

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES

Organisation:

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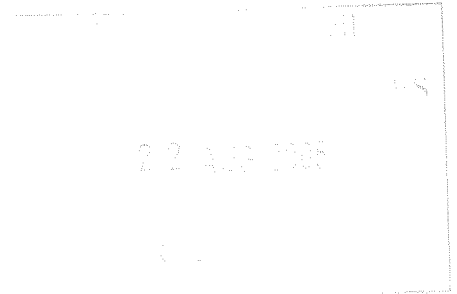
Subject:

Summary

SUBMISSION INTO THE PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES
NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No 4

Submission from: Paul McLisky

Address:



PRELIMINARY:

I was a member of the initial Community Liaison Group (CLG) and am currently a member of the re-formed group, representing the residents of Coorabell, Coolamon Scenic Drive and Fowlers Lane. I reside on the northern edge of the Investigation Area.

“Plateau” has been used in this submission to describe the elevated land on top and to the west of the coastal escarpment, and includes the lower lying areas of Byron Creek, which cuts through the escarpment in an east-west direction.

“Coastal plains” has been used to describe the coastal plains to the east of the escarpment, much of which in the Investigation Area is drained, cleared, levelled and planted with sugar cane.

COMMUNITY INFORMATION SESSIONS:

I attended the initial Community Information Sessions at Ewingsdale at which there was considerable information exchange between the RTA/ARUP and the attendees. This was collected and later collated by the RTA. Even at that early stage there was widespread concern that the study area was too small, and that the pre-determined entry and exit points (particularly to the southern section) precluded some potentially viable route options.

There was no reason given as to why the Investigation Area was restricted to the plateau and did not include the coastal flats to the east of the escarpment other than the fact that the Ballina bypass (which was already an adopted route) terminated on the plateau at the top of Ross Lane, which runs from the coastal plain up to the top of the plateau.

COMMUNITY LIAISON GROUPS:

At the first several CLGs these issues were discussed between the members and with the RTA. The consensus of an overwhelming majority of the members became that the Investigation Area should be widened, and this was expressed repeatedly to the RTA's Shane Higgins, who eventually committed to seeking an extension of the Investigation Area. Mr. Higgins stated to the CLG that if the Investigation Area was widened some of the CLG members would have to vacate to make way for representatives of the newly incorporated areas. There was general agreement with this, and several of the CLG members indicated that they might be prepared to step down to make way for new members. There was concern by the CLG that the decision whether or not to expand the Investigation Area was to take so much time (several months), as much of the work of the Group up to the date of the intake of new members would have to be duplicated once they joined, to bring them up to speed. The RTA stated that they could not get a decision quicker.

The expanded study area was eventually announced, and rather than seeking some resignations and adding new members to the existing group the decision was made to disband the existing group and form a new CLG (CLG 2). The original group had apparently been formed with a balance of representatives from three areas, north, central and southern (it is not clear to what extent the population density of these areas was taken into account when allocating the numbers to each area). The

members of CLG 2 were to be recommended to the RTA by the Independent Chairperson after her consideration of the application forms.

The consequent group was weighted so heavily to representatives from the new area (the coastal plains) that it has since been a rubber stamp for their total rejection of any route in that area, and insistence that the existing highway route be followed. This has resulted in biased evaluation criteria that are designed to influence the route selection away from the coastal plains and onto the plateau.

USE OF COASTAL PLAIN FOR FULL LENGTH OF UPGRADE:

I submit to the Inquiry that the current Investigation should also be inquiring into the failure of the RTA and the Department of Transport to extend the Investigation Area to encompass the flat land to the east of Ewingsdale in the northern section of the area (thus giving a coastal plain route along the North-South length of the Investigation Area), as it may have been possible to construct a new highway on a Greenfield corridor along the coastal plains without having to go up onto the plateau at all. This would have necessitated a tunnel under Coopers Shoot, but would replace a suggested tunnel under St. Helena.

When one considers the amount of energy that will be wasted over the expected life span of the route (forever?), raising the vehicles and their loads up the escarpment onto the plateau only to descend a few kilometres later, some serious questions need to be asked about the Investigation Area selection process.

LEVEL OF UPGRADE:

The design criteria of the upgrade have changed since the Ewingsdale-Brunswick Heads section of the Upgrade was completed and the Bangalow/Ewingsdale section (Option B modified) was chosen as the route for that section.

i) Design Speed and Gradient: The design speed has been lifted from 100 kph to 110 kph. This has served to lower the maximum gradient up hills, which will mean more cut and fill for a steep incline. This becomes a major issue when passing through the steep slopes on the plateau, not only when ascending and descending the escarpment, but in many areas on the escarpment due to the valleys and ridges. In some areas, such as the St. Helena hill (McLeod's Shoot) these will have to be massive cuts if the existing highway route is followed, as the road will have to be dug into the hillside and the lower areas ramped to create the reduced gradient.

ii) Curve radius: The radius of the curves has been increased, which will further limit the ability of the highway to avoid constraint areas such as villages, vegetation, springs, rainforest remnants etc.

iii) Local traffic access: The highway is now to have no access to local traffic, rather than the limited access status of the previous highway designs. This has resulted in the need to provide a local access road to one and possibly two sides of the new highway, depending on the activities carried out on either side of the highway and whether there are underpasses or bridges for local traffic to access the side road (s). In hilly areas where there has to be cutting and filling and local access roads on two sides of the highway the width of the corridor would be massive; this would be particularly the case in the hill leading down to Bangalow from Lawlers Lane and the McLeod's Shoot/St. Helena hill. Note that the lookout at the top of the St. Helena hill provides one of the most iconic coastal views in NSW and possibly Australia, and will be all but destroyed if the existing highway route proceeds. The width of the corridor in these and other steep areas could be up to 500 metres, consisting of a central gutter, two lanes each side, provision of a third lane, embankments, cuttings etc., one or two local access roads on either side and fencing. The way to minimise this would be to run the highway along flat ground of the coastal plain where embankments and

cuttings were not necessary or minimal, and local access roads are not required due to sparse activity and limited severance of existing landholdings and communities.

OBJECTIONS TO THE EXPANSION OF THE STUDY AREA:

The objections to the expansion of the study area have come predominately from people who are concerned that their properties will be adversely affected by the positioning of the highway in the expanded section. The rationales given in their arguments to the issues of road user and adjacent community safety, the amount of community disruption per capita to the local residents, the long-term benefits of each option in terms of long term economy, and the retention of prime agricultural land are transparently one sided. These arguments would not have been made if the expansion of the highway was made in another direction, e.g. to the West.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE POSITIONING OF THE EXISTING HIGHWAY:

The existing highway was not developed as a through road, but a local road connecting small settlements whose main means of freight transport was by boat from the larger centres of Sydney and Brisbane. The roads in many areas took the higher ground as the settlements were made in the areas most suitable for agriculture, which in many local areas were the volcanic red soiled plateaus which had not eroded through to the underlying and less fertile clay based loams.

Thus we have inherited a road system laid out in a way that was never intended to provide a route for modern transport needs. Yet objections to the extension of the Investigation Area have been lodged based on the presumption that the upgraded highway should follow the route of the existing highway, as if it (the existing highway) was a suitable route for the next century of freight traffic, with its projections of phenomenal increase of 200% in the next 10 years.

The objectors have invoked a sort of “Original Sin” concept which condemns the existing route to perpetual upgrade no matter how illogical or inappropriate that would be, and seek to circumvent the consideration of other options.

IMPACT ON PRIME AGRICULTURAL LAND:

The highway route on the plateau would be through prime agricultural land for its entire length. The impact on the viability of the existing agricultural producers can only be estimated, but considering the width of the corridor (see above) and the intensive agricultural development on the plateau, disruption would be considerable, particularly when value added tourism is taken into account. Severance would create considerable social disruption.

A route on the coastal plains however would pass through agriculturally inferior land with significantly lower population density and development. In quantifiable terms any valuation would show that the financial value of the land on the plateau would be significantly higher than that of the coastal plain, which is inferior agricultural land to the red soil of the plateau.

IMPACT OF B-DOUBLES ON HIGHWAY:

The introduction of B-Doubles on the existing carriageway has been disastrous for many of those people living close to the highway. Given the fairly primitive state of some of the existing segments and their use by slow farm vehicles (livestock trucks, tractors etc.) it is impossible to say how many incapacities and deaths have occurred due to the adoption of the Pacific Highway as a route for B-doubles, however there has undeniably been a impact. There are also well documented health concerns relating to the effects of noise and diesel exhaust fumes on residents beside freight corridors , which have been addressed by other submissions.

It is in my opinion very questionable whether expenditure on a fully restricted access highway with the design criteria necessary to serve the needs of a freight corridor and B-doubles/triples is appropriate for the coastal region of the North Coast given the projected population increases and the inevitability of the coastal lands becoming intensively populated.

COMMUNITY CONSENSUS:

The expansion of the Investigation Area of the T2E section of the highway upgrade has been divisive for the community, and it is almost certain that this will become worse before the final route is chosen. Groups with geographical or ideological bases have formed into conflicting factions that are putting perceived self interest before safety and the long term interest of the wider community. I believe the expansion of the Investigation Area to have been necessary to enable legitimate alternative routes to be assessed.

I believe the one general principle that all of the groups and residents would support is a restriction of through freight traffic on the Pacific Highway, with an alternative route along the Bruxner or New England highways. This could be achieved with a toll on trucks using the Pacific Highway to counteract the trucks' additional cost of using the Bruxner or New England routes.

I also believe that there would be widespread support for the affirmative promotion of railways for inter state and inter city freight rather than fossil fuel burning internal combustion engines.

End of Submission