

**Submission  
No 257**

## **INQUIRY INTO IMPACT OF THE WESTCONNEX PROJECT**

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## WESTCONNEX PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY

WestConnex has been horrendous for communities throughout the Inner West, including Haberfield and Ashfield in my Summer Hill electorate.

Residents have been impacted through unfair acquisitions, the loss of irreplaceable heritage homes, round-the-clock dust, noise and vibration from construction, a lack of coordination between contractors and utility providers, un-compensated damage to properties, increased traffic on local roads including heavy vehicles, street closures, increased pressure on local parking, a lack of adequate notification of works, and negative interactions with construction workers.

Residents have continually been short-changed by the project when it comes to mitigation of the project's impacts. Residents also face uncertainty around air quality, rat-running on local streets, and ongoing noise and vibration impacts once the road becomes operational. And to make matters worse, the community remains uncertain and sceptical of the Government's rationale for the project, clearly preferring a meaningful investment in public transport.

This parliamentary inquiry represents a rare opportunity for public scrutiny on the project. At every stage, the Government has shielded the project in secrecy and sidelined residents with genuine concerns about the impacts and strategic value of the project.

The Government established the Sydney Motorway Corporation as a private entity so as to exclude it from the *Government Information (Public Access) Act*.

In that process, the Chief Executive of RMS and the Secretary of Transport for NSW was ousted, meaning that the State's largest transport project was no longer being overseen by transport officials.

The Office of the Auditor-General slammed the early governance of the project, arguing that:

“There were a number of deficiencies in governance and independent assurance over the early stages of the WestConnex project.... The processes applied to WestConnex to provide independent assurance to Government did not meet best practice standards.”

The report also noted an inappropriate lack of gateway reviews, and conflicts of interest in providing assurance; and also criticized the first business case, noting it:

“...had many deficiencies and fell well short of the standard required for such a document.”

The Government then held back the updated strategic business case for WestConnex until after the last parliamentary sitting day of 2015 to avoid parliamentary scrutiny.

The Government ignored the tens of thousands of submissions from community members throughout the Environmental Impact Statement process; approving each stage with only minimal concessions to residents' concerns.

They continue to shield M4 tolling information from the community under the guise of the information being commercial in confidence, when in fact it is pivotal to understanding the projected utilisation of the project underpinning the Government's rationale.

There are significant questions around contracts, the legality of property acquisitions, salaries for Sydney Motorway Corporation bureaucrats, traffic modelling, air quality monitoring and more. There are significant questions around rolling cost blow-outs and the financial dealings around the project.

I have met with countless residents affected by WestConnex. I have heard their stories. I have sat with them in their soon-to-be-acquired kitchens while they cried and held their head in their hands. I have joined with residents at protests, town hall meetings, marches and street gatherings; all coordinated by residents not because of self-interest, but because of an abiding and passionate commitment to their local community and through a desire for fairness and justice.

They deserve to be heard.

### **Key issues**

Over the past four years, residents have raised a large number of concerns pertaining to the WestConnex project, including:

***WEAK CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL***, which have meant that the impacts of construction have been far worse for residents than projected, and in many cases left unchecked, with those able to mitigate them left powerless to do anything.

***UNFAIR ACQUISITIONS***: There were significant failures in the acquisition process for WestConnex, with Haberfield and Ashfield homeowners routinely ripped off hundreds of thousands of dollars off the value of their homes. Homeowners reported that acquisitions appraisers were poorly trained and believe that their lack of expertise was a ploy to delay the process, forcing homeowners to settle for much less value at the risk of being dragged through the Land and Environment Court. While I acknowledge that the Government amended the relevant act in response to complaints and offered additional compensation, residents remain incensed at the process.

***PUBLIC HOUSING TENANTS*** have been more or less abandoned throughout the construction period. I have worked with numerous residents in Alt Street and Dobroyd

Parade in Haberfield, to ensure they were provided with even minimal noise and construction mitigation. It is unclear as to whether Sydney Motorway Corporation or the Department of Family and Community Services pre-emptively worked with residents in a concerted way (as was the case with other residents), or whether mitigation measures were only provided when asked by residents.

**EXTENDED CONSTRUCTION** in Haberfield and Ashfield for Stage 3 of WestConnex is deeply concerning to local residents, who were promised an end to construction in 2019. Residents now face years more noise, dust and disruption and feel misled and let-down by the announcement.

**INSUFFICIENT AND INCONSISTENT NOISE ABATEMENT**, with some residents left severely exposed to noise in both the construction and operational phases of the project. I remain deeply concerned for the residents on Wattle Street, Loftus Street and Chandos Street in Haberfield, who are located directly adjacent to construction sites and road portals. These residents have been offered insufficient protection against the road and deserve a consistent and fair approach. To date, their requests have been largely ignored.

**DUST, NOISE AND VIBRATION** have been a persistent issue throughout construction, with residents deeply concerned about the impact on their health and property. Residents have been required to continually clean dust from their homes, vehicles and gardens. Noise and vibration has often persisted throughout the night.

**POOR COORDINATION** between project contractors and utility services, meaning that construction impacts have often been around-the-clock. Planned respite periods have been ignored as associated works have been carried out by telecommunications companies, Sydney Water, power companies and more.

**DAMAGE TO PROPERTY THAT HAS NOT BEEN COMPENSATED BY THE PROJECT**, including cracks in foundations and property walls. Residents have also reported damage to fences, driveways and other property from construction vehicles, and have expressed frustration at delays in rectification or lack of compensation.

**LACK OF RESPONSIVENESS** from contractors' customer relations staff has been a persistent issue throughout construction.

**LOSS OF PARKING** as construction workers regularly utilising resident parking in local streets. Despite persistent promises that the problem would be rectified, the issue has persisted.

**STREET CLOSURES** have crippled local communities in Haberfield and Ashfield, often forcing additional traffic down residential streets and putting pedestrians at risk. Residents have raised concern about the length of closures and what they believe to be poor notification and planning for alternative routes.

**VARIABLE MESSAGE SIGNAGE** on Dalhousie and Waratah Streets in Haberfield have been wound back, but residents still object to their imposition on their local streets. Residents believe that these signs are an admission from the Government that local streets will be jammed full with motorway traffic and heavy vehicles. Residents have also raised concern with the size and placement of height detector boxes that have been installed by Roads and Maritime Services, which effectively block access on local footpaths for people with disability or parents with prams.

**RAT RUNNING** is clearly evident throughout Ashfield and Haberfield, noticeably during periods where construction reduced lanes on Parramatta Road and following the re-tolling of the M4 motorway. Residents fear the increased rat-running on local roads will further imperil pedestrian safety and place additional pressure on local roads and communities.

**IMPACTS ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT**, including the removal and relocation of bus stops with little to no public notification or consultation. Residents also raise concern with the lack of certainty around transport solutions for Parramatta Road. The former Planning Minister Rob Stokes guaranteed that two lanes on Parramatta Road would be designated for public transport, however, there has been little information since and the public's preferred options of light rail or Guided Electric Transit Systems (GETS) have been junked by the Minister for Transport.

**THE HABERFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOL COMMUNITY** have repeatedly requested a crossing guard at the Bland Street crossing following a child being struck at the school. While the accident was not a direct result of WestConnex, it is clear that there is increased traffic on Bland Street since the start of construction. Parents report a number of extremely dangerous near-misses at the crossing and are disappointed by the Government's failure to listen and respond. With the Muirs sites on Bland Street likely to be used for construction parking, there is even greater need for a crossing guard at this location.

**THE ROLE OF THE MUIRS SITES** in future construction remains under a cloud, as does the arrangements around the purchase of the building. The EIS for the M4-M5 Link left an open question over the use of the site and only after a concerted campaign from the community at Haberfield Public School was the decision made to allegedly sequester the site for offices and parking. Given allegations of land-banking by RMS in Rozelle, residents have raised serious concerns about the decision to purchase this site.

**LOCAL BUSINESSES** have struggled through the period of construction so far, and businesses were also subjected to unfair acquisitions for the project. Local community organisations including Ashfield Bowling Club have also been severely impacted by construction, with members unable to access the Club at times and a general downturn in visits with construction next door.

**AIR QUALITY** continues to be a significant concern for residents, including families at Haberfield Public School. Following abnormal recordings at the Haberfield Public School air monitoring site, numerous requests for clarification and certainty around safety for students have been ignored. The Haberfield ventilation stack is a stone's throw from schools,

child-care centres, nursing homes, parks and residences, and the community has little certainty that public health will not be affected.

**LOSS OF TREES AND VEGETATION.** Residents have had to fight tooth and nail for vegetation to be retained at sites such as Wattle Street. Significant trees have been lost in Reg Coady Reserve and along Wattle Street and Dobroyd Parade, Haberfield. Importantly, residents have lost access to large swathes of Reg Coady Reserve.

**HERITAGE PROTECTIONS** have been poor, not just of the many irreplaceable Federation homes we have lost in Haberfield, but through the ongoing erosion of Haberfield's reputation as the world's first garden suburb. The Haberfield Association have continued to fight for the remaining suburb to be listed on the State Heritage Register, with little response from the Government. Despite being spared from construction, there have been creeping impacts on Ashfield Park. Residents are also dismayed at access restrictions to the historic Yasmar Estate and the cutting back of heritage trees on the premises.

**THE FUTURE USE OF SO-CALLED "LEGACY LAND" REMAINS UNCERTAIN**, including whether mooted parkland will be encroached on by residential development. Residents adjacent to the C10 Parramatta construction site have also raised questions about the future uses of the site and treatments to protect homeowners and the adjacent Willows Nursing Home.

## **Conclusion**

One of the most frustrating aspects of the WestConnex project for local residents has been the contempt with which Government members have responded to their valid concerns. Former Roads Minister Duncan Gay dismissed residents as "latte sippers," declaring that the residents of Newtown would deify him when the road opens.

Former Planning Minister Rob Stokes dismissed parents' concerns about ventilation stacks close to Haberfield Public School when he approved the M4 East, but then declared there would be "no way in hell" that he'd allow stacks near schools in his north shore electorate.

But residents are most appalled at the lack of responsiveness to even the smallest of requests for assistance, whether it a crossing guard at a local school to deal with increased traffic, noise mitigation for residents now living with a six lane freeway at their door, or when calls for a night's respite have been met with movie tickets or ear-plugs.

This inquiry offers the first real opportunity for their stories to be heard and for the Government to acknowledge the horror that has been their lives for the past three years.

I sincerely thank all those who worked to make this parliamentary inquiry a reality. I also renew calls for a full judicial inquiry into WestConnex, so that we can hold the secretive Sydney Motorway Corporation to account.

I also take this opportunity to thank the countless local residents and community action groups who have worked to hold the Government to account on WestConnex. Groups like the WestConnex Action Group, No WestConnex: Public Transport not Motorways, Save Ashfield Park, Rozelle Against WestConnex and Leichhardt Against WestConnex have passionately and bravely defended our communities and fought for due process.