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Submission from Renew Newcastle

About Renew Newcastle

Renew Newcastle is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee that was established in 2008 to address the decline of Newcastle's inner city by treating its most visible blight – its empty shops and offices – as an opportunity. Our efforts have been focussed on gaining temporary occupancy of these spaces and making them available to artists, creative entrepreneurs and community groups for little or no rent. By providing a relatively low-risk opportunity to access these otherwise empty spaces we give individuals and groups a framework to:

- Generate cultural activity accessible to local residents and visitors
- Establish and develop income generating businesses
- Clean up properties and improve the amenity of the street, and
- Attract clients, customers and visitors to the city centre

In a just over 4 years the Renew Newcastle initiative has cleaned up, fixed up and occupied 52 otherwise empty properties and filled them with more than 100 creative community projects. In doing so we have been injecting interesting, diverse and unique creative, community and commercial activity into the city centre.

The flow-on effects have been substantial. Each year through Renew Newcastle's efforts more than ten thousand volunteer hours are contributed by local community members in cleaning up and activating their city. Tens of thousands of Hunter residents and tourists have participated in arts events and activities that otherwise would have been unlikely to take place. Many new businesses and jobs in the Creative Industries sector have been nurtured through the program.

In 2011 Lonely Planet named Newcastle one the Top 10 cities to visit in the world and cited that 'Australia's most underrated city' has transformed itself 'from steel city to creative hub' because of 'an explosion of artists... photographers, fashion designers, digital artists and more as part of the inner-city regeneration scheme Renew Newcastle.' It was the first time that any Australian city had made that list and has in turn fed into considerable world wide attention for Renew Newcastle and Newcastle as a result of our activities.

Renew Newcastle is a small scale, grassroots initiative which has delivered impressive results. An economic impact analysis completed by SGS Economics and Planning in 2011 established that the Renew Newcastle initiative delivered a cost benefit ratio of 10.8: 1 benefiting to community by more than \$1million per year.

Response to the *Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012*

Renew Newcastle welcomes the NSW Government's policy and funding commitment to regeneration activity in the Newcastle city area through the *Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012*. However we are concerned to ensure that the investment, policy and strategy continues to include the small scale, grassroots, on the ground community driven projects and initiatives. As demonstrated by our history over the last 4 years many of the most significant opportunities for the city will accumulate or be lost while the larger scale development projects are in the planning, development and execution stages.

Many of the strategies outlined in the paper will, by necessity, take place over years if not decades. Renew Newcastle's view – borne out by evidence from other cities and towns – is that large-scale infrastructure fixes can but do not always drive needed investment. In some circumstances they can hinder the kind of individual, creative and small business led revitalisation that cities need. Without careful planning it is inherent in the nature of these plans that significant sites in the city can be in stasis for many years, that construction and other works can have short term disruptive effects that can work against long term gains or that the sheer time lag between plans being announced and implemented can create perverse incentives in the short term that encourage properties be boarded up, knocked down or sit otherwise unused.

It is our strong view that any large-scale strategy needs to be complemented by a concerted effort to get the small things right. Strategies, incentives and policies need to be put in place to ensure that negative feedback loops (where vacant spaces and inactivity drive away established and deter new businesses) do not occur. As a case in point, Renew Newcastle's sister program Renew Australia has recently been working in Melbourne's Docklands where – despite substantial investment from both the public and private sectors – more than 40% of restaurants have closed in the last year. It is an example where capital-intensive investment and long term master planning did not necessarily lead to vibrant street level activity.

Specifically, we would argue that the final version of the strategy should ensure that well resourced interim activities are developed. We strongly recommend that property owners are incentivised to keep properties active wherever it is feasible to do so. This can be done through advocacy, tax incentives or grants and should be led with government owned properties. It can also be enabled by ensuring that the relevant planning frameworks provide clear and cost-effective pathways to approval and compliance for small scale and temporary initiatives in buildings and on otherwise vacant sites.

While our work has contributed to a considerable decline in the vacancy rate for buildings in the CBD over the last few years, we have noted that the number of demolition sites and vacant spaces in the CBD – particularly in Newcastle West – has

grown. We are concerned it may continue to grow in coming years we would strongly encourage the NSW government to invest in a “Life in Vacant spaces” type program that encourages short term projects and initiatives from the community and the private sector. If the appropriate model is developed Renew Newcastle could participate in or manage such a scheme. We are confident there is an extensive network in the private and public sectors to initiate and promote creative entertainment like outdoor cinemas, container cafes and bars, gardens, community or other activities on these vacant sites. These kinds of low cost, iterative and temporary initiatives will be a cost effective means of discovering viable long-term strategies for the city.

Renew Newcastle’s role

Renew Newcastle is already playing a leadership role in key initiatives listed as catalyst projects for the implementation of the plan (p202). We have contributed substantially already to the revitalisation of Hunter St Mall and adjacent major land holdings and have played a key role in reshaping Hunter Street as a key city destination. We would hope that our role would continue under this framework and that all levels of government will work with us to support and maximise the value of these efforts.

Renew Newcastle has also been playing a growing role in Newcastle West and believe we can contribute to the public domain and to the generation and incubation of activity there. For example we are working in the Cottage Creek Corridor where we are currently in discussions with Hunter Water who are the titleholders for 681 Hunter St. We note this property is earmarked for removal in the Cottage Creek upgrade but this is unlikely to happen for a considerable period of time. Hunter Water has indicated broad support to allow us to occupy 1-3 of the properties at that address. In the short term, as per the concerns above, there is value in activating those street frontages despite their removal in the medium term plans (3-8years). We intend to use this opportunity in order to complement the fresh shoots of promising cultural activity in the area – Bellevue Street’s Bank Corner café, and neighbouring residents have already commenced a groundswell of positive city living and place making activity in that pocket of the city. This stimulus can only benefit the Cottage Creek redevelopment plans and the Renew Newcastle would like to be involved in development planning for the area.

We note also that we are referenced in relation to the Hunter Street Upgrade (page 212) in relation to ‘PARKing Day’. While the organisation is interested in the placemaking initiatives that will be undertaken, we do not ourselves deliver placemaking projects in public spaces. Other organizations such as *Livesites*, *Street Art Walking* or others as yet unidentified may be better positioned to assist with the delivery of these types of programs. We would of course offer support where relevant.

Economic Initiatives

Renew Newcastle's activity has contributed considerably to the growing reputation of the East End and Hunter St Mall areas, including in generating visitor interest in the unique and boutique retail experience of the city centre. The activities of our organisation and projects have been the catalyst for countless state-wide, national and international media coverage in travel, design, architecture and foodie publications.

A key component of our program is the business development, training and support for micro creative industries enterprises. We are also a point of contact for small business start-ups outside of arts and creative industries, most of which we are unable to assist through our program due to our required focus on arts, creative and cultural projects. The organisation seeks to remain involved in marketing activity, development planning, and new business support programs which are generated out of the Newcastle Economic Strategy.