

Submission in response to: 'Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012'

Friday 19 April 2013

Dear Sir/Madam,

A few months ago, the Newcastle Lord Mayor Jeff McCloy appeared on television watching a train go by, and counted '1, 2, 3', referring to his count of passengers in the train, not at peak hour. He concluded that the train line between Wickham and Newcastle Stations had to be removed.

Until that time, there were a lot of people interested in the removal, with light train plan to bring to Newcastle and the Hunter region an efficient integrated public transport system. Academic, architects, urban and transport planners participated in the debate and offered ideas and systems.

After that time, the NSW Government announced that it was granting \$120m towards the removal of the tracks and the construction of a new station at Wickham (interchange). All the discussions about an integrated public transport have been ignored in the new strategy, only proposing additional bus services to replace the train services.

This submission highlights some strong discrepancies and hidden facts in the proposal.

Costs:

The budget of \$120m is at best three times smaller than a previous independent estimate commissioned by the former government which estimated the cost of the track removal and building of the Wickham Station at between \$375m and \$505m
Source: <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2010/11/15/3066609.htm>).

This independent estimate was already well below a previous estimate by Railcorp (\$675m).

Train attendance:

(Source:

http://www.bts.nsw.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/223/CityRail_Station_Barrier_Counts_Summary_2004-2011.zip.aspx)

Train statistics compiled by the NSW Government Bureau of Rail Statistics shows that the daily number of people entering or exiting these three stations is 5,290. This

figure is the daily average taken between 2004 and 2011, and does not take into account school children, police, etc. (see Technical Notes in abovementioned document). This is more than the number Jeff McCloy is using to argue to close the railway!

Removing the tracks between Wickham and Newcastle would have some impact on the people who now use the Civic and Newcastle Stations (the two stations scheduled to close). The NSW Government Bureau of Rail Statistics again can provide the following (again using the daily average between 2004 and 2011):

Number of people entering or exiting the two stations = 4,508 passengers

This can be interpreted as 2,254 travellers using these two stations daily.

Since the new plan is to transport commuters by bus (light trains, integrated transport ideas have disappeared), the number of buses to accommodate these travellers can be estimated at 83 buses filled to full capacity, as standard buses are allowed a maximum of 54 passengers (39 seated and 15 standing). This is conservative as buses are rarely full and the reality is in my opinion that there will be a need for 150 buses or more.

(Source: <http://www.newcastlebuses.info/chartering-a-bus>).

The NSW Government Bureau of Rail Statistics also provides a spread of passenger traffic. 4,111 passengers pass the gates of these two stations between 6:00am and 6:30pm, representing 76 full buses, meaning that most of these buses will have to run in a 12 hour period. Within this 12 hour period, most will travel at peak hour. This is just to highlight the increase to the peak hour traffic.

As an illustration, two train services from Maitland in the morning when car traffic is at its peak are running at full capacity with 4 carriages. This represents approximately 400 passengers. Do you intend to have 10 buses waiting at Wickham Station?

Further, if we assume that say 30% of these commuters decide to use their own car and organise car-pooling (assume 1.2 passenger/car), this will add 660 vehicles to the already congested peak hour traffic, plus the need for car space, increased pollution.

Additional considerations and practicalities:

- There is no room at Wickham to accommodate and park trains from Maitland and the only possible area would be between Wickham and Hamilton. The electric trains from Sydney, some of which have 8 carriages, are too long to be parked in that same spot and will have to be accommodated between Broadmeadow and Hamilton, meaning that the services from Sydney will actually terminate at Broadmeadow. I guess it means more buses between Broadmeadow and Hamilton for the commuters using both services. This is not negligible as Hamilton shows an average of over 2000 journeys daily (averaged between 2004 and 2011).
- The controversial budget of \$120m does not address the cost of additional buses to existing services.
- The argument that the centre of town will be revitalised with the removal of the tracks has not been the subject of any study and is just the opinion of people wanting the removal of the tracks, mainly developers. There is an

argument that it will produce the inverse effect. Revitalising means something different for developers and citizens.

- The announcement of the University of Newcastle grant this week to construct a substantial campus in the CBD, which will have huge implications for public transport needs with many students having to live away from the CBD due to the cost. More public transport will be needed.
- The projected population growth of the Hunter should prompt the NSW Government to actively design proper public transport, not to destroy it. The priority should be to provide services between Sydney and Newcastle running at 100km/h, not the actual 55km/h.
- There is no costing available for the additional bus services. In light of the fact that some carriages from the Hunter line were sent to serve in Bathurst, there is doubt that the Government intends to spend more funding to the region.
- There is no mention of consultation with RailCorp in the proposal. It seems unlikely that the organisation the most concerned with the removal would not have been consulted. Should we conclude that this was omitted from the proposal in order to hide these figures to the public?

Conclusion:

The removal of the tracks had some supporters amongst the experts at one time, but there was then some discussion of light rail, buses and public transport integration for the whole of the Hunter, which is the fastest growing area in country NSW and provides the State with substantial income (coal royalties). All these have been forgotten and 'Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012' proposes to remove the rail tracks between Wickham and Newcastle Stations, with a more than questionable budget, and no public transport solution, affecting over 2,200 daily commuters.

The proposal does not address any technical issues such as the parking of the trains, the future of the junction between the Newcastle and the Hunter train lines, which is used by many commuters.

The proposal does not address the effect on the car traffic of the closure of the two stations, at a time when fast population growth is predicted for the region.

The proposal based its need for the removal of the tracks on the assertion that it hinders the revitalisation of the CBD, without providing any studies to support this assertion.

The Hunter Region is a major financial provider to the State of NSW through the mining royalties. This proposal from the NSW Department of Planning is shockingly empty of technical data in support of this project. It is made of pages and pages of promises, without any costing.

The lack of proper costing and of technical info raises one question in my mind: is the Department of Planning aware of these facts and figures and simply hiding them from the public in order to provide financial benefits for those who wish to develop the centre of Newcastle, or is the Department incompetent and not to be trusted with the decision for the future of our region (and our state by extension).

The sad reality is that no protest, even enquiries (in light of the ICAC enquiry over Obeid-McDonald) would resurrect the railway tracks, should they be removed. It would be a great loss to the region.

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