a few minutes walk from Newcastle Beach cannot be underestimated as an attraction for people to travel to Newcastle, both locals and visitors alike.

To consider terminating the rail line at Wickham is a strange approach given that the stated intention is increase jobs, business and the residential population which would, in turn, increase the demand for these very services being cut. It makes no sense to attempt to create incentive for more people to travel to the CBD on the one hand while at the same time cutting the public transport option that is most capable of delivering commuters quickly and efficiently. All this for the most spurious of reasons – that of some supposed barrier! Anyone who thinks that the rail line is the barrier obviously has never actually walked the length of Hunter Street to see the long row of buildings that impede north/south access. This will be the case regardless of rail line or no rail line, unless the government is also planning to spend many hundreds of millions of dollars acquiring property just to knock it down!

Buses are not and will never be a substitute for trains, no matter how hard the government tries to sell the concept. Unfortunately, government bus services in Newcastle are so poor that the population has a total lack of faith in the government's ability to deliver comfortable, efficient and convenient services in place of the existing train service.

Furthermore, a terminus at Wickham seems to be **a poor choice of location**. It seems that there is insufficient space at that location. It would need enough space for multiple platforms, room for train stabling and additional large space for creation of a sizable bus/taxi interchange (with room for future expansion if the plan is indeed a success). Wickham is some distance from the ferry wharves so there would be no interchange to service passengers for north of the harbour. Those people would require a change at Wickham for bus, then a second change a few km east for the ferry. It is also claimed that the lack of stabling room would probably require closure of both the Railway Street and Beaumont Street level crossings. These are **vital north/south crossings**. Closure would cut the north and south of the city off between Hamilton North and Newcastle West – a distance of about 4 km. Bearing in mind that the crossing at Clyde Street is frequently closed for lengthy periods of time with freight trains, Newcastle would often have no north/south access between Waratah and Newcastle West! This is an absurdity and totally unacceptable!

On top of this, it would dramatically increase congestion at **one of the most already congested locations in the city** – Stewart Avenue which would be one of the few north/south thoroughfares east of Waratah, some 5 km further west. Anyone who has ever had to travel north/south at Newcastle West via Stewart Avenue will know that it can already take 5 to 10 minutes to travel just a couple of hundred metres. There are lights at Parry/King Street, Hunter Street and Honeysuckle Drive all of which dramatically slow traffic to a crawl. Travelling east/west on Hunter Street is also very slow at that location. It will certainly add substantial travel time to any journey, even with current traffic volumes. Adding more traffic at that location from a transport interchange requiring passengers to disembark trains for buses and taxis on choking city streets seems to be the concept of madness.

Newcastle needs more north/south crossings, not fewer – both in the CBD and west of the CBD. Sacrificing the north, south and west, where most of the resident population lives, for the CBD in the east is irrational, particularly when four more rail crossings can be installed in the CBD without requiring closure of the rail line and consequent closure of other crossings in the west.

If the heavy rail must be terminated west of the CBD then it must not be done unless there is a clear commitment and **iron clad guarantee for immediate replacement of heavy rail services with light rail**. Anything less is unacceptable.

A concept that might be acceptable is a new large Newcastle Central station and interchange at **Woodville Junction**. There is more than adequate room there for a large rail terminus/interchange on substantial land already owned by the state as rail property. It is in a central location and there is adjacent industrial property that could be acquired to incorporate into the project, if needed. Inter-city trains could continue north to terminate at Maitland with electrification of this section. The overhead electric lines could be removed east to Newcastle for the last 4 km and trains between Newcastle and Maitland could be diesel or light rail instead, interchanging with heavy rail & inter-city services at Woodville Junction. Frequent suburban services from Fassifern and Toronto to Newcastle could also operate as light rail along with reinstated services to Cessnock, Belmont etc (as mentioned above) and a new service north to Newcastle airport.

This would provide improved rail services and better rail access for more people in the Newcastle metropolitan area with greater incentive for use. Retention and improvement of rail services to Newcastle would help facilitate the growth and renewal of the CBD of Newcastle, whereas reduction of services is likely to restrict growth and cause congestion. Scarce land in Newcastle West would not need to be acquired for rail purposes at substantial cost and loss of opportunity. In my opinion, if heavy, inter-city rail is to be terminated, Woodville Junction would be a superior option, **provided** that light rail services to Newcastle continue to be maintained for suburban/metro services.

I trust that you will appreciate that my comments have come from a love of the city of Newcastle, a knowledge of the city that comes with half a century of living and working there and a desire to see it develop in the best possible way. I don't believe that any of the above suggestions are in any way unattainable or unaffordable for the largest state in the Commonwealth, and the largest non-capital city, particularly in the context of the spectacular sums currently being invested and proposed for Sydney. In fact,

I believe that most of the suggestions would be significantly more cost effective than most of the metropolitan projects mentioned and would provide NSW with economic and social benefits far in excess of the cost. The legacy would benefit the state for decades to come.

Regards,
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