

Renewing Newcastle

My Background

My name is Giles Martin. Although I was born in Sydney, I went to school in Newcastle and I've lived in Newcastle most of my life. However, I lived and worked in Columbus, Ohio, between 1999 and 2011, before retiring to live back in Newcastle. For most of my working life I was a cataloguer at the University of Newcastle Library, but I worked in the U.S. as an Assistant Editor of the Dewey Decimal Classification.

So I have a love of Newcastle, but I have also travelled a lot in the U.S. and Canada – particularly the Midwest – and I've seen how a lot of cities and towns work. In particular, I found Columbus, Ohio, an interesting contrast, since I think it's the largest city in the world with no passenger rail service – though they do have proposals for light rail within the city, and for high-speed passenger rail to join the largest cities in Ohio.

What are Newcastle's Problems?

People complain about the traffic, about the lack of parking, about the poor public transport, and about the railway line dividing the CBD in two. However, in my view, those aren't the real problems. They are no worse than you'll get in an average city the size of Newcastle.

The real problems are:

- (1) Newcastle is not a capital city, so it gets overlooked by the state government, with a few exceptions, such as the Wran Government electrifying the railway line to Newcastle. And it's not because it's a safe Labor seat: having an Independent like George Keegan or a Liberal member like Tim Owen doesn't help either.
- (2) The Newcastle CBD is too long for a city of its size. It can't sustain a CBD going from Newcastle Beach to Dairy Farmer's Corner, so we've seen a lot of urban decay throughout the long CBD.
- (3) The Newcastle CBD is on a peninsula, so people don't go through it on their way from north to south or from east to west.
- (4) The Newcastle CBD had some large employers that have gone out to the suburbs, particularly the Royal Newcastle Hospital (effectively replaced by the John Hunter), and the big retailers like David Jones (which have moved to the suburban malls).
- (5) The radial public transport system of buses and trains (and in a bygone era trams) used to funnel passengers into the CBD. Now 90% of journeys to work, to shops or to recreation are by car, so unless their destination in the CBD people have no reason to go through it.

I think all these problems just have to be accepted, and any proposal to renew the Newcastle CBD has to work with them, not against them.

What are the opportunities?

It's not all gloomy for the Newcastle CBD, however:

- (1) The redevelopment of Honeysuckle has revitalised disused railway and port land, and has shown what can be done with the strategic injection of government finance and planning. I think a lot can be learned from its success.
- (2) There has been a lot of residential redevelopment throughout the CBD, showing that there is an increasing market for inner-city apartments rather than for outer suburban houses.
- (3) There are large retailers in the West End, particularly Marketown and Aldi, though these serve a local market rather than the regional market that the CBD used to serve and that the suburban malls now serve.
- (4) There is a small university presence in the Civic area which is likely to be enlarged in the future, bringing both employment and students into the CBD.
- (5) The CBD and its fringes are a popular destination for recreation, particularly Newcastle Beach, Nobbys Beach, the Foreshore, Darby Street and Beaumont Street. Hunter Street is notably absent from that list, however, even with bridge connection between Queen's Wharf and Hunter Street at Market Street.

Renewal of the CBD should build on these successes.

Perceptions

A lot of the difficulty in the debate over the Newcastle CBD is that people have perceptions of reality – perceptions which may or may not be true, and (if they are true) something can be done to correct the reality.

One is that public transport is undesirable, compared with cars: it's slow and infrequent, doesn't go where people want it to go, is expensive (while the sunk costs of a car are invisible), is dirty and covered in graffiti, and requires you to share the ride with dangerous and obnoxious fellow passengers. A second perception (often heard with respect to the railway line to Newcastle) is that people don't use public transport, so it should be removed when it interferes with travel by car.

Of course, the fact that these perceptions are partly based on reality makes it harder to deal with them. And, of course, people in Sydney would have similar perceptions about public transport being undesirable, but with the exception that their perception is that public transport is over-crowded. But people in Sydney do use public transport much more than people in Newcastle, because there's no alternative: all-day parking in the Sydney CBD, and in the regional CBDs like Chatswood and Parramatta, is too expensive.

Solutions to the problems

A. What to do with the CBD

I think the three-activity-hub approach of the strategy makes sense, including moving many of the CBD activities to the area around Wickham Station. However, removing the railway line would make it harder to sustain the East End and the Civic activity hubs. In particular, it's going to make access to the new university campus and to the new courthouse next to Civic Station much more difficult. If you don't have a railway line east of Wickham, then in the long term those areas are going to become

less desirable because of reduced public transport and increased demand for car-parking spaces. So the East End in particular will have a further decline.

B. What to do with the railway line

Three approaches are needed here:

- (1) Encourage use of the railway line so that there is less congestion on the roads. The existing trains clearly have spare capacity, especially the Sydney services, so that capacity ought to be used.
- (2) Build connections across the railway line. I believe level crossings could be added, especially at Steel Street and Worth Place, but I have heard that would conflict with an inflexible state government policy against new level crossings. If that policy cannot be changed, then at least there could be pedestrian bridges. For example, there could be a walkway parallel with Steel Street linking Marketown with the foreshore, or one linking the redeveloped Stegga's Emporium with the foreshore. These would break the perceived barrier of the railway line without removing it.
- (3) Build a road bridge linking Hannell Street with Stewart Avenue. The problem here is not just the level crossing next to Wickham Station, but also the closeness of three traffic lights at Parry Street, Hunter Street and Honeysuckle Drive. At peak periods, traffic will be delayed almost as much with those traffic lights as it is with the level crossing. I'd suggest a two-lane road (one lane each way) to take through traffic over Hunter Street and the railway line, retaining the existing road and level crossing underneath it for local traffic. However, if that's impractical, then a four-lane bridge would solve most of the problems there.

In addition, completion of the Inner Newcastle Bypass, by linking the roundabout on Newcastle Road at Jesmond with Lookout Road next to the John Hunter Hospital, would take some longer-distance traffic off Hannell Street and Stewart Avenue. This traffic does not need to go through the Newcastle CBD.

C. How to Encourage Public Transport Usage

If the state government is going to encourage public transport usage, it needs to make some visible changes to the network, such as:

- (1) Building the proposed Glendale Station, including a bus-rail interchange and free parking for commuters and people travelling to Sydney. There is the space to do it there, and to encourage commuters for the Glendale area to use the train. (They can't travel so easily from Cardiff Station into Newcastle, because they can't park there.)
- (2) Provide free rail travel between Hamilton and Newcastle, in parallel with the free inner-city bus services. Since the trains are under-used at present, and since tickets are rarely or never inspected on this line, this would cost City Rail nothing except publicising the decision.
- (3) Have an integrated ticketing system, including trains, ferries and buses. Seniors already have this with their \$2.50 tickets, so it should not be too hard to do it for the rest of the community.
- (4) Have true express bus services linking major centres. The strategy talks about improving the 100, 363 and 320 bus services. I would suggest:

- a. A Newcastle-Wallsend express service along King Street, Parry Street, Donald Street, Griffiths Road, and Newcastle Road.
- b. A Newcastle-Charlestown express service following the existing 349 route, but much more frequent between Newcastle and Charlestown.

Respectfully submitted

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