

INQUIRY INTO WINDSOR BRIDGE REPLACEMENT PROJECT

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SUBMISSION

To: Portfolio Committee No.5 – Industry and Transport
Inquiry into the Windsor Bridge replacement project

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BACKGROUND

I am a local historian who has, over the past 35 years, been researching the history of the Hawkesbury. I am the author of a number of publications and write extensively on the history of the Hawkesbury. In 2001, I was awarded an OAM – 'For my service to the community through the preservation of the history of the Hawkesbury'.

CONCERNS

The Windsor Bridge Replacement Project has, from the very beginning, been a contentious issue, and continues to be. I am in complete opposition of the Windsor Bridge Replacement Project with major concerns about the project relating to the social and heritage impacts. As a local resident living on the western side of the Hawkesbury River, I am very concerned about the so-called benefits of the new bridge and its impact on traffic conditions.

1. HERITAGE IMPACTS

The Hawkesbury district has a very unique history which is well documented in publications including:

- Barkley, Jan. & Nichols, Michelle. (1994). *Hawkesbury 1794-1994: the first 200 years of the second colonisation*. Windsor, NSW : Hawkesbury City Council
- Barkley-Jack, Jan. (2009). *Hawkesbury settlement revealed : a new look at Australia's third mainland settlement 1793 - 1802*. Dural, NSW : Rosenberg Publishing
- Bowd, D. G. (1973). *Macquarie country: a history of the Hawkesbury*. Windsor, NSW : D.G. Bowd

In brief, European settlement of the district was established when Lt.-Gov. Major Francis Grose "*settled on the banks of the Hawkesbury twenty two settlers.*" The Hawkesbury became a major contributor of food which allowed the colony to stabilise, and the term used to describe the Hawkesbury "the granary of the colony" is well known from that time. As the settlement prospered, the area developed. The main mode of transport was via the river, therefore the wharf was an important transport hub. The main administration area of the Hawkesbury was located in the vicinity of the public square, entrepreneur and chief constable Andrew Thompson (1773?-1810), an emancipated convict, leased land near the square and operated his various businesses.

In 1810, during his tour of the Hawkesbury district, Governor Lachlan Macquarie directed the establishment of new townships on higher ground less liable to flooding, renaming the locality known as Green Hills, Windsor. The township was later surveyed and plans drawn and Thompson Square was named in honour of the late Andrew Thompson, by Macquarie in 1811, whose death in 1810 was a result of illness due to rescuing many inhabitants in the 1809 flood. The commercial centre of Windsor eventually shifted towards the railway in the 1860s but Thompson Square remained an integral part of the town, retaining much of its original integrity.

The surrounding buildings including the historic Macquarie Arms Hotel built in 1815, form an important heritage landscape and have long been recognised by organisations and former governments. In 1984 Hawkesbury Council received a \$500,000 grant from the Australian Bicentennial Authority to restore

Thompson Square. The project resulted in the facades of many of the buildings in the square being reinstated,

...with the aim of renewing and extending the economic use of the buildings, while at the same time encouraging the ever expanding tourism industry and providing an attractive pleasant recreation area. (Official opening brochure, 23/4/1988)

The project was officially opened by the Hon. N. F. Greiner, Premier of NSW, on 2 April 1988.

Thompson Square was given a Permanent Conservation Order in 1982 and then later recognised in the State Heritage Register (SHR). The Statement of significance compiled for the SHR states:

Thompson Square is one of the oldest public squares in Australia and notable for the large number of Colonial Georgian buildings which surround it. It is the only public space remaining from the original town and has played an important part in the history of the town. It is the only remaining civic space as laid out by Governor Macquarie and is a vital precinct in the preservation of the early Colonial character of Windsor. The Square reflects Macquarie's visionary schemes for town planning excellence in the infant colony. Windsor is the third oldest settlement in Australia while the Square is the oldest public square in Australia.

The Casey and Lowe Heritage Review reports that the *"Working Paper 1 says impacts are so major Windsor Bridge Replacement Project (WBRP) should not go ahead."* However the RMS did not accept the heritage consultant's advice. The report continues, *"The Built Heritage and archaeological landscape investigations report (August 2011) examined the various options. It was very much a proforma examination of the statutory issues. While it stated that its aims were to 'address all heritage values – historic landscapes, built heritage, archaeological evidence' (October 2009, published 2011:2) it does not do this."*

The continued denial of advice from experts is overwhelming and a perpetual flaw with the project.

2. ARCHAEOLOGY

Last year the RMS commenced an archaeological dig as part of the Windsor Bridge Replacement Project and part of a unique brick barrel drain believe to date to about 1814/1815 was uncovered. The RMS reported that *"a small excavator will be used in controlled circumstances to carefully excavate the soil...if an object is detected in the soil layer, work with the excavator will cease and the contractors will proceed using manual salvage."* I have visited the site on a number of occasions and the excavator which is not small, has been in constant use. The transparency of this dig is unacceptable. There has been little feedback from the contractors or the RMS particularly via social media nor has there been any interaction with the community. Similar projects including the extension of the light rail and the Royal Oak Inn at Rouse Hill, kept the community informed and held open days.

According to the RMS website, "Testing to date has provided valuable information about both historic and Aboriginal heritage around the project site." It would be considerate of the RMS to share this information and photographs, keep the community up to date.

3. VISUAL IMPACT

The visual impact of raising the bridge on Thompson Square and the impact to the character of the area will be irreversible. The open space of Thompson Square is very recognisable in paintings and photographs taken since the 19th century.

The height of the proposed bridge at Windsor will have an unsympathetic impact on Thompson Square. The bridge will be much higher than the existing low level bridge and the buildings in Thompsons Square will be impacted and the original sightlines obliterated. The noise will impact the park area of the square and little mention has been made of the substantial vibration impact of the building of the bridge and continual increased traffic will have in the fabric of the heritage buildings. The EIS adequately failed to reflect the impact of noise and vibration on the houses in Thompson Square, and the *"potential impacts upon these residences"*.

The RMS states that a *“unified open space in Thompson Square increasing the usable area in the square by more than 500 square metres with direct access to the river.”* The EIS states that the design and landscape of the parkland would include, *“Minor earthworks in the upper Thompson Square parkland to provide a gentle slope.”* However this is not correct as although additional space is planned to be included from the old Bridge Street, taking into account retaining walls, The Terrace, much of the land will be sloped and unusable. The new structure will also cast shadows over the square.

4. SOCIAL IMPACT

From its establishment as a public square, it has been an integral part of the fabric of the Hawkesbury. It was originally where the bell post rang for the convicts to attend work. The stocks were also situated in the square and used to confine both men and women for a variety of misdemeanours including drunkenness. The pillory was positioned in the square and used for punishing crimes such as perjury. Public Auctions were conducted in Thompson Square in the early 1800s, according to the Sydney Gazette newspaper including Ralph Malkins infamous sale of his wife in 1811. A bullock roasted in Thompson Square fed the crowds when the railway opened in 1864. The square has been used for entertainment and relaxation for many years with even a mini golf course set up in the 1930s. Parades and marches commenced in Thompson Square and the Hawkesbury Lancers marched to Thompson Square in 1900, cheered on by a large crowd of onlookers. It has long been used as a picnic area by the community and tourists alike. When the nation celebrated the bicentenary in 1988, Thompson Square was filled with thousands of descendants when the Pioneer Monument was officially launched.

Despite enormous opposition for the project from peak bodies including the Heritage Council, the Royal Australian Historical Society, National Trust of Australia and the Engineering Heritage Committee of Engineers Australia, the Government has ignored the views of the experts in their field. The Heritage Council of NSW stated, *“It is unequivocally opposed to the project for the ‘irrevocable damage’ it will do to Windsor and Thompson Square. It reinforced its preference for a bypass option. A number of petitions with thousands of signatures have also been ignored and dismissed.*

5. TRAFFIC CONCERNS

- a. **Flood free access** - The RMS website states that the *“NSW Government is funding this project to help improve traffic flow and provide a reliable and safe crossing of the Hawkesbury River”* and it will provide *“A new bridge that can cope with higher levels of flooding.”* I am neither an engineer nor an expert on road construction, but I fail to see how the proposed bridge will provide a reliable and safe crossing during times of floods? What is the use of a higher level bridge when there is no flood-free access across the floodplain to a road system on the Freemans Reach/Wilberforce side of the river? The Hawkesbury Valley Way and Jim Anderson Bridge provide flood free access between Windsor Road and the township of Windsor but nothing similar exists between Windsor and Freemans Reach/Wilberforce. The Project EIS confirms the project will have little impact on flood free access.
- b. **Travel time – personal experience** As a local resident, who commutes to work through Thompson Square daily, I am concerned that the replacement project is not going to address the transport concerns of our community. I live approximately 11.5 km from my place of work in Windsor which out of busy times is about 13 minutes. During peak times, it takes me about 30 to 40 minutes to travel this distance due to the congestion of traffic on the bridge and through the roundabout in Thompson Square. With the introduction of a roundabout at Freemans Reach will give right of way to traffic travelling from Freemans Reach this add further delays to traffic approaching from Wilberforce, the travel route.

Over the last five years, the traffic over Windsor Bridge has increased with the number of trucks on this route, dramatically increased. According to the CAWB Traffic Count, *“Over the 2012-2017 five year period, while light vehicle movements on Windsor Bridge only increased by 7%, total heavy vehicle movements increased by 48%. Rigid trucks had a 45% increase, while articulated trucks had a 59% increase.”* Although a number of independent studies have shown the extent of

the growth in heavy vehicle traffic across the bridge however from personal observation from my travel, there has been significant increase in recent years. It is vital that heavy vehicles are removed from the town centre as a matter of safety and that is why it is important a bypass is considered. The proposal to build a replacement bridge at Windsor (three lane bridge over the Hawkesbury River) is seriously flawed. How is this going to relieve and reduce travel times when a roundabout and new sets of lights are also to be established? Retaining the old bridge for local traffic and looking at another viable option is in my opinion, the only viable solution.

- C. **Windsor Bridge** – there was controversy surrounding the establishment of the Windsor Bridge in the 19th century and it was eventually approved and constructed, officially opening in 1874. The bridge was designed and constructed by William King Dixon and Andrew Turnbull using modern techniques with *“cast iron cylinders and screw piles braced with strong wrought iron beams...piles and cylinders to be sunk to the rock, and lewised thereto by heavy wrought iron bolts, previous to being filled up with cement concrete”* according to a newspaper (Australian Town & Country Journal 22.8.1874) account of the day.

In 1919 it was decided to replace the timber on the bridge with reinforced concrete. The work, was carried out by Monier and the bridge reopened. The bridge has withstood numerous major floods of the Hawkesbury River including the 1961, 1964 and 1978 inundations without any major damage.

An independent engineer report, ‘A Review of the Structural Condition of the existing Windsor Bridge – Final Review’ was prepared by Peter Stewart Consulting P/L for the NSW Department of Planning. The Executive Summary confirms what many locals have long questioned, that the bridge *“is not about to collapse in the short term”* and *“The bridge can be refurbished at a cost such that it can function for the next 50 years with little ongoing maintenance.”*

It concluded, *“The condition of the existing bridge is such that it is not in dire condition and could relatively economically be refurbished and strengthened. However, it is in danger of accelerated deterioration through neglect of maintenance. It is not proposed to refurbish and strengthen the bridge to carry the future traffic volumes and loads and hence meet the RMS desired level of service, standards and specifications.”*

The information about the bridge and the project has been conflicting. In one of its own reports, (Inspection and Structural Assessment for Windsor Bridge) it is reported, *“If the RTA intends to decommission the bridge in near future, the bridge in its present condition and loading will be safe for some time.”*

6. TOURISM IMPACT

Since the restoration work revitalised Thompson Square in 1988, tourism to this area has increased. Outside dining, weekend markets and establishment of the Hawkesbury Regional Museum has resulted in this area being an important destination for locals and tourists and there is much potential for this area to grow. On the weekend, the Macquarie Arms Hotel and other eateries are bustling. The Windsor Bridge replacement project will severely affect the cultural tourism of Thompson Square and the construction of the new bridge will impact on the uniqueness of Thompson Square. The appeal of this area will dramatically decrease will impact the local economy.

7. FINANCIAL COSTS

I also object to this project as it represents an extreme waste of Taxpayers money. The bridge is purported to have a short life-term and will result in traffic issues for several decades to come during the construction and use in future. Will the NSW Government revisit the Windsor Bridge replacement project again, as noted, after the new bridge is constructed?

CONCLUSION

I believe the Windsor Bridge replacement project has been poorly conceived since its commencement. I have attended a number of the public meetings and read many of the reports. The information has been insufficient and inconsistent. I have written to numerous officials and politicians, requesting additional information but

had no adequate explanation as why the destructive Windsor Bridge replacement project is the best possible outcome for the Hawkesbury and why a town bypass is not the best option. Bypasses appear to be standard practice in many similar locations throughout NSW. Also when issues have been raised with officials, including politicians, the community have been called “fringe-dwellers” and other offensive names.

This project has, and will have, an enormous impact for the Hawkesbury community, not only now but also for the future. The Hawkesbury has survived so much over the past and it reprehensible that our history is being threatened with so little respect.