

**Submission
No 225**

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

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

Introduction

This submission to the committee focuses on the planned closure of the rail line from Wickham to Newcastle, which is currently intended to take effect on 26 December 2014. This closure will have a range of detrimental impacts particularly on the renewal and revitalisation of the central area of the City of Newcastle, around and near Newcastle railway station.

Effects of the railway closure – loss of public transport patronage

The principal result of the closure will be to make it more difficult for people to reach the centre of Newcastle by public transport, from the suburbs or from further away. Those coming by train either from the south – from Sydney or many intermediate points, or from Maitland or beyond – will be forced to disembark at Wickham and seek alternative transport to Civic or the city. Initially this transport will be by bus; later by light rail if current proposals go ahead. This transfer between modes will add to journey times; it will be inconvenient for those with luggage.

This forced transfer from one mode to another will act as a deterrent to people seeking to come into the central city area by rail. They will make fewer visits; they will seek to work or shop or study elsewhere, where access by public transport is easier. Some of those who now come by train will seek to bring their cars into the city, adding to traffic congestion and increasing pressure on parking. None of these outcomes is desirable and all of them will have a negative impact on the city.

The closure of the railway is expected to reduce the use of public transport to reach the city by 23%. See the *Sydney Morning Herald* report dated 20 August 2014, at <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/transport-minister-gladys-berejiklian-defends-cutting-newcastle-rail-line-despite-likely-fall-in-patronage-20140819-105rud.html>

According to a report quoted in this news item:

“The traffic assessment for the Wickham interchange asserts that the number of people catching public transport into Newcastle would drop because the trip will take longer after the train line is cut.

“It is estimated that about 77 per cent of the total daily train passengers might be potential customers for the post-construction shuttle bus or the future light rail,” the assessment says.

It is hard to imagine a business – or a government enterprise – which would adopt a policy which will reduce its patronage by 23%, with a corresponding reduction in revenue.

The University of Newcastle

An institution which will be materially disadvantaged by the closure of the railway is the University of Newcastle.

The university draws on the advantages of the location of its Civic campus. According to its website:

The University of Newcastle plays an important part in the renewed sense of vibrancy in the Newcastle CBD and our Newcastle City Campus is very much at the centre of the city's burgeoning arts scene.

Our wonderful Conservatorium of Music (part of the School of Creative Arts) is located in the Civic Centre precinct. Its premier Concert Hall is a much-loved performance venue for local, interstate and international artists.

Also in our city campus are the Newcastle Legal Centre and Newcastle Graduate School of Business which are located in University House, a landmark art-deco sandstone building directly opposite Civic Park.

Our city presence provides opportunities for us to strengthen our relations with the business community and increases the number of opportunities for our students to integrate their studies with work placements.

Closure of the railway will impede access to the university's city campus, about whose location it is so positive and enthusiastic, as it will to other institutions, shops and offices in the central city area.

The pressures for closure

There is little doubt that the main pressure for closure has come from developers, who see an opportunity to profit from development of the rail corridor. This topic - the supposed benefits from redevelopment of the land occupied by the rail line - has been aired in the media over many years.

The question should be asked: are these the developers who have been identified by ICAC as the source of illegal political donations?

Former Newcastle Lord Mayor Jeff McCloy, forced to resign in August 2014 following ICAC revelations, was a strong supporter of closing the railway. A report in the *Newcastle Herald* on 12 February 2013 was headlined "McCloy says rail must go". See <http://www.theherald.com.au/story/1297484/mccloy-says-rail-must-go/>

The news item stated:

Newcastle's "dying" centre could be revived in less than five years if the rail line and "dingo fence" separating the city and harbour were removed quickly to allow private enterprise to flourish, lord mayor Jeff McCloy told business leaders on Tuesday.

It must be concluded that at the very least, the motives of those advocating closure of the railway are open to serious questioning.

It is claimed that the railway line forms a barrier between the city and the foreshore, and that traffic crossing the line at level crossings is excessively delayed by warning lights and boom barriers when a train passes. Such claims are spurious. There are multiple crossing points along the railway, and more could be created by the building of overpasses, if necessary. And delays at crossings are no worse than the delays which every road user experiences at traffic lights at a myriad of intersections. Time spent waiting for a train to pass is no different from time spent waiting for road traffic at an intersection.

An unwelcome distinction

So far as is known, no other city in the world is currently planning to cut back a rail line into its centre. World-wide, the importance is recognised of high quality rail transport in providing access to the heart of cities. For inter-city travel or for longer journeys from suburbs, this means heavy rail. Introducing a change of vehicle represents a reduction in quality, impeding and discouraging access. In taking this planned step, Newcastle is unique in the world – not a record of which it would be proud. It should be recognised too that urban land use can change significantly over time. Urban redevelopment in the vicinity of the existing Newcastle station could lead to a significantly higher residential population in the area. These people would appreciate – even demand – better transport to Sydney and elsewhere than would be provided by a bus service to a more distant rail terminus.

Auckland - a case study

The experience of Auckland, and the actions taken there, are an interesting case study. In the distant past, the railway station was established close to the centre of the city and its waterfront, near the foot of Queen Street, the city's most important street and its main commercial thoroughfare.

The area suffered a decline and in 1930 the railway was cut back to Beach Road, more than a kilometre away. The station was redeveloped as a bus terminal, and later Auckland's first parking building was opened next to it. In the following years the area suffered from lack of investment and increasing decay, and for 30 years much of it lay derelict and forgotten.

In the early 2000s the reopening of the railway and the redevelopment of the former station became Auckland's largest-ever transport project. The new centre was given the original

name of the area, Britomart. The station was restored and reopened in 2003, to bring rail access closer to the city's CBD and help boost Auckland's usage of public transport.

Obviously, the experience and actions of Auckland are in contrast to what is now proposed for Newcastle. Auckland recognised the role played by rail access in revitalising the city.

More information is at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Britomart_Transport_Centre

Light rail for Newcastle

This submission does not oppose the introduction of light rail or trams in Newcastle. Consideration of heavy rail and light rail should not be on the basis of adopting one or the other; as in many cities worldwide, both could play significant roles.

From 1923 to 1950, electric trams were an important part of Newcastle's transport. Their reintroduction could see them adding to mobility by providing an attractive and accessible form of street transport in inner areas.

The need for an Act of Parliament to close the railway

It should be remembered that a railway in New South Wales cannot be closed except by an Act of Parliament. No such act has been passed since the 1960s. Since then many rail lines in the state – country branch lines – have had their services withdrawn, but they have not been legally closed. Importantly the rails and sleepers cannot be removed without closure by way of an Act of Parliament. As a result, the many 'closed' railway lines throughout country New South Wales remain intact but in a derelict state.

While the government can withdraw train services into Newcastle, it cannot remove the rail track without the passage of an Act.

Conclusion

The committee is urged to consider the points made in this submission and to recommend that the railway into Newcastle should remain open.

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This submission is made by Dale Budd,

24 October 2014