



Submission to NSW Dept Planning and Environment responding to the draft plan for growing Hunter city.

23 Feb 2016

Newcastle Cycleways Movement inc has been advocating for cycling in Newcastle since it was formed in 1977 making it one of the first bicycle user groups in the country. We are focussed on improving conditions for utilitarian and recreational cycling by adults and children, and do not represent the racing community.

The Draft Plan for Growing Hunter City offers an opportunity to shape the future of urban living, but we identify that the current document fails to identify opportunities for change. It is a plan for far flung suburbs connected by much too many roads, and will do nothing to improve the quality of life of residents. The Hunter has the same problems with obesity as the state as a whole, and suffers even higher rates of sedentary diseases such as cardiovascular disease. A new urban plan has the opportunity to improve population health by building a city in which cycling is a safe and attractive transport option for the majority of child trips to school and adult trips of less than 10Km length.

We are pleased to see that the health outcomes of urban planning are recognised in the vision statement, but unfortunately there is very little to promote health in the rest of the document. Health is mentioned in relation to health services, and in the health of natural environments, but the health possibilities of building a city which entices and supports high levels of physical activity is only alluded to in photo captions about active living. Health should be at the core of town planning, as it was when towns were improved to beat the scourge of infectious disease in the 19th century. The epidemic of chronic diseases due to sedentary living can be contained by new directions in town planning for the 21st century.

Cycleways are active transport infrastructure

At action 1.4.3 cycleways are placed in the section on parklands and waterways. This is a fundamental mistake, as cycleways are transport infrastructure and should be dealt with in direction 1.3 to enhance city wide transport. For years councils have built wiggly concrete paths through parklands and called them cycleways, despite this design being of little use to people using a bicycle for utilitarian transport.

The Fernleigh track is mentioned, and is a superb community asset. The planning process for this was however a mess. Despite being only 15 Km long it was divided into five stages, took 15 years to build, and was allocated tiny amounts of money until the commonwealth came up with financial stimulus money during the GFC. If it wasn't for the GFC we would still be waiting. It is hard to imagine a road project being so badly treated.

Throughout the document we find the phrase "work with Council to improve walking

and cycling links between major transport, retail and health services.” We find this an encouraging sentiment, but do not see any detail of how this would be implemented, or commitment of funding to see that this happens. Luckily there is a community proposal that spells out exactly how this should be done.

In September 2014 members Newcastle Cycleways Movement and other community organisations launched a bold proposal for a cycleway network serving the transport needs of people across the Newcastle LGA, and the northern part of Lake Macquarie LGA. The Cycle Safe Network requires 150 Km of new cycleways to complete a network of uniform high safety standard, linking seven of the nine strategic centres identified in the draft plan. It builds on key learnings from the international literature on creating cycling networks. The key points are:

- To create continuous links from origin to destination, not just building the easy bits.
- To start building in places that already have high bicycle use, to support cultural change.
- To link everywhere to everywhere, not trying to pick “cycling destinations”
- The overall community benefit is greater when a network is constructed as one big project rather than many disjointed projects.

By our estimation the cost of the total network would be the same as the cost of 1001 metres of the proposed Newcastle city bypass behind John Hunter Hospital to Jesmond, so would be extremely good value for NSW.

We propose action 1.3.2 as follows:

Establish a local active transport authority to plan and implement cycling and walking facilities to the nine identified strategic centres, and to public transport nodes for multi mode trips.

- The Cycle Safe Network will be built over the first 5 years of the plan, and extended to the remaining strategic destinations during the second five years.
- In addition to the broad CSN network, identified cycle routes to each school will be constructed to a radius of 1 Km in each direction, giving children a safe option of cycling to school.
- Targets for bicycle mode share will be set for 2021 at 5% of all adult trips and 20% of child trips to school, and progress to these will be reported annually.

Richmond Vale Rail Trail

The Richmond Vale rail line runs 32 Km from Hexham to Pelaw Main near Kurri Kurri, including three historic tunnels under parts of the sugarloaf range and passes close to the Blue Gum Hills regional park at Minmi. It presents a unique opportunity to create a major tourist drawcard for the Hunter City hinterland. Old rail lines make perfect cycleways as the gradients are gentle, and they often preserve important local history. The Richmond Vale Rail Trail has a very favourable feasibility report commissioned by the Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and Cessnock city councils in 2014. Rail trails can boost tourist activity, attracting large numbers of visitors. As comparators, the Lilydale-Warburton rail trail 1 hour from Melbourne attracts 105,000 visitors annually, and the Mundaring shire trail outside Perth attracts 180,000 visitors who between them make 900,000 visits per year. The

Richmond Vale Rail Trail will deliver tourists to the wine country area, making an attractive package with food, wine and cultural events.

At a projected cost of 9.3 to 13.4 million dollars the rail trail is a very low expenditure for a major community asset that would greatly boost regional tourism income, and advance the creation of jobs that are not affected by the cyclical nature of the resource industries bringing valuable balance to the regional economy. It is a perfect fit with the Draft Hunter Regional plan: ACTION 2.2.2 Develop strategies for enhancing tourism infrastructure to increase national competitiveness.

The Richmond Vale Rail Trail also fits with the plan for growing Hunter City. As a mostly recreational facility it is appropriate for action 1.4.3 as part of the city's Blue and Green network, and the new plan is an opportunity to accelerate the implementation of this important project.