

**Submission  
No 249**

**INQUIRY INTO PLANNING PROCESS IN NEWCASTLE  
AND THE BROADER HUNTER REGION**

**Organisation:** TVT Transport Development and Road Safety Research

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SUBMISSION TO THE NSW PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY  
Into PLANNING PROCESS IN NEWCASTLE  
AND THE BROADER HUNTER REGION

23/10/2014

From Peter Mackenzie;

TVT Transport Development and Road Safety Research

Firstly, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to provide this input.

I am writing in regard to the planned truncation of heavy rail to Newcastle, to be cutback to Wickham Railway Station area, with a proposed light rail installation between there and Newcastle CBD (Watt Street?).

My focus is purposely mainly restricted to comment on:

(a) the core justification argument around this proposal: ie that the existing heavy rail line between Newcastle Rail Terminus and Wickham Railway Station, is said to be an impediment to the so-called “revitalisation of Newcastle”; through it being a “barrier” separating the city from the waterfront/ harbour foreshore.

(b) and to the more minor argument that the rail infrastructure is “ugly”, and that is also an impediment to the city. (gleaned from comments made in the general media by former Newcastle City mayor Geoff McCloy et al).

I know that a number of associates will submit solid arguments for retention of the heavy rail line, so I will leave that to their expert knowledge.

The stated aim of reconnecting the city to the foreshore sounds commendable, and of course is easily talked up. That the rail line is emphasised as seemingly the only barrier between the city and the waterfront/foreshore seems to stem from talking up as well.

However, once examined critically and objectively, the arguments are seen to be flawed, and it appears that there is a quite myopic view or perception that is well-entrenched enough to have become a 'mindset'.

I am assuming that the aspired-to reconnection refers to both visual and physical access. In both cases there is a significant problem in that there is already a considerable amount of built infrastructure between the southern side of Hunter Street and the harbour foreshore.

So much so that in reality there is really only up to around 300-400 metres of visual or physical clearway between the north side of Hunter Street and the foreshore.

The rest is already built over with apartments and other buildings, some of which are several stories tall.

Even within that 400 metre visual window, there are some buildings on the foreshore itself.

A quick aerial view using Google Earth will confirm that situation.

At the west end of that 300-400 metre visual window, up to just east of Civic railway station, there are multi-story buildings on the foreshore side of the railway, so it wouldn't matter whether the railway was there or not- there is no direct access to the water edge. If Civic Railway station wasn't there, there would be clearer physical access to the Honeysuckle precinct, but west of that, there are enough existing buildings along Hunter Street, acting as barriers, to make concerns about the railway as a barrier quite irrelevant.

In fact, it is easier to create accessible crossings over the existing railway line than it is to try and make them through solid buildings. Any additional building over the rail line alignment once the rail line is removed, will only exacerbate that situation.

The fact that some of the buildings mentioned above, are not all that old, and that reportedly some railway crossings have been removed within recent decades, begs the question of how concerned the decision makers really have been about this aspired to "reconnection" to the waterfront.

It seems to be a more recent conversation, that has become a mantra.

In terms of physical access, given the nation's historical love of motor vehicles, - and of the roads that make that work - it is not surprising that the question of roads, particularly Hunter Street is basically overlooked as a physical barrier between the south side of Hunter Street and the waterfront. It is as though they aren't there, and the difficulties and risks of crossing them are negligible.

Yet the reality is that Hunter Street is a four lane, undivided road that takes people with disabilities, and other who are slower at mobility, quite some time to cross, and there are actually few marked/signalised crossings.

And apparently four lanes of tarmac aren't ugly, though a railway line is.

In addition to the above, it needs to be noted that, for the 300-400 metres of (almost) clear visual access between the south side of Hunter Street and the waterfront, there is actually for most of that section, the buildings between the north side of Hunter Street and Scott Street that act as a visual and physical barrier to the waterfront.

If you take a coin and start drawing access/walking time circles on a google map of the area in question, you quickly realize that most of the access issues are as much about roads and buildings other than the railway, as the railway itself.

Digressing for a moment, any concern about vehicle access for tourists etc is a real furphy, as the drive from say Civic Station area to the waterfront is in time and distance, even via Watt St, so inconsequential that it is laughable.

For walkers, we need to draw the circles and along with that, consider where from and to people might be walking.

From anywhere within the Hunter Street mall area, the route to the the waterfront over the railway line is no more problematic than walking the distances between blocks along Hunter St Mall.

For people coming from Hunter Street west of Brown Street, nearly as far as Darby Street, with the rail line removed, you still will not be able to access the waterfront precinct directly, due the the apartments built there.

East of Brown Street, the walk to the closest railway pedestrian overbridge is about the same as walking one of the city blocks in the Hunter Street Mall.

For people walking from areas south of Hunter Street, the access issues are similar.

For anyone travelling from east of Bolton Street, it would be as easy to access the waterfront via Watt St than to travel a city block or two in the other direction.

Doubtlessly, some additional pedestrian overbridges with ramp access, strategically placed, would assist people with disability/mobility/health issues. certainly it could help with people who use mobility scooters and motorised or non-motorised wheelchairs.

For some of the people mentioned above, if the additional 1 to 1.5 minutes time/distance to access a pedestrian crossing over rail is a serious impediment, I would suggest (from working with and for such people), that their ability to access the waterfront area would also be an issue without the rail line being in place.

It would be considerably cheaper to build some additional easily graded pedestrian overbridges than the (probable) overall costs of \$500m to remove the rail line, build temporary facilities, chop up Hunter Street and install light rail. (that's in addition to the external costs of disruption, dust, potential hazards, noise etc).

Plus the real risk that the heavy rail line will go, and may not be replaced by light rail.

Former Mayor Jeff McCloy referred to the “ugliness” of the rail line. It's not pretty, granted but I would welcome the opportunity to show the committee some other ugliness that apparently wasn't obvious to the former Mayor.

Unlike the former Mayor, I came to this issue from a very different and unique perspective:

1. As a former Novocastrian who has walked along all the streets and laneways of Newcastle in the past- and I mean ALL, as we did that as an adventure when young, but later I did that as an electricity meter reader for the former Shortland County Council (NESCA).
2. And as commuter to the (then) steel city, by bus, train, car and ferry (the last from Stockton) at different stages of my earlier working life.

As a transport historian and as a transport development and road safety researcher, who has presented papers at several national conferences, and to other Parliamentary Inquiries.

As a Community Safety Officer for Launceston City Council.

And as a Youth Development Officer, and former Project Officer for Council on The Ageing (COTA) NSW and as a worker and advocate for people with disability and frail aged.

And from taking the opportunity to re-walk the streets and lanes from Watt Street to Wickham Railway Station twice this year to test out my observations from past memories and from Google Earth.

So in the main, we are talking about removing a railway line, but to clear the way for connecting people from roads to roads, roads to building, and buildings to buildings, more than connecting people to their “waterfront” as such.

In summary, my main concerns are:

1. The stated aim of reconnecting the city to the foreshore is limited by existing built infrastructure, and at further risk from potential new building development along the right-of-way of the existing heavy rail line between east of Civic Railway Station and the western end of Newcastle Railways Station infrastructure.
2. The railway line does limit physical access to the foreshore to 3 overbridges along that section, but only adding around 2 minutes extra walking time at the most from any specific point on the north of Hunter Street.
3. Hunter Street itself present access/safety issues that a fenced rail line doesn't. In terms of access from the southern side of Hunter Street, there are relatively few controlled crossings and it takes about 8 seconds walking time on the open sections, which is not good as a safety risk. I personally watched people taking risks crossing the road while in Newcastle in June and September.
4. While access from both sides of Scott Street is better, access from the Mall is limited by the buildings between Hunter and Scott Streets. The mall will not be magically “reconnected” to anything if the rail line is removed.
5. The “barrier” of rail is a perception far more than a reality, and the opportunity cost impacts of removal and replacement are really quite massive against the background of national transport infrastructure deficit and funding shortfall.

I freely offer to guide the committee on a tour of the areas and issues I have discussed above, but in the event that that is not possible, I have included some photographs taken around the section of Newcastle between Newcastle Railway Station and Civic Railway Station. Some are on the Scott Street side of the railway, and the others are between the railway line and the true waterside. Hopefully these will help to demonstrate some of the issues. (Appendix A sent as separate attachment)

The theme of the photographs is “only rail is ugly” and “only rail is a barrier” I hope which is which should be obvious.

I again thank the Committee for the opportunity to comment.

And finally to add that the cost of around \$2m for every one of the 300-400 metres of visual access to the real waterfront (the actual waterside) is a very expensive option for which I suggest the funds could be better spent.

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