PIA Position Statement – Newcastle Regional City

The NSW Division of the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) is promoting the adoption and implementation of an agreed plan for Newcastle Regional City addressing environmental, social and economic fundamentals underpinned by consultative and courageous civic leadership.

PIA advocates the vision set out in this Position Statement for Newcastle.

A Vision for Newcastle

Newcastle will continue to evolve as an important regional capital in NSW. The city will cater for needs of a growing regional population, being an important place for commerce, industry, culture and entertainment. It will also continue to provide a range of accommodation and tourist opportunities for both residents and visitors. It will celebrate the unique and beautiful coastal environment in which the City is placed.

Future planning needs to recognise that parts of the inner city will have a different focus. For example the heritage and fine urban design character of the east end needs to be protected and measures adopted to allow it to evolve as a mixed use precinct catering for the needs of workers, residents and tourists. Similarly the west end and Marketown should be allowed to continue to evolve as a commercial/retail and mixed-use high density living precinct.

The city centre will continue to play an important role as the business centre of the region, supported by retail uses that cater for the needs of workers, residents and visitors. More people should be encouraged to live in and around the city centre which will support the evolution of a safe and vibrant city both during the day and at night.

Connectivity between the harbour and the CBD is fundamental. Integration of infrastructure and adequate investment in public transport is also essential.

The city needs to engage with our rich past through sympathetic reuse and adaption of the city’s historic fabric. The existing human scale of the city needs to be respected, while allowing for well-designed development in key locations and precincts.

Future Actions

There is a critical need to send clear signals to the market indicating where investment should be targeted and how it will be supported. These signals need to be underpinned by a robust economic development strategy which has realistic goals and measurable actions to achieve these goals. The promotion of tourism must be a vital part of this strategy.

Genuine stakeholder engagement, understanding and respect for all interests are required. We need to translate the community's passion and ideas into practical actions to enable Newcastle to achieve critical mass and fulfil its true potential.

The region’s professional planners are committed to making a positive contribution to this critical regional issue and will be guided by the need to promote the public interest at all times.

The top priorities for future action are:

1. **Deliver a university city campus which is integrated with the city centre.**
   It is considered that this has universal support and is the primary catalyst to transform the city. Planning processes need to ensure that the city campus will be seamlessly integrated into the city centre.
2 Adopt an economic development strategy.
This underpins the “business case for Newcastle” and future initiatives to attract private investment and public funding. The strategy needs to focus on initiatives at both the macro and micro level and obtain the support and co-operation of the public and private sectors as well as the local community. The “Renew Newcastle” initiative showcases what can be done through vision and co-operative action at the local “grass roots” level. However the strategy needs to be developed as part of a regional plan that takes into account the main economic drivers such as Newcastle port, Newcastle University and the Williamtown RAAF Base and civil airport.

3 Deregulate the current planning controls in the existing Local Environmental Plan (LEP) for priority precincts and the identification of key sites that will be a catalyst for future development.
This can support and implement the economic strategy and facilitate the city campus and other targeted renewal precincts at key development sites for a specific period of time. The identification of these sites and precincts needs to be based on a regional plan. A strategic development plan would allow planned trade-offs on heritage, mine subsidence, car parking and building height to target these controls where it is important. Guidelines for future development of these areas should be performance based and may allow bonuses for additional development, based on the achievement of objectives relating to quality urban design, affordable housing provision and public domain improvements. The existing requirements relating to the current commercial to residential landuse mix should also be relaxed in the eastern precinct to recognise the ongoing shifting focus from commercial to residential activity and encourage more people to move into the city. Other economic incentives also need to be explored.

4 Implement an integrated public transport system servicing the Regional City, linking regional centres, suburbs and Hunter Street.
A modern, frequent, clean, safe and reliable public transport system is required now to service and shape the Regional City. An integrated transport system will support the above initiatives such as a city campus and future redevelopment. Connectivity, accessibility and maintaining maximum flexibility into the future is the key. Planning for a bicycle and walking-oriented city needs to continue.

5 Support small scale entertainment venues and a new convention centre
Encouragement of a more diverse night time economy with more clustering of small restaurants, cafes, bars, theatres open at night would improve after hour’s safety and city vitality. More diverse after hours entertainment venues in the city would support the university and increasing residential and tourist development in the CBD. A new convention centre is urgently needed in the city to increase the attraction of the city to the business community.

6 Leadership in planning
The rejuvenation of the Newcastle city centre needs to be driven by strong leadership that enables decisions to be made for the overall good of the city. This approach to both strategic and development decisions should be consultative, but the interests of State agencies and local and regional interest groups’ needs should not detract from sound decision making.

PIA is calling on the State and Commonwealth Governments to take immediate and courageous action to support the transformation of Newcastle into a vibrant 21st Century regional city. This must be done in close consultation and co-operation with Newcastle City Council, the private sector and the local community.