

**NEWCASTLE RAIL IMPROVEMENT
FOR THE HUNTER COMMUNITY**

PREPARED BY SAVE OUR RAIL NSW Inc

<http://saveourrail.org.au/>

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HOLDING THE LINE

Save Our Rail, on behalf of the community, welcomes the announcement by the Premier, The Hon Morris Iemma, to retain rail services into Newcastle and to spend \$20 million to start implementing the findings of the Hunter Transport Taskforce.

The Hunter Community has indicated very clearly that retention of heavy rail into Newcastle, accompanied by an improvement program, is what is needed for the benefit of the whole region.

There has been a lack of progress in upgrading the Newcastle line, since the Honeysuckle Corporation adopted an "Approved Plan" which stated as an aim the cutting of the rail, supposedly as a way to advance Newcastle. This notion has been criticised by various planners and valuation advisers, who have clearly advocated that the presence of a direct rail connection enhances property values and therefore creates advantage for the community. Dupont Fagan advised Honeysuckle¹ on this matter and quoted from the Real Estate Board of Toronto (Canada) which was exploring transport options, as follows:

If an urban transit system (rail) never earned an operating profit it would still pay for itself a thousand times over through its beneficial impact on real estate values and increased assessments.

The "Approved Plan" under which Honeysuckle operates could be changed by negotiation with the NSW Government and this should be undertaken for the benefit of the City of Newcastle and the Hunter Region, to ensure certainty for the future in maintaining the most sustainable transport system.

IMPROVING THE LINE

Save Our Rail anticipates that this decision will unify all players in pursuing the best result for the city and the valley, pulling together to ensure that the funding allocated will be spent judiciously for the maximum advantage to business and the community.

Long overdue system upgrades should work towards increased patronage of the system, with a resultant decrease in car use.

There is great advantage for Newcastle in the present provision of two lines, direct to the CBD, beach and harbour.

The electrified CityRail Newcastle Line has the capacity to transport large numbers of passengers, which will have added importance as the growth areas in the Central Coast (including the incubator development at Warnervale), increasingly turn to Newcastle for employment.

¹ Dupont Fagan Valuers, Letter to Angus Dawson, Honeysuckle Development Corporation, 20/10/2000. (Obtained through Freedom of Information)

The Hunter Line trains from the inland towns are currently well patronised, especially at peak times, allowing the exchange of workers particularly between the two cities, Newcastle and Maitland, and providing the Upper Hunter residents with access to the beach and city amenities.

SAVE OUR RAIL SURVEY OF POSTCARDS

Save Our Rail produced postcards for people to complete, allowing space to state reasons for keeping the rail line to Newcastle. (1,700 were handed to the Minister for Transport, Mr Watkins at the Maitland meeting with him.)

The survey showed that for many people their **destination** need was Newcastle and that they required an uninterrupted journey. For many commuters, such as workers and students time is important, as well as punctuality.

Tourism has become an important industry for Newcastle since the closure of the BHP steelworks. This developing industry needs promotion and the encouragement of awareness of Newcastle as a destination, because of its beautiful beaches and harbour playground. Any delay or interruption to the direct rail service into Newcastle would be a deterrent to tourists.

Others, including the **elderly** or young **families**, need to attend specialist medical appointments or access the Family Court or seek legal assistance. **Blind** people cannot drive and cannot use buses, so depend on rail. Stating the reason for using trains as **convenience** this group needs a direct journey because of reduced mobility in many cases.

The train service would lose the prized “convenience” aspect if passengers had to get off and join a different vehicle during their trip.

Some who prefer train travel, arrived **from places quite distant from the rail**, even Swansea and Belmont. Anecdotal evidence was that they preferred to catch the train at Newcastle, driving or coming by bus to there, because of the level access, and because they can take their time boarding, being the terminus.

Of the group from **Stockton** using the ferry link some are disabled and use the disability access recently provided. These passengers have time to arrange for the ramp and to prepare for boarding, and their independence to travel to the Central Coast or Sydney is only possible if they don't have any interchange during their journey.

HOLDING THE LINE

We have concern that any proposal, such as that submitted by Hunter Business Chamber, causing **a forced interchange** would greatly disadvantage passengers. Those with **reduced mobility** would be especially affected.

A time penalty would be incurred by all passengers (an estimated minimum of 25 minutes per trip). This would result from the movement from one train to another,

waiting for the other train to move into the station, boarding time, and the reduced speed proposed, to make it seem like a tram.

The smaller Hunter Line trains, already at capacity in peak periods, would not readily accommodate the influx of passengers from the double deck electric trains, and therefore all passengers would experience **crowding**.

LINE	TRAIN TYPE	CARS	SEATING CAPACITY
Hunter Line	“Rattler” (620/720 pair)	2 cars	102
Hunter Line	Endeavour (TE/LE pair)	2 cars	190
Newcastle Line Suburban	K-Set (a/b pair)	2 cars	224
Newcastle Line Intercity	V-Set (a/b pair)	2 cars	* 180 to 208
Newcastle Line Intercity	V-Set (2 x a/b pair)	4 cars	* 360 to 416
Newcastle Line Intercity	V-Set (3 x a/b pair)	6 cars	* 540 to 624
Newcastle Line Intercity	V-Set (4 x a/b pair)	8 cars	* 720 to 832

* Depending on the cars’ seating configuration

Table 1 - Train Seating Capacities

The Lower Hunter has been in consultation to formulate a Regional Strategy. DIPNR identified as a certainty that there would be a large increase in population (predicted to increase by between 95,000² and 125,000).³ It has also been established that the greater cohort of the increased population would be **elderly**. This emphasizes the importance of the rail service into the future.

The Draft Lower Hunter Regional Strategy⁴ emphasizes that Newcastle should retain its status as the business and cultural centre. The Kellog Brown Root Report⁵, in reference to the earlier proposed Woodville Junction Interchange, states “Any removal of the heavy rail line towards Woodville Junction would mean that preservation of the CBD’s role as the regional centre would be compromised with enforced interchange from suburban rail services, the resultant decrease in accessibility ... into the CBD would mean the CBD is no longer as attractive and customers would increasingly look for alternate destinations.”

The inconvenience of a forced interchange is well documented as a cause for **loss of patronage**. Following the closure of the Toronto Line (NSW) public transport usage dropped by more than 30%; a similar figure was predicted by the Lower Hunter Transport Working Group (LHTWG) in its proposal to close the line at Broadmeadow, when there was an estimate that no additional buses would be needed because of this predicted decline. Prof Graham Currie⁶ in his independent critique of this document suggested the figure would be more like 60%.

² Prof Phillip O’Neill, University of Newcastle, Presentation to ECCHO (Environment and Community Coalition of Hunter Organisations) Forum, May 2005

³ Shane Nugent, NSW Government Demographer, DIPNR regional Strategy workshop, April, 2005

⁴ Lower Hunter Draft Regional Strategy, NSW Government, Planning Department, Oct 2005

⁵ Kellog Brown Root “Newcastle Transport Options Study” NSW Government, Oct 2003

⁶ Prof Graham Currie, “Decision to Close the Newcastle Branch Line – Independent Review of Transport Reports” Monash University, 2005 pp 18

In the conclusion of the Premier's Hunter Task Force Report there is a recommendation that "*There should be a determined effort to increase patronage on the current rail system.*" The Hunter Business Chamber proposal seems to be ensuring a decrease in patronage.

The Hunter Business Chamber's proposal, aside from passenger disadvantage, would also swallow up the money allocated to improving the system in overcoming the many technical obstacles including: the need to re-build overpasses, the cost of electrification to Warabrook, and modifying station platforms.

Overcoming the technical difficulties would involve massive disruption to ARTC's freight lines and the critical coal lines to the harbour.

There are also safety concerns with alterations proposed for Waratah station.

IMPROVING THE LINE

Save Our Rail proposes that the following improvements would create benefits for the passengers and for the general community.

1. Upgrade to automatic electronic signalling along Newcastle Line

- This includes signals to trains and interlocks at level crossings.
- Delays at level crossings are a major source of frustration for pedestrians and motorists.
- Gates are being closed well before the train arrives at the crossing.
- All rail signalling integrated with traffic signalling along Hunter Street.

Benefits

- Closure times are reduced to approximately 40 seconds (as occurs elsewhere in Australia).
- Train drivers have line-of sight view, therefore can see if there is an obstruction and stop. The long delay is unnecessary.
- Heavy rail trains would continue to run at normal speed, without compromising safety and without introducing delay.

2. Upgrade all Newcastle line pedestrian level crossings to "urban" standard

(as opposed to "suburban" standard at Stewart Ave, and "semi-rural" standard at Merewether and Beaumont Streets)

Urban standard would have:

- Crossing tile surface level with the top of the tracks, with minimal gap to allow train movement.
- Gates open when crossing is open to pedestrians, closing off access to rail corridor when necessary.

- If the gates cannot close properly (e.g. someone on track) the signal trips to “proceed with caution” rather than “all clear”.

Benefits

- Pedestrians can cross safely.
- Improved accessibility for mobility and visually impaired pedestrians.
- Can be achieved without slowing heavy trains from normal speeds.

3. Build level crossing at Worth Place

- Urban standard at-grade crossing.
- Automated signalling.

4. Integrated ticketing for all

- Currently available for Concession Excursion Tickets.
- Convenience for passengers.

5. Grade separation at Stewart Avenue

- Electrified heavy rail line would be raised above the road at Stewart Avenue.
- Height to allow existing vehicles, including heavy vehicles to pass underneath bridge.
- Legislative restriction on number of level crossings would allow Worth Place crossing to proceed only if Stewart Avenue level crossing is eliminated by grade separation.

Benefits

- Total elimination of delay.
- Risks of accident reduced.
- Rail line remains on existing corridor.
- Building commercial premises under and beside bridge – to be leased for revenue.
- Inviting entrance to Marina Precinct.
- Livening up area.

6. Introduce Park and Ride facilities

- Security to ensure car and personal safety.
- Co-locating services – e.g. childcare, automotive services, dry cleaning.

7. Provision of Bicycle facilities

- Bike lockers.
- “White bike” depots for community bicycles.

8. Provision of NSW Government services at stations

- Where appropriate, re-location of Government Services to Railway Stations, or close proximity

9. Encourage commercial outlets at stations

10. Explore provision of external outlets for ticket purchase

11. Improve efficiency of passenger ticket checking

12. Beautification program - Newcastle Line

- Replace “dingo fence” with more harmonious fencing.
- Landscaping program for platforms and line surrounds – improvements as at Wahroonga, and as in the Winning Design in the 1981 Newcastle Harbour Foreshore Competition
- Replace gantries with slim poles as in Wahroonga Station.

13. Create more welcoming aspect to Newcastle Station

- Open Western end of Newcastle Station, providing access leading directly to the Brewery and Ferry Wharf.
- Re-open Bolton Street access.
- Ugly walls closing off the Western end of the station create forbidding aspect for passengers, additional walking to the Eastern end is unnecessary and not user friendly.

14. Beautification and re-positioning of Civic Station

- Move station to the west behind existing buildings on Hunter Street.
- Create landscaped concourse, opening to parklands and heritage buildings and enhancing Newcastle’s Cultural Precinct
- Kiosk to be relocated to eastern end behind existing buildings – with al fresco eating and piazza

15. Promotion of Newcastle Rail for tourism

- Actively promote Newcastle Rail for tourism with posters at Central Station, newspaper advertisements, etc.
- Promote train travel for commuters – with collaboration of local businesses – seek sponsorships and incentive schemes.

16. Explore Public Transport for Newcastle Airport

- Currently no public transport exists.
- Explore a future provision of light rail to Stockton ferry, to link to Newcastle Station.

CONCLUSION

Newcastle, the second largest city in NSW, has a valuable asset in its rail service, being currently connected by heavy rail with modern electric trains to the largest city in Australia. When it is suggested that these two cities should be connected only by a two car diesel train, accessed up the line at a non destination for most, instead of the current quality transport provision direct to the heart of the CBD, it must be considered that the Hunter Business Chamber does not have the best interests of the city in mind.

With “Peak Oil” already here and car use becoming a luxury many will not be able to afford, it seems more important than ever to provide sustainable public transport.

Global warming and the environment are of concern. The NSW Government support for the principles of the Kyoto Protocol is commendable and implies that every department should be conscious of environmental issues. The Actions For Air initiative⁷ calls for measures to reduce “VKT” (Vehicle Kilometres Travelled). Any proposal that causes passengers to be sufficiently inconvenienced to take the car option must not be considered.

There will be additional people living in this region and many of those will be elderly, emphasizing the need for the continued provision of suitable public transport, especially rail, which has the “convenience” factor. Save Our Rail therefore requests that you implement some affordable improvements to the Newcastle Line, while ensuring that the direct rail transport enjoyed and valued by members of the community should be protected from any form of reduction, and maintained at a high standard.

⁷ Kellog Brown Root, Newcastle Transport Options Study, Section 3.4.3. NSW Government, 2003