Planning Institute of Australia - Submission on the Review of Environmental Factors for the Proposed Newcastle Light Rail

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) welcomes the NSW Government’s investment in the urban renewal of Newcastle and the provision of an integrated broader public transport system for the region, including light rail, a transport interchange and integration with other modes of transport.

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) is the peak body representing professionals involved in planning Australian cities, towns and regions. The Institute has around 5000 members nationally and around 1200 members in New South Wales. PIA NSW plays key roles in promoting and supporting the planning profession within NSW and advocating at all levels in relation to key planning and public policy issues. This submission has been prepared by Members of the Hunter Branch of the Planning Institute of Australia NSW Division (PIA NSW).

PIA considers it is imperative for the NSW Government to assess all considerations of a transport solution that supports the best possible urban renewal solution for the Newcastle CBD. To defer urban design matters to subsequent stages should be avoided. To this end, PIA believes that there are a number of opportunities for the NSW Government to integrate best practice urban design approaches into the current project prior to determining the Review of Environmental Factors (REF).

1. Integration with existing Plans and Master Planning

1.1 Information provided through public consultation and evident in the REF is that the REF is a technical document and only considers the project ‘curb to curb’ resulting in the project being progressed in a piecemeal way. An overall Master Plan dealing with the interchange (including the store site)/ light rail / road changes needed to guide the overall development should be undertaken.

1.2 The current light rail project is 2.7 kilometres long and is focussed within a narrow commuter catchment. The potential to extend the light rail is highly strategic and would lead
to better outcomes for Newcastle. PIA seeks a commitment by the NSW Government for planning of the broader network to commence now for the reasons articulated below:

1.2.1 The planning for the wider network will have land use planning impacts, both strategically and in development control;

1.2.2 Failure to make an early start will create missed opportunities to accommodate and enhance the long term delivery and performance of the network;

1.2.3 Plans for the network will inform private sector and other agency decisions on investment;

1.2.4 The wider plan will help the community understand the regional benefits of light rail in the Greater Newcastle urban area, and probably garner increased community support;

1.2.5 An early commencement of the planning will facilitate maximum involvement of stakeholders and limit the potential for pressured decision making in the event funding becomes available for network development (eg. Smart Cities funding, other asset sales).

2. Urban Design

Overall there is a lack of detail provided on key built elements, including the Wickham Transport Interchange, the Stabling and Maintenance Facility and the light rail stops. Accordingly it is difficult to appreciate how the design would interface with the surrounding urban fabric and raises concerns that opportunities could be lost or outcomes may not be ideal. The light rail project does not appear to reflect urban revitalisation objectives (as expressed in State Government and Council documents), or transport objectives. It is a compromise between placing the system largely on Hunter Street (for unclear reasons) and achieving these objectives. Further detailed comments are provided below.

2.1 The deferment of assessing and integrating urban design outcomes to a later and separate process is not supported.

2.2 The current Light Rail REF deals with the project in relative isolation in the context of the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy (NURS). The NURS has not been revisited or updated since light rail was proposed.

2.3 Wickham Transport Interchange - This interchange is a key focus and should be designed to a high standard. The indicative images show a potentially dominant structure and little amenity. Elements for consideration include ensuring the building design is informed by the site context and emphasises a pedestrian-like scale through appropriate street furniture and tree planting. The treatment of Stewart Avenue/Hannell Street will also be important, particularly due to the proposed road widening. Treatments that could improve the amenity and signal a more
pedestrian environment include establishing large street trees to visually link the two sides, planting in the central median to break up the expanse of bitumen and specific road surface treatments to differentiate this area.

2.4 **Stabling and Maintenance Facility** – There is some concern as to the location of this facility in the Cottage Creek area, which may disrupt potential visual and physical connections to the harbour that have been planned as part of future redevelopment. Alternative locations should be considered.

2.5 **Section along former heavy rail corridor** – The proposed retention of ballast along this section is not supported. It will result in a very poor visual look and not provide the extent of crossing opportunities that a higher quality surfacing would.

2.6 **Light rail stops** – In general these stops should be designed so as to maintain important view corridors where relevant and provide a high aesthetic. The proposed weather protection should not just be limited to a canopy, but also include clear sides to provide adequate wet weather protection.

2.6.1 Honeysuckle stop: should ensure it does not interrupt the existing view corridor across the existing public space in Hunter Street to the harbour;

2.6.2 Civic: The relationship of the proposed public space to the north needs to consider views back to Civic Theatre and how it will link to the Honeysuckle area. This public space is supported, yet currently there is a disconnect between Hunter Street and Honeysuckle. There is already a lot of similar open space in this area, with the new space being an opportunity to create a much needed activated link. It is suggested that measures to enliven this space would be required if it is to be successful. This could include encouraging outdoor dining uses along the sides, providing a weather-protected link, high quality landscape planting and public art.

2.6.3 Crown Street/Market Street stops: more detail is needed on how the stops relate to the former heavy rail corridor.

2.6.4 The Store and Interchange area need to be designed as a modern mixed use interchange as an integrated whole, not a series of incremental developments.

2.7 The REF fails to demonstrate how the light rail will deliver the fundamental objective of improved amenity along a substantial section of Hunter Street. At a minimum the REF should consider the alignment and segregated running against basic urban design principles as well as the overarching intent of the Urban Renewal Strategy and intent of the Draft Hunter City Plan.
3. Technical Issues

3.1. Impacts to Hunter and Scott Streets The effect on how Hunter Street, and to a lesser degree Scott Street, would function and look is one of the most important issues to ensure a successful outcome. Significant change to the streetscape, that includes the removal of parking, means that there is potential for Hunter Street to lose a feeling of activity, and instead appear as a wide expanse of bitumen with little aesthetic appeal. If this option is pursued it is critical to demonstrate that a high quality, activated streetscape can be achieved.

3.2 Parking impacts There would be a large loss of parking along Hunter Street and other areas (267 permanent spaces) and part day parking loss along King Street (83 spaces) which will have a significant impact on current parking and potentially a high impact on businesses. It has been widely acknowledged that car parking in Newcastle is already insufficient, and these changes will obviously exacerbate this. It is understood that a separate car parking strategy is currently under consideration; however, it is critical that a suitable solution to this issue is found prior to any decision on the proposed light rail.

3.3 Cyclist provisions The King Street on-street cycleway will not operate when affected by the proposed clearways, meaning that it will not be available at peak times when it is most needed. It is understood that a separate strategy to identify a replacement east-west cyclist link is currently under consideration; however, it is also important that this issue is resolved prior to any decision on the proposed light rail.

3.4 Route and Running options

3.4.1 As the proposed Light Rail route is only 2.7km long, impacts of a slower running model will not impact on travel times significantly. Breakdowns / accidents will only have short-term impact and will not significantly impact on travel times (it is most likely that one can simply get off and walk).

3.4.2 The proposed placement of the light rail system in segregated running down Hunter Street compromises the ability to revitalise Hunter Street as a people place. Further the light rail alignment runs on or next to the existing heavy rail alignment for at least two thirds of its route and further justification for the option of running down Hunter Street should be provided.

3.4.3 Placement of the light rail in the heavy rail corridor will avoid short-term business impacts in Hunter Street due to the inevitable real and perceived impacts of construction activities on shoppers and visitors.

3.4.4 There are a number of mitigation measures that appear to have been deferred in the REF. Further attention must be given to key mitigation measures prior to the approval and commencement of the project. These include:
Business impacts - loading zones, clearways, short term parking for customers;

Parking strategy - short term, longer term, park and ride facilities outside of the CBD;

Urban amenity - urban design and landscape outcomes, cycling strategy, visual impacts, heritage impacts;

Traffic and intersection impacts and mitigation.

PIA is appreciative of the NSW Government for the opportunity to comment and trust that our suggestions outlined above are taken into consideration prior to finalising the REF.

The Institute welcomes ongoing engagement on this issue and is happy to elaborate on any of the matters covered in this submission.

Yours sincerely

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