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### **Opinion Piece for the Newcastle Herald Hunter Water's Role in a Growing Region**

I have been fortunate to live in some of the world's great cities. Places like London, Istanbul, and now Newcastle.

I love cities. I love their vibrancy, diversity and opportunities. Great cities thrive on creativity, forward thinking, and community centric decisions.

Since starting at Hunter Water in July, I've learnt plenty about our region and its water utility. It's an exciting time to have made the Hunter my new home, with cranes in the sky, new suburbs under development, and State Government funding for major transport infrastructure. The Hunter Regional Plan predicts the region's population will hit 862,000 by 2036, and calls for the public and private sectors and the community to work together in facilitating growth and opportunity in the region.

For Hunter Water, our role needs to go beyond laying pipes and building treatment plants.

Hunter Water's current 'purpose' is to "provide safe, reliable and efficient water and wastewater services to our community". While it's hard to argue with that objective, we need to aim higher.

In the early 90s, I managed the water supply in Oxfordshire, England, following a major cryptosporidium outbreak. For Thames Water, delivering a safe and reliable service was critical to ensuring the public's health was protected, and to retrieve the community's confidence in its water supply.

'Safe and reliable' is absolutely essential, but it's not everything.

At Hunter Water, we are unwavering in our dedication to protecting public health and the environment. However there is an opportunity to build on this solid foundation.

Hunter Water must play a role in delivering liveability, or helping to improve the lives of people right across our region. Hunter Water has a tremendous opportunity to enable its growth and sustainable development, and improve liveability for all by building strong partnerships and working closely with the University of Newcastle, local councils and the community.

A fine recent example of how working in partnership can improve liveability is Throsby Creek. This waterway is largely owned by Hunter Water, and for years had remained in a dilapidated state. Hunter Water's current regulatory role is to simply maintain stormwater channels, ensuring they're structurally sound and allow water to pass.

Over the past few years we have worked in partnership with the State Member for Newcastle, Newcastle City Council, Local Land Services, Roads and Maritime Services

and community to go beyond this basic regulatory focus, and to work in partnership towards delivering sustainability by improving the amenity of the waterway. Upgrades now tie into wider improvement to Islington Park and surrounds, turning it from a simple drainage asset to a genuine community asset.

We are changing our focus from bill paying customers to our broader community.

A focus on Hunter Water customers' alone doesn't capture tenants, water users or those who reside in our drinking water catchments.

Hunter Water exists primarily for its community. We work for our community, and our decision making needs to have the community at heart.

Work is underway now to prepare for the revised Lower Hunter Water Plan, the region's long term water planning document.

At the current rate of growth, we are about 20 years away from requiring additional capacity from our water sources.

However, the planning process for major projects take time, and require that a decision on sources needs to be made much sooner.

A question to be answered through creativity and innovation is, what if we could build time to make better decisions?

Working in partnership with the community, we have an opportunity to potentially add 10 years to the timeline. In economic terms that could be worth \$10 million per year for each year gained, enhancing our ability to engage with the community and other stakeholders about what options will work best.

These benefits are only achievable through creative, collaborative thinking, and Hunter Water has started the conversation with regulators, local councils, communities, researchers and other water utilities to help understand how we can challenge the status quo.

Expect more than just safe and reliable services from Hunter Water as we work to make this region even greater.

DR JIM BENTLEY  
Managing Director, Hunter Water