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NEWCASTLE CBD TASK FORCE

WORKSHOPS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Newcastle CBD Task Force is overseeing the preparation of a strategy to build on existing momentum within the Newcastle CBD. The initial focus of the Task Force is to:

- **Identify means to support and facilitate private sector investment in the city centre;**
- **Identify and review options for development/redevelopment of Government occupied assets;**
- **Ensure a continued focus on transport, the public domain and connectivity outcomes as development projects are brought forward; and**
- **Provide a clear forum to enable community members, Council and Federal and State MPs to have a broader discussion about the future of the CBD and how to support this renewal.**

An early initiative of the Task Force was to facilitate a series of workshops involving key community, business and government stakeholders to inform a State Government submission to the Commonwealth's Major Cities Unit. These workshops were:

WORKSHOP 1 – DEVELOPERS AND INVESTORS

Key Question: What infrastructure improvements would encourage you to spend money in the CBD tomorrow?

The first workshop of developers and investors identified the key challenges to investment and infrastructure priorities that would encourage investment and result in a more viable, vibrant CBD. A key concern was the attitude of local authorities to developers wanting to invest and the length of time it takes for the development application process. There was a firm view that there should be some strong leadership shown with a single dedicated coordinator to manage the development application process.

Mine subsidence was a particular area where coordination and expediency was desperately needed with some participants saying they viewed Newcastle as a "no go zone" because of this issue. It was also noted that ongoing and substantial investment was needed in drainage, sewerage, power and water if Newcastle is going to sustain future population targets.

Amalgamation of sites, flexibility in assessing proposals against the DCP, connectivity to significant regional facilities and to Sydney, and attraction of employment generators such as significant corporate and government head offices would all enhance the city's attractiveness to residents and investors alike.

In terms of infrastructure priorities the workshop was unanimous in its view that removal of the barrier that the railway line creates between Hunter Street and the harbour is the number one priority and the heavy rail should be removed and replaced with a modern easily accessible interchange at Wickham and a frequent light rail loop between the CBD, Merewether, The Junction and Wickham.

Participants were somewhat sceptical that government funding would be offered for the Hunter's infrastructure needs. Nonetheless they suggested creating a funded infrastructure plan (funded federally through the Major Cities Unit) and that the NSW government live up to its buy line: Make NSW "open for business".

WORKSHOP 2 – GOVERNMENT AGENCIES / INSTITUTIONS

Key Question: What are the options for development/redevelopment of government occupied assets in the CBD and what are the infrastructure implications?

This interagency workshop was a valuable exercise in government agencies beginning to think cooperatively about potential interactions, co-locations and their contribution to the life of the city. It was clear from this workshop that there is enormous scope for more regular and strategic interaction across departments.

There has already been considerable discussion prior to the workshop about the Justice Precinct and the possible co-location of the University of Newcastle's Law Faculty with the Justice Precinct. Attorney General's priority is a building that can function as a modern courthouse – the current site has constraints, including an outdated heritage building. The University already has a presence in the CBD through the Conservatorium and Nesca House. Like many Agencies they have challenges maintaining a heritage building. One of the issues with a CBD co-location to be resolved would be access to student housing. Access to transport is also important as is funding for creating a new Law School. Participants were of a view that the current situation presented a "once in a lifetime opportunity" for the legal precinct to join with the University and develop a united precinct. The interaction and energy that would come with having a University Faculty located in this precinct, within the CBD, is beneficial to the whole community.

Newcastle City Council is about to release a vision statement for the CBD that includes new office buildings, updated retail, streetscapes and landscaping. They are about to tender for a Transport Plan for the city and are interested in promoting connectivity, creating a public domain plan and responding to the GPT proposal.

State Property Authority is interested in making the most efficient use of government properties and supporting government agencies through proper management of assets. The government buildings in Bull Street site and the Justice Precinct are on our agenda. Bull Street represents an excellent opportunity for redevelopment and yet it is a sound building that functions well and it is not necessarily good practice to demolish sound buildings.

Participants emphasised that a good public transport system is essential – not just for the CBD but to regional services such as John Hunter Hospital. They also emphasised the importance of environmentally sustainable practices, custom building for several agencies in the one building and closer cooperation at the strategic level across agencies.

WORKSHOP 3 – PUBLIC MEETING; TRANSPORT, CONNECTIVITY AND THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

Key question: What will make this City work better / be more "liveable" in terms of public domain, connectivity and transport?

Participants in this workshop stressed the importance of affirming the existing planning outcomes developed by Newcastle City Council as expressed in the LEP and the City Centre Vision. They affirmed the desire for a vibrant city and highlighted the importance of connectivity, accessibility, public transport and safe and welcoming public spaces. While there was a variety of opinions expressed on how to create a viable, sustainable CBD there was certainly a singular commitment to working towards that end. This group also identified the current approvals and planning processes as needing coordination and leadership, and not just for development and investment but also for public events such as triathlons.

There was some irritation that GPT made a presentation to the workshop about its proposal but the majority of people were interested in hearing some of the details for the first time. The GPT presentation did tend to skew the debate with much energy spent discussing the rail line. There was considerable debate about whether or not to remove heavy rail into the city and discussion on the possible alternatives. Opinions were divided but the weight of the discussion supported finding viable transport alternatives to the heavy rail including the creation of a transport interchange at Wickham, Hamilton or Woodville. Those in favour of maintaining heavy rail into the city discussed level crossings and connectivity possibilities. There was strong agreement that Hunter Street from Newcastle East to the West End needed to be opened up to the Harbour and the connections made more easily accessible.

There was agreement on the need for Park and Ride facilities and on the importance of minimising cars in the CBD and promoting cycleways, walking and public transport. The importance of transport connections to significant regional facilities and beyond the LGA to Maitland, Port Stephens and Sydney was also emphasised. More efficient, reliable and accessible transport links around the inner city, as well as to Carrington and Stockton, was also stressed.

Essentially participants were asking for good urban design – green spaces, thoughtful links, and places for people. The point was strongly made that through Newcastle Port, Australia has exports of \$10billion p.a. – why isn't Newcastle getting a share of this income? There was a desire to see Newcastle become a world class city and much of the research undertaken by GPT resonated with most participants.

URBAN DESIGNERS WORKSHOP

Key Questions: What are the urban design principles that should underpin the infrastructure projects under consideration by the Newcastle CBD Taskforce? Will the projects lead to an optimal outcome for the CBD or are there other strategies that urban designers would recommend? (Save Our Rail Submission and the notes of the previous 3 workshops were supplied as background for this workshop).

The workshop with Urban Designers of considerable standing, both local and Sydney-based, was visionary and strategic.

Public transport was identified as a major issue which should be the priority. It should be user friendly, simple and accessible for everyone, including older people, people with prams and in wheelchairs and people with surf boards. Transport planning is crucial. There is a need to replace outmoded rail with something new – perhaps a rapid bus system. While light rail was highly desirable it was felt that Newcastle did not have the population base to justify this level of investment.

There was no support for keeping the heavy rail into Newcastle but the preferred option was for a modern transport interchange to be built in the vicinity of Wickham with all the facilities that make a modern transport system work; including a state of the art ticketing system, high frequency services and public spaces that give users a sense of arrival.

The Urban Designers felt that the GPT proposal is sound and attractive but the city also needs to consider the possibility of a step-down version of the GPT option. It is essential to keep the rail corridor as a green space for pedestrians and bicycles, and possibly buses (although there was a strong view put that buses should travel down Hunter Street in order to activate the retail and commercial premises there).

It was recommended that in the short term there be a selection of interesting, achievable projects. We need a clever plan that works for our city; making it a walkable city with slow vehicle access through the Mall, a link between Stewart Avenue and the Honeysuckle area and Darby Street continuing all the way into Honeysuckle. It is very important to have an economic series of nodes throughout the CBD so that there may be a Cultural Precinct, a Justice Precinct, an Education Precinct, a Health Precinct (Polyclinic), a Retail Precinct and so on. The green corridor along the existing rail corridor would link these nodes and every stop would be a destination with a different character. It is also recognised that Newcastle Port Corp could become a major player as port land becomes available.

Participants were of the view that building the interchange at Wickham could be the catalyst to start this renewal of the CBD. It would require strong leadership. This group of Urban Designers could be an advisory group to the CBD Task Force should it choose to begin this process.

A briefing will be held on 11 December for all participants in the process to date. The briefing from the CBD Taskforce will outline the research and analysis undertaken by the Taskforce to date and its recommendations.

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