

**Submission
No 50**

INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES: COFFS HARBOUR

Organisation: Woolgoolga Punjabi Sikh Community

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Subject:

Summary

**Submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No 4
Inquiry on Pacific Highway Upgrades**

2 November 2005

Members of Woolgoolga Punjabi Sikh Community

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2 November 2005

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No 4
Legislative Council of NSW
Parliamentary Enquiry into Pacific Highway Upgrades
Parliament House, Macquarie Street Sydney 2000.

We would like to take this opportunity to convey our gratitude to the Legislative Council for establishing this inquiry, to allow comment and input on the proposed works (including By-pass Option E) on the Pacific Highway.

This opportunity will allow us to contribute information that has been ignored by the RTA and which we feel is of high significance and vital in any decision making process by the RTA and the State government in making a decision about the Pacific Highway upgrade and especially the proposed Option E By-pass.

As this submission raises many unique cultural and social issues resulting from the impact upon prime agricultural land, issues that will have a devastating effect upon Australia's best known multicultural community of Punjabi Sikhs we formally request the opportunity to present our submission in person to the Standing Committees of the Legislative Council in Coffs Harbour on 21 November 2005.

Please note the submission has attached background reading to assist in the development of an understanding of the significance of agriculture to the Punjabi Sikh community

You're sincerely

Rashmere Bhatti

Our submission will address points 1. (C) and 3 of the terms of reference that is

- The impact of the highway upgrade on prime agricultural land and the resulting social, economic and cultural impacts of this on the local Punjabi Sikh community.
- Lack of appropriate 'consultation' with the Punjabi Sikh community during the process that resulted in the selection of Option E as the RTA's preferred bypass route for Woolgoolga
- Complete lack of substantiation for the RTA's assessment that Option E 'had better socio-economic outcomes'.
- Wider concerns relating to property values and
- The multicultural nature of the whole community.

1. The impact of the highway upgrade on prime agricultural land and the resulting social, economic and cultural impacts of this on the local Punjabi Sikh community.

Agriculture and land are especially relevant and significant to the local Punjabi Sikh community (approx 750 persons in the Coffs Harbour LGA). This is supported by the fact that approx 94% of the community are engaged in agriculture and that the Punjabi Sikh banana growers represent more than 90% of the industry in Woolgoolga that is 540 hectares of prime agricultural land is owned and cultivated by them¹.

The RTA's proposed By-pass Option E will carve through prime banana producing land owned and farmed by Punjabi families for over 50 years. As well, this land is currently being developed with hefty financial input and resources for family-based blueberry cultivation.

The work on agricultural concerns is undertaken by family units (men, women, elders, and youth) which mean that the proximity of this land to their homes in Woolgoolga, transport routes, packing facilities and other agricultural infrastructure is crucial and allows them to engage in earning their livelihood as well as meeting their familial obligations.

The Punjabi Sikh community is the most significantly effected by the RTA's preferred Option E by-pass route for Woolgoolga. Option E will directly affect sixteen Punjabi Sikh owned properties and agricultural concerns. However, as these concerns are jointly owned and operated in reality up to 30% of the Punjabi Sikh community will bear financial loss, upheaval and displacement.

Given the magnitude of the effect upon the Punjabi Sikh community it is of the greatest concern that the Punjabi Sikh community were not engaged in the consultation process by the RTA that resulted in selection of Option E as the preferred By-pass route (Please see section on consultation in this submission).

Further, the RTA justifies their selection of Option E by stating "Option E provides better socio-economic outcomes for the community (RTA Value Management Workshop August 2004). In fact, there is a complete lack of substantiation for the RTA's comment as the RTA did not make any attempt at all to appropriately investigate and take into consideration the social, cultural and economic impacts of Option E on the Punjabi Sikh community. There are no validated in-depth studies to support the RTA's statement. Statement

In addition, Option E was not a part of the original by-pass options that were put to the community for over 2 years. Option E was added on as an after thought after the RTA received complaints from residents on the original options. The original options did not affect many Punjabi Sikh families. In reality, the RTA moved the problem (by-pass option) into the backyards of the people in the community (Punjabi Sikh) least able to advocate for themselves due to cultural, language, lack of skills and knowledge of processes and already disadvantaged by their lack of inclusion in the consultation process.

¹ From A Punjabi Sikh Community-from Australian Sojourners to Australian Citizens 2001

The direct impacts on the Punjabi Sikh community if Option E proceeds are devastating and include:

Economic impact

- There will be severance from their primary source of income (banana and blueberry) for approx 30% of the community. This will of course result in a major displacement (livelihood, housing, family life, education) and have major flow on economic impact on infrastructure and the wider local economy. (See case study Singh for a detailed economic and cultural perspective)
- The loss of ‘critical mass’ in the remaining local agricultural industry will have a substantial flow –on effect to other reliant industries and service providers. There is the risk of an ‘implosion’ of service infrastructure threatening the operational viability of those Punjabi and non-Punjabi farmers that remain.

Topographic and environmental impacts on the remaining prime agricultural land and community (Punjabi and non-Punjabi) such as

- Severance of irrigation channels and waterways servicing remaining farms
- Severance of infrastructure such as farm roads,
- Changes to the micro climate such as the creation of wind corridors
- Increased pollution of rainwater tanks (drinking water for farm properties)
- Increased buffer zones required for safe spraying of crops and effects of increased motor vehicle emissions (pollution).

In selecting route Option E the RTA has failed to acknowledge or consider or investigate the social and cultural impacts on the Punjabi Sikh community. Some core

Cultural impacts:

- Agriculture defines the Punjabi Sikh community. Agriculture is the economic livelihood of the local Punjabi community. Agriculture and land are deeply significant in defining the cultural way of life of the community.
- Agriculture is at the core of family and community activities. It is the shaper of daily life and broader cultural activities.
- Agricultural concerns provide a close structure of support and economic security for the whole family. The family owned banana, blueberry, tropical fruit farms provide year round sources of employment for the whole extended family in an area which experiences some of the highest unemployment in the country.
- Elder members of the community are able to participate and assist where they can, creating interest, physical activity and emotional support.
- Women with very poor English language skills are able to work while caring for children and the elder members of the family.
- A high number of youth (sons) are following strong cultural traditions and inheriting property and agricultural businesses to become significant contributors to the economic cycle. These sons are supporting households with wives, children and parents. By being gainfully self-employed they are able to still meet their cultural and family obligations.

- The self-employed autonomy provides the opportunity to create and participate in cultural events and significant religious celebrations that are central to the way of life of the community.

In addition, the following issues/questions arise if Option E proceeds. These issues resulting from the impact upon prime agricultural land have not been considered and need to be given due consideration by the State government and the RTA

- What are the employment alternatives for the Punjabi Sikh community?
- What re-skilling will be available to them, especially in the context of a rural group with poor English language skills and isolated from the main service centre Coffs harbour by poor transport?
- Is it equitable to up-root this economically, socially and culturally vibrant community?
- What does the future hold for CALD youth and women and only skills in agricultural fields?
- Will a community already classified as ‘disadvantaged’ under Australian government policy become further disadvantaged through this forced redundancy?
- If people are forced to adopt employment outside family operated concerns and the ability to maintain an extended family environment is no longer possible, which will care for the elderly, the sick, the frail and children? Extensive research and consultation show that there is a lack of culturally appropriate services in the area to support the Punjabi Sikh community.

2. Australian multiculturalism.

The devastating economic, cultural and social effect on the Punjabi Sikh community as a result of the impact on prime agricultural land from the RTA’s preferred route Option E needs to be considered from a wider perspective. Woolgoolga is recognised Nationally and globally for its success as a multicultural community with the agricultural industry being the key to the Punjabi Sikh’s stability, common purpose and cultural and social life. Because of the local Punjabi Sikh community, Woolgoolga attracts widespread interest for academic, research, tourist, and food religious factors and provides the theme for many narratives depicting multicultural themes and cultural harmony.² These themes and promotion of Woolgoolga are fundamental in building and supporting national cultural harmony outcomes. A deterioration or wipe out of the Punjabi Sikh community (as can realistically happen with 30% of the community affected by By-pass Option E) would present in terms of cultural harmony and grass roots multicultural models.

3. Property value

The properties, in the majority owned by Punjabi Sikhs along the proposed Option E by-pass route all consist of rich farming land as well as undulating and high land with magnificent ocean, township and hinterland views. With their proximity to the

²For example most recently the local community has recently contributed to a Radio national program depicting which has attracted widespread national interest and also was supported by a Commonwealth grant to produce a book and website (A Punjabi Sikh Community In Australia –from Indian Sojourners to Australian Citizens) depicting the community in response to wider communities needs for this information.

facilities of the township of Woolgoolga and its resources-pristine beaches, lake, services, community facilities, location in terms of access to the Gold coast and major cities such as Sydney and Brisbane and the idyllic climate these properties represent some of the best real estate on the east coast of Australia. It is without doubt that the intrusion of a major highway will significantly reduce their value and potential. And it will be the Punjabi Sikh community who will be the most effected by this.

Case study – Singh

This case study is presented at September 2005. This case-study can be extended to capture a general view of other Punjabi Sikh households in Woolgoolga

Jaswinder Singh 50, with his father Sohan 70 and his son Michael 26 (3 generations) own and operate a 30-acre banana farm through which Option E will carve and divide this valuable property into 2.

Jaswinder's wife and Michael's young bride from India both assist on the farm for at least 5 days per week. Jaswinde'rs mother cares for Michaels's 2 young children.

The family employ 2 labourers for 2 days per week.

The family live together in a newly built mansion style home, 2 Toyota land cruisers and family sedan.

Jaswinder has a daughter aged 20 studying Pharmacy at Sydney University and is fully funded by her parents. Another daughter lives in Brisbane and was married in May this year. The wedding was preceded by a family trip to India to find a husband within the cultural arranged marriage tradition and involved the required elaborate ceremonies, gifts and rituals in India. On the grooms arrival (sponsorship and travel costs) a religious wedding ceremony and reception for 500 people was held (cost 500 @ 35.00 per head). The daughter was supported to purchase a house in Brisbane and the family supports the new husband while he seeks employment (new migrants not entitled to commonwealth support for 2 years).

This family's banana family's banana farm produces approximately 500 cartons of fruit a month. In September this sold at \$20.00 per box earning the family \$20,000.00. Costs to produce this fruit are approximately \$6,500 (cartons \$2,500, chemicals and fertiliser \$2,000 -proportion of \$24,000 per annum, wages \$1,600.00, sundries \$400.00). The annual gross income is therefore \$240,000.00.

This family receive approx \$20.00 a carton for their produce because of its excellent quality. Production increases to 2,000 cartons in summer.

4. Lack of consultation with Punjabi Sikh community by the RTA in selecting Option E as the By-pass route for Woolgoolga.

The view that there have been major omissions and flaws in the RTA's consultation process is widely supported by the local community. The inability to communicate and the disregard for basic government consultation process by the RTA have led to widespread community resistance and the formation of well-organised opposition groups.

However, the omission, disregard and lack of engagement by the RTA of the Punjabi Sikh community in the consultation process is very serious and in direct violation of Australian government endorsed principles of Access and Equity and the State governments Principles of Multiculturalism Act 2000 which requires that government agencies engage in appropriate consultation with CALD groups to ensure their participation in decision making processes.

Recently, members of the Punjabi Sikh community have tried to initiate discussion with the RTA about the consultation process through the Community Focus Groups. However, these attempts have resulted in the RTA strongly supporting their claim that the Punjabi Sikh community were included within the 3-year consultation process. We wish to voice the following major concerns about the consultation process.

Although the RTA identified the Punjabi Sikh community as a 'significant group' they have limited their consultation work³ over 3 years with the community to

- One- of information sessions at the Sikh temples
- Translation of some information releases into Punjabi with distribution at Sikh Temples and the Neighbourhood Centre.
- Dialogue with 1 member of the Punjabi Sikh community in the Community Focus group and Value Management Workshops over a 3-year period.
- Meetings with property owners,

It is obvious that these points do not support attempts at a meaningful engagement or show of respect by the RTA to a group, which they identify as *significant*, in the consultation process. A further study of these claims reveals.

- The one of information sessions at the Sikh temples at the start of the project were initiated by a member of the Punjabi Sikh community through her contacts with a local councillor
- The translated information releases were limited to decisions made and were subjective supporting the RTA's views only. Research and conversations with Punjabi Sikh community reveal that until the 19th January 2004 most Punjabi's were of the belief that that there would be a true western by-pass of Woolgoolga leaving their properties intact. There was not a disclosure of Option E (not an original by-pass option) to the wider Punjabi community prior to 18th February 2004.

³ This summary was provided by Cris Clarke, the RTA project manger for the area on request of Community Relations Commission on behalf of Punjabi Sikh community representatives in March 2005

- The RTA hand - picked a member of the Punjabi Sikh community for the Community Focus Group. This person at the time was a member of the Banana Industry Committee and not a representative of the wider Punjabi community. In addition, this person only attended 1 meeting over 3 years.
- The Punjabi Sikh community were not represented at all on the Value Management Workshop which endorsed the Option E by-pass route

Therefore, it is clear that the RTA have engaged in a ‘tokenism’ approach that makes a mockery out of any consultation process. This is extremely serious when the outcome of the process has been that the significant group that **were not** engaged in the decision making process are the ones most significantly effected by the decision. In addition, this group can be classified as a ‘disadvantaged’ group in the Australian community due to cultural, language and lack of advocacy skills.

As a community the most seriously affected by the RTA’s selection of by-pass Option E we seek recognition that the RTAs consultation was flawed and wish to highlight the major flaws with the RTA’s consultation with the Punjabi Sikhs. We feel that these factors are basic considerations that should have formed part of any genuine and meaningful consultation strategy.

- As the RTA identified the Punjabi Sikh community as a significant group, what specific communication strategies were identified? Where a range of approaches identified to engage the community? What mechanism did the RTA have in place to evaluate the effectiveness of their communication activities?
- With the translated material, what methods did the RTA use to measure effectiveness and understanding of the communication with the Punjabi Sikh community? What methods did the RTA employ to ensure a representative sample of opinion within the Punjabi community?
- Why did the RTA fail to translate information seeking input at CFG and VMW’s?
- How did the RTA ensure that the Punjabi community was aware of the significance of the CFG and how people could participate?
- What was the selection process for the CFG and how did it ensure that the representative chosen actually spoke on behalf of the Punjabi Sikh community.
- Why was a Punjabi Sikh advisory group not formed?
- Why did the RTA fail to engage with the Punjabi Sikh community at points such as formation of CFG’s and convening of VMW to seek their participation?
- How did the RTA communicate with and ensure that the Punjabi Sikh community were aware of the decision making process and their rights within that process
- When the Punjabi community member selected by the RTA only attended 1 meeting over 2 years why didn’t the RTA engage in an evaluation process to identify reasons and seek options to ensure adequate representation continued. What strategies were employed to review the methods and ensure that a replacement was found?

- How was the Punjabi Sikh community informed about the Value Management Workshops and its objectives? What processes were undertaken to encourage the Punjabi Sikh community's participation as a significant group.
- Why did the 'decision critical 'Value management Workshop proceeds without representation from the Punjabi Sikh community?
- How was the Punjabi Sikh community's participation monitored and evaluated to ensure that they have been represented and engaged in the process?

Conclusion

We agree and recognise that the Pacific Highway between Coffs Harbour in the south and Arrawarra in the north and around the township of Woolgoolga is inadequate for the volume of traffic travelling on it and that it requires immediate work and improvement to ensure road safety.

However, we strongly feel that the State government and the RTA must give serious consideration to the many issues and suggestions raised by the community to improve and revisit the proposal presented by the RTA, including their consultation process. The formation of well-organised opposition groups, community outrage, political response and extensive media coverage of the issues and proposals by the RTA overwhelmingly support a rejection of the RTA's proposed solution (that is up-grade the highway to dual carriage way with Option E providing a by-pass of Woolgoolga).

This submission has outlined the major impacts of the RTA's proposed Option E by-pass on the local Punjabi Sikh community. We completely reject Option E as a solution to improve the Pacific Highway. We feel that the 10 kilometres at a cost of approximately 300 million (which Option E will provide) will not achieve any useful or long-term alternative. When this is compared to the impact upon prime agricultural land and the resulting economic, social and cultural impacts upon the Punjabi Sikh community and the wider impacts upon Woolgoolga it is not an option at all and must be rejected immediately by the State government. In addition, the RTA's decision completely lacks substantiation for the economic, social and cultural impacts on the Punjabi Sikh community.

Importantly, this submission has demonstrated that the consultation process by the RTA with the Punjabi Sikh community has been seriously flawed and as a result the by-pass route determination is incorrect. Therefore, we strongly feel that the RTA cannot proceed with Option E with this evident lack of participation, especially as the RTA's decision most significantly affects the Punjabi Sikh community.

In addition, we wish this inquiry to note that the Punjabi Sikh community as part of the By-pass Action Network (BAN) community group. Strongly support the recommendations put forward by BAN in their submission to this inquiry.