

**Submission  
No 34**

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

**Name:** Mr Kevin Harrison

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**SUBMISSION TO  
THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE PLANNING PROCESS IN  
NEWCASTLE AND THE BROADER HUNTER REGION**

My submission will address the following two aspects of the committee's terms of reference.

1. The changes to the built environment of Newcastle East under the State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP) Amendment (Newcastle City Centre) 2014, the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy and DA 2014/323 Newcastle East End Development. ( 2 (a), 2 (b) and 2 (d) of the Terms of Reference)
2. The termination of the heavy rail line at Wickham and the construction of a light rail to replace it. (2 (b) and 2 (c) of the Terms of Reference)

It is my view that both of these decisions, the SEPP Amendment and the termination of the rail line have been made, not with the benefit to the citizens of Newcastle in mind, but to maximise the financial outcome for the State Government and to provide maximum profit opportunity for developers.

There has been no real effort to show what the benefits of both of these measures will be to the people who live in Newcastle, and very little time allowed for comment before the decisions were made. It is telling that the development application for the high rise towers in Newcastle East went on public display before the SEPP Amendments were approved, indicating that decisions were already made and the provision for public submissions was just window dressing.

I have a serious concern that there is a conflict of interest in these decisions as the NSW government, which stands to benefit from these proposals, is also the body which approves the changes to regulations and plans for them to be implemented.

I have not seen nor heard any mass support for either of these proposals from ordinary citizens who live here in Newcastle.

## **1. CHANGES TO THE NEWCASTLE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT PLAN AND DEVELOPMENT CONTROL PLAN DUE TO THE SEPP AMENDMENT (NEWCASTLE CITY CENTRE)**

I am a supporter of the need to redevelop and enhance the inner city area of Newcastle. I also want to preserve the unique early to mid-twentieth century ambiance, character and skyline of the eastern part of the city. (That part east of Darby St - Area C in the Newcastle LEP). We are lucky this character has survived to this time and can probably put it down to the neglect of this area over the past few decades. It is a valuable asset and we need to protect it. It could be said to be Newcastle's equivalent to the "Rocks" area near Circular Quay.

The SEPP Amendments are, in effect, a spot rezoning of this area. They allow the **GPT** Group and UrbanGrowth to get development approval to build towers up to three times the height allowed under the Newcastle LEP. This is not right. The high rise towers do not enhance the skyline. Sight lines to the cathedral are blocked from many view points and the visual connection between the urban structures and natural topography is destroyed.

A sensible approach, that will not destroy the unique attributes of this area, would be to reduce the towers back to the original height limits (40m). It is certain that if

the high rise towers are allowed to go ahead, many more will rise in the years to come. Once the precedent is established, it will prove impossible to resist developer pressure for more high rise and our pleasant heritage city will be lost forever. High rise buildings should be restricted to the west end of the city as in the original plan.

One reason we have been given for higher height limits is that anything lower would not be viable. No evidence has been forthcoming to back this up. In the last 10 to 15 years, 12 apartment blocks, either new or re-adaptations of existing buildings, have been constructed in this area. All of these were constructed within the 40m height limit. None of the developers of these buildings felt that they would be unviable. There is also one new apartment development presently under construction.

I know that the **NSW** government stands to make a lot more money if it can have high rise towers as part of this project. The destruction of our city centre's character will be the price Newcastle's citizens will have to pay. It is not as if the government will control the development and ensure the best interests of Newcastle are served. We have been told that as soon as possible the site will be sold and we will be at the mercy of a developer who will only want to maximise his profit.

**I SUBMIT THAT THE CHANGES MADE TO SPOT REZONE THE NEWCASTLE LEP TO ALLOW FOR HIGHER BUILDINGS SHOULD BE REVERSED. THERE IS A REASONABLE CONCLUSION THAT IT WAS DONE FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE CURRENT STATE GOVERNMENT AND PROPERTY DEVELOPERS AND NOT FOR THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE THERE.**

## **2. THE TERMINATION OF THE HEAVY RAIL LINE AT WICKHAM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A LIGHT RAIL LINE INTO THE CITY TO REPLACE IT.**

With the state government trying to encourage higher density living and the use of public transport it seems a strange decision to remove existing mass transport infrastructure and spend millions on replacing it with one of less capacity. One that will require travelers to get off the train and get on the light rail to reach a destination in the city. Changing to light rail from the heavy rail will also be difficult for wheelchair users, parents with prams, Conservatorium students with bulky instruments, surfers (especially young people from up in the Hunter Valley) who use the service to get to Newcastle beach, blind and vision impaired people, and users who are older and less mobile.

The governments own transport department estimates that the existing levels of patronage on the rail line will be reduced by 23% with the need to change modes of transport at Wickham.

In the first part of this submission I talked about apartments in the east end of Newcastle. There are a lot already and the future will bring more. There is also to be an increase in university activity with the construction of a large city campus already in the initial stages. All of this will mean a big increase in the number of people wanting to travel into the area. There are existing rail stations within easy walking distance of all of this development, some are just across the road.

We are told by government ministers that this will "revitalise" our city but no arguments have been put forth to back that up. There has been no evidence of any

business case or cost/benefit analysis leading to the conclusion that to boost economic activity the main rail line into Newcastle needs to be removed.

Removing the heavy rail back to Wickham will open up easy access from the city to the foreshore area. This is true, although it has not been shown what need there is for this or what benefits it would bring. There are already several locations ( Worth Place and Steel St for example ) where a street level pedestrian or road crossing could be installed at minimum cost. Indeed there were some road crossings closed in the recent past when for some reason easy access to the foreshore was not a prerequisite for prosperity.

Another reason for cutting the heavy rail at Wickham is that it will relieve peak hour congestion at the Stewart Ave rail crossing because the railway barriers hold up the traffic. The small amount of detail that we have on the proposal reveals that the near by Railway St crossing will be closed. This means that most of the traffic that now uses the Railway St route will be diverted to the Stewart Ave one. There will also be one light rail journey every ten minutes. Given the location of the proposed interchange these light rail vehicles will have to cross Stewart Ave at the same place that the heavy rail does now. From 7 am to 7 pm the current timetables show 25 heavy rail trips west and 21 east. That means about one rail crossing every 15 minutes. So I cannot see there will be any improvement here. More likely there will be longer delays.

It is hard not to come to the conclusion that once again this decision has been taken to allow the state government to sell the rail corridor land and for developers to get land which will be easier and more profitable to develop than other locations in the city. Note that the land occupied by the rail corridor is not undermined and to build on it does not require costly "grouting" of the old coalmine tunnels before

construction can begin. We were told initially that none of the rail corridor would be sold. It would all remain in public hands as green space, pedestrian and cycle paths. However Minister Goward has recently admitted that "some" development would take place. I think this was always the intention. Instead of taking the cheapest route for the light rail line, the chosen route conveniently diverts from the best areas for development and runs down Hunter St.

**I SUBMIT THAT THE DECISION TO CUT THE RAIL LINE AT WICKHAM SHOULD BE REVERSED. THERE IS A REASONABLE CONCLUSION THAT IT WAS DONE FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE CURRENT STATE GOVERNMENT AND PROPERTY DEVELOPERS AND NOT FOR THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE THERE.**