

**Submission
No 47**

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES: COFFS HARBOUR

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Subject:

Summary

General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4
Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Pacific
Highway Upgrades
By the Bypass Action Network (Coffs Harbour)



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Impact of the proposed upgrades of the Pacific Highway between Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga including:

The Sapphire – Woolgoolga Upgrade
Woolgoolga Deviation (Option E)
Woolgoolga – Wells Crossing Upgrade

The Bypass Action Network submission will address the following terms of reference laid down by the **General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4** for this Inquiry.

1) [Impact of the proposed Pacific Highway Upgrade between Sapphire and Woolgoolga, including the Woolgoolga Deviation and the Woolgoolga – Wells Crossing Upgrade](#)

b) The level of upgrade proposed for these sections and the remainder of the Pacific Highway;

c) The impact of the highway upgrades on prime agricultural land;

e) The impacts of B-doubles on the Pacific Highway;

f) The impacts of interstate heavy transport on the Pacific Highway and of the mixing of interstate and local transport;

g) The impacts of interstate truck transport on the New England Highway;

h) The significance of the New England Highway as a designated national transport route;

i) Existing or proposed strategic transport plans that seek to deal with the forecast doubling by 2025 of the NSW freight task;

j) The significance of statements by the Minister for Infrastructure Planning and Natural Resources that the Pacific Highway is dedicated as a regional road;

3) [Any other related matters](#)

Introduction

The Bypass Action Network (BAN), representing 10 community groups from the Northern Beaches of Coffs Harbour, was formed at a public meeting on 3rd May, 2005 to offer **unified** opposition to the 3 RTA Pacific Highway Upgrade projects proposed for our area.

These projects are the Sapphire – Woolgoolga Upgrade, the Woolgoolga Deviation (Option E) and the Woolgoolga – Wells Crossing Upgrade.

The History of Pacific Highway Policy

RTA North Coast Road Strategy (1993)

In 1993, when faced with the decision to build a new 600 km freeway standard Motorway Pacific or upgrade the existing Pacific Highway route, the State Government of NSW adopted the policy, recommended by the RTA, of:

“Upgrading sections of the existing highway prone to accidents including where justified local bypasses of Urban Centres” (RTA North Coast Road Strategy-1993)

A view expressed by the RTA at that time was that communities on the Highway route would be disadvantaged if a different route was taken for the Motorway Pacific.

Funding Arrangements for the Pacific Highway 1996-2009

From 1996 – 2006 the NSW Government contributed \$160 million per annum towards Pacific Highway Upgrades while the Federal Government contributed only \$60 million per annum.

In 2004 AusLink was established by the Federal Government to better manage investment in the National Network of road and rail infrastructure in Australia.

According to the AusLink Whitepaper, spending by AusLink for the period 2004 – 2009 will total \$9.2 billion Australia wide.

\$7.7 billion is allocated for the National Network and this is to be shared between the 6 states and 2 territories for rail and road projects.

NSW will receive \$2505 million with the allocation for the Pacific Highway being \$645 million between 2004-2009.

Table 1 shows government funding for the Pacific Highway from 1996 – 2009.

Table 1

	Total Pacific Highway Funding 1996 – 2006	Total Pacific Highway Funding 2006 - 2009
NSW Government	\$1600 million (\$1.6 billion)	\$480 million
Federal Government	\$ 600 million	\$480 million
Combined Funding Total	\$ 2200 million (\$2.2 billion)	\$960 million

The AusLink agreement between the Federal and State Governments signed recently provides \$320 million per annum for the Pacific Highway for the next 3 years.

At the opening of AusLink the former leader of the National Party, John Anderson made this statement

“It's terribly important that we now move as rapidly as possible to develop a national seamless rail link, and I reckon motorists understand instinctively that we need to fix rail, otherwise we tread water. We do the roads up; we put a lot of taxpayers' money into roads; only to find that they're choked, prematurely again, by trucks, with the exploding freight task before us. **Fixing the rail network will significantly enhance the value of the money we're putting into roads at the same time as it will save fuel and reduce emissions and make the whole system more efficient.**”

Unfortunately Mr Anderson also suggested the upgrade of the Pacific Highway to dual carriageway could be completed by 2016.

To his credit, when he eventually met with former Roads Minister, Michael Costa in 2005 he was conceding the dual carriageway proposal could take 25 years at current funding levels.

This was based on the RTA cost estimate of \$8 billion (in 2005 dollar terms) for upgrading the Pacific Highway to dual carriageway. (\$320 M x 25 = \$8 billion)

Over recent weeks the NRMA have joined the Pacific Highway campaign, also suggesting dual carriageway could be completed in 10 years.

To **their** credit they have undertaken audits of the Highway as late as November 5th and have been quoted as saying that current project delays for the Pacific Highway total 27 years and that cost overruns amount to \$467 million.

If we take into account current funding levels, project delays, cost overruns and inflation there is a good chance the upgrading of the Pacific Highway, including deviations could take over 50 years to complete.

Consider Coffs Harbour's 5 Proposed Pacific Highway Upgrade Projects.

Table 2 shows estimated costings for the 5 proposed upgrades within the Coffs LGA . They account for about 73 kilometres or less than one fifth of the remaining dual carriageway works

Table 2

Coffs Harbour Upgrades	Estimated Cost (In 2005 figures)	Approximate Length of Sections	Estimated Commencement Date
Englands Road – Lyons Road	\$ 73 million	5.3 km	completed
Bonville Deviation	\$ 150 million	10 km	2006
Coffs Harbour Deviation (IS1 and IN2)	\$ 500 million	10 km	

Sapphire – Woolgoolga	\$ 900 million	15 km	2011
Woolgoolga Deviation (Option E)	\$ 300 million	10 km	
Woolgoolga – Wells Crossing	\$ 650 million	28 km	
Total	\$2500 million	73 km	

These costings will be greater when the following are taken into account.

- **Cost overruns of up to 10%** occur in 90% of RTA projects (Staysafe Report)
- Economic forecasts suggest a **4% inflation rate in 2006** – at 4% inflation \$8 billion of roadworks in 10 years time will require \$11.8 billion.
- **Project delays** must be factored into budget estimates for highway upgrade projects. For example, the Bonville Deviation was due for completion in 2003 and yet it is unlikely to be completed until 2008.

The RTA is facing over 300 voluntary redundancies. This has resulted in **additional delays for several road projects**, some already announced by the Roads Minister.

BAN is concerned that RTA cost projections for the Pacific Highway upgrade to dual carriageway are understated and have not been verified by an independent financial analyst. Upgrade costs in 2005 dollar terms are fine but what are the costs if the project drags on for 30, 40 or 50 years?

In light of recent NRMA findings of nearly half a billion dollars in RTA cost overruns a moratorium on all new RTA projects should be put in place immediately.

Coffs Harbour Pacific Highway Safety Works Required Now

A commitment to **improving safety standards** along the Pacific Highway route from Corindi Beach to Sapphire must be agreed to by the State Government as a matter of urgency.

BAN believes this can be achieved for less than \$200 million without resorting to the major upgrades of the Pacific Highway proposed by the RTA. Our solutions will be presented by BAN's Technical Officer, Steve Moody.

In the interim there is an **urgent** need for the **removal of heavy interstate transport from the Pacific Highway**, a move also supported by the Coffs Harbour and Byron Shire Councils and several northern based community groups.

The Railway Technical Society of Australasia “suggests that transferring interstate freight to rail should be viewed as an integrated strategy to improve road safety.” According to them, RTA data from 1993-2003 suggests 36% of all fatalities between Maitland and the Queensland border involved articulated trucks (Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry).

Meanwhile BAN, along with Coffs Harbour City Council, has written to the NSW Minister for Roads seeking 80 kph speed limits between Arrawarra and the 60 kph zones in the Coffs CBD until other safety improvements are in place. Accident statistics for **country** NSW in 2003 reveal that the number of fatalities in 80 kph speed zones was 36 compared to 159 in 100 kph speed zones.(STAYSAFE Report)

We also support the safety upgrades of local intersections by developers such as has occurred at Moonee Beach. Given the huge impost on councils for local roads funding, this helps take the burden off the public purse.

Pacific Highway Upgrades Impacts on Coffs Harbour

Local commuters and tourist traffic should not be sharing this highway with B-doubles and HAZMAT heavy vehicles as well as faster travelling interstate vehicles.

Coffs Harbour City Council's report on the Pacific Highway (Ordinary Meeting of 16 December 2004) states:

"Traffic studies have shown that there has been an increase in heavy vehicle volumes on the Pacific Highway as a result of completion of key Pacific Highway upgrade projects. For example average daily heavy vehicle movements on the Pacific Highway through Coffs Harbour were around 1450 prior to the opening of the Yelgun to Chinderah upgrade, which has increased to 1700 since opening.

The long time frames previously discussed which are being considered for the Highway Deviation options means that the Coffs Harbour community will potentially bear the negative road safety and amenity impacts of high heavy vehicle volumes on the Pacific Highway for some time to come."

There are at least 40 toxic contaminants in diesel exhausts that residents living and working in the CBD and West Coffs will come to know very well as Pacific Highway traffic levels increase. This will be exacerbated by atmospheric inversions that occur in the Coffs Harbour basin, trapping pollutants in the lower layers of the atmosphere.

The RTA plan is to proceed with the Bonville Deviation, then the Sapphire to Woolgoolga upgrade while the Coffs Deviation has a 20 year time frame. A tourist destination with a permanent brown haze over the City centre is not a good look nor is it a great marketing tool for a city with only 65,000 people, especially if you are competing with other Mid North Coast holiday destinations like Port Macquarie that don't have a Highway running through their town centre.

In addition, the RTA has detected between 190 noise sensitive sites between Korora and Sapphire alone along the Highway route. This is one of many areas in Coffs Harbour where the background noise levels have become more prolonged since 2002.

Alternative Proposals

It should be noted that the Federal Government has until 2004 considered the New England Highway to be the National Route through NSW.

AusLink funding arrangements now suggest the Federal Government has changed its policy and considers it wiser to develop the Pacific Highway as the main national transport corridor between NSW and Queensland.

2004-2009 funding from AusLink for the Pacific Highway was \$645 million as opposed to \$102 million for the New England Highway.

BAN suggests the Federal Government revisit the aims of AusLink to develop a seamless rail link of S2 standard between Sydney and Brisbane and take a third of the freight of the Pacific Highway.

Funds saved on the excessive RTA Pacific Highway Upgrades should be put into rail infrastructure improvements as a matter of urgency by the NSW State Government.

In fact so urgent is the need, we should consider a “Snowy Mountains” approach to the development of our rail infrastructure.

The RTA – The Coffs Harbour Experience

1. The Roads and Traffic Authority have not listened to the Coffs Harbour community.

Minutes for the Northern Community Focus Group (Sapphire – Woolgoolga) reveal a complete breakdown of meaningful exchange between the RTA and the community. The RTA came to Coffs Harbour with their own preferred options. Invariably, as Coffs Harbour City Council will attest, options put before the RTA were dismissed without adequate consideration of broader social, environmental and economic implications for the local community.

When it was put to them that proceeding with their options would cost the Coffs Harbour community \$2.4 billion they could not think beyond their narrow parameters of “upgrading sections of the existing Highway”.

The lack of proper communication with the Punjabi Sikhs over Option E is testimony to the arrogant way in which the RTA approach community consultation. The parameters of RTA community consultations are set to suit the RTA agenda and as such they never satisfy local community needs. It is extremely frustrating to see so much money wasted by such an inbred and inefficient government agency. Perhaps the word Authority means they don't feel the need to take advice from the community?

Either way this inability to communicate by the RTA has led to community resentment and the formation of well organized community opposition groups. Delays can now be expected to be compounded through potential legal action and the possibility of other Parliamentary Inquiries into the RTA.

2. Delays in road safety upgrades cost lives and money and provide planning uncertainties for Councils and developers.

There is no point in the RTA talking about the cost of Highway upgrades in 2005 dollar terms when so many projects (particularly in Coffs Harbour) are delayed for years. With inflation set to increase and cost overruns being inevitable the road budget will blow out dramatically.

Present Highway upgrades occur in a piecemeal and ad hoc manner and in many cases blackspots are actually just being shifted further along the Highway.

Furthermore by funding excessive dual carriageway upgrades, basic safety upgrades that are urgent now will be delayed for years.

The RTA propose to spend nearly \$1 billion dollars on the 15 km Sapphire-Woolgoolga Upgrade and yet safety works could be achieved now for under \$200 million.

\$1 billion equates to 3 years of combined funding for the Pacific Highway by the State and Federal Governments.

3. The RTA has a poor track record in Coffs Harbour for road design and safety.

There are inherent design faults at several intersections in the Northern Beaches as well as at Bonville

The NSW Parliament's STAYSAFE Committee Report on Road Safety Administration in New South Wales has been very critical of the RTA over their tardiness in gathering statistics on road trauma in NSW and consequently their management of Highway blackspots.

The chairman of the Staysafe Committee, Labour MP, Paul Gibson in an interview with the former head of the RTA, Paul Forward asked, "How can you budget and plan to achieve the best results in road safety if your statistics are three years behind?"

BAN has already advised the Parliamentary Inquiry into Pacific Highway Upgrades of several unsafe sections of the Highway in the Northern Beaches of Coffs Harbour. These safety concerns will also be addressed to the STAYSAFE Committee.

4. The RTA has misled the Government about the cost to upgrade the Pacific Highway to dual carriageway as well as the time it would take to achieve this.

To suggest that another 400- 430 kilometres of dual carriageway, including designated Deviations of Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga, not to mention Ballina, Kempsey and Macksville, could be completed in 10 years is absurd.

At current rates of progress the RTA could not finish the 5 upgrades proposed for Coffs Harbour in under 30 years. And these only account for less than 80 kilometres of the carriageway.

It would take around 9 years of State and Federal funding in today's terms to pay for these works alone.

BAN estimates that if we factor in delay times that usually run into years (Bonville Deviation was due for completion in 2003), as well as adding 10% for cost overruns which occur in 90% of RTA projects, as well as inflation which is predicted to rise to 4-5% next year, then up to 4 billion dollars could be needed here in Coffs Harbour alone.

5. The RTA is an inefficient bureaucracy as evidenced by the need for over 300 voluntary redundancies.

The RTA has become inefficient and a financial burden to the State of NSW. Its inability to monitor and improve road safety and build new sections of road cost efficiently are becoming more obvious.

There is talk of between 300 and 600 voluntary redundancies and already several road projects have been delayed and maintenance staff cut on the North Coast.

Overheads involved in the community consultation and road building processes are excessive with questions needing to be asked about the RTA's overheads and effectiveness in these areas.

The RTA can be likened to an overweight shark, feeding off taxpayers funds, while their “sucker fish” consultants hang off their every mouthful.

6. The RTA are guilty of other things

The Blackwall Highway Action Group submission reveals in minute detail how RTA consultants lied comprehensively about environmental assessments they were meant to carry out.

It is not hard to understand why the opposition leader, Peter Debnam, called for a complete dismantling of the RTA.

Conclusion:

If we are to see immediate reductions in fatal accidents on the Pacific Highway in the Coffs Harbour LGA, the NSW Government must legislate to make interstate heavy vehicles use the New England Highway and reduce maximum speed limits to 80 kph in areas of the Pacific Highway without dual carriageway.

Funding levels for the New England Highway must increase as a consequence.

Current Pacific Highway Upgrades are excessive for the sensitive coastal areas and prime agricultural lands they go through and are subject to long delays and cost overruns.

Basic safety works are needed **now** to save lives in several areas and in some cases such as at Moonee, private developers are footing the bill for highway safety improvements. The same condition has been put on developers in the Sandy Beach/Hearns Lake DCP area. This reduces spending by all levels of Government and still allows for sustainable growth.

The best way to preserve our roads is to put less cars and heavy vehicles on them. As John Anderson said at the launch of AusLink “Fixing the rail network will significantly enhance the value of the money we're putting into roads”.

We must develop our Sydney – Brisbane rail line to S2 standard as a matter of **urgency** with the aim of increasing the rail freight share to 36% (2001 ARTC Track Audit).

If we delay improving the rail network it is in danger of becoming irretrievable.

Alternative Highway route proposals being promoted to date do not address the needs of the people living in the west of Coffs Harbour and as such are not supported by the Bypass Action Network.

Given the need for massive spending on rail, it would appear that a new motorway would have to be funded by private enterprise or through a Public Private Partnership.

And finally, there must be a public inquiry into the RTA's management of Pacific Highway Upgrades with a focus on current project delays, cost overruns, distortion of environmental assessments, ineffective community consultation, the RTA's apparent lack of accountability and their inability to manage blackspots and deliver cost efficient road upgrades.

Actions Required

What Coffs Harbour City Council must do:

- Place a moratorium on new development in the Northern Beaches of Coffs Harbour until safety upgrades are in place.
- Continue to lobby for a reduction in the maximum speed limit to 80 kph in those areas without dual carriageway.
- Continue lobbying for an alternative route for interstate freight and the immediate removal of interstate heavy vehicles from the Pacific Highway.

What the State Government must do:

- Conduct an immediate review of NSW's transportation policy and in particular the RTA North Coast Road Strategy.
- Implement basic safety upgrades of a less excessive nature as soon as possible, including the lowering of maximum speed limits to 80 kph between Arararra and the Coffs Harbour CBD
- Legislate to remove heavy interstate vehicles from the Pacific Highway to the New England Highway.
- Increase funding to rail infrastructure substantially and upgrade the Sydney-Brisbane rail line to S2 standard.
- Put a stop to all RTA Pacific Highway Upgrade Projects until a review is conducted into their operations.
- Restructure the RTA to make it more efficient and at the same time co-ordinate road and rail planning under the same portfolio.
- Improve town planning on the NSW Mid North Coast by completing a Regional Plan before even considering RTA Upgrades.
- Investigate economic costs to Local Communities of Pacific Highway Upgrade projects.
- Initiate a transportation policy for the next 50 years that will best serve future generations.

What the Federal Government should do:

- Stop trying to interfere with NSW coastal planning by holding the State Government to ransom over Highway funding.
- Provide money for rail infrastructure to S2 standard in NSW.
- Restore the New England Highway's National Route status and increase funding for further upgrades.
- Start thinking about Global Warming and Greenhouse Emissions.
- Provide a tax rebate for the next 5 years for fuel used by interstate truck drivers that use the New England Highway.

Wayne Evans
On Behalf of the Bypass Action Network