

**Submission
No 200**

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

Name: Mr John de Bruyn

Date received: 23/10/2014

RE: Inquiry on the planning process in Newcastle and the broader Hunter region

To the Select Committee,

I am a resident of Newcastle, living in the "CBD" increasingly referred to as the "East End" of Newcastle. I have a young family and we enjoy the amenity of Newcastle's Beaches, Harbour, Parks, Mall (and surrounds), Civic Buildings, Transport Infrastructure and Schools.

"East End" development(s)

Over the last 6-7 years the old Newcastle (East of Darby St) has flourished. The Mall used to be empty of shops and people and a dangerous no-go area after dark, but due in large part to the Renew Newcastle initiative and changes to alcohol licensing laws, the mall and surrounding area is now safe, buzzing with coffee and retail shops, art, offices and more. Many businesses are locally owned and operated, which is indicative of the creative energy Newcastle is becoming known for.

Much political capital has been spent on promising new development over the years, but it is only now that the Newcastle City Centre is a sought-after location anyway, that large scale development is likely. So it is not surprising that these development plans which claim to "re-invigorate", "kickstart", "re-activate" the Newcastle City for "urban renewal" are met with scepticism by the the Newcastle community.

There is a prevailing view that these developments are more about reaping the benefits of an already reinvigorated neighbourhood, that actually making any real positive change.

I do not have any objection to increased density in Newcastle and actually believe it to be a positive thing. The Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy outlined a broadly acceptable pattern of development in the three zone East End, Civic and West End, but it appears that now the East End is beginning to work anyway, it is being looked at for financial gain rather than community benefit.

I urge the inquiry to look closely at what interests are being catered to, and what agendas have been prioritised for the developments proposed.

I would not object to significant development around the mall area (or "East End"), even on those locations being considered, but it seems to me that the real focus of Urban Renewal is required in the "West End" of Newcastle. That is the area nominated for future transport interchange and high rise development and is suited to that scale of intervention.

I urge the committee to question why public money is not being directed to projects in areas, more obviously in need of it and where the benefits would serve a much larger number people.

The Rail Debate

The train line is an obvious link for those who live far afield to access Nobbys Headland, Nobbys Beach, Newcastle Beach, Newcastle Baths the Harbour, Foreshore Park and the "Trainsheds" for a myriad public and private events. But so is the car, and the community has long been divided on the issue of whether to remove or keep the train line.

I have held both viewpoints and am still quite ambivalent about the outcome, personally believing the resulting transport mix and total transport infrastructure to be much more important and worthy of debate than this one element. I cannot say which is the correct decision, but I am not convinced the decision has been made by Novacastrians for Newcastle or even (more importantly) by the Hunter Valley Community for the Hunter Valley. I believe the decision has been made (at best) for perceived political gain by various authority groups located elsewhere, or (at worst) for perceived financial gain by various corrupt groups located here.

There is a prevailing view in Newcastle that the main reason for removing the the railway line along the harbour is to liberate the corridor for development.

I cannot believe it is that simple as that and prefer to believe in incompetence than corruption, but the issue is so muddled by rumour, hearsay, accusations, denials and politics that no one in the community can confidently say what will happen with that land, and in who's interests that may be.

For this reason I urge the inquiry to look closely at what decisions have been made, what agendas are being prioritised, and in who's interest that will be.

Other Developmental Impacts

Added to the proposed re-structuring of existing urban transport infrastructure is the complications introduced with the proposed new developments. The University of Newcastle is already building facilities ("[NeW Space](#)") in the "Civic" precinct to compliment the existing facilities (University House and Conservatorium of Music) and talking about more, while the Newcastle Courthouse is also moving from the "East End" at Bolton St to the "Civic" precinct. The train line currently links Newcastle, Hamilton and Waratah to the University Campus at Warabrook Station, which even though very awkwardly placed (adjacent to the campus) is heavily used by students and staff going in both directions, and would be beneficial to linking the increased presence in Newcastle City.

But the increased student activity and requirement for the public to access the courts do not appear to be planned for. ([see Newcastle Herald front page - 17 Sept 2014](#)) So it is again not surprising that the Newcastle community feel underserved, and skeptical of the decisions being made on our behalf.

I again urge the inquiry to look closely at what decisions are being made and for what gain. The Newcastle and Hunter Valley Community are confused, sceptical, divided and somewhat fatigued by these debates, and we need clarity on these issues.

Light Rail

The vague nature of recent information given to the public about the Rail Line Truncation, Future Light Rail and Transport Interchange has only increased the cynicism in the community and further separated the "keep it vs cut it rail" debate.

The planning for light rail is running about a year behind plans to remove the heavy rail, and is limited to replacing the lost heavy rail. Supporters of light rail and probably most Novacastrians would like to see an expanded transport system, which links the central areas like The Junction, Merewether, Carrington, and more rather than just Newcastle's East End. The dogged pursuit of removing an infrastructure rather than creating new infrastructure is worrying to many on either side of the Rail Debate.

There is a perception that the light rail is being run down Hunter St in order to keep the rail corridor free for development. There is the perception that the light rail is being used as a diversion to allow the removal of the rail and will be forgotten as the political cycle turns. There is a perception that the decisions are being made by car-centric commuters whose only interaction with the rail system is at level crossings.

And there is the reality that Newcastle is divided on this issue and even though it may be frustrating to all involved, it is Newcastle and the Hunter who need to come to some sort of compromise.

I urge the committee to recommend that the rail infrastructure at least be left in place until a clear Transport plan for Newcastle City is drawn up, accepted and being constructed. There may never be consensus on this issue, but Newcastle deserves the right to make the decision for itself in an atmosphere of trust and goodwill, not scepticism and paranoia.

An often heard example of a typical train user is the teenager with a boogie board, who catches the train from somewhere suburban, or even as far west as Dungog and gets off at Newcastle station, and then is able to walk easily to Newcastle beach for a surf, and head safely home again. The point being that no other transport medium can support these commuters as easily. Surfboards are more cumbersome again, and any bicycles will only add to the equation. The rebuttal from the light rail proponents has been that the change will be easy, accessible and not hinder the amenity for those users or the elderly, the disabled the parents with prams, the backpackers, students with bikes and more.

Recent [media](#) showing the proposed “interchange” was confusingly underdeveloped. ([see also Newcastle Herald Editorial - 29 July 2014](#)) The idea being pushed is apparently to “... *provide seamless connections for customers catching trains, buses, light rail and taxis*” ... yet light rail is absent from the plan, there is little area for the more than one or two busses and little evidence of taxis, let alone bicycles, pedestrians or park and ride facilities we have heard about in community forums over the years, and would expect as minimum in any sort of transport Interchange.

It appears that the political momentum to remove the rail line is overriding any genuine work to improve the transport infrastructure. Location of the Train line terminus seems to be planned for one side of Stewart Avenue, while the Light Rail would start on the other side. This is not seamless, or even practical and falls far short of the assurances made by those making the decisions.

Newcastle and the Hunter Valley Community deserves better.

The narrow peninsula of Newcastle and the “East End” is somehow a cultural focus for a very large catchment of the Hunter Valley community. I live here, and welcome that focus. Newcastle can and should serve the entire Hunter Valley and beyond as an Economic, Civic and Cultural centre, and I hope the attention this inquiry brings to its development is able to help us achieve those goals better.

Good Luck with your Inquiry and I look forward to hearing the results.

Yours Sincerely

John de Bruyn