



David Shoebridge MLC
Member of the NSW Legislative Council

The Greens NSW
Submission
19 April 2013

Greens NSW Submission

RE: Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy

Department of Planning & Infrastructure
GPO Box 39
SYDNEY NSW 2001
urbanrenewal@planning.nsw.gov.au

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy 2012.

This strategy presents a unique opportunity to plan for the future of the second biggest city in NSW. The right strategy can allow Newcastle to flourish as a vibrant and sustainable, walkable and liveable city. Sadly this strategy does not provide such a plan.

The primary concern the Greens NSW and many community members share about this proposal is the plan to cut the rail line at Wickham.

It is a cause for concern that the Government has announced this strategy for consultation, whilst also giving the impression that they intend to push forward with their plans, regardless of community opposition.

A renewal whose most notable feature is the removal of public transport infrastructure and the shuffling around of public services does not satisfy the longer term needs to plan for the growth and sustainability of Newcastle.

For many in the Newcastle community these flaws are so serious that they conclusively compromise the renewal strategy and require a complete overhaul of this proposal. This position is also maintained by the Greens NSW.

Please do not hesitate to contact my office at david.shoebridge@parliament.nsw.gov.au or (02) 9230 3030 if you have any questions regarding this submission or require further information.

Regards,

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David Shoebridge
Greens NSW MP



Cutting the rail line at Wickham

The proposal to cut the rail line that currently goes to the centre of Newcastle and create a new Transport Interchange at Wickham is unacceptable to both the community of Newcastle, and to those who might visit it. Changing from trains to buses to access the city will add time and cost to many journeys, and provide an incentive to avoid the centre of Newcastle. It will also provide additional access difficulties for the disabled, elderly people and children.

As has been repeatedly said to my office “no one wants to take the train almost to Newcastle”. As a basis for a strategy that is intended to facilitate the renewal of Newcastle this proposal is short sighted and must be reconsidered. Cutting the rail line removes current direct links to Maitland, the Central Coast through Gosford, all the way to Sydney.

None of the development proposed requires the removal of the railway line and its removal as part of this plan is considered highly suspect by many in the community. In fact, the renewal strategy has all the appearance of a scheme designed initially with the railway line intact, which at a later point has then been used in a slipshod fashion, to justify a long-standing position of both this and the former government to remove passenger rail services to central Newcastle.

Heritage concerns

Newcastle Station is listed on the NSW State Heritage Register, with the following significance statement:

Newcastle Railway Station has State heritage significance. The site has historical associations with the Great Northern Railway as its second terminus, built in 1859, only one year after the line was opened. As such it is one of the longest continually used railway sites in NSW, although there is no remaining fabric from that early period on the site. Newcastle was the headquarters of the physically separated northern rail system until the construction of the Hawkesbury River bridge in 1889.

The substantial first floor office space provided in the 1878 station building provides tangible evidence of this important administrative arrangement and its separation from Sydney, even after the Sydney to Newcastle rail link was completed. The ornate architectural style and fine detailing of the Newcastle Station building remains a tangible reminder of an age of prosperity and confidence in the NSW rail system and the strategic importance of the station within the northern region of the state. Newcastle Station played a vital role in the economic and industrial development of the Hunter region from the 1850s to the late twentieth century as an interchange point between land and sea for the passage of primary goods such as coal, timber, wheat and livestock.

The movement of the terminus of the Great Northern Railway to the current site in 1858 influenced the development of Newcastle's urban and trade centre throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as it clustered around the station and the land



and sea interface. The station has also been a focus for major social events throughout its life including acting as a major departure point for troops during the first and second world wars, when substantial temporary platforms and loading ramps were constructed. The Newcastle Station building is an example of Victorian Italianate architecture used for larger stations in NSW in the 1870s and 1880s.

The two-storey construction is unusual and adds to the imposing presence of the station as the terminus to the Great Northern Railway and the Newcastle to Sydney railway line. Despite some alterations and modern additions, the station is still able to evoke a grander age of rail travel though the grouping of the 1878 station building, platforms and nearby railway hotels and staff accommodation (privately owned). Visually, the station is an important element in the Victorian city centre of Newcastle, which developed around the railway precinct. Newcastle Signal Box was built in 1936 and is in highly intact, original condition. It was the only Type O signal box provided with a electro-pneumatic miniature lever power interlocking machine - a major technical innovation at the time of construction and a reflection of the box's importance in what was at the time one of the State's busiest railway precincts.

The grouping of the station building with the multiple platforms, signal box, the remains of the adjacent gas works, railway accommodation (hotel and staff housing) and archaeological remains of the former goods yard and loading docks form an outstanding railway precinct that is rare in NSW due to its urban setting and its context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century city centre of Newcastle. The Newcastle Railway Station Group also provides rare remaining evidence of the nineteenth century operation of the Great North Railway, which was the first railway line in NSW. The interior of the Signal Box in particular is highly intact and is able to demonstrate clearly the aesthetic qualities of a 1930s signal box and its operation. Newcastle Station was the only regional station to have a silver service dining room for passengers (Central was the only other station in the state to have one) and the spaces for the dining room and upstairs kitchen, including dumb waiter, are still discernible.¹

Given the significance of the railway station, and the fact that a key part of its heritage value lies in its continuous use as a railway station, it is extraordinary that the Government is intending to terminate this use without even obtaining a Heritage Impact Statement.

The failure to obtain a Heritage Impact Statement of the railway station is emblematic of the failure to properly test through either an environmental impact statement or an alternative options paper the real impact of this proposal as against other viable options to assist in the renewal of Newcastle.

The failure to produce an Environmental Impact Statement and community studies examining the impact of such a proposed change with a view to justifying the decision is a further substantial

¹ <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=4801028>



omission. In this regard it is notable that the strategy does not include any consideration of the impact of the various alternative options for development which involve the retention of the existing railway line.

Positive alternatives to the current plan

The alternative option that should be considered is the maintenance of the existing railway and heritage stations servicing central Newcastle, together with improved access to Wickham, Civic and Newcastle Stations. It is understood that such a move would be consistent with recommendations from Transport for NSW and other internal Government referrals.

In addition to improved access to the stations, greater access to the waterfront could be readily, and cheaply, achieved by the installation of additional pedestrian bridges and the level crossings. In particular, level crossings provide pedestrian friendly and economic measures for connecting the waterfront to the balance of the city. There would appear to be unjustified opposition to further level crossings based on overzealous safety concerns. A closer examination of the safety issues surrounding pedestrian level crossings of the feasibility of additional level crossings is called for given the fact that the railway line has significantly fewer traffic movements and a shorter distance to cross than most main roads.

Impact of removal of rail on existing traffic networks

Increasing the difficulty of accessing Newcastle by public transport will inevitably drive existing and future public transport users towards private motor vehicles. This will not only increase the number of vehicle movements on the already congested Hunter road network, it will, as has been predicted in existing traffic studies for Newcastle, produce traffic gridlock in the city centre by 2016. This cannot be the Government's genuine intention.

The loss of public transport is even more important when considering density increases in the centre of Newcastle. Increased private car use will aggravate the existing parking shortage in the Newcastle CBD. Parking in Newcastle will always be difficult at least in part due to the geography of the city. New residents will require high quality public transport that truly connects them with the rest of the surrounding area, and indeed the State. Heavy rail from Newcastle to Sydney must be maintained for this, and consideration given to further development of train and light rail options connecting the heart of Newcastle to the suburbs and surrounding region. For these reasons any truly forward looking plan to renew Newcastle cannot afford to increase the reliance on private cars for access.

Other considerations

The Domain and Old Town of Newcastle must be protected as part of any renewal strategy – the crucial heritage values of these places being a particularly priority. With this in mind there are some concerns about the suggested height limits for this area, and the impact that they will have on views.



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If the harbour is to be opened up to the city, it is essential that there is adequate provision of appealing public spaces that can be accessed. With this in mind, the renewal strategy should include consideration of the removal of the open car parks from the foreshore between Wickham and Civic.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission and look forward to positive changes to the strategy as a result of the public consultation.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Shoebridge', written in a cursive style.

David Shoebridge
Greens NSW MP and Planning Spokesperson