

Secretary: *J. Dawson*

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON
TRANSPORT AND
REGIONAL SERVICES

House of Representative Committee on Transport and Regional Services

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission on regional rail and road networks: Hunter region passenger train services

I note the Hunter Business Chamber (HBC) has suggested that trains from Sydney and Lake Macquarie to Newcastle should be redirected towards Maitland (Hansard, 30/1/06, p47-8).

This relates to the NSW government's controversial proposal to close the train service from Broadmeadow (the mainline junction station) to Newcastle City. It is not particularly relevant to freight access to ports. However as the HBC has been able to put its views on this at your hearing, I hope you will accept submission in reply.

The HBC proposes sending electric trains from the south towards Maitland 'rather than coming out here to the peninsula... the population is to the west, so do not run the Sydney trains out here to stop just down the road; turn them inland and run the electrification as part of the growth of public transport in the region to where the people are.'

These ideas are confused and unsound. They misunderstand the role of the regional train service.

What the HBC dismissively calls 'the peninsula' is in fact the Central Business District of Newcastle: the largest concentration of commerce and employment in the region, slated for major growth in the recently released Lower Hunter Regional Strategy. It is the most important destination on the two regional train routes between Newcastle and Lake Macquarie and Maitland.

To send trains from Lake Macquarie to Maitland instead of Newcastle is like suggesting that trains from Sydney's western suburbs to the City should turn off before they get there and go to the southern suburbs instead, because more people live in the southern suburbs than in Sydney City.

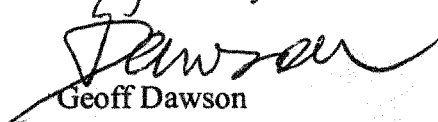
The trains should go where the majority demand tells them to. That is determined by many things apart from the raw population of catchment areas – mostly, by the shape of the network and the location of major activity centres. On the trains from Sydney and Lake Macquarie there are about 10 passengers going to Newcastle City for every one going towards Maitland.

Electrifying the Maitland line may be worth considering for the longer term, but there is no reason to think it is a current priority for rail investment (a good diesel service already exists), and it is certainly no justification for cutting out trains from Sydney and Lake Macquarie to Newcastle City.

I attach a backgrounder on this issue and more detailed comments on the HBC's proposals.

I respectfully suggest that if the Committee is inclined to comment on this matter, it should seek out full information and other views first. The three affected local Councils and most of the local State MP's oppose cutting the Newcastle City train service and could presumably comment.

Yours faithfully


Geoff Dawson

attachments: 1. Backgrounder. 2. Comment on Hunter Business Chamber proposals

Backgrounder on Newcastle rail debate

The proposal: cut train services to Newcastle City

The NSW Government proposes to cut back the Hunter region train service from Newcastle City to Broadmeadow, 5km short of the present Newcastle terminus. Passengers off trains from Maitland or Sydney, to reach Newcastle City, would use existing suburban bus routes which pass Broadmeadow station. No extra buses or timetabled connections are proposed.

This would add about 15 minutes to trips. Official reports predict that up to 43% of Newcastle line train users would abandon the service because of the delay and inconvenience of interchange.¹

The main motive for cutting the line is to remove the 'railway barrier' between Newcastle city centre and the harbour, where former industrial land is being redeveloped. As well, it is sometimes claimed that a Broadmeadow 'transport hub' could improve the regional public transport service.²

Previous studies and warnings

A 2001 study proposed a major regional interchange at Woodville Junction near Broadmeadow. Nearby bus routes would be diverted through the interchange to improve cross-suburban connections. Express buses to Newcastle along the former rail corridor were envisaged.³

However a review of this proposal in 2002 warned that diverting buses to access the interchange could delay the majority of passengers who do not need to use it. It also warned that:

- interchanges away from commercial centres tend to become 'unattractive and unsafe places';
- some freestanding interchanges have been 'singularly unsuccessful... the fundamental reason is that the trip linking to the commercial centre is often a third trip for many people'.⁴

Lower Hunter Transport Working Group, 2003

In April 2003 the new Minister for Transport Services, Mr Costa, appointed a Lower Hunter Transport Working Group to 'investigate the replacement of the rail line to Newcastle City with a dedicated transport corridor for a superior frequent bus service'. The Working Group consisted of three local business and community leaders, and an official of the Department of Planning.

Both Mr Costa and the three local Working Group members or their organisations were already known for their view that the line should probably be closed. The three were also directors of the Honeysuckle Development Corporation, which stood to gain from developing surplus railway land.⁵

The Working Group recommended replacing the train service with an on-street shuttle bus from Broadmeadow. It admitted it did not know how this would affect public transport use. It did not mention the warnings about the risks of interchanges noted above.⁶

The Working Group claimed that developing surplus railway land could fund public transport improvements. It published proposals to place six 4-storey buildings on the narrow waterfront site near Newcastle station (now rail sidings and public open space).⁷

Broadmeadow interchange planning, 2004

In May 2004 Transport Minister Costa engaged the Transport Infrastructure Development Corporation to make detailed plans for a train/bus interchange at Broadmeadow.

TIDC proposed a site on Broadmeadow bridge, where existing bus routes cross the line. This would avoid the need to run extra buses or to divert buses to pass the station entrance.⁸

Meanwhile a report to the Dept of Planning, released in August 2004, argued that cutting the line would harm the future of Newcastle City as a regional centre. It attracted wide media attention. Shortly afterwards Mr Costa commissioned a further study of economic impacts of cutting the line.⁹

In December 2004 Mr Costa announced he had decided to close the line. He relied on the findings of the economic impacts study which he had commissioned. This claimed large benefits from closure. It was later noticed that this study had made fundamental mistakes in its working, which meant that its key findings were wholly invalid.¹⁰

In March 2005 the new Transport Minister, Mr Watkins, engaged McCormick Rankin Cagney to advise further on Newcastle transport planning matters. This advice has not been made public. A Lower Hunter Regional Strategy, to guide long term urban growth, is also in preparation by the Department of Planning. A draft for comment was released on 4 November 2005. It promotes Newcastle City as the major 'regional city', to accommodate 10,000 more jobs by 2031. It does not deal with transport infrastructure requirements.

The proposed rail closure has been vigorously debated in local media. Newcastle, Maitland and Lake Macquarie Councils, and almost all the Hunter region state Members of Parliament, support keeping the train service. A community-based 'Save Our Rail' group is active.

Continuing confusion over the purpose of the interchange

Earlier proposals for a major regional interchange, and continuing media references to a Broadmeadow 'transport hub', have created confusion about what the purpose of the interchange is.

In fact the current proposal is limited to a train/bus interchange to allow closing the Newcastle City train line. Broadmeadow bridge is a very poor site for changing between buses. This would prevent it from serving any wider redesign of the bus network to improve cross-suburban connections.

Inadequate transport planning process

The reports of the Lower Hunter Transport Working Group were greatly biased by its members' pre-determined anti-rail views. They ignored or discounted arguments for keeping the line. They did not consider options for improving the train service. They did not consider other options for solving Newcastle's 'railway barrier' problem (for example, more ground level crossings).

TIDC's interchange feasibility study deals with the detailed implementation. The threshold question of whether the interchange is advisable or deserves priority has not been properly considered.

NSW Treasury guidelines require economic evaluation of major projects. This considers not only financial costs to the operator but also non-financial costs and benefits to the broader community (for example: disbenefit of interchange delay to train users). There has been no competent economic evaluation of the Broadmeadow interchange.

Notes: 1. TIDC interchange feasibility study: patronage review. 2. Eg. Newcastle Herald (NH) 3/3/04:9, 15/12/04:8, 18/10/05:8. 3. Sinclair Knight Mertz, *Proposal to Boost Public Transport Usage at a Regional Level*, 2001:35. 4. SGS/Maunsell, *Evaluation of Woodville Junction Proposal*, 2002:5-9. At www.ncc.nsw.gov.au 5. John Tate, Lord Mayor of Newcastle; Glenn Thornton, CEO of the Hunter Business Chamber; Gary Kennedy, Secretary of the Newcastle Trades Hall Council. Eg. NH 11/4/03:18; 4/7/03:10; 17/10/05:20. 6. LHTWG reports, 2003. 2nd report, p11. At www.transport.nsw.gov.au 7. LHTWG Final Report, p36. 8. TIDC, *Broadmeadow Transport Interchange Feasibility Study*, Nov. 2004. 9. Kellog Brown & Root, *Newcastle Transport Options Planning Study*, 2003:3.3. NH 20/8/04:1. 10. GHD, *Economic Impact of Rail Closure in Newcastle*, 2004. NH 15/12/04:3; 22/12/04:9.

Comment on Hunter Business Chamber proposals for Newcastle train service

G. Dawson, January 2006

Summary

- Proposals for more ground level railway crossings and related improvements in Newcastle City should be supported.
- Proposals to promote rail travel to ease parking demand in Newcastle City should be supported.
- **The proposal to divert electric trains from Newcastle to Warabrook is not advisable:**
 - It would seriously worsen rail service from Sydney and Lake Macquarie to Newcastle City.
 - It would cause ongoing extra operating expenses and revenue loss.
 - The claimed advantages of a Warabrook terminus are minor or could be obtained in other ways. They are far short of being enough to compensate for its disadvantages.

Background

A proposal to cut back the Hunter region train service from Newcastle to Broadmeadow has been debated since 2003. In connection with this the Premier, Mr Iemma, in October 2005 promised \$20 million for 'rail solutions' in Newcastle, and appointed a taskforce in the Premier's department to advise how this should be spent.

Hunter Business Chamber proposals

The Hunter Business Chamber's submission to the Premier's taskforce proposes that:

- Electric trains from Sydney and Lake Macquarie are diverted to terminate at Warabrook (University) on the Maitland line instead of Newcastle. Passengers reach Newcastle by changing at Waratah or Warabrook to existing Maitland-Newcastle diesel trains.
- A new station and level crossing is built at Worth Place in Newcastle City. New pedestrian crossings are provided 'at key locations'. Signalling operates 'in a coordinated manner with road traffic lights'. Trains are limited to 20kph from Hamilton to Newcastle.
- The rail easement in Newcastle City is narrowed with 'aesthetically acceptable' fencing. Surplus land is used for car parking and landscaping.
- There should be interchanges at Glendale, University, Broadmeadow and Waratah. Commuter car parking at Waratah and Warabrook can ease pressure on parking in Newcastle City.
- Train service can be extended to the Hunter Economic Zone (Kurri Kurri), Rutherford/Lochinvar and the Sweetwater estates 'over the next few years' (HBC 2005).

Comment

New crossings in Newcastle City should be supported

Proposals for more crossings and related improvements in Newcastle City are constructive and should be supported. Newcastle City Council Development Control Plan 40 calls for road crossings at Darby St, Worth Place and Steel St. There could be as many pedestrian crossings as desired.

Coordinating train signals with traffic lights should be considered against other options. By itself it does not reduce the level crossing closed time. There may be practical difficulties.

Level crossing closed time could be greatly reduced by simple changes to train operating procedures: see **Attachment**, 'Reducing delay at Newcastle level crossings'. Arguably this should be done with priority. Whether any problem remains could then be reconsidered.

Limiting trains to 20kph should not be supported

It is unclear what the purpose of this is. It is unclear why trains travelling on a segregated right-of-way with gate-protected crossings need to be limited to 20kph, while buses may travel at 60kph on busy streets only a few metres from pedestrians on the footpath.

Slowing trains to some extent may improve amenity, but a 20kph limit is excessive. It would lengthen the trip from Hamilton to Newcastle by 5 minutes (not 1-2 minutes as claimed). It would **increase** level crossing closed time, because of the extra time that extremely slow-moving trains take to cross. Closed time is minimised by a speed of about 45-55kph - see **Attachment**.

Proposals to encourage train use should be supported

Proposals to encourage train use are constructive and should be pursued. This could include park and ride facilities, train/bus integrated ticketing and timetabling, and better interchange facilities.

Proposals for new rail services should be further investigated. It must be stressed that this needs to be properly integrated with planning of new urban releases and regional centres. Little will be gained by providing an infrequent service to a point on the outskirts of a car-dependent subdivision whose design has ignored the presence of the line. It is unlikely that such a service would be viable.

A Warabrook terminus is not advisable

- Replacing direct service with interchange at Warabrook would seriously worsen the train service from Sydney and Lake Macquarie to Newcastle City.
- A significant loss of train use to Newcastle City may be expected.¹
- This is inconsistent with the goals of the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy. The strategy calls for maintaining Newcastle City as a major regional centre, with 10,000 new jobs by 2031 (DOP 2005:11). Considering the traffic and parking problems which Newcastle City already suffers, this clearly requires better public transport access.
- In particular, the strategy proposes Morisset and Wyee as major growth areas. This implies a need to keep their direct train service to Newcastle.

¹ Comment is based on predictions of 34-43% loss of Newcastle Line trips which would be caused by a similar interchange at Broadmeadow: TIDC 2004: patronage review.

A Warabrook terminus would be costly and impractical

- Warabrook station is confined between the coal lines and the wetland, and building the needed facilities (platform extension, sidings...) would probably be expensive and troublesome.
- There would be extra ongoing operating expenses of duplicating Newcastle's terminal facilities at Warabrook (cleaners, shunters, crew amenities...) There may be extra expenses of providing extra service to ensure adequate capacity from Warabrook to Newcastle.²
- Warabrook has no potential as a larger interchange or park and ride site as there are no nearby facilities and road access is very poor.

The claimed advantages of a Warabrook terminus are questionable

Claim: A Warabrook terminus would **better serve the '250,000 residents [who] live west or south of Broadmeadow'** by comparison with the '5,000 residents at Newcastle East'.

Comment: This is simplistic. Train use to Newcastle City is determined not by the residential population, but by the fact that Newcastle City is a major centre of employment, commerce and recreation for the entire region.

Train trips from south to Newcastle City are at least 20 times more than to Warabrook.³ There is no prospect that running electric trains to Warabrook will open up a large new market of western residents sufficient to make up for losing much of the established rail business to Newcastle City.

Claim: A Warabrook terminus would **stimulate new park and ride traffic** from western Newcastle to Sydney.

Comment: A significant effect is unlikely. Road access to Warabrook is very poor. Most western suburbs of Newcastle proper (ie the continuously built-up area) are more convenient to Broadmeadow or Cardiff. Any new traffic would presumably have origins towards Maitland. This would be coming from a very low base, and there is no chance that it would make up for loss of existing traffic because of worse service to Newcastle City.⁴

Park and rides from the Maitland region to Sydney would be better promoted by assuring a reliable Maitland-Newcastle train service with cross-platform interchange at Hamilton.

Claim: Park and ride facilities at Waratah and Warabrook could **ease pressure on parking** in Newcastle City.

2 Comment is based on patronage counts in LHTWG 2003a:15. These suggest that existing Maitland line trains would have difficulty accommodating interchange passengers, at least in peak hours.

3 There are about 7,000 trips per day to/from the Newcastle City line. About 65% of these – thus about 4,550 trips – are to/from the south. There are about 450 trips between south and west with interchange at Hamilton. There are 1,780 entries/exits at Waratah and Warabrook, and 5,360 entries/exits west of Warabrook to Maitland, Dungog and Scone. If Hamilton interchange trips are to/from Waratah/Warabrook or points west in the same proportion as entries/exits, it suggests about 110 Hamilton interchange trips to/from Waratah/Warabrook. This would be one fortieth of trips between south and Newcastle City. The true figure may be higher because of trips from the Central Coast to the university. Cityrail November 2003 entry/exit statistics. SRA/RIC 2003:12-13.

4 For example, assume that • trips from south to Warabrook and to Newcastle City are in the ratio 1:20, as suggested above; • the inconvenience of interchange causes a loss of 25% of trips from south to Newcastle City (this is probably a low end estimate given the figures for a Broadmeadow interchange suggested in TIDC's feasibility study). Then trips to Warabrook would have to increase sixfold to compensate.

Comment: This may be so, but it is not an effect of a Warabrook terminus, as these riders would be using existing Maitland line trains. A Warabrook terminus for southern trains might **discourage** park and rides on the Maitland line if it causes overcrowding between Warabrook and Newcastle.

Claim: Reducing train movements on the Newcastle line would **improve access to the foreshore.**

Comment: Improving access depends mostly on opening new crossings and the other proposed improvements. Whether the train service is quarter-hourly or half-hourly is a small point.

Claim: Reducing train movements on the Newcastle line would **reduce level crossing delays.**

Comment: Level crossing delay is small compared with the normal red light delay at the many nearby traffic lights.⁵ Delay could be cut by at least two thirds by simple changes to train operating procedures: see **Attachment**. If this is done, arguably no significant problem remains.

Claim: Removing overhead wires in Newcastle City would **improve visual amenity.**

Comment: The disamenity of the wires is arguably small in context of all the other visual clutter normal in any big city. The main visual barrier between the CBD and the foreshore is existing buildings: KBR 2003:7-3

Claim: It would be possible to **remove station buildings at Civic** which obstruct views.

Comment: If desired this can be done in any case.

Claim: Diverting electric trains to Warabrook would **reduce noise and odour in populated areas.**

Comment: This claim has no basis. A Broadmeadow-Warabrook train passes through just as much urban area as a Broadmeadow-Newcastle train.

Summary comment: The advantages of a Warabrook terminus are minor or could be obtained in any case. They are far short of making up for its serious disadvantages.

References

- DOP (2005): Department of Planning, *Draft Lower Hunter Regional Strategy*, November
HBC (2005): Hunter Business Chamber, *Submission by Hunter Business Chamber to the Premier's Committee reviewing options for the Lower Hunter Public Transport System*
KBR (2003): *Newcastle Transport Options Planning Study*
LHTWG (2003a): Lower Hunter Transport Working Group, *First Report*, Sept. 2003
LHTWG (2003b): Lower Hunter Transport Working Group, *Second Report*, Nov. 2003
LHTWG (2003c): Lower Hunter Transport Working Group, *Final Report*, Dec. 2003
SRA/RIC (2003): State Rail and Rail Infrastructure Corporation, *Newcastle Branch Line - rail operation and infrastructure options*, November 2003 [attachment to LHTWG 2003b]
TIDC (2004): Transport Infrastructure Development Corporation, *Broadmeadow Transport Interchange Feasibility Study*

5 For example: 'A stop watch on stationary time for each of the three traffic lights and the rail crossing from Stewart Ave to Industrial Drive, taken 28 times over two months last year, resulted in a total delay of 37 minutes. The percentages were: King St 50.8; Honeysuckle Drive 22.3; Hunter St 17.3 and the railway crossing 9.6 per cent.' B. Eastoe, Newcastle Herald 13/1/05:10