

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES

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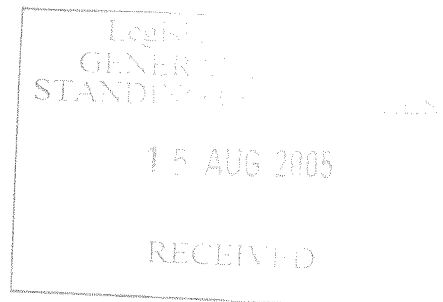
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Subject:

Summary

Submission to the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into the Pacific Highway Upgrade: Ewingsdale to Tintenbar

From: Paul Gannon



OVERVIEW

Ad Hoc Planning for the Pacific Highway Upgrade

- No strategic plan
- No cost benefit study
- Simple response to demand from Heavy Vehicles?

Other options are available

- New England Highway
- Summerland Way

A Flawed Process to Determine Upgrade Route

- Arbitrary decision re planning envelope
- Criteria for judging secret
- Whole process secret if RTA wants it to be

Important Local Factors to be Considered

- Why closely following the existing road is essential
- Why local farms are more important
- Why local tourism is more important

Another Personal Story Lost to Big Brother: The sense of local community loses again!

- Farm development proceeds because of government announced certainty of upgrade following existing road route
- Hundreds of thousands of dollars invested
- Family whole life dreams/ viable business threatened because of government bureaucratic corruption/ bungling?

Summary

Ad Hoc Planning

Other options available

Flawed Process to Determine Upgrade Route

Important Local Factors to be Considered

Another Personal Story Lost to Big Brother: The sense of local community loses again!

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AD HOC PLANNING

The notion of upgrading the Pacific Highway from Grafton to Ewingsdale is fundamentally flawed. The upgrade is happening without any objective and comprehensive examination of the transport needs of the North Coast of NSW. It is happening without examining whether it best meets the needs of the present and future users of the road. It is happening without weighing out the total costs and benefits of such an upgrade!

Upgrading the existing highway without any consideration of how best to meet the transport needs of the region and without examining the unique economic, social, cultural, and environmental nature of the region, is counterproductive. The questionable advantages that the planned upgrade may provide to the region are far outweighed by the disadvantages (economic, social, and environmental)! The Clarence and Richmond valleys are the most desirable agricultural regions in the state. They have climate suitable for growing the widest range of products possible. It is a high rainfall, sub tropical climate, with excellent soils. In addition the region is visually and climatically attractive to tourists and is environmentally unique! Finally, there is a constant flow of retirees to the area lured by the climate and the peace and quite. All of these advantages and attractions are being diminished by the RTA's plans to upgrade this section of the Pacific Highway. The upgrade is not likely to best meet the present and future transport needs of the region. The planned SIX LANE upgrade does not even meet the needs of those who travel interstate and use the road. Minor additions to the existing road will see it transformed into a very workable, safe, and divided four lane road! This transformation is possible now!! Why are we waiting for a predicted (by the RTA) reduction in road accidents at some indeterminable future date, when this can happen NOW! With a concrete divider and some addition to the existing three to four lanes that already exist on the highway NOW!

The pressure for an upgrade on this section of the Pacific Highway has come suddenly with the arrival of 2000 a day heavy vehicles (mostly B-doubles) diverted from the New England Highway. It is the further projected increase of heavy vehicles to 6000 a day in a decade or so, that makes the greatest claim for an upgrade. The solution to this problem is not to create more problems (social, environmental, and economic) by making the Pacific into a "super six lane highway"! The solution will come from diverting interstate heavy vehicles (the major growth traffic) to the Summerland Way and/ or the New England Highway.

According to the RTA's web site The Pacific Highway Upgrading Program aims to:

- Significantly reduce road accidents and injuries.
- Reduce travel times.
- Reduce freight transport costs.
- Develop a route that involves the community and considers their interests.
- Provide a route that supports economic development.
- Manage the upgrading of the route in accordance with Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) principles.
- Provide the best value for money.

The first dot point is a spurious aim. There is no direct evidence that building super highways leads to a significant reduction in road accidents and injuries.

Highways that mix B-doubles with local business travelers, casual tourists, and retired people taking a peaceful and relaxed drive along the coast are more likely to be problematic! The facts are that road accidents are clearly most associated with driver speed, attitude, and drug consumption (mainly alcohol). Making a super highway doesn't necessarily reduce accidents and injury. The recent announcement that the Sydney- Newcastle super section of the Pacific Highway has the 3rd worst accident rate in the state is testimony to that.

All of the other aims espoused by the RTA (above) would be better achieved by diverting the 6000 a day interstate heavy vehicles to the Summerland Way or the New England Highway. Clearly there needs to be a political decision made to do this. The RTA has no interest other than to further extend its power and influence by building bigger highways! They do not have the ability to determine if the upgrade to the Pacific Highway is the best transport option available. They do not have the ability to see that the social, environmental, and economic costs are not worth it. Only politicians have the ability to do this. Do our politicians need to have the foresight, intelligence, and strength of mind see that there is a pressing need for an overall transport strategy that best takes the state forward into the future. Simply continuing to upgrade the Pacific Highway is counter productive to the best transport policy for the state. Are the state's politicians up to the challenge?

OPTIONS OTHER THAN A PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADE

a) New England Highway

It is clear that the New England Highway has always been (until the illegal opening of the Pacific Highway to B doubles by the RTA) the official and unofficial route for interstate heavy road transport. Since the bypassing of Murwillumbah by the Pacific Highway and the (illegal) allowing of interstate heavy transport vehicles to use the Pacific Highway there has been an instant increase of heavy vehicles on the Pacific Highway. This practice has led to massive environmental damage (noise and air pollution) and loss of amenity to all of the people living within earshot (at least 5kms on either side) of the highway. For all non heavy vehicle users on the Pacific Highway the highway has become a "hell trip". Large trucks (especially b-doubles) continue to scare and even harass other users of the road. The incidences of truck drivers harassing other road users have been so frequently documented in local news media that a local identity has collected these stories and published them in a book (by June Zenveld).

Maintaining the New England Highway for heavy vehicles not only means there is an alternative route north from Sydney in times of emergency (floods, fires, major road accidents, terrorists/ war), it also means that the Pacific highway remains what the NSW Government has been saying it is all along, a regional road. One of the interesting aspects of the upgrade plans for the Pacific Highway is that it becomes less of a regional road; not only because it is becoming dominated by interstate traffic, but also because the upgrades are limiting the access points for local drivers. Instead of being able to access the present highway from any local road, in the "upgraded" sections local drivers may have to go many kilometers out of their way before they can even get on to the upgraded highway. For most local travelers this means that they

can never use the “upgraded” sections. It is easy to see that local people on the coastal Pacific Highway route question that the Upgraded highway is any use to them. Certainly it is easy to see why they only see the disadvantages (more noise, air pollution, reduction of arable land, reduction of visually desirable land usually attractive to tourists). Most of these negatives are diminished or even eliminated when heavy vehicles travel on a properly maintained New England Highway where the population is comparatively sparse, the land is much less valuable per hectare for production, and the visual look of the landscape etc is much less desirable for international tourists.

b) Summerland Highway Upgrade

For the section of Highway between Grafton and Ewingsdale most of the RTA’s aims will not be best realized by simply upgrading the existing Pacific Highway. Certainly in terms of reducing road accidents, reducing travel times, reducing transport costs, supporting economic development, and providing the best value for money, an upgrade of the existing road is not the best option. These aims would be best realized by upgrading the Summerland Way (Grafton-Kyogle- to the Queensland border). This option would allow heavy vehicles to travel from Brisbane via the Mt Lyndsay Highway to meet the Summerland way. This route is considerably shorter than traveling to the eastern most point in Australia, near Byron Bay, and then returning west to travel up to Brisbane. The Pacific Highway route from Brisbane is already congested with urban and tourist traffic. If the 2000 a day heavy interstate vehicles traveling through Ballina heading south were redirected to the Summerland Way, it would instantly reduce this urban/ tourist congestion on the road from Brisbane to Grafton (especially from Brisbane to Byron). The Mt Lyndsay-Summerland Way route is shorter, thus reducing travel times and costs. It is also likely to cost much less if the upgrade planned for the Pacific Highway occurred on this route. The route being shorter will cost less to build, and would resume less productive land than an upgraded coastal Pacific Highway!! The regions traversed by an upgraded Summerland Way would benefit economically by the additional infrastructure, the additional traffic, and the additional employment for road maintenance and for servicing the increased traffic. These regional areas are already bleeding from the drain of services and investment over the years.

Upgrading the Summerland Way and attracting the, at present 2000 a day, heavy vehicles, and the estimated tripling in these numbers over the next decade or so, is a win-win solution. Socially, economically, and environmentally it is a better option than a major upgrade to the pacific highway between Grafton and Ewingsdale. The Summerland Way upgrade provides the best value for money for both taxpayers and the interstate traffic that will become the major user of the Summerland Way.

FLAWED PROCESS IN DETERMINING ROUTE FOR UPGRADE

Whilst I have argued so far that the whole notion of simply upgrading the Pacific Highway is not linked to any coordinated transport strategy, it is also clear that the process being used to push forward with the upgrade of the Pacific Highway between Grafton and Ewingsdale, has serious deficiencies. These deficiencies revolve not necessarily around any lack of considering certain factors, but on the decision making process in general. These include how is the area under investigation to be

determined, what weighting will be given to factors that will impinge on a final decision, the openness of the inquiry and decision making process, and the perceptions of corruption of the process.

Area Under Investigation In 1997 the then Minister for Roads declared that any upgrading of the section of the Pacific Highway between Bangalow and Ewingsdale would follow the existing highway. This decision followed a lengthy, public, and detailed process. Subsequently, detailed plans were drawn up, public announcements were made, concept depictions were developed and published, and land along the route bought by the RTA to allow for the upgrade. It is no wonder that the people in the region went ahead with plans to develop their farms, buy their retirement plot, and generally made plans to purchase land (at greater dollar costs) away from the announced upgrade. The announcement also firmed the expectation that an upgrade from Tintenbar would have to follow the existing highway to be able to join with the completed multi million dollar Bangalow bypass in the north and the planned Ballina by pass in the south. This was further reinforced by the fact that the land surrounding the existing highway had been, for more than 20 years, zoned for highway expansion. Even at the beginning of the latest planning process to upgrade the Ewingsdale to Tintenbar section the RTA, in spite of it reversing the 1998 decision, still issued to the public a planning envelope for the upgrade that essentially followed the existing highway.

Why then did the RTA double the planning envelope of the section upgrade, months after the public consultation and planning process had begun, without consulting the wider community and in doing so ignoring more than 20 years of community expectation that any upgrade would follow the existing Highway? Such a sudden and unsubstantiated widening of the planning envelope looks suspiciously corrupt! Even the plans of Ballina Council and the RTA itself (its publically committed plans for the Ballina bypass) have been disrupted and/ or ignored by the decision. The RTA justified its decision by saying that the 20 person Community Liaison Group (CLG) whose members were chosen by the RTA itself in a nonpublic process, were supportive of the widening of the envelope. It becomes an even more suspicious decision when many of the consultants chosen by the RTA to further investigate this widened envelope have past and present association with the RTA!!! Isn't their subsequent financial gain by the decision suspiciously corrupt?

Weighting Given to Factors Part of the fault in the process is to list the factors to take into account in considering upgrade routes, but to not offer any idea to the public, of the weighting that will be given to each factor. While it is clear that the RTA will place weighting on factors to make the final route decision, these weightings are not provided to the public, thus making the RTA bureaucrats unaccountable to no one! Other than themselves! A nice cosy arrangement given the nature of the decision making process. Nothing is more illuminating than sunlight! Why isn't the process open? Why do the public employees need protection from the public gaze? One of the major aims for the RTA in the upgrade process is to "Develop a route that involves the community and considers their interests". In this regard the community is only involved to the extent that the RTA wants it to be. How can the community have their interests considered when the public cannot judge how much (weighting) of their interests are considered?

Openness of the Inquiry and Decision Making Process

Aside from the above two headings that demonstrate the limitations of the inquiry process, the CLG which is supposed to liaise with the local community is severely restricted in its ability to do this. It is chosen by the RTA, in a secret process, it is given no resources to enhance communication with the local community, and it is sworn to secrecy with respect to any information the RTA wishes to keep secret. For the RTA to pretend that this arbitrary secretness is somehow a positive aspect of the process is ingenious. It only adds to the perception that the process is somehow corrupt. It is simply set up to advantage the RTA and its employees. There is no advantage to the local community what so ever! There is certainly no advantage to the state to be supportive of a process that is perceived as inefficient in the least and, at the most, simply corrupt!

LOCAL FACTORS THAT NEED HEAVY WEIGHTING IN THE DECISION

Given that the weighting of factors is not known in the existing decision making process I provide below 3 factors that need to have the highest weighting in the process used to judge the best route option between Grafton and Ewingsdale. They are all factors that are emphasized by me, not because people are necessarily claiming them as critical factors, but simply because they are factors that have been the most influential over people's behaviour in the local communities over the last 20 years. In as much as we can make judgments about the future, it seems that they are likely to be most influential over the next 20 years as well (aside from the controllable?? influence of a highway upgrade!).

The Need to Follow the Existing Highway

One of the most positive aspects of the Australian type of democracy, and the governments that it has produced, is the ability to produce certainty and security. These are probably the most important and respected aspects of government in Australia. Certainty and security are the lubricants that facilitate commercial activity and social cohesion. Any act that lessens our sense of certainty reduces our sense of security, and consequently our trust in the process of government.

A decision was made by the government in 1997 for a significant part of the Ewingsdale to Tintenbar section to follow the existing highway (the Bangalow to Ewingsdale section). Many millions of dollars were spent to develop the detailed plans for this section and buy the land necessary to carry out this section upgrade. This section was to complement the already completed multi million dollar Bangalow bypass section of the pacific Highway. Altogether these sections covered nearly half of the Ewingsdale to Tintenbar section of the road. Certainly it would be more than half, in potential costs. Given these commitments it was clear to all that the rest of the highway, from Tintenbar to the southern section of the Bangalow bypass, could only be upgraded by closely following the existing highway. Certainly the long standing zoning of the land adjacent to the existing highway route as fit only for a highway upgrade, solidly reinforced this clear expectation. The RTA itself reinforced this expectation in late 2004 when it announced it plans to upgrade the existing section by producing a planning envelope that would investigate an area that principally followed the existing highway from Tintenbar to the Bangalow bypass.

A clear sense of certainty has been in place for many years that the section of highway upgrade between Ewingsdale and Tintenbar would closely follow the existing

highway. For the RTA to arbitrarily and suddenly change this expectation undermines any respect for governmental process. It certainly raises questions of corruption!

Impact on Farming

The department of Infrastructure and Planning in NSW has declared that the deep red soil areas of the North coast need to be protected. Allied with the high and assured rainfall here, farming is a premium! After all Australia is a dry country and by any standards seems to be coming even drier! Any move to reduce the available farmland in this region should be strongly resisted! Along comes the RTA and draws lines to represent new highway routes through land that is prime for agriculture. Where is the sense of strategic planning here? Why has the RTA the overriding influence? What is more fundamental, food or the ability of heavy trucks to travel at high speed over a super highway? Productivity of the farming land per acre diminishes greatly as you travel inland! It is logical then the further west the road goes the less there is a negative influence on farming.

Impact on Tourism

It certainly is true in many instances, that the development that follows tourism growth will either destroy or enhance the very things that attract the tourists in the first place. The North Coast of NSW is the most attractive place for international tourists in the state outside of Sydney. It is that way because of the visual beauty and the quite and relaxed atmosphere in the region. The development of a major highway that will destroy the visual beauty of escarpments and ocean views, and destroy the peace and quite of the region certainly has the potential to kill the goose that is laying the golden tourist egg. The RTA seems to place little emphasis on the degree to which its highway "development" will affect the beauty and peace and quite of the region. Already the topography (long and deep valleys) has telescoped and amplified the machine gun rat tat tat of B doubles passing through the night at the rate of one per minute at present. On a still country night this sound is awakening people at 3 in the morning as far as 5 to 10 km away. Who wants a peaceful farm stay in a quite cabin that includes such a sound? So much for the Byron Council tourism strategy encouraging farm stays! Tourists want a beautifully clear view of the surrounding countryside from Mt Warning? What view? Cloaked by the increasing air pollution of 6,000 diesel trucks per day!!

The RTA upgrade of the Pacific Highway is clearly biased to supporting large interstate transport. It wants lines, grades, and number of lanes to support the speed and fuel consumption that is ideal for these vehicles. What chance does a clean green industry like tourism have against this

PERSONAL STORY: MAGGIES FARM

I bought my 100 acre farm at Coopers Shoot in 1992 with the assurance that there were no "man made" planned impediments to my development of the farm. Indeed I was encouraged that land zonings at the time supporting any existing highway development would follow the existing road and that the adjacent land to the existing highway was zoned for such an upgrade. I was further reassured in 1997 when the then State Minister for main roads declared that the newly opened multi million dollar Bangalow bypass would join with the highway upgrade to Ewingsdale that would follow the existing highway. The way was open to build a house and develop the farm without having to worry that a highway would pass through and destroy it. Hundreds of thousands of dollars invested to first build a dam that would be central and

fundamental for all subsequent developments and then to build the other entire infrastructure required for my planned farm development.

The dam was the key to the whole farm development. It came first, cost a lot, but all farming on the land depend ending on it. A means to assure the organic coffee and vegetables would have adequate water at the right time and that the beef cattle would also be able to survive periods of extended dry. A license to secure irrigation was properly acquired. Without the dam and its 8 megalitre water capacity the farm cannot survive. If a highway upgrade route takes my dam, it may as well take the whole 100acres. Without the dam there is no farming on my property!

Along with the agricultural aspects, the dam areas (and other parts of the farm) were the target of massive plantings of rainforest trees. Many of these were rare and endangered species secured from the only local undisturbed rainforest stand at Hayters Hill. These were largely acquired as a part of our local land care activities. Many of these trees are more than 12 years old and have attained heights of more than 30-40 feet! The dam area is also home to a wide range of local fauna including platypus and migratory birds in season like Jabiru!

The final part of the farm plan was to integrate the organic farm development with the local tourist industry and to develop farm stays in small cabins. The local council plan encourages up to six cabins on my farm. Plans to do this had proceeded to the employment of a consultant with the drawing up of plans as a precursor to council application.

All of these activities have now been stopped or compromised by the announcement of the widening of the planning envelope for the Ewingsdale to Tintenbar upgrade of the Pacific Highway. My farm is within the new planning envelope. In spite of publicised certainty, regarding the Ewingsdale to Tintenbar upgrade, it would seem that the RTA is the only entity in the state that can override all other plans. Individuals, businesses, Local Councils and even its own decisions seem not to matter to the RTA! They make up their own minds, even when it seems they had already made up their mind. Can we trust them to make any enduring decisions in the future?

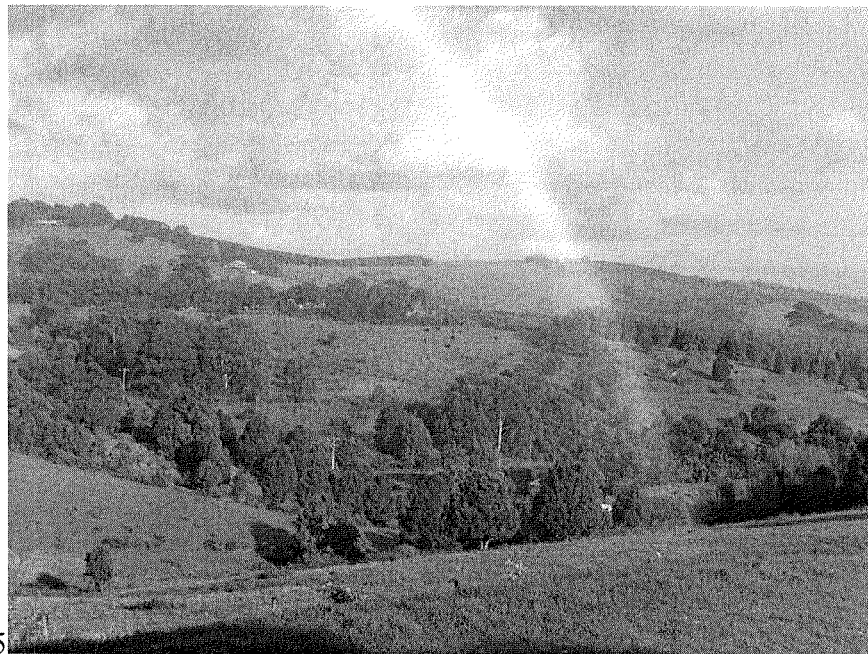
The \$4 to \$5 million dollars being spent at present to investigate the widened search envelope for the highway upgrade could have been better spent on local projects that require urgent attention NOW! Byron could have a road bypass through the town with that money. Ther is a need for town by pass, created by the pacific highway upgrade from the Queensland border, bringing tourists and day trippers to the Byron area. Byron is congested every day because the highway upgrade was not planned to consider the effects it would have on the demand for the use of subsidiary roads. Last week Booyong Meat works closed because the road to the meat works was inadequate, yet the money spent to simply investigate the Pacific highway upgrade (on a road that may never be built) could have upgraded a local road and saved the business and jobs of local people! These things (and many more) are happening because a proper cost-benefit study of the Pacific Highway upgrade has never been done!

As of this writing a strong rumour exists that one of the upgrade route options being considered by the RTA will go right through the heart of my farm (the Dam). I have included a photo of part of my farm that covers the dam area.

SUMMARY

A half completed upgrade of the Pacific Highway has already occurred because of inadequate strategic planning and cost benefit analyses. It is no excuse to continue the rest without adequate planning. Other suitable, less expensive, and more viable options exist, in the New England Highway and/ or an upgrade to the Summerland Way and Mt Lindsay Highways. In addition the process of deciding how the Pacific Highway should be upgraded is potentially corrupt. The choice of planning envelope is an arbitrary and easily manipulated decision. Overwhelming factors exists to suggest that there is no other option other than to simply upgrade the existing highway route, yet this is being denied! Finally, insufficient attention is being given to the need to protect businesses, farms, tourist icons, and the existing environment. I hope politicians are smart enough and civic minded enough to really examine what is happening with the upgrading of the Pacific Highway. The whole community IS NOT getting value for money!

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14 August 2005