

**Submission
No 21**

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

Name: Dr Sue Outram and Mr Andrew Zdenkowski

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SUBMISSION TO THE NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL : SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE PLANNING PROCESS IN NEWCASTLE AND THE BROADER HUNTER REGION

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

Our submission concerns sections (b), (d) and (e). They are interrelated, however we will concentrate on two aspects: the rail termination and urban renewal strategy; and the east end development proposals.

(b) the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

(d) DA 2014/323 – Newcastle East End Development

(e) the decision to terminate the Newcastle rail line at Wickham and any proposal to construct light rail including along Hunter and Scott Streets

Rail Line Terminating at Wickham

It has been announced that the rail line will “temporarily” terminate at Broadmeadow) on 26 December, 2014, to allow work on the next phase, termination at Wickham.

The State government professes to have a strategy that increases and encourages the use of public transport in our cities. By terminating the public rail line, at a place which will necessitate a second mode of transport (buses or light rail) to complete the journey into the centre of the city the use of public transport will be discouraged. It is acknowledged Newcastle has traditionally been a car dependent city and it has been difficult to achieve a greater use of public transport. The inevitable increase in petrol prices will eventually create a need for greater use for public transport. Greater incentives to use public transport are needed, not fewer.

Terminating the rail line, even temporarily, at Broadmeadow without any clear plan in place for the ongoing links to the city is premature and frankly absurd. Broadmeadow station is not user-friendly, it has no capacity to increase parking except on surrounding suburban streets where residents will find it difficult to get a park. It is a narrow street with a small roundabout and this will make for increasing traffic congestion, noise to residents and delays to transit time.

We believe that this decision to cut the railway at Wickham goes against the Urban Renewal philosophy and is contrary to the State government’s strategy to increase the use of public transport. We believe this decision should be reversed at least until a clear plan, with committed funding, is effected for ongoing transport into the city of Newcastle.

Linking Termination of Rail with Urban renewal

One of the underlying premises for the termination of the rail line into the city is that access from Hunter Street to the harbour will hasten the renewal of the city and increase business bringing greater prosperity. However it needs to be acknowledged (and has not been) that renewal has already occurred, at least in the mall. Newcastle Mall is now busy, weekdays and especially weekends. This busyness is not the type of business of previous years, the type that the Business Council envisaged, when the mall was the centre of the retail business. Many of us were very sorry to see David Jones go from our city however retail has changed and David Jones is not busy over at Kotara in the large shopping centre either. It is well documented that the whole basis of retail has changed, with the greater prevalence of online shopping. This is an uncomfortable proposition for those who own retail business and one which the Newcastle businesses, Newcastle Council and associated developers have resisted. The businesses thriving are cafes, restaurants, boutique clothing stores, artisan products, galleries and flower stalls.

It is true that there is a lack of easy access between Hunter St and the harbour foreshore. An elevator to allow the aged and unwell, people with a disability and prams to cross the railway lines using a footbridge overpass is essential from the mall to the harbour and at other points. This would be much less expensive than a light rail. In Wellington New Zealand there is a 4 lane highway separating the CBD from the harbour and the access is via overpasses- foot bridges and paths decorated with statues and sculptures and nice places to sit and admire the view. It is an asset not an eyesore.

The earlier suggestion of increased green space “a green corridor” swayed many people that removal of the rail line would enhance livability and public use of the inner Newcastle. The now well publicised fact that the rail corridor contains the last parcels of developable land not subject to mine subsidence, and therefore attractive to developers, has led to more cynicism and distress in the public of Newcastle. Thus there is a feeling that profits to be made by a privileged few from the development of the rail corridor is a strong factor in the decision to remove the rail.

East End Development

There is an existing plan to concentrate high rise apartments in the West End of Newcastle, with height restrictions in the East End that are sympathetic with the heritage streetscape and contour. This plan should be maintained. The increased height of the three towers proposed which goes against existing regulation should be stopped. These towers change the wonderful landscape and silhouette of Newcastle and for many citizens this amounts to desecration of our environment. Additionally city centres such as Newcastle with many historic buildings, an iconic cathedral on a hill, surrounded by sea and harbour, are increasingly a drawcard for tourists and the financial advantages that brings.

Summary

The development of outmoded ideas of retail prosperity cannot be the basis for removing the rail line and reducing access and efficiency of public transport in Newcastle. The fact that that property developers have set out to unlawfully influence public policy makers who have made these decisions on rail termination and development in the historic areas of Newcastle has resulted in a widespread loss of confidence in politicians of at all levels of government and of public policy for the wellbeing of the citizenry of Newcastle. The intertwining of developers as policy makers and the state government as developer is indefensible. Newcastle is a wonderful city and there is an opportunity to be a model of urban growth and renewal.

Sue Outram & Andrew Zdenkowski