

Submission
No 190

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

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 23/10/2014

Partially Confidential

Submission to the Select Committee on the Planning Process in Newcastle and the Broader Hunter Region

Overview:

This submission relates to the proposed closure of the Newcastle rail line and will review aspects of attempts to contact a number of Local Members, Ministers and the Premier and the lack of transparency in government decision making relating to the closure of the Newcastle rail line.

I will also canvass concerns for the well-being of regular commuters and members of the public who use the public transport system on a less regular basis.

I will also make brief note of alternative arrangements which may be a reasonable compromise for all parties.

Disclosure:

I am a regular user of the Newcastle train service, thus I have a personal interest in maintaining this service. I work in the city of Newcastle and I travel between Fassifern and Civic stations on week days.

I am not affiliated with Save Our Rail or any other community group.

I do not own property in the city of Newcastle, nor do I have any pecuniary interest in any business or property in that city.

I have never been a member of any political party.

Background:

The announcement to cut the train line did not come as a surprise to many in this region as it has long been suspected that the value of the rail corridor would prove irresistible to a State government.

There have been previous calls from some quarters, the loudest being from the majority Singapore-owned GPT Group, that no 'revitalisation' of Newcastle can go ahead with the rail line in place. Some people in the region agree, however from my experience, this is very much a minority view.

I understand GPT is a major partner in the proposed Government/Private partnership in many of the developments planned for Newcastle. If this is the case, there must surely be a conflict of interest on the part of the NSW Government. It must be asked if the GPT view has impacted on the decisions of the Government.

It is commonly believed that the rail line is particularly valuable real estate as it is the only part of Newcastle which is not under-mined. I do not know if this is correct. Certainly it occupies land overlooking a nice harbour, so it is difficult to believe any comments that the land will be maintained

in public hands. Indeed, Minister Pru Goward has openly said there would be development on the land even before a closure date was announced!

I would also note, that when the new Court building was announced (planning approval not being required as it is over-ridden by NSW Government legislation), concern over the lack of parking (I think <10 spaces) was met with a response of, in effect, "That is OK. It is on the rail line".

Similarly, when the new University building was announced, there were similar concerns and these were met with the same reply – the rail line is there.

The Court and University buildings are proceeding, which is good, but I do wonder how people will access these facilities in the future – it takes a lot of busses to move 1000 students, but only one train – especially one which goes directly to the other campus.

Timing

The biggest question I have is the timing. The Minister for transport has said words to the effect that "I expect work on the light rail will COMMENCE within a year of the rail closure" (my emphasis).

I took issue with this and wrote to the (then) Member for Newcastle, Tim Owen. I am sure I do not need to elaborate on his current status, thanks to the ICAC. Mr Owen's office advised (my emphasis in **bold**):

Thank you for your recent email enquiry.

Tim Owen AM MP has asked that I respond on his behalf.

*The rail line truncation needs to happen prior to work commencing for several reasons. **Firstly, a section of the current rail corridor will be used for light rail, therefore the area will need to be clear in order for the work to begin. Also, as the Minister for Transport has said, it would be extremely difficult, from an engineering perspective, to construct the light rail with the current transport system still operating.***

Buses will be used to transport commuters without fuss and the arrangements for this will be based around two years of research and planning. Although some people see this as an inconvenience, others are delighted that the Stewart Avenue railway crossing bottleneck will be removed.

As it has been said before, the rail line will be truncated on 26 December 2014. The implementation of light rail will happen and the decisions on this matter have been confirmed.

The public will be informed of the process as final decisions are made regarding bus routes and light rail commencement.

I trust that this information has been of assistance.

I remain at a loss to understand what the engineering difficulties might be. I accept that the work needing to be done on the "shared" section of track cannot be done while the rail is operating, but

surely there is other work which can be conducted on the replacement 'light rail', particularly as the new route is 50 – 100 metres from the existing line.

My main point here is that commuters will be severely disadvantaged for at least two years when disruption for that period is clearly unnecessary.

My question here is – Why Boxing Day 2014? Why a year before a shovel is put into the ground?

Route:

You are no doubt aware that the route chosen for the light rail primarily runs down one of the busiest streets in Newcastle. Co-incidentally, this was the preferred route for a prominent Newcastle developer and former Lord Mayor, Jeff McCloy. Similar to Mr Owen, I will not dilate on his interactions with ICAC and his current status.

The question here is – Why not run the light rail on the existing corridor where infrastructure and land ownership are already in place, away from a busy road?

To sum up the previous two sections, we have closure on a date hugely in advance of requirements and the curious routing of the light rail. I hypothesise the date is due to the election in March 2015 meaning the land must be secured prior to any potential defeat at the election and the route is designed to provide maximum financial return for the NSW Government.

Correspondence & transparency:

I wrote to the Premier, Mr Baird and received what I consider to be an off-the-shelf reply to my concerns – “ the NSW Government is building a vibrant city” type reply which I will not burden the Committee with. Frankly, it was insulting.

I then wrote to the Minister for Transport, received a reply (of sorts) from her junior before I again asked the same questions. I had to ask the questions again because not a single one was answered in any form. I have not received a reply to date. This sequence of emails is attached as Annexure A.

There seems to be a reluctance to answer questions which, I believe, are reasonable and clear. In the information vacuum I find myself in, I can only consider that my questions were too close to the mark.

Recent events:

We have recently been advised (via media) that the trains will terminate at Hamilton with busses running at the peak rate of one each 10 minutes. The Minister expects this will add 15 minutes to the journey each way, which is at best, optimistic.

By my rough count, my morning train conveys approximately 50 people to Wickham and over 50 people to Civic. I do not know how many go through to Newcastle, but suffice to say that one bus will not carry, say 120 people. This means it is very likely that some commuters will be waiting at Hamilton for 20 minutes before they can proceed on their journey.

This delay, which at best adds 2.5 hours to the weekly commute (based on the Minister's 15 minutes) is unacceptable. It would not be tolerated in Sydney or other major centre – I ask the committee to consider the effect on their work and personal lives if an arbitrary decision was taken to increase their travel times to that extent for two years.

Assuming one works 48 weeks per year, this is the equivalent of working an additional 15 (8 hour) days for each year the line is closed.

This will inevitably result in a number of things, including:

- Frustration at the delays,
- Frustration 'boiling over' and leading to potential arguments/violence,
- The young/old/infirm being in potential danger from rushing commuters,
- People queuing in the heat and cold,
- Loss of time at work (and/or home),
- The wholesale move away from public transport.

I am unconvinced the Minister has good advice as to train passenger numbers. Today, 22 October 2014, I saw for the first time, a person counting passengers disembarking at Civic Station. I do not know who employed this person, but if the government is starting to count passengers now, how robust is the planning? Ticketing counts would be a very unreliable indicator as these stations do not have ticket barriers.

This afternoon, at the same station, I counted approximately 80 passengers waiting for trains out of Newcastle, with a further 40 or so at Wickham. How is one bus every ten minutes going to cope with those volumes? Again, people will simply turn away from public transport. I suspect I will do likewise.

Options:

I do not accept the "need" to close the rail line. There are options which did not appear to see the light of day, for example selling the airspace above the line (like has been done in Sydney and elsewhere), cut & cover – sink the line a few meters and cover over the top or even a full subterranean line which could then extend to Port Stephens and Newcastle airport – expensive yes, but also future-proofing this area.

IF the line must be cut, the logical place would be to terminate at Civic where the major employers, Courts, Theatre and University are or will be located. There is space nearby for stabling yards. Again, nothing I have read has even shown this as an option.

Summary:

In brief, given the sum of:

- ICAC revelations,
- Chosen termination point,
- The complete lack of community consultation,
- The severe and shocking lack of transparency,
- The chosen light rail route, and
- The utter disregard of disruption to thousands of people's lives,

any reasonable person would conclude that this sequence of events does not pass the 'smell test'. It smells of a government influenced by an unrepresentative but wealthy group and a government bent on a single objective – money.

Those elected by the people of NSW need to listen – we ask that cutting the line not go ahead until any suggestion of corruption is swept away under the light of public scrutiny and a clear mandate on that issue is delivered to them.

I thank the Committee Members for their time in considering this matter.

Yours sincerely,

22 October 2014