

Submission
No 274

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

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 24/10/2014

Partially Confidential

RE: Inquiry into the planning process in Newcastle and the broader Hunter region

Dear chairperson,

The planning process in Newcastle has been flawed for quite some time as the main state government bodies involved in the planning process, particularly within the Newcastle CBD, are the Hunter Development Corporation (HDC) and its parent organisation the Honeysuckle Development Corporation (HSDC). As the name suggests the HDC/HSDC is not concerned with good urban planning principles and the best urban renewal outcome for the city, these are merely secondary to its stated aim to 'help facilitate development by the private sector on key state landholdings under its control to ensure...maximum value for the people of the region and the State'.¹

Train Line - History

Since the 80's the HDC/HSDC and developer lobbies such as the Property Council of Australia and fronts such as Fix this City (funded by the former Lord Mayor) have presented many consultant reports exploring the potential benefits of removing the train line, and have influenced various politicians from both political persuasions to announce removal of the train line, only to later have the decision reversed due to public outcry. One may expect developer lobbies to engage in tactics such as commissioning reports with narrow terms of reference i.e. removing the rail, to achieve their preferred outcome. But the fact that a government body such as the HDC has repeatedly engaged in such activity is evidence of an agenda. Neither the HDC nor the state government, over the last 30 year of this debate, have yet to provide any cost benefit analysis of removal versus retaining and improving on the rail line. The only conclusion one can reach for such a glaring omission is that it would overwhelmingly support retaining the rail line.

NURS

The recent Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy (NURS) outlined ways to foster urban renewal in Newcastle. Two major findings of the NURS are being broken by current state government policy

- Urban renewal in Newcastle is NOT dependant of removal of the train line
- The height limits of buildings within the CBD should be adhered to in order to maintain the low rise character of the city, keeping Christ Church Cathedral as the focal point of the city skyline and maintain the city's historic beauty and appeal

Public transport

The plan to cut the rail line at Wickham and replace the current heavy rail service with a bus service (and perhaps a light rail service in the future) is not an improvement in the level of public transport amenity. It is a significant down-grade. Forcing people to change modes of public transport is associated with decreased patronage and to down grade the current direct service and force people with bags and surfboards to disembark then wait to re-embark to complete their journey is not in the interests of improving public transport. A lot of people including myself use the train to make the journey to Sydney when they have large bags to carry, for instance when going to the airport, as it is easier to fit large bags on the train. Such passengers with large bags will be significantly inconvenienced and incentivised to make alternate arrangements, as transferring large bags to a bus to complete the journey is an annoyance that negates the convenience of using the train. Transport experts such as Prof Peter Newman have supported the view that changing modes decreases patronage and maintained that keeping the heavy rail is the best public transport outcome.

Land Grab

It is common knowledge that the land on which the rail line sits is not undermined, which is a problem that plagues most development sites in Newcastle. The cost of grouting undermined sites makes them uneconomical to develop and was the touted cause of a Nathan Tinkler led development 'Honeysuckle Central' to fail. This increases the attractiveness and potential economic return from prime waterfront land that is not undermined as brings into question the motivation of developer donations to politicians that are involved in freeing up such land for development.

ICAC

The recent findings of improper conduct against a plethora of state government politicians including the members for Newcastle and Charlestown in relation to the acceptance of developer donations brings into extreme doubt the motivation for the key decisions in the region such as the truncation of the rail line and the lifting of the NURS height limits for buildings in the CBD involved in the GPT Urban Growth NSW development. The fact that the member for Newcastle was found to have accepted illegal donations from Buildev, a firm that would stand to make a lot of money from potential commercial and residential development contract on the rail land, raises the prospect that the decision was initiated and motivated by the potential monetary gains this firm stood to make from development of the rail corridor.

The member for Charlestown was found to have improperly accepted a donation from Former Lord Mayor Jeff McCloy, who himself was involved in major campaign to remove the rail line – Fix Our City and owns several properties in and around Hunter St and whose development company which could stand to gain a lot of money from acquiring former rail corridor land or the contract to develop it.

GPT and Urban Growth NSW

GPT bought a substantial portion of land in the CBD with the plan of a large development. This plan was abandoned after the GFC. Their presence in the CBD has been somewhat of a negative force with their refusal to maintain the Scott Building leading to the withdrawal of David Jones department store. The state

government in its role as GPT's development partner Urban Growth NSW is completely conflicted being the planning regulator ruling on its own development. The decision to overrule the long standing planning principle, reinforced recently in the NURS, has the potential to destroy the appearance of the Newcastle Skyline and the character of the city. The inherent conflict of interest of the state government as both developer and regulator in this development is untenable and the decision should be reviewed by an independent body. This decision is not supported by local residents who have been vocal in opposition

Proposed Light Rail

The plan to remove the heavy rail and replace it with light rail extending down Hunter and Scott St a mere 20 metres away is such a ludicrously expensive duplication of current infrastructure it is no wonder that the state government has not supplied a business case to support the plan. It is indeed no wonder that the state government hasn't costed the plan and hasn't in anyway begun to initiate the plan and have stated that it may commence in a couple of years. This poor commitment to the plan shows that they have no intention of ever building the light rail and intend to remove rail access to the CBD and at best replace it with buses. The government has indeed confirmed these suspicions with its recent announcement that the rail will be cut at Hamilton and replaced with buses. This downgrade of the current public transport access to the CBD for no net gain is not in the public interest.

The light rail plan is associated with a host of draw backs that have yet to be discussed with the public such as

- Making Hunter Street one way in each direction
- Removal of on street parking for 3 km section of Hunter St
- Closure of Railway St level crossing and isolation of current businesses there
- Closure of the Beaumont St level crossing and the resultant decrease in access to locals and businesses
- Increased traffic congestion caused by buses replacing trains before light rail is built (which may be indefinite)

Cost

The cost of the current plan of removing the heavy rail line and building a new light rail system and heavy rail interchange at Wickham is about \$600 million. This is a ludicrous waste of money to duplicate the current level of access with no apparent gains.

University CBD Campus and Law Court Development

The University of Newcastle plans to open a new campus opposite the current Civic railway station. This campus is planned to be used by up to 2700 people at peak periods. This development only has 5 allocated parking spots. This planning anomaly was allowed due to the proximity of Civic railway station. Once the rail line is removed this easy access by public transport is gone. This poor decision is further compounded by the fact that the current rail line directly links the new campus via civic station to the current main campus at Callaghan with a 10 minute service that alights directly opposite the new campus. The same journey via car or bus is a

minimum of 25 minutes with a peak journey time of 40 minutes. This doesn't take into account the time taken to park the car, which will further increase the journey time and will doubtless involve extra cost. Further diminishing students' access to equitable travel.

The new state law court development is next door, opposite the current Civic station which is set to be closed as part of the rail truncation plans. Once truncation occurs, the nearest train station will be Hamilton, over 2 km away. This will necessitate catching a connecting bus and eliminate the convenience of a direct journey. The law court also passed planning approval with a similar lack of parking spots due the proximity of the soon to be removed Civic rail station. This is especially significant as a large section of community that uses the law court is disadvantaged and relies on public transport more than others. This decision will particularly disadvantage them

Business Case

There has never been a business case offered for either the removal of the rail line and or its replacement with light rail or the supposed gains realised with removing the rail and connecting the city to the harbour. There needs to be a business case done to support these extremely costly decisions and weigh up any potential benefits with the cost of the project and the large downgrade of public transport amenity suffered by the public of Newcastle and the Hunter Region.

Cut and Cover Option

It is rumoured in 2011, local engineering firm GHD approached the state government with a costed plan to lower the rail line below current ground level using a technique known as 'cut and cover'. This technique has been used successfully as part of urban renewal in Perth and was espoused as a potential solution to Newcastle's urban renewal plan by public transport expert Prof. Peter Newman when he was brought to Newcastle to provide his expert advice on how public transport should be used to regenerate the city. In an affront to transparency of decision making, this report has not been made public by the state government. This plan would have broad public support as it seems to meet the objectives of the two main groups involved in the Newcastle rail debate:

- Maintain heavy rail access to the current Newcastle station
- Remove the rail line as a visual and road barrier between the harbour and the city

The only potential problem with this solution is that it would preclude high rise development on the rail corridor. Thus its absence from the public debate raise questions about the state government's intentions for the site.

Personal Experience

I have lived in cities all over the world including London, Melbourne and Sydney and have used public transport extensively in these places. From my experience a form a public transport that doesn't require any changes is the best. In particular rail is

the best form of public transport as it is spacious and not subject to the vagaries of traffic, such as buses. It allows one to plan times of departure and arrival with relative precision, something that buses can't provide as they are subject to the vagaries of traffic. Therefore, to remove a train line and replace it with buses (with a vague promise to investigate a very expensive plan to duplicate the current heavy rail service with a light rail service sometime in the future) is a significant downgrading of public transport amenity.

The main reason stated by proponents of removing rail is that it will improve access between the city and the foreshore. I have no problems accessing the foreshore from the city and vice versa. There are many crossing points whether they be overpasses or level crossings. There could definitely be improvements in this area such as:

- More overpasses
- Lift access to overpasses

However, removing the rail is a very costly and drastic solution to a very minor issue.

Another reason cited, is the traffic congestion caused by the rail line at Stewart Ave justifies its removal. It's true it is an inconvenience to have to stop at the rail gates, however, this fails to recognise that 50 metres either side of the rail gates are traffic lights that impede the traffic just as much. The only solution that would ensure the free movement of traffic on Stewart Ave would be an overpass of the rail line AND Hunter St. Removal of the rail line will NOT solve this problem as the traffic lights will still impede the traffic.

Renewal Ideas

My ideas for renewing the city include

- Retaining heavy rail and putting it underground from Wickham to Newcastle using the 'cut and cover' method
- Low rise development of current rail corridor/ creation of cycle way
- Augmenting the current heavy rail service with light rail to Merewether, John Hunter Hospital and The Junction.
- Creating a Newcastle Botanic Garden on the foreshore with low-rise café developments
- Proceed with art gallery redevelopment
- Convention centre
- Exposing/recreating old cobblestone roads in the CBD to add to tourist appeal (like The Rocks)
- Opening up Nobbys to appropriate sympathetic development
- High rise apartments in Newcastle West NOT
- State government incentives for Businesses from Sydney to relocate to Newcastle
- State government to relocate departments from Sydney
- State government to fund a grouting fund that helps to ameliorate the costs of grouting development sites in the city.

Conclusion

The recent ICAC findings of local politicians accepting illegal donations from developers coinciding with the decisions to:

- Circumvent the CBD building height limits
- Remove the rail line

Which seemingly go against public support, public interest, good planning principles and advice from public transport experts. And the fact that the rail corridor land isn't undermined thus would be a valuable prize for a developer and the government's lack of transparency in not revealing key documents. These decisions need to be reviewed and reversed and another plan struck upon to renew the city that doesn't involve inappropriate high rise and removal of the rail line.

Yours sincerely,