

**Submission  
No 176**

**INQUIRY INTO IMPACT OF THE WESTCONNEX  
PROJECT**

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Tracy (my wife) and I have been affected by the WestConnex monolith since it began as a concept in 2013. We had moved to Dobroyd Parade in Haberfield in 2011. Our neighbour, the then Ashfield Mayor asked if we had heard about WestConnex in 2012. We had not. After that time we noticed a lot of road markings on our street for utility placements.

Then came the offers of sound proofing, but we missed out as it was assessed on the basis of the length of time people had lived in their homes.

There was still no information about the government's intentions. That didn't come until late 2013 when information sessions were held at the Haberfield Library building. Being kind, the sessions were useless. The sessions entailed large mud maps of tunnels, and explanations from people who had little or no information.

I then wrote to Duncan Gay (Minister for Roads and Ports) and Paul Goldsmith (Acting Chief Executive WestConnex Project) requesting details of property acquisitions, construction dates, staging areas and full plans. Minister Gay's response was garbled nonsense. Paul Goldsmith didn't even bother responding.

That level of arrogance and contemptuous disregard for residents set the tone for what we have endured since December 2013.

On 16 December 2013 Ashfield Council held a public meeting with a number of WestConnex staff and over 400 residents in attendance. The meeting was heated and it soon became obvious that the people representing the project could not answer questions about –

- The project design
- The number of ventilation stacks
- The location of the ventilation stacks
- Property acquisitions
- Road closures or realignments
- Air quality and traffic studies

On 29 December 2013 Tracy and I attended a meeting held by PUSH (People Uniting Surry Hills), a group dedicated to highlighting the effects of the CBD SE Light Rail on local residents. This was a catalyst for us in convening our on meeting to help inform residents of their legal rights if subjected to property acquisition.

We organised a resident meeting for 6 February 2014 with a solicitor who specialised in property acquisition cases. Tracy and I letter-boxed every home in the area we thought would be affected. Such was the response from people desperate for useful information, we had to search for a larger venue.

That meeting provided residents with more information in two hours than they'd had in two months. After the meeting I put together a list of residents interested in taking up the offer of legal representation. It was only then that the true horror of this project hit home. Here are some examples for your inquiry –

- A number of residents spoke to me about RMS/WestConnex representatives door-knocking with acquisition offers and asking residents to sign letters on the spot.

- Residents were told they didn't need legal representation and it would only lengthen the process.
- One older resident owned two blocks of flats which he and his wife fully owned. They were retired and lived off the rent without the need to claim pensions. Their forward planning was lost. This man cried when talking to me. He had worked hard since he migrated so he wouldn't be a burden to the government when he retired.
- Many residents of Haberfield were older people of Italian heritage, and their English wasn't great. They struggled with the approach by people to buy their properties and couldn't properly understand what was happening.
- One resident showed me three letters. The first said RMS may acquire the property. The second said they wouldn't acquire the property. The third letter said the property would be acquired. Unprofessional and disgraceful.
- A woman who lived in the previously mentioned flats worked at the motel near Ashfield Park. It was compulsorily acquired. She lost her job and received an eviction notice in the same day. When I spoke to her she hadn't even been told by WestConnex reps that she was entitled to some moving and bond expenses.
- Residents were also surprised to find that WestConnex had to pay for their reasonable legal expenses, a fact that had been conveniently sidelined.

At this point it was quite obvious that acquisitions were proceeding before the EIS and actual plans were released. Again, the contempt for residents was palpable.

We organised a second legal session on 18 June 2015 after the true number of acquisitions became apparent, and the scale had dramatically increased. If residents stayed in the property for a short time after acquisition this disgraceful government charged rent. This was overturned in some cases after a huge public backlash.

From a personal perspective, it took us many months to confirm that our property would not be acquired. Living in Dobroyd Parade at the bottom of Waratah Street however, lead us to ask questions about the effects on our street, and the impact of roadworks associated with the tunnel egress/ingress at Ramsay Street.

As with much of the information about WestConnex, it was non-existent. Original concept plans showed the construction zone would finish around Martin Street. However, that flew in the face to the geotech drilling in Reg Coady Reserve which was on the other side of the City West Link to where we lived. Questions to WestConnex re: the necessity and purpose for the drilling were met with terse and non-committal answers.

It was obvious to us that the footprint of the construction was slowing approaching closer to where we lived, or in my wife's terminology, the lava is spreading. We sought legal advice as to whether we could request that our home be acquired. For that to occur we would have to prove that our amenity, lifestyle and property value had been adversely affected by the construction of the road. The catch was we had to wait until the completion of the works in 2019. We were not prepared to do that.

Family circumstances had allowed us to pay out the mortgage on the Dobroyd Parade house. WestConnex put us in a position that forced us to sell our mortgage-free home.

We contacted a real estate agency and were told it was the biggest semi in Haberfield. Unfortunately the roadworks had already encroached further than originally planned, and we believe it cost us about \$400,000 in lost value.

We then moved to another property in Bland Street, and as a result of moving we now have another mortgage. Our decision to move was difficult, but indications were that the property in Dobroyd Parade would become extremely unappealing once the construction was complete.

That fear has now been confirmed as the nice tree-filled grass verge between Dobroyd Parade and the City West Link has been decimated by the construction. The project wasn't intended to extend so far, but the effect on residents has been terrible. Rather than looking at an aesthetically pleasing grassed area and across to Timbrell Park, all they have now is a 5 metre high noise barrier. At least three homes, including ours, were bought prior to being advised of this ugly structure.

As an aside, shortly after moving I walked down to Wattle Street where homes were being demolished. I grew up in 21A Wattle Street, a home my parents built in 1963. I watched as it was razed. While I was watching a worker passed by and asked my interest. I said I grew up in the house. He said, oh well, that's progress isn't it? I was speechless at such an imbecilic comment, but later thought it was a reasonable commentary on the manner in which the entire project was being handled.

Since we bought our Bland Street property, once again WestConnex have moved the goalposts. The M4-M5 Link tunnel was originally designed to travel under Alt Street near the corner of Denman Avenue. Much to our disgust that tunnel has been re-routed and will travel under Bland Street near the Denman Avenue intersection. That is directly underneath our house.

The way in which these plans continue to alter with complete impunity is a disgrace to this current government. We made a costly financial decision based on available information which has now changed.

Bland Street is a weight limited thoroughfare, but that seemingly doesn't apply to the B-double trucks which regularly go past the house. Vehicular traffic has increased generally since we moved, much as a result of constant street closures in Haberfield. The increased traffic has also had a detrimental effect on the Haberfield Public School.

Reports to WestConnex of this cowboy behaviour were always met with requests for registration numbers. That was very hard to do with moving trucks that are often dirty, and as truck and trailer are separately registered, the plates are different. This caused an anomaly in so far as the truck registration was recorded, but not the trailer.

Ramsay Street was closed at Wattle Street last year for a few months so bridge and tunnelling work could be completed. That prevented the free flow of traffic between Haberfield and Five Dock, the result of which was a decreased in passing trade to the Haberfield businesses.

It has since been reopened, but the damage was done with at least three businesses closing down due to lack of customers. I've spoken to a number of the store owners who are disgusted that there has been no offer of financial compensation. The simple fact is that where traffic is diverted, diners will go to other restaurants and shop customers will find other stores. In some

cases they may not return, and that has certainly been the case. The government has completely washed their hands of responsibility.

The ongoing noise has also been a bugbear. When the EIS was first released it was stated that the hours of work for above ground construction would be 7<sup>am</sup>-6<sup>pm</sup> Monday to Friday and 8<sup>am</sup>-1<sup>pm</sup> Saturday. Tunnelling would be a 24/7 proposition.

The roadworks are now 24/7 regardless of the type of work. We receive a weekly report on out-of-hours work. It is not regular and three to four nights each week. Complaints to WestConnex are pointless, as the blame is usually shifted to utility companies.

Complaints to the utility companies are pointless as the blame is shifted to the RMS. We are impacted by road works on the corner of Bland Street and Parramatta Road about three nights each week. The works start at 6<sup>pm</sup> and often continue until 5<sup>am</sup> the following morning. Concrete sawing usually starts at around 10<sup>pm</sup> because RMS will not issue a road access licence for Parramatta Road until that time.

We have given up complaining about the noise as the Inner West Council, Department of Planning and the EPA are all powerless to achieve any meaningful respite. WestConnex remain completely oblivious to complaints. It has been suggested to me by the community liaison officer that shorter working hours will delay the project. It has also been suggested that we take a break and go away for a week. And the most infuriating of all was the provision of ear-plugs.

Let's be clear here, I don't care about Parramatta Road. Shut a lane. Shut the road, but let us sleep. I realise work safety is involved, as it should be. But if fully or partially closing the road is necessary, do it. And do it during the day, or at least between 6<sup>pm</sup> and 8<sup>pm</sup>. This goes back to the arrogance and contempt I mentioned earlier.

Dust is also a major problem. I realise the construction are dirty places and sites have remedial procedures to deal with dust, but they either don't work, or it's not taken seriously. Based on the sight of a worker spraying a site with a garden hose, I'd suggest it's not taken seriously.

Cars, home windows, exterior walls and pathways all need constant cleaning. On a few occasions clothes have needed to be washed a second time. The dust remediation requirements aren't being addressed.

Parking is also ridiculous. From as early as 6<sup>am</sup> contractors start arriving and occupying on street parking in Bland Street, Denman Avenue, Alt Street and Walker Avenue. When the project started we told that parking compounds would be arranged for contractors. Five years on we're still waiting.

The Muirs site was touted as a parking area for M4 East contractors, but apparently it will only be available to M4-M5 Link contractors. As with closing Parramatta Road, I don't care. Get the contractor vehicles off the streets and give residents some respect.

And now to our house itself. We have cracks in the lounge-room wall, bathroom ceiling, main bedroom ceiling and above the front door. They weren't there when we moved in, and they've slowly gotten bigger. I can supply photos if required.

We wrote to the M4 East Team on 3 March 2017 at 9.30<sup>am</sup> to request that a WestConnex building engineer to come to our house to inspect this crack. The response came at 10.05<sup>am</sup> which not surprisingly denied the request. But 35 minutes? This was an important matter for us and it was discarded in 35 minutes, not by an engineer, but a desk-bound community liaison officer.

That same community liaison officer advised us that our property was not within the identified area to be offered a Property Condition Survey (PCS). As per Australian standard, a PCS is to be offered to properties located within 50 metres of a construction work site. We were told it was unlikely that the construction work could cause the damaged as described. And this gem, "it is very common for properties to show damage following a hot, dry summer; my house is also cracking in a similar way."

To receive a response in 35 minutes, with a refusal to send someone out is pathetic. The response was patronising rubbish. It is even more of a concern now that the tunnel will pass under our house.

It is similar to other emails I've sent to M4 East and WestConnex. Most responses are condescending and relate to project procedural policy rather than solutions to important issues affecting us as residents.

In summary we have been affected by –

- Cost of moving house due to the detrimental effect on our previous property.
- Cracking in walls of our current home, with denial of any responsibility by WestConnex.
- An ever increasing occurrence of dust and general grime around our house, and the need to clean areas much more regularly than we encountered in previous homes.
- Increase in competition with contractors for street parking, contrary to promises of on-site parking for contractor use.
- Complete disregard for residents with increased night work hours and use of noisy heavy equipment at inappropriate and unsocial times.
- Increased use of Bland Street by heavy vehicles including B-Doubles, and the use of the Bland Street/Denman Avenue intersections as a turning bay.
- Condescending comments from community liaison officers regarding noise by way of suggesting we go on holiday.
- Condescending comments from community liaison officers suggesting that if all work was done during the day, it would extend the completion date.
- Condescending supply of ear plugs from Sleepless nights have led officers.
- The inability of the government to provide residents with an actual set plan of the final route of the tunnelling.
- Sleepless nights have led to daily tiredness, affecting employment. Lack of sleep also decrease health in general and leaves us susceptible to infections and flu.
- Sleepless nights have also led relationship strains that would otherwise not exist.

In closing the arrogance and heavy-handed tactics in the acquisition processes were disgraceful. The condescending nature of many of the community liaison staff is just sad and reflects on them personally and the company itself. The government has also seemingly acted outside its powers, a fact borne out by the Desane fiasco.