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NSW Department of Planning & Infrastructure  
GPO Box 39  
Sydney NSW 2001

Dear Sir

**Re: Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012**

After studying the department's Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012 I would like to submit a series of comments and questions for your Department's consideration.

While the Strategy does contain some interesting ideas there are many unanswered questions which cast doubt on its overall practicality.

The cutting of the rail line at Wickham is obviously the focal point of the whole Strategy and represents the bulk of the government's current commitment of funds (\$110 M out of a total of \$120M). A key question that needs to be asked is whether the expenditure of \$110M on removing the rail line represents the best use of these funds. I have yet to see a convincing argument that it does.

The other big question hanging over the whole strategy is whether the Government's \$120M will be an adequate sum to cover the cost of the proposed works. No details of how this sum was arrived at have been presented. It has been noted that the State Government is seeking an additional contribution of \$100M from the Federal Government to finance the work. If these additional funds fail to materialise (which seems most likely), will the Government still proceed with the works as proposed? Will it provide the additional funding to cover the likely cost increases?

My comments have been largely confined to the issues of transport and finance as these are the central issues in this report.

**A. Changes to Hunter Street as a Transport Corridor**

I would question the justification and benefit of the proposal to turn Hunter Street into a single lane carriageway for motor vehicles as proposed in Figure 4.8.

Why is it necessary to include a dual cycleway in Hunter Street when a safer and more convenient alternative would be become available on the abandoned rail corridor? As no other short term use is proposed for the rail corridor, why not turn it into a cycleway?

Yes, there would be a cost involved, but at least the area can be put to good use and not be allowed to degenerate into an unmaintained fenced off weed paddock.

Cyclists would then not have to contend with buses, cars and pedestrians in Hunter Street. It would also encourage cyclists to remove themselves from the Foreshore boardwalk, making it safer for pedestrians.

If more cyclists are to be encouraged to commute into the city, then more thought will need to be given to creating safe and dedicated cycle link routes from the outer suburbs.

Also, what thought has been given to safe connections onto the start of the cycleway at Stewart Avenue? This is one of the busiest traffic spots in Newcastle. Definitely not a safe area for cyclists.

A discrepancy is also apparent as to the extent of the cycleway. P 196 Fig 5.52 shows the cycleway starting on eastern side of Stewart Avenue (which I assume is correct), yet P185 Fig 5.4.1 shows a cycleway passing in front of the Store. As this will be a major stopping point for buses, surely this is incorrect!

A dual cycleway in Hunter Street will create an unsafe and inconvenient environment for bus passengers entering and alighting from buses. Fig 4.8 shows buses stopping on the outside of the cycleway. People wishing to catch a bus will have to leave the footpath area, cross the cycleway zone (who has right of way?), risking being struck by a cyclist and then stand on the edge of the cycle barrier while waiting to enter a waiting bus. How convenient and safe is this for children, the elderly and disabled?? Surely this will not be an improvement in bus travel!

Likewise, passengers alighting from buses will need to step out into the cycleway, braving cyclists coming from both directions, before they can reach the safety of the footpath.

Also, think of the discomfort bus passengers will have to endure in wet weather as they move out onto the exposed on the edge of the cycleway as their bus approaches, away from the shelter of kerbside awnings.

Removing two of the existing lanes from Hunter Street will have consequences other than those intended by planners with their anti-car bias. This idea will not work satisfactorily because Hunter Street is also a busy bus route. Apart from the morning peak period when buses will have their own inbound express lane, every time a bus needs to pull away from a stop all of the following traffic will need to give way and stop. Travelling by car in Hunter Street will become a slow stop-go procession, especially during the afternoon peak-period (no express lane for buses leaving town during afternoon peak) .

Also, every time a car stops to reverse park, traffic will also be brought to a stop.

It can be expected that the frequency of rear end collisions will increase as a result of these changes.

The idea of planting deciduous trees all along Hunter Street may have appeal but has any consideration been given to the cost of maintenance, the potential for blocked street gutters during heavy rain and the maintenance required to keep awning gutters

free of leaves? The possibility of tree roots interfering with existing services needs to be considered.

## **B. Connectivity**

One of the frequent arguments put up by supporters of cutting the rail line is improved connectivity. Emotive phrases such as “removing the Berlin Wall” and “dingo fences” have been bandied about by politicians and the development lobby to justify removing the rail line.

It is agreed that removing the rail line would enable improved connectivity between Honeysuckle and Hunter Street – but at what cost?

There are simpler and far less costly ways of providing access in those areas where convenient access is currently not available. Currently there are sufficient crossing points east of Civic. The provision of ground-level pedestrian crossings at Steel Street and Worth Place would go a long way to assist in improving access at key points between the Harbour and Hunter Street. While not providing the same level of connectivity as envisaged in the Strategy Report, it would certainly be far cheaper than cutting the rail line.

## **C. Improving the Commercial Viability of the CBD**

There are many well-documented reasons why the CBD has declined as a shopping destination since its heydays in the 1970's. The rise and attractiveness of suburban shopping centres, with their convenience, their free and adequate undercover parking and enclosed air-conditioned shopping areas, would be one of the principal causes of the decline.

As rightly pointed out in the Strategy Study, the CBD will need to re-invent itself as a shopping destination. The success of the expanded Marketown shopping centre would call into question the need for another similar large-scale shopping centre in the Mall, although a scaled down version could be viable based on local resident support.

Up-market boutique shops, not found in the big shopping centres, could be viable in the Mall. However, they would have to be attractive to customers from a wider area than the CBD to succeed. If customers from beyond the CBD are deterred from driving into the CBD to shop because of traffic and parking restrictions then the potential viability of areas such as the Mall will be threatened.

This raises the question of the place of cars in the CBD and the anti-car bias shown throughout the Study. While encouraging improved patronage of public transport is a worthy goal it should not be imagined that this can be achieved by an all-out assault on the use of private vehicles. Public transport must be made attractive and convenient if it is to successfully attract people away from their private vehicles. The current level of attractiveness and convenience of the Newcastle bus service falls well short of meeting these objectives.

If shoppers are faced with lack of off-street parking, high parking costs and hefty fines for parking violations, they will avoid the CBD and do their shopping elsewhere. This is a trend that has been occurring for some time. Imagining that shoppers from

outlying areas will put up with frustrations of a poor bus service to patronise the CBD is ignoring reality.

The Strategy proposes a cap on future parking stations in the CBD. Already we are seeing the potential loss of spaces for the general public following the sale of some of the existing council car parks. For example, the new owner of the Gibson Street car park plans to add four commercial floors above the existing parking levels. Obviously a large proportion of the existing car park will be reserved for the exclusive use of the commercial tenants. There are also tentative plans to transform the Bolton Street car park into a hotel.

Parking is going to become a serious issue at Civic once the new Law Courts are established and the University possibly decides to go ahead with its Civic campus. As the Civic area is to become the cultural and administrative hub of the CBD parking spaces will be in high demand and will not be able to be met by available street parking and nearby off-street parking. The removal of Civic station will also exacerbate parking problems.

Serious consideration should be given to establishing a major parking station on the site of the current Wilson's Wright Lane car parking area to overcome these problems.

#### **D. Wickham as a suitable site for a Transport Interchange**

The Planning Minister has promised us a "superior" Transport Interchange at Wickham for trains, buses and coaches. Is this feasible with the limited area available at the Wickham site? Judging by the scarcity of details in the Strategy Report I would suspect not. Surely there are concept plans in existence. Why haven't they been included in the Strategy Study?

The first observation I would make is that Wickham will present as a most unattractive entrance to Newcastle for visitors arriving by train. Renaming Wickham Station "Newcastle" would add insult to injury. It would be equivalent to making Redfern the main train terminus for Sydney.

On the southern side of the new station we have the vista of the unattractive backside of the old Store building (unlikely to be replaced by the envisaged multilevel office tower in the foreseeable future). And on the northern side we have dilapidated sheds fronting Station Street. A wonderful entrance to our city!

Consider too that most of the attractions that people travel by train to visit – the harbour, the Foreshore, Nobbys Beach and entertainment – are currently readily accessible from Newcastle Station, what sense does it make to make these attractions as difficult to access as possible?

As this will be a transport interchange I am wondering how train travellers will "interchange" with buses to provide that promised superior transport option? Again no details.

P 199 Fig 5.55 does show bus stops remaining at existing locations at the front of the Store. This would seem to be the only practical location for buses to operate from, at least until the Store site is extensively redeveloped.

Therefore train travellers (including the elderly, the infirmed and travellers with luggage) alighting at Wickham would be required to make their way to the exit of the station at the Stewart Avenue end of the station and then proceed (in the open) by the footpath to the waiting (?) buses at the front of the Store. This will probably add another 5 minutes to their journey, but they will at least have the benefit of the exercise!

The question of the frequency of buses meeting arriving trains is overlooked. Are there to be special buses to meet every train? Is there going to be sufficient seating capacity on the arriving buses to transport the arriving train travellers without delay (especially during morning peak hour). If normal bus services are to be used what guarantee will there be that there will be unoccupied seats available? How much extra time will be wasted waiting to transfer on to buses? What provision will be made for luggage, surfboards, etc on the buses?

What arrangements will be made to transport large crowds arriving by train to attend events at the Foreshore? How will buses cope with moving these crowds from Wickham to the top end of town?

There will certainly be extra time needed to travel the remaining part of the journey along Hunter Street. Morning and evening train arrival and departure times will need to be adjusted to suit. Does the extra delays and inconvenience involved warrant this being described as a superior transport system? I guess those affected travellers can make up their own minds about this.

If this is indeed going to be a transport interchange what allowance has been made for taxis and coaches? There appears no evidence on plans provided that this has been considered.

The physical space to construct a new station is constrained at the Wickham site. Only two tracks are shown at the station (compare this to what exists at the existing Newcastle Station). It has already been well documented in the press that only four car trains could be accommodated at the new station, and it would therefore be necessary to terminate Sydney trains at Broadmeadow. This would create a whole raft of problems in itself as it would be difficult to seamlessly transfer passengers to and from the Newcastle connections.

The railway gates at Railway Street and Beaumont Street could be forced to be permanently closed because of extra train movements depoting trains. All these outcomes are serious drawbacks to the line cutting proposal, and should have been foreseen and acknowledged well before a Scoping Study stage.

## **E. Finance**

The Government's allowance for funding the removal of the railway line and the creation of a new transport interchange at Wickham will no doubt be shown to be

totally inadequate in due course. The envisaged \$100M contribution from the federal Government will never materialise in the present economic environment.

The government seems to have based its costings on the estimate of \$110M released to the press by the Hunter Business Chamber in September 2012. The government apparently places more trust in the estimates of a private business organisation than it does in its own experts. While the Business Chamber's estimate is devoid of detail I guess we should be prepared to trust the Chamber's no-doubt extensive experience in planning and managing complex engineering projects.

Even the very optimistic estimate prepared for the Hunter Development Corporation by Parsons Brinckerhoff put the cost at \$150M (source NMH November 10, 2009). Estimates prepared by RailCorp, who would be presumed to be more aware of the operational difficulties associated with the project, put costs in the order of \$650M.

Even if the RailCorp estimate is out by 100%, which I doubt, the \$110 M which the Government has so far allocated for the rail removal component will be totally inadequate.

Funding the other \$58 M of inner-city infrastructure works from Council developer contributions also seems very problematic. A report in the Newcastle Morning Herald of March 8, 2013, reveals that there is very little money currently available in the developer contribution funds. Are the ratepayers of Newcastle to be forced to pick up the tab for the civic improvement proposed in the Strategy?

The obvious lack of funding to complete the works in the Strategy Report can only raise a very big question mark over the viability of the whole project and whether the government is indeed serious about undertaking it in the first place.

## **F. Recommendations**

If the Government is sincere about spending \$120 M to improve the Newcastle CBD then there are much better ways to utilise the money than proposed.

There is no justification in cutting the rail line at Wickham at the present time. The rail service should be allowed to continue to Newcastle Station until such time that it can be replaced with a properly designed light rail system, operating out of Woodville Junction.

Two additional ground level pedestrian crossings at Steel Street and Worth Place would go a long way to overcoming the lack of connectivity between Hunter Street and the Honeysuckle precinct. The cost would be only a small fraction of the costs involved in cutting the rail line.

Proposals to turn Hunter Street into a two lane transport corridor should be abandoned as unworkable and action taken to expand off-street parking spaces in the Civic area to accommodate the development taking place in the area.

The State Government needs to take a lead in financing key "catalyst" projects in the city to help in its renewal. To date it has set a very poor example in this area. Our art gallery upgrade has been denied a modest \$7M contribution by the State Government,

the old Post Office site continues to rot in neglect, a government department is to be shortly moved out of the CBD to Charlestown and the Government has recently pulled out recycling the former Empire Hotel site for use by a government department.

A sum of \$120 M could go a long way in funding various projects in the CBD and the Greater Newcastle region that would ever be achieved by wasting it on an ill-considered proposal to cut the rail line. Available funds should be spent for the benefit of the Newcastle Region as a whole rather than pandering to the short term gain of a handful of developers.