

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES – COFFS HARBOUR

RESPONSE TO PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY

Introduction

Based on the uncorrected transcript supplied by the General Purpose Standing Committee No.4 regarding the public hearing held in Coffs Harbour on 21 November 2005, it is assumed the following claims regarding Pramax Communications were made by the witness, Mr Bruce Alexander Scanlon:

1. That Pramax Communications is a public relations company employed by the RTA to promote the views of the RTA
2. That Community Focus Group members have not had opportunities to provide input into meeting agendas
3. That CFG members have not had adequate opportunities to provide input into the consultation process because the meeting facilitator curbed discussion
4. That complaints about the meeting facilitator remain unresolved
5. That the minutes of meetings are not provided to CFG members within two weeks of a meeting as set out in the CFG charter
6. That the minutes of meetings are checked by other representatives of the RTA who do not attend the meetings before being released to CFG members and that the minutes are posted on the RTA web site before being adopted or corrected by the CFG
7. That the minutes of meetings are taken by the wife of the facilitator, a partner in Pramax Communications, and therefore are not an "independent" or accurate record
8. That all members of the present focus group agree with the views put forward by the witness, Mr Scanlon
9. That at a later stage during the process, a new community member was appointed to the CFG who did not represent any interest group/community section.

Responses

The following responses are made to the claims set out above:

1. Pramax Communications is a community consultation company, not a public relations company as alleged. It was engaged indirectly by the RTA to carry out the community consultation for the Coffs Harbour Highway Planning Strategy and to facilitate the meetings of the three Community Focus Groups involved in the strategy's development. Pramax Communications does not conceive, write or prepare any RTA publicity/public relations material such as advertisements, slogans or media releases. It is a community consultation company that specialises in large infrastructure and community-based projects. For the past seven years, the company has been engaged on large infrastructure projects for Local and State Government authorities, principally urban water and sewerage strategies and Pacific Highway upgrading programs. Its history of consultation engagements include the development of the Ballina Shire Urban Water Management Strategy for Ballina Shire Council, the Drought Management Program for the North Coast Water Authority, the Coffs Harbour Sewerage Strategy for Coffs Harbour City Council, the Gosford-Wyong Council's Water Authority's Stream Flow Management Strategy, and the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines' Logan River and Tributary River Habitat and Processes Study.

A copy of the company's capability statement and history of engagements can be supplied to the Committee. The Committee is referred to the minutes of the meeting of the Sapphire to Woolgoolga Northern CFG (Woolgoolga Bypass) held on 10 May 2005 at which the witness Mr Scanlon made the claim that Pramax was a PR company. He was advised then that the claim was incorrect.

2. Community Focus Group members have always had an opportunity to provide input into meeting agendas. As set out in the charter adopted by the CFG: "The project team will be responsible for compiling agendas for CFG meetings, however CFG members may nominate issues for discussion at the preceding CFG meeting". Agendas for meetings also have included a "Matters Arising" section to allow for issues to be raised by CFG members.
3. In relation to the claim that "CFG members have not had adequate opportunities to provide input into the consultation process because the meeting facilitator curbed discussion", it is pointed out that this accusation was made by the witness Mr Scanlon at one meeting of the current CFG that the witness is a member of. While the role of the facilitator is to encourage and allow discussion on agenda items by all members of a group, it is also his role to progress through an agenda for a meeting – that is, to achieve a balance. The Committee is referred to the minutes of the meeting held on 10 May 2005 where the facilitator allowed discussion to continue beyond the time allocated for an item on the agenda. When another member of the CFG requested that they move on, the facilitator assessed that the discussion was getting bogged down and ensured the major points raised had been recorded. As stated previously, the facilitator has facilitated the three CFG groups involved in the development of the strategy. The three groups have had 40 meetings since the project started in September 2001. The facilitator has also facilitated numerous community reference/liaison/focus groups, which have operated for both short and lengthy periods of time, for the engagements listed previously. At no time has such a claim been made by any member of the community groups involved in previous engagements or in current engagements other than the meeting held on 10 May 2005.
4. In regard to complaints about the meeting facilitator remaining unresolved, the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4 is referred to the minutes of the meeting of the Sapphire to Woolgoolga Northern CFG (Woolgoolga Bypass) held on 10 May 2005. The minutes list as an item to be actioned that the witness Mr Scanlon provide the RTA in writing of any probity issues concerning the facilitator. It is understood that to date, the RTA has not received anything in writing from Mr Scanlon.
5. Regarding minutes of meetings not being provided to CFG members within two weeks of a meeting as set out in the CFG charter, the Committee is referred to the minutes of the Sapphire to Woolgoolga Northern CFG (Woolgoolga Bypass) held on 2 March 2005 where lengthy discussion was held about the minutes. The project manager acknowledged there was a need to put more effort into getting the minutes back to members and he would endeavour to do that. The minutes of the 2 March 2005 meeting were distributed to members of the group on 11 March 2005. The minutes of the subsequent meeting held on 10 May 2005 were distributed to members of the group on 18 May 2005.

6. In regard to item 6 of the previous page, the Committee is referred to the minutes of the Sapphire to Woolgoolga Northern CFG (Woolgoolga Bypass) held on 2 March 2005 when the witness Mr Scanlon also claimed that the minutes went to various departments for "cleansing" before being issued to CFG members. At the meeting, the project manager stated this was not correct. "The Notes were placed on the RTA's website. This meant they had to go through a process for placing on the website. Forwarding the Notes on did not mean the reason was for other people to go through the Notes and agree or not agree with them. The approvals process (for placing the notes on the website) simply had to happen." In regard to the minutes being posted on the RTA website following their distribution to CFG members, this was a process that was adopted by the CFG. The Committee is referred to the minutes of meeting No.10 of the Woolgoolga Area CFG where the process was reviewed: "Discussion followed on the merits of maintaining the previous practice or adopting a new method. The group decided the previous practice of posting the Notes on the web site after they had been provided to members should be maintained. Any amendments would be recorded in the Notes of the following meeting before they were accepted." The witness Mr Scanlon was an attendee at that meeting.
7. During the strategy's development, the minutes of CFG meetings were previously taken by stenographers engaged by Pramax Communications from a Coffs Harbour professional secretarial company. The Committee is again referred to the minutes of the Sapphire to Woolgoolga Northern CFG (Woolgoolga Bypass) held on 2 March 2005 and the meeting held on 10 May 2005 when it was pointed out that, one of the reasons for the delays in getting the minutes out to the members was the time it took the stenographers to transcribe the minutes and return them to Pramax Communications. At that meeting held on 2 March 2005, the witness Mr Scanlon claimed that he did not have issues with the accuracy of the meeting minutes when they were taken by the stenographers from the secretarial service. The claim was dealt with at the following meeting of the group held on 10 May 2005. The Committee is referred to the minutes of that meeting where it was accepted that of the 17 meetings of the current and previous CFG which the witness Mr Scanlon has been a member of, only the minutes of three of the meetings have been taken by Janice Smith and the Committee is referred to the minutes of meetings 1-17 for the accuracy/number of amendments made to previous meeting minutes.
8. Regarding item 8 of the Introduction of this response that all members of the present focus group agree with the views put forward by the witness Mr Scanlon, it is pointed out that only two meetings of the present focus group have been held out of a total of 40 overall meetings of the three CFGs. The Committee is again referred to the minutes of the meetings of the Sapphire to Woolgoolga Northern CFG (Woolgoolga Bypass) held on 2 March 2005 and 10 May 2005 for recorded dissension on this claim by other members of the present group. Mr Scanlon received some support from two or three other CFG members. One CFG member supported Pramax. Four other CFG members did not participate in the discussion and their views are unknown. Neither of the other two CFGs have expressed concerns regarding Pramax Communications.
9. Regarding item 9, the CFG member referred to was not brought into the strategy's development at a later stage during the process as claimed by the witness Mr Scanlon. He attended his first meeting of the CFG on 22 May 2002, which represented the fifth meeting of the group. The first meeting of the group was held on 21 November 2001. The member was identified at his first meeting as a representative of the Bucca community which was impacted by a community-raised option that the RTA had agreed to investigate and which did not have a representative on the CFG. The Committee is referred to the minutes of the meeting of 22 May 2002.

The above responses only address comments made by Mr Scanlon in regard to Pramax Communications.