

urbanrenewal - Submission - Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

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Subject: Submission - Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

To the Manager, Centres and Urban Renewal, Department of Planning & Infrastructure,

As a town planner with many years experience in regenerating existing urban areas, I recognise that the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy contains many positive elements that will benefit the centre of Newcastle. Of particular note are the proposed built form controls and the focus on making the 'west end' the future CBD. The public domain improvement initiatives are also to be commended and show quite clearly a very positive future for the city centre. However there are a number of points which I believe require further consideration which are mainly related to broader policy settings and transport. If these issues are not resolved satisfactorily then the very good work undertaken to date, and the success of future initiatives and the revitalisation exercise more broadly will be severely compromised:

- Policy framework - There needs to be a recognition that the current depressed environment that characterises the inner city area of Newcastle has as much to do with poor planning in the Lower Hunter more broader than it has to do with the urban design, transport and economic characteristics of the centre itself. By allowing multiple very large shopping malls to be developed in the city's suburbs and by releasing land for low density car dependent suburbs in the Lower Hunter, the planning framework has facilitated the relative decline of the centre. To support the city centre, the planning framework for the Lower Hunter needs to control this outward march of housing, employment and retail services and a regional scale effort at meaningful urban consolidation needs to occur.
- Transport - It is clear that the heavy rail connection between Wickham and Newcastle stations needs to be removed to make for a more connected city centre. However replacing heavy rail with increased bus services I believe is poorly considered. My experience in planning for successful public spaces in Sydney has demonstrated the difficulty in co-locating such areas along streets used by buses. Relying on buses will ensure the very positive public domain initiatives in the strategy will not work. The rail corridor lends itself perfectly to being re-engineered so that light rail can be provided at grade along with significant green space and mature plantings. Lightrail could cover the same route as the existing heavy rail using a 'there and back' service or a loop could be provided linking the hospital and future higher density areas to the south with the city centre. Pedestrians and cars would be free to 'cross the tracks' in many more locations than is currently possible (possibly everywhere depending of the frequency of services). Many small and medium sized cities around the world provide similar services without the severing effect of a rail line. While the capital outlay required to achieve this solution would not be insignificant, I believe it is the only way to ensure Newcastle gets the city centre it deserves and so desperately needs. Without such investment, the rest of the strategy is unfortunately likely to fail. The Minister has mentioned that light rail may be considered in the future if residential densities increase, however I believe he is placing the cart before the horse. It is imperative that light rail be built early in the revitalisation project to justify and attract a planned increase in residential densities.

Regards

Alex Williams
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