

**Submission  
No 16**

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

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

**Inquiry on the planning process in Newcastle and the broader Hunter region**

**Submitted by  
Ms. Bronwyn McDonald 3 October 2014**

To:  
The Director  
Select Committee on the Planning Process in Newcastle and the Broader Hunter Region  
Parliament House  
Macquarie St  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam,

I would like to make a submission to the inquiry specifically relating to the terms of reference e) concerning the termination of the Newcastle rail line at Wickham. This submission requests the inquiry closely examines the relations between property developers interests and the government organisations, businesses and politicians involved in the processes that were involved in the decision to terminate the Newcastle intercity rail line at Wickham.

Yours faithfully,

Bronwyn McDonald,

**To the Select Committee on the planning process in Newcastle and the broader Hunter region**

This submission responds to the inquiries terms of reference e) the decision to terminate the Newcastle rail line at Wickham and any proposal to construct light rail including along Hunter and Scott Streets.

The planning decisions which ostensibly informed the decision to terminate the Newcastle intercity rail line need to be examined for evidence of wrongdoings. Both because of the controversial nature of the plan, as well as in light of ICACs revelations of corruption in NSW state government politics this is a matter of urgency.

Other submissions to this inquiry will no doubt make clear the details of the contested views of the decisions to cut the rail line. This submission however is concerned for the political processes that saw developers interests prioritised above the community of Newcastle and the wider hunter, and above logical urban planning prospects.

This submission poses that the nature of the decision making involved in planning to cut the Newcastle intercity rail line was not carried out according to proper community consultation processes; does not satisfactorily address wider community interests; and was perhaps even corrupted and illegal.

Part of assessing these and similar concerns would be to examine whether the advocacy voices involved in opposition to the termination of the Newcastle inter-city rail line were consulted with any *meaningful respect* by the planning processes. Given the outcome was in favour of cutting the rail despite such vibrant ongoing opposition this seems to be not the case. It is a matter of due political process being followed and it is not at all apparent this has occurred.

There is a huge literature on the importance of hard rail public transport for cities. This includes for vibrancy of urban spaces, for economically reasons, and community inclusivity and importantly for environmental reasons. In light of these needs, it is crucial to consider the context of sustainability for the city of Newcastle. The decision to terminate the Newcastle intercity rail line is anomalous to ongoing sustainability and equity urbanisation plans, both in Australia and abroad. It is therefore questionable whether the decision process was fair and legitimate in this context.

Cutting the rail at Wickham will disadvantage the city of Newcastle. These disadvantages are not cancelled out by the growth that would supposedly take place post the removal of the rail infrastructure in line. It is not just contentious but insulting that the decision to cut the rail is in anyway justified to 'develop' our city. Cutting the rail will disadvantage the city, not just in

the short term but importantly far into the future.

In the context of ‘development’ the role of different groups supporting the intercity rail line termination should be examined. This also includes the role played by such government groups as Urban Growth (previously known as Landcom), and The Hunter Development Corporation (HDC). Especially regarding these government organisations, the institutional validity and role should be scrutinised in light of any misdoings or questionable planning decisions regarding the rail.

The controversy around Landcom buying The GPT Group landholdings in Newcastle city centre for example should be examined for wrong doing. The threatening nature of businesses disinvesting in Newcastle as an idea in and of itself, and enacted by GPT in this instance, lends itself to questionable political lobbying processes. This example and the general tone of the idea of disinvestment because of the rail infrastructure suggests a bargaining lobby power that unduly held otherwise important development back. However the leverage that these kind of suggestions could have afforded developers may be one reason that the government did go ahead with the otherwise controversial and illogically planning decision to terminate the intercity rail line.

Moreover, there are questions to be asked about types of donations, directly, indirectly or otherwise that may of been received by those involved in the government decisions to terminate the Newcastle inter city rail line. This is especially so if any form of donation or ‘gift’ can be found to have come from property developers given the strict and important laws and election funding authorities regulations about political donations.

This submission proposes that the development interests of large corporations unduly pressured and manipulated the political system. These interests have been unfairly and perhaps illegally prioritised over the current and future needs of the people of Newcastle.

The inquiry into the planning process in Newcastle and the broader Hunter region, (specifically in this case as pertaining to the decision to terminate the Newcastle rail line at Wickham) has a responsibility to arrive at an explanation that can properly justify how such a controversial and short sighted development plan was agreed upon.

It is hugely worrisome, especially in the light of the ICAC hearings that inappropriate and illegal dealings may have contributed to rushing this decision. This inquiry needs to examine decision making processes that resulted in the green light for the Newcastle intercity rail line being terminated, both for legitimacy and for corruption.