

## INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES: COFFS HARBOUR

**Organisation:**

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**Subject:**

**Summary**

BY EMAIL

The Hon Jenny Gardiner MLC  
Chair  
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4

Dear Ms Gardiner,

This letter covers my submission to your inquiry into the Pacific Highway upgrades at Coffs Harbour.

I very much welcome the decision by yourself and your colleagues to examine the position with regard to the Pacific Highway generally. It is an issue of pressing importance to my constituents, many of whom use the road on a daily basis. Unfortunately, many have also witnessed fatal accidents. Also, as I mention in my submission, the current position with up-grading the road has led to disillusionment with the political process, as a result of apparent inaction in the face of an obvious need.

I would also welcome the opportunity to give evidence in person when your committee visits Coffs Harbour.

Yours sincerely,

Luke Hartsuyker, MP  
**The Nationals Member for Cowper**  
9 November, 2005  
LH:RL

SUBMISSION TO STATE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO PACIFIC  
HIGHWAY UPGRADES – COFFS HARBOUR BY THE FEDERAL MEMBER  
FOR COWPER, LUKE HARTSUYKER

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## 1. Summary

The future of the Pacific Highway is an issue which dominates the public life of the city of Coffs Harbour and the electorate of Cowper. Any visitor to Coffs Harbour will quickly realise that the highway runs through the heart of the city. The highway splits the city in two. This submission will address the terms of reference, covering the improvement of the road between Bonville and Woolgoolga, but I believe any response must also look at the bigger picture.

This submission will therefore look briefly at the plans for growth in the local communities mentioned in the terms of reference; the background to the Bonville upgrade; the need for and nature of the Coffs Harbour-Woolgoolga up-grade; and what is required from Federal and State Governments to make much-needed progress.

## 2. Plans for Growth

Coffs Harbour is a rapidly growing community. It has gained many new residents as a result of the sea-change phenomena and current projections show the population of the local government area – which includes the upgrades which the Committee is considering – increasing from 67,000 to more than 100,000 by 2030.

That does not include the seasonal fluctuation caused by the many thousands of tourists who visit the area every year. Permanent residents and tourists alike all use the highway. The projected population growth will not just take place in Coffs Harbour itself but also in the communities affected by the up-grades: Bonville, Safety Beach, Sapphire Beach, Moonee, Emerald Beach, Sandy Beach and Woolgoolga.

I am sure that Coffs Harbour City Council will offer you more detailed information on the plans for these communities so I will merely mention that Moonee alone will soon see around 4,500 new homes and a nearby shopping centre. A new junction is being built but many fear it will not be adequate at peak times. Virtually the only transport link for these communities and a number of other small clusters of habitation is the Pacific Highway. In the 15km between Sapphire Beach and Woolgoolga there are no fewer than 37 junctions.

That means that every day, in increasing numbers, we have commuters, shoppers, school buses, agricultural vehicles and recreational traffic pulling out on to a major inter-state highway. Every morning, queues form at each of these junctions as drivers try to get on to a highway which is carrying an estimated 2,000 heavy vehicles a day.

The number of heavy vehicles using the Pacific Highway increased by 34 per cent from 2001 to 2004, an increase that mirrored that in light traffic. (The increase in heavy vehicle numbers is not, as some misinformed individuals argue, a result of displacement from the New England Highway, which has only seen a reduction of seven per cent over the same period).

This combination of intra- and inter-state traffic using a road and junctions designed for another era is, quite simply, a recipe for disaster. We have already seen a large number of fatalities. I have on file 159 articles, 107 letters and 26 comment pieces about the highway in our local daily paper, the Coffs Coast Advocate, between 19 March and 8 November this year. Far too many of those stories relate to deaths.

Before considering the Bonville up-grade, it should be mentioned that the increasing number of heavy vehicles all pass through the centre of Coffs Harbour, at all hours of the day and night.

I welcome the Federal Government spending \$450m on up-grading the Sydney-Brisbane railway line to take 120,000 container loads a year off the highway and on to rail. That will help, and it is right that we should be moving as much freight as possible off road and on to rail. But, given increasing freight movements, it will not mean an end to heavy road vehicles thundering down our main street.

To sum up, we are dealing with an increasing resident population, a seasonal influx of temporary residents, and increasing heavy and light, inter- and intra-state traffic, all using a road system that is already inadequate. Even if decisions are taken now, it will be a matter of years, and undoubtedly more fatalities, before any improvements are completed.

### 3. The Bonville Up-grade

For many years, the section of highway at Bonville and Pine Creek has been causing concern and has been the scene of some of the worst accidents. The problems are the winding nature of the road, the width of the road in some places, the cluster of retail and other outlets beside the road, smaller roads joining the highway and lighting conditions in the sections bordered by forest. There have been 13 deaths on this section since 2001.

I will not dwell on the long history of the Bonville Deviation. I very much welcome the decision by the State Roads Minister, Mr Tripodi, first to sign the Auslink agreement with the Federal Government, and then to invite tenders for the scheme. Sources in the construction industry tell me that it should be possible to start work on the new road early in the second half of next year. I hope this is the case.

Given the history of this scheme, which is, of course, a State scheme, there remains a deep concern that, if history is a guide, this schedule will slip, almost certainly with the loss of more lives. Getting the scheme started will require a commitment and sense of urgency which I have to say has not been displayed to date by the State Government.

Tenders have been invited, and reduced speed limits have been imposed, which I also welcome. I am sure they will help reduce the current rate of fatalities. An offer from the Federal Government to pay for interim safety measures was accepted, after some delay, as this submission was being prepared, and now \$5m of Federal money will be used for median barriers, road widening and changing lane contours in sections merging from four to two lanes.

However, another Federal offer of \$30m to ensure that work on the main scheme starts promptly remains unanswered at the time of writing.

The lack of urgency is disturbing and hard to understand, given the nature of the issue we are dealing with. It was only a short time ago that we were able to announce

agreement between the Federal and State Governments, through the then Roads Minister, Mr Costa, and the City Council on the Hogbin Drive scheme, which I hoped was a sign of better things to come. Sadly, that does not seem to have been the case.

Although the need for this scheme has been more than clear for many years, it is also of great concern that no detailed design work has been carried out. This means that the invitation to tender had to be issued on a “design and construct” basis, rather than on a “construct only” basis, which can only extend the period before work starts while designs are prepared.

**Residents need to be convinced of the State Government’s goodwill in this matter and of its commitment to starting and completing the scheme as soon as possible.**

**To that end, the State Government should publish a timetable, from acceptance of a tender, through start of work, to completion of work and announce its intention to use its best endeavours to maintain that timetable. The reasons for non-compliance with the schedule at any stage should be made public.**

#### 4. Sapphire to Woolgoolga Up-grade

I have already outlined the pressures on the highway in the area covered by the Sapphire-Woolgoolga scheme, the section between Coffs Harbour and Sapphire having already been improved.



Twelve people have died on this section since 2001. Plans are in existence for a widening of the road and improvement of some junctions but, once again, there is no timetable. The planned growth of settlements, the high number of junctions per kilometre, the increase in the number of short, local journeys using those junctions, and the increase in freight and other traffic generally are a recipe for disaster.

An examination of the planning status of a range of projects under consideration indicates that it has not been allocated a high priority. It lies behind four schemes (including Bonville) for which planning approval has been obtained; behind the Bulahdelah by-pass, Kempsey to Eungai, and Moorland to Herons Creek, which all have environmental assessments underway; and behind Banora Point, Iluka Road to Woodburn, Harwood to Ilkua, Herons Creek to Stills Road, and Failford Road to Tritons Road, which are still at the concept development stage.

Given the length of time it is likely to take to plan and complete this scheme, immediate action is called for. It may already be too late to prevent the section of highway between Sapphire and Woolgoolga eclipsing Pine Creek and Bonville in notoriety.

**Therefore, the State Government should move quickly to state its intentions for the whole of this section, providing detailed designs for all major settlement junctions, reducing the number of junctions with alternatives for those affected, and moving toward inviting tenders as soon as possible. There is a current and pressing need for the scheme, whatever decision is taken on the bypass of Coffs Harbour itself.**

## 5. Coffs Harbour By-pass

This is an extremely contentious issue. The RTA-favoured route skirts the western edge of the city, leaving the highway at Englands Road in the south and rejoining at Korora to the north. However, there is strong support from the community and the city council for a route or routes running further to the west. The longer route would take long-distance traffic off the Sapphire-Woolgoolga section.

While strongly supported by the community, a far-western bypass of Coffs Harbour provides substantial challenges. The options traverse steep and mountainous terrain and would require the building of four to seven tunnels. Studies released by the RTA indicate that costs could be in the order of \$1.5bn and the resulting benefit-cost ratio is low. There would be significant impact on landscape of Aboriginal importance and on flora and fauna. Given the steep gradients and their effect on the operational efficiency of heavy vehicles, it may be that substantial numbers of heavy vehicles may continue to use the existing route, rather than taking a far-western option. Coffs Harbour clearly needs a by-pass. It is important that this work is completed in a timely manner.

**Current options to bypass the Coffs Harbour CBD should be reviewed and further consideration given to a possible western option. Costings provided by the RTA for route options should be re-examined.**

## 6. Federal-State Cooperation

The Federal Government is assisting to fund the highway under AusLink. Under the AusLink programme, as I have previously mentioned, \$450m is being invested by the Federal Government in the railway line between Sydney and Brisbane with the aim of transferring freight from road to rail. The Federal Government has a lease on the line and will conduct a substantial up-grade of the line, through a range of measures, including improved signalling and providing more passing loops which will reduce the journey time for goods trains between Sydney and Brisbane by three-and-a-half hours.

The importance of this measure cannot be over-emphasised. The freight load is expected to double by 2020. Without measures such as this, we face the prospect of seeing all improvements to the highway infrastructure being overtaken by increasing traffic volumes, particularly at the current rate of progress.

To maximise the benefits of the Federal Government's plans for the East Coast line, the branch lines feeding it, currently the responsibility of the State Government, need maintenance and improvement. Many of the branch lines in New South Wales operate under restrictions; some have been closed. The State Government must invest in these lines to provide a seamless rail route for freight from towns served by the branch lines to the major cities.

**The Federal and State Governments should agree a coordinated investment approach to obtain maximum benefit from the Federal upgrade of the east Coast**

**line. This would involve a commitment by the State to upgrading branch lines to maximise freight carried by rail and take pressure off our road system.**

With regards to the highway, the agreement provides for \$480m of Federal money over the next three financial years. This money will be matched by the State to provide a total of \$960m, up to 2008-09. This agreement was welcomed by two previous State roads ministers as an opportunity to make progress on up-grading the highway.

It is essential that there is tight management control of this project and that all allocated funds are spent. A draft proposal by the State Government indicates, I understand, that there are sufficient projects with appropriate priority to fully utilise the \$960m. However, there remains the question of timing. It is worth remembering that the Bonville Deviation was originally a State-funded scheme and was due to be completed in the late nineties. Work has not yet started. There are only three schemes, other than Bonville, on which planning is complete. If there is a minimum of six months (and that is a tight time-scale) between calling for tenders and the start of work, then there must be doubt about the \$320m allocated for 2006-07 can be utilised.

Major roads are long-term projects. They require consultation, coordination and careful allocation of resources, taking into account the capacity of the construction companies capable of doing the work.

That is why the Memorandum of Understanding between the Federal and State Government is important in the context of the AusLink agreement. It would provide a basis for the two governments to identify the work necessary to complete the duplication of the highway in NSW, including the by-pass of Coffs Harbour.

**Agreeing the Memorandum of Understanding is essential to progress the works. It would also help ensure that the considerable funds being allocated to the Pacific Highway are fully and efficiently utilised.**

## 7. Conclusion

It is hard to understate the degree of disillusionment with, and contempt for, the political process as a whole which the handling of the Pacific Highway in and around Coffs Harbour has engendered. In the face of such obvious need – in the face of multiple fatalities – people cannot understand the lack of action and the apparent lack of willingness to proceed.

To sum up, what is needed to restore some semblance of faith in public administration is:

- a timetable for the completion of the Bonville Deviation;
- a review of priorities regarding, and a commitment to, an upgrade of Sapphire to Woolgoolga that will ensure the safety of residents and other road users through the predicted period of community and traffic growth;

- a decision on the route options for a bypass of Coffs Harbour and the commencement of construction at the earliest opportunity;
- a commitment to a plan for spending the money now available for the Pacific Highway so that no funds are left unallocated by 30 June, 2009, the end of the current funding period under AusLink;
- as part of that, agreement on a way forward for the duplication of the whole of the road.

**LUKE HARTSUYKER**  
**Federal Member for Cowper**