

**Submission
No 228**

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

Organisation: Hunter Communities Network

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“Reclaiming our Valley”

Hunter Communities Network

SUBMISSION

Inquiry into Planning process in Newcastle and broader Hunter region
Friday 24 October 2014

The Hunter Communities Network (HCN) is an alliance of community based groups and individuals impacted by the current coal industry and concerned about the ongoing rapid expansion of coal and coal seam gas exploration and mining in the region.

HCN welcomes the NSW Government inquiry into planning processes in Newcastle and broader Hunter region. HCN believes that the terms of reference of the inquiry should have been broader to consider the planning processes relating to the approval of coal mine expansion in the region, particularly the changes to the Mining SEPP 2007.

1. Rail termination

HCN wishes to raise to the attention of the Committee that residents in the Upper Hunter who are regular users of the train service into Newcastle were not consulted when the decision was made to truncate the line on Boxing Day 2014.

HCN considers this decision to be a cynical move by the NSW Government to disrupt public transport use during the holiday period.

There has been no consideration by the Government of the many elderly citizens who use the train service into Newcastle to attend medical or business appointments. Elderly rail users do not wish to have their journey disrupted by having to disembark the train and board a different mode of transport to reach their final destination.

There has been no comprehensive survey conducted about the use of the rail into Newcastle by commuters from Scone, Muswellbrook, Singleton, Maitland, Dungog and the Central Coast.

HCN does not believe that the Government is serious about building a terminus at Wickham or a light rail service up Hunter St.

The latest information provided through the media¹ indicates that all trains from the Upper Hunter will terminate at Broadmeadow on December 26. HCN considers that this is the

¹ <http://www.theherald.com.au/story/2637312/bus-service-after-train-line-cut/>

underlying plan of the Government, to have Broadmeadow as the terminus for train travel in the Hunter.

HCN considers that there has been no credible consultation or information provided to the users of the rail service into Newcastle station.

HCN is a strong supporter of the public transport system in NSW because it is often the elderly and socially disadvantaged who rely on it. It is also safer in the Hunter to stay off the New England Highway, if possible. Many of the fatal road accidents in the Upper Hunter have been caused by fatigued mine workers travelling home from long 14 hour shifts.

Another key issue for rail service users from the Upper Hunter is the current timetable. More people would take advantage of the service into Newcastle if there were additional passenger trains available and at a suitable time. The weekend services are particularly unfavourable and would enjoy greater patronage if the timetable was improved.

The issue of adequate car parking in Newcastle is an ongoing problem that has not been considered in the context of terminating the trains at Broadmeadow. HCN believes that many more people will drive into the city rather than be inconvenienced by the proposed changes to public transport.

A comprehensive study of rail commuter behaviour is needed before any move to terminate the existing services is implemented.

2. Planning for cumulative impact

Communities in the Upper Hunter are particularly impacted by the planning process for coal mine approvals. The ongoing system of modification of existing operations gives no security to the local residents who are suffering from air and noise pollution, blasting impacts, loss of property value and amenity.

The change to Mining SEPP 2007 that requires decision makers to consider the value of the coal resource above social and environmental impacts of a mining operation has removed the balance of the planning process and the consideration of environmentally sustainable development.

The cumulative impact of the rapid expansion of the coal industry has decimated remote rural communities in the Upper Hunter.

The influence of the coal industry on various planning decisions in Newcastle and the region needs to be better understood. HCN urges the Inquiry to look closely at the relationship between the mining and development lobby and key decision-makers.

3. Open and transparent decision-making

HCN calls for an improved system of community consultation and open decision-making processes on issues that have an impact on the people, the environment and long term sustainability of the Hunter region.

Conclusion

HCN trusts that the Inquiry will take into account the lack of transparency around key planning decisions in the Hunter region.

We particularly emphasise the need for a comprehensive study of rail commuter behaviour and request that the Inquiry recommend that the proposed truncation of rail services at Broadmeadow on December 26 be overturned.

Bev Smiles
Convenor