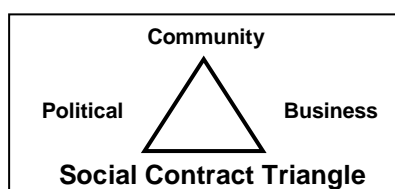


Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

Hunter Tomorrow Inc. Submission

April 2013



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Hunter passenger rail at Hamilton heading to Newcastle.

A line between Newcastle and the then much larger settlement at Maitland was first proposed in 1853 by the proponents of the original Sydney to Parramatta railway. The *Hunter River Railway Company* was formed later that year and the line was surveyed, however the private company failed and was bought out by the NSW government. Construction continued until the line opened in 1857. It was electrified in June 1984 (Wikipedia).

Proposal: The NSW Cabinet announced on 14th December 2012 that they had resolved to ‘revitalise’ Newcastle CBD by cutting off passenger rail services at Wickham and continuing transport into Newcastle by bus. This was announced as the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy (NURS) and subject to SEPP 2012. It was announced this was a *decision of cabinet* and the reasoning for the decision is secret for the next 30 years.

The “community” was invited to respond to this by 17th March, since revised to 19th April. This didn’t make much sense as the much touted NSW Transport Masterplan (NSWTM) had not been completed, the Planning Minister said the rail would be cut regardless of community views and the proposal contradicted many of the already declared objectives of the state government for example:

- 1) The Hunter community would decide the future of heavy rail passenger services into Newcastle and they would be consulted (& act on their views?) *before* making any decisions.
- 2) No decision on cutting the rail would be made until after an alternative transport system was costed and operational.
- 3) If heavy rail were to be terminated it would be replaced with light rail.
- 4) To reduce passenger rail travel time between Sydney and Newcastle to 2 hours.
- 5) To attract travelers to leave their cars at home and travel by public transport.
- 6) To provide Hunter travelers with a *better* transport system.

The Hunter Infrastructure Advisory Board (HIAB): Was commissioned by the Premier soon after the elections, chaired by Maitland Mayor Peter Blackmore. The Premier said this Board would represent the views of the Hunter community and would set up proposals for Infrastructure expenditure in the Hunter for the next 20 years, The members of the Board would be made up from the Hunter community he said however Planning Minister Hazzard said the Board members were nominated by the Hunter Development Corporation (HDC) and rubber stamped by the Planning Minister. When the Minister was asked to explain this he advised that it was a *decision of Cabinet* and the reasoning for the decision is secret for the next 30 years. None of the nominated Board members were members of any commuter or community groups and in fact most of them were members of property and development groups. If the HIAB consulted with any commuter or community groups this too was kept secret. On 4th December 2012 the Newcastle Herald announced that the HIAB had; ‘earmarked \$60m to kickstart the revitalisation of the CBD’ just before the secret Cabinet meeting coincidentally arriving at the same decision 10 days later which was then declared to be a *decision of Cabinet* and the reasoning for the decision will be kept secret for the next 30 years. No explanation of which community group had requested this has so far been revealed.

CBD access to/from the wharf: The HDC has declared that the existence of the rail line makes it impractical to travel from the CBD to the wharf. Perth transport planner James McIntosh who visited Newcastle in February 2013 commented that rail crossings between Watt and Merewether Streets were normal for that type of demographics. However he observed that it appeared that the crossings at Worth Place and Market Street had been temporarily blocked off and when they were returned to service he could see nothing wrong with access across the rail in Newcastle. If there were any serious concerns, then level/over or under crossings could be installed at a fraction of the cost of removing the rail. The NURS has proposed to install eight new crossings ‘after the rail is gone’. If the rail is perceived as a blockage, why not replace the eight new crossings before wasting hundreds of millions of tax dollars and destroying rail services?

Rail services underutilised: It would be profitable for taxpayers and government for the relative ministers to take a train ride from Newcastle to Maitland and at another time, Newcastle to Morisset in peak times to observe that they have been deceived as to the under-utilisation of these services. In fact they would appreciate that in most cases more carriages are needed. The Minister for Transport acknowledges that they recognise there are 5,500 movements a day at Newcastle Station. Many emotive and unfounded stories circulate via the captive media painting a false picture of the patronage. The rail currently facilitates all the festivals without undue congestion while Hunter roads go into gridlock and parking spaces become unavailable very quickly.

Maximum demand: Whether planning to convey excrement or commuters every system must have a capacity to convey its *maximum* demand efficiently. Unlike roads, rail has a huge differential capability to meet widely varying load demands seamlessly. In peak times such as festivals and holidays, rail travels at the same speed as at any other time regardless of load, whereas roads continue to slow down as the load increases. The proposal to remove rail because of its average usage is lower than its maximum demand is as rational as proposing Hunter Street be reduced to one lane to meet its 2am road load. Transport Planner, James McIntosh showed in Perth a train which travels at 130 km/h regardless of peak loads while adjacent road traffic beside it slows to 25km/h during peak times.

Festivals: The current NURS proposes to terminate all passenger rail at Wickham and offload those people onto buses. Currently for many Newcastle festivals the tens of thousands of travelers unload at Newcastle and walk across the road. With the new proposal the government will need to supply huge numbers of buses to take these people from Wickham to their destination. It's certain that if direct rail connection is removed from Newcastle, various festivals now enjoyed by Newcastle business and community would be relocated to different venues at great cost to the Newcastle business sector.

Heritage: The first government railway in the world between Newcastle and Maitland is understandably a NSW Heritage listed item. In fact the entire location surrounding Newcastle Station is of heritage significance. Stepping off the train at Newcastle station one is surrounded by the history of Coal City with the Convict lumbar yard and Custom House over the road. Historic artifacts abound nearby such as Nobbys' lighthouse, the railway storage sheds, Fort Scratchly and many other attractive tourism items of interest.

Temporary closure of rail: HDC has repeatedly advised the government that rail services into Newcastle should be cut because there is insufficient patronage to justify it. The Corporation then proposes the rail corridor remain as government property so that it can be returned to service 'when patronage increases'. This translates to about \$650m to terminate the rail temporarily and probably about \$1B to return it to service – considering the projected population increases and development in the Hunter this should not be too long from now, possibly in a year or two?

If passenger rail transport must terminate at Wickham, government will gain a great deal financially by keeping the rail operational through to Newcastle for festivals only. This could have the bonus of keeping the rail ready to return to general service, 'when patronage increases'. The rail lands around Newcastle Station could also be very useful for stabling.

Young, Aged and Disabled: The NURS demonstrates little attempt to comply with the Aged or Disability Acts both of which require that any transport changes not make travelling any more onerous for the aged and disabled. The current system of merely remaining on the train to Newcastle Station provides a five minute walk or wheelchair trip to the ferry to Stockton. If these people are forced to get a bus from Wickham it will certainly be a much more difficult trip for them. Whereas disabled and able bodied commuters can convey themselves from Newcastle station to the ferry wharf now, the government will need to supply disabled friendly buses from Wickham for all travelers.

Newcastle station attracts the elderly and disabled from far away as it is the only station accessible from ground level. Young people and their bikes and surfboards are unwelcome on buses and they have no other transport option. Large numbers of youths travel from as far away as Gosford and Muswellbrook.

Vision impaired: Vision Australia is located beside Hamilton Station. It is a convenient venue for those people who need special vision services. Vision impaired people and their seeing-eye dogs have been trained for decades to find this location and if any of the Renewal plans should threaten the location of this service, those people and dogs will all need to be re-trained.

Interchange: There is an abundance of statistics to confirm that changing transport modes is a sure way to drive people off public transport if they have the option. Every opportunity to maintain the same transport mode is an encouragement for using it. Disabled, blind, elderly and people with considerable luggage will not appreciate unnecessary mode changes. Fassifern is a great example where travelers have been forced onto buses which rarely synchronise with trains. If this cannot be done at Fassifern what can one expect at Newcastle with a much greater patronage?

Media: Some Newcastle media outlets have constantly promoted termination of rail services since about 2004. Reporting has been blatantly biased in favor of all proposals negative to retaining passenger rail into Newcastle. Pro-rail events and reports get little or no coverage whereas anti-rail events usually occupy the headlines. This appears to be an attempt to 're-educate' the public and government. For example festivals which attract tens of thousands of people, mostly travelling by rail are not mentioned in print or TV. Hugely congested rail stations are described as being 'under-utilised'. Every picture relating to rail events is usually of (single occupant) cars waiting at rail gates. Media reports continually regurgitate false low numbers of rail users in an ongoing attempt to mislead government. By contrast, other Newcastle media provide refreshing factual and believable reports.

Pacific Highway: More commonly known locally as Stewart Avenue and Hannell Streets, this highway passes across the main east/west streets of Newcastle; Glebe Road, Hunter and King Streets carrying a great deal of heavy industrial through traffic causing serious congestion whether rail is in service or during trackwork when no trains pass here. Since the previous Labor government spent \$20m improving rail stations, crossing access and signaling, the delay time caused by rail at this rail crossing is usually no more than 30 seconds. This is about the same time as the following road traffic lights delay traffic and hardly seems a feasible reason to cut rail services. However with the current proposal to terminate rail at Wickham there can be no doubt that this delay will be hugely increased by the conga line of buses that will be needed to replace the rail service.

The great deception: Because so much energy and expense has been channeled into deceiving government and voters that the rail has caused all the city's problems, the real cause of Newcastle's traffic gridlock has been completely submerged and ignored. The removal of the rail or building an over/underpass of rail or road will not change the increasing gridlock in any way and in fact world wide experience predicts the opposite. That is, removal of rail will seriously exacerbate the traffic problems in Newcastle.

The other great deception probably best exemplified by the Herald's front page report that Go Lo had been caused to close because the rail existed, is that Newcastle business has declined because the rail line exists (for the last 150 years ?). In fact small inquiry reveals that the CBD has declined because of a lack of free parking, fear of parking fines, shopping malls surrounding the city and the removal of the Royal Newcastle Hospital and its peripheral industries and commerce to New Lambton. Finally, the relocation of many key businesses of the old CBD to Honeysuckle killed the golden goose.

Transport Minister: Minister Berejiklian commented soon after her election that she was pleased to meet with community groups and others as she had no records at all because the previous government had destroyed them all. More recently she commented that she had no records supporting the retention of rail services into Newcastle. This is not difficult to believe as it appears that HDC is the government's sole source of information and any information contrary to HDC's objectives obviously does not reach the Minister. There are many reports available supporting rail retention into Newcastle.

Community Support: This debate has continued for more than 20 years and is essentially a conflict between property speculators and commuters. The people who promote the NURS constantly pretend they have community support and have the money to pretend it's true. There is good reason to do this as it would not benefit government to promote a very expensive proposal that is to cause huge dissatisfaction amongst voters as this one would. However it does not take a very observant person to note that the support for the NURS is entirely illusory. How could any person seriously pretend that the people of Maitland, Muswellbrook or Morisset would be deliriously pleased to see Newcastle CBD upgraded at the cost of their public transport? More local government councils, community groups and individuals are joining the chorus of disenchantment to voice their lack of support as they realise the enormity of the proposal. Genuine unambiguous surveys of the support for passenger rail services into Newcastle have consistently revealed about 95% in favour of retention, virtually unchanged over the last two decades in spite of the media barrage to change this. Any surveys reporting differently have been ambiguous and questions predicated on a contradictory outcome.

If the government has any doubt of the above statement, an accurate appraisal of the public view can be obtained via a very simple referendum of the people of the Hunter (or Newcastle) by asking: 'Do you want the heavy rail passenger services into Newcastle cut – yes or no?'

Buses: NURS proposes that Newcastle transport will be *better* by forcing people off the rail onto 'fast, frequent' buses. The history of buses in the Hunter does not support this concept with many services transporting much air around the region. Every time a new bus timetable is published the patronage drops further whereas rail patronage continues to increase regardless of conditions. We believe that if the rail is terminated at Wickham many new disabled compliant buses with bike and luggage capacity will be needed to continue commuters to their destinations. These buses will be too numerous to fit into the existing bus terminus and so a new terminus will be necessary.

If this new expanded bus plan is so beneficial why not prove its value with the rail in place? For a preview of the value of replacing rail services with a bus service one can observe the dismal services existing at Fassifern since the rail to Toronto was cut. No body wants to own the 'Train' bus or its terminal and whenever timetables are changed on trains it seems that nobody tells the bus company about it. It's worthy of note that the main reason explained for abandoning the Michael Costa proposal to cut rail back to Broadmeadow in 2004 was that the costs of rearranging streets and buses was not viable. Obviously existing buses will be of no value as they will be carrying their peak loads before they meet the train.

In February 2005 a 'Fast Frequent Bus' exercise was carried out in which a small train load of people (about 200) assembled beside Newcastle Station to board buses during a quiet Tuesday afternoon at non-peak time to observe the effect. In a very few minutes Scott Street was blocked as far as was visible by buses unable to meet the load. Push bikes of course were refused admittance and wheelchairs had to wait for a long time for compliant buses to be available. Eventually half the travelers abandoned all attempts to board a bus and walked to Civic Station and caught the next train home in the comfort they were accustomed to.

Some Expected costs of cutting the rail: We don't propose to advise the government on costings but will list here some of the obvious costs that will need to be taken into account:

- 1) A fleet of tilt-buses with disabled access and provision for pushbikes and large luggage.
- 2) A new bus depot for the new buses.
- 3) Drivers and maintenance crews for the new buses.
- 4) Modified road signaling at the Stewart Avenue crossing.
- 5) Modified rail signaling from Broadmeadow to Wickham.
- 6) New terminating platforms at Wickham – ideally four.
- 7) Rail stabling facilities and real estate at Wickham.
- 8) Staff and public facilities and amenities at Wickham.
- 9) New coach and bus/rail interchange at Wickham.
- 10) Kiss and ride facilities at Wickham.
- 11) Park and ride facilities at Wickham.
- 12) Bicycle secure storage at Wickham.
- 13) Modifications to Broadmeadow, Hamilton and Wickham streets as appropriate.
- 14) Road, parking and signaling modifications for Hunter, Merewether, Scott and Watt streets and Stewart Avenue.
- 15) Rebuild/relocate and or modify Ferry access.
- 16) New signage for the new buses at many locations.
- 17) New Sydney/Newcastle and Hunter train timetables
- 18) New Newcastle bus and ferry timetables.
- 19) Relocation of Vision Australia Offices.
- 20) Retraining vision impaired people and their dogs

The future of Newcastle transport: If nothing were done to Newcastle's transport now we can predict huge increases to both road and rail traffic over the next few years, concentrated around Civic rail station. A new Legal precinct and University campus will attract not only the obvious users of those facilities but also related commerce, industry and visitors. The university at Callaghan is currently a traffic nightmare and we would hope that this is not to be copied into Newcastle which is already close to gridlock. Added to extant traffic, peripheral development north, south and west of Newcastle will generate further congestion. The only remedy for this problem is the passenger rail service which of course has a huge differential capacity to bring many more people to and from the city with negligible impact on other transport and infrastructure at minimal cost to taxpayers. The whole traffic problem is solved by simply adding a few extra carriages and services to the existing rail services. Cutting passenger rail services into Newcastle is not a viable or rational option. The confirmation of the Legal and university facilities alone is the catalyst for the government to promote the improvement and extension of existing rail services and earn appropriate kudos.

Second year of Liberal Government in NSW



Save Our Rail protestors and supporters at Parliament House 2009

The Liberal government is half way through their first term and many people are preparing report cards on the government's achievements or failures. Premier O'Farrell during an interview explained his reasons in a report in Newcastle Herald 23rd March 2013. "For making the right decisions for the Hunter". He said there will be no backflip on his government's decision to remove heavy rail into the city. His reasons for this decision he said were:

- 1) He had delivered certainty where his predecessors had failed.
- 2) He considered light rail the best replacement of heavy rail but doesn't have the money to do it.
- 3) He believed that people wanted certainty of public transport above all else.
- 4) The heavy rail forms a barrier between parts of the city
- 5) Framework decisions have been made and now we need to consult how best to do it.
- 6) The Premier said he hoped his government would be remembered for having delivered infrastructure that was long awaited.

Response:

Referring to the above numbered items:

- 1) This statement is the opposite of fact. **The previous ALP government delivered certainty** in 1998, 2000, 2004 and 2006 that cutting rail services into Newcastle was not viable and was not supported by the community. Many millions of rate and tax dollars were paid to consultants and for studies to arrive at these well researched decisions.
- 2) Member for Newcastle Tim Owen told many media outlets that he had surveyed the electorate of Newcastle (even though the rail isn't their property) who had told him they would support a light rail replacement of the heavy rail. Minister for Planning Brad Hazzard said that any transport replacement 'must be better' than the existing system to proceed. Transport Minister Gladys Berejiklian said that no decision would be made on heavy rail services until after a replacement system was fully costed and operational. If the Premier's promise is to be realised, and there's no money for light rail then nothing should happen until after **money is available to do the job properly**.
- 3) The Premier is right that **people want certainty** in their transport. Sadly because property speculators rejected the previous four decisions, certainty has been achieved four times only to be sabotaged immediately after it is declared during this last 20 years. ('Yes Minister that was only the third decision we've got another couple to go yet!')
- 4) The only transport planner consulted since the Liberal election that studied and reported on Newcastle transport options was Perth planner James McIntosh in February 2013. Mr. McIntosh studied the rail between Watt and Merewether Streets which the HDC described as a 'barrier' and observed that the existing crossings were standard for the type of demographics under consideration. In other words **the 'barrier' is a fabrication** without foundation and is not consistent with standard practice.
- 5) The Premier promised before and after the elections that the community would be consulted before any decision on the rail line was made. **Consultation is worthless if there is no intent to act upon it**. No significant thing has been adopted by the government that was proposed by the ordinary community and everything that property speculators have demanded has proceeded. If all parts of the Hunter, meaning ordinary people, small business, commerce and industry are not seen to be fairly and equally considered then controversy and contention will surely continue indefinitely.

- 6) If the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy proceeds as property developers and speculators propose, **this government will be remembered along with Nick Greiner** as the government that removed essential infrastructure and turned Newcastle into a larger version of Fassifern to benefit a small group of speculators.

Observations: Every one of the last five attempts to remove essential public transport in the Hunter has been promoted by unfounded emotional speculation and developer greed and fantasy. The rail is not a barrier, the existence of the rail didn't cause the decline of the CBD nor will its absence revitalise the CBD to regain its 1950's grandeur – strip type shopping and commerce died in the 1970s. The Honeysuckle planners missed a great opportunity and seem set to repeat their previous error. The world is undergoing another radical transition right now that could be an opportunity if motivated by the appropriate objectives. The Newcastle CBD died mainly because nobody wants to drive past free parking at Glendale or Charlestown, Newcastle Hospital was closed and Honeysuckle sucked all the viable businesses out of the old CBD either onto the wharf or they moved away to Charlestown or Glendale.

Conclusions:

- 1) It is difficult to explain how the any government could be so seriously misled so as to make these inappropriate decisions contrary to public perception, values and the long term benefit of those affected. Changing from ALP to Coalition as a result of the elections has not had the slightest effect upon the plans of the HDC which has continued on with its program as though there was no election at all. The only change resulting from the election is that the ALP and Coalition have swapped policies – so who's governing NSW? Certainly not the elected politicians.
- 2) If 8 new crossings are planned to improve access across the rail, install them first and save a few hundred million tax dollars. If a 'fast frequent' bus is to be a great improvement to Newcastle's public transport test run it with the rail intact to prove its value.
- 3) All projects that are proposed in the NURS can be completed with the rail remaining in service, so it begs the question; why must the rail be absent? The only explanation must be that there are projects not yet made public. The true reason that cannot be revealed to ordinary people can only be that they would certainly not approve. Property Council of Australia regional director, Andrew Fletcher said it all in a recent item in the Herald (12/4/13): "The cost of grouting the old mines trashes the feasibility of many projects". Newcastle rail line is unique in that it is not undermined.
- 4) The hundreds of millions of tax dollars needed to execute the rail cut could be used on many other projects in the Hunter with far more kudos to government than the existing Plan.

Recommendations:

- 1) Take real notice of and act upon genuine reports, submissions, meetings and workshops. All public consultation to the present has been falsely reported and could never be a useful guide for government decision making. Don't be misled by vested interests as to what is best for the region.
- 2) Commission an open Environmental Impact Statement before doing anything else to seek to restore a degree of public confidence that a balanced approach is being attempted. If this is not done there will be constant negativity from most Hunter citizens who perceive a government contemptible to the community.
- 3) Rewrite or abandon the NURS before it's too late.
- 4) Earn public approval by reallocating the money to genuine projects of public concern, such as the John Hunter Eye Clinic, Newcastle Art Gallery, Adamstown Gates overpass, Glendale Interchange, Clyde Street Gates, Pennant Street Bridge, the Western freight rail bypass and numerous other genuine Hunter Valley public concerns.

The Newcastle Herald, Monday, May 14, 1990

Rail line meeting goes ahead despite appeal by chamber

By **SALLY CROXTON**
Civic Reporter

NEXT Wednesday's Save our Rail public meeting will go ahead despite pleas from Newcastle Chamber of Commerce and Industry to call it off.

The call is the latest salvo in the counter-campaign being waged by business groups against the fight to keep the rail line into Newcastle station.

The Save our Rail campaign has re-emerged as the NSW Government is looking at a budget to fund its plans, announced 18 months ago, to bring the rail back to Civic and build a new bus/rail interchange.

In a media statement issued yesterday, the chamber called for The Newcastle Hill Residents Group to call off Wednesday's public meeting in the name of unity.

'We need unity not division if we are to get the investment and jobs we need in Newcastle,' a chamber spokesman said.

'The protest meeting next week can only undermine Government and pri-

vate sector support for Newcastle's revitalisation and harm the job prospects of literally thousands of people.'

But Ms Margaret Henry, president of The Hill group, as well as one of the organisers of the public rally in the City Hall, said the meeting was much bigger than her group, and even if she wanted to it was not within her power to call it off.

It was being held by several organisations including inner-city resident groups, Hunter Valley commuters, trade unions, university students and pensioner groups.

Already more than 6000 people had signed petitions calling for the rail line to be saved.

And the meeting was being supported by several of the region's ALP politicians. Mr Gaudry, MLA Newcastle, would be one of the speakers and Mr Mills, MLA Wallsend, Mr Hunter, MLA Lake Macquarie, and Mr Bowman, MLA Swansea, had accepted invitations.

Mr Face, MLA Charlestown, had sent his apologies and the group was still waiting to hear from Mr Price, MLA Waratah, and Mr Martin, MLA Port Stephens.

Ald Sutton (Newcastle Greens) said yesterday that he and four more of the council's 12 aldermen were supporting the retention of the rail line and would be at Newcastle Station from 8am to noon today to hand out pamphlets. Two Labor members, Ald Heys and Ald Manning, plus Ald Tate (Ind) and himself and probably Ald Goumās (Ind) would be there.

Ald Sutton was critical of some of the information being put out by the town's business groups and of the amount of public money being spent to push their views.

The Citycentre Committee, partly funded by Newcastle City Council, and the Hunter Economic Development Council funded by the State Government, were among the groups employing a public relations consultant to issue media statements supporting the rail line being withdrawn to Civic.

Ald Sutton asserted that a briefing paper issued by the business groups and circularised to media organisations last week contained points that were at best misleading.

George Paris.

Secretary Hunter Tomorrow Inc.

CC

Premier NSW, Barry O'Farrell MP.

Leader of the Opposition John Robertson MP.

Minister for Transport, Gladys Berejiklian MP.

Shadow Minister for Transport, Penny Sharpe MLC.

Member for Maitland Robyn Taylor MP.

Member for Wallsend Sonia Hornery MP.

Member for Lake Macquarie Greg Piper MP.

Member for Newcastle Tim Owen MP.

Mayor of Lake Macquarie

Mayor of Cessnock,

Mayor of Dungog,

Mayor of Maitland

Mayor of Muswellbrook.

Mayor of Singleton.

Mayor of Wyong.