

Submission
No 26

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES

Organisation:

Name: Mr & Mrs Alan & Marianne Logan

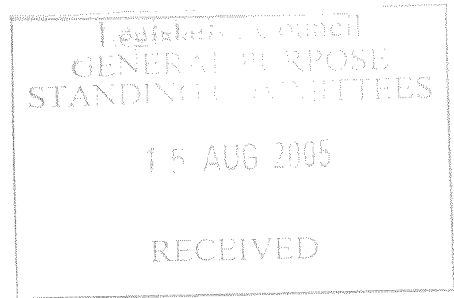
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Summary

SUBMISSION



Inquiry into the Pacific Highway Upgrades

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Submitted by:

Alan and Marianne Logan

The Hon. Jennifer Ann GARDINER, MLC
Parliament House, Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000
Phone (02) 9230 2903
Fax (02) 9230 3408
jenny.gardiner@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Pacific Highway Upgrade Inquiry
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4

Introduction

It is clear that for safety reasons alone the Pacific Highway is in need of an upgrade. However it would seem that the highway at present is being upgraded in an ad hoc way and not as a result of a well considered infrastructure plan.

Such an important item of infrastructure should be developed as a result of a full transport strategy for the State being carried out.

It would seem that the Pacific Highway is becoming the de facto interstate transport route for the trucking industry without any detailed study to determine whether this is in fact good planning, or appropriate for present or future generations who live along and use the highway.

We would suggest that the Government instruct the RTA to take one step back from the current planning for the highway until a statewide integrated transport study is carried out.

With regard to the current proposal for the Tintenbar to Ewingsdale upgrade of the highway we would like to comment on the following issues as set out in the terms of reference for the Inquiry.

1 (a) Reasons for expanding the highway upgrade study area on the St Helena to Tintenbar section

As a long term residents of the Newrybar area we were shocked when the RTA announced it had extended the study area to the east to include our property.

We believed that any upgrade of the highway would occur within the existing highway corridor in that the Ballina bypass of the Pacific Highway to Ross Lane had been approved and awaiting construction as had the Ewingsdale to Bangalow section of the highway. The Bangalow bypass had also been constructed.

Therefore the Tintenbar to Ewingsdale section of the highway had approved upgrades at each end, leading one to conclude that the remaining highway would be upgraded within its current corridor.

When the RTA released the original study area for the upgrade it was confined to the plateau area adjacent to the existing highway. This is what one would have expected.

We were therefore stunned when the RTA reneged on the original study area and expanded the study area to the east, to include the scenic escarpment and coastal plain and wetlands.

The reason given for this expansion as outlined by the RTA was as a result of community pressure and social interests.

The community pressure turned out to be a small number of residents who lived on the existing highway running a scare campaign about the highway upgrade polluting Ballina's water supply in a cynical attempt to have the highway moved away from their properties.

The social interests as advised by the RTA were less residential driveway crossings to be contended with, if the road was put in a new location as opposed to remaining in the current location.

It should be noted that the RTA never canvassed the opinions of the residents in the expanded study area to see what social implications a new highway would have if located in their backyard prior to expanding the study area.

Residents who live on the highway know that the highway is there and would reasonably assume it may be upgraded and their property values reflect this fact.

To consider locating a new highway on some of the most scenically beautiful coastal land in the state, as opposed to keeping the highway where it is, beggars disbelief. Also as a matter of equity it is totally unfair to impose a highway on people who have deliberately purchased property away from the highway and paid a premium for it.

The upgrade of the highway becomes a misnomer if the highway is located in a new corridor such as the coastal flats and coopers shoot area, it is fact a new highway. Our understanding is that new highways must be built at least 5 kilometres from residential areas.

For the RTA to say that a new highway on the coastal flats or through Coopers Shoot rural areas is a "highway upgrade" so as it does not have to meet the requirements for a new highway is a cynical interpretation of the planning instruments to say the least.

Generally the RTA acted irresponsibly in expanding the study area for the highway with no compelling reason to do so.

1(b) The level of upgrade proposed for this section and the remainder of the Pacific highway

The RTA has advised that the highway upgrade is being designed to meet the brief provided to them by the Government.

However it is unclear on what data the brief from the government is based or whether the brief is responding to any planning studies for the highway.

We understand a metropolitan transport study was carried out by the Government and believe that it is time for the Government to carry out an integrated transport study for the whole State.

One of the main criteria for such a study would be to look at the options for interstate transport. At the moment it would appear that the Pacific Highway is being upgraded as the de facto interstate road freight route.

However the Pacific Highway is not the national highway, it is classified as a regional road. The New England Highway is the national highway.

The majority of the State's population live on the coastal strip, and it is where much of the State's tourism is based.

It would seem obvious that interstate road freight is not compatible with areas of population. The trucking industry has shown itself in numerous enquiries to be a danger to the community. Studies have shown the prevalent use of amphetamines by some truck drivers so as to stay awake, to help meet tight schedules. Truck drivers continue to disobey the road rules by speeding and tailgating to the danger of all road users.

It may be very well to say that it is only a small minority of drivers that offend, however a large truck can become a lethal weapon and it is usually the car driver that is intimidated or killed by an irresponsible truck driver.

So in terms of upgrading the highway a starting point must be to look at alternative transport options including, moving interstate trucks to less populated areas such as the New England Highway, an upgraded rail freight system and the use of road railers.

If for instance the interstate trucks were removed from the highway the level of upgrade required may not need to be as large.

1(c) The impact of the upgrade on prime agricultural land.

If the highway were to remain within or close to the existing highway corridor the impact on agricultural land would be minimized.

The highway between Tintenbar and Ewingsdale is already 3 – 4 lanes wide in places and therefore additional road widening for the upgrade could be accommodated. There are some significant macadamia farms on the plateau within the study area, which should be able to be largely retained if the highway was to stay on the highway.

1(d) The potential impact of the upgraded highway on prime agricultural land in the expanded study area

The new study area includes some highly productive farm land. The coastal flats are gradually being converted from sugar cane production to macadamia nut production. The Coopers Shoot

and Talofa areas also are highly productive agricultural areas. They are largely unencumbered by roads and are held in large parcels.

Therefore it does not make sense to construct a new highway through prime agricultural land when an existing highway corridor already exists.

As well as the economic benefit to the state of this agricultural land, it also has the additional benefit of providing the rural vistas that the north coast is famous for.

Indeed the rural vistas from the escarpment to the coast, across the hinterland and coastal plain provide an outstanding attraction for residents and tourists to the area.

Co existing with the agricultural lands are areas of high conservation value. Many farmers and residents are carrying out rainforest plantings and maintaining and preserving rainforest remnants.

To consider running a new highway through this area is very shortsighted and would deprive future generations of the beauty we currently live with.

1 (f) The impacts of of interstate heavy transport on the Pacific highway and of the mixing of interstate and local transport.

The completion of the Yelgun to Chinderah section of the upgraded Pacific Highway has lead to a big increase in the use of the highway by interstate heavy transport.

The decision by the Government to change the rules to allow B double trucks to use the Pacific Highway was negligent considering that approx 2/3 of the highway is still single lane..

The fact that the Government has also presided over the large increase of trucks using the highway without any planning is also negligent in that it endangers lives.

Many trucks are using the Pacific Highway rather than the New England Highway.

This increased use of the highway by interstate trucks has been allowed to happen without any assessment by Government of the impacts or problems it may bring.

Some of the immediate impacts that have become apparent are;

- The increase in noise to local communities.
- The increased danger on the highway to road users by mixing interstate trucks with local and tourist traffic.
- Increased pollution from exhaust fumes.

Interstate trucks are on tight time deadlines and their main interest is getting to their destination on time.

These time constraints mean that other traffic on the highway becomes a nuisance and an inconvenience to the truck driver.

As mentioned previously there is ample evidence to suggest that many trucks consistently travel above the speed limit, they tailgate and intimidate other road users. There is also the fact that some truck drivers are using amphetamines to help stay awake so as to meet deadlines.

Regulations to date have failed to curtail these illegal practices taking place.

The Pacific Highway travels through areas where a large percentage of the States population reside. The coastal strip is also where local and international tourists visit and stay.

Tourism has a huge economic benefit to the State.

The coastal strip also has many conservation areas and areas of natural beauty. It is the place where population increase is continuing to occur largely due to lifestyle choices.

Interstate heavy transport would be best located away from population areas to minimize the conflicts.

It is clear that the de facto way in which the pacific highway has become the interstate truck route is not good infrastructure planning, in fact it has occurred with no planning.

It is time to look to the future, carry out some forward planning to determine the most appropriate transport infrastructure for the State, not just based on economic considerations, but also including social, environmental and intergenerational equity considerations.

In conclusion we believe that the expansion of the study demonstrates a conspicuous failure to consult by the RTA with local communities. It has caused unnecessary worry and concern to the effected residents who deliberately chose to live away from the highway only to now be confronted with the possibility of a highway running through their properties.

The Pacific Highway is a designated regional road and it should stay that way.

The Pacific Highway should not be the interstate truck route.

Any upgrade to the highway should remain on the highway.

We thank the General Purpose Standing Committee for the opportunity to express our concerns and trust that some of the issues we have raised will be of benefit to your deliberations.

Yours Faithfully

Alan Logan

Marianne Logan