

## **INQUIRY INTO WINDSOR BRIDGE REPLACEMENT PROJECT**

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**Submission to the Inquiry into the Windsor Bridge Replacement project  
NSW Legislative Council Portfolio Committee No. 5 – Industry and Transport.**

**Danielle Wheeler**

**Introduction**

I make this submission as a resident of Wilberforce, a small town approx 5km from Windsor. Windsor Bridge is my nearest river crossing and I use it many times each week. I am also an elected Councillor on Hawkesbury City Council. I was elected on a Greens ticket in 2016. I am Chair of Council's Heritage Advisory Committee and the Town Centres Revitalisation Working Group and a member of the Floodplain Risk Management Committee. I am a research scientist by profession. I will attempt to address each of the terms of reference in this submission. The views presented herein are my own and are not endorsed by Hawkesbury City Council.

**A) the current Windsor Bridge, including its maintenance regime, renovation methods and justification for demolition**

There has been little maintenance of Windsor Bridge over the last twenty years despite an increase in load limit and traffic numbers, including heavy vehicles (detailed in submission 32 by Mr C Hallam). The bridge looks tired and run down. Any work completed has been made to look “temporary” with a poor standard of finish, reinforcing the public notion that the bridge is no longer fit for purpose. The road surface is poor and has been allowed to deteriorate. There are regular mounds of asphalt on the bridge which are noisy for residents, providing further objections to the bridge's retention. It has been clear for many years that the RMS has never had any intention of conserving this State-listed bridge, well before public consultation into any replacement project began. It should be noted that all heritage protections for Windsor Bridge (built in 1874), a listed State heritage item in its own right, have been turned off to allow the Replacement Project to proceed.

Most concerning has been a public campaign of misinformation, carried on by former Councillors, State Government Members and the RMS, which claims that the bridge is no longer safe. Some have gone so far as to state that the bridge could collapse, and that “if that happened with a busload of school kids on it, it would be a disaster”. Yet, all the time, traffic volume and load limits have increased. This is an outrageous abuse of position and has left some locals fearful of using the bridge. Along with deliberate misinformation about traffic improvements and flood-free access, this calculated fear-mongering has influenced some local residents opinions in favour of Option 1.

The RMS has now offered to retain the first section of the bridge as a viewing platform. These plans have been presented to Hawkesbury City Council for comment. They show an idealised version of Thompson Square, with a viewing platform looking out onto the river, and a view of a huge concrete bridge, out of all proportion and of vastly different form to anything in the heritage listed Square. The platform will provide little evidence of the extraordinary building feat that was Windsor Bridge, the role it had in the local economy and community, and its importance as a major linkage for communities in the Hawkesbury. It will be an unnecessary financial impost on Council, which already maintains a viewing platform a few hundred metres down stream where the view will be less impacted by a large, modern bridge.

**b) the replacement bridge project, including:**

**i. options presented to the community**

The community and Hawkesbury City Council were presented with nine options for the Windsor Bridge Replacement project. None of these included a bypass, the most desirable outcome. Council was told that a bypass was too expensive and therefore out of the question. All options were deeply flawed. Only one, option 9, called for the retention of the State-listed Windsor bridge. It was also the only option where problems were detailed in public information. Several options presented were not feasible. Others, particularly option 7 (Court St) had an unacceptable heritage impact and also pitted one group of residents against another. Several of those residents have confided that they feel “used” by the process and it has damaged community relationships. This “divide and conquer” approach lacked the integrity required for reasonable community consultation, rendering the process worthless.

**ii. post construction strategic outcomes, including traffic benefits, transport and network service capacity**

It is difficult to understand how the RMS can justify the project on traffic grounds. It is clear to local residents who use the road frequently that the traffic bottleneck does not occur on the bridge, but at the Bridge and Macquarie St intersection. This will not be rectified by a replacement bridge as the intersection will remain unchanged. As one protest sign states, its a case of “bigger bottle, same neck”. Instead of improving morning traffic flow, the replacement bridge will just bring traffic from west of the river to the bottleneck faster. Morning traffic is substantial. Queues can form for up to 5km and it can take 30 minutes to travel from Wilberforce to Windsor, a distance of 6km. It must be remembered that this area is already 90 minutes commute from the CBD. Afternoon travel times are similar. Traffic problems are compounded by the dreadful traffic between Richmond and North Richmond (45 mins travel time for less than 5km). Public transport in both areas is extremely poor and car dependence is high. A third crossing on a bypass is desperately needed to improve the commute times and quality of life of residents west of the river before two major housing developments are completed.

**iii. economic, social and heritage impacts**

Option 1 is extremely damaging to heritage. It is impossible to overstate this fact. I have been to the archeological salvage site (outside the fence) and I am shocked by the scale of the removal and the heavy machinery involved. The RMS are continuing to use heavy excavation equipment in very close proximity to the recently exposed brick barrel drains (built 1814) and without knowledge of where the remaining tunnels may be. Colonial era bricks are being dug up and removed daily. Staff seemed surprised by their discoveries, despite numerous local accounts of the tunnels and the rich history of the use of the Square dating back millennia. It is exploration by backhoe and in direct opposition to the “controlled circumstances” and manual salvage the community was promised.

Thompson Square has been greatly misunderstood as a parkland. It is much more than this. It consists of 22 heritage items, buildings, their curtilage, the public square and associated parkland. It is physically impossible to “enlarge the Square” as has been claimed as this would require moving the buildings. The real value of Thompson Square is in its arrangement and scale – a Georgian, human scale space which gives a clear idea of how it functioned in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries as a market place, mustering point, high ground in times of flood, and now social and recreation area. The earliest records of its use as a Colonial trading point predate Governor Macquarie and go back as far as 1795. Aboriginal use goes back far earlier. The sight-lines across the Square have been identical since the 1850s. The Square contains magnificent and well preserved examples of Georgian and Colonial architecture rarely seen in Western Sydney and these streetscapes are a key part of Windsor and the Hawkesbury's identity and marketability as a tourist centre. One of

the buildings, Howe House, is owned by Council and is open to the public as a museum. It is popular destination for schools. Others have been and continue to be used as businesses and film sets. Such uses will be unlikely once the replacement bridge is built due to the visual impact of an industrial-scale bridge and increased traffic noise.

The buildings of Thompson Square will be damaged by the project. All are built of soft brick with lime mortar. They are sensitive to vibration and are already exhibiting cracks and movement due to increased heavy vehicle traffic. This will become worse. The RMS has visited property owners to measure up for noise mitigation equipment. It is impossible to install much of that equipment in State listed buildings. You cannot effectively double glaze french doors or twelve-pane windows without significant visual impacts. The houses in question will become increasingly unliveable, especially where they will be level with the deck height. Thompson Square, its houses, heritage and residents are being sacrificed for no tangible benefit.

I am not sufficiently well informed to comment on the impacts on Aboriginal heritage. I hope the Committee will seek advice from local Elders. From what I have witnessed of the archeological salvage, little care is taken and any artefacts appear to be disturbed and then found during sieving after being removed from the site. Given the site's riverine position on high ground, on both a Songline and travel route, it is likely that the area will be rich in artefacts which could date back millennia. The RMS's current ideology is to preserve the artefacts, Colonial and Indigenous, in concrete, if recent conversations with their Senior Project Manager are to be believed. The theory is that because the lower quadrant of the Square has been disturbed a number of times, further disturbance and entombment is OK. Surely, in 2018, we can work from the position that when we know better we should do better. We must do better in this precious place.

The impact of the destruction of heritage in Hawkesbury's flagship town will have lasting impacts on tourism and economic potential, but also on the psyche and feelings of place of community members. The community has maintained a constant vigil over this place for more than four a half years. The Square and the little tent in the corner have become a community hub, a source of friendship, local news and a site for community events. It is ironic that fighting to prevent the Square's destruction by the NSW Govt has given the Square back its place as the heart of the Hawkesbury. The destruction of this place will be devastating.

Destruction of heritage will also send a clear message to the community that heritage is not important or worth saving. When the State Govt can ignore its own heritage protections to ram through an unjustifiable project, why should local residents care about and maintain the heritage items on their own land? At a time when heritage is extremely vulnerable to the pressures of development and burgeoning property values, the NSW State Govt is sending entirely the wrong message.

#### **iv. flood immunity benefits**

The proposed replacement bridge offers little improvement to flood immunity. While the height of the bridge deck will substantially increase, the construction style of the new bridge means that its under-carriage is reported to be only 400mm higher than the existing bridge. Bridge closures are now determined by river height relative to the under-carriage. Thus, the proposed new bridge offers only 400mm additional flood immunity, by which point approach roads from McGraths Hill and Wilberforce will also be underwater, rendering the bridge useful only as a viewing platform. The Hawkesbury is built on a flood plain. Flooding has been part of the culture of this community since settlement, and figures heavily

in local Indigenous stories and customs. It should come as no surprise to anyone that the Hawkesbury floods. While better flood evacuation routes are highly desirable, the replacement Windsor bridge is unlikely to provide the best solution given its low-lying approach roads. Further, the proximity of the new bridge to the old bridge and the likely resultant behaviour of flood waters appears to be a further justification for the destruction of the State-listed old bridge (G. Standen, personal communication).

**v. project assessment process**

Council's role in this process is questionable. Hawkesbury City Council was asked to make comment on the options for the bridge replacement. I believe that they did not engage in this process in good faith but instead were motivated by party ideology.

Until the 2016 Local Govt elections, Hawkesbury City Council was dominated by a conservative voting bloc which took its lead from Liberal Party Councillors. By 2011, two of those Councillors, including at times the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, were also NSW State MPs. Hawkesbury City Council uses a Heritage Advisory Committee (HAC), made up of community members and expert heritage professionals, to provide heritage advice. In 2011 the HAC, of which I was a member, became increasingly concerned that Council and the NSW State Govt had made a grave error in adopting Option 1. On the 9<sup>th</sup> February 2012, the Committee resolved to ask Council to receive a presentation detailing the historical importance of Thompson Square and Windsor Bridge, and the deleterious heritage impacts of Option 1. Council, at its meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> February, refused to receive this presentation because it had already resolved to support Option 1 (Resolution 55). Greens Councillor Leigh Williams, already staunchly opposed to the project, asked that his name be recorded in opposition to the motion.

At its meeting on the 8<sup>th</sup> March 2012, the HAC was informed of Council's refusal to meet with them and the minutes record their disappointment. Ms Jan Barkley Jack, historian, author and now contributor to the Strategic Conservation Management Plan for Thompson Square, is recorded as raising "grave concern" at the resolution, citing Councillors had "not yet been presented with new historical information regarding Thompson Square and therefore might not fully understand the implications of Option 1." The HAC resolved to form a subcommittee to discuss the new information. It then resolved on the following recommendation:

That:

1. Council be advised of the new historical information indicating that:
  - a) Thompson Square predates Macquarie by 15 years which heightens the site to national significance.
  - b) Thompson Square is the only 18<sup>th</sup> Century Square in Australia.
  - c) The boundary of Thompson Square extends beyond the existing grassed area to include the existing buildings and their rear yard curtilage.
2. This Committee again seeks to present its findings to Councillors in view of Council's decision to support a new bridge through the heart of Thompson Square (Option 1).

The HAC resolved to ask that Council update the Office of Environment and Heritage and the RMS with the complete documentation and relevant facts relating to Thompson Square 1795-1810. I am unaware of whether or not that recommendation was followed. The HAC was also informed by Council staff at that meeting that it was the intention of the RMS to remove the existing State-listed bridge for "structural reasons".

At its meeting on the 27 March, Council again refused to receive a presentation from the

HAC and further requested that the General Manager ensure that no staff or resources were allocated to the sub-committee and that no presentation was required (Resolution 78). The motion was moved by Clr Conolly and seconded by Clr Bassett, then the Member for Riverstone and the Member for Londonderry, respectively. Council continued to support Option 1 without a full understanding of the heritage implications until the Liberal Party lost its dominant vote in 2016. The new Council swiftly resolved to withdraw its support for Option 1 and now is resolutely opposed and calling for a bypass. The Heritage Advisory Committee, of which I am now Chair, has again stated its opposition to Option 1 and is now allowed to make representation to Council following a Council resolution on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2017.

Council has also resolved to prepare a Conservation Management Plan for Thompson Square as it believes the Strategic Conservation Management Plan, a document invented only for this project and with no basis in legislation, to be woefully inadequate. Lucas, Stapleton Johnson and Partners have been contracted to complete the work.

**vi. planning and procurement strategies and associated project costs**

There is deep distrust within the community that proper processes have been followed. The State Govt has not revealed the full costs of the project, costs appear to be rising due to “unexpected” archeological findings (a laughable claim given the location of the site), and budget documents do not provide sufficient information about funding allocation. Much of the information revealed to the public during the Upper House Call for Papers was redacted. This is unacceptable given that the project will spend a very large amount of public money on a bridge that confers little benefit for the community.

**vii. cost benefit analysis process,**

It is simply not possible for any cost-benefit analysis to adequately account for the loss of heritage and it is thus deeply flawed. Further, as detailed elsewhere, the project provides no tangible traffic or flood immunity benefits. Thus it seeks to spend up to \$100 million of public money for no positive outcomes.

The cost-benefit analysis has also failed to adequately consider the impact of the project on the economic activity within Windsor. Increasing the burden of through-traffic will condemn Windsor Town Centre to being a drive by rather than a destination. This is contrary to Hawkesbury City Council's current focus on revitalising our Town Centres, with Windsor as one of our flagship tourism destinations. Current town centre master planning works to remove traffic, preferably on bypasses. The success of this approach for economic activity can be seen in the Southern Highlands (Mittagong and Berrima, bypassed in the 1980s and thriving since) and more recently Berry. The fact that Berry has far fewer heavy vehicle movements and less heritage standing and yet has still been granted a state-funded bypass is a slap in the face for residents of the Hawkesbury.

This project will have an irreversible and devastating impact on business activity within Thompson Square, currently one of the Hawkesbury's best food and beverage areas. Where currently residents and tourists buy food and picnic in Thompson Square, tree removal, steep gradient (1 in 4 in the lower Square), loss of shade, and unacceptable noise and visual impact from the new bridge and associated traffic will render Thompson Square uninviting. People will simply keep driving. This will have flow-on effects in Windsor Mall, which is already struggling and is the subject of a revitalisation plan by Council.

**c) any other related matters.**

Liberal party representatives, including Liberal Councillors are presenting the replacement bridge as a “first step” with a bypass the ultimate solution. No timeframe, route or likely funding sources have been offered, just an assurance that it will happen as a logical next step. This empty promise acknowledges that replacement of the existing bridge with a similar but inappropriate bridge does not provide a solution in the medium term and ignores the devastation that the project will cause to Windsor. Once the state listed bridge is gone, it will be gone forever. Once Thompson Square, its Georgian scale, magnificent buildings, sight-lines, brick barrel drains and Aboriginal archeology are gone or encased in concrete, they are gone for good. No later bypass will re-instate them. This is a once-only chance to save Australia's oldest surviving Town Square, and with it a priceless part of Australia's story.