INQUIRY INTO PLANNING PROCESS IN NEWCASTLE AND THE BROADER HUNTER REGION

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SUBMISSION TO LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE PLANNING PROCESS IN NEWCASTLE AND THE BROADER HUNTER REGION

Thank you for taking the time to investigate planning processes in the Lower Hunter. The recent ICAC hearings uncovered a litany of corrupt dealings between developers and politicians, involving developers making banned donations to political candidates. One can only assume the developers made the donations with the expectation of developer friendly planning decisions from an anticipated change of government. My particular concern relates to the cutting of the railway line at Wickham, however all dubious planning decisions should be investigated.

Terms 2(a), (b), (d), and (e) of the Select Committee's terms of reference involve lifting height restrictions in the historic eastern end of the Newcastle CBD, and cutting the rail line at Wickham. It would seem that these two decisions are related and are exactly what the developers wanted. The strip of land on which the railway runs is the most valuable piece of land in Newcastle, because it, and a small piece of land in Wickham, are the only pieces of land in the inner city which are not undermined by old mine workings. Not only would be building on this land be much cheaper (no need to spend millions on grouting old mine shafts) but it can support taller buildings.

Developers have waged a long and deceptive campaign to get access to this land. Using slogans such as "Fix Our City", and claims that the railway line was a barrier between Hunter Street and the foreshore, they pushed for "revitalization" of Newcastle City centre. "Connectivity" was one of their buzzwords. Cutting the rail line was always an integral part (indeed the underlying aim) of any report on how the centre of Newcastle could and should be improved.

First up was the March 2009 Hunter Development Corporation "Newcastle City Centre Renewal Report to NSW Government". This report made 12 recommendations. The first was that the Government implement the report. Recommendations 2 and 3 were that the State and Federal Governments relocate their court facilities to a new justice precinct in Civic (this is now happening and should be completed by the end of next year), recommendation 4 was that the University of Newcastle relocate some of their faculties to the CBD (this is also underway – although the appearance of the planned building is not in keeping with surrounding buildings), and 6 of the 8 remaining recommendations (5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 11) involved cutting the railway line at Wickham. Recommendation 10 was for further planning and feasibility work on the catalyst projects and Recommendation 12 specified the number of jobs they expected to be created by the catalyst projects.

The report also provided some statistics on public transport usage, and the proportion of commuters within Newcastle and Lake Macquarie who travelled by train to get to work in Newcastle CBD but completely neglected to supply the figures for the proportion of commuters from catchment areas along the Hunter Line (in particular Maitland) who use the train to travel to work.

Furthermore the report did not take into account the number of passengers who travel by train but are not counted in passenger numbers because they are unable to purchase a ticket. There are no ticket machines at Scone, Aberdeen, Muswellbrook, Singleton, Branxton, Greta or Lochinvar Stations and the ticket offices at Muswellbrook and Singleton are not open after 5.30 p.m. As 3 of the 4 trains travelling down the Hunter Valley from these stations depart at times before or after the ticket offices are open most people travelling from these stations are not counted in the passenger numbers. From my observations travelling by train between Scone and Newcastle, this is in excess of 50 passengers per day.

Other problems with this report included

- Reference is made to the rise of regional shopping malls and escape expenditure
 to Chatswood and Sydney (page 16). Indeed the biggest competitor to GPT's
 proposed Newcastle Shopping Centre is their currently expanding Charlestown
 Square shopping mall. One wonders why they want to build in Newcastle CBD.
 There is no reason to suppose that people will return to shopping in the Hunter St
 Mall when they can go to shopping malls closer to their homes.
- Dilapidated buildings and absentee landlords lead to anti-social behaviour (page 16). While this is true, the biggest cause of anti-social behaviour has been binge drinking at the many licensed premises in the central Newcastle area. Newcastle Liquor Accord is addressing anti-social behaviour and considerable improvements have already occurred.
- Declining public transport patronage (page 16). Patronage is in fact increasing particularly on the Hunter Valley rail line. In 2009 Cityrail had recently commenced using 4 car trains between Maitland and Newcastle during peak hours. Singleton residents were, and still are, campaigning for more services to their town because many passengers have to stand all the way from Newcastle to Singleton on the trains to Scone.
- University of Newcastle sees termination of the train line as a key success factor. When has anybody from the University said this? There is no way that the university could benefit from cutting the rail line. Students are major users of the rail line. Students living in Newcastle East and Cooks Hill use the train to travel to the Callaghan campus and students on the Central and the Hunter Valley would use the train to travel to the proposed Civic Campus.
- Assessment of the transport options 1-5 (listed on pages 43-44) all of which involve retention of rail or its replacement by tram or light rail, all start with the assertion "This option reinforces the rail in the wrong place" (see pages 45-46). This is what is known in mathematics as assuming what you are trying to prove.

- If the railway line was to be built today, it would be built along a different corridor (see page 49). Given the hill in King Street between Wolfe and Bolton Streets the only alternative corridor is along Hunter Street.
- Contrary to the assertion on page 10 that the railway line is the primary geographical constraint that has caused the city to become elongated, the city is elongated because it is situated on a narrow stretch of flat land between the harbour and The Hill.
- Rail is not the preferred choice for journey to work (see page 49). This could be because there is no rail line in the proximity of a worker's residence. For example there is no rail service available to residents who live east of Lake Macquarie. A more relevant statistic for preferred commuting mode would be the proportion of workers whose residence and workplace are both within walking distance of a railway station. It is interesting to note that nowhere in the Report is there any mention of the proportion of commuters between Maitland and Newcastle who use rail to travel to work. On page 12 we're told that almost 33% of Newcastle CBD employees commute from Lake Macquarie but not the percentage who commute from Maitland and on page 29 we're told 2% of Newcastle Local Govt Area residents use rail to travel to work but not the percentage of Maitland LGA residents who use rail to travel to work. Similarly the "Attitudes Toward Redevelopment of the CBD: Survey of Residents in the Newcastle Electorate" report prepared for GPT by Hunter Valley Research Foundation in November 2008 completely avoids the issue of the proportion of commuters between Maitland and Newcastle who travel by train.
- If the rail line is cut and a new terminus built at Wickham, then the costs of running Newcastle Station will be transferred to Wickham, so the savings are not likely to be the \$5.5 million quoted in the Report as the annual operating cost of the rail line from Wickham to Newcastle (see page 51). The only savings would be maintenance of the track and maintenance of Civic and Wickham Stations.
- The total length of railway track that is proposed for removal would be no more than 10 km (taking into account that it is double track and there are 4 platforms at Newcastle Station) so any saving in maintenance costs would be minimal.
- "The future city will not be served by a terminus at Newcastle" (see page 49). Again this is assuming what you are trying to prove. The busiest station/stop of a public transport service does not have to be at either end. It can be somewhere in the middle with residents from terminus stations travelling to intermediate stations. The increasing population around Newcastle station will require the train to travel to places elsewhere in the Hunter Valley, the Central Coast and Sydney.
- There is absolutely no explanation of how the benefit figures in the tables on pages 58 and 59 have been arrived at (the highest of which is \$1.1 billion if all

proposals go ahead) let alone the \$2 billion economic benefit claimed on page 89 if the retail precinct goes ahead.

Perhaps some of this economic benefit was to come from selling land along the rail corridor? However there was no mention of this in the report. Instead the report showed an artist's impression of the green corridor frequented by pedestrians and cyclists that would replace the rail line. Complete with sculptures, at least one café and a first floor bridge connecting buildings on either side of the corridor, this land was to remain public land. And if anyone had any doubts about this they had only to look at the other illustration on page 76 which showed a 4 platform railway station on the western side of Stewart Avenue and from the eastern side of Stewart Avenue the intact railway corridor running off into the distance to Newcastle Station. The report said "high quality commercial buildings will line the corridor, while residential buildings will extend along the foreshore" (page 76) while between Foreshore Park and Scott Street the corridor would be integrated with the existing park and Newcastle Station would be converted to a conference centre with a northern wing replacing the platforms, convenient to a new cruise ship terminal. (page 77)



Artist's impression of the pedestrian and bicycle corridor to be built along the Newcastle rail corridor on page 76 of the March 2009 Hunter Development Corporation Newcastle City Centre Renewal report



Artist's impression of the intact rail corridor after removal of the rail line as shown on page 76 of the March 2009 Hunter Development Corporation Newcastle City Centre Renewal report

At least half the land to be used for the Wickham interchange now has a used car dealership built on it and the artist's impression of the interchange issued by the Department of Planning in July 2014 now shows a single ugly asymmetric awning inadequately covering two tracks with no sign of the replacement light rail service promised by the Liberal Government. (Labor premiers realized that ripping up the rail line made no sense from a public transport perspective).

Following the change of Government (March 2011), and more particularly the election of Jeff McCloy as Mayor of Newcastle (September 2012), the Hunter Business Chamber issued "Newcastle Central A real solution, right now" on 27 September 2012. A glossy concise 20 page publication with an aerial view of Newcastle taken while the Pasha Bulka was stranded on Nobbys Beach in 2007 on the front and back covers, it dealt solely with the removal of the rail line which it relabelled the "Newcastle rail spur" and described as the "heavy rail "barrier". Claiming that removal of the rail line would establish "the right type of investment climate that the Newcastle CBD desperately needs to achieve continued urban renewal" the Hunter Business Chamber called for the rail line to be removed and replaced by Bus Rapid Transport with possible staged conversion to Light Rail Transport later on.

Hunter Business Chamber continued to maintain the fiction that the rail corridor would become a pedestrian corridor, devoting a whole page to it that included the artist's impression of the pedestrian corridor from page 76 of the 2009 Hunter Development Corporation Newcastle City Centre Renewal Report of March 2009. They even suggested that if light rail was installed, the first short section should be along the rail corridor before continuing along Hunter Street – the route eventually chosen by the Government after "public consultation".

And in an attempt to give the impression that Wickham is the logical place to have the rail terminus Hunter Business Chamber renamed it Newcastle Central and argued that other cities such as Sydney (Central Station), London and Paris have their transport terminus on the edge of the city's CDB (page 10). In the case of London and Paris this is because all the land in the CBD was used before railways were invented. In the case of Sydney this was initially the case, but his was rectified in the 1920's with the building of the underground city circle that allows passengers to continue on in the same train to a destination in the centre of the city. Newcastle is fortunate in having a rail line that goes right through the CBD to the places that passengers want to travel to such as the beach, foreshore and various other entertainment and employment options. No need agonize over how to achieve integration of transport modes (discussed in detail on page 11) when a seamless travel option already exists. Newcastle rail line should be retained to save passengers the inconvenience of changing modes at Wickham.

In order to justify closure and removal of the rail line between Wickham and Newcastle the Hunter Business Chamber quoted figures from the Bureau of Transport Statistics Station Barrier Counts 2011 which show that on the sample day (chosen with the expectation that it will be a typical weekday) there were 900 passengers entering Civic station and 910 passengers leaving that station and there were 1340 passengers entering

Newcastle Station and 1340 passengers leaving that Station. In other words there were a total 1810 journeys to or from Civic Station and a total of 2680 journeys to or from Newcastle Station. Comparative figures for previous years show virtually no change over the previous two decades (page 9).

Hunter Business Chamber argues that these figures show that "patronage for this section of line is very low for a heavy railway passenger service" (page 9). Whether patronage is very low is best decided by comparing the barrier figures for Newcastle and Civic with the barrier figures for other stations on the Cityrail network. (See the Compendium of Sydney Rail Travel Statistics 8th edition at www.bts.nsw.gov.au/.../79/r2012-11-rail-compendium.pdf.aspx). These statistics show that with 1340 passengers per day Newcastle is the 141st busiest of the 307 stations on the Cityrail network. Civic was 165th and Wickham 186th busiest station. In other words if patronage is the key factor in deciding which railway stations should be closed there are 166 stations that should be closed before Newcastle is closed.

More passengers use Newcastle station than

- Any station between Schofields and Richmond inclusive
- Any station on the Carlingford line
- Any station on the South Coast line except North Wollongong and Wollongong
- Any station on the Southern Highlands line
- Any station on the Blue Mountains line except Springwood
- Any station on the Central Coast line except Woy Woy, Gosford, Tuggerah and Wyong
- Any station between Warnervale and Broadmeadow inclusive
- Any station on the Dungog line
- Any station on the Scone line

Yet nobody is suggesting that any of these stations or lines be closed.

At Wickham 510 passengers were counted using the station. So of the 2750 passengers per day on trains approaching Wickham from further inland, 18.6% want to get off at Wickham (fewer than one fifth), 32.72% want to get off at Civic (just under one third) and 48.7% (or nearly half) want to go to Newcastle. The Department of Planning traffic assessment for the planned Wickham interchange estimates that 23% or close to a quarter of these passengers for Civic and Newcastle will desert public transport if the rail line is cut at Wickham. See http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/transport-minister-gladys-berejiklian-defends-cutting-newcastle-rail-line-despite-likely-fall-in-patronage-20140819-105rud.html

The Liberal Government duly delivered on the Hunter Business Chamber's request with Planning Minister Brad Hazzard announcing on Friday 14 December 2012 that the rail line would be cut at Wickham. Mayor Jeff McCloy crowed that this was a fantastic day for Newcastle but letter writers to the "Newcastle Herald" were opposed to the decision with many sceptical that the land would remain a green corridor or that replacement public transport would be provided (to be fair it should be noted that there were a

significant number of online comments in favour of the cut). (See "Newcastle Herald" Sat 15.12.2014).

The decision to cut the rail line was announced in the context of the release of the NSW Department of Planning "Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy" report with three months allowed for submissions from the public. Tucked away on page 124, the report said

"Future uses of the rail corridor

In the short-term additional at-grade connections can be created across the corridor in strategic locations. Uses of the remaining parts of the corridor will need to be investigated, although there are opportunities for it to be landscaped in the short-term This urban renewal strategy reinforces Hunter Street's current role as the main movement corridor in the city centre to support activity and economic opportunity. Any future uses of the railway corridor will need to factor this in."

Despite this hint that the rail corridor would be sold to developers, the Government continued to insist that the land would remain in public ownership and that the promised replacement light rail system would be built. It was new Planning Minister Pru Goward who let the cat out of the bag a couple of months ago when she started talking about the types of buildings that could be built on the rail corridor.

It was put to Transport Minister Gladys Berejiklian at community meetings in Newcastle that the light rail should be built before the rail line is cut, to demonstrate that the Government is genuine when it says that light rail will be provided, but Ms Berejiklian was unable to respond coherently to this eminently sensible suggestion. Many, if not most, people in Newcastle are sceptical that the light rail will ever be built. They can foresee the Government finding that they can't afford to build it and scrapping the whole idea.

Ms Berejiklian's responses to requests for comment on Department of Planning transport projections showing that only 77% of current passengers travelling by train to Civic and Newcastle might be candidates for the post-construction shuttle bus or future light rail indicate that she realizes that cutting the rail line at Wickham is not good public transport planning policy. Insisting that she wants to increase the number of people using public transport in Newcastle she has repeatedly said that cutting the rail line is a planning decision not a transport decision and that the Department of Transport has to work with this "decision to revitalise Newcastle, of which transport is a part" See http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/transport-minister-gladys-berejiklian-defends-cutting-newcastle-rail-line-despite-likely-fall-in-patronage-20140819-105rud.html

The reasons that cutting the rail line at Wickham is a poor planning decision are manifold. (page numbers quoted below refer to the 2012 Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy unless otherwise specified)

 Rail passengers would be forced to change mode at Wickham causing inconvenience and increased journey times. According to the Hunter Development Corporation's Newcastle City Centre Renewal Report to NSW Government of March 2009, rail is the quickest means of travel between Wickham and Newcastle as shown on page 30 of that report – 4 minutes as compared to 4.75 minutes by car and 6 minutes by bus. Bus time doesn't include the time to make the connection between train and bus at Wickham for those forced to change modes.

- 71% of CBD jobs are east of Wickham (37% Civic, 27% Hunter Street Mall, and 7% Newcastle East see page 30 HDC Report of March 2009). While increasing the percentage of CBD at jobs at Wickham, by building on vacant land there, will increase the number and percentage of passengers alighting at Wickham, and will also increase total rail patronage, it will not necessarily decrease the number of people travelling to Civic and Newcastle. Indeed the current report notes that the largest concentration of employment land is towards the east end of the city, Civic and Honeysuckle precinct (page 38).
- The additional 6500 new residents and 10,000 new jobs targeted by the Newcastle City Plan (see page 15) or the 6000 new dwellings and 10,000 new jobs envisaged in the report, will require transport and rail is the most efficient form of public transport. Hopefully there will be a large overlap between the new residents and new jobs with the new residents walking or cycling to their new jobs in the city. However for those commuting to new jobs in the city from areas served by rail transport a change of mode at Wickham would be very inconvenient.
- New residents in the city will on occasion want to travel to Sydney and other
 places outside Newcastle and rail is the most efficient means of doing so. Rail is
 not just a means of getting into the city it is also a means of getting out. With all
 the apartments and student accommodation Newcastle is now an origin as well as
 a destination.
- University students attending the Civic campus of Newcastle University, particularly those living on the Central Coast and up the Hunter Valley, require public transport **all** the way to Civic by train. Some students also need to travel between the Civic and Callaghan campuses by train and indeed already do so.
- University students and staff living in the inner city use the train to travel to the university. Changing modes at Wickham would be a serious inconvenience. Increasing the number of students living in central Newcastle (see pages 109 and 115) will increase the demand for rail travel to the university.
- People using the current legal precinct can get there by public transport and will still want to travel beyond Wickham by train when the legal precinct moves to Civic. The NSW Department of Justice has a long established policy of not supplying parking for clients and so those attending the new Court House will need to use public transport. There is a multi-storey car nearby on the opposite side of the railway line but presumably it is already fully utilized. Currently Court

clients can use the Bolton Street carpark so moving the Court House will actually lead to a greater demand for public transport.

- Increased petrol prices will lead to increased use of public transport. This is already occurring in Sydney with complaints of insufficient rail capacity.
- Passenger traffic on the Hunter rail line is increasing. According to New South Wales Transport patronage increased by 20% or about 227,000 journeys between 2001 and 2011 (see http://www.railpage.com.au/f-t11370843.htm and widely reported in the media at the time). Cityrail now uses 4 car trains between Maitland and Newcastle during peak hour and Singleton residents are campaigning for more train services to their town, as many passengers have to stand all the way from Newcastle or Hamilton to Singleton on the trains to Scone.
- Rail moves the greatest number of people a given distance in the shortest period of time. Consequently it should be given priority. People need to get into the city before they can walk around it and rail does this most efficiently.
- When it comes to land use, cars are the least efficient form of transport as they take up the most space. Not only do most cars entering Newcastle CBD contain only 1 person in a vehicle 6-8 times the size of a single seat on a train or bus, but they also require braking space between them while travelling, and when they reach their destination they require parking space while their occupant(s) are in the city, whereas trains and buses continue travelling along their rights of way carrying other passengers. The more space taken up by parking, the less the area of land available for residential and business development. And in a vicious circle the more the car is used the further people live from where they work and shop (because of the amount of land devoted to roads and parking) and the greater the need for even more roads and parking. The car is the problem not the solution.
- Rail travel costs 48c per passenger kilometre including both private and public costs as compared to 57c per passenger kilometre for bus travel and 84c per passenger kilometre for car travel (Dr Garry Glazebrook, Senior Lecturer in Urban Planning, University of Technology, Sydney quoted in the "Sun-Herald" Sunday 19.4.2009 See http://newsroom.uts.edu.au/news/2009/03/motorists-arrive-last-in-new-study-of-sydney-transport-costs).
- Buses are noisier and more polluting than trains. Passenger and freight trains emit one third of the pollution emitted by cars or trucks providing the same transport service. (Brian Buckley, public policy consultant writing for/to the business pages of "The Age" 25.6.2009)
- The permeability of a grid (page 196) can be provided by bicycle, pram and wheelchair friendly ramps over the railway line. There is no need to remove the railway line in order to encourage workers from Honeysuckle to visit Hunter Street during their lunch break or after work (page 4) all that is required is

strategically placed pedestrian overbridges. Similarly there is no need to remove the railway line to give Honeysuckle workers better access to bus stops along Hunter Street.

- Newcastle already has a good rail-bus-ferry interchange at Newcastle Station.
 Rather than building a new interchange at Wickham buses should continue to pass close to Civic and Wickham stations for the convenience of those who wish to change modes at those stations.
- Removing the transport interchange at Newcastle particularly disadvantages Stockton residents who already have to use two modes of transport (ferry plus either train or bus). Those who currently change from ferry to train would be forced to use 3 modes of transport to get to where they want to go.
- There is no need to cut the railway line at Wickham in order to have cross-city bus routes to suburbs such as Merewether. These routes can simply be added to the existing public transport system.
- Trains are more wheelchair and pram friendly than buses. They can also accommodate surfboards and bicycles unlike buses.
- You can read or use social media while travelling on public transport. You can't do these things while driving a car. Time spent driving is simply wasted time.
- One of the unique features of Newcastle is the ability to travel to the beach by train and the glimpses of the harbour one gets from the train on the way there. Many young people use the train for this purpose. The logistics of surfboards on buses has not been addressed in the report.
- Rail is the quickest and easiest way to get to tourist accommodation at Civic and Newcastle East particularly for those coming from Sydney.
- Rail is the quickest and easiest way to get to waterfront entertainment venues.
- Removing the railway line also removes the train stabling facilities. There has been no thought given to where the trains would be stabled and how much disruption this would cause.
- There has been no thought given as to how the buses will get in and out of the Wickham interchange and how much disruption this will cause.
- There has also been no thought given to how many extra buses will be required.

The Government wants to see increased use of public transport while taking away the most efficient public transport option !!!!. What is worse the Government plans to spend half a billion dollars removing the rail line and possibly replacing it with

something inferior. Removing the rail line reduces the range of public transport modes and is more likely to lead to an increase in car use. It also reduces the attraction of the city centre because the centre becomes less accessible.

It doesn't require the construction of a new transport interchange at Wickham and the cutting of the rail line to Newcastle in order to support a new CBD at Wickham. All that is required is that there be places for all modes of public transport to set down and pick up passengers. This can include rail continuing on to Newcastle just as the buses continue on along Hunter Street.

Nor does it require cutting the rail line at Wickham to improve traffic flow on Stewart Avenue. It is unfortunate that when this road was built the Government at the time did not take a more farsighted approach and build an overpass. Estimates of the cost of the proposed Scone overpass range between \$65 million and \$75 million. Rectifying the Stewart Avenue "problem" by building an overpass would be far less costly than the half a billion dollars the Government plans to spend on the Wickham interchange and removing the rail line.

Proponents of cutting the rail line at Wickham have the myopic view that the rail line is in some way a barrier between Hunter Street and the foreshore. The simplest and cheapest solution is to build a series of ramped pedestrian overbridges over the railway line. Not only would these pedestrian bridges provide "connectivity" between Hunter Street and the waterfront but they would also provide better views than ground level connections. The Government proposes constructing 3 pedestrian overbridges just to the west of the proposed Wickham Interchange so why not leave the railway functioning all the way to Newcastle station with pedestrian overbridges at all points proposed for improved connectivity between Hunter Street and the waterfront? This would be a much cheaper and more desirable option than what is proposed.



Pedestrian and bicycle bridge over the canal next to Paddington railway station, London

If the Government wants buildings along the rail corridor this can be done without removing the rail line. Elsewhere in the world, such as Europe and Japan, buildings are built over the top of railway lines. There is no need for the railway line to be removed in order to have development between Hunter Street and the foreshore.

It is now clear that removing the rail line is all about providing prime development land for developers at the cheapest cost to those developers (while also providing a continued raison d'etre for the Hunter Development Corporation). It is certainly not about improving transport in inner city Newcastle. Rather than wasting half a billion dollars giving the developers what they wanted, and passengers inferior public transport services, the Government should be taking a more holistic and cost efficient approach, retaining the rail line, building pedestrian overbridges, possibly selling the air rights over the rail line, building the Stewart Avenue overpass and then having money left over to proceed with other long desired transport improvements in the Lower Hunter such as the freight rail bypass between Fassifern and Hexham, Glendale interchange, Adamstown Gates overpass, and more trains on the Hunter Valley line.

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