

Draft Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

Submission by Planning Institute of Australia (NSW Division)

March 2013

The Planning The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) is the peak body representing professionals involved in planning Australian cities, towns and regions. The Institute has around 4,500 members nationally and around 1,200 members in New South Wales. PIA NSW plays key roles in promoting and supporting the planning profession within NSW and advocating key planning and public policy issues. This submission has been prepared on behalf of PIA NSW by members of the Institute.

INTRODUCTION

The NSW Division of the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA NSW) welcomes the Government's initiative to develop a long-term strategy with a clear implementation plan for Newcastle's City Centre.

This approach is consistent with the Institute's advocacy for greater attention to strategic planning prior to projects being developed on individual sites. The strategy should also refocus consideration of economic growth in terms of the future of communities and liveable centres not just jobs and dwellings. The promotion of greater urban activity in centres where public transport is available complements the Government's approach to integrated transport and land use planning. The Institute is in agreement with this approach to reinforce better local and regional planning.

In early 2011, the Institute prepared a position statement on Newcastle Regional City (appendix 1). That Position Statement was developed by Members of the Institute and endorsed by our Executive.

In providing a response to the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy, we have referenced our Position Statement as a baseline.

KEY ISSUES

In our 2011 position statement¹, the Institute identified five key components of a “Vision for Newcastle:

- Newcastle will continue to evolve as an important regional capital in NSW, catering for the needs of a growing population and as a centre for tourism, for commerce, industry, culture and entertainment;
- Future planning needs to recognise that parts of the inner city will have different focus;
- The City Centre will continue to play an important role as the business centre of the region and more people should be encouraged to live in and around the Centre to support the evolution of a safe and vibrant city;
- Connectivity between the harbour and the CBD is fundamental;
- The City needs to engage with its rich past through sympathetic reuse and adaption of the historic fabric.

This submission identifies some key issues in this context and provides some recommendations for a way forward.

1. Future of the rail corridor

Whilst an actual decision is welcome, in the absence of a regional transport plan the implications must be carefully considered in order to inform development of an alternate transport network solution for the entire city. Any changes to the existing rail corridor need to ensure that public transport linkages are retained and enhanced to the City Centre.

It is recommended that a detailed urban design master plan of the corridor be undertaken, taking into consideration the heritage significance, the proposed north-south connections between the city and the harbour, and the interaction with the surrounding land. The former rail corridor should be re-invented; another east-west connection is not required.

2. Defining the need for revitalisation

It is recommended that the strategy explains why the city is actually in need of revitalisation. It is obvious that the city has been in economic decline for an extended period of time, and it is important to understand the reasons for this.

The key reasons for Newcastle CBD decline are:

- Retail activity has been pulled out of the city into suburban shopping centres leaving limited retail attractions in the CBD, particularly in terms of regional activities;
- Parking issues, specifically the lack of parking and the high cost;
- The City is unattractive and not a pleasant place to walk around, including derelict buildings and poor public domain (few trees, unattractive, too strung out, a pedestrian

¹ Planning Institute of Australia, NSW Division. Position statement – Newcastle Regional City. March 2011

mall lacking people), the Harbour/Honeysuckle area is disconnected, with no good view to the harbour from the City Centre and a lack of social dimension;

- Limited major attractors to bring people into the city;
- Getting there by public transport is not easy (poor servicing by buses and trains) and most people in Newcastle, especially those in the wider area, would prefer to drive;
- Personal safety issues – the CBD is not perceived as safe at night;
- Rail corridor – the current arrangement (at grade and needing to be flanked by security fencing) divides the city centre physically and visually from the harbour foreshore and Honeysuckle.

The Strategy needs to identify key actions and define benefits and performance measures to address these issues, that can be benchmarked. The Strategy needs to learn from the failures and successes of previous plans and approaches to revitalisation (e.g. opening the mall to traffic, re-paving the mall, street tree planting etc.).

3. Economic development focus

The economic focus of the CBD should be its role as a regional centre. As such, it should continue to build upon and accommodate a range of commercial uses, supported by civic, cultural, medical, learning and residential uses. PIA supports a robust economic development strategy to underpin the development of the proposed precincts.

As outlined in the Newcastle Community Strategic Plan², the objective for Newcastle is to be a Smart and Innovative City. As such, the potential for innovation hubs, co-working spaces and other elements that build on innovation could be explored.

The desired role of the CBD in the regional commercial hierarchy must be clearly defined. The CBD should not compete with regional shopping centres but rather establish a centralised retail function that is a point of difference to attract businesses and visitors.

The expansion of suburban shopping centres affecting the Newcastle CBD crosses local government boundaries is beyond the control of Newcastle City Council. Rather than restrain market supply and demand, and revitalise the CBD at the expense of other areas, the CBD should instead offer a point of difference. It must still function however as a centre that meets the needs of the growing residential community within and surrounding it.

A cruise-ship terminal would provide an economic opportunity exclusive to the CBD. This is potentially a lost opportunity to bring visitors and business to the City.

It is suggested that the scale and nature of proposed West End development is out of character with Newcastle, in that it is both too dense and too high. The Mall should remain the heart of the CBD.

² Newcastle 2030: Newcastle Community Strategic Plan, February 2011

4. Stakeholder engagement

PIA and the NSW Government itself in the *NSW Planning System Review Green Paper* (2012), strongly advocate collaborative planning and community engagement in plan preparation, however it is felt by local industry and practitioners that this Strategy has had limited consultation and much less collaboration.

The Strategy has to date been delivered, and presented at community information sessions, with little detail or transparency. Specialist skills in community engagement and experience in explaining the process and outcomes would bolster the community support for the Strategy and improve the transparency and perception of the planning process.

5. Leadership and implementation

The Strategy states that ultimately, renewal will rely on the co-operation of a range of stakeholders including State government, local government, the private sector and the community.

We contend that the success of the Strategy will be in establishing one organisation with the clear responsibility for making the strategy work, with the budget and powers to do so. This may well be a specialist organisation created with this sole purpose and made up of practitioners from requisite disciplines and tiers of government. This process must occur however in partnership with Newcastle City Council and the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Newcastle as a global city

The Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy presents an opportunity to ensure that Newcastle's future meets global standards and the decisions on its future are considered in the context of good examples from other jurisdictions.

As one example, Taidong in Taiwan had a similar issue with its railway corridor. Although a smaller city than Newcastle, it is an interesting comparison, being also post-industrial, low density, and more relevant say than New York or Paris's raised landscaped defunct corridors.

In Taidong, the answer was simple, and effective. Soft landscaping, bike and walkways which connected existing uses and open spaces, retention of interesting structures and machinery as part of the landscape, and re-use of buildings by the local indigenous people as art galleries, performance spaces and markets, which were, indeed, fun and interesting to visit. Taidong Council clearly has funding issues. There appeared to be investment in the creation, but little money for on-going maintenance. Investment in public open space, and its on-going care, would make a centre with so much potential, much more attractive.

Economic drivers for growth

For the Strategy to succeed, it is important to consider the broader regional context and macro-economic drivers which have the potential to impact on future growth. This includes work underway on the economic feasibility of a high speed railway.

As PIA noted in our submission to the Draft **NSW Long Term Transport Master Plan September 2012**³

"Faster rail must be increasingly on the agenda for the regions to city transport task. In this regard the draft (long term Transport Master Plan) plan is disappointing. It commits to a review of country passenger services and to a 2 hour Newcastle to Sydney service but firm commitments are lacking.

The draft plan references the federal government work on high speed rail (a truly transformative project from a settlement and economic perspective) but contains no other firm proposals for more rapid regional rail services focussed on Sydney."

The draft plan is unfortunately silent on the second Sydney airport and any associated fast rail access links.

PIA contends that a vision for Newcastle should not ignore the potential of broader economic drivers for growth and advocates for strong action on prioritising areas for investment.

³ Draft NSW Long Term Transport Master Plan September 2012 Submission by Planning Institute of Australia (NSW Division). October 2012

Stakeholder engagement

PIA NSW advocates for genuine and ongoing stakeholder engagement. Community involvement is integral to the success of the renewal and the revitalisation project provides the opportunity to translate the community's passion and ideas into practical actions.

The Green Paper on the NSW Planning Review gave considerable coverage to a new stakeholder engagement process.

In our submission⁴ PIA made the following points:

- The issue of accessible participation mechanisms needs to be addressed, for example, access to the internet for older people, participation by ethnically diverse communities and lower socio economic communities;
- Community engagement needs to ensure that all public interests are represented, remembering that planning is an activity undertaken to optimise the use of land in the public interest; and
- All background information and evidence should be available to inform public consultation and debate. The City of Sydney provides a good example of how the on-going availability of background documents and studies allows the public and proponents to understand the rationale and decisions that sit behind the existing planning controls.

The Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy would seem to be an opportunity to use this project as a test case as to how it intends running the engagement strategy for the future Subregional Plans and/or Urban Activation Precincts.

Active travel and active living

PIA has supported the active living / healthy lifestyles agenda on a number of fronts. Transport is a very important issue in terms of planning and health. Active forms of transport such as walking, cycling and public transport are opportunities for physical activity, mental wellbeing and social connectedness.

We support the draft Strategy in addressing mechanisms to improve the capacity of our urban transport systems by increasing the mode share of walking and riding for short trips, and improving access for people walking or riding to public transport stops.

Implementation

Support from the local community, the business community, local and state authorities and key stakeholder groups is essential.

The rejuvenation of the Newcastle City Centre needs to be driven by strong leadership that enables decisions to be made for the overall good of the City. Consultative structures and processes need to be developed to involve and inform key stakeholders in the redevelopment.

A clear set of timeframes, lines of responsibility and an Authority with a clear mandate to deliver, including the power to acquire, is essential. PIA would be pleased to contribute

⁴ Planning Institute of Australia (NSW Division): Submission on A new planning system for NSW Green Paper, September 2012

through membership of the Urban Renewal Authority Reference Group, to facilitate due process and strong planning outcomes.

PIA supports the State and Commonwealth Governments taking immediate action to progress the transformation of Newcastle into a vibrant 21st century regional city. This must be done in close consultation with the Newcastle City Council, the private sector and the local community.

APPENDIX 1

PIA Position Statement – Newcastle Regional City

The NSW Division of the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) is promoting the adoption and implementation of an agreed plan for Newcastle Regional City addressing environmental, social and economic fundamentals underpinned by consultative and courageous civic leadership.

PIA advocates the vision set out in this Position Statement for Newcastle.

A Vision for Newcastle

Newcastle will continue to evolve as an important regional capital in NSW. The city will cater for needs of a growing regional population, being an important place for commerce, industry, culture and entertainment. It will also continue to provide a range of accommodation and tourist opportunities for both residents and visitors. It will celebrate the unique and beautiful coastal environment in which the City is placed.

Future planning needs to recognise that parts of the inner city will have a different focus. For example the heritage and fine urban design character of the east end needs to be protected and measures adopted to allow it to evolve as a mixed use precinct catering for the needs of workers, residents and tourists. Similarly the west end and Marketown should be allowed to continue to evolve as a commercial/retail and mixed-use high density living precinct.

The city centre will continue to play an important role as the business centre of the region, supported by retail uses that cater for the needs of workers, residents and visitors. More people should be encouraged to live in and around the city centre which will support the evolution of a safe and vibrant city both during the day and at night.

Connectivity between the harbour and the CBD is fundamental. Integration of infrastructure and adequate investment in public transport is also essential.

The city needs to engage with our rich past through sympathetic reuse and adaption of the city's historic fabric. The existing human scale of the city needs to be respected, while allowing for well-designed development in key locations and precincts.

Future Actions

There is a critical need to send clear signals to the market indicating where investment should be targeted and how it will be supported. These signals need to be underpinned by a robust economic development strategy which has realistic goals and measurable actions to achieve these goals. The promotion of tourism must be a vital part of this strategy.

Genuine stakeholder engagement, understanding and respect for all interests are required. We need to translate the community's passion and ideas into practical actions to enable Newcastle to achieve critical mass and fulfil its true potential.

The region's professional planners are committed to making a positive contribution to this critical regional issue and will be guided by the need to promote the public interest at all times.

The top priorities for future action are:

- 1 Deliver a university city campus which is integrated with the city centre.**

It is considered that this has universal support and is the primary catalyst to transform the city. Planning processes need to ensure that the city campus will be seamlessly integrated into the city centre.

2 Adopt an economic development strategy.

This underpins the "business case for Newcastle" and future initiatives to attract private investment and public funding. The strategy needs to focus on initiatives at both the macro and micro level and obtain the support and co-operation of the public and private sectors as well as the local community. The "*Renew Newcastle*" initiative showcases what can be done through vision and co-operative action at the local "grass roots" level. However the strategy needs to be developed as part of a regional plan that takes into account the main economic drivers such as Newcastle port, Newcastle University and the Williamstown RAAF Base and civil airport.

3 Deregulate the current planning controls in the existing Local Environmental Plan (LEP) for priority precincts and the identification of key sites that will be a catalyst for future development.

This can support and implement the economic strategy and facilitate the city campus and other targeted renewal precincts at key development sites for a specific period of time. The identification of these sites and precincts needs to be based on a regional plan. A strategic development plan would allow planned trade-offs on heritage, mine subsidence, car parking and building height to target these controls where it is important. Guidelines for future development of these areas should be performance based and may allow bonuses for additional development, based on the achievement of objectives relating to quality urban design, affordable housing provision and public domain improvements. The existing requirements relating to the current commercial to residential landuse mix should also be relaxed in the eastern precinct to recognise the ongoing shifting focus from commercial to residential activity and encourage more people to move into the city. Other economic incentives also need to be explored.

4 Implement an integrated public transport system servicing the Regional City, linking regional centres, suburbs and Hunter Street.

A modern, frequent, clean, safe and reliable public transport system is required now to service and shape the Regional City. An integrated transport system will support the above initiatives such as a city campus and future redevelopment. Connectivity, accessibility and maintaining maximum flexibility into the future is the key. Planning for a bicycle and walking-oriented city needs to continue.

5 Support small scale entertainment venues and a new convention centre

Encouragement of a more diverse night time economy with more clustering of small restaurants, cafes, bars, theatres open at night would improve after hour's safety and city vitality. More diverse after hours entertainment venues in the city would support the university and increasing residential and tourist development in the CBD. A new convention centre is urgently needed in the city to increase the attraction of the city to the business community.

6 Leadership in planning

The rejuvenation of the Newcastle city centre needs to be driven by strong leadership that enables decisions to be made for the overall good of the city. This approach to both strategic and development decisions should be consultative, but the interests of State agencies and local and regional interest groups' needs should not detract from sound decision making.

PIA is calling on the State and Commonwealth Governments to take immediate and courageous action to support the transformation of Newcastle into a vibrant 21st Century regional city. This must be done in close consultation and co-operation with Newcastle City Council, the private sector and the local community.