

1 Corona Street
Hamilton East NSW 2303
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Revitalising Newcastle
Submission to the Department of Planning and Infrastructure

Thank you for the opportunity to comment upon Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012. I commend the authors on some thoughtful and innovative suggestions to revitalize Newcastle. I will limit my comments to a few aspects of the strategy.

First some background. We have lived in Hamilton East since 1979 with a break of about 10 years when we lived in Columbus Ohio. During this time, family members lived in our house in Corona Street.

One of the key reasons for choosing to buy a house in Hamilton East was its proximity to public transport. While in Newcastle, we have been a one car family. We had four children and all of us have used public transport regularly. Family members have worked and studied at the University of Newcastle, and so were regular passengers of the railway between Wickham and Warrabrook stations. Prior to the railway station being built at Warrabrook, we relied on the bus which also provided regular service, albeit a little slower than the train. We were very fortunate to live so close to both the railway station and bus stops. We were delighted when the timetable was changed so that most Sydney trains stopped at Wickham. Prior to this it was necessary to either get a Hunter train to Hamilton or Civic station (or walk) to make the connection.

Whilst my husband and I lived in Columbus, I was continually lamenting the poor public transport there and singing the praises of Newcastle's. Columbus has no passenger rail line and the suburbs are poorly served by buses. Bus routes ran from the suburbs to the Downtown area and the Ohio State University campus and there were some morning express services which encouraged park and ride. However, getting to and from points not on these routes was difficult. For my husband to get to work (about a 10 minute drive) there was no service except for a bus ride into the city and then another out again which would take about two hours. Therefore, while in Columbus, we became a two car family so we could both get to work in a timely fashion.

One innovative thing Columbus did have, however, was a "free" bus service to Ohio State University for its students. OSU is one of the largest universities in terms of undergraduates in the US. The free bus rides were financed by a compulsory fee the University levied on all students. This enabled the Central Ohio Transit Authority to provide the service. I believe some sort of similar scheme could be explored with Newcastle University to alleviate the parking problems on the Callaghan campus as well as reducing traffic in the area.

I am disappointed that the railway is to be terminated at Wickham although from a personal point of view, Wickham is our local station, just a five minute walk away, so we will not be personally disadvantaged. We rarely travel on the train between

Wickham and Newcastle, preferring to walk or catch one of the free buses. However, those living nearer Civic and Newcastle stations are not so fortunate and will be disadvantaged by having to change from the train to a slower form of transport. The cutting of the train seems inevitably to lead to more cars in the inner city so it is difficult to see that the buses will not be slowed by traffic congestion. Moreover, currently the time spent waiting for a bus in Hunter Street is highly unpredictable with sometimes, a fifteen minute wait and then the arrival of two or three buses at the same time. This is understandable given that buses have to negotiate traffic and can't stick precisely to timetables as trains can.

I commend the Strategy's authors for the stated aims in 'People the Streets' and the theme of reducing cars in the inner city and encouraging use of public transport, cycling and walking. Like many others, I'm concerned at the lack of specific proposals for how this is to be achieved and look forward to the release of more detail on this.

In the section Barriers and Linearity, p 44. There is reference to giving pedestrians priority. As a regular pedestrian along Hunter Street, one of the barriers is the long waits at many side streets. These are not particularly busy but have traffic lights on them. I am referring to streets such as Auckland Street, Steel Street and even Union and Darby Streets. A walker is constantly stopped by traffic lights as the pedestrian lights need to be activated and arriving at the wrong time can mean a long wait. More often than not, there are only one or two cars, but the lights stay red for a long time. I find this a bigger barrier to pedestrians than the railway.

Proposal for West end to be CBD

The extension of Market Town has already increased traffic especially along National Park Street. Apart from the inconvenience of it being difficult to cross the street at times, there are safety issues that need to be addressed. The area has high pedestrian activity not just from locals but from the Newcastle High School students. If the West end is to be the new CBD, traffic problems will increase unless traffic can be encouraged to access the West End from the south by Stuart Avenue. National Park Street has just one lane each way, is parked out on both sides from Hunter Street to a little south of Parkway Avenue, and has speed restrictions and speed humps to discourage through traffic. Nevertheless, traffic has substantially increased over the past decade or so and especially since Market Town was extended.

Parking

Currently, our street and the streets all around (e.g. those bounded by Parkway Avenue, Stuart Avenue, National Park Street and Parry Street) are completely filled with commuter parking from about 8am till after 5pm on weekdays. When the strategy refers to there being a supply of 10,500 parking spaces (page 48) with a peak of 7500, this does not take into account that our streets are filled with commuter cars who take advantage of free parking. I would think the number of cars in Cooks Hill, Hamilton East and other areas would number thousands. Naturally this commuter parking increases the traffic at peak hours.

Improvements to Birdwood Park would be welcomed and the general thrust of developing the West End appears attractive. However, the scale is daunting and once again if there is to be high rise of the scale suggested, the density of the population

would increase traffic. Personally, I find traffic, not the railway, the bigger obstacle to amenity in the inner city.

Cycleways

I commend the Strategy for its suggestions on improvements to cycleways and the provision of an end of trip bicycle facilities. Cycling is environmentally friendly and good for fitness, and will help to ease the congestion on the roads.

Planting at Wheeler Place

The proposals for the beautification of Wheeler Place are attractive. My preference is for deciduous trees. With increased people in the area having a shady area to sit in will be much appreciated.

Educational Hub

I also support the development of the university in the city. However, I believe the train would be a more efficient people mover for students. As previously mentioned, students use the train to Warrabrook. I have been at Callaghan campus the last few weeks and have seen the large number of students walking from the train station to campus. From my experience when I was working at the University, most of the students approaching from an easterly direction were already on the train when I caught it at Wickham. Fortunately those coming from the Maitland side will not be affected by the truncation of the line at Wickham. Those coming from inner Newcastle, will, of course, still have bus options, but this seems like going backwards as the railway line to Warrabrook has made the journey quicker and more reliable.

Conclusion

The Renewal Strategy provides welcome ideas and momentum to the development and beautification to the city. It does not address in detail, transport and traffic concerns for inner city residents or for commuters. One hopes there is some compromise solution which would move people quickly and efficiently and thus reduce the traffic and parking problems. Keeping the Maitland trains running to Newcastle but at a slower speed, increasing the crossings across the railway, improving the ascetics through tree planting along the line have all been suggested. Light rail is another solution but apparently prohibited by cost. We have appreciated the improvements to public transport over the years especially the establishment of a station at the University and the changes to timetabling to enable trains to stop at Wickham. The current proposals, however, are steps backwards.

I understand that there are compelling reasons for some people to opt for car travel e.g. parents taking children to childcare, however, there are many who could use public transport but do not, preferring to cope with increasing congestion and fight for a parking space. Changing this mindset is a challenge and I suggest working with the University is a good starting point.

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