

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

Ray Ramage, Cooks Hill

Dear Sir/Madam,

I would like to add my voice to the debate around the proposed "Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy", particularly the controversial aspect of removal of the rail line between Wickham and Newcastle.

I would also like to argue that the rail line would best be terminated at or around the current Civic station as both a logical alternative and a compromise that may suit most parties.

Weaknesses of the Proposed Renewal Strategy

There appears to limited assessment done to justify the closure of the rail line at Wickham. The premise that the rail line is hampering the revitalisation the city by cutting it in two is speculative at best. It appears that the argument has gathered steam through a combination of the effects that rail line may have on traffic congestion leading to community complaints and a notion promoted by prominent Newcastle developers that removal of the rail line will promote development.

The abovementioned developers have, through their access to Council, State Government and local media, promoted the removal of the rail line as a guaranteed boost to local development. There is a strong community perception that there is an agenda, only partly hidden by developer's rhetoric, which will lead to removal of an existing community asset at the expense of the NSW taxpayer and the local community that will potentially lead to a windfall for these developers without a sound argument as to how the community as a whole will benefit.

It has been argued that the section of rail line to be removed is underutilised, however Rail Corp's own statistics reveal otherwise with approximately 2200 passengers a day using Civic and Newcastle stations¹

When commentator's state that there are only a few passengers on each train I think they are making selective observations (i.e. out of peak or peak counter direction services). For example, based on information from a relevant Station Manager approximately 400

¹ The NSW Government Bureau of Rail Statistics daily averages between 2004 and 2011 indicate the number of people entering or exiting the two stations is 4,508 passengers. This can be interpreted as 2,254 travellers using these two stations daily.

passengers are on each of the morning peak services from Maitland to Newcastle many of which are alighting from Civic and Newcastle Stations. It is not uncommon to see many passengers standing in these trains. The Maitland services alone would require approximately 10 buses to be waiting at the proposed Wickham Interchange (calculations can be provided).

Further, the argument that the rail line cuts the city off from the foreshore is not supported by assessment but is merely an assertion. As a resident of Cooks Hill I find the biggest impediment to getting to the foreshore area is crossing Hunter Street, and not the rail line. To state that removing the rail line will improve access to the harbour without adequate assessment, including the consideration of alternatives, is without merit. Alternatives which should be assessed include additional level crossings (there is a possibility for an additional three or more) and road/rail signal synchronisation. I use the train regularly (from Civic) as well as drive in and out of the city across the rail line and find it frustrating to see almost relationship between train movements and road signalling.

My views are also informed by the observation that much of the section of the community that would like the rail line removed has developed this negative view because it impacts on their commuting, typically a delay of a few minutes and probably less than 10 minutes at worst (my own experience) when travelling across the rail line at Stewart Avenue and Merewether Street. I feel this situation may not improve much with removal of the rail line, no more than it probably could be by improved signal synchronisation. Unfortunately it is apparent that this sentiment has been used as fuel for the local development industry to gain advantage at the expense of NSW taxpayers generally, local residents and those that commute to Newcastle by train.

The proposed Renewal Strategy also appears to ignore other developments in the city, such as the new Courthouse and legal offices at Civic and the recently announced University of Newcastle campus also at Civic. I understand that the latter will result in 3000 students and staff coming into the city where there is very limited parking. Some may live in the city, but many will commute from outer suburbs. The proponents of these also expect other associated developments to follow (e.g. coffee shops etc.). These two developments alone imply a potential for increase patronage on the rail line and/or increased traffic congestion which should be considered in an assessment into removal of the rail line.

The proposed Wickham Interchange would also require significant acquisition of private land for the project as the rail corridor is only about 25m wide at the proposed interchange location and is bound between a public road (fronted with residential housing) and privately owned commercial premises. The existing rail terminus at Newcastle Station is 40m wide.

Down-Side Risks

It is apparent from the above that there are a number of down-side risks to the proposed Renewal Strategy:

- So-called revitalisation of the Newcastle CBD may not happen as a matter of course;
- Significant increases in traffic congestion due to additional car/bus movements both from existing commuters and potential new commuters from new developments;
- Practical limitations to realising proposal, such as space for new rail interchange;
- Potential gains in traffic flow at level crossing may be offset or even worsened by increased congestion from former rail users switching cars/buses and the traffic effects of new developments;
- Reputational damage to the State Government should benefits (perceived or real) not materialise or where the costs exceed any benefits to the community. In my view this is already starting to occur.

A Better Alternative

My view is that there is a better alternative, which if the notion that removing a section of the rail line will provide some benefit proves correct, will also retain the benefits of an existing community asset. That alternative is to cut the rail line at Civic which is the cultural and administrative centre of the city and where major developments that would benefit from rail transport are currently underway. It is both a logical alternative with technical merit and a compromise that may suit most parties.

I do not see how in any way that continuing the rail line to Civic would diminish the proposed Renewal Strategy, particularly the so-called revitalisation of the Hunter Street Mall/CBD area and redevelopment around the West End of Hunter Street, other than continued traffic issues around the Stewart Avenue level crossing.

Aspects of this alternative

- A new rail terminus to be built at Civic which will require acquisition of a Council carpark providing an approx. 35m wide corridor for the new terminus. This is based on the fact that the current terminus at Newcastle Station is 40m wide including station buildings. It should therefore be feasible to build this terminus at Civic with limited acquisition of private land;
- Road/rail signal synchronisation around the Stewart Avenue level crossing;
- Potential additional level crossings to be built at Bellevue St, Worth Pl, Argyle St, and Steel St;
- The rail line to be terminated before Merewether Street allowing some improvement to traffic flow on this street;
- The rail corridor east of Merewether Street then becomes as is currently proposed.

Advantages of this Alternative

I see a number of advantages in this proposal including the following:

- A compromise between the wishes of community and business interest groups;
- An important existing community asset will be retained where it is probably most needed, i.e. the Civic precinct where current and future developments would lead to the best utilisation of the asset;
- Some improvements to foreshore access may be possible east of Civic;
- The rail corridor from Wickham to Civic is currently bound by commercial buildings of various heights and age and is not a particularly attractive corridor for a cycle/pedestrian way. I anticipate this may become an alley of vandalism without the restricted access of the rail corridor;
- The section of the rail corridor most suited to being a cycle/pedestrian way is east of Merewether Street, particularly further east from Scott Street;
- The argued effect of removing the rail line on revitalisation of the CBD, albeit valid or not, in most part can still be realised;
- Limit to reputational damage to the State Government as a compromise is seen to be made but also makes technical sense in the context of the Civic precinct being in reality the centre of the city.