

Submission
No 250

INQUIRY INTO IMPACT OF THE WESTERN HARBOUR TUNNEL AND BEACHES LINK

Organisation: Western Harbour Tunnel Action Group

Date Received: 16 June 2021

The Hon Daniel Mookhey MLC
Chair
Parliamentary Inquiry into the impact of the Western Harbour Tunnel and Beaches Link

16 June 2021

Dear Honourable Member Mookhey

This submission summarises our concerns in relation to the proposed Western Harbour Tunnel (WHT) project. We are part of a group, known as the Western Harbour Tunnel action Group (WHTAG), which consists of approximately 80 local residents in Birchgrove, all of whom will be impacted by the WHT project.

Our concerns are outlined below:

1: In respect of Terms of Reference (a), (h) and (i), all of which relate to the Business Case for the WHT and appropriate transparency, We would like to highlight that almost every Tolted Tunnel project constructed in Australia to date has fallen well short of their target objectives and, in some cases, projects have been disastrous financially. These projects depend on various traffic assumptions which are inherently very risky. For example, a key assumption associated with the WHT project is the average peak hour speed of a vehicle travelling over the Anzac Bridge.

2: In respect to Term of Reference (b)-consideration of alternative options, there does not seem to have been any serious consideration of building a deeper tunnel under the harbour, which would eliminate the need for dredging the contaminated sediment on the Harbour floor, thereby avoiding a major environmental risk.

3: We have a major concern in relation to the risks associated with dealing with contaminated sediments on the harbour floor. These occur across the route of the WHT in addition to construction support sites such as at Berrys Bay. This issue relates to Terms of Reference (f) and (j)-the impact on the environment, including marine ecosystems. Transparency by government in relation to the details of contamination has been poor, with details being classified as “commercial in confidence” in the early stages of exhibition of the EIS for the project.

There are very high levels of toxic chemicals in the sediments, including TBT, mercury, dioxins and arsenic. If these are released during dredging and construction there is a high risk of environmental damage to the harbour, substantial fish kills and risks to human health. There needs to be imposed detailed methodology to monitor these chemicals within the construction methodology.

We are also critical of the proposal to utilise shallow silt curtains to retain or limit movement of particulate fines during dredging. The route of the WHT is across a narrow part of the harbour which has at times significant currents and winds. Construction in this type of environment is risky and mistakes happen. There needs to be significant contingency planning to deal with escaped contaminants and limiting dredging during adverse weather conditions.

4: In relation to Term of Reference (f)- affected communities, the practice in earlier stages of the Westconnex Project has been to define “affected Properties” as those within a maximum distance of 50m from the closest construction. Media has reported damage to homes in Haberfield at a distance of 250m from construction. We believe this arbitrary 50m definition for potentially impacted properties needs to be removed.

5: Term of Reference (g)-Covid 19 impact. Post Covid traffic patterns are not yet established. A lot of people have not yet returned to using public transport and are driving to work. It is also far from clear what proportion of workers will work totally or partially from home in the future. This could have a very material impact on future traffic volumes. The advent of Covid 19 will mean that there will now be no accountability by Consultants for the forecasting done for the modelling of the project.

6: Alternative transport options: Public transport was not sufficiently considered. The WHT project would create another toll road – another tax to the people of NSW.

7: The project by design would result in more cars on the road causing a significant increase in emissions and contribute to climate change. If the NSW Government is serious about the net zero emissions goal, the need for the WHT and associated projects should be reassessed. We need serious action on climate change in a smarter approach than digging tunnels – with better public transport as the key.

8: The EIS does not adequately address the human health concerns including the impacts of noise, offensive odours, air quality and exposure to contaminated sediments through aerosol spread of transported/stored sediment and decrease in air quality due to use of unfiltered air stacks.

9: The community is rightly concerned about vibration and potential damage to homes as caused by tunnelling during WestConnex construction. The contention that only properties within a 50 m distance from tunnelling will be impacted is not convincing. In Haberfield, homes over 250 m away from the closest construction experienced cracking.

Regards,

Robert Kelly, Convenor
John Symonds, Secretary
Western Harbour Tunnel Action Group