

Submission
No 234

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Newcastle enquiry submission

In addressing the issue of the Newcastle rail line being cut this year I can only add a statement of my dismay and confusion and hope to reinforce some evidence for the illogical nature of what's going on. In summary, I can not provide a smoking gun but I sure can smell it's smoke.

Firstly, I believe that cutting out a heavy rail option is detrimental to any city. This is evidenced by the experience of other cities globally that regret the removal of rail lines and that are seeking to reintroduce rail services in many places including the home of the car, Los Angeles. Cutting out the rail corridor doesn't make sense. There are so many other alternatives and compromises that are possible and perhaps feasible apart from removal. I believe removal to be the worst/last option. I have heard nothing from the government regarding rejected alternatives if indeed any have been considered. Nor have I heard any economic rationale.

As recently as late January this year ABC radio reported that "The state government says it is yet to be decided how the bus network in the Newcastle CBD will operate once light rail is up and running" (Posted 23 Jan 2014, 1:47pm Thu 23 Jan 2014, 1:47pm). Yet by August everything had been so well thought out and planned that the government was in a position to cut the rail line from Boxing Day with complete confidence that this was a sound decision in the best interests of the Hunter and Newcastle. This seems to be a long way too fast to be a sound decision. Transport in Newcastle is too complex to be confidently resolved quite so quickly.

The timing is also somewhat of a puzzle. Why cut the rail in the middle of the peak Christmas holiday period?

Listening to the Special Minister for the Hunter and Minister for Transport Ms Berjiklian on local ABC radio in August, I was stunned at the illogical nature of what was being said. Supporting the decision to cut the line, the Minister was suggesting that project planning had resulted in a decision to cut the line and dismantle it as a first step in the replacement process which would see buses introduced for perhaps three years followed by light rail. This seemed to be illogical considering that in most projects I have ever been involved in, the replacement system was put in place before the removal of the old unless there were unusual circumstances. Having managed projects myself and having taught Project Management at tertiary level for many years I was intrigued to listen to the logic of this decision, but the Minister was unable to provide any suggestion of evidence either verbally or by referral to any documentation. I have always viewed the inability of being able to provide examples or evidence to back a decision, together with a request to simply 'trust us', to be deceitful at worst and unprofessional at best. The only conclusion I was able to come to, after her talk, was that the action was targeted to get past the point of no return as quickly as possible for some reason that the Minister was either unwilling or unable to relate, or perhaps was not even aware of herself. She does appear to be a mouthpiece for the government and perhaps not fully committed to the decision personally.

To me there seemed to be no logic. On further enquiry however, I found a disturbing set of factors that made the decision logical but not for any reasons that I considered to be in the public interest. These included:

- the land on which the rail line lies is the only suitable land in inner Newcastle suitable for high rise development
- ICAC revelations of corrupt dealings between the local ministers and developers including The Lord Mayor of Newcastle
- joint developments that included government ownership
- apparent proposed lifting of height restrictions in inner city developments
- failure of the Minister and the Government to rule out development on the rail corridor and most recently
- reports of units being sold off the plan for a number of high rise buildings planned for the rail corridor which of course are yet to seek approval
- timing the cut for Boxing Day minimises the opportunity for public protest as many people would be out of town for holidays

This all pointed to the rail cut decision opening up the land for development and in all likelihood that development will be higher than current limits and contrary to what I can see to be the wishes of the

majority of the residents of inner city Newcastle as well as many concerned citizens in the region. This is the only logical explanation I have found.

Logic also says that if developers need to purchase favour with the government in a covert way then their plans must not be compelling in the light of public scrutiny.

I sought out and joined the Save Our Rail organisation to learn more and to express my dismay in a positive way. I have spoken to many members of that organisation and have distributed leaflets for them which gave me the opportunity to speak with many train users and with people in the streets. I was not surprised to find that the overwhelming majority of the people who took the time to speak with me or who threw a quick comment my way did not agree with the rail line being cut. Those in favour of the cut said that they were inconvenienced by poor walking access to cross the line or didn't like the wait at the level crossings. No one gave me any other reason.

To me these reasons are trivial compared to the need for a city to incorporate fast mass transit into its transport mix. For me to get to the fish markets in Carrington, for example, the rail crossing at Stewart Avenue is only one of the 15 sets of traffic lights that I have to cross. That's not a major inconvenience. If I did that daily that's still only less than 7% of the lights I cross. Arguing to cut the rail for these reasons is like arguing to close off all of the cross streets with traffic lights between my place and my destination because it delays my trips.

I know that several inner city developments with limited parking options had their DA approved based on proximity to the Newcastle Station. So what happens now?

Many cities only allow higher density development within a kilometre of mass transit stations. But here we have an example of removing mass transit and introducing higher density accommodation. This makes no sense ... creating greater population and bringing more cars into a small city area. But, of course, if a developer can put in some car parking stations then they create some nice residual income from parking charges and this makes good sense to a developer.

I have stood on Civic Station and looked in one short sweep of view at the new Law Court building under construction, the Civic Theatre, the Civic Administration Building, the Town Hall and the new University Campus under construction. I'm sure that part of the approval for the new buildings must have been the close proximity of the rail station especially as there are only about 18 car parks planned between the two developments. What sense does it make to demolish that station and force passengers into a transit situation that will slow down the commute, at a time when thousands of extra people will be commuting?

A few have argued that for many years a handful of Newcastle people have stymied development and that this has gone on too long. It seems to me that the only ones prolonging this development argument are developers. The people have had their say and it's only the developers who keep going on about it. Most people don't seem to want high rise and they do want to keep their main rail link.

The government's plan is illogical. The decision has been hurried and the implementation is being rushed. This makes no sense other than getting past the point of no return ASAP and for reasons that are not being told by government. Would any economist suggest selling of an asset (the port) ripping out another asset (the rail) then spending the proceeds of the port sale to replace the rail, and to do it as fast as possible, with planning happening on the fly. That's nowhere near smart thinking and destroys my confidence in government.

Many friends now have the same distrust of the NSW Government as I have. Many are saying that they will vote informally in the by-elections, and that is a disturbing situation and a disgraceful reflection on both of the major parties.

I can't provide the smoking gun but I sure can smell the smoke! In light of the ICAC revelations and the seriously suspicious look of this rail situation it would seem appropriate to delay the rail line closure and to undertake a thorough investigation of the process that led to the decision. This would go a long way to helping to restore trust in the system.

Regards