

## Train to Cessnock

# Response to Cessnock City Council's 2023 Traffic and Transport Strategy

### Summary of our response

Train to Cessnock recognises the demographic forecasting that led to the release of the 2023 Cessnock Traffic and Transport Strategy (CTTS), which updates Council's 2018 CTTS. Strategic planning is an important task for council to undertake, and it informs many other activities related to the LGA – for example, the 2018 CTTS was a key source of background information used to develop 'The Case for the Train to Cessnock' – setting out very clearly the dearth of effective public transport available in the Cessnock LGA and clearly expressing the need for this to be remedied.

In this light, the most notable feature of the 2023 CTTS is the absence of any meaningful discussion of public transport. With the forecast rapid growth in population in the LGA, this absence is astounding; surely such an increase means that the calls for provision of effective public transport should be louder in the 2023 CTTS than in the 2018 CTTS.

Our response below has four components:

1. To remind Council of some of the many statements in the 2018 CTTS that clearly set out the need for enhanced public transport to the Cessnock LGA. These needs are only increasing with the revised forecasts now available.
2. An argument that the highest and best use of the existing Maitland to Cessnock (Bellbird) rail corridor to the people of Cessnock LGA is to operate a passenger rail service between Cessnock and Newcastle.
3. In the absence of any public transport strategy set out in the 2023 CTTS, we have outlined one in this response, centred around passenger rail services using the existing Maitland to Cessnock rail corridor and enhanced rail services on the corridor from Maitland to Greta, Branxton and Singleton.
4. Specific responses to the Preferred Road Network Plan set out by Council in the 2023 CTTS, focussing on the plan's proposed usage of the Maitland to Cessnock rail corridor and the impacts if passenger services are restored.

Overall, our recommendation is that Council should actively support a plan to repurpose the existing Maitland to Cessnock (Bellbird) rail corridor to its highest and best use: to operate a passenger rail service between Cessnock and Newcastle and thereby to provide a vital public transport spine to around 50,000 people who live along or near the corridor. We believe this plan is embodied in the Train to Cessnock proposal as outlined in The Case for the Train to Cessnock.

This primary recommendation has two corollaries:

1. Council should revisit the 2023 CTTS to include a public transport vision and strategy, with the centrepiece being to seek that Transport for NSW moves to establish, as a matter of priority, a passenger rail service between Cessnock, Maitland and Newcastle. Other initiatives to be pursued are to enhance passenger rail services on the corridor between Maitland and Singleton, and to establish and enhance a feeder network of bus routes throughout Cessnock, Kurri Kurri and nearby communities.
2. Council should revisit the Preferred Road Network Plan set out in the 2023 CTTS to take into account the operation of passenger train services between Maitland and Bellbird. Three specific areas of the plan are in conflict or require reconsideration, namely the use of the rail corridor for the Bellbird to Duffie Drive connection, the at-grade crossing of the Northcote Drive connection, and the suggestion to repurpose the rail corridor for light rail, bike paths or other uses.

We note that the execution of the Train to Cessnock would be a State Government responsibility and thus is in some way out of the remit of Council. However, it is folly for Council to be proposing the loss of an asset that could be used provide a vital service to the community Council purports to serve. In contrast, Council should be active and loud in lobbying the State Government to establish the Train to Cessnock, and should be using documents such as the 2023 CTTS to show how this corridor is integral to meeting the needs of a rapidly growing community that is woefully underserved by public transport.

This response to the 2023 CTTS should be read in conjunction with our document "The Case for the Train to Cessnock," which is available for download from our website [www.traintocessnock.org](http://www.traintocessnock.org).

## 1. The need for better public transport in Cessnock LGA

What is astounding about the 2023 Cessnock LGA Traffic and Transport Strategy is the complete lack of consideration of public transport. This is particularly disappointing given that the prior strategy, the 2018 CTTS, clearly set out the need for enhanced public transport.

The following extracts from the 2018 CTTS highlight the call included in that document for better public transport options. This call should only get louder with the substantial upwards revision of population growth in the LGA.

**Community Consultation (2018 CTTS p20):** Inadequate Public Transport is rated as the No. 2 Key Traffic and Transport issue in Cessnock LGA, raised in 20% of responses.

Feedback comments recorded in the 2018 CTTS include:

- The times the buses run wouldn't get me to work on time or way too early.
- University services do not extend throughout the day - attending evening classes by bus is impossible.

**Mode Share (2018 CTTS p20):** Public transport makes up 3% of all trips made in the Cessnock LGA (presumably because public transport options are inadequate -see above).

**Ageing Population (2018 CTTS p 29):** "Forecast population data shows an expected increase in the percentage of Cessnock LGA residents that will be under the age of 20 and over the age of 65 out to the year 2041, consistent with the State average. These age groups typically have a greater reliance on public transport."

**Car Dependence (2018 CTTS p 31):** "While Cessnock LGA is expected to continue to be a car-dependent city, a balanced investment in public and active transport infrastructure is required to provide greater choice of travel modes."

**Modal Priorities: Public Transport (2018 CTTS p80):** "Increasing the use of public transport is a fundamental need of the Cessnock community and to support future growth in the region in a sustainable way. If the public transport network is to achieve this, it will require considerable expansion and improvement, and best practice techniques must be adopted to improve passenger experiences, with emphasis on:

- developing a public transport network of direct, frequent services on strategic routes linking Cessnock's towns and villages with other regional centres;
- supporting the trunk public transport spines with local buses that extend coverage to areas not serviced by high-frequency transport services; and
- developing a connected network that services the full range of destinations within the urban area, based around key transfer points. "

We recognise that Cessnock City Council does not carry the responsibility for provision of public transport; this is a state government responsibility. However, the absence of any meaningful discussion of public transport within a "long-term vision ... to guide transport related decision making between now and 2041" (2023 CTTC p4) diminishes the document and the vision it purports to contain.

## 2. The highest and best use for the Maitland to Cessnock rail corridor

Our document 'The Case for the Train to Cessnock' sets out what we believe to be the compelling case for the NSW Government to acquire the Maitland to Cessnock rail corridor from its current owners, upgrade it as appropriate to provide an effective public transport service, and reintroduce passenger rail services as a matter of urgency. We believe that this is the highest and best use for the rail corridor, in terms of the value provided to the community.

The Maitland to Cessnock rail corridor is currently in a serviceable condition and could be used to operate a train at very short notice (clearing the disused wagons off the corridor would be an obvious task to be done prior to any train operating). The upgrade outlined in 'The Case for the Train to Cessnock' is to allow high speed operation to provide a viable end to end journey time, and to provide passenger facilities such as stations and stabling. If the corridor is not used, it will deteriorate and may ultimately be lost – sections will be removed, equipment vandalised, trees grow, etc. The cost of restoring train services will increase dramatically and may become impossibly high.

To see this future, Council only need consider the ongoing fight to restore rail services between Casino and Murwillumbah. This corridor has been out of use for around 20 years. It is overgrown. Bridges are decaying and have been removed for safety. Tunnels are now dangerous as the tunnel lining is unstable. Despite community pressure and several studies, the barriers to restoring the line to operation are substantial and growing.

As the Cessnock community grows, the need for effective public transport will also grow, and the calls from the 2018 CTTS above will become more urgent. As noted in the 'The Case for the Train to Cessnock,' restoration of the corridor plus placement of stations at appropriate locations could provide a viable and usable public transport option to around 50,000 people that live in the suburbs directly surrounding stations, plus many more within a short distance. This was in 2021. The 2041 population will be much higher.

It is true that these suburbs also deserve a better road network, as outlined in the 2023 CTTS. However, this is not sufficient, and traps these communities into a high-cost car dependency. If one adult uses a car to get to work, a second car is necessary for another adult from that household to get to work, take kids to school, go shopping or whatever. How does a 16-year old get out and about, for example to education? How does a disabled or elder person that is unable to drive get about? The Train to Cessnock is an obvious and readily available answer, and (in the gamut of infrastructure projects) is a rapid solution to an entrenched problem.

Other potential uses for the Maitland to Cessnock rail corridor (alluded to in the 2023 CTTS) pale in value when compared to this option:

- Use of the corridor as a bike path takes what could be valuable transport asset used daily by thousands of residents, for work, education, travel, tourism, etc, and turns it into a recreation facility that may be used (at best) by a few hundred people each week. Further, with the Shiraz to Shore bike path already under construction, any potential users of a bike path will already be well supplied with bike routes throughout the LGA and connecting to Newcastle. To add additional bike paths to the detriment of effective and achievable public transport would be ludicrous.
- To consider light rail on the corridor is unnecessary and wasteful. The scope of upgrade of the corridor to accommodate light rail would be little different to any upgrade to accommodate heavy rail – indeed it may be more challenging because of the need to establish a new link between East Greta Junction and Maitland Station. A light rail solution would also mean change of train at Maitland, providing a slower journey time and hence a less functional public transport option. The Train to Cessnock solution of heavy rail passenger services connecting through to Newcastle is far superior.

The option of converting part of the corridor to a road, as suggested in the 2023 CTTS, is also a sub-optimal approach. Whilst it would provide some additional road capability and divert traffic around the congested Wollombi Road, it would also effectively eliminate the possibility of ever establishing an effective rail service into Cessnock and hence forever damage the prospect of useful public transport for the LGA. This would be a decision that generations to come would live to regret, and would forever complain about the short-sightedness of Council's decision making. (Having said that, we do have some suggestions below on how these two options can work together in some way).

### 3. A Public Transport Vision for Cessnock LGA

Given the lack of any vision for public transport in the 2023 CTTS, we propose the following, which is aligned with the best practice approach outlined in the 2018 CTTS (p80, quoted above).

#### Spine services based on rail

The LGA has two significant rail corridors, neither of which are being used in any meaningful way to provide useful public transport options to residents.

- **South Maitland Railway, Maitland to Cessnock / Bellbird via Kurri Kurri:** Coal operations on this corridor ceased operation in 2020 and, whilst the track remains in a reasonable condition and could accommodate traffic, it is now unused. Introduction of passenger trains between Newcastle and Cessnock / Bellbird using this corridor would provide a viable service to and between the most heavily populated areas of the LGA, including to many areas which have seen rapid population growth and more is forecast (e.g. Bellbird, Cliftleigh). This initiative is considered at length in our document "The Case for the Train to Cessnock."

- **Main North Railway, Maitland to Greta, Branxton and beyond:** Some 50 trains each way per day operate on the rail corridor from Newcastle to Maitland. Of these, only 6 trains each way operate west of Maitland, extending to Singleton, Muswellbrook or Scone. This does not provide a viable public transport option for LGA residents in Greta, Branxton, Huntlee or North Rothbury.

The introduction / upgrade of passenger rail services on both of these corridors to at least an hourly service both ways is viable and would be transformative in the level of public transport on offer to residents of Cessnock LGA. The service upgrade should be accompanied by station facilities to encourage mode transfer, such as bus stops, car parking, kiss and ride, and bike and e-scooter storage.

### Feeder services using buses

A local feeder bus network should be established to provide a connection between homes and communities that are located a greater distance from the rail corridors that form the spine of the public transport service. Bus services would connect to trains at the major stations of Bellbird, Cessnock and Kurri Kurri (Maitland to Cessnock Line) and Branxton (Main North Line).

Bus corridors and routes may reflect some or all of the current set of bus routes operating around Cessnock and Kurri Kurri. However, it would be appropriate to reconsider all routes based on need to provide for interchange with trains at the station locations. Bus frequency should be upgraded to operate at least hourly, with timetables established to align bus times with train services

The provision of a quality connecting train service would increase the attractiveness of the local bus routes to many residents, and vice versa, increasing ridership overall compared to current usage (which is limited).

The following are suggestions for additional routes that should be considered:

- **Kitchener to Cessnock and Branxton**, via Cessnock Station (change for train), Cessnock CBD, Nulkaba, Visitors Centre, North Rothbury, Huntlee, Branxton (change for train). This route provides a connection between population centres (Cessnock, Huntlee) and a link between the two spine corridors.
- **Pokolbin Loop**, via Cessnock Station (change for train), Cessnock CBD, Nulkaba, Visitors Centre, Pokolbin Village, Hunter Valley Gardens, Mount View, Cessnock CBD, Cessnock Station (change for train), with stops on request at wineries and other business en-route. This route would be a value-add for visitors, enabling public transport access via train and bus to key tourism sites.

### Other corridors

Additional, less frequent bus services could be retained for corridors such as Cessnock to Morisset, or perhaps Cessnock to Singleton via Broke.

### Priorities and actions in delivering this public transport vision

Priorities and actions to progress this public transport vision are as follows:

| No./ Priority | Action  | Rationale  |
|---------------|---|--|
| 1             | Council to support the Train to Cessnock initiative, and to actively lobby the NSW Government to introduce passenger train services on this corridor, as outlined in “The Case for the Train to Cessnock” by 2028. Also, engage with Maitland City Council to enlist its support and present a unified voice to government. | This is considered the priority 1 action as (1) it is the most significant public transport initiative available to the Cessnock LGA, and will make the greatest difference to the community, (2) There is a need to act now to preserve and use the corridor; there is an opportunity to complete the necessary upgrade works and introduce train services relatively cheaply, and every year delay will add to cost and impact of the work, and (3) establishing this corridor will act as a catalyst to all other public transport initiatives. |

| No./ Priority | Action  | Rationale  |
|---------------|---|--|
| 2             | Council to actively lobby the NSW Government to enhance passenger train services on the corridor west of Maitland, servicing Greta and Branxton, and for upgrade of Greta and Branxton stations to provide appropriate interchange facilities. Also, engage with Maitland, Singleton and Muswellbrook Councils to enlist their support and present a unified voice to government. | There is no risk of the existing rail corridor through Greta and Branxton being lost (as there is with the South Maitland Rail, Action 1), reducing the urgency of this action. However, this work is vital to creating the second public transport spine for the LGA and providing a service to growing communities, and has wider benefits for other LGAs. |
| 3             | Council to liaise with Transport for NSW to develop a feeder bus strategy that aligns with and supports the spine public transport corridors provided by the train services in Actions 1 and 2.   | Global experience shows that alignment between bus and rail services is key to providing a quality public transport offering and thereby to maximise ridership.  |
| 4             | Review plans for the road network and planned road upgrades to accommodate the necessary public transport infrastructure and flows, e.g. bus stops, turn-around bays, parking, etc.   |  |

#### 4. Comments on Council’s “Preferred Road Network Plan”

The primary focus of the 2023 CTTS appears to be to set out Council’s Preferred Road Network Plan to service the 2041 forecast traffic volumes.

The focus of Train To Cessnock is on establishing passenger train services between Maitland and Bellbird, and on providing a viable and effective public transport corridor to the citizens of the LGA. However, we also recognise that a robust road network will be integral to managing the forecast population growth, and so applaud Council for developing this plan and taking a forward-thinking approach to the issue. We have no comment on the logic or intent of the Preferred Road Network Plan.

We disagree strongly, however, with the Plan’s treatment of the rail corridor.

As per our document ‘The Case for the Train to Cessnock’, this rail corridor and the existing rail infrastructure provide the basis for an incredibly important asset for the community. The cost to establish passenger train services would be incredibly low compared to any other rail project in NSW and Australia.

With this context, the options for use of the rail corridor canvassed in the 2023 CTTS are short-sighted and regrettable, and must not proceed.

- We recognise the value of a road connection from Bellbird to Duffie Drive. However, re-purposing the rail corridor to achieve this would forever damage the prospect of establishing a passenger rail service to the primary urban area in the LGA (i.e. Cessnock) and to one of the fastest growing localities (i.e. Bellbird). Regardless, the Train to Cessnock proposal is for passenger rail services to be established between Maitland and Bellbird as a matter of priority, and we believe 2028 is a reasonable timeframe. If this eventuates, then the rail corridor will be unavailable for reuse as a road corridor, so an alternative would need to be found. We have included some additional thoughts on this below.
- Likewise, we recognise the value of the Northcote Steet Connector. However, we would suggest that Council give pause to planning of an at-grade crossing of the rail corridor, pending an indication from Transport for NSW of its intentions for the rail line in response to the Train to Cessnock proposal. Assuming the Train to Cessnock proposal is adopted, at minimum an at-grade crossing for this new connection would present an increased risk of road vehicle / train collision compared to the current overbridge or grade separation of the new connection; such an increase in risk may be difficult to justify. Further, an at-grade crossing would mean some disruption to traffic as trains passed. The treatment of this crossing should be reconsidered in the light of the Train to Cessnock proposal to ensure that appropriate decisions are made and investments are not wasted.

- The 2023 CTTS states that “further investigations are undertaken to determine ... the best use for the (Cessnock Branch Rail Line) corridor, either for active transport, or mixed with light rail”. Either of these mooted options, or any other option, will clearly provide substantially less community amenity than the Train to Cessnock proposal of introducing passenger rail trains between Bellbird and Newcastle, as discussed previously in this document.

In summary, in the context of our overall submission in response to the 2023 CTTS, the above three elements of the Preferred Road Network Plan should be reconsidered by Council to align with a plan to repurpose the existing Maitland to Cessnock (Bellbird) rail corridor to its highest and best use: to operate a passenger rail service between Cessnock and Newcastle and thereby to provide a vital public transport spine to around 50,000 people who live along or near the corridor.

#### **One option to enhance alignment between the Train to Cessnock and the Preferred Road Network Plan**

As noted above, the use of the rail corridor to achieve a road connection from Bellbird to Duffie Drive is in conflict with the Train to Cessnock proposal and, should the Train to Cessnock proceed, this will not be a viable option.

One partial solution to this issue may exist in the staging of these two projects:

- The base Train to Cessnock proposal is to use the rail existing corridor and rail infrastructure through Aberdare, Cessnock and Bellbird. This offers the quickest and cheapest way of establishing passenger rail services, and permits viable stations to be established at Cessnock near Turner Park, and at Bellbird. However, this alignment also bypasses central Cessnock and other population areas such as West Cessnock.
- Accordingly, we have identified a ‘Stage 2’ alignment which corrects this deficiency, and allows better placed station at Cessnock (near Vincent Street), West Cessnock and Aberdare, with the initial Cessnock station decommissioned. Refer to Section 10 of the Case for the Train to Cessnock.
- This Stage 2 alignment would also release a significant length of the existing rail corridor, from near Bellbird to near Turner Park. This would mean that this portion of the rail corridor could then be used for the Bellbird – Duffie Drive connector, with new segments at each end.
- In terms of timing, we propose that the initial Train to Cessnock project could be completed by 2028. The 2023 CTTS identifies the Bellbird – Duffie Drive connector being required by 2041. The following sequence appears quite viable:
  1. The Train to Cessnock is established in 2028, using the existing alignment through Cessnock and to Bellbird.
  2. The Stage 2 rail alignment through Cessnock is pursued soon thereafter, for completion say by 2035. This provides a better rail service to the people in Cessnock, but also releases part of the rail corridor.
  3. The Bellbird – Duffie Drive connector is designed then completed in 2041, making use of the available portion of the rail corridor.