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Scanning Room

Submission Regarding Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012

Having read the document regarding Newcastle's urban renewal strategy, I would like to make the following comments.

At first glance, the document and the plan looks very impressive, however it soon becomes clear that there are concerns which should have been more obvious.

The biggest concern is the removal of the railway. Considering the cost, it would seem that experience from other cities where suburban railway services have been removed should have been seriously considered before making such a decision. Experience in these cities has shown that little if any benefits were achieved. In nearly every case patronage of public transport fell by about thirty percent. Because of this, traffic and parking problems became worse. In all cases the revitalisation that was supposed to take place simply didn't happen. Some of the cities in question are: Fremantle, Bunbury, Semaphore in suburban Adelaide, The Gold Coast, Brisbane, Auckland, Dublin and Vancouver just to name a few. At the front of the document it states that part of the plan is to promote a shift to public transport to reduce the number of cars in the city centre. How can this happen if a major piece of public transport infrastructure is closed? The experiences in the cities mentioned earlier were that people abandoned public transport and used private motor vehicles. The reverse to what the plan is trying to achieve will most likely be the result. However because parking space in Hunter Street will be replaced by cycle lanes, a bus lane and a row of trees, many people will most likely avoid the city centre altogether.

The plan does not put forward a strong enough case for the removal of the railway. "Connectivity" is a word that is used a lot in the document. The railway has been blamed for the lack of "connectivity". However, the real reason for this so called lack of "connectivity" is the developments that have been built in Honeysuckle and Wharf Road. These buildings have obstructed access between Hunter Street and the harbour. They have also obstructed views of the harbour from Hunter Street. It is also very clear that little regard was given to the aesthetics when these buildings were planned. Their presence has seriously damaged the character of Newcastle. Much has been made of plans for additional walkways, lanes or streets running from Hunter Street to the foreshore. There is no reason for not putting those in place now. The construction of level crossings or bridges would be a far cheaper and more effective option than closing the railway. The document also mentions a plan to increase the population of the city centre with both high density and medium density housing. What will those buildings look like? Will they further erode the unique character of the city? If the number of people mentioned in the document, do actually come to live in the city, it would be unrealistic to assume that all of these residents will be working in the city centre. They will need effective and efficient public transport, something the suburban trains already provide.

Another part of the plan is to move part of the university campus into the city centre. The plan tends to suggest that students attending this campus will be living in the city centre. While many may choose to live in the city centre, it is highly unlikely that many of the students will, in fact, live there. For this reason, many students will have to commute and the railway will be far more effective than the buses, particularly if they have to change onto a bus at Wickham.

While part of the plan is to have the retail sector centred around the west end at Wickham, another part of the plan involves revitalisation the Hunter Street Mall; which is at the other end of Hunter Street and a long way from the proposed rail terminal. Considering how much more difficult it will be to get to the east end, how can revitalisation of the mall actually take place? Retailers at the east end claim they see a dramatic fall in business whenever the railway is closed for track work. What will happen if the line is closed altogether?

Much of the document describes many of the changes that will be required to revitalise the city centre, however, little if anything has been said about the new railway station at Wickham. What will the station look like? What facilities will be there? Will there be any facilities for the disabled? Will there be any shelter? Will there be any toilets? Where will the buses arrive from and where will they go? These are glaring omissions that should have had a greater level of importance.

In the plan, there seems to be no provision for the disabled or the elderly. How will they cope with the new arrangements? Will the buses that replace the trains be able to carry wheel chairs, surf boards, strollers or prams? Mothers with young children will also have difficulty coping with the new arrangements.

An initiative on page 215 says "Limit the expansion of out of centre retail that will compete with the city centre". Does this mean the council will stop any development or any initiative that will help struggling businesses in places like Hamilton, Wallsend, Cardiff or Mayfield where locals will find shopping more accessible and easier?

Since the O'Farrell government announced the closure of the railway, a number of events have taken place in the city centre. Two of these were the New Years Eve celebrations and the Australia Day celebrations. In order to avoid congestion, additional trains were rostered for some of the events. On New Year's Eve in particular, a common talking point among passengers was, "how would they be able get into the city when

the railway is closed"? They were not happy about having to change onto a bus at Wickham. On Australia day, when asked for their opinion on the closure of the railway, the general feeling among passengers was: "why would they do that?" Clearly, the majority of the residents of Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and the Hunter Valley can see the value of the suburban services running into the city centre to the present terminus.

A plan as ambitious as this one is bound to attract considerable comment, both positive and negative. However, by far the biggest flaw that has the potential to have serious adverse effects is the removal of the railway. Experience has shown that removal of passenger carrying railways does not improve cities. Removal of the railway will end up costing hundreds of millions of dollars and have little if any benefit. A much cheaper option would be to build additional level crossings. If Newcastle is to effectively survive, the railway must remain open and the trains must keep running into the city.

Peter Sansom



Can you see the railway line in Fremantle?
It's at the end of the road.



The railway line is NOT a barrier in Fremantle
Can you see the level crossing?



The train caused less inconvenience than cars on the road.



These buildings are the barrier, NOT THE RAILWAY, between the Newcastle CBD and the Foreshore.