

SUBMISSION ON THE NEWCASTLE URBAN RENEWAL STRATEGY 2012

FROM GEOFFREY NICHOLLS

The Executive summary for the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy (NURS) states that there is “no single answer” to the revitalisation of Newcastle, yet it supports the NSW government’s decision to truncate the railway line at Wickham – as an essential subtraction from the city’s current operation and character that will enable renewal to occur. The primary purpose in the removal of the rail line is repeatedly stated in the strategy as a necessary means for creating connectivity along the north-south axis of the city. However, the intention to increase residency, business, entertainment, cultural activity, administration and education, while to “reduce the number of cars”, presents a conundrum about the strategy’s agreement with the removal of a functioning, passenger-bearing, mode of public transport – as evidenced in the railway service to Newcastle Station. There is an intention to ‘utilise existing infrastructure and services’ which is contradicted by the decision to remove a key mode of infrastructure that services the city at three stations – Wickham, Civic, and Newcastle.

The NURS emphasises “accessibility and convenience of public transport” throughout its documentation, yet the complete removal of an established mode of public transport shall certainly impose increased levels of inaccessibility and inconvenience to passengers who must transfer themselves, and luggage items, from a rail carriage into an interchange environment and onto a less suitably designed vehicle provided by a bus service. The extra buses that will necessarily be utilised to accommodate the increased numbers of travellers venturing into an urban environment that is proposed as having much greater human density would certainly create issues of traffic-jamming along the Hunter Street thoroughfare. The reduction of public transport services from rail and bus through to the East End down to only bus – must represent a scenario of over-crowding and impeded journeying that is counter to the aims of the strategy to enhance the city’s public transport service.

The single iterated reason given in the strategy for the removal of the rail line is to facilitate “connections... way-finding to the waterfront”. This submission agrees with this purpose but does not agree with the removal of an integral, future-orientated, rail transport corridor to satisfy a relatively minor aspect of the city’s development – as envisaged by the strategy. The intentions to maintain “existing integrity” and develop the city’s “own character” should provide for creative solutions for connecting the city to the waterfront that can negotiate the rail line. There is a suite of aesthetic and accessible constructions that could bridge the tracks without removing them. This submission welcomes the NURS’s ambition to source creative solutions for transport and connectivity throughout the demarcated Newcastle city area via its Design Excellence agenda.

The addition of the University of Newcastle’s providing of further educational facilities in the Civic zone would definitely revitalise that defined core area. I am a mature-aged student at the university’s Callaghan campus and I use public transport to attend the facilities there. My observation of the rail service to Warabrook is that it is highly utilised by student passengers during the semester periods. The convenience of

a rail service connecting a City campus directly with the Callaghan campus is obvious – particularly considering the time constraints on students. Civic Station would also provide an efficient access for students travelling from the Central Coast, Lake Macquarie and the Hunter. The strategy proposes affordable student housing as part of its residential plan for the city's renewal – most of this being in the Civic zone. Students attending the Callaghan campus would be better served by the operation of stations at Civic and Newcastle than the less efficient prospect of an inconvenient journey ending at Wickham Station.

This submission also welcomes the NURS's emphasis on developing cycle-ways in the city. I am also a cyclist and often combine the modes of rail transport and cycling because the carriages provide spaces for the conveyance of bicycles. With keeping rail services into the city, this carrying capacity, (that is not duplicated on buses), will allow cyclists to utilise the proposed pathways within the city from journeys that commence at distances that are not feasible for a cycling journey alone. Other bulkier accessories to travel, (such as the aforementioned luggage items, and surfboards), are already components of the reality of travelling into the beach-side, residential and recreational city. These components are best incorporated into roomier trains that offer largely uninterrupted transport to the desired destination.

The strategy offers no revitalising concepts for the deserted corridor it applauds, other than a single mention of "landscaping", yet maintains the area will remain designated as 'SP2 infrastructure'. This aspect of the NURS lacks a coherent address.

There is a major level of commitment to building development required by the renewal strategy. Tremendous increases in floor space ratios are recommended throughout the document. These dense and towering structures will represent the most dramatic aspect of the strategy when they are constructed and occupied. This submission welcomes the intention of the NURS to maintain view corridors to the waterfront and the cathedral, and appreciates the scaling of the building heights away from street interfaces and toward the proposed commercial zone in the West End for the largest edifices. This submission proposes that these buildings can be connected above the railway infrastructure and not suffer significant impedimenta as a consequence. It is conceivable that creative solutions for bridging the rail corridor could be achieved with pedestrian bridges between buildings (such as over the Pitt Street Mall in Sydney) and open plazas above the railway services (such as exhibited by the construction of Federation Square in Melbourne). The engagement of minds specialising in architectural and engineering solutions in the diverse modal environments of urban constructions should provide models that incorporate both building and transport needs.

The NURS affirms the need for a rail service to the proposed emergent CBD in Newcastle West, yet it neglects to provide for the needs raised by the emerging educational precinct at Civic and residential and entertainment precinct at East End. These hubs of traveller activity are, in their envisioning – in addition to the demand for nearby railway stations that the museum, Civic Theatre, conservatorium and business schools of the university, and events on Shortland Lawn, the harbour, along with Nobbys and Newcastle beaches all currently represent. It is wondered why these needs are not also affirmed as requiring a rail service, such as the CBD in Newcastle West would?

The NURS document promotes the notion of rail transport offering “regular access” for the greater area reaching out to the Hunter Valley and down to Sydney. It also acknowledges the desirability of an interchange “that integrates bus, rail and taxi transport, and includes a park and ride facility”. Newcastle Station already provides a level of the features of a desired interchange while the contribution of park and ride could be realised outside the city area, along the railway connection. There is evidence that much of the transport infrastructure required to meet the aims of the NURS is in place. To remove the continuous rail service into the city would deplete this co-ordinated aim.

Another aim posited by the NURS document is the practice of sustainability, in this case identified in terms of “a greater reliance on public transport” as a means to “minimise carbon emissions”. The railway service, since 1984, has offered overhead electrical lines to power Sydney and Central Coast trains. This option meets the stated aim to reduce carbon emissions and provides infrastructure that could be adapted for a light rail service in the future. The alternative mode of public transport required due to the truncation of the rail line would be counter to the stated sustainability aim in the NURS document as the intended increase in buses and the collateral increase in cars eventuating from the removal of the rail service would raise the level of carbon emissions.

I have been a resident of Newcastle city since 1978, and permanently since 1988. These years of residency have included the catalytic events designated in the NURS as having transformed the character of the city: the development of the mall and the foreshore, the earthquake, Honeysuckle’s projects, the closure of BHP, and the Global Financial Crisis. I have witnessed the city gradually transition from a heavy industrial emphasis through to a modern metropolis that invites a mixture of businesses, tourists, residents, and cultural and educational opportunities. From a city that was closed in on itself, Newcastle has opened out to become a modern place with heritage character. Much of the NURS recognises this and encourages prudent approaches to the best interests of the city’s growing community of residents, workers, and visitors. The renewal of Newcastle should welcome people as modern cities around the world do – with key modes of a range of transport options implemented as effectively as common expectations necessitate. My expectation as a longer-term Novocastrian is to have choices for travelling in and out of the city that all conform to “accessibility and convenience” – to remove one of these without convincing replacement is onerous – and this sensibility is one that I would also understand in anyone whom I would welcome into the city that is my home.

A feature of the renewed Newcastle, as presented in the NURS, is the focus on Hunter Street as a defined spine for the peninsular orientation. The three “existing activity nodes” of West End, Civic, and East End are to be connected primarily by this revitalised Hunter Street. The road is designated in the plans as having decreased car lanes and “dedicated bus and cycle lanes”, while the footpaths will be widened. There would be additional south to north routes across the rail corridor resulting in more junctions or turning locations along the west to east route. Questions arise as to whether Hunter Street could accommodate such traffic scenarios: where cars need to cross over bus lanes; and buses need to cross over the cycle lanes in order to serve bus stops. The NURS places much emphasis on traffic uses for Hunter Street, some of

which would be recognition of the requirement to incorporate the travelling loads transferred from the railway at the Wickham termination. An alleviation of this probable congestion would be to maintain the parallel spine affected by the rail.

Pedestrian access throughout the city is addressed in the NURS with positive attention. It is justifiable to recognise the rail corridor as representing a barrier in this context, however improved aesthetic and accessible designs for the numerous footbridges that serve this purpose (in conjunction with potential further surface level crossings) can attain a satisfying compromise between the genuine demands for access across the rail line and for rail transportation being maintained to Newcastle Station.

This submission proposes that in order for the railway corridor to be negotiated in a favourable cohesion with the NURS recommendations there should be adjustments made to railway operations as they are. There should be an exploration into the feasibility of a reduction of heavy rail movements into and out of the city. The lengths of Sydney trains from six to eight cars present observable delays to the south to north crossings of the tracks. This submission recognises a residual factor of compliance to the greater Sydney's passenger loads being conveyed unsuitably into Newcastle city. An option of ceasing electric trains at the earlier Woodville Junction area could be a solution. A transferral facility in that suggested location would include adjacent platforms utilised by regular two to four carriage Hunter line trains that terminate at Newcastle Station. The transport solution would result in noticeable reductions in rail-carriage passing times at road and pedestrian intersections (either current or proposed by the NURS plans). The heavy-engineering stanchions that provide current for electric train operations could be maintained to allow targeted high demand four car services into the city, or they could be modified or replaced to facilitate a lighter rail system in the future. A frequency of inbound and outbound trains at fifteen minute (on average) intervals would offer the city rail corridor seven and a half minute (on average) crossing periods that would amply support the renewal plan's vision for ambient south to north pedestrian and bicycle connectivity. Adequate signalling and decreased train speeds would satisfy a general level of safety at these ground-level accesses.

Since the release of the NURS document research into the proposed truncation of the rail at the new location for Wickham Station to the west of Stewart Avenue has concluded that marshalling of longer trains at that site would prevent traffic flows along Railway Street in Wickham and even the iconic Beaumont Street in Hamilton. Other advice has assessed such cessation of Sydney trains at Broadmeadow would prohibit movements of coal and freight rolling stock through this hub. It appears that the logistics, let alone the financing, of the NSW government's decision to terminate the railway into Newcastle at Wickham (that the NURS accepts and approves) are uncertain of having viability. This submission believes that the removal of the rail is an aspect of Newcastle's revitalisation that must be perceived as being not just returned to being negotiable, but rather surpassed with a more reasonable assessment on how its continued operation can be incorporated into the overall vision for Newcastle's urban renewal.