

**Submission  
No 295**

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

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## Newcastle Planning enquiry

I am writing this submission with reference to one of the development proposals which affect the Newcastle CBD, specifically the truncation of the rail line into the CBD. As a local resident I wish to thank those in State parliament who supported this enquiry to shine a spotlight on the planning process which underpins the proposed developments in the CBD.

I submit my personal view that the proposal to truncate the rail line into the CBD should not proceed at this time because the decision making process behind this proposal has not been transparent, because the real benefits of truncating the rail line have not been clearly presented and the range of benefits and/or beneficiaries have not been made clear. In short, a convincing case for truncating the rail line has not been made public. The timeline of 26 December announced for the start of the removal represents no consideration for the needs of the community in the months that follow. Further to this, while a replacement for this infrastructure has been identified, there are insufficient details, no guaranteed timeline and it seems no guaranteed budget. How can the community be confident that the transport infrastructure that is in place now and being used will actually be replaced with something better in a reasonable period of time. Lastly the case for truncating the Rail line has not been put forward as a component of an integrated development proposal for the city. While there are other development proposals on the table they do not form an integrated plan that residents can engage with and comment on.

The existing rail line is a significant piece of infrastructure that has been in place for many years. A whole range of activities and social movement in and out of the city has developed around this infrastructure. Therefore discussions around its removal should have been done in a non-political setting and actual proposals and timelines for what will replace it should have already been presented to the city. But this has not been done. The truncation of the rail-line is a no-going-back proposal. Once the first steps have been taken the city will have lost this significant piece of infrastructure.

The announcement that the heavy rail line would be truncated and work would begin on 26 December was made in an information vacuum. For something so important which will impact on peoples lives immediately and for many years to come, there was no information supplied in advance to the many questions which this announcement would most certainly stimulate. Responses to the many questions which did follow this announcement were put off. Instead information has dribbled out. It is not surprising that the recent announcement of a replacement public transport service, namely buses every 10 minutes from Hamilton days, just before the By-Election on 25 October, has been met with cynicism. The plan has been offered with very little detail and raises another whole set of logistical questions. I doubt we will get any answers to those in the short term. Unfortunately if the public transport services that the State government offers to replace the rail line do not work, there will be little we can do about it.

The significant contribution Newcastle makes to the State coffers through its state-owned water authority, the inner city land given over to industrial activity and the upper hunter land given over to coal mining has never seemed to translate to investment back into the city. This gives residents the impression that the interests of city and the region is a low priority for State government. In spite of what we contribute, Newcastle has always has to fight for everything and shoulder disappointments when governments change stripes and what was promised by one gets taken away by the other. We have had to stand by on other occasions when State government takes over development.

As a community we cannot be confident that the interests of the city and the region are at the forefront of decisions. It sometimes feels like Newcastle has not only been taken for granted but has indeed been sacrificed by successive state government for the sake of maintaing the revenue streams. State level decisions which affect Newcastle often seem to be made with limited local input. What input does come from local sources seems to be limited to an inner circle.

The old way of a small enclave having the ear of the government of the day and taking a we-know-best approach has been shot to pieces by recent ICAC submissions and the stepping down of a significant number of local members. In this vacuum of diminished representation it is not appropriate for these significant developments to proceed.

In my view the rail and its future has been made to languish under a cloud of uncertainty. The argument of removing or retaining has been around for so long and so polarised the community that it is difficult to know where or when it started and who was behind the start of that campaign. But it is certain that a decent conversation about this issue can no longer be had anywhere. The decision to cut or retain has been used as a political football for so many successive governments I have lost count.

Retail in the CBD has felt the impact of expanding suburban retail hubs and decisions in the last 20 years or so around parking and traffic have either exacerbated those impacts or complicated and confused the issues. A view has developed among a percentage of the community that the heavy rail line is the main problem and if only this were removed, a way forward would become clear and Newcastle would be reborn.

But it does not take much effort to see that a rebirth is already happening and the existing rail line into Newcastle is not impeding this development in any way. Descriptions of a dying CBD don't mesh with the resurgence of small shops and galleries which have emerged in place of larger retail businesses. Renew Newcastle, the brainchild of one of our local go getters Marcus Westbury has been so successful that Mr Westbury has been given an honorary degree by Melbourne University and has gone round the world to share the Newcastle success story.

What has been missing in my view is a city wide, locally led planning initiative involving people who understand the place and want to live here. Newcastle is certainly one of Australia's larger cities but it doesn't feel like a big city when you live here, that is part of the magic of the place. The Newcastle CBD and the East End can at times have a small coastal village feel. I live in Stockton, which has the best view of the Newcastle CBD, which sits alongside our oldest suburbs and has developed around our wonderful collection of historical buildings, housing the early history of Newcastle but also servicing today's population and industries. It enjoys a wonderful geographical and economic and social position.

Now and then a visiting expert or a brave local expert inspired by the potential of the location, has stepped up and put forward proposals, but these seem to come and go. Newcastle's people, its industries and its institutions are a rich resource and there is potential to tap into the brain power of our many industry experts, University staff and students and the Hunter Research Foundation, which has been taking the pulse of the place for over 40 years.

Decisions about Newcastle's future must be done in a way that gains the confidence of residents. The developments proposed may have some backers but they have not inspired confidence in many residents that they have been developed with the best interests of the city in mind.

Christine Prietto