

28 December 2012

The Hon. Michael Gallacher, MLC
Level 33 Governor Macquarie Tower
1 Farrer Place
Sydney NSW 2000



Dear Mr Gallacher

CLOSURE OF THE NEWCASTLE RAILWAY LINE

It is disappointing to hear that the Government is planning to close the Newcastle railway line.

Although there is an obvious need to revitalise the city centre, and the strategy developed contains many positive proposals, the decision to remove rail public transport in the process seems to be a short-sighted and counter-productive move.

Forcing passengers on to a bus transfer system for a short distance is likely to reduce public transport patronage and make the existing local rail network less viable. This decision runs contrary to the Government's goals of improving public transport and seems particularly illogical given the proposal to build a university campus with 8,000 students in the city centre, encourage 10,000 additional jobs and plan for 6,000 additional dwellings.

I am reminded of a decision by the Western Australian Liberal Government to close the Perth - Fremantle railway line in 1977, when it was a run-down diesel railcar service. Similar reports were produced demonstrating the benefits to public transport users of converting the line to buses, but the quoted benefits to train users were similarly somewhat dubious. An incoming government reversed that decision and electrified the line. Today the Fremantle train service is part of the remarkable growth in public transport patronage in Perth.

I believe there are other ways in which the development needs of Newcastle can be met in conjunction with the retention of the Newcastle railway line, including:

1. Increasing the number of pedestrian crossings over the current railway line (on the level, rather than by overbridges), such crossings being just as safe as crossing a road;
2. Reducing the length of the trains so that level crossing gates are not closed as long (e.g. 8 car trains from Sydney should divide at Gosford with only 4 cars to Newcastle, on all occasions);
3. Reducing the speed of trains as they approach crossings between Wickham and Newcastle so that level crossing gates are not closed as long (i.e. trains would not trigger the boom gates until they were almost upon the crossing, and then would cross at low speed);

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4. Reducing to a bare minimum the number of empty train movements (amalgamating empty trains where feasible);
5. Consideration of the conversion of the Maitland/Telarah to Newcastle diesel railcar service into an electrified light rail service that could operate at higher frequencies and faster speeds along the existing rail corridor between Maitland and Wickham, and then switch to on-road running between Wickham and Newcastle Beach. (Sydney trains could terminate at Wickham and feed straight on to a connecting tram, providing a seamless service by comparison with the inconvenience of changing to buses).

If the Government does decide to continue with the ill-advised decision to close the line, may I suggest you do it in the following manner?

1. Firstly institute a trial operation of the connecting bus service from Wickham to Newcastle before making any long term change to the rail line (the trial period should include the summer months, when beach going patronage is at its' highest);
2. Retain the rail corridor in public ownership and prohibit any permanent development on it (thereby enabling the train service to be reintroduce at a future date).
3. Also retain the overhead wiring and related structures, with the wires de-energised, so minimising the cost of reinstating the train service.

Thank you for considering my comments.

If you or your staff wish to discuss any aspect in more detail please do not hesitate to contact me on 9686 6556 or 0411 106 556.

Yours faithfully

HUNTER TRANSPORT CONSULTING PTY LTD



Glen E Hunter
DIRECTOR