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The Hon. Jenny Aitchison MP
NSW Minister for Regional Transport and Roads

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25 February 2025

Dear Minister Aitchison

Re: Hunter Joint Organisation submission to the Draft Hunter Strategic Regional Integrated Transport Plan

The ten Member Councils of the Hunter Joint Organisation (JO) welcome the opportunity provided by the State Government to provide feedback on the Draft Hunter Strategic Regional Integrated Transport Plan.

The Member Councils of the Hunter JO include:

- Cessnock City Council
- Dungog Shire Council
- Lake Macquarie City Council
- Maitland City Council
- MidCoast Council
- Muswellbrook Shire Council
- City of Newcastle
- Port Stephens Council
- Singleton Council
- Upper Hunter Shire Council

A well planned, effective, integrated and accessible transport system is a core shared priority of the ten Hunter JO Mayors, and is directly reflected in the [Hunter JO Strategic Plan 2032](#) vision of “A globally connected region whose residents enjoy transport and digital infrastructure and systems that enhance their economic and lifestyle opportunities”.

I encourage you to consider the recommendations included in our submission and would welcome the opportunity to further discuss our ideas, given the enormous transport related opportunities and impacts facing the Hunter region. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with Transport for NSW to finalise and implement this important regional plan.

Should you have any further queries please don't hesitate to contact Kim Carland, Advocacy and Government Relations Lead, Hunter JO at kimc@hunterjo.com.au or on 0460 034 614.

Yours Sincerely

Cr Sue Moore
Chair, Hunter Joint Organisation



Submission: Recommendations to inform the Hunter Strategic Regional Integrated Transport Plan

Introduction

“A globally connected region whose residents enjoy transport and digital infrastructure and systems that enhance their economic and lifestyle opportunities” is an integral component of the transport vision established by the region’s ten Mayors in the [Hunter JO Strategic Plan 2032](#). This reflects not only the importance of an effective, integrated and accessible transport system for enhancing the region’s current liveability, but the fundamental role that transport can play in accommodating our rapidly growing population, and in directly supporting and accelerating the evolution of shared federal, state and local government objectives for transforming the Hunter’s economy to net zero. Key objectives from the strategic plan directly supporting this vision relevant to the submission include:

- Within the region there is a robust integrated transport solution that underpins the experience/liveability and productivity of its residents and visitors comparable to its global peers.
- Through its port and airport the Hunter is a globally connected and economically prosperous city-region, recognised as a key international gateway, providing its communities with a vibrant and unique lifestyle and growth in products and services to replace the economic output of thermal coal.
- A region that is built around sustainable transport options.
- Coordinated planning and investment by all levels of government that empowers the region and its residents to maintain and grow jobs, economic opportunities and quality of life.

The information and priorities provided in the submission have been drawn from considerable consultation with Hunter JO Member Councils and through various meetings, workshops and discussions involving a range of stakeholders and sources including Hunter JO, Member Councils, Department of Planning & Environment, Regional NSW, Greater Cities Commission and Transport for NSW. As part of this broad consultation process, Councils have identified and rated their top five transport priorities and shared these with TfNSW to inform delivery of the Hunter Strategic Regional Integrated Transport Plan technical workshop held in June 2024.

Feedback on the draft plan

1. Local Council Priorities

The Hunter JO is pleased to see representation in the draft plan of our member council’s top 5 transport priorities across both short term and mid-term initiatives, including:

Short Term initiatives

- **Bus, rail and ferry** - Review and implement an increase public transport services to better connect the Hunter and to better connect to our key precincts like the Newcastle Airport.



- **Lower Hunter Freight Corridor** - Develop Lower Hunter Freight Corridor including undertaking concept and detailed design to inform delivery.
- **Tourism and cycling infrastructure** – Developing our rail trails including the Shiraz to Shore cycle trail and supporting safe cycling connections.
- **Heavy Vehicle Movement** – Supporting the safe and efficient movement of heavy vehicles (Oversize and Overmass OSOM) including heavy vehicle rest stops, compliance and decoupling facilities.

Mid-term initiatives

- **Rail service improvement:** passenger and freight– Commencing delivery of Lower Hunter freight corridor including enabling increased passenger trips on the Central Coast and Newcastle & Hunter rail lines; and facilitating increased freight access to and from the Newcastle Port.

2. Overall Feedback

Overall, the Hunter JO is very supportive of the proposed draft Hunter Strategic Regional Integrated Transport Plan and commend the clearly set out initiatives, strong strategic analysis and context setting in the plan. Our councils are keen to assist Transport for NSW and provide the on the ground knowledge to facilitate the identified transport improvement in each local government area. However, we have identified areas and specific projects that require further improvement or clarity, including the following:

Provide a high level summary document – a short, summarized document, for example, five pages would be beneficial, including, a visual representation of short term projects (on a map). For example, refer Page 40 Hunter Regional Plan 2041

<https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-03/hunter-regional-plan-2041.pdf>

Methodology – The document is still at a fairly high level of detail. If the next level of detail cannot be publicly shared, it would be good to include a methodology for how you develop, prioritise and deliver the projects in more detail. This could include elements like an explanation of the decision-making process, how you prioritise projects and how you would work with councils to achieve the priorities of each local government area. Furthermore, consideration should be given to how and when you would use trigger points in the methodology to determine moving to the next level of detail for a project. For example in section 6.1 #7, what would be the key triggers to change a bus passenger service from Muswellbrook to Singleton into rail service improvements (population, usage numbers etc.?) The methodology could include formal mechanisms to increase inter-agency and Council collaboration and streamline design approval and construction processes.

Population numbers are outdated – we have seen this happen in many NSW Government documents, where planning is based on outdated and unrealistic population figures. It is acknowledged that the recent population update occurred late in 2024, however, many Hunter JO councils have higher population estimates than the latest 2024 figures. Hence, we have outlined the need to include triggers in your methodology so that when the population numbers are updated to higher numbers, as they often are for our region, then the relevant elements of the plan can be adjusted accordingly.



Local road funding mechanisms need to be improved – it is well known that a diversity of road funding mechanisms are producing outcomes where housing projects or employment lands cannot be developed or where sections of the same road are funded differently due to the LGA boundary or road classification. Consistency of funding based on the potential need or route would improve outcomes.

The plan is not always future focused – There are several key elements in the plan that provide solutions to the existing situation in the region but do not accommodate the potential or desired future state of the region. Light rail planning seems to assume it will travel no further than Broadmeadow, however, the region would welcome completed designs for services to the John Hunter Precinct, Lake Macquarie LGA and other key catalyst growth areas. All freight in the document indicates travel through Brisbane airport or the Port of Sydney, whereas our region has significant plans for freight through Newcastle Airport and the Port of Newcastle. Transport orientated development is focused on the existing TOD stations however, planning should be developed for all the other stations that have future TOD potential so that we are ready for future population expansion.

Walking and cycling prioritisation – it would be desirable to see a commitment that walking and cycling be incorporated into all projects funded by Transport for NSW, with shared pathways, pedestrian crossings and refuge islands prioritised in all new road developments.

Climate change - is addressed only as a long-term objective with no short- or medium-term actions.

Mobile black spots on the Central Coast and Newcastle Line - There is very poor mobile reception on the railway line between Wyee and Cardiff in the Lake Macquarie LGA. A short-term initiative to improve phone coverage would assist in making train travel more attractive for commuters until faster or high-speed rail services are delivered.

Regional airports are an important transport asset for the region - Several maps within the draft plan identify Maitland and Singleton aerodromes as Regional Airports. Cessnock Airport is not annotated on these plans, e.g., Figure 11 Hunter public transport network. Cessnock is the only Council owned and operated airport within the region that has capacity to support growth for evolving and future air transport needs for the region. Cessnock airport should be identified as a regional airport within the plan, and supported by actions which enable its growth and diversification for movement of freight, tourism and emergency services.

3. Specific Feedback on Section 6: Realising the Vision

The following are changes, improvements or suggestions regarding the Draft Initiatives included in section 6:

#6 The John Hunter Hospital provides more than just hospital services. It will be a significant growth precinct that needs strong planning for transport access.

#12 The document acknowledges the catalytic role of the Newcastle Light Rail in urban transformation but does not specify further extensions other than this initiative providing transit



corridor preservation to Broadmeadow. There is no mention of extensions beyond this connection. Planning could be undertaken in the short-medium term to acknowledge the business case already completed for extension to the John Hunter precinct.

#15 Strengthen this initiative to include working with Councils on identifying and seeking funding for the missing elements of key cycleways routes in the Lower Hunter. Councils need funding for investigation and design of these key recreational cycleways– for example designing the key missing cycle routes in the Newcastle LGA, the Eleebana to Belmont cycleway, Maitland to Kurri Kurri cycleway gaps, Denman to Merriwa rail trail, Broke to Pokolbin link cycleway and key connecting cycleways in the Maitland growth areas.

#18 The Newcastle link road planning should address capacity constraints and designing for a direct connection to the Summerhill Waste Management Facility so that the truck movements will be accommodated.

#28 Strengthen this initiative to include a business case or other investigation into how and when the Maitland to Cessnock passenger rail would become viable (see methodology comment above)

#40,45 Strengthen these initiatives with transport easements along key routes to the airport such that bus priority or bus rapid transit is facilitated.

#42 Improving connections and service frequency to the High Speed Rail Station will be critical. A short – medium term initiative should be to plan for these connections and services.

#53 Strengthen this initiative to complete an investigation of using the Lower Hunter Freight Bypass to include passenger rail to connect to future residential growth areas around West Wallsend (HCCDC land) and connecting the potential North West Lake Macquarie growth area (LMCC)