

## NEWCASTLE LIGHT RAIL

### SUBMISSION by Peter Newey

**NOTE:** This writer doesn't have a car so is totally dependent on public transport.

If the light-rail is to be installed along Hunter St instead of the now vacant heavy-rail corridor, this will be a recipe for disaster and "drive a stake through the heart of Newcastle". Unless it is extended into the suburbs right now instead of some time in the future, it will be just a white elephant like the former monorail in Sydney's CBD.

The Newcastle City Council is against the light-rail being in Hunter St, the Hunter Business Chamber is against it, and several community groups (like Newcastle Inner City Residents Alliance and Hunter Concerned Citizens) are against it. Even the former lord mayor Jeff McCloy, who was among those who had agitated for the light-rail to be in Hunter St, has changed his mind since seeing the details on how it would be constructed and operated. The *Newcastle Herald* is now "having reservations" after being an enthusiastic supporter of the light-rail project.

These are all locals who are in a better position than a Sydney-based government to determine what's best for Newcastle.

If the government persists in having the light-rail in Hunter St, this would be its second great big blunder with the drastic changes it's making to supposedly improve and modernize Newcastle's public transport with "seamless connectivity" as part of a grandiose "revitalization" plan for the inner-city area.

The first big blunder was "truncating" Newcastle train services 18 months ago and making Hamilton the terminus till a new transport "interchange" is built at Wickham.

How can the government claim that forcing commuters on Newcastle-bound trains to board a "shuttle" bus for the last 4-km of their journey is an "improvement" in public transport? This change is very inconvenient and completely unnecessary. It fails to take into account the special difficulties facing mothers with strollers, tourists with heavy luggage, beachgoers with surfboards and people in wheelchairs. Anyone with a bicycle is not allowed on the shuttle bus.

As a result, the number of people using the "Newcastle" train service has been reported as falling by 50%. There's also been a noticeable increase in motor traffic within the inner-city area.

The impact of closing the inner-city train-line would be similar to the government deciding to remove Sydney's "city-circle" rail-line and terminate all trains at Redfern. Imagine the chaos this would cause for city-bound commuters.

Regarding the location of Newcastle's light-rail, it seems incredible that the government's original intention was to use the heavy-rail corridor all the way to the former Newcastle train station. Reasons for this were outlined in a cabinet minute dated 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013. They included:

- Would lead to "space constraints" and "impact on key urban renewal initiatives".
- Travel times for cars and light-rail alike would be longer than if light-rail continued along rail corridor. Removal of car-parking spaces, loading zones and taxi ranks would "impact businesses on ongoing basis".
- Combined corridor-street option would have "higher costs (\$100million more), greater delivery risks and greater impacts on businesses during construction" than only using available rail corridor.

With the rail corridor running parallel with Hunter and Scott streets, and only a few metres apart, wouldn't it make sense to use the corridor? This would greatly reduce construction costs. It would also be free from traffic and safer for "tram" commuters to board and alight.

Another important consideration is the rapidly growing number of people living and working along Wharf Rd and Honeysuckle Dr. Aren't they just as entitled to easy access to the light-rail service as the shoppers and retailers along Hunter St?

Now, when the government announced its decision three years ago to "truncate" Newcastle's inner-city train-line, it gave a "guarantee" that the rail corridor would be retained as "public open space". Later on we hear that parts of the corridor could be made available for "low-scale" development such as restaurants and coffee bars. Finally we're told that the corridor would be opened up for "property development".

This raises the question: is the government's "change of mind" on shifting the light-rail from the corridor to Hunter St linked to its "Revitalizing Newcastle" project?

The "revitalization" is a joint venture between a government agency UrbanGrowth NSW and a private developer GPT. Artist's impressions accompanying the "four options" (placed on exhibition last year for public comment) for future uses of the rail corridor show buildings erected on the rail-line near the Newcastle train station.

It should be noted here that a few years before this partnership was formed, GPT unveiled an impressive \$600-million redevelopment of the Hunter St "mall" precinct. This huge project was abandoned when the then government refused to comply with GPT's demand for the inner-city train-line to be closed because it was considered to be a "barrier" preventing shoppers and residents within the redevelopment area from having direct access to the harbour foreshore parklands.

If developers want to erect apartment buildings etc on the rail corridor land, why can't they do so above the rail-line, as has already been done at the Hurstville and Kogarah train stations in Sydney? This would have allowed the trains to continue running right into Newcastle Station.

Having a light-rail service of just 2½-km from the Wickham "interchange" (yet to be built) to Pacific Park seems to be incredibly short compared to Sydney's light-rail lines.

The Dulwich Hill line is 13km, the new South-East system (under construction) will be 12km, and the new Parramatta system (currently being planned) will be 22km. The new "G-link" light-rail line on the Gold Coast is 13km.

The government says that Newcastle's light-rail will cost \$460-million.

This seems to be extraordinarily expensive compared to an estimated \$420-million for building a 7-km extension of the Gold Coast's G-link. The French city of Tours paid only \$650-million for their light-rail line of 15-km.

The government has estimated that Newcastle's light-rail service will have 2000 commuters a day. What a pitiful number compared to the patronage of light-rail services in French cities with a similar population to Newcastle.

Angers (12km) has 37,000 a day, Dijon (20km) has 36,000, Orleans (29km) has 42,000, and Tours (15km) has 55,000. Since the Gold Coast's light-rail opened two years ago, the use of public transport there has increased by 25%.

Even an executive from Keolis Downer (one of five companies short-listed by the government for constructing Newcastle's light-rail) has been reported as "not completely convinced" that the present plan is the right one. He believes that it's too short and too expensive. He says that Newcastle needs a total transport solution with a world-class light-rail and bus system that people want to use.

As already mentioned, the government's stated aim is to improve and modernize Newcastle's public transport.

Before Newcastle-bound trains were terminated at Hamilton, the running time between these two stations was 6-min. The shuttle bus now used takes 12-min. From Wickham trains took just 4-min to reach Newcastle. Buses take 9-min between these two points.

The new "tram" is expected to take 17-min to travel from Wickham to Newcastle. This would be twice as slow as a bus and four times slower than a train. Can this be claimed as an "improvement" to Newcastle's public transport?

Now, if the light-rail went along the rail corridor, the journey could be done in half the projected time because it would have a traffic-free run all the way.

Let's look at the problems that having the light-rail along Hunter St will create.

By having "segregated" lines, motor traffic in Hunter St will be confined to one lane in each direction. This will necessitate the removal of 280 car-parking spaces and the relocation of loading zones. The latter would cause much inconvenience to retailers.

The government claims that separating the light-rail from motor traffic instead of having "mixed" running along Hunter St is the most appropriate solution for safety reasons and operational efficiency, also for minimizing disruptions for light-rail commuters and motorists.

Why is it necessary to have the rail tracks 100mm above the road surface instead of being flush with it? Is the government trying to "cut corners" by using an easier less-costly method for laying the rail tracks?

This could pose a safety issue for passengers having to cross the rail tracks to reach the centrally placed stopping zones at Crown St and Market St. It would also be bumpy for motorists crossing the rail tracks while entering or leaving side streets.

It's interesting to note here that Sydney's first tramway along Pitt St in 1861 was built with raised rail tracks like a train line. This caused so many problems for horse-drawn vehicles that the line had to be removed five years later.

One reason for closing the inner-city rail-line was the frequent holdup of motor traffic at the Stewart Ave level crossing.

A map of the light-rail route shows the "tram" starting from beside the Wickham transport "interchange" and crossing Stewart Ave to follow a short section of the old rail-line. How will motor traffic be controlled to allow the "tram" to cross Stewart Ave (a busy "through" road)?

As "trams" are scheduled to run at 10-min intervals each way, this means that motor traffic will be stopped on an average of every 5-min for the "tram" to pass.

Wouldn't this be just as bad as when the trains were running?

Incidentally, the Northumberland County Plan of 1952 envisaged Stewart Ave (then ending at Hunter St) being extended via a bridge over the rail-line to connect with Hannell St. That bridge was never built.

Besides the Stewart Ave crossing, motorists face a similar problem where the light-rail diverts from the rail corridor through Worth Place to enter Hunter St.

It's all very well for the government to declare that it wants people out of their cars and onto public transport. However, with the light-rail causing even more traffic congestion and parking problems, this will keep people as well as cars out of the inner-city area. They'll simply go to the major suburban shopping centres like Kotara, Charlestown and Glendale that are closer to their homes.

Will that achieve the government's hoped-for "revitalization" of Newcastle's CBD?

Newcastle's CBD is located on a narrow "peninsula" with the ocean on one side and the harbour on the other. This means that all traffic entering the CBD must leave the same way, and there are only three roads available.

Hunter St as the main thoroughfare is wide. Wharf Rd and Honeysuckle Dr are narrow, with the Honeysuckle Dr section containing tight bends and really small roundabouts that are hard for large vehicles like buses to negotiate. King St is also narrow from Pacific St to Union St where it becomes a divided road.

Now, if the light-rail is located in Hunter St instead of along the rail corridor, this would create immense problems for emergency vehicles in the event of a major catastrophe like the 1989 earthquake or the 2007 and 2015 "super" storms. This could place people's lives at risk when rescue workers and ambulance officers are hampered in their efforts to reach these people.

For similar reasons, the construction and operation of the light-rail line along Hunter and Scott streets will cause major disruptions for traffic in the inner-city area.

A foretaste of this occurred a few weeks ago when the centre of Hunter St was used by two large cranes to lift a 100-tonne "module" into place on the University of Newcastle's new city campus under construction. Traffic was slowed to a crawl as it was reduced to one lane in each direction. With the closure of Auckland St that runs along the western side of the university building, there were major disruptions to traffic in King St as well.

This writer experienced this while travelling into "town" on a bus in mid-morning (well after the "peak" period). It took the bus 20-min to travel just over 1-km from the old "Store" building at Wickham to Merewether St opposite the Civic Theatre.

Construction of the light-rail line is expected to take two years. This will involve the relocation of service utilities like power, water and gas underneath the roadway.

Retailers along Hunter St are very worried about the likely impact this will have on their businesses (also when the service is in operation), due to the removal of car-parking spaces plus loading zones in front of their premises. Some are already

considering relocating elsewhere, and a group is organizing a “class action” to sue the government if their businesses incur losses caused by the light-rail project.

A government pamphlet about the future of public transport in Newcastle shows a “concept” map of possible light-rail extensions to destinations such as Mayfield and Broadmeadow, with further extensions to Warabrook and Hunter Stadium. There’s also a branch line along Brunner Rd to Adamstown that ends on a bend at Olney Rd instead of continuing another 300m to the old tram terminus in the shopping centre.

Another “concept” map shows possible “long-distance” extensions to the Airport (25km) and Glendale (15km) where a transport interchange is being built in stages. The accompanying text doesn’t seem to offer much hope of these eventuating.

Unsurprisingly, Newcastle people want to know when at least the shorter extensions will be built. All the government has said so far is that the design, funding and construction of these extensions will be “up to future governments”. Does this mean “not in our time” or perhaps “never”? Meanwhile, the 2½-km light-rail in the city is destined to become a very expensive “novelty” that few people would want to use.

Recently a delegation made a study tour of light-rail networks in four French cities with a similar population to Newcastle. *Newcastle Herald* journalist Ian Kirkwood was invited to join them. What they experienced was a level of sophistication and integration that was “on another planet” compared to what’s available in NSW.

Here are the main points from Mr Kirkwood’s insightful series of reports and articles in the *Newcastle Herald*:

- Keolis (a French transport company) “thinks like a passenger” when designing and constructing light-rail and other transport networks.
- Public transport works best when the authorities (usually city councils) work closely with the operator to design and build an integrated multi-modal transport network that greatly improves the liveability of cities. Light-rail provides the spine of the system to give people a quick, reliable and affordable service.
- French politicians believe in public transport and accept the fact that fares can only recoup up to a third of the cost. Hence they are prepared to use taxpayers’ money to subsidize public transport services. This is in direct contrast to Australia where the trend is to reduce the cost to taxpayers by shifting it to “user pays”.

- French transport authorities appear to think in time scales that are far beyond the Australian focus on the next election.
- French transport doesn't have peak and off-peak services. The aim is for a more predictable and frequent service across the entire daily operating period, thus encouraging people to use public transport instead of their cars. Light-rail services are so frequent (sometimes every 5-min) that commuters don't need timetables.
  - Shopkeepers directly affected by the impacts of light-rail construction receive cash compensation.
  - Segregated running is used where possible to avoid traffic congestion. If the rail corridor was used instead of Hunter St, this would minimize the disruption to traffic and businesses during both construction and operation.
  - Installing light-rail services in French cities has seen increases of up to 40% in the patronage of public transport.

Now for Mr Kirkwood's views on the light-rail to be built in Newcastle:

- Light-rail in Newcastle has potential but the present plan for just 2½km of line has little chance of success. It can't be regarded as a serious transport system.
- The light-rail line certainly needs extending if it is to have a wider regional impact and give the city the chance of a real and dramatic change. It will need to be accompanied by a massive overhaul of the city's bus routes.
- Will our government give Transport for Newcastle the autonomy and funding needed to ensure its decisions are in the Hunter's interest and not Sydney's?
- There's a strong feeling that the transport companies interested in building the light-rail have been telling the government "quietly" that buses are a better solution for Newcastle.
- We could be left with two options: a light-rail to nowhere or a truncated train-line with nothing to replace it.

Among other comments in the *Newcastle Herald* is this one from an American academic Dr Bill Herbel who has been at the University of Newcastle for 25 years. In his home town of Baltimore there is a light-rail network of three lines totalling 30km that carries 28,000 commuters daily.

Dr Herbel says that Newcastle has a "dreadful" public transport system despite an ever-growing need for it. The plan for a "token" light-rail line is "too little, too late" and destined for failure. The reason that Newcastle doesn't have a proper public transport system is because our politicians believe that its citizens are too poor, too ignorant and too apathetic to do anything about it.

Another regarded the light-rail as a “comedy of errors”, and said that the people of Newcastle would be paying a “very very sorry price” if this goes ahead.

The Hunter Business Chamber has called on the government to delay the start of construction on the light-rail until it has addressed a number of concerns and does more scrutiny of its safety and governance, also the impact on business and traffic. The chamber says that the government’s Review of Environmental Factors is “deficient in a number of areas”

The Newcastle city council recently compared the relative merits of having the light-rail in either the rail corridor or Hunter St using 35 criteria. The rail corridor was found to be the better option.

The Report of Independent Experts contained a similar verdict. It failed the Hunter-Scott street proposal on seven out of nine criteria. It said that 2½km of inner-city track using small inner-city trams was not enough for a viable light-rail network. Those trams wouldn’t be suitable for extensions to suburbs and regions.

Recently the government announced that all public transport in Newcastle, including the new light-rail service, would be privatized and controlled by one company.

This mightn’t be such a bad thing. Over a number of years the bus services have become a shambles, thanks to discontinuing or amalgamating routes and reducing frequencies from 30-min to an hour. The present routes meander so that someone wanting to travel from A to B is taken on a “Cooks Tour” through X, Y and Z as well.

Here’s an example of what can happen when buses are run at hourly intervals.

A person living in the suburbs has a medical appointment in town. That person has the choice of arriving 50-min early or 10-min late. The appointment ends 5-min after the bus home has gone so the person has to wait nearly an hour for the next bus. That person spends nearly half a day to do something taking just a few minutes.

No wonder the people of Newcastle have abandoned public transport. The only commuters these days are students and pensioners (on concession fares) and anyone who doesn’t have a car.

If services were made more direct and frequent (30-min intervals, or more often on busy routes and in peak periods), many more people would use them, with most paying the full fare. Patronage would become three or four times greater (maybe even more) than what it is at present.

It’s interesting to note that the Tourism and Transport Forum claims in a report that governments could save \$1-billion in five years if government-run bus services were franchised in Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra, Hobart and Newcastle.

Adelaide Transit Systems has been able to introduce a seven-day high-frequency link to Adelaide Airport and double the off-peak services on a number of routes “at no additional cost to the government”.

Whenever in Sydney, this writer has noticed that there are many more people on buses and in trains than in Newcastle. The reason is that they run much more frequently, generally every 15-min.

If the government wants to see lots more Newcastle people using public transport, it has to make vast improvements. It must change its attitude of making commuters accept what it decides and provide them with what they need and want.

If Newcastle is to have a light-rail service, the present plan should be scrapped and a proper network for the whole region designed before work begins on the first stage.

As has already been stated, French cities have an integrated multi-modal public transport network which has been designed by experts.

The best thing that the government can do for Newcastle is to invite an established private transport company like Keolis Downer to devise a similar network and provide the funding required for its implementation.

Because Newcastle people have avoided using public transport for so long, it will require a well planned promotion to lure them back. One way of achieving this would be to allow people to travel for the first month without paying fares.

It's time for Newcastle to have a fully integrated public transport network that offers a fast, frequent, reliable, attractive and affordable service.

**Peter Newey**