

**Submission
No 289**

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

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PLANNING PROCESS IN NEWCASTLE AND THE BROADER HUNTER
REGION (INQUIRY)

Legislative Council
NSW Parliament
6 Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

To Whom it May Concern,

This submission responds to the inquiry's terms of reference (e) the decision to terminate the Newcastle rail line at Wickham and any proposal to construct light rail including along Hunter and Scott Streets.

This submission lists a number of issues that I believe were not taken seriously into account in the planning process which resulted in the decision to cut the Newcastle inner city train line.

I dispute that planning decision (e) was in any way a true reflection of the best options for Newcastle and the Hunter. Moreover, I contend that cutting the rail will have devastating effects on the local and broader Hunter community, and will be an embarrassment for the city for decades to come.

I do not believe that the people of Newcastle and the Hunter region were properly consulted during the decision making process. I do not believe that the patrons of the Newcastle inner city train line were respected, or properly represented or accounted for, in the planning process.

1. Sustainability

In the context of pressures of resource limitations and climate change, cities such as Newcastle need to prioritise policies and initiatives of sustainability. There are many initiatives and campaigns around the world that support a shift from the use of private transport to public transport, especially rail. Taking away the Newcastle inner city rail line runs counter to this evidence-based world-wide shift. By retaining the rail line, the government and the city of Newcastle could be a world leader in approaching the possibility of a shift towards renewable technologies for running the rail line. Taking the Newcastle inner city rail line out will only further entrench the use of private transport. Destroying the rail line ignores both the issue of sustainability and equity and is a shameful representation of the backward looking development interests at play in the Hunter.

Considering the possibilities of transitioning to renewable energy for running the rail was never seriously considered as an alternative to removal of the inner city line.

An important way to address climate change and sustainability is to move towards a low emissions transport sector. It is important to understand rail can be alternatively run off renewable energy, and thus can form part of an integrated low emissions transport sector for Newcastle. Maintaining the rail line within a low emissions transport sector would result in decreased dependency on fossil fuels and lower numbers of private cars on our roads creating more space for safe, emission-free cycleway. In contrast, cutting the rail line will increase reliance on private transport to access Newcastle city and the beaches (as well as the University City campus) and this will be disastrous, not just in terms of climate change, but also for traffic and parking conditions in the CBD.

2. Public transport as equity

As mentioned, the use of private transport versus public transport is an important issue for questions of sustainability, but it also an issue of equity. Urban planning in the 21st century must take into the issue of equity of access for the disabled, people on low incomes, and the increasing number of elderly people in our community. It has been pointed out by concerned community groups and by the Government's own report that removing the inner city rail line will reduce the use of public transport in Newcastle.

In the current context of ongoing economic pressures and unemployment rates in the Hunter, coupled with the rising costs of private transport, there is an urgent need for affordable public transport systems in the Hunter. The costs of private transport are much higher than using public transport.

We are very concerned that entrenchment of lower socio-economic disadvantage and exclusion will result from cutting the Newcastle inner city rail line. For the communities outside the city of Newcastle, namely the wider Hunter Region, Newcastle is one of the only accessible cities and beaches. Destroying the rail line will destroy the only opportunity some in the country have of coming to a city to access services unavailable in country towns and also to enjoy a day at the beach.

It is shameful that in the planning processes the issue of access and equity has not been regarded as important.

3. Under and unutilised buildings in Newcastle

Too many buildings in Newcastle have low occupancy rates. Many apartments, offices and entire buildings are sadly empty. It is nonsensical to argue that Newcastle needs new buildings to encourage utilisation of the current ones. This claim, which has been central to the developers' campaign in favour of cutting the rail line, is insulting. It implies significant manipulation, and perhaps even bullying, on the part of developers in the planning process regarding the purported benefits of cutting the inner city rail.

We are concerned that illegitimate rationales such as this put forward by those with the economic power to widely disseminate this perspective, have wrongly influenced the planning process of development in Newcastle.

The Renew Newcastle program offers a positive, uncontroversial and hugely successful initiative resulting from genuine desire to address the issue of under-utilised buildings and spaces in Newcastle. The program has proved unparalleled in its success in revitalising the city and achieved international recognition for this. If the NSW Government were genuine about revitalising Newcastle, caring for and utilising the buildings that are already here, would be a priority. Renew Newcastle should be granted more funds and expanded. Investing in a positive future for Newcastle would not include cutting the rail. Renew Newcastle has proved this possible.

4. Costings

Retaining the line and addressing some of the perceived problems with its present state is cheaper than removing it.

Putting in place more pedestrian level crossings has been proposed as one alternative to cutting the line. This would easily and affordably address the purported problem of the rail acting as a barrier to the harbor from the city. Putting in place more crossings for cars to ease busy traffic in the CBD is also possible and desirable. Whilst safety concerns have been raised regarding more pedestrian level crossings, the ones that currently exist already provide excellent models on safety designs, as do other available international models. It is important to understand that the purported problems with the rail line in its current form can be met by means other than cutting it.

We also note that the interim replacement of the rail service with buses will come at huge additional cost. The alternative bus system will especially impact negatively on the city, adding to the traffic and road wear and tear. As explained above, clearing space on the roads is an important element of sustainable urban planning.

5. Conclusion:

The inquiry's mandate to "examine a number of projects to develop Newcastle and the broader Hunter region" reveals the contentious nature of this political problem. The use of the word develop here is inconsistent with the backward, damaging and unfair effects that cutting the rail will have. A genuine intent to develop the city would properly take into account the concerns that we have expressed. Destroying the rail line will be the antithesis of development for Newcastle and the Hunter region.

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would properly take into account the concerns that we have expressed. Destroying the rail line will be the antithesis of development for Newcastle and the Hunter region.

I respectfully urge the Upper House Committee to please consider making the following recommendations:

To immediately call on the NSW State Government to desist with plans to cut the rail line on December 26 2014.

In conclusion, I trust this information may assist the **Parliamentary Inquiry**.

Yours sincerely,
Steve O'Brien