

INQUIRY INTO WINDSOR BRIDGE REPLACEMENT PROJECT

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Inquiry into Windsor Bridge Replacement Project

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Origins of the Bridge Project

Initial push for a new bridge came largely from councilor Bob Porter (liberal affiliated independent) concern over:-

- Windsor bridge structural condition
- Risks of collisions – especially with increasing bus and large truck traffic (B double)
- Narrow old bridge

When Bart Basset (liberal) was elected to council, then as Mayor he and other Liberal councilors pushed the bridge project, promising to obtain state funding for this “community project”.

By the time of the first community meeting Mayor Basset had identified the new bridge as a Flagship, legacy project for councils liberal majority. Mayor Basset was also clearly using a successful bridge project as a vehicle for his election to state parliament.

Mayor Basset by then in state parliament was subsequently discredited by ICAC for taking undeclared political donations (\$18,000) and helicopter rides from Buldev – the controversial North Richmond estate developer.

I also clearly remember a council meeting some 3 months after the first community bridge meeting. Senior members of the local historical society had raised alarm in this council meeting regarding RTA giving scant consideration to Thompson Square historical significance. At the conclusion of the presentations, Mayor Basset flushed red with anger and stated that it was too late to consider the history presented and fumed that all this should have been presented at the community meeting on the bridge some months earlier.

Bridge Options Presented to Community

At the first community meeting the options range put by RMS was clearly loaded to only one acceptable plan – that being pursued at present through Thompson Square. This was a 2 lane bridge with fixed budget around \$65 million. Alternatives to this proposal were clearly unviable or unacceptable to the community including:

- 2 options parallel to Bridge Street in the commercial heart of Windsor, down Baker Street or Kable Street or possibly Fitzgerald Street. – These would cut through the commercial heart of Windsor.
- North of the McGraths Hill Flats near to Tebbutts Observatory (Historical site) and cutting through the North Windsor residential area, before crossing the river.
- An alternative crossing by pass road near Pitt Town, was mentioned, BUT indicated as well out of budget of \$65 million.

Heritage of the bridge site was mentioned, but almost as a passing irrelevance.

I clearly remember the presenters firmly highlighting the fixed budget for the project, hence limiting the acceptable outcome to only one viable option – that being through Thompson Square. Presenters became most exasperated when the audience indicated shortcomings in the presented options, especially

- need for more than 2 bridge lanes, 4 lanes on the proposed bridge to meet future needs and growth in the area
- need for higher bridge roadway well above the proposed level for flood prevention
- flood free bridge access on both sides of the river. Many members of the audience told presenting engineers not to bother building a bridge without flood free approaches both sides of the river.

Several later community meetings and all personal community contacts with planners met with similar reactions with bridge consultants – a fixed budget and 2 lanes the only option. Later RMS relented somewhat and compromised with 3 lanes to be built, the third lane to open sometime after the bridge completion. Recently the position has changed again, with an announcement that all 3 lanes on the bridge will operate from day one – apparently a concession from community pressure for improved peak traffic relief.

Funding

NSW Governments finances have changed markedly in the Seven years from the first public meeting, due to recent large asset sell offs for infrastructure building

Reconsideration of the approved \$65 million Windsor Bridge is now timely as now money is available for a more rational bypass bridge, providing an improved Putty Road Highway with longer term traffic capacity AND potential for flood proofing the bypass bridge and access roads.

Leaving the old bridge in place, as now wanted by Hawkesbury Council for local traffic use, after minor repairs by RMS, will separate Putty Road heavy and highway traffic from local traffic. This is a more sensible infrastructure spend with long term benefits for Windsor and protection of early Colonial heritage around Thompson Square.

RMS Role in Project

RMS is clearly a government agency tasked to deliver a project to political orders. In order to change the RMS brief, new directions have to be given to the RMS by government, changing the project and with a new budget. Clearly they are unable to respond to voiced community desires for a different project unless political direction is given for an altered project.

Heritage

RMS appears to have vastly underestimated the significance of Thompson Square heritage which goes back to the very early days of the English Colony at Windsor.

Only well after the first public meeting has RMS been forced into major archaeological works – well above initial cost estimates I've heard. What's being done appears to be aimed at excavations ready to put the new bridge foundations in place – no matter WHAT is found on the site.

Heritage considerations have become of more value to the public than this. Significant heritage is also a basis for tourism growth in Windsor. Old barrel drains, heritage roadways on the site need to be preserved for Windsor heritage, as with convict built drains preserved under glass at Windsor Museum and also at Sydney Conservatorium of Music extensions.

RMS has been cavalier in poorly executing road works around the square – damaging sandstone gutters and changing pavement levels.

Planning documents for the Square landscaping and precinct surrounds have been demonstrated by Hawkesbury Council and consultants to be shoddy and sub standard – not meeting RMS standard requirements. Lighting indicated to be installed by RMS was also shown not to meet heritage standards required in the historic precinct.

Bridge Traffic

At the first community meeting, RMS outlined traffic projections, at the time, only justifying a 2 lane bridge and dismissed any community objections to their data.

RMS data failed to include known growth estimates for the Hawkesbury – Glossodia area estates development, for example, was about to be lodged with Hawkesbury Council so did not appear on the RTA agenda.

Traffic volumes have increased beyond the RMS values, with state government now mandating further growth in the Hawkesbury both sides of the river.

The Putty Road Highway is experiencing steady growth beyond RMS values. Heavy vehicles (B double included) is increasing. Also, sand mining at Tinder Creek Mine has increased putting more trucks on the road and further sand mines in the Mellong Area are due to commence in the identified sand resources area. More B double trucks will be carting extracted sand from this area in the near future.

The new bridge proposal fails to separate local light traffic from heavy vehicles and long distance travelers not needing to visit Windsor. A bypass bridge would improved flood free access roads is a better solution for through traffic.

Flood Immunity Benefits

The proposed new bridge will deliver minor flood benefits, as new standards bridge closure now require this to occur when water reaches the bridge understructure. RMS details of this new height advised to be only slightly above the old bridge water level closure height. Hence, the new bridge will deliver only a small extension of time for use in floods.

As nil work on the bridge approaches raises road levels along the McGraths Hill flats or Wilberforce Road, no benefits are gained here regarding flood immunity i.e. no extension of road use in flood times.

Hawkesbury Infrastructure

The Hawkesbury has been starved of road infrastructure improvements for many years – with one exception, the Jim Anderson Flood Relief Bridge. The Hawkesbury now has state government mandated growth requirements and is also affected by Sydney's growth, including the North West Sector, putting more traffic onto Hawkesbury roads and river crossings.

New higher capacity flood resilient bridge crossings are urgently required at both Windsor and north Richmond, as minimums. Separation of local and through traffic, with flood time immunity of the new river crossings is urgently needed.

Fate of the old Bridge

The RMS indicates it is determined the old bridge must be demolished and removed entirely, despite it being assessed as being structurally sound and been given load limit upgrades by RMS in recent years allowing loaded B Double trucks onto this 100 plus year old bridge.

Hawkesbury council now wants the old bridge retained in its entirety as a useful heritage item. It has offered RMS to fully take over all maintenance and liability for the bridge after RMS does minor makeover works prior to handover.

Uses for the old "heritage bridge", over 100 years old, include:

- pedestrians^{and} cycle ways
- Markets and other commercial activities
- Tourist and heritage attractions

Richmond Lowlands Sand and Gravel Deposits

These alluvial deposits have been long identified and listed as state significant, similar in size to those extracted at Penrith Lakes scheme.

Conspiracy theorists in the Hawkesbury opine that extracted sand and gravel from these deposits be best moved by barge on the Hawkesbury River rather than by heavy trucks on road, which would meet

major resistance from residents. River barge traffic would be unable to navigate beneath the existing Windsor Bridge, hence its removal is essential in order to allow extraction on the Richmond lowlands to be viable

The new bridge proposal will allow barge traffic, hence confirming the potential of the sand mining conspiracy theory.

Economic, Social and Heritage Implications

The new bridge will not deliver best possible economic value, as it

- Fails to separate local traffic from Putty Road Highway through traffic
- Will not resolve major congestion issues in Windsor around the bridge area. Hence it fails to solve the social issue of traffic congestion in peak hours and holiday times.
- Resident frustration with traffic congestion will not be resolved
- Significant improvement on the bridge opening times during floods will not be delivered

Heritage is poorly considered in the new bridge project – it appears to be almost an afterthought by RMS. Whilst RMS claims to unite the Thompson Square Precinct this in fact at significant heritage cost

- digging up existing undisturbed waterfront lands
- building over heritage sensitive drains and roads
- Putting out of character concrete bridge through the heritage area and in front of heritage listed buildings facing the precinct.
- Failed to reduce traffic and especially heavy vehicles going through the heritage area
- RMS has failed to present correct and adequate planning documents for works intended in the heritage areas

Windsor needs sensitive considerations in road works by RMS as its tourism is growing in economic importance and needs heritage preservation as a tourism feature – Windsor being one of the oldest communities in the founding colony of Australia. Excavation almost anywhere in Windsor township is likely to turn up significant old colonial works or Aboriginal Artifacts. Windsor's heritage in the ground appears to be regarded as an inconvenience, not an opportunity for an economic benefit based upon its heritage.

Political Personalities in the Bridge Project

Major drivers of the Windsor Bridge project have been liberal party Hawkesbury councilors, especially Bart Basset (former mayor and later state parliamentarian).

The new bridge was paraded as a flagship legacy project for the community. This would also set up a run for state parliament for both Bart Basset and Kevin Connelly – Deputy Mayor to Bart Basset during most of their time on Hawkesbury council.

There appears to be a linkage to the Liberal Party origins of the bridge project and RMS and state government being unwilling to review the bridge project or listen to local desires to have the project reviewed on any basis.

Local Liberal state parliament members Perrottet – current treasurer, Williams and Connelly appear totally deaf to requests for project reviews. PERHAPS allowing a project review would involve a “loss of face” on the part of Liberal party members in the event of adverse findings regarding the bridge project.

Whether the Liberal party involvement in the bridge project is relevant I’m unable to determine as a private citizen, lacking insider political knowledge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if the Sydney Harbour Bridge had been built on the basis of RMS advice and budget restrictions like those of the Windsor Bridge project the current Harbour Bridge, still viable 80 years later, would not have been built. Most likely, a 2 lane bridge meeting the depression budget would have been constructed – showing a total lack of foresight now demonstrated in the Windsor Bridge Project being reviewed by the Upper House committee.

(1) Attachment to Submission
(Community Hand-out document relevant to this
Submission, typical of much Community feelings
wanting a More Rational Windsor Bridge Project)

Mr Bill Sneddon
Monday 22nd Jan 2018