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Hunter Regional Transport Plan
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Draft Hunter Regional Transport Plan 2041: 20 year vision

SUBMISSION November 2022

TRRA's interest in Transport

Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association Inc. (TRRA) actively represents the community on a range of issues that affect the Tomaree peninsula including planning and development, economic development, cultural infrastructure and resources, the built and natural environment, tourism and other grass roots issues.

TRRA networks with other local organisations on issues of shared interest, and works to ensure that our Council consults with the community and maintains transparent and accountable processes.

Having regard for TRRA's objectives as outlined above, regional transport infrastructure and services are very much within the interests of our Association.

This interest is in the Hunter Regional level, the specific needs of Port Stephens and its Regional Centres, as well as, the services and operational issues which affect individuals in our community.

Overview - Transport Vision

TRRA supports the concepts and strategies outlined in the Vision as outlined in the Executive Summary, but only in relation to the short and medium term. The Vision provides a good foundation and introduction to the challenges and opportunities which need to be addressed in a Transport Plan for the Hunter Region at least for the next 10 years.

However, given that the Plan purports to cover a longer term out to 2041, we believe it lacks ambition and fails to adequately envisage, and plan for, a climate constrained future that will require major emissions reductions. Despite acknowledgement of these issues – in particular on pp19-21 and p30, we submit that long term transport planning needs to include a more significant commitment to major inter-modal shift from road to rail. We expand further on this in the last section of this submission.

The Transport Challenge

The analysis of population and economic trends provides a useful backdrop to the current and short term future challenges which need to be addressed in a Regional Transport Plan. However, **TRRA queries whether Port Stephens and the Tomaree Peninsula has been given sufficient prominence in the discussion.** While the major regional population growth will be in the Newcastle, Maitland and Lake Macquarie sub-regions, Port Stephens has very significant existing and potential economic, service and industrial activities which underpin the future of the entire region. These include:

- The Expansion of Newcastle Airport to international status
- The Williamstown Special Activation Precinct
- The major Tomago-Heatherbrae industrial zone (Aluminium, Gas processing, engineering etc.)
- The nationally significant RAAF/Defence base at Williamstown currently being upgraded
- The nationally significant Tomaree tourism destination area
- The expanding residential developments around Fern Bay, Medowie, Raymond Terrace (Kings Hill), along Nelson Bay Road and on the Tomaree peninsula
- Major State investment in the NPWS Coastal Walk
- Expanding sand mining along Stockton Beach dune system
- Expanding hard rock quarrying to the north of Raymond Terrace

We note that the cumulative impact of heavy vehicle haulage movements from the last two trends above (and from major construction works around the airport) has particularly serious implications for the road network of Port Stephens and the wider region which needs more express recognition and discussion in this Plan (see also our last section on long term intermodal shifts).

Recognising the unusual settlement geography of the Tomaree peninsula

On **page 10** of this analysis (and throughout the Plan) there is a reference to **Nelson Bay** as a **Regional Centre** providing important infrastructure and services. In the Tomaree peninsula context, Nelson Bay has arguably been supplanted or at least equalled by the Salamander Centre in the overall urban hierarchy and Taylors Beach is also growing rapidly as a light industrial and Big Box retail centre. The Salamander Centre is now the major bus transport interchange of the peninsula.

We are concerned that 'Nelson Bay' may be intended as a surrogate description for the network of smaller centres on the Tomaree peninsula. This has caused confusion in past strategic planning. We submit that a more generic term such as 'Tomaree' should be used when talking about the combined urban areas of the peninsula (with a total population of around 30,000). The term 'Nelson Bay' should only be used when talking about that township itself (which even with Corlette included houses less than 10,000 people).

An example is the reference in the Plan's discussion of regional transport services to a **Nelson Bay/Newcastle 'spoke' or 'connection'** (Figure 11, p23 and Figure 12, p26). This route would more accurately be described as a **Newcastle to Tomaree** spoke/connection, at least for the current bus route system. Port Stephens as a whole, with emerging growth centres as described above, already has a more complex transport network. It services a dispersed pattern of residential, business and industrial centres which feed residents and employees to a range of commercial, service, recreational, educational, industrial and employment destinations. The current commercial bus services are provided by large vehicles with a capacity of around 50 passengers. As a consequence, high frequency is difficult to achieve and travel by car is often a more attractive option. This situation could lend itself to some of the initiatives posed later in this Plan such as on-demand services, minibus, park and ride or ride sharing.

On **page 13** there is a section entitled '**A Destination of Choice for Tourists**'.

The Tomaree peninsula is a well-established domestic and international visitor destination. TRRA suggests that in Paragraph 1 of this section, after *including national parks*, **Tomaree** and be added before Barrington Tops.

In the final paragraph on **page 14** there is reference to the **expansion of Newcastle airport and the consequent ground transport needs for visitors**.

Over recent years the expansion of the passenger terminal at Newcastle Airport has been supported by very significant increases in short and long term parking. The facilities for public buses and tourist coaches were originally located immediately outside the terminal building with access and seating under an attractive all weather sail style cover. More recently these bus stops have been relegated to the southern side of the short-term car park, necessitating a long walk (with luggage) without cover to the terminal. The bus shelter is an unattractive corrugated iron and pipe construction with insufficient weather protection. The priority for proximity to the terminal is now given to taxis and private motor vehicle drop-offs. This change may have contributed to the low patronage on the Port Stephens Coaches service from the airport to and from Newcastle and to and from the Tomaree Peninsula. With the impending resumption and growth of international air services, there needs to be a major rethink of the bus and coach timetable, terminal location and bus stop design to encourage greater patronage.

TRRA believes that with upgrade to International status, Newcastle Airport transport considerations need to plan beyond road transport to more time-reliable and energy

efficient light rail. Few International Airports are not integrated into a regional or urban rail service and this should be a similar consideration for Newcastle. A Newcastle hub to airport rail link should be a long term planning goal if we are to be serious about tourism and efficient travel. Such a rail link would also better serve the Tomaree Peninsula residents by providing faster access to and from Newcastle as well as obviating further improvements to the Nelson Bay Rd between the airport and Fern Bay. (See also the last section of this submission on intermodal shifts)

There is also a need to address the current difficulty of provision for coach parking in the vicinity of Nelson Bay Marina where visitors transfer to cruise boats to view dolphins and whales. Prior to the covid pandemic 10 -15 coaches at one time was not unusual and this pressure will increase with the international air services and the implementation of proposals in this Plan.

The provision for transport of visitors to the National Parks and Wildlife Service \$7 million Tomaree Coastal Walk, now under construction, will also require innovative management of motor vehicle and public transport access. Visitation to this walk and other potential attractions at Tomaree Headland, could increase to around 500,000 or more per annum. Remote car parking together with a shuttle bus service has been mooted, together with a ferry service to the Tomaree Lodge site from Nelson Bay and other jetties in Port Stephens. These additions may reduce the growing traffic and parking congestion in Shoal Bay and at the Headland.

TRRA supports the investigation of possible additional ferry services across Port Stephens.

The Transport Opportunities

On **page 20** (paragraph1) and in **Objective 13 – Transition to lower emission technologies to improve health and amenity** (p57) the need for cleaner transport services is discussed. TRRA strongly supports such improvements, including the proposal for a fast charging network for electric vehicles and the encouragement of hydrogen fuel development in the Hunter.

TRRA is very supportive of the introductory statement on **Connectivity (p20)**:

‘Improved connectivity with competitive and comfortable transport will be key to making public transport an attractive and viable alternative to the private vehicle’.

We also strongly support the more specific objectives:

- *Plan for infrastructure improvements on major regional corridors*
- *Transport will investigate day return public transport services between key centres and towns within the region based on population growth.*

- *Collaborate with DPE and Councils to ensure an integrated approach to land use and transport infrastructure.*

We also support the proposals around new **fast rail services especially to Sydney together with the introduction of new rolling stock**. For these improvements to be effective in securing a shift in favour of rail over cars, there will need to be a major increase in car parking capacity on the feeder bus routes and at Newcastle Interchange and/or Broadmeadow station.

Looking ahead it is vital that DPE and Councils take seriously **the need to ensure an integrated approach to land use planning and transport infrastructure**.

On the Tomaree peninsula there are several examples of major new developments being approved without attention to the availability of public transport. For example, so-called Lifestyle (land-lease) communities have been proliferating in greenfield locations (mostly on rural zoned land) along the entire length of Nelson Bay Road from Fern Bay to Anna Bay. Each development has involved several hundred permanent residences which have no pathway access to retail shops, medical facilities and other recreational and commercial services, and in some cases no commercial bus services. While some have 'courtesy' minibus services to local centres, private cars seem to be the only practical transport choice for most residents. This adds to the congestion on the main 'spine' of Nelson Bay Road and to the parking overload in the local centres.

We submit that future greenfield development should not be allowed in rural areas that are not close to services and adequately served by public transport, and that Transport for NSW should ensure that this view is clearly expressed in comments on planning proposals and major DAs.

Major Industrial estates and big box retail developments such as Taylors Beach are also not well served by commercial bus routes.

From **Page 26**, the draft Plan rightly emphasises the need for connectivity. Connectivity with inter-regional rail services is a major concern. For example, the Port Stephens Coaches timetables frequently fail to offer a seamless transfer to the Sydney trains at the Newcastle Interchange. To miss a connection by just a few minutes results in the passengers having to wait for up to an hour for the next bus or train. This has been raised with the bus operator who has advised that their timetables are ultimately set by the New South Wales Government. A further impediment is the design of the Newcastle Interchange which has no roof over the pedestrian link from the new Bus Terminal to the heavy rail platforms. The refreshment and coffee outlet at the interchange is rarely open for business and the nearest food service is often almost 200 meters away.

Bus services from the Tomaree peninsula are often circuitous and slow. There could be **scope for additional express services** in peak hours which would encourage commuters to Newcastle CBD and Transport Interchange.

TRRA has previously called for reservation of sites along Nelson Bay Road for **park and ride and parking for car-pooling**. An informal parking lot operated at the intersection with Jessie Road for many years, but a recent sale of this site has

significantly reduced its scale. The Plan's acknowledgement of the value of such facilities is welcomed.

On Page 43 Objective 8 – Enable and support successful places to live, work and visit advocates more attention to place planning for urban centres to better integrate transport services. This an essential requirement going forward.

Appropriate bus stop locations and shelter facilities are required for road passenger transport and their passengers. 30 kph speed limits should be considered for much of these centres together with well signed by-pass routes to divert through traffic.

On Page 55 Objective 12 – Increase the number of trips made by walking, cycling and public transport across the Hunter. TRRA strongly supports the planning for and installation of this infrastructure.

The role of road transport in a climate constrained future

Looking to the future, we submit that despite acknowledging climate change implications, and generally favouring public transport over private vehicles, the Plan still reflects conventional (Australia-wide) thinking about transport which has for many years favoured the use of roads over rail, based on short-term cost modelling and vested interests from strong road transport and construction industries lobby groups.

In this school of thought, buses are considered as a cheaper public transport alternative to passenger rail. While buses may have been more cost-efficient in recent decades, they won't be in future. In the essentially energy-constrained society of the post-fossil fuel era, greater weight will need to be given to the substantially higher overall efficiency benefits of rail transport over road (even with electric buses). In terms of rolling efficiency and infrastructure maintenance, rail transport of people and freight have far greater overall energy efficiency, and can have lower per kilometre labour costs.

The dominance of heavy articulated vehicle freight transport has cost Australia dearly in terms of road maintenance, not to mention environmental and noise pollution. This cost will worsen exponentially in the post-fossil fuel era where the cost of road materials and equipment required to maintain it in an increasingly higher temperature and volatile climate.

We urgently need to take lessons from the European model that has existed for decades now. This is a transport future where all long-haul freight is carried on heavy rail and an increasing proportion of passenger transport on fast rail (inter-city) and a mix of heavy, metro and light rail for shorter journeys. Smaller freight trucks and electric freight trams are used for short distance freight haul from rail hubs using compatible rail/road containers. End trip passenger journeys will increasingly be on foot or using shared and/or autonomous electric vehicles. Hydrogen powered vehicles may also play a role.

The increasing cost of air transport and the need to reduce the use of jet fuel to lower emissions will also increasingly favour investment in long distance rail transport.

The Plan contains some welcome encouragement for increased use of electric and autonomous vehicles, and acknowledges the medium term demise of coal freight, However, TRRA submits that the Plan fails to envisage a dramatically different future where climate change will have a major impact on transport modalities. We need long term Plans such as this to change the fundamental thinking towards infrastructure development priorities and life-cycle costings.

Conclusion

TRRA welcomes the draft Plan and broadly supports most of its analysis and prescriptions for the short and medium term, but questions its lack of ambition to chart a different course for the longer term shift towards a completely different inter-modal transport future.

We would like to see a clearer recognition of the particular circumstances of the Tomaree peninsula within Port Stephens LGA, and need for some specific initiatives to address those circumstances, as set out in this submission.

And of course the Plan will only achieve its vision if adequate funding is made available for the range of infrastructure works and other initiatives required to deliver. While Councils will play an important role in implementation, the cost of all the relevant measures are well beyond the means of local government reliant largely on rate income. State and hopefully Federal funding will be required - we call on the State government to both invest directly in some of the infrastructure and provide new grant streams to Councils and other parties to undertake other works and measures.

We have no objection to this submission being published in full and unredacted.

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