

Submission
No 239

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Submission to inquiry into 'Planning process in Newcastle and the broader Hunter region'

I am not writing this submission after trawling through the workings of the people involved, but as an educated observer trying to understand decisions that don't appear to have any logical sense. What causes a government to rush the cutting of the railway? Something that no city in recent history is contemplating except Newcastle. You may think this is not rushed because it was announced earlier this year, but it is rushed in the lack of measures to ensure it is sensible and goes smoothly.

I am frankly opposed to the railway being cut at Wickham, both because this doesn't seem to make planning sense, and also because the way the cutting and construction will be done is not treating current users with the same respect normal construction projects treat other transport users.

Firstly, I would like to address my second point. One doesn't cut a road to cars for two years and expects all drivers to leave their cars at a particular point and get into a bus. If work is being done on a road, the construction is managed to minimise interference to the users - this is not the case with the Newcastle train users. We will be stopped from using the train before any construction really starts. Does this make sense at all? The plan is not to use the rail line for a substantial section of the proposed tramway route, so one must ask why this has not already been constructed before the rail line is even cut. This would minimise the time that current train users are inconvenienced. I find this utterly disrespectful to the people that the government should be most pleased with for using public transport nowadays. To understand the impact you will have on current users, why hasn't the government shut the rail line for a week to see what are commuter responses - they won't be happy and some may even decide to drive instead (even within a week), causing a very congested city centre (meanwhile all the construction vehicles are going to struggle to get through the excessive car traffic).

This planning schedule reminds me of the cutting of the tramlines back in the 1960s when it was all about burning our bridges so we had no possibility to go back to having trams again – they were literally burn and rails ripped up in an display of entropy inducing madness. Adaptive management principles should be at the core of any planning process these days – wherever possible we should be making changes in ways with feedback loops to ensure it is carried out with common sense and adapts to the needs of the evolving community. I will come back to this point when discussing options for a lightrail network in Newcastle.

I would now like to address my general opposition to the cutting of the rail line from a planning perspective. One has to ask who are the changes targeted at and what else could the money and political will be better spent with. Most people who currently use the train are not looking forward to having to change at Hamilton, so it is obviously not for those people (which includes me) – it was stated in a government document that a reason not to put the interchange at broadmeadow or Hamilton was that it would be inconvenient for passengers having to change before they reach the 'new CBD' in Wickham – the CBD is currently still in Newcastle and the planners are happy to inconvenience everyone who will be using public transport to reach there – this is absurd. Most people who walk (which includes me) through Newcastle are quite capable of walking along the overhead passes if they need to cross the line and it's not such a big deal for pedestrians to wait at the level crossings - we wait more often and for about the same amount of time to cross King Street and Hunter Street. I wouldn't mind if they put another pedestrian overpass between Wickham and Civic, but they have been too obsessed with getting rid of the rail rather than enhancing our

experience with it to think of such things. For people who ride bikes (which includes me), it is also not targeted at them. You can put bikes on trains really easily, and I don't have a problem crossing at one of the level crossings - it's never too far on a bike from one to the next really. For disabled people (which is not me for now) the ability to stay on the same mode of transport is essential. If you are cutting the rail only to serve car drivers - this is not good planning practice. If you want to make people think about using other modes of transport, you have to stop trying to enhance their experience of driving.

It is well-recognised that excessive car use is bad for the urban planning of a city. Along with this, it has been demonstrated that it is bad for health impacts, safety concerns, psycho-social issues, environment problems, and it drives our culture in the directions of individualism to a point our capacity to empathise and make decisions in a caring way is reduced. This has to be the first concern when we are trying to rejuvenate a city! We have to try and provide access for all while reducing the impact of the car. My recommendation is to expand our public transport network, not just spend all the money, planning and political will to chop and change this one section of real rail infrastructure we currently have. What is stopping the first piece of light rail being put in the direction of somewhere that currently doesn't have rail infrastructure, for example towards Merewether - or towards Lambton or Mayfield? I find this the strangest strategy of them all - if you want to community to embrace light rail - you put it down for the people who are going to use it, that have felt oppressed with their current transport option. At the moment you are putting the rail down not for the people who are going to use it - but for the people who are bothered by waiting in their cars for trains to pass (the fact the train crossings and lights have never had control between them to optimise the system is beyond me).

In the last ten years, since I have been engaged with this debate and transport in general, there have been various words flying around the council, the parliament, the business world and now, sadly they have also crept into the conversation of unwitting members of the public. These are words constructed by public relations professionals who realise the power of framing the debate in terms of freedoms and beauty. 'Cutting the city in two' is repeated over and over again and people don't have a concept of how or what is being cut in two – it is almost a chant they have been entrained to say – a frame of how they see the world. One doesn't stop to count how many crossings there currently are between Newcastle and Civic station, where you have to go as far to find a crossing of Hunter/Scott Street than a crossing of the railway. I live between Civic and Newcastle and only 100 metres from the train line. I don't feel cut off from the harbour. For me the framing of this debate is just trying to make people feel like they are trapped on one side or the other of the railway - I am happy to teach people how to use the overhead crossings for pedestrian if they are feeling trapped on one side. Buildings line much of Hunter Street so I'm not sure how cutting the railway will stop the buildings from 'cutting the city in two'. The ugliness of the train is also an image that PR professionals have tried to create in our heads. I think it is has much more character than most four wheel drives and other oversized cars that parade down Hunter Street and King Street. I love the stations – they actually represent a piece of calm for me in the city. It is amazing how people's imaginations can be twisted.

Finally, as a human I am baffled with the timing of this. At a time when we need more than ever for communities to come together, to learn about each other, accept diversity, and work towards dealing with serious global threats including climate change, economic crises and widening social gaps, we don't need to cut any public transport. Put more in! Public transport is a place people can see other humans, can talk to people from 'other worlds' and accept them as part of their world. It is one part of our lives we can stop what we are doing and think about caring for others. We need as much of this as we can get. I have travelled the world talking to people about their urban transport experiences and the importance of human contact and getting to know your community while using

public transport is profound – If you want a tram, get rid of a road rather than a rail – and first reach out to suburbs that don't have as much access to the wonderful world of public transport as inner-city Newcastle where I can live quite happily carfree.