

**Submission
No 264**

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

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Date received: 24/10/2014

Submission on planning for the Newcastle rail truncation

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This submission is in two parts: Part 1 is new material; Part 2 is a submission I made to NSW Transport.

PART 1.

PLANNING PRIORITIES AND PROCESSES

In the 2012 Hunter Regional Action Plan (attached), the rail removal was listed as a Priority Three project after 39 others (see pp15–18). Now it's suddenly top of the list. What was the rationale behind this? If the Action Plan was mistaken, what mistakes were made and what processes took place to so radically change the priority? The Plan is attached to my email and online at http://www.2021.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf/DPC13926-NSW-RAP-Hunter2012_web.pdf

As discussed in Part 2, why was it decided to remove the rail line before the Wickham Interchange and the light rail are built? Surely this infrastructure should be built before the heavy rail is removed, to avoid years of inconvenient and messy bus transport which can only reduce rail patronage and increase car use even more than would otherwise be the case. Where is the benefit to Newcastle in the current plan? Why the unseemly haste?

Transitional Hamilton Station 'interchange'

Hamilton Station (my local station) is obviously highly unsuitable for a bus interchange. Already that stretch of Beaumont Street is often traffic-jammed to a standstill even without the level crossing being closed. Adding a bus every few minutes to the mix can only create even worse congestion, throwing the bus timetables into disarray. (See the photo and caption below)

Each bus appears to make two stops according to the government project map, one to let off passengers and then another on the other side of the rail crossing to pick up.

As the buses are meant to meet the trains – and each train will have to reverse back out of the station soon after it has arrived – the buses will frequently face closed level crossing gates in between their two stops, further increasing delays and congestion.



A very recent photo of Beaumont St near Hamilton station, taken at 11.40 AM. At this time the level crossing gates were open – this is just normal traffic. Note the 8 tonne and over prohibition sign. Buses weigh about 8 tonnes. Clearly this area is not suitable for large vehicles.

The street is already signposted as unsuitable for large vehicles. This is clearly a third-rate plan, actually laughable in transport planning terms. Surely proper planning would have found a less messy solution than this one – it looks like a desperate attempt to fit a political decision to remove the rail before the interchange and light rail is built. A transport planning student submitting this plan would be failed – and so should its actual creators.

PART II - SUBMISSION MADE TO NSW TRANSPORT ON 19 AUGUST 2014

I am a resident of Islington who recently attended the information session at the Croatian Club in Wickham. After the session I was none the wiser as to the strategy behind this scheme. It appears to contain several fundamental flaws which the government officers at the session were unable to explain or justify.

I can find no convincing argument that this project will "revitalise Newcastle". Indeed the few advantages it is said offer seem to be cancelled out by clear disadvantages. One such is the removal of existing public rail infrastructure, so I would expect to see thorough independent studies done and consulted on, demonstrating that the pros outweigh the cons, BEFORE the rail is to be removed. Instead we are told the rail will be removed before any proper traffic or business studies have been done. This appears to put the cart squarely before the horse.

Further, removing the rail without any detailed plan and no budget for a light rail alternative sets the scene for yet another announced public transport project to simply evaporate, as so many previous plans have done – the Parramatta to Epping rail link and the CBD Metro in Sydney to name but two. Given the parlous state of the NSW budget, I have little confidence that a future government will commit to the light rail expenditure. If this project is ever to be budgeted, now is the time to do it by earmarking funds from the sale of the port. At the moment we are offered no more assurance than nice words from the Minister and a line on a map in a glossy brochure.

Railway St level crossing

The fundamental driver behind the project is to 'reconnect' Newcastle CBD with the foreshore. I understand the importance of easy connections in urban dynamics, so I was surprised to learn that the existing level crossing at Railway Street will be permanently closed to all forms of traffic – pedestrian, cycling and vehicular.

As part of the project rationale is that the 'centre of gravity' of Newcastle CBD is shifting westwards, it seems counter-productive to be permanently closing an existing connection in the western precinct.

While I agree with your documents that the remaining crossing at Stewart Avenue carries a lot more traffic than the Railway Street crossing, the plan would force ~100% of the Railway Street cross-rail traffic to divert to Stewart Ave. All traffic on the north side of the rail will have to drive as far as the Branch St roundabout before heading back as there are no right-hand turns between the roundabout and the railway. This will clearly add significantly to the Stewart St traffic and add to delays at the Hunter Street traffic lights, a busy and important intersection.

This increased traffic will also clearly add to noise, air pollution and risk of accidents.

Furthermore Railway St on both sides of the rail is a hub of Newcastle's car industry, which by definition must generate significant local traffic. The Kloster Group, for instance, has businesses on both sides of the rail. Closing the crossing MUST have a significant efficiency cost to these businesses.

There are many other vital businesses on Railway St north, for instance the Bid Jungle auction warehouse that generates significant traffic seven days a week. Closing the crossing MUST adversely affect this business as it reduces its convenient catchment.

Similarly the Lass O' Gowrie Hotel, adjacent to the crossing, will be adversely affected. This pub is famous for supporting local music and is a crucial part of Newcastle's cultural life – it is one of the key reasons I recently moved to this area. At present it is accessible from the city side not only by car but also by foot and cycle, an important feeder for a hotel with no parking. Diverting patrons via Stewart avenue will create a significant barrier and this MUST reduce patronage by some percentage. Further, to the extent that it may increase travel by car, the incidence of people driving under the influence of alcohol will increase.

Changing transport modes

The plan will force people to change transport modes to travel all the way into Newcastle. This MUST by definition cause delays and MUST therefore reduce rail patronage to some degree, as people are very much driven by convenience. People carrying pushchairs, pushbikes, surfboards and the like – or even just going on a big shopping trip – will be particularly disadvantaged, especially during the suggested transition period when buses will be the only alternative transport mode.

A proportion of these passengers will switch to using a car, which will increase traffic congestion, noise and pollution in the city. Some people will simply not come at all.

A further problem with the plan is that, IF the light rail is ever built, I have little doubt this government will prefer it be a private operation. Does this mean passengers will have to pay TWO fares to reach Newcastle city? If not, subsidising a private operation from reduced rail patronage would seem to be a difficult prospect. If the current heavy rail is not profitable over that route, a separate light rail operation carrying the costs of new infrastructure will be similarly unprofitable.

But, as explained above, I have little confidence that this single-track light rail will ever be realised, leaving us with a third-best scenario of inefficient, noisy, polluting buses which are woefully inadequate at replacing rail services, as we can see by the delays whenever track work or the like makes buses necessary.

Parking

As explained above, the project will likely increase vehicular traffic. This adverse effect may or may not be balanced by opening two level crossings (Stewart Ave and at Civic) but by your own figures this will assist only the ~20 percent of traffic currently being delayed there, so there is an 80 percent discount to any advantages. Even if traffic is freed up overall, this will only induce further traffic so we end up no better off.

The increased traffic will have fewer places to park – 75 spots to be lost on Station Street alone. Your statement that “There is considered to be sufficient parking in surrounding areas” is very unconvincing, especially in reference to Wickham where most houses have do driveways or garages and street parking is always at a premium.

Additionally, to revitalise shopping, MORE parking is needed, not less. The ready supply of built-in parking is why most people shop in outlying ‘super-centres’ like Kotara and Bennets Green. I see nothing in this proposal to counter this effect.

Conclusion

In conclusion I can identify many definite downsides to this proposal. The suggested upsides are not supported by any evidence beyond bland assurances. Surely the sincere way to do this would be to conduct **independent** traffic and impact studies (with community consultation), then make a viable urban plan with a real business case, then possibly build the Wickham interchange and the light rail, AND ONLY THEN remove the heavy rail, avoiding the messy and inconvenient interim arrangements being proposed. It is perfectly possible to develop rail corridors while keeping the trains running, as we have seen at St Leonards and Chatswood.

The current plan to remove the rail first creates a *fait accompli* that can only deepen the suspicion that this project is really about exploiting the rail corridor for future high-rise development as it is solid ground with no old mines underneath. THAT proposal at least makes a kind of sense, at least for big developers. THIS proposal is so full of holes it should be abandoned immediately.

Finally, in the interests of transparency, I request that **all submissions be published in full online** as is best practice for many government projects.