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Submission attached

# A Vision of Newcastle without Heavy Rail

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The state coalition government has won re-election, and proceeds with its promise to cut the Newcastle rail line to a new interchange west of Stewart Avenue. There are complaints about the resumption of land in the very heart of the new West End CBD to build the interchange, some of them from the local member (the vision does not quite reveal which party won this seat).

As construction proceeds, it is necessary to close the level crossings at Railway Street and Beaumont Street. This generates massive road traffic congestion and consequent storms of protest.

The new bus-rail interchange at New Wickham is completed, and the rail tracks from Stewart Avenue to Newcastle station are covered over. Buses take over the task of transporting passengers between New Wickham and the East End precinct. A significant increase in road congestion in this area is immediately obvious.

The security fencing along the abandoned rail corridor is taken down as soon as the land is considered safe and convenient for pedestrian use. By this time, agitation for the rail corridor to be used to relieve pressure on the road system has risen to hysterical levels.

The state government decides that the rail corridor should be converted to an express busway in the interests of public transport. The rail corridor then becomes a construction site for the busway, with the exception of the area occupied by Newcastle station, which becomes a construction site for luxury apartments and offices. The historic Newcastle station building is retained for the sake of its heritage value, but is difficult to see behind the new construction.

The busway removes considerable traffic from the road system, but a number of accidents involving pedestrians occur, and the security fencing along the corridor is restored. There are also accidents involving frustrated motorists, who are enraged to see lightly loaded buses, both in the off-peak periods and returning in the contra-peak direction during peak hours, and also enraged at the much shorter interval between buses than was the case for the trains. Agitation builds for the corridor to be bridged in several locations to remove the level crossings, or at least for boom barriers to be reintroduced at the crossings.

Business interests in Newcastle complain that they are not seeing the promised improvements in permeability of the former rail corridor. The official reply is that the government is considering what can be done by way of bridge construction.

Business interests also complain that Newcastle has not become a more visitor-friendly city as promised, because the new construction in the city has excessively high floor space ratios and obstructs visibility from the city to the harbour. The official reply is that government at

all levels has to take a balanced view of the various interests in the city, that the current construction boom is extremely valuable to the people of Newcastle in providing jobs and economic activity, and that there are still very nice views of the harbour to be had near Harry's Cafe de Wheels.

Ticket sales for stations on the Morisset and Hunter rail lines drop by ten per cent because passengers do not like having to interchange, and road traffic increases as a result. The loss of revenue causes the state government to cut train services in order to keep a balanced budget. A further increase in road congestion throughout the Newcastle urban area is noticeable, because the cut in rail services also makes the trains less appealing to passengers. Rumours grow that the government will cut all Morisset services and replace Hunter line trains with buses.

With the increase of commercial and residential construction in the Newcastle CBD, the load on the road system in Newcastle becomes worse and worse. Traffic on the express busway becomes much heavier, rendering permeability almost non-existent. There is a gradual recovery in rail patronage as the road system becomes unbearably congested, but the quality of the journey to the CBD via the interchange is still a problem for many commuters.

Eventually, the Labor party wins government at state level, on a platform that includes electric trains to Maitland, conversion of the whole of the Broadmeadow to Newcastle rail corridor to light rail, and complete reconstruction of Broadmeadow station, including the Lambton Road overbridge, to support a safe and convenient bus-rail-tram interchange that will not interfere with RailCorp/ARTC freight operations. A speed limit of 25 kph is promised on the light rail line in areas where the security fencing will be removed to re-open the line to pedestrian cross-traffic, and at the approach to level crossings, allowing a highly competitive journey time of 15 minutes from Broadmeadow interchange to the East End terminus. Also promised is a study to determine the feasibility of extending light rail along Lambton Road. The new government is only slightly inconvenienced by questions about where the money is coming from, and rumours that a consortium of Chinese financiers is involved.

At this point, the vision has become very cloudy.