

**Submission
No 248**

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

Name: Miss Sonia Hornery MP

Date received: 24/10/2014

An argument for the suspension of the decision to truncate the Newcastle rail line until after the March 2015 state election. This suspension would be due to the possibility of corruption of the planning process due to developer donations to the election campaigns of local members. Suspending the decision until after the election would allow Hunter residents to vote on the rail line.

The Chair

Select Committee on the Planning Process in Newcastle and the Broader Hunter Region

Parliament House

Macquarie St

Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Revd the Hon Fred Nile MLC,

I am writing to you to submit for consideration my views as NSW Shadow Minister for the Hunter on recent development decisions made in Newcastle. There have been a number of decisions made recently that I believe could possibly have been affected improperly by the taint of corruption, specifically developer donations to the campaigns of Tim Owen and Andrew Cornwell. These include the massive increase in allowed building heights in the Newcastle CBD, the route for the proposed light rail system and the Newcastle Art Gallery redevelopment affair. I feel though that the issue I've had most involvement with, and am therefore most qualified to write about, is the truncation of the Newcastle rail line. I also feel that this is an issue of great and urgent importance to the people of the Hunter and that an investigation into the legitimacy of the decision to truncate the line should be given the utmost priority.

Truncation of the Newcastle rail line

Newcastle is more than Hunter Street. Its borders extend beyond the limits of the central business district and Honeysuckle. Planning decisions made in Newcastle are also about the Hunter. Those who live in the outer suburbs deserve the same attention as their inner-city counterparts. They also deserve equal State funding and equal consideration of improvements to their infrastructure.

This consideration is pertinent to the proposed rail truncation because any disruption to train services is going to hit residents of Maitland and Newcastle's outer suburbs particularly hard.

Maitland to Newcastle peak hour trains are crowded daily with Maitland citizens who rely on an efficient, reliable and frequent rail service to get to work, to recreate, to attend the courthouse, to visit medical specialists and to go to the beach.

Retaining the rail line also offers great benefits to CBD residents. Newcastle has the advantage of mass transport direct to the central business district. It transports workers, customers and tourists, linking several cities, including our capital city of Sydney. Our rail line also has a major overseas connection. Worldwide experts agree that access to mass transport is vital to the success of a city. Rail is considered the most sustainable transport system, with heavy rail being the best value in terms of capacity and efficiency.

The evidence in every report regarding cutting the rail line shows that forced interchanges will cause patronage loss. This goes against goal No. 8 in the NSW 2021 plan. The New South Wales Government wants to grow patronage for commuter work trips by 20 per cent by 2016. How will this goal be achieved if the rail line to Newcastle is cut? Newcastle hosts many large events, including Surfest, Australia Day celebrations and New Year's Eve concerts, when people are encouraged to use rail instead of private transport. A university campus, with an estimated 8,000 students, is to be established in the central business district near Civic station. The parking shortage at the Callaghan campus is an indication of what will happen at the city campus if the rail line is removed. Further, the plan for the new law courts in the inner city has only 13 car parking spaces—because of their proximity to Civic station.

Population projections suggest growth of about 150,000 residents over the next 20 years. According to the Bureau of Transport Statistics, employment growth by 2046 is expected to bring 75,000 jobs to the region, and 20,000 of those will be in the inner city. Public funding is scarce. Ripping up existing rail infrastructure would be a huge waste.

It's clear that truncating the rail line is not going to provide better public transport outcomes. In fact, resident outrage and backlash against the decision, in the form of letters to the editor and website comments, was so strong that The Singleton Argus, The Scone Advocate, Cessnock Advertiser, Muswellbrook Chronicle, Dungog Chronicle and the Maitland Mercury have joined forces to run a campaign to "fight for residents to have the chance to vote on one of the region's most crucial infrastructure decisions in recent memory", by postponing the decision to truncate the line until after next year's state election.

In November last year I presented a petition to parliament in Sydney with more than 13,000 signatures of Hunter residents, calling on the Government NOT to truncate the line.

With such a strong case for keeping the line, it seems plausible to me that the Government's bullheaded determination to rip up the line could be linked to undue influence of Hunter developers keen to get their hands on the very valuable rail corridor. This is some of the only land in Newcastle not undermined by mine workings and situated as it is between Hunter street and the affluent honeysuckle precinct would be very attractive to developers.

On Tuesday 21st October this year I asked Premier Mike Baird a question in parliament –

"My question is directed to the Premier. Will the Premier give the people of the Hunter a say in their future and hold off on any move to terminate the Newcastle rail line until after the March general election and guarantee that that corridor will not be handed to property developers?"

His answer

"No".

The Government's argument for the most part has been that we need to truncate the rail line to allow for better access from the CBD to the foreshore. If that land is sold to developers and the rail corridor is filled with developments, how will that improve access?

This is a huge decision, costing hundreds of millions of dollars, with implications for Novocastrians for generations to come. I think if there's even a possibility that developer donations to election campaigns have swayed government decision making process, which in this case doesn't seem

unreasonable, then the truncation decision should be suspended until after the March 2015 elections, to give the people of the Hunter a chance to vote on the issue.

Yours Sincerely,

Sonia Hornery

Wallsend MP, Shadow Minister for the Hunter