

urbanrenewal - NURS 2012 Comments

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Subject: NURS 2012 Comments

I have reviewed the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012 and wish to raise a number of points for consideration:

- The back bone of any CBD is the transport system – without good transport the CBD will not thrive. To increase the number of residents and employees within the Newcastle CBD as proposed, it is essential that a sufficient capacity is provided in the transport system to cater for this growth. The proposal to cut the rail line at Stewart Avenue and replace this mode with buses, and the reduction in the number of lanes on Hunter Street reduces the effective capacity of the transport system in the CBD. It is considered likely, although this should be confirmed through appropriate modelling (which it appears has not been done) that the reduction in capacity will be so severe, that it will not be sufficient to cater for existing travel demands, let alone future growth. **To be clear, I oppose the decision to remove the rail line from Wickham to Newcastle** on the following grounds:
 - It is unknown how much this will cost (somewhere between \$120M and \$600M according to the various reports prepared on the subject)
 - It is unknown what the design will be (there has been no consultation with the bus companies and/or Railcorp, and there is no plans submitted as part of the strategy).
 - The proposed interchange, as has been reported in local media, is insufficient to cater for train sets from the Sydney route. A requirement for these trains to terminate at Broadmeadow would impose a further disincentive on passengers to utilise public transport, as the current Broadmeadow station does not service a great number of trip generating developments.
 - The artists impression of the station does not provide any details on how the mode change would be facilitated – it appears that the existing buses on Hunter Street would remain with train passengers forced to wait on Hunter Street in substandard facilities for a bus to arrive. This will again add to the disincentive to use public transport.
 - It is unlikely integration between trains and buses will occur given the current frequency. Otherwise, why has this not happened before?
- It is considered possible that the reduction in capacity will be so severe, and the increase in the queues and delays so significant, that retail in particular will suffer. Other types of trips, such as workers, uni students (assuming the uni comes to town) etc are captive trips, so there will still be traffic, but:
 - Queues and delays will significantly increase immediately.
 - Land values will not rise as much as it could due to poor transport, or even decrease.

- People will prefer to shop at areas where they are not significantly impeded by queues and delays caused by insufficient capacity.
- People will prefer not to work there, leading to businesses not setting up there.
- The current government appears incapable of running buses on time in Sydney, (currently more than 10% are late) so how can we expect timetables in Newcastle to be kept?
- The future use of the rail corridor has not been determined in the strategy. **It is considered likely that the underlying reason for the removal of the rail is to facilitate development of this land. This land would be considered desirable due to the fact it is not affected by subsidence. While this is not necessarily a bad outcome for the corridor, it is considered the underhanded way this is being achieved will result in significant community backlash.**

My preferred option is introducing 5 new level crossings in the short term (yes this can be done). Total cost around say \$10M. The ultimate alignment for the rail would still need to be determined, but I believe should be underground following King Street, with stations at Market town, around Darby Street (with connections to the uni), and to the east end (for the boutique retail and tourist Mecca!). Length is around 3kms, which at approximately say \$300M per km (based on Fremantle project currently under construction – 1.2kms for \$360M) is \$900M. Add in the stations, at around \$60M each (say \$180M), and upgraded commuter carparks at various key stations (say \$150M) for just over \$1.2B we can have a fantastic public transport system, backed by sound planning decisions (i.e. high rise buildings over / adjacent to stations) which can be partly funded by the private development industry via a VPA.

- The Government's stated objective is to increase the proportion of public transport users. The following points apply:
 - It is essential to achieve this objective that the system is fast, effective, easy to use and safe. The requirement for passengers to change from bus to train will be a significant disincentive for using public transport; the opposite of what is trying to be achieved (assumes same frequency). However, if the interchange time is minimised, and integration of the bus and train timetables is realised by increasing the frequency of services to 5 to 10 minutes, there will be an increase in patronage. **It should be noted the integration of buses / trains and the increase in frequency could be achieved without the need to cut the rail.**
 - Also, there are a significant number of low cost or free parking options in the CBD. While I believe these parking options are near capacity with the current population, there needs to be consideration given to pricing these parks to provide additional incentive to use public transport. This may include increasing parking fees, vehicle tolls to enter the CBD (particularly during peak times). Also incentives should be given to employees of businesses to use public transport – i.e. charge for private parking spaces.
 - The Lower Hunter Regional Strategy (LHRS) appears to prefer land that is not anywhere near public transport, in particular rail. I believe this is due to the land being bought dirt cheap by developers, and then promoted to government as future residential developments. Examples of this would be Gillieston Heights including Cliftleigh, Thornton North (this does have a small station), Raymond Terrace North

and Huntlee (which is next to a train station, but there are not enough passenger trains to suggest this would attract a significant number of trips). I realise this is off-topic, but this is counter-intuitive to the Government's stated objective and should be reviewed immediately.

- The following points apply to the planned vehicular changes including around Hunter Street:
 - While the plan identifies higher buildings would be permitted around the new Wickham station, there is significant development proposed east of Wickham including a new University campus, and higher density residential, which should ideally be serviced by rail. **Also there seems to be no focus placed on the existing parking stations. These are currently under-utilised, so consideration should be given to higher building limits around these places.**
 - **While the proposal may achieve additional north-south connectivity relative to the current situation, there is the reduced east-west connectivity that needs to be considered – that is the connections between Newcastle CBD and the rest of Newcastle and beyond, which appears to have been taken for granted that it will not change. This is a significant concern that will need to be addressed.** Connectivity has been raised as a reason for the removal of the rail. It would be significantly cheaper to install new signalised at-grade level crossings (vehicle/pedestrian and pedestrian only) at strategic locations between Wickham and Newcastle (as mentioned above, I would suggest that this could be done for around \$10M) than the proposed rail removal and construction of a new station. This is suggested to be a short term solution, and could be achieved within the next 18 months.
 - **The reduction of Hunter Street to two lanes (three in the morning peak) is not likely to be practically achievable.** The plan only provided a typical cross-section with no consideration of transitions or treatments at intersections, particularly at signals. Hunter Street, especially around Stewart Avenue, experiences significant congestion particularly during the afternoon peak period. It is recommended you consult with RMS as soon as possible regarding this proposal.
 - **It is not clear why no work is proposed to be undertaken on the major routes, particularly Stewart Avenue and Hunter Street itself.** The intersection improvements identified in the plan only focuses on a small number of local intersections, some of which have already been upgraded. This is not correct and will need to be modified to reflect what is proposed.
 - **My view is that King Street should be made inbound only and Hunter Street outbound only.** This would significantly simplify each of the intersections, and provide extra capacity at the pinch points (being the signals). It is considered (this should be checked through appropriate modelling) that three lanes would be sufficient for each direction of flow – this would achieve the same outcome as reducing Hunter Street to one lane in each direction, and it would spread the load between both Hunter and King Streets.
- The following comments relate to funding of the works and other miscellaneous items:
 - It has not been made clear how the physical works identified in the strategy would be funded. While the State government has committed \$120 million to commence

the strategy, it is considered a significant risk that additional funding will not be forthcoming and no positive benefits will be realised. I would suggest that many times this amount will be required (assuming the Chamber of Commerce figure of \$120M for the removal of the rail is accurate). **It is considered a special levy, through a mechanism such as a VPA, should be imposed on future development in the CBD to contribute towards infrastructure.**

- The decision of the government not to develop the former Empire Hotel site and the failure to re-develop the former post office has sent a more definite message to the community than the proposed strategy. **Any re-vitalisation of the Newcastle CBD must begin with investment by the government in the form of job transfer from other areas, such as Sydney.** This will be the best way to create confidence in the business community that the government is willing to invest in Newcastle.

In summary, it is recommended that a model such as Paramics or similar is commissioned to test the proposed network changes both now and over the life of the proposed strategy. Further, it is recommended that key stakeholders including Council and Roads and Maritime Services are able to provide input into the modelling. It is requested that alternative methodologies are considered in realising the proposed strategy. This should include as a minimum undergrounding the rail roughly underneath King Street with surface connections and stations around Marketown, Civic precinct/Darby Street and East End. There are alternate configurations available to the King Street and Hunter Street corridors to improve capacity, while reducing the number of lanes. These should be explored further, with RMS.

Regards,

Ben Konetschnik

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