

**Submission  
No 317**

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

**Organisation:** Planning Plus

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■ Select Committee on the Planning Process in  
Newcastle & the Broader Hunter Region

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Lodged at <[www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/newcastleplanning](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/newcastleplanning)>

Dear Sir/ Madam

## **Inquiry on planning process in Newcastle & broader Hunter Region**

Thankyou for the opportunity to comment on matters being inquired upon by the Select Committee. I propose to limit my comments to item (e) of the Select Committee's Terms of Reference, namely:

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

### **I. Strategic significance of rail access to the Newcastle city centre**

The Newcastle urban area is Australia's seventh largest nationally-ranked city (the others being Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and the Gold Coast). Each of these major urban areas have urban passenger rail services (services to the Gold Coast being introduced in 2009, with further extension to Coolangatta planned within the next decade).

The present Newcastle rail link, which has been in continuous operation for 157 years, has long been a major feature of the city centre, but has suffered from decades of chronic under-investment. Whilst large- and medium-sized cities around the world are currently improving rail access to their city centres, the decision to truncate rail services seeks to do quite the opposite. In short, the decision is completely contrary to current international best practice. Little consideration seems to have been given to the long-term strategic importance of city centre rail services.

A rail link to the heart of the Newcastle City Centre, both from within the Hunter Region, and from external regions (such as the Sydney, the Central Coast and Mid North Coast regions) is likely to be one of the city's key economic assets of the future. It would underpin future competitiveness and potential to attract investment due to:

- ability to provide premium quality inter-city connectivity for high-order services
- potential for direct or connecting rail services via a possible future East Coast high speed rail network
- resilience to foreseeable future transport energy constraints.

Currently published information and analysis on the decision (such as the *Wickham Interchange Review of Environmental Factors*) does not assess any of these strategic issues, nor does it place the decision within the context of proposed city centre employment growth. I would suggest that this is a highly unsatisfactory basis for a planning decision of such importance. The consequence is likely to be a significant reduction in the Newcastle city centre's accessibility and strategic position for decades to come.

## **2. Lack of economic justification**

The lack of any cost-benefit analysis or similar evaluation in support of the decision is remarkable. This is particularly so given the likely \$500-700 million price tag of a new rail terminal/interchange, decommissioning of existing plant, construction of replacement light rail infrastructure, and purchase of rolling stock.

The sum of money likely to be involved is extraordinary for a project that would merely replace an existing functional piece of infrastructure with another one that at best would provide no service improvement, but which might significantly reduce the quality of service for existing and potential future users. Consequently, there is a very real prospect that windfall gains from the privatisation of the Port of Newcastle (from which the decision is to be funded) will be wasted on a project that is of little or no net public benefit, and which is likely to have many negative long-term consequences.

It would seem fairly clear that an expenditure of this magnitude might be more beneficially spent on a program of major 'transformative' public transport improvements across the Hunter Region. This would make a small contribution towards correcting decades of inadequate investment. Many of the often-quoted objections to the Newcastle rail link could be overcome instead at relatively modest cost by the provision of additional rail crossings, aesthetically designed light rail-style overhead wiring and stanchions, and trackside landscaping.

## **3. Likely impact on rail patronage**

The decision to truncate rail services will necessitate a forced modal change at Wickham, which is a very short distance (1-2 km) from the ultimate destination for passengers accessing the city centre. This can be expected to introduce a significant time and inconvenience penalty for passengers to or from Newcastle University, Maitland, the Upper Hunter, western Lake Macquarie, the Central Coast or Sydney.

To date, there has been no attempt to assess or quantify what these impacts are likely to be, other than a cursory statement in the *Wickham Interchange REF* that it could 'result in travel time increases for some passengers, depending on their origin and destination'. Given that the transfer time penalty is likely to be of the same general magnitude (or greater) as the final journey leg by light rail or bus, a significant impact on patronage is to be expected.

If, as would seem likely, the light rail option is subsequently shown to be unviable (because of its very short 2 km length), a rail-bus transfer arrangement would

eventuate. Based on the international literature, substitution with bus services can be expected to induce further patronage losses, completely reversing the current growth in rail patronage on the Maitland corridor.

For example, Tennyson (1989)\* analysed extensive US data over a 40 year period showing that closure of urban rail lines and their replacement by buses, often with enhanced service frequency, resulted in a significant loss of transit patronage. Tennyson found that where service conditions are equal (travel time, fare, frequency of service, population and density), rail services are likely to attract from 34 percent to 43 percent more riders than would an equivalent bus service. This shows that there is not a simple substitutability between rail and bus modes as is often supposed.

One particular example cited by Tennyson has some parallels to the proposed Newcastle rail truncation. It involved the elimination of direct services into the Chicago Loop from the Chicago, Aurora & Elgin Railway in the mid 1950s while a highway was being constructed, necessitating passengers to make a forced transfer. Ridership dropped 50 per cent, and half of this was attributed to the forced transfer, and one quarter each due to slower trip time and higher fares. Services were then discontinued.

Similar levels of patronage loss resulting from the truncation of services at Wickham and substitution with buses would inevitably lead to the abandonment of all passenger rail services to Newcastle originating from Maitland, the Upper Hunter and the Central Coast. This would significantly affect the ability of the Newcastle city centre to perform its future regional role in accordance with the *Greater Metropolitan Strategy* and the *Lower Hunter Regional Strategy*, and would have major undesirable effects on the traffic environment and general amenity of the Newcastle city centre.

\* Tennyson, E.L. (1989). 'Impact on transit patronage of cessation or inauguration of rail service', *Transportation Research Record 1221: 59-70*. Transportation Research Board National Research Council, Washington, DC. [A copy is appended to this submission].

#### **4. Effect on proposed City Campus**

The establishment of a major university campus within the Newcastle city centre is a central plank in the *Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy*. The extent to which the campus is ultimately developed will depend a great deal on the quality of its accessibility to the Hunter Region, the Central Coast, the Sydney Region, and the Callaghan campus. This issue has not been addressed, yet it is highly relevant to the decision.

The removal of direct rail services to Civic Station is completely inconsistent with the City Campus concept. It is universally accepted that very high trip-generating activities such as universities should be located on the fixed rail network. Indeed, on the same day that termination of rail services to Newcastle was announced, the NSW Government also announced construction of a light rail line to the University of NSW in Sydney, in effect reinstating tram lines that were ripped up 60 years earlier.

#### **5. Inadequacy of Wickham Interchange proposals**

The proposed rail terminal at Wickham is consistently described as a 'transport interchange'. However, examination of the recent Review of Environmental Factors shows that this is not an accurate description. The published proposals show only a

stub-end terminal station, with no provision for passengers to conveniently change from rail to tram, bus, taxi, bicycle (or the Stockton ferry).

To provide a convenient transfer between rail and tram/ bus, it would be necessary to bring platforms for both modes alongside each other, which is standard practice overseas (see photo below). However, this is not possible due to the constraints of the site, which is too narrow to permit such a configuration.

The location is also unsuitable as it is likely to generate further significant traffic congestion in the vicinity, due to the confined nature of the site and proximity to the Stewart Avenue-Hunter Street intersection.

The proposals show an unbelievable lack of understanding of the requirements for a major city centre transport terminal, and a wide gulf with current international best practice. It is very difficult to take these proposals seriously in a professional sense.



Seamless interchange between tram and TGV (high speed rail) at Grenoble (France), population 175,000 (smaller than the Newcastle urban area). The station design provides for parallel platforms, which is not possible at the Wickham site due to insufficient site width.

## 6. Inadequate basis of decision

The Wickham Interchange Review of Environmental Factors describes the proposal as comprising the following three components:

- 1 constructing and operating a new station at Wickham, and a transport interchange for heavy rail, local buses, taxis and private vehicles (short term parking for passenger pick up and drop off) to the west of Stewart Avenue
- 2 ceasing train services between Wickham and Newcastle stations
- 3 providing for the future introduction of light rail.”

However, the REF does not provide any review or assessment of the impact of the final two aspects. In particular, there is no assessment of the transport, economic and strategic consequences of terminating rail services, including:

- impacts on accessibility to the Newcastle city centre (that is, the ‘ability to reach desired activities with reasonable time, cost and effort’)

- likely consequences to patronage levels, future service levels and traffic generation
- likely implications to urban renewal projects, including key strategies such as the City Campus.
- cost-benefit assessment of the proposal or comparison with alternatives.

Consequently, a decision has been made to terminate services (as of 26 December 2014) without any proper evaluation of the likely impacts and consequences. This represents a clear failure of the planning system.

### **7. Lack of justification for immediate termination of services**

The December 2014 closures of services (including ‘temporary’ closure between Broadmeadow and Wickham) has been justified on the basis of the need to undertake site works for the new terminal station and future light rail construction. However, to date, no actual proposals for the light rail link have been prepared, nor is there any foreseeable likelihood of the Government entering into contracts for construction works for many years. It would seem that the December 2014 closure date is not based on any actual works proposals, but rather on a determination to close rail services in favour of a permanent replacement bus service.

### **Conclusion**

The decision to terminate rail services between Newcastle and Wickham is likely to have significant strategic long-term consequences for the Newcastle City Centre and the wider Lower Hunter community, yet these impacts have been given little or no attention.

There is clear evidence that the quality and rigour of planning and decision-making being applied to this matter are far from satisfactory. The motivating factors behind the decision do not seem to include wider regional and transport considerations, but are instead focused on an outdated ‘back-to-the-1950s’ anti-rail outlook.

The decision will take Newcastle in the opposite direction to similar-sized cities in Europe and other parts of the world, where there has been a renewed focus on passenger rail investment over the past 20 years. Ultimately this is likely to undermine the long-term prospects for Newcastle to hold its place as one of the nation’s significant urban centres.

Owing to the dubious justification for the proposal, the decision to terminate services in December 2014 should be reversed. It is suggested instead that an innovative urban design strategy should be prepared that retains the strategic values offered by rail, but which overcomes the present aesthetic and foreshore access difficulties surrounding the rail line.

Yours faithfully

I. Donovan

*principal,*

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