

**Submission
No 217**

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

Name: Mr Peter Newey

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ENQUIRY INTO NEWCASTLE PLANNING

SUBMISSION: by Peter Newey,

RE: decision to terminate Newcastle rail line at Wickham and proposal to construct light rail along Hunter Street...

I believe the government is being too hasty with decision to terminate train services between Hamilton and Newcastle on 26th December as first stage of “revitalization” plans for Newcastle’s CBD. There is number of problems that need addressing to prevent “revitalization” becoming monumental disaster.

I believe the government is aiming to have rail-line infrastructure between Wickham and Newcatle removed before next state election to ensure rail corridor available for major redevelopment and prevent train services into Newcastle being restored if election results in change of government.

When government first announced decision to close inner-city rail-line, it said that rail corridor would be preserved as “open space”. Later the Minister for Transport (also Minister for Hunter) declared that parts of corridor could be made available for “low-rise” development. In my view this is “thin edge of wedge” for full-scale high-rise development as corridor land the only part of inner city area not affected by old underground mine workings.

I believe the decision to close inner-city rail-line been motivated by GPT as partner with Urban Growth NSW on “revitalizion” project. When previous government in office, GPT’s plans for \$600million redevelopment of Hunter Street Mall precinct were conditional on rail-line being removed. GPT ended up “walking away” from this project after then government kept “hesitating” about agreeing to this condition.

I view partnership between high-profile private developer and government department as “conflict of interest” for government in its role as planning authority for major development projects. I believe this partnership should be thoroughly investigated to ensure all its activities are legal and proper.

Minister for Transport has claimed “vast majority” of people want inner-city rail-line removed. Yet newspaper polls have shown that 60% of *Newcastle Herald* readers and 88% of *Maitland Mercury* readers want rail-line retained.

“Official” reason for wanting to terminate trains at Wickham that rail-line a “barrier” to direct access between Newcastle CBD and Harbour Foreshore. In my view, real reason is that rail corridor been “earmarked” for redevelopment with high-rise buildings etc.

With former Newcastle MLA Tim Owen among several MPs “caught out” at ICAC enquiry into illegal political-party donations, its findings could have implications for government’s “revitalization” plans for Newcastle. Mr Owen was staunch advocate for inner-city rail-line to be removed, also high-rise “towers” in Hunter Street Mall (which would ruin precinct’s unique heritage and character). Hence, it’s essential that work on these projects be placed “on hold” until government receives reports from ICAC enquiry into political donations and Select Committee enquiry into “Newcastle Planning”.

During August several “information sessions” held in Newcastle regarding “environmental factors” for new Wickham Transport Interchange, with copies of 12-page “summary” distributed. Its “next steps” conclusion includes statement that Transport NSW would consider issues in submissions made by people at information sessions then determine “whether to proceed with proposal”. Has Transport NSW done this? If not, then terminating trains at Hamilton (scheduled for 26th December) should be postponed until such “determination” been made.

Surely government must realize difficulty and inconvenience facing train travellers (especially those with strollers, surfboards or luggage) as change to “shuttle” buses just 2km short of their destination (Newcastle). Will it be possible for people with bicycles to carry them on these buses?

Shutting down inner-city rail-line would be akin to closing Sydney’s “city-circle” rail network and terminating suburban, intercity and country trains at Redfern. Imagine the huge uproar if government tried to do that.

Wickham Interchange will have only three platforms compared to four at Newcastle Station, with no room for expansion unless nearby properties resumed. "Drop-off" zones in Station St (to be narrowed for third platform) for taxis and private cars too small, with access from Stewart Ave by narrow lane, so that queues could extend out onto Stewart Ave (busy thoroughfare) and cause problem for "shuttle" buses stopping/waiting outside Interchange. People wishing to catch suburban bus services would need to walk several hundred metres to stop in Hunter St, with no weather protection along way.

At Newcastle Station, buses able to set down immediately outside and pick up directly opposite. Study of plans for Wickham Interchange show would be impossible to offer similar services there. Furthermore, at information session learnt that regional and interstate coach services would continue to arrive/depart from near Newcastle Station. This means that people arriving on trains from Sydney and Hunter Valley would need to change at Wickham for last 2km into Newcastle to access these coach services.

I can see huge problems occurring with "temporary" terminus at Hamilton. Level crossing on busy thoroughfare along narrow street at western end of station bound to cause so much traffic congestion, especially with "shuttle" buses stopping constantly either side, that crossing may have to be closed, or Sydney trains terminated at Broadmeadow, or perhaps Hamilton Station closed altogether with Hunter Valley trains diverted to Broadmeadow as well.

Terms of reference for this enquiry describe planned light-rail as "proposal". Does this mean possibility it may never eventuate?

I'm very concerned that work on light-rail not scheduled to start till at least late next year. As this expected to take up to two years to complete, train travellers face having to "put up with" shuttle-bus services for three or four years (until light-rail service ready for use). How can government honestly expect people to tolerate spending much more time over such long period to travel just 2km between Wickham and Newcastle than would take on train? This certainly wouldn't be fulfilling government's much-vaunted promise of "seamless connections".

To me it seems obvious that to achieve “seamless connections” from one mode of transport to another, work on light-rail and Wickham Interchange should be done simultaneously so both ready for use at same time.

Quite frankly, I believe government deliberately delaying work on light-rail with hope that “shuttle” bus service proves so “satisfactory” that can abandon light-rail project and use allocated funds for other purposes. In my view, if light-rail built, it will prove “white elephant” (like Sydney monorail). Funds for this could be better spent on replacing level crossings at Stewart Ave Wickham and Glebe Rd Adamstown with underpasses, and improving woefully inadequate bus services in Newcastle and Lake Macquarie areas.

If light-rail installed, why have it along Hunter St? Wouldn't it be more practical and far less costly to use present rail corridor? Having light-rail in Hunter St may be good for retailers etc, but what about all the people living and working along Wharf Rd and Honeysuckle Dr on other side of rail-line? Having light-rail along corridor would cater for these people too. Consider also how light-rail in Hunter St would greatly increase traffic congestion.

Trains recognized as best means of transport for moving large numbers of people quickly from point to point. With so many multi-storey residential apartment blocks being built in inner-city area, also thousands of students attending city campus of Newcastle University when it opens, it's imperative that trains allowed to continue running right into Newcastle.

If government insists on “truncating” Newcastle rail-line, wouldn't it be more practical and far less costly to make Broadmeadow the terminus for all trains from Sydney and Hunter Valley, and use rail-line between Broadmeadow and Newcastle for light-rail service?

I think government will end up doing this anyway, as bound to strike too many problems when starts detailed planning for Wickham Interchange etc.

Train services into Newcastle have worked well for 150 years. Why replace with something inferior that would drive people away from public transport?