

**Submission
No 126**

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

Name: Ms Leonie Crennan

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Attention:

Select Committee on the Planning Process in Newcastle and the Broader Hunter Region
Parliament House, Macquarie St, Sydney 2000

Submission from Leonie Crennan

Dear Committee Members

1. Thankyou for this opportunity to express my views regarding the so-called Urban Renewal of Newcastle. I feel that this is the first time there is a chance for an objective hearing and a genuine community consultation. The timeframe is very short given the long-term magnitude of the decisions being reviewed.

2. I am not opposed to renewal or "development" in Newcastle. It has saddened me to see so many of the buildings in the CBD become vacant and neglected. And it is also mystifying why this has happened given that it is such a beautiful city, surrounded by the harbour and the beach coastline. I have wondered whether some owners have deliberately not maintained or tenanted their buildings because they are waiting for a time when they can sell them at great profit. Business in the CBD seems to have slowly declined since buildings were demolished after the earthquake, and the Hospital was moved out of town.

3. I understand that to renew the city we may need more people to live and work in the city. This will happen with the development of a University campus in the CBD, and the expansion of the regional courts. The existing empty buildings in the CBD could be renovated or rebuilt to provide extra commercial and residential accommodation, and expand retail. There is also a lot of vacant land around Newcastle West that could be developed.

Bringing more people into the CBD will require effective public transport . The peninsular is narrow and already has numerous roads slicing through it (with minimum pedestrian crossings). Large ugly parking lots fill the foreshore particularly near Honeysuckle, but parking is limited now, and will be more so with extra people living, working, and studying in the CBD.

4. What I definitely don't understand is how removing the existing public transport infrastructure is going to facilitate the renewal of Newcastle.

For many years members of my family have commuted between work in Newcastle and Sydney. The rail line which provides a direct link from Newcastle CBD to Sydney has been an essential advantage.

Newcastle Station is a Transport Hub for people from Stockton, Fern Bay and others who catch the ferry across from the northern side of the harbour, including school children and University students.

It is already a challenge to ensure that the ferry connects with the train to Sydney. If we were forced to catch a bus or 'light rail' from Newcastle to Wickham to then try and connect with the train on time, the journey to Sydney would be too long and time consuming to be feasible. This would force us to drive,.. another car on the road.

5. Having separate rail lines going south to Sydney, and up to Maitland and the Hunter and to the University is already an effective public transport system, which ensures regular, direct, scheduled trains leaving and entering Newcastle CBD in all directions. I feel the decision to remove this system must have been made by people who do not use public transport.

6. Since the announcement that the heavy rail line would go, it has been presented at something that the majority of Newcastle residents want, and that community consultation has been conducted to prove this.

Who are the people who want the rail to go??

Where do they live, work and study?

Do they use public transport?

When was community consultation conducted? Where are the results of these surveys?

Although I did not agree with the decision, I reluctantly accepted that I must be in a minority because the politicians, and some local media keep telling us it is what everyone wants. However on the day it was reported (July 3, 2014) in the Newcastle Herald that the line was to be truncated on Boxing Day, I happened to be travelling into Newcastle and heard people talking everywhere I went...and they were angry. Business people, high school and Uni students, parents with children in prams, State Rail staff, surfers, cafe owners. Not one person was happy about it. This surprised me. So who are the Majority who advocate truncation, and why???

Some years ago my daughter-in-law was randomly contacted and offered \$80 to participate in a 'community consultation' conducted by GPT associates. They proposed that the rail line be removed and the area opened to public parkland. She lived in Adamstown so this 'development' would not affect her directly. She happened to know that Newcastle Station was the public transport hub for people north of the harbour as well as for CBD residents and workers, so she was shocked by how determined and persuasive GPT was, and could not understand their motivation.

On March 8, 2014 I attended a community consultation event regarding "revitalising" the CBD. The event was held at Newcastle Town Hall. I was expecting an information session presenting transport and development options, and their pros and cons. The room was full of public servants, uninformed consultants, and "transport experts" whose sole purpose was to canvass possible routes for a light rail from Wickham to Newcastle. The main notice board announced that the heavy rail was to be removed, and that the government was responding to the request from the community for light rail, (as though we didn't already have an existing rail transport system, and they were doing us a favour by exploring the possibility of light rail).

There was to be no discussion about whether the heavy rail should be removed, or about the pros and cons of new light rail versus the existing heavy rail. We were encouraged to fill out a survey form. The questions were skewed to support light rail (or no rail). *There was no question whether or not we wanted the heavy rail to be truncated and replaced by light rail.* I have included a copy of the survey form, with my notes in red criticising the way the survey is structured.

The form includes a section that asks us how we want to be updated on the process. I have never received any update. The next thing I hear is in the media, the government announcing the heavy rail is to be truncated on Boxing Day 2014. Light rail is mentioned, but was yet to be approved, and will take at least three years to install !!! So what happens during that 3 years??? And why 3 years for such short distance?

Its mid October now, and still no details have been released of alternative transport arrangements during the 3 year period of installation of the light rail!!

Its takes time and effort for an ordinary resident to express their opinion. When I have told people about your Parliamentary Inquiry, they have said 'I've done surveys and written to the government or Council before about the rail going, and it went no where.. no point in doing it again'

7. Why have the the supporters of truncating light rail put so much energy into silencing debate on the issue?.

The editor of the Portside Local wrote in the August 2014 edition that she was roundly criticised for including an article by the community group "Save Our Rail" in a previous issue. *Why didn't the proponents of truncating the the rail want another point of view to be published?* Readers appreciated "Save our Rail" describing their position in practical detail. The opposition could have done the same instead of attempting censorship. Why not clearly lay out all the pros and cons for any developments? (economic, social, environmental etc)

The vested interests who want the heavy rail to be removed have the time, money and air space to push their point of view. Those that object or question the sense of truncating the rail are ridiculed and dismissed as a "vocal minority" of trouble makers. I don't feel particularly vocal, and I am now fairly convinced that I am not a minority.

8. The port of Newcastle was sold by the NSW government, and a percentage of the money from the sale has been allocated to the renewal of Newcastle. We are all want this money to be spent on Newcastle renewal. Some people are afraid that if they oppose the truncation of the rail line we will lose the money, and nothing will happen in Newcastle.

9. These are some of the questions I would like the Committee to explore

A. Who exactly made the decision to truncate the rail, and what was the process? Please examine all communications between government agencies, developers, politicians etc.. (hopefully these communications have not been destroyed or "lost")

B. Were other options seriously considered such as improving and beautifying the rail corridor, or building above Newcastle and Civic stations. What evidence is there of these deliberations? Many cities around the world centre their retail and residential developments above/around railway stations. We already have the rail in place. If light rail is a useful possibility why not start it at Newcastle station and run it east around the beaches where public transport is really needed. The money would be available to do that if the heavy rail was not truncated. *Give us an improvement in services, not a reduction.*

C. What evidence is there of community consultation? How was it conducted and by whom? Who, or what organisation paid for it?
What has been done with the results of these consultations?

D. Was there any cost benefit analysis done on the development proposals for the CBD?

E. Was there a proper tendering process for removal of the rail line, and construction of light rail? What contracts and agreements have been made between the government and developers?

Thankyou for your attention
Leonie Crennan

Please acknowledge receipt of my submission. After previous experience I just don't trust that it will get to the Committee intact.

Attachment: UrbanGrowth survey form.