

**Submission
No 106**

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

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Nile Inquiry :NSW legislative Council.

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The Secretary,
Committee of Enquiry into Planning in Newcastle and related Matters.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comment on Town and Regional Planning in Newcastle. I have been following the issues since about 2003 evidenced by: occasional letters to Newcastle City Council (hereafter, NCC) and correspondence with local politicians at all levels. Much relevant commentary can be gleaned from the various NCC committees and reports. There is much history. At this stage my responses will be coloured by allusions to apparent flaws in the planning processes.

My specific responses, (item by item), to the topics canvassed in your enquiry are:

a) and b) : SEPP Amendment NCC 2014 to the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy:

The original document (about 256 pages) was critiqued by me (see State Planning website) as generally concerned with development detail (floor space ratios, building heights, solar access etc.) for the peninsula of Newcastle: an area say 3km. by 2km. The amendment made some adjustments to that detail. On the transport issues it stated that a proposed light rail would compensate for the removal of the heavy rail, along with opening up of streets and encouragement of cycling.

The finalisation document has a sense of further concentrating on the minutiae of development. Ironically there was little detail as to the predicted outcomes of those proposals. I alluded to a judgement that the proposed developments would result in the area being stressed by associated traffic of all sorts for the next 20 years(?) What after that? (Refer To my original submission).

There was no accommodation of a broader, regional vision, which has been researched elsewhere (see above), and the prospect of spending hundreds of millions of dollars of public moneys, (from hunter infrastructure funds and the sale of the port), on such a narrow area (6 sq km.), asks questions about vision, fairness, equity and bias. The people of the Hunter and of NSW are asking these ethical and fiscal questions. I trust that your enquiry will seek some answers.

c) Whitebridge:

A cursory glance at this on the Lake Macquarie Council website reveals issues of compliance. (There is a lot of that in development issues.) My initial reaction is that, in my experience strict adherence to rules ('blind justice') leads up a 'blind alley'. To me the rules should be used to achieve the best possible result in the public interest. However some of the offences seem very opportunistic (eg the fire zone usage) and should be rejected. The issues of environmental sensitivity and traffic seem important.

From a regional viewpoint the Fernleigh Track was an old rail easement. If light rail is seen to be a solution to Newcastle's transport issues (see again NCC's Planning Reports), then is the preservation and expansion of the Fernleigh Track as a light rail easement desirable? Could that action impact on the Whitebridge development? Light rail connections could be made with Belmont, Swansea and Western Lake Macquarie. As I recall 'Save Our Rail', (a local action group), had a 'WestTrans' proposal, and the Hunter Independent Transport Initiative had ideas which may be able to be integrated with the Fernleigh track.

d) DA 2014/323 Newcastle East End:

It took me some time to trace this. The Council Planning office told me that it was a State Govt. project. The office told me that it was the GPT development. The Council was the Govt's agent. Some commentary suggests that Urban Growth (a Govt. enterprise) and GPT put in joint submissions ; superficially , a dubious practice.

I can't locate the specific planning document on the State Planning website, but it seems *again* that the 'revitalising Newcastle' issue comes down to land use in a 6 sq. km. area, using hundreds of millions of dollars of public funds and assets.

e) Termination of rail line at Wickham:

I was at a public meeting at Newcastle Town Hall (2012, chaired by New Institute) in which Ed Duke, an architect, and Howard Dick put forward a transport plan. I recorded him (Duke) as saying that there could be a transport interchange at Woodville Junction, but the best site would be Wickham, but it would be expensive. However both ideas were part of a whole overall strategy (see Hunter Independent Transport Initiative), including more extensive light rail. They would agree that the termination of heavy rail into Newcastle would be an unproductive exercise. (Our present interchanges are Hamilton and Newcastle).

At another consultative public meeting with the Minister for Transport , Gladys Berejiklian, Les Wielinga and Tim Reardon present, many people , (probably a majority), were focussing attention on the proposed closure of the line to Newcastle. To my understanding their voices were not noted in the meeting's report! That is clearly an abuse of the principle of consultation.

Another meeting at Newcastle Town Hall was called for community consultation over the preferred route for light rail from Wickham. The closure of the line was given as a *fait-accompli*!! with the noticeboard stating : Step 1; Closure of the line at Wickham. Which alternative route would you like for light rail ? That, to me, was hardly consultation!

I speculate that there is a structural institutional bias in the development process leading to the proposed closure. It is a fair time ago now, but I think that the Lower Hunter Transport Working Group which proposed rail truncation was dominated by members of Hunter Development Corporation: a body to develop and sell government owned land ('line was in the wrong place'((HDC on CBD, 2012 ,sec. 2.4)). My guess is that the inclusion of the rail line land with other parcels in the East End of Newcastle would give disproportion synergies of wealth to the integrated product. There may have been a conflict of interest between the public good (access, space, recreation, mobility) and the financial largesse that concentrated development can bring. It probably warrants an overview.

(f) Other relevant matters: Development at Wickham:

The NCC admits that this major development lacks sufficient public space. They admit that Birdwood Park is inadequate, though it is being 'tarted up'. To me, public spaces define 'good' cities. This development must include comprehensive public space.

Conclusion: Much energy has been spent on these issues. But the long term future of a city is involved. My input here has tried to highlight the indecent, hasty and extravagant allocation of public funds to a very small section of the region and the state and deficiencies in the consultation process. Other people know more about this than me, especially high level bureaucrats and past and present representative politicians at all levels.

Thanks again for having the enquiry,

Gary Townsend