

Questions Asked in Workshop 1: City Hall, 9 May 2011

1 Hunter Street Revitalisation

Q1: Is Council willing to partner with other parties in the development of Hunter Street?

Answer: GPT, who currently own a large consolidated parcel in the mall, are in dialogue with prospective buyers, which has been covered in the press recently. Council has the opportunity to negotiate future development of its properties including the mall car park and road footprints. The requirement for these parcels will depend on the developers' proposed use for the site. Council is pursuing discussions around options for these assets.

Q2. How can we clean up Hunter Street? There are things we can do that won't cost a lot of money. Things like the Council depot in Civic Park and another one in King Edward Park – it's untidy and a mess and looks awful. Can we force the buyback of neglected properties? The park at the end of Church Street is awful and poorly maintained. Why have a 10 year asset plan when we can't look after what we have already?

Answer: There are a number of issues for Council: one is that we can't undertake work on private land. The only ways in which Council can intervene is if a building or site poses a threat to public safety. The city's Pride of Place Taskforce and City Centre Committee assist with beautification works, such as banners, planter boxes, lighting and directional signage.

Q3. What other assets does the State Government own?

Answer: During the Hunter Street Revitalisation workshops, a large map showing ownership along the street was part of the display. This will be posted to the website.

Q4. Are council looking at rezoning of areas that are under-used, dead areas, to improve use and provide potential for growth?

Answer: Rezoning is one tool that can be used to encourage growth. When there is a major project such as Hunter Street, rezoning would be one of the tools to consider. On Hunter Street, mine subsidence and the high water table are constraints to development which are being addressed at a whole of Government level. The Local Environment Plan and Urban Renewal SEPP are further tools available to Council in the inner city area.

2 Coastal Revitalisation

Q1. What return is Council expecting from commercial assets along the coast ie Surf House at Merewether? Will returns realised from assets along the coast, be returned to further develop the areas?

Answer: The Surf House development is a commercial development, occurring on Crown land. The Coastal Revitalisation Plan includes the whole 11km stretch of our city's coast – and some of the assets there now, for example Stockton Tourist Park, generate a high return and its dividend can be reinvested along the whole coastal stretch. Most of the works proposed as part of the Coastal Revitalisation Plan, say 75%, are of a public domain nature: improvements to seating and shade, roads and pathways, parking and other community facilities for public enjoyment. There are only a few improvements of a commercial nature.

3 Infrastructure Backlog

Q1. Please don't increase infrastructure with these new major projects, when we can't look after the infrastructure we have now. Mentioned Civic Park's Airforce Memorial Grove, the Junction and other areas across the city.

Answer. Part of this long-term financial plan is to include the acquisition, maintenance and disposal costs of all our assets – the asset lifecycle. Materials and design will include durability and longevity to decrease maintenance costs where practical.

Q2. If a building is still good, could it be refurbished and re-used?

Answer: That needs to be part of any consideration of this type. In some cases with council assets, the refurbishment costs can exceed the costs of construction of a new one. In other instances buildings may not be suitable for other uses. Some buildings however can be successfully adapted.

4 Consultation and Information

Q1. How will Council inform me of what's proposed? I can't afford a rates hike. Have you thought about using rate notices to disseminate information? I want more information about my rates and where the money is being spent.

Answer: Gaining the community's attention for important matters in Council is a key challenge for the organisation: information is currently disseminated through the rates notices, online, onsite signage, in print with the Council News quarterly newsletter and through Newcastle Voice, the community reference panel which participates in an ongoing conversation on many topics of importance. Press and online advertising is used to notify the public of all documents on public exhibition, as well as major projects. The community's ideas on how to improve communication channels are always welcome.

5 Priority of Works

Q1. There have been many plans and panels over the past ten years, with many proposals. How will we have stability in these plans?

Answer: It is only when there are firm long-term financial plans that stability about Council's priorities can be achieved. By planning for where we want to be we can put the appropriate funding sources and cost efficiencies in place.

Q2. Could we please get the priorities right? For example the Civic Park Masterplan cost a whole lot of money to get a new landscape plan and yet there are no maintenance works happening at the memorials there.

Answer: As this is the first time that a ten-year financial plan has been prepared, the long-term maintenance of an asset such as a war memorial or park can now be accounted for. It will also allow for major funding to be sourced for major projects. The entire life cycle of an asset, from acquiring or creating it, to maintaining it, and then disposing of it, needs to be better explained and shared.

Q3. Cycleways are so important. Why aren't there more being built now?

Answer: The plan is a ten-year plan, and there are actually two 5-year tranches of work planned for cycleways, to be supplemented with state and federal government grants.

Q3. Are the major projects identified here hard and fast – are these going to be the ones which get done if we approve the rates increase?

Answer: They have been selected based on their fit with the 2030 Community Strategic Plan (which encapsulates long-term community expectations) and on Council's readiness to proceed with key projects. Of course, the fine details would be the subject of further community consultation – and then put to the elected Council for decision-making.

6 Funding Options

Q1. What percentage do the coal companies pay to support or grow Newcastle? Do they pay a levy to help repair damage done by coal extraction? Do they pay anything for the impact which their work has on many Newcastle residents in Mayfield, Tighes Hill and Carrington?

Answer: The state government receives income for the use of the port and council receives commercial rates from companies which operate in our local government area, such as Port Waratah Coal Services and the Newcastle Coal Infrastructure Group.

7 Parking and Transport

Q1. In 1993 Council brought in a specialist from America who discussed a 2-hour free parking system - no metered parking, which was introduced in Newcastle and worked. Since then, Council has put in parking meters and the city has died, killing Hunter Street. Moving the law courts will further deaden the eastern end of the city as the legal firms and chambers relocate to surround the new court precinct.

Answer: There has been a substantial demographic shift in the residents of the inner city since 1993, and many commercial and social changes. The Hunter Street Masterplan looked at four precincts, considering the whole street, not one proposed development at a time. The location of the new court facility on Hunter Street creates future retail potential. Increasing residents in the city will increase the critical mass of people requiring retail and other services. The old court site is no longer suitable.

The purpose of the parking strategy is to maximise retail opportunities rather than have long term parkers using these spaces on the street. At present, we do not have the balance between on-street and off-street parking right. Private parking providers consider our parking stations unattractive. There are also high refurbishment costs on those assets and low rates of return.

Q2. We need to look at alternative transport measures. Have we thought about free parking?

Answer: This creates more congestion in the city – free parking will attract city workers to park on the street all day, every time. Other options are therefore preferable, such as: pricing signals between on- and off-street parking, park and ride such as the system in operation to the university and The Mater Hospital, cycle lanes, light rail, level crossings and improved public transport. An integrated plan is required.

Q3. What percentage of overall income is parking fees?

Answer: Income from Connected City, which is primarily parking revenue, totals \$11.9m of Council's total income of \$199m, which is approximately 6%.

Q4. Is additional parking being provided at No 2 Sportsground? That needs to include park and ride - or use the Showground for parking.

Answer: Approximately 300 spaces are being provided at No 2 Sportsground which would be metered during the day. During special events and in the evenings, parking fees would not apply. The Showground is not a Council asset.

Q5. When putting in parking meters at The Junction - should they be all 2 hour? Is there a cost for residents of The Junction parking where meters are installed? We'd be hit twice.

Answer: Parking times and charges would be reviewed with shop owners when meters are introduced. The fee for resident parking stickers is \$58, with pensioners charged \$48 (p.21 Fees and Charges document). Again one principle will be to attract retail opportunities for shop owners.

8 Cost savings

Q1: Are there any plans to reduce staff by say 500, or sell off even more assets?

Answer: Selling off un-productive assets is entirely part of this proposal, included in every option from Option 2 onward. The Sustainability Review conducted an audit of each of the Council's current 69 services which are being provided according to current community expectation, and staffing now reflects those service expectations. Further reducing staff would mean that Council stops providing those services, which is what many councils in other states are doing. We are interested in any areas of service which community members no longer require to be provided by Council.

Q2: What is the makeup of the asset sales? Is the art collection, worth \$70m, being considered? You have stated that only 2% of the collection is on display.

Answer: The list of assets which are under-utilised and proposed for sale are property and land items only. Most of the \$70m value of the art collection is held in 8-12 major works. These are not listed for sale.

9 Option 4 – Proposed Rates Increase

Comment 1: I support Option 4. A couple of dollars per day is worth spending to get the revitalisation of Newcastle.

Comment 2: Rates are set on land values, and in Merewether, where land values are high, there are lots of pensioners.

Comment 3: Pensioners find it difficult to pay rates, let alone an extra couple of dollars.

Q1. Have local Councils lobbied for increase to the rate cap from the state government? If the community knew more about how the rates are spent, you might get more agreement to increases.

Answer: The NSW Local Government Association is very active in this regard. The NSW state government pricing regulator, IPART, consider that councils across the state are unproductive and have reset the allowable rate cap with the intention of forcing productivity increases. Interstate, there are many examples of councils with high rates and high levels of community satisfaction. Wodonga Council consistently has the highest rates in Victoria, and also enjoys a high level of public support. These councils have been engaging in deep conversations for years with their ratepayers about what community expectations are, and then how they might be funded.

Q2. What percentage of Council's total income is generated by rates?

Answer: It is a little-known fact that, in Newcastle, rates make up 54% of Council's total income. The balance is sourced from fees and charges for a range of services - and state and federal government grants for specific activities.

10 King Edward Park Headland

Q1: We need more open space in the city. Could Council buy King Edward Park headland and use it for open space? It was included in the Heritage and Strategic Management Plan for the area as open space; there is nothing in there to suggest that the community seeks another club selling alcohol and fuelling anti-social behaviour at this location.

Answer: The site is owned by the State Government and their current plans are for the site's redevelopment. A development application is currently under determination at that site, and as always, there will be people in favour and those against any development application. King Edward Park itself is included in the Coastal Masterplan as open space.