

**KATE WASHINGTON MP**

**Shadow Minister for the Hunter**

**Response to Draft Hunter Regional Plan & Draft Plan for Growing Hunter City**

Regional planning is an essential role of the New South Wales Government. Planning should provide confidence to both residents and businesses about the future of their community, not just in relation to future urban developments but also their environment, social services and cultural heritage.

The NSW Opposition acknowledges the importance of planning for the future of the Hunter region to support growth and sustainable development alongside the community's social, health, employment and educational needs.

This submission is made in addition to any submissions made by individual members of the NSW Opposition and does not seek to override their views or the needs of their constituents. Nor does this submission purport to capture every concern that the NSW Opposition and the Hunter Labor MP's have with these plans.

The Hunter generates 8% of New South Wales' economic activity making it the State's largest regional economy. The Hunter is predicted to undergo significant economic and population growth in coming years. By 2036 the Hunter will be home to additional 117,850 people<sup>1</sup>. Over the same period of time the Hunter economy is expected to grow by 75% with an eventual economic output of \$64.8 billion<sup>2</sup>. These demographic and economic changes will involve significant shifts to the nature of the economy, the demands on existing infrastructure and urban fabric in the Hunter. For too long the Hunter has been making an economic contribution to New South Wales without the commensurate investment from State Government.

The NSW Government's Draft Hunter Regional Plan (HRP) & Draft Plan for Growing Hunter City (GHC) have attempted to provide a framework for future growth and investment in the Hunter region. However errors, flawed boundaries and the absence of detail have resulted in a report that is little more than a glossy brochure of intent, with no concrete plans for the region's future. Given the plans are intended to shape the Hunter's future for the next 20 years, it is critical that the foundations and framework established by the plans are strong. They must be a true reflection of the Hunter community's potential, but also harnesses all available opportunities to maximise the benefits it will confer on the Hunter.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/~media/Files/DPE/Plans-and-policies/draft-hunter-regional-plan-2015-11.ashx>

<sup>2</sup> [file:///D:/My%20Documents/Downloads/RDA-Hunter\\_Strategic-economic-study\\_March-2013.pdf](file:///D:/My%20Documents/Downloads/RDA-Hunter_Strategic-economic-study_March-2013.pdf)

## **Implementation**

Responsibility for the delivery of the broad targets outlined in these plans has been left to the Coordination and Monitoring Committee, which is proposed to be made up of representatives from the NSW Government and councils from across the Hunter.

The NSW Opposition supports, in principle, the formation of a committee which is responsible for the implementation of the plans, however, there are a number of concerns about the structure, membership and powers of the committee.

For the committee to effectively implement the plan, once finalised, it is vital that a broad membership is engaged so that the community can have ownership of the outcome. Specifically, the committee would benefit from the inclusion of representatives of the NSW Department of Education and Department of Health, as well as representatives of the private sector, the University of Newcastle and Hunter and New England Health.

Equally, it is concerning that Treasury is not included in Committee's functions. The inclusion of a representative from Treasury will help ensure that there is concrete investment in the Hunter's infrastructure and institutions.

It is imperative that there are residents and businesses of the Hunter represented on the committee to ensure that the implementation is sensitive to the needs of the community and also to ensure that the regions employment generators are at the table.

The residents of the Hunter do not need or want another bureaucratic body, made up of people who do not live in the Hunter, dictating to the Hunter community, what is in their best interests.

The process by which people are appointed to the committee must be transparent.

By drawing input from a broad cross section of sectors and experience, there is a greater likelihood of better outcomes for our community. Transparency in the appointment process is critical to ensure the community has confidence in the committee and its processes.

The HRP and GHC fail to adequately state the powers, authority and responsibilities of the committee. The Opposition's support for a committee to oversee implementation of the plans is conditional on the committee being given adequate powers and authority to act.

If in the future, the committee's role is properly defined, the Opposition proposes that an appropriate name for the committee would be the "Hunter Commission". This title would adequately reflect the importance of the Hunter to the State's economy.

## **Boundaries**

The Hunter is comprised of many different communities and regions. Nevertheless, it is a region that is well-defined by a common sense of identity and spirit.

It is a region which is comprised of 6 Federal electorates, 9 State electorates and 11 local government areas.

The boundary proposed for the area described in the GHC as “Hunter City” is both ill-defined and confusing. In fact, there is no map or diagram provided in the document itself, which clearly defines the area.

The merit of creating yet another boundary to define “Hunter City” is likely to create confusion given it does not follow any natural geographic boundaries or existing Federal, State or Local Government boundaries.

To add to the confusion, the newly defined area of “Hunter City” is being proposed by the NSW government at a time when it is also proposing Council amalgamations for Hunter communities.

The NSW Opposition suggests that the NSW government’s multiple proposals to redefine areas within the Hunter, is likely to result in poor engagement in the feedback process and confusion going into the future. Moreover, the draft report contains a number of unfortunate and embarrassing omissions of important regional centres which will continue to be important hubs of development in the Hunter.

The exclusion of Morisset as a strategic centre, and its classification as a major / larger town in the Hunter City hinterland, fails to recognise its continued and growing importance as a growth hub of Western Lake Macquarie.

Morisset is a site of both residential and commercial investment and will require appropriate planning to ensure the future needs of residents and businesses are met.

It is disappointing that Morisset has been placed in the hinterland zone, which the draft plan describes as “remaining a productive and predominantly rural landscape for the long term benefit of the community. This will allow the hinterland to sustain its rural production values and the protection of floodplains and wetlands.”

This description is at odds with the current zoning of land in and around Morisset which aims to fully utilize its location along a major rail line.

Morisset has a comparable population, employment and workforce to other strategic centres identified in the draft plan, such as Raymond Terrace. Morisset would benefit from a similar inclusion in the Hunter City plan to reflect its potential as a growth area.

The omission of growth areas from “Hunter City” raises the obvious question as to how the boundary was determined. Given the well-known influence of particular developers in the Hunter, the NSW Opposition questions whether the ownership of areas flagged for development was a factor in the drawing of the boundary.

The status of the regional centres of Kurri Kurri also need to be clarified, as it appears to be excluded from the Hunter City region, yet is included and labelled as a population centre on other maps within the Hunter Cities plan.

The inclusion of only part of some local government areas, such as Port Stephens, in the HCP, is causing concern that areas not included, will be left with little support, particularly if the proposed Council amalgamations proceed.

### **Missing future projects**

The Draft plan omits or undervalues a number of key strategic developments which have either been completed, are under construction or will require appropriate planning controls to be implemented to ensure their future delivery.

The Lake Macquarie Transport Interchange is described by Hunter Councils as the number one infrastructure priority for the region, yet the Draft report includes only cursory mention of this development, including the impact of - as yet unfunded - sections of the project. The only commitment regarding the inclusion of a rail connection at this site is for the Government to continue “monitoring patronage and demand for rail services in the long term”.

With construction already commenced on stage 1 of this project a commitment to the ‘long term’ will fail to deliver the rail connection in time to meet the planned residential and commercial growth in Northern Lake Macquarie.

The M15 Hunter Expressway (HEX) is also undervalued in both the DHP and HCP as a stimulus for development in the western part of Hunter City. This transport link has significantly reduced travel times throughout the Hunter and must be fully utilized to ensure that growth and opportunities are available throughout the Hunter.

Despite this, the HEX is only mentioned 3 times in the Draft Hunter Plan. Since it was opened in 2013 the HEX has become a transport spine for the Hunter--essential for those travelling east to west and also connecting the north-south routes on the New England Highway. This provides obvious implications for transport “pinch points” at the eastern and western connections.

The HEX provides a magnitude of opportunities for development right along its 40km span, yet these opportunities are largely unconsidered in this Draft Plan. By contrast significant attention appears to have been paid to the “old” infrastructure of the old New England Highway between Hexham and Lochinvar. There are 3 significant drawbacks to future development along this route– it is already largely built and shaped (recognised in this Draft Plan); secondly, it is flood prone (recognised in this Draft Plan); and finally it is no longer a major transport route for north, south, east or west commodities because it has been replaced by the HEX.

The HEX has been designed with capacity for future growth; to be established, shaped and formed over the coming decade, yet the HRP and GHC plans fail to maximise this opportunity. The route of the HEX provides convenient access to a number of opportune growth sites such as the Buchanan interchange (a 4 way intersection of major routes), the Hydro Aluminium Smelter site to be re-developed, the Huntlee development (with expected population of 20 000+) and a variety of greenfield development sites. There is ample opportunity for additional transport and logistics hub along the Expressway.

The Newcastle airport remains a major driver of the Hunter economy, providing an essential point of access for visitors to the region and for locals to access other markets, as well as driving significant employment. The future of the Hunter will require a clear and dedicated plan about how the airport’s connectivity will be prioritised.

The HRP and GHC plans recognise the importance of the Newcastle Airport and outlines a number of the logistical challenges faced by the Airport, yet offers no solutions to these challenges. The GHC plan describes increasing public transport options to access Newcastle Airport as part of the four priority areas for the Inner Newcastle District, yet while other priority areas have corresponding NSW Government actions to achieve these outcomes, this priority area has no such action point. The HRP and GHC should be planning for a fixed public transport option for Newcastle Airport to ensure its future viability and growth.

The HRP and GHC lists both high-speed rail and a freight rail bypass as under consideration. The fact that these corridors have not been mapped in the HRP suggests that they have already been dismissed. The NSW Opposition views these transport links as opportunities which would deliver many social, employment and economic benefits for the Hunter. A

high-speed rail connection would make the Hunter a viable alternative for commuters working on the Central Coast and Sydney. This in-turn would help address housing affordability in the Greater Sydney region.

The HRP and GHC also says little about the diversification and future operation of one of the region's most important assets—Newcastle Port. The Port of Newcastle currently encompasses 200 hectares of vacant land, deep water access and existing road and rail connectivity. The Port of Newcastle remains one of the world's largest coal export ports generating \$13.78 billion in 2014/15<sup>3</sup>. The HRP and GHC should be planning to diversify the Port's existing operations including consideration of its future capacity as a container terminal and the upgrade of existing Cruise Ship facilities. Planning for a diverse future for the Port of Newcastle will ensure it remains a sustainable and vibrant contributor to the New South Wales economy.

The Hunter's role as a centre for Energy production is well captured by this report however insufficient attention is given to expanding the role of renewable energy within the Hunter. Where renewable energy is mentioned in the report it is contained within "alternative energy" which is described as including both "gas and renewables".

The Hunter is well served by the presence of the Newcastle Institute for Energy and Resources and the CSIRO Energy Centre. For future employment in the energy sector there must be a focus on renewable energy and planning mechanisms which allow the Hunter to leverage new projects off the presence of existing renewable energy agencies. The HRP and GHC fail to capitalise on significant existing assets within the Hunter.

### **Lack of planning for services growth**

While this report seeks to provide an overview of areas expected growth over coming years, no attempt has been made to holistically map the NSW Government services which will be required to accompany this expected growth in both residential and commercial development.

The NSW Departments of Education and Health, both as major employers and critical public services, warrant inclusion in this plan so that the public can be confident that residential growth areas will be well serviced by schools and health facilities.

The University of Newcastle and John Hunter Hospital are major employers in the region. The HRP and GHC should include further detail on how these institutions will be given

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.portofnewcastle.com.au/Resources/Documents/PON-Annual-Trade-Report-2014-FINAL.pdf>

further opportunities to develop and grow including capacity for development outside of their existing footprints.

Recognition of the Government's commitment in the GHC, to develop a health precinct in Metford, with a new Maitland hospital at its heart, is welcome.

Targets for affordable housing are also omitted from this report. Instead the community is only provided with broad statements about seeking ways to increase supply. A number of important questions remain unanswered such as:

- Is the government prepared to set affordable housing targets to ensure that our communities remain diverse and inclusive?
- How does the government intend on revitalising the Newcastle CBD without low income residents (for example, cleaners, nurses and school teachers) living within close proximity of their places of work?

Despite the Hunter City boundaries extending into the suburbs this document retains a single CBD focus which under-delivers for the residents in the suburbs of the greater Newcastle region. We should not repeat the mistakes of congestion and poor employment access in other major cities. Planning for a poly-centric region will help with future transport planning and also ensure the Hunter remains a place of opportunity and relative equality. Greater priority within both the HRP and the GHC plan needs to be given to the NSW Government services which will be required throughout the Hunter region and how residents will access these services.

### **Environmental concerns**

Both the HRP and GHC undervalue the importance of the natural environment to the Hunter community – for recreation, for amenity and for the tourism sector.

The HRP frequently mentions Coal Seam Gas (CSG) and other alternative gas products, whereas the Government has been buying back Petroleum Exploration Licences (PELs). There would appear to be an inconsistency between this plan and the government's actions which raises the question: does the government see the Hunter's future prosperity hinging on CSG?

Significant clarification is required regarding the role of the gas industry in the Hunter as outlined in the HRP.

Extractive sand mining receives only one brief mention in the HRP despite the significant impact of this industry in the Hunter region. The inadequate regulation and oversight of this industry has been a topic of media debate over recent years but this plan fails to identify the importance of proper regulation in restoring the community's confidence in the extractive industry more broadly.

Insufficient weighting has been given to the protection and maintenance of a “Green Corridor” to link the Newcastle coastal estuary with the inland mountain habitat. Throughout the plan there is a need to outline how the impact of development will be minimised on land of high conservation and environmental value as well as identify the green corridor lands which will be reserved in order to retain habitat connectivity.

### **Land Use Conflicts**

The HRP notes the importance of ensuring ‘balance competing land use requirements for rural and resource production’

In the western section of the Hunter Valley there remains a tense and ongoing conflict between open cut mining and agriculture, equine and viticulture industries. Maps contained in the HRP appear to show a continued overlap between these industries and fails to provide a mechanism for resolving this conflict.

These valuable and vibrant industries require planning certainty so as to be able to maximise employment and economic opportunities in the future. This plan does not provide any such certainty.

In the Lower Hunter, specifically in the Maitland region, the land use conflicts involve competing interests between development and agriculture. This is exacerbated by the location of Maitland on a significant area of flood plain, with an ageing levy bank infrastructure. Boutique farming, including high quality meat and other producers, is at risk of damage to their property and more intense inundation by run off from an increased area of hard surfaces created by new housing developments.

Future planning in an areas such as Maitland, Raymond Terrace and the townships in between, which are subject to flooding, will require the agreement and cooperation of the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, NSW Roads and Maritime Services, NSW Department of Planning and Environment and Local Governments to ensure that road access is maintained for residents in times of flood. The failure of successive governments to address flooding at Testers Hollow led in 2015 to the forced isolation of a whole community of some two thousand people at Gillieston Heights for over 7 days and to a community at Oakhampton in January 2016. Flood access is a key need for Maitland and surrounding areas.



## **Errors in the Plan**

The HRP contains a number of unfortunate and embarrassing errors which highlight the Government's lack of engagement in the Hunter region.

Direction 4.4 of the HRP refers to strengthening the economic self-determination of Aboriginal Communities. The draft Plan refers to a list of Aboriginal Land Councils the Government will work with, identifying priority sites so that each Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) can "create a pipeline of potential projects". One of those identified LALCs listed is Koompahtoo Aboriginal Land Council, however Koompahtoo was dissolved by the Minister in 2010. Biraban LALC has been established in the area for at least a few years.

The inclusion of Forster-Tuncurry in HRP speaks to the lack of involvement of anyone from the Hunter in the development of the plan. Residents in this area do not identify themselves as being part of the Hunter. Ambitious and incorrect mapping of the areas covered by the plan would be cured with the involvement of people who actually live in the Hunter, in the revision of the plans.

The HRP also features contradictory mapping such as some diagrams which include Cessnock within the proposed hinterland, but in other diagrams only Kurri is included. The precise boundaries of the proposed areas needs urgent clarification.

## **Accountability**

Finally, it is concerning that a document of this significance has little detail on when or how this overarching plan will be delivered. The HRP makes no commitment to future infrastructure and investment in the region. Given the region's economic significance and projected growth, a plan for the region's future should include a series of strategic investments in infrastructure and institutions with timelines for their delivery. Without these commitments the plan will have little use other than wallpaper.

Given the importance of the plans to the future of the Hunter, the NSW Opposition requests a further extension of time for community feedback. This is particularly relevant given the focus of many residents is on trying to preserve their local council as opposed to reviewing planning documents.

Alternatively, it would be appropriate for the next draft of the plans to be placed on public exhibition. The enormous inadequacies in these first drafts will require extensive revision which will warrant further feedback.

The Hunter Labor MP's would also welcome an ongoing dialogue with the Department as the plan is revised. We trust that the Department will provide us with this opportunity.

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**Shadow Minister for the Hunter**