

Submission  
No 98

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

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

21st October 2014

## **Please consider the following points**

### **Preamble**

This letter has been difficult to write for the reason that we and most Novocastrians feel completely in the dark about decisions made for their City by remote hands in Sydney - SYDNEY KNOWS BEST. It is impossible to imagine that any of those responsible for decisions regarding planning heights, the railway, local transport have more than passing acquaintance with our wonderful city and its needs; or how they can have put together such a mess of ill co-ordinated and thought-through policies.

Newcastle can't be cast in aspic but only a fool would imagine that that is the case. Hunter Street is bouncing back to life, sympathetic LOW RISE development is going on all around. Historic buildings are being renovated and put to modern use, new apartment blocks, hotels, offices are springing up all around. The City is coming alive again - through sensible local planning by local planning officers for local people. The notion that Sydney Knows Best and that only Urban Growth and dollops of centrally administered and dictated government cash can revive the City is patent nonsense.

The secrecy and undue haste and lack of consultation over key development and infrastructure issues smacks of bad and remote government and worse, it smells of corruption.

Only a complete moratorium on all recent development and infrastructure decisions, followed by an ICAC style investigation of the processes, guidances, instructions, conversations and decisions can clear the air and hopefully result in something that carries overwhelming local consent - and properly addresses the issues facing Newcastle.

One outcome might be the establishment of a strong, independent local planning and infrastructure body for Newcastle, Lake Macquarie and the Lower Hunter whose role is -

- a) to promote and coordinate appropriate infrastructure - roads, rail, air, port
- b) to produce and consult over regional development plans and
- c) approve DAs which comply with locally agreed plans
- d) It should NOT have the type of development role granted to Honeysuckle Development Corporation or Urban Growth and would be entirely independent of any vested interest, whether government or commercial.

Another favourable outcome should be that Urban Growth is required to sell its interest in the former GPT holding to an independent commercial contractor and that the original 2012 LEP be reinstated in full pending full consultative review.

### **High Rise** in particular decisions relating to Newcastle East End Project DA 2014/323

The widely consulted 2012 Newcastle LEP was considered to be the most thoughtful plan for the City. It anticipated a commercial zone, potentially with higher rise buildings set back from the historic and scenic harbour in the area around the widely mooted Wickham transport hub. On the other hand, the former CBD around Hunter Street was seen as a cafe/residential area not unlike

the Rocks in Sydney. Suggested building heights were to be broadly in keeping with the low rise nature of the area - as they are in the historic heart of Sydney.

In 2012, the GPT Group seemingly reached the conclusion that their plans for a retail development at around the former David Jones building were incompatible with the 2012 LEP, reached agreement to sell 50% of their holding to the government via state held Urban Growth.

In late 2013, the 2012 LEP was turned on its head and - lo and behold - the carefully constructed LEP was amended to allow extreme high rise development on the former DJ site and to lesser heights elsewhere in the CBD area. Consultation on the revised LEP was truncated and local council debate on the matter was guillotined by the disgraced former mayor, himself a prominent local developer and property owner who we believe may have benefitted directly or indirectly from a change in the planning laws. His role in corrupting state politicians was uncovered by ICAC.

The most likely conclusions are several -

- a. That the GPT sale to an agency of the State was the undoubted reason for the height amendments to the LEP
- b. The State government had a vested interest in a change to the 2012 LEP, it stood to gain financially from an appreciation in the value of its recently acquired Urban Growth holdings. In this respect it has acted little differently from a private individual or company who corruptly sought to influence a planning decision for personal gain
- c. The State government failed in its duty to consult widely and to act independently or to reveal discussions, briefings etc and reasons for the decision
- d. That decisions may have been made corruptly

### **Railway and traffic management**

Most nations outside of Australia and North America have concluded that an efficient rail system:

1. is a major part of a co-ordinated approach to traffic management
2. brings overwhelming economic benefits, particularly to the regions
3. mitigates the causes of global warming
4. contributes to improved public health

A terminus at Wickham, with a feeder of an efficient network of buses, park-and-ride, light rail and coupled to a fast, non-stop service to Sydney could achieve many of these forward looking benefits.

Instead, the only clear reason for truncating the line at Wickham is that it opens up the existing lines and sidings to future development. Indeed a recent promotional video supporting the changes at the former DJ site let the cat out of the bag showing future development here. Again, the residents of Newcastle are being treated as fools as discussions and decisions about the future of our City are seemingly made after consultation with development interests rather than with residents. Corrupt? Bad government? Inexcusable.

The rail line is being truncated before the proposed replacement light rail has been constructed or plans for interim bus services have been made. Again, bad management, macho decision making, hidden agendas?

And there is no hint of an integrated traffic management plan, of how the city would cope with additional traffic generated by the city university (provided with three parking spaces), or the proposed high rise developments, or continuing organic renewal.

Traffic and parking in the city is already approaching crisis. Existing residential and commercial development has failed to go hand in hand with the provision of additional parking or public transport. Shore reserves at Nobby's beach, the streets in and around King Edward park are used as weekday car parks by city workers, significantly reducing their otherwise superb amenity value.

In all respects the present approach has failed. Decisions have been taken by remote interests for the seeming benefit of government and private commercial interest, possibly corruptly, almost certainly without proper consideration, consultation or any sense of cohesion.

We do hope that your committee will consider all these points.

Yours sincerely