

Submission for Newcastle Regional Plan

At first glance this document and its companion document "Draft Plan for Growing Hunter City" look impressive. A number of issues associated with projected growth are acknowledged. However, both documents are very light on detail and there is very little in the way of statistics or figures. Much of what it does say simply "states the obvious". There doesn't seem to be a clear plan or list of options dealing with the issues outlined in either of the documents.

What is of concern is that while it is acknowledged that the population is expected to grow from the present population of about 450,000 to about 750,000 little was said about transport, in particular public transport. Two reasonable questions would have been: where will the population expand to and where will people live? What transport arrangements will there be? The documents say: "as Hunter City expands, a greater proportion of growth will occur in areas without access to railway stations". This is happening now and has been happening for some years, although the documents do not acknowledge this. The documents say that most of Hunter City's population lives in urban areas or regional cities with a population of 10,000 or more, e.g. Morisset, Maitland, Singleton and Muswellbrook which have passenger rail services and Cessnock, Forster-Tuncurry, Raymond Terrace and Nelson Bay which do not have passenger rail services. Nowhere in the documents did it say that additional passenger rail services should be provided or that new passenger rail lines should be built; yet it would seem these would be obvious solutions. Residents at Singleton and Muswellbrook have been campaigning for additional passenger rail services for some years without success.

In the document it is stated that the NSW government is monitoring patronage and demand for passenger rail services. Patronage on bus, train and ferry services has been impacted by changes to timetables. Changes which many people found inconvenient or totally useless. Some people have told of how they got off a train and when they went to catch a connecting bus, the bus was leaving. When they contacted their local member, the response was that the buses had to keep to a timetable. This sounds like something out of "Thomas the Tank Engine" or "Fawlty Towers"!

Another factor that has dramatically impacted patronage on passenger rail services has been the closure of the railway between Wickham and Newcastle. Before the railway was closed, the services were fast, efficient and convenient. People did not have to change at Hamilton. The replacement of the train with buses has increased journey times to the point where some people have had to leave their jobs because the buses could not get them to work in time. The situation has been compounded by insufficient shunting sidings at Hamilton. The result has been that some trains have to be despatched early to allow following trains to leave on time. This has often caused passengers to miss connections. The result has been a dramatic fall in patronage. Figures are not available, however, evidence suggests that the fall in patronage could be over fifty percent. This is a disaster!

No valid reason has been given for the closure of the railway. It was said the railway was a barrier. However, solutions such as building more level crossings or bridges (which would have been a lot more cost effective than closure), sinking the railway or raising the railway were not acknowledged let alone considered.

Considering the level of economic activity in the Newcastle city centre and the number of commuters who travel to the city centre it is surprising that closure of the railway was even considered let alone acted upon. The result of the inconvenience associated with the closure of the railway has been more traffic congestion and parking problems. While those who lobbied for closure of the railway spoke of opening up the foreshore to the CBD, nothing was said about how closure of the railway would affect access to the city itself. It would be abundantly clear that little if any thought was put into the consequences of the closure of the railway.

What is not mentioned in either of the documents is the levels of traffic during peak periods when commuters are travelling to and from work. All of the main roads see high levels of traffic and many roads see serious congestion which is only becoming worse; particularly since the closure of the railway into Newcastle. In the Draft plan for growing Hunter City it states: improving public transport and providing safe cycle and pedestrian access will improve convenience. The opposite has happened in Hunter Street and King Street since the closure of the railway into Newcastle. Observations suggest there are more cars than ever using these streets. The same document also speaks of protecting future corridors from development, yet the rail corridor in Newcastle has been ear marked for development.

The draft plan for Growing Hunter City refers to the light rail and the Wickham interchange as being significant infrastructure investments. Such being the case, why was the railway closed before the interchange and the light rail were built? Experts have said that light rail should run along its own right of way if maximum efficiency and potential is to be realised. If this is true, then why is the plan to run the light rail along Hunter Street and not along the rail corridor? Proponents of the light rail point to the success of the light rail on the Gold Coast.

However, it needs to be remembered that the light rail on the Gold Coast is about 14 kilometres long and it did not replace a heavy rail service. The light rail planned for Newcastle is only about two and a half kilometres long and people will still be forced to change from a train which they did not have to do when the train ran into Newcastle.

What should have been in both documents is data on where people are commuting from and to. Before transport infrastructure can be planned and built, planners need to understand where the infrastructure needs to be built and how and where services will run. For example, there would be little value in building a light rail line from Newcastle to Mayfield if it would be more beneficial to run the light rail to the university campus at Callaghan. Clearly, there needs to be more research on traffic movements if planning for public transport infrastructure is to be correct and if people are to be persuaded to leave their cars at home and use public transport.

Has a passenger railway to Raymond Terrace or a passenger railway to Nelson Bay via the airport at Williamtown been considered? Large numbers of commuters travel to and from Raymond Terrace and Port Stevens each day.

Both documents speak of improved and new road and rail corridors to improve access to the port of Newcastle which has been referred to as a gateway. Where will these new rail and road corridors be? The airport at Williamtown has also been referred to as a gate way but, there has been no reference to rail access.

Considering the fact that Williamtown airport is becoming an international airport, rail access should be an obvious inclusion. A railway to Williamtown would also potentially reduce traffic congestion for commuters during peak periods.

Reference is also made of planning for a freight rail bypass for trains accessing the port of Newcastle from the south, however no mention is made of how this or any other freight rail corridor will serve local industries. A freight terminal at Sulphide could serve the industrial area at Cardiff, it would also be in the geographical centre of Newcastle and lake Macquarie. Another freight terminal at Hexham or Beresfield would serve the industrial areas at Hexham, Beresfield and Tomago. If a railway is ever built to Raymond Terrace, Tomago could be another option for a freight terminal. This is important as it states in the Newcastle Regional Plan: "Supporting industrial clusters close to inter regional transport networks will improve efficiencies and make the region more attractive to investment." In spite of this, there is no information on what improvements will be made to rail infrastructure and little information of what rail infrastructure is being planned.

In conclusion, the authors of these documents need to "do their sums again". There needs to be thorough research on where population growth is most likely to occur and determine in which directions commuters will be travelling to and from work. The data from such research will be critical if planning and construction for transport infrastructure is to be effective and represent value for money. The need for this cannot be overstated as one issue that determines the liveability or otherwise of a city or region is how easy it is to get around for work or recreation. For far too long the emphasis has been upon building roads and freeways, the result has been more traffic congestion. Both documents do acknowledge a need for more rail services, passenger and freight, but there needs to be a serious commitment to provide additional services and where appropriate, build new lines, however all of this needs to be carefully planned and there needs to be accurate information if new railways and rail services are to be effective at reducing congestion. Failure to do this will have serious consequences for the projected 750,000 who will be living here.