

Submission

No 55

INQUIRY INTO THE UTILISATION OF RAIL CORRIDORS

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The Committee Manager
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Dear Sir/Madam

THE UTILISATION OF RAIL CORRIDORS

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the inquiry into the utilisation of rail corridors. Brief comments are provided in the following, however not all of the terms of reference are addressed. Council would welcome the opportunity to provide further comment as the inquiry progresses.

Context

Newcastle is located at the mouth of the Hunter River, approximately 160km north of Sydney and is the economic, administrative and cultural centre of the Hunter Region. Two major rail corridors service Newcastle – the electric intercity line which runs from Newcastle via the western shore of Lake Macquarie to the Central Coast and Sydney and the Main Northern Line. The future of the inner city rail corridor, from Broadmeadow to Newcastle, has been the subject of debate for decades.

RailCorp owns and maintains the metropolitan rail network. North of Hamilton Station, the Australian Rail Track Corporation has responsibility.

Providing opportunities for mixed use property development

Policies guiding the development and redevelopment of residential, commercial and industrial lands are provided in the *Newcastle Urban Strategy* and are implemented through the *Newcastle Local Environmental Plan*. The key objective of the *Newcastle Urban Strategy* is to promote existing neighbourhoods as mixed use centres - 'urban villages' - with higher employment and housing densities than in the past, and with buildings and streetscape works that celebrate local identity and respect local character. Key principles of the Residential Development Strategy (incorporated in the *Newcastle Urban Strategy*), are to increase housing densities within walking distance of centres/public transport; maximise proximity of residents to employment; locate dwellings to support existing infrastructure and services; and facilitate revitalisation of existing commercial areas by increasing housing densities around these centres.

Council has recently adopted the *Newcastle Local Environmental Plan 2011* and *Newcastle Development Control Plan 2011*. Future development of rail corridors for mixed use should be consistent with these instruments.

Connectivity of communities either side of railway lines

In the Newcastle City Centre, there are currently six footbridges (Bellevue Street, Civic Station, Argyle Street, Perkins Street, Market Street and Queens Wharf), and level crossings (for vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists) at Merewether Street, between Wickham and Newcastle Stations, and at Stewart Avenue/Hannell Street. The footbridges largely involve flights of stairs and cannot be used by cyclists and some users with mobility problems. Three former pedestrian crossings in the City Centre have been closed and not relocated.

A specific objective for the development of the Newcastle City Centre is to integrate the waterfront and Hunter Street through additional north/south linkages. A considerable body of work has been undertaken by Newcastle City Council, the Honeysuckle Development Corporation (now Hunter Development Corporation) and the NSW Department of Transport (Transport for NSW) to investigate the feasibility of, and risks associated with, additional level crossings of the railway between Wickham and Newcastle Stations. Studies have indicated that congestion will worsen beyond acceptable levels (particularly at the intersection of Stewart Avenue and Hunter Street) if additional crossings are not provided.

Traffic congestion and delays would be considerably reduced, and permeability improved, if additional vehicular and pedestrian level crossings were provided at Steel Street and Worth Place. These crossings could be provided with the same vehicle safety standards as at the level crossing at Stewart Avenue. Provisions for new crossings are included in the *Newcastle Development Control Plan 2011*.

The Newcastle City Centre is one of the first three precincts nominated in the *State Environmental Planning Policy (Urban Renewal) 2010*, for renewal and revitalisation. Improvements in connectivity for pedestrians and cyclists is a key focus of the work by Department of Planning and Infrastructure and Council for the urban renewal project.

Newcastle 2030 – Newcastle Community Strategic Plan

In March 2011, Council adopted *Newcastle 2030 – Newcastle Community Strategic Plan*. The *Newcastle Community Strategic Plan* sets out the community's aspirations for the future and the key strategies required to work towards that future. The community indicated that they want a *connected city*, in which transport networks and services are well-connected and convenient, and walking, cycling and public transport are viable options for the majority of residents' trips.

Through the consultation process for development of the *Newcastle Community Strategic Plan*, the community strongly expressed its desire for more, safer bicycle facilities, physically separated from cars. This was supported by consultation undertaken in preparation of Council's draft *Newcastle Cycling Strategy and Action Plan*.

The adopted *Newcastle Community Strategic Plan* includes a range of ideas suggested by the community. Of relevance to the current inquiry is the suggestion for use 'of existing rail corridors for parallel cycleways e.g. Maitland to Newcastle, Adamstown to Broadmeadow' (p. 32). Key strategies in the document include development of a network of safe, linked cycle and pedestrian paths integrated with key destinations and green space and giving greater priority to cyclists and pedestrians in transport planning to enhance safety and encourage travel behaviour change.

The overwhelming majority of trips undertaken by residents of Newcastle are short trips (less than 10km) that could be undertaken by walking or riding, if people thought it safe and convenient to do so. The use of rail corridors for cycleways would allow more effective use of the space and the opportunity to connect some key destinations by relatively safe, traffic free links, to supplement the existing network.

It is noted that many of the issues associated with use of rail corridors for cycleways have been investigated. Council commends the report *Cycleways Along Railway Corridors – Final Report for NSW Department of Transport*, (Bruce Ashley Environmental Consulting, 1997) to the Committee members for a comprehensive discussion of the subject.

The report states that:

Rails-with-trails are particularly suited to enhancing utility cycling. They are attractive because they provide a separated bicycle way relatively free of motorised traffic and characterised by excellent grades for cycling by all categories of cyclist. They are generally along important links between trip producers (residential areas) and trip attractors (shopping, education, and employment centres).

The State plan, *NSW 2021 – A Plan to Make NSW Number One* (NSW Government, 2011), aims to more than double the use of cycling in Greater Sydney for local and district trips in the period to 2016. The *NSW BikePlan* sets a target of 5% mode share to cycling for short trips and doubling of the mode share to cycling for commuting. There is clear community and political support for enhancement of active transport. Innovative, more frequent use of rail corridors could complement other initiatives to encourage cycling to meet the stated targets.

Efforts by individual local councils to pursue cycle paths in rail corridors would likely be facilitated by ready access to clear, consistent guidelines, to carry out a preliminary assessment of feasibility. Notwithstanding the detailed investigations that would need to be undertaken for specific locations, the provision of clear information on conditions under which a cycleway could be considered, safety considerations, clearances, lease, maintenance and management arrangements, would assist in preliminary assessment of proposals and likely provide a more effective process than that which has occurred to date.

The *NSW Bicycle Guidelines*, in section 6.7.1 indicates that the 'closest a bicycle path or shared path can be safely located next to an active rail line is 2.5m to the outside running rail with a preferred distance of 3.0m' (p. 40). RailCorp's engineering standard *ESC 530 Cycleways on the Rail Corridor* (accessed from http://engineering.railcorp.nsw.gov.au/Civil_EngineeringStandards.asp) appears to indicate that the trackside fence of the cycleway should be no closer than 6.2m to the centreline of the nearest track. Council is not aware of ARTC's requirements.

A specific rail corridor proposal that Council is pursuing involves a section of the Main Northern Line in the vicinity of the Maud Street Overbridge, Waratah, as described below.

Route 6 – Newcastle City Centre to University

Council has undertaken significant work recently on enhancements to a cycle route from the City Centre to the University of Newcastle, in partnership with the Newcastle University Bike Users Group and Newcastle Cycleways Movement. With the University's plans to increase its presence in the City Centre, use of this route is

expected to grow. The route is primarily on shared paths and quiet local streets however two road crossings, at Hannell St Wickham and Maud St Waratah present challenges to almost all categories of riders. Funding for upgrade of the Hannell St crossing has been approved.

Various scenarios have been proposed to address the dangerous crossing at Maud Street. One concept proposed includes continuation of the existing shared path from the University along the rail corridor, under the Maud Street overbridge of the railway to join the on road route at Prince Street. Council is currently negotiating with Roads and Maritime Services and the Australian Rail Track Corporation regarding potential use of the corridor.

Resolution of issues on R6 route is a priority for Council. There are however, other locations in the LGA for which Council would like to pursue use of rail corridors. At its meeting on 17 May 2011, Council considered the Notice of Motion 17/05/11 – Fernleigh Track and resolved to investigate the feasibility of continuing the Fernleigh track from Adamstown to Woodville Junction and the TAFE Campus, Islington running parallel to the railway.

Efforts by councils to pursue use of rail corridors (active and disused) for supplementing their bicycle networks would be facilitated by a clear commitment from the State Government to do so.

Identification and preservation of transport corridors

Throughout the Lower Hunter, there are several former rail corridors which are still substantially vacant and mostly in some form of public ownership. The mode of travel within the corridors can be determined later. In the short term, the corridors should be preserved for use as part of the future regional transport system.

Yours faithfully



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