

**Submission
No 47**

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

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Submission to Rail Closure and Other Planning Decisions in the Hunter Region Inquiry

The closure of the railway between Newcastle and Wickham was announced in December 2012. Since then I have tried to convince this government of the stupidity of this decision for the following reasons; with no success:

It needs to be remembered that the trend around the world is to build suburban railways, not remove them. New suburban railways are being built or have been built in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Melbourne and Adelaide. Why has a decision been made to pull the railway out of Newcastle which is supposed to be the second biggest city in the state?

In cases where railways were removed, the promised benefits did not materialise. This was the case in Fremantle, Bunbury, Semaphore in suburban Adelaide and the Gold Coast in Queensland. In the case of Fremantle and the Gold Coast railways were reinstated.

Excuses have been invented to justify closure of the railway that are not valid. The main excuse being that the railway is a barrier. More recently there has been talk of a need for connectivity between Hunter Street and the harbour. This is simply not true. The real barrier is the developments that have been built in Honeysuckle and Wharf Road. If access across the railway is an issue then level crossings, bridges or underpasses would be a much cheaper option. Strangely this government has not acknowledged any of these options. However the government has said that if the proposed light rail is built then additional access points will be added. There is no reason why these access points cannot be installed now. However this government is determined to press ahead with wasting hundreds of millions of dollars to close the railway and leave Newcastle with a grossly inferior transport system.

It will be an inferior transport system because people will have to change at what looks like a glorified car port at Wickham. At present it takes about four minutes from Wickham, six minutes from Hamilton and ten minutes from Broadmeadow to get to Newcastle on a train. It will take a lot longer in a bus; if they can get onto one. From Wickham people will have to find their way onto a bus. It was stated at a recent alleged information session that buses would run every ten minutes. During this so called information session it was said that modelling had been done and that it would work! This "modelling" must be questioned. When asked how the people from an eight car double deck train would fit onto a bus there was no answer. The new arrangements will be hopelessly inadequate particularly during the peak hours and during special events when the trains are heavily used. Not only will people be inconvenienced, people with disabilities, in particular those with vision impairment will be disadvantaged. On top of all of this, some information has come to light suggesting replacement buses will have no provision for surf boards, no provision for bicycles and provision for only two wheel chairs.

Another invented excuse is that the railway is ineffective, inefficient and under used. This is simply not true. While loadings during the day vary, the services are heavily used during the peak hours and during special events. The services also tend to see more patronage on weekends than during the week.

The transport Minister has acknowledged that if the railway is closed at Wickham then patronage is expected to fall by 23%. Past surveys have suggested the figure could be higher. Some have said it could be as high as sixty percent! At a time when the Transport Minister wants to increase public transport usage by 25% by 2016, closing the railway simply doesn't make any sense.

If public transport use fall by at least 23% percent then it will be clear that those who abandon public transport will use their cars. This will make traffic problems worse. That's not all. At one of those "information sessions" it was said that when the interchange at Wickham is built, about 75 car parking spaces will be gone. Those responsible for this said this number was acceptable. At a time when additional traffic is going to demand more parking spaces this is totally unacceptable. With the construction of the interchange, the railway Street level crossing will be closed which in turn will put more traffic onto Stuart Avenue and Albert Street. Contrary to what was said at the "information sessions" removal of the boom gates at Stuart Avenue will not improve traffic flows.

The closure of the Railway Street level crossing will severely impact local businesses. Trucks will have considerable difficulty accessing local industries. People will have serious issues with access to the Lass O'Gowrie Hotel which is a popular venue for live music. Those who previously would have walked to this venue will probably drive or not go at all.

At a time when this government is allegedly trying to stimulate business activity around Wickham and at a time when they are trying to get more people onto public transport cutting the railway back to Wickham makes no sense at all.

The new law court and the university campus have provision for very little parking. If both of these facilities are constructed, then efficient public transport will be essential, particularly for the university campus. Interestingly, the estimated number of students who will be attending has varied widely since the announcement was made that the campus would be built. At first the number was about eight thousand, then six thousand. Last I heard the figure was less than four thousand. Does anyone actually know? Considering the amount of space available at the Callaghan campus questions must be asked why the decision was made to locate the campus in the centre of Newcastle. The design of the building must be questioned as well. It looks like something from a B grade science fiction movie and it looks totally out of place among the historic buildings in the immediate vicinity. In any case if the campus is built in Hunter Street then an efficient mode of transport will be essential. The railway provides that efficient form of transport. Apparently, the decision to build the

university campus and the new law court in Hunter Street was made on the understanding the rail services would remain in place.

The Urban Renewal Strategy stated that the plan was to have an additional 10'000 jobs and 6'000 additional dwellings by 2036. These figures are somewhat curious considering the government has shifted offices from Newcastle to Charlestown and other businesses have been encouraged to relocate. In any case, if the figures do prove to be correct an efficient form of mass transport will be essential for those who do not live in the city to get to and from work. Under these circumstances the city will not function if the railway is removed.

There have been a number of so called "information Sessions". They should have been called no information sessions! No-one could give any details about traffic flows, where buses would run, what provisions would be for the disabled or indeed how the new arrangements would work. Clearly there has been no planning for the closure of the line. At some information sessions questions were not answered and in one case, when a woman asked about the railway, the microphone was switched off! If that's not enough, there has clearly been strong opposition to closure of the railway and proposed high rise developments for the city centre. However, submissions calling for retention of the railway and for high rise projects to be stopped have been ignored. Surprisingly, this government has been saying that everyone is excited at the prospect of closure of the railway because it will open up the city to the harbour. This is a total lie!

The fact that there has been no planning is obvious because:

- .No project manager has been appointed.
- .Geotechnical survey work for the light rail was only done recently. This should have been done before the decision was made to close the line.
- .Test bores allegedly for the light rail were only done recently. Again this should have been done before the light rail project was announced.
- . There are still no details as to where the buses will run or how often they will run.
- . There are no details as to what if any provision will be made for people with bicycles, surfboards, prams, strollers or wheel chairs. There have only been rumours.
- . There has been no cost/benefit analysis.
- . Reports by transport and planning experts recommended keeping the railway into Newcastle.

The present Terminus at Newcastle is an historic building that, despite neglect, still has a presence. The station is close to the foreshore, the ferries, the beaches, the shopping centre and Fort Scratchley. There are four platforms which can just cope with the number of trains arriving and leaving. Compare this to the proposed terminus at Wickham which will only have three platforms and is no-where near any of the attractions or facilities at Newcastle.

Those who want the railway removed say that Newcastle needs to be revitalised and the railway needs to be removed so revitalisation can happen. However, revitalisation is happening now with the railway in place and operating. The only reason for closing the railway is that the railway is on a strip of land that has not been undermined. If the developers can build on that land they will not have to contact the department of mines and the mine workings will not have to be filled with concrete. Filling the old mine workings with concrete or grouting adds significantly to the cost of construction and even then there still restrictions on the height of the building. Conversely, if there no mine workings, then there is no limit on the height of the building. The tall buildings that are proposed for the land that is presently occupied by the railway will not only ruin the aesthetics of the city and destroy its character, they will have the potential to influence housing prices and possibly affect local wind patterns. The construction of these buildings will make a joke of the notion of connectivity between Hunter Street and the harbour. If they are built, these edifices will complete the barrier between Honeysuckle and Newcastle.

The government has announced that the existing heavy rail will be replaced with light rail. However, no cost/benefit analysis has been released. Another issue that has caused comment is that it will be at least twelve months after closure of the railway before work on the light rail project will begin. Why the wait? If light rail is to be built then the existing railway should remain open until the light rail is ready to be connected. Clearly there has been no planning for this light rail. All we have seen is some pretty pictures.

There is no business case and it may be hard to find an example where a light rail line as short as the one that has been announced would be viable. Such being the case it begs the question why a government would use many millions of dollars from the lease of the Hunter Ports to ignore good city planning.

There can only be one reason as to why the government would even consider closing the railway. That reason started to become clear when it was revealed that the member for Newcastle and the Member for Charlestown accepted political donations from the Lord Mayor and developer Jeff McCloy. Would it not be reasonable to assume that those donations would have been made with strings attached? Tim Owen was the main driving force behind the closure of the railway. Would it also be reasonable to assume that Jeff McCloy influenced, co-erced, pushed him to have the railway removed. Considering the manner in which the decision was made to close a vital transport artery, considering that a vast majority of people want the railway to remain, considering the manner in which calls for the line to remain have been silenced and considering the total lack of planning associated with that closure, it is very clear that the decision to close the railway needs to be investigated.

Please investigate this matter. At best the decision to close the railway is the result of gross incompetence at worst corruption, most likely, both.

Peter Sansom