INTRODUCTION

The Hunter Business Chamber is the largest regional business chamber in Australia and was established in 1886. The Chamber represents almost 2,000 member businesses to all levels of government and is the peak industry association in the Hunter which represents all sectors of business in the region.

The Hunter Business Chamber works as an integral part of the Chamber network in NSW and represents business at local, state and federal level to advocate for an improved operational climate for businesses in this region.

We welcome the opportunity to provide comment on the Newcastle Light Rail Review of Environmental Factors (REF).

The Hunter Business Chamber is strongly supportive of the NSW Government's investment in the urban renewal of Newcastle.

This Chamber has been a longstanding advocate for the renewal of our great city and it is incredibly pleasing to see the progress that has been made by the NSW Government after many decades of neglect and inaction.

Newcastle is the second largest city in NSW and is expected to grow in not only population size, but also regional importance. It is therefore necessary that future infrastructure is carefully considered to ensure the provision of beneficial outcomes for all users. The Newcastle Light Rail project has the potential to assist in achieving the desired growth and visions for Newcastle, it is therefore imperative that Transport for NSW (TfNSW) receive constructive input into the decision making process.

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 (vehicles, bus, ferry, cycling and pedestrians) is pivotal to the future success of the city.

Strategic developments and much needed initiatives, such as the new Court facility, the University NeWSpace Campus, the new Wickham Interchange and the truncation of the heavy rail have delivered a positive platform for the attraction of private investment.

The Newcastle Central Business District (CBD) is currently enjoying unprecedented renewal. Attracting further investment will take the renewal of the CBD to the next level and ensure that Newcastle becomes a world class city. It is vital that this project not only minimises disruption to business during the construction stage, but that it is strategically developed to ensure that all important urban renewal elements are included prior to the commencement of the project.

This submission will address a number of elements under the following broad headings;

1. Masterplan and Governance
2. Socio economic elements
3. Urban amenity, urban design elements, and technical challenges
The Chamber believes that strategic and proactive consideration is needed now to address key measures such as:

- future use of The Store Building;
- planning of next stage of light rail route
- location of train support (stabling) facility;
- public amenity zones including streetscapes and amenity;
- loading zones and clearways to support business operators;
- traffic and parking strategy and proactive mitigation of loss of parking spaces;
- pedestrian access,
- cycleways,
- more appropriate treatment of the rail existing corridor, that is, the use of the existing ballast

The Chamber has been mindful to share our views with other key business and industry stakeholders in the region. We have forwarded our key themes to the following organisations:

- Australian Industry Group
- Engineers Australia
- Hunternet
- Master Builders Association
- Newcastle NOW
- Newcastle Tourism Industry Group
- Planning Institute of NSW
- Property Council of Australia
- Regional Development Australia – Hunter
- Tourism Hunter
- Urban Development Institute of Australia

They have confirmed their support of our key themes and we understand they are forwarding their own submissions to the REF.

It is vital that the REF includes consideration of a transport solution that provides the best possible urban renewal outcome for the CBD. To state that these matters will be dealt with in subsequent project stages is a concerning approach for NSW’s second largest city.

It is important to ensure a more comprehensive consideration of key renewal and mitigation measures as these aspects will determine the success or otherwise of the project. A consequence of this may mean a small delay to the project. The Chamber would support this delay if it ensures all key urban renewal project elements are addressed appropriately prior to the commencement of the project.

**Business is the key driver of urban renewal, growth and employment. The fundamental principle of our submission is that the sustainability and prosperity of businesses in the Newcastle CBD must be of the highest priority when planning a large project of this nature.**
The Hunter Business Chamber believes a strategic focus on a Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy/Masterplan is vital. The Chamber notes that three key catalyst urban renewal projects are currently underway in the Newcastle CBD. They are:

- Wickham Transport Interchange
- Newcastle Light rail project
- Urban Growth NSW – Newcastle Urban Transformation and Transportation Program (NUTTP)

Although the Revitalising Newcastle website and strategy mentions each of these projects, there is concern within the business community that each of these crucial projects are delivered collectively in parallel and that the core objectives of the NUTTP are the true cornerstone of each project.

In fact, the REF states that the basis of the Newcastle Light Rail project lies in the Newcastle Urban Transformation and Transportation Program (NUTTP) and is part of UrbanGrowth NSW’s suite of projects to help deliver the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy.

The NUTTP is underpinned by the following 6 core objectives:

- Attract people to the Newcastle City Centre
- Reconnect the CBD to the work harbour waterfront
- Assist in employment generation in the CBD
- Create great places linked to new transport
- Create economically sustainable public domain and community assets
- Preserve and enhance the city centre’s heritage and culture

To be effective the Newcastle Light Rail (NRL) project needs to be sympathetic to all six core objectives by providing an effective transport network without limiting future development of the city and/or limiting the use of existing facilities.

Further, the Chamber commissioned a review of the REF documentation, specifically focusing on whether the assessment of impacts has been undertaken to an extent as required under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act (1979) (Section 111). The determining authority is required under the Act to “examine and take into account to the fullest extent possible all matters affecting, or to likely to affect the environment”.

Upon review of the REF, our conclusion is that there are a number of areas where the assessment is deficient and has not fully assessed the potential impacts to their full extent. Specifically this relates to impacts associated with traffic, transport and access, noise and socio-economic impacts.

**RECOMMENDATION:** It is recommended that the principles in the NUTTP form the basis for a comprehensive masterplan, which prioritises the key projects that ensure the abovementioned principles are developed in a timely and complementary manner.
Socio economic elements

The Chamber believes that further attention must be given to key mitigation measures as a matter of the highest priority (sections 8 and 13) and prior to the commencement of the project. These measures are of such crucial importance to the success or otherwise of the urban renewal of the Newcastle CBD, that the Chamber would support a delay of the project in order to ensure appropriate treatment.

A socio-economic assessment was prepared for the REF. It was to assess both the benefits, impacts and risks from the proposal. The socio-economic assessment does not fully assess the potential impacts to the community.

Potential impacts to local businesses are not quantified and potential impacts are deferred to a management approach.

Specifically the socio-economic assessment states the following:

- Section 5.2.3 of the socio-economic assessment states that “Some businesses which already face challenge with profitability may be at risk of closure as a result of the additional stresses caused during proposal construction”.

- The potential impact to businesses during construction needs to be further assessed to understand any negative consequences.

- Discussion on local business impacts once the proposal is operational primarily discusses the loss of parking and loading zones, however the REF does not go on to assess these impacts (refer REF section 13.3.2). This is a significant impact of the proposal and therefore should be fully addressed as part of the assessment. Closure of businesses as a result of this proposal would not align with the outcomes of the renewal strategy.

- The assessment states “Noise and vibration impacts would be managed to acceptable levels with standard construction mitigation measures”. However Section 9.4.1 of the REF discusses that out of hours work would result in noise exceedances and there was also potential for sleep disturbance. Therefore this statement is not fully supported.

- The assessment states “night time average and maximum noise levels generated by operation of the light rail are anticipated to generally be lower than the existing noise environment due to road vehicle traffic”. However Section 9.4.2 of the REF identifies a number of locations within the study area that are predicted to experience noise exceedances both during the day and night time. This conclusion is therefore not supported by the noise impact assessment.

**RECOMMENDATION:** It is proposed to undertake a survey of potentially affected businesses prior to construction to determine impacts. To accurately determine the potential socio-economic impacts, such a survey should be carried out immediately, in conjunction with key business stakeholders, as part of the assessment process.
Traffic

A traffic, transport and access assessment was undertaken for the project. The purpose of the assessment was to determine the potential impacts of the proposal based on the existing and future demand on the local network.

In general the traffic, transport and access assessment is lacking in the following areas in order to fully assess the extent of impacts:

- The proposal will result in a loss of 350 on-street parking spaces during the peak period, which equates to a loss of over 50% of currently available parking in the study area. This is a significant impact which is not addressed. The location of future parking areas is not identified, nor the potential impact on the local road network due to relocated parking;

- The potential impact of the relocated bus routes and bus stops due to the light rail proposal is not addressed and is deferred to a future revised city centre bus plan. The future location of bus routes should be understood now and incorporated into the traffic study;

- The assessment should include an analysis of which bus routes are to continue running on Hunter St and assess the impact to vehicles also utilising the single lane;

- Details on proposed road improvements (specifically at Stewart Ave precinct and King Street precinct) are not provided and are deferred;

- The traffic study does not include analysis of impacts on intersections with Wharf Rd. As stated in the REF, the introduction will “result in redistribution of traffic in the study area”. Therefore key intersections such as Wharf Rd / Merewether St / Workshop Way and Wharf Rd / Watt Street should also be included in the assessment;

- The assessment lacks acknowledgement of the cumulative impacts of the proposal. It is important that TfNSW do not develop plans in isolation. Taking consideration of other urban renewal initiatives will be vital to the success of the project. For example, bringing increased pedestrian traffic into the city centre by widening and landscaping footpaths and increasing opportunities for outdoor dining will be key drivers of urban renewal.

**RECOMMENDATION:** A comprehensive traffic assessment should be undertaken to provide a holistic assessment of traffic, transport, landscaping and access impacts.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Based on the items raised above an assessment should include a definitive and costed proposal for a solution for the loss in parking spaces resulting from the currently proposed design, together with a detailed proposal and design for loading zones, disabled and 15 min parking zones to ensure continued accessibility to businesses in the CBD to avoid any loss of trade and thus adverse impacts on business.
Urban amenity, urban design elements and technical challenges

It is important that the REF is able to adequately demonstrate how 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 running of the light rail against basic urban design principles as well as the overarching intent of the Urban Renewal Strategy and intent of the Draft Hunter City Plan.

The Chamber notes that both mixed and segregated running methodologies are intended to be utilised in the project. The Chamber further notes that there has been much public contention and discussion regarding the best type of running for the CBD of Newcastle.

Both methodologies require strong mitigation measures to be included and implemented at the commencement of the project. The Chamber appreciates the challenges of balancing safety considerations and delivering appropriate urban renewal outcomes.

Mitigation Measures

Chapter 17 of the REF summarises the proposed mitigation measures previously outlined in earlier chapters for the proposal. The purpose of mitigation measures are to lessen or reduce impacts which have been predicted as part of the assessment process. A number of mitigation measures outlined in the chapter do not fit into this category, as the potential impact has not been adequately detailed.

Mitigation measures should be specific and measurable; however measures specifically relating to traffic, parking, noise and socio-economic impacts are deferred to a future strategy, further assessment or management plans.

The following elements should be fully explored immediately in the final project plan rather than deferred:

Pedestrians - access, space and comfort - to make a walkable city

- The REF should demonstrate how segregated running will cater for, or support the needs of pedestrians or the objectives for creating a pedestrian friendly environment;
- It is acknowledged that segregated running will occupy a larger proportion of the available road reserve and in doing so, reduce opportunities for foot path widening, an essential element of urban renewal in creating active street frontage.
- It is acknowledged that both mixed and segregated running methods have safety issues that require mitigation. Bringing moving vehicles closer to pedestrians and removing parked cars, that act as a barrier could reduce the safety, comfort, and amenity of the pedestrian environment.
- It is important that pedestrian amenity is not compromised. It is vital that aesthetic qualities and value of the streetscape are improved and not compromised.
Cyclists - safe, separated cycleways through the city

- The topography and linear urban form of inner Newcastle creates a landscape which supports cycling as a mode of transport. This is recognised in Urban Growth’s Revitalising Newcastle engagement project which found strong support for bringing people back into the city and improving connections for pedestrians and cyclists.

- In this regard, the failure to integrate a dedicated cycleway, or at worst fully explore and justify the alternate options proposed is thought to be a fundamental flaw in the REF. The provision of cycleways must be fully explored and resolved before the REF is determined.

- Table 5.12 of the Traffic, Transport and Access Assessment clearly articulates that no bicycle lanes will be provided in Hunter Street, and pushes cyclists to alternate routes without considering the safety or adequacy of the suggested alternate routes.

- The REF seeks to defer consideration of such matters to a ‘review of options’ after determination. This matter must be brought forward and addressed ‘up front and centre’ to enable an adequate impact assessment to be undertaken.

Stabling Facility - REF (Section 5.3.3) Sub-options for the light rail terminus

- The REF does not consider any options west of the Wickham Interchange and The Store building. The proposed location of the light rail terminus sterilises an otherwise valuable development site in the city renewal with increased maintenance, noise and visual impact to the residential apartment blocks nearby.

- It is recommended that the proposal should not be finalised in isolation of the development proposal for The Store site. There is real potential to provide other options for finalising the light rail plans, including in relation to the design and integration of the expansion of the light rail network to the west, the design and integration of a bus system feeding into the light rail network both to the east and to the west of the Wickham interchange.

Other Urban Design Considerations

- Summary of Mitigation Measures (Section 17) outlines the development of an urban design and landscaping strategy.

- As part of this, the REF discusses the use of ‘high quality landscape buffers’ as well as the ‘design of barriers (railings, fences, or walls) required for safety’. It is unclear in the REF where, under segregated running, such measures will be required.

- While it is appreciated that such matters cannot be fully resolved until the detailed design is well progressed, the REF should at least articulate where such measures are expected to be relied upon. Concern is expressed that such measures will ‘creep’ into the final design or be added during construction and cause detriment to the landscape character.
Technical challenges

The Chamber understands that a range of technical solutions and challenges exist with both a separated or mixed running option. A number of technical issues have been identified that require further consideration and include;

Section 6.2 Track Alignment and Layout

- This section does not adequately consider the typical roadway cross sections on Hunter Street between Worth Place and Auckland Street and near Perkins Street where the clear zone to the pedestrian footpath is reduced introducing a safety risk to pedestrians and motorists (including buses).

- The typical sections illustrated in the REF indicate that the light rail track surface level is flush with the adjacent road surface levels. Should concepts develop where the track is raised above the adjacent road surface levels then Sections 15 and 17 of the REF need to be updated for the risks introduced by having a raised track form.

Section 5.3.6 Preferred alignment option

- This section states that the preferred option allows for the realisation of urban renewal and transformation opportunities in the former rail corridor, however having 600m of ballasted track between Wickham Terminus and Worth Place effectively prevents any north south connectivity/access through this part of the rail corridor. Ballasted track in this section does not align with the aims of the renewal strategy.

Safety

- The REF considers safety of the light rail customers and interaction with the light rail operations, however, it does not adequately consider safety hazards that are introduced to pedestrians resulting from collision with road vehicles under the proposal to move road traffic closer to the footpaths. These safety risks should form part of the assessment and not be left for resolution at a later date.

- Further to this, the impact of this proposal on future light rail corridors in terms of safety, traffic, parking, access, power supply and general functionality should be considered.

- The proposal should set the precedent for future light rail corridors and how they will operate in terms of mixed or separated running.

- Safety under the final operating scenario requires further consideration. The REF (Section 5.5.2) states that separated running would reduce the potential for safety risks compared with mixed running by minimising the number of interactions between light rail vehicles and other road and pedestrian traffic.

- The Chamber recommends a project specific detailed safety assessment should be completed to justify the proposal for separated running along Hunter and Scott Streets.

- In order to provide certainty for the project and to allay the fears of many in regard to a segregated running option, an independent third party should be commissioned to prepare a safety assessment focussed on the planned Newcastle light rail itself.
• This is important as assessments based on other locations may not be comparable to Newcastle in the terms of population numbers and density. In addition, the geography of Newcastle is a long peninsula without the options provided from a number of alternative parallel streets to absorb through traffic and parking displaced from Hunter Street.

RECOMMENDATION: Mitigation measures specifically relating to pedestrian access, traffic, safety, parking, noise and socio-economic impacts should not be deferred to any future strategy, further assessment or management plans. These measures are fundamental to the success of project and must be delivered as core components of the initial project.

RECOMMENDATION: The site suitability of the proposed stabling facility is questioned. The proposed location of the light rail terminus sterilises an otherwise valuable development site in the city renewal with increased maintenance, noise and visual impact to the residential apartment blocks nearby. It is recommended that the proposal should not be finalised in isolation of the development proposal for The Store site.
CONCLUSION

The Hunter Business Chamber strongly reinforces its support for the NSW Government’s Newcastle urban renewal program. The positive transition that is currently occurring in the city is due largely to the leadership and vision driven by the NSW Government. This leadership is creating a high level of certainty that is now attracting significant private investment.

There is no doubt that this city has experienced an extended period of inaction and lack of attention. There is now a positive path ahead and it will be vital that the Newcastle Light Rail project is developed in a manner which continues to deliver positive outcomes.

The Chamber has as its main focus the ability of businesses in the city to thrive and prosper. The feedback we have received from members is the vital nature of clearly identifying and addressing key mitigation measures as crucial components of the project.

The Chamber believes that the development of an overarching masterplan and complementary governance model is vital for the delivery of the best outcome for the city.

The Chamber’s primary concerns relate to issues which have been raised in the REF but not set for further exploration until the project plan is finalised. This appears to be a contradiction to a well prepared project plan that will deliver a positive outcome.

There are several areas of significance where greater detail should be provided to explain proposed mitigation measures. Immediate and thorough consultation should occur in order to fully assess impacts, both short and long term, to business in the CBD.

Briefly the main shortcomings the Chamber have identified are:

- Loss of car parking due to separated running along Hunter and Scott Streets, with no strategy for alternative parking;
- Consultation and impact to businesses along Hunter Street as a direct result of reduced parking and access;
- The impact of redistributed traffic in the area which has not been adequately analysed;
- The impact on other public transport operators;
- Safety concerns for pedestrians on Hunter and Scott Streets as a result of the changed road configuration under separated running;
- Insufficient noise modelling;
- Unsubstantiated selection of separated running for operational reliability reasons;
- Limited assessment for cumulative impacts;
- Potential impact of separated running on possible street side landscaping solutions;
• Detail around service connectivity with: Wickham terminus and the adjacent Store building redevelopment, NeWSpace and the Newcastle Courthouse; and

• Consideration for future developments and light rail corridors.

Newcastle has waited a long time for a transport solution with a longer term vision. It is imperative that time is taken now to get the detail and assessment right, including the implementation of the vital mitigation measures.

Business is the key driver of urban renewal, growth and employment. The fundamental principle of our submission is that the sustainability and prosperity of businesses in the Newcastle CBD must be of the highest priority when planning a large project of this nature.

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