

**Submission
No 358**

**INQUIRY INTO IMPACT OF THE WESTERN HARBOUR
TUNNEL AND BEACHES LINK**

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I welcome the announcement that the Public Works Committee of the NSW Legislative Council will inquire into and report on the impact of the Western Harbour Tunnel and Beaches Link Project, including each of its constituent parts: those being the Warringah Freeway Upgrade (WFU), the Western Harbour Tunnel (WHT) and the Beaches Link (BL). There is still time for common sense to prevail and for the tens of billions of dollars that would be wasted on these projects to be redirected to areas of real need, including bushfire and flood remediation, meaningful action to reduce greenhouse emissions, kick starting the green revolution required to reduce global warming, job creation in disadvantaged rural areas of NSW, improving public transport, reducing waiting times for elective surgery, and tackling poverty and serious social issues in our state.

Adequacy of the business case - what business case?

My concerns regarding this Project have not changed since the Premier's March 2017 announcement regarding a preferred route and the start of geotechnical drilling. This announcement took everyone by surprise because no comprehensive analysis of the transport issues facing northern Sydney had been released and, to my knowledge, none has been undertaken. It was driven, to the best of my knowledge, by nothing more than a perceived need to appeal to voters in former Premier Baird's seat in order to avoid a by-election disaster for the Government. Given the degree of accountability the public demands in the administration of public monies and its legitimate expectation that the government will achieve value for money, progressing such a major initiative without consideration of all the options is inconceivable. Nor is it credible that the proposal is consistent with Transport for NSW's Principles and Guidelines for Economic Appraisal of Transport Investment and Initiatives. The sums of money that this motorway would cost are of historically significant proportions, hence all further work on these projects should be suspended until a robust assessment of all possible options, including public transport-based options, has been undertaken and has been the subject of meaningful community consultations.

The project is inconsistent with the NSW Government's strategic directions

The proposed motorway tunnels are inconsistent with the productivity, liveability and sustainability objectives for Sydney which were determined by the Greater Sydney Commission. Further, they represent 20th century technological solutions in an era in which we need, to quote Minister Constance when he launched the NSW Government's Future Transport program in February 2016, "to look at smarter systems and technology-driven solutions to cope with demand". The Future Transport Roadmap cites five strategies to be adopted by Transport for NSW with the aim of shaping the most customer-centric, innovative, digitally-enabled transportation system in Australia. No mention is made in the roadmap of new motorways, with the focus instead being on: developing real-time digital information to enable transport services to be personalised; increasing the attractiveness of mass transit networks; fostering shared, demand-responsive services; adopting national standards to enable autonomous vehicles to deliver community benefits; and creating intelligent transport networks, managed with data. The NSW Government needs to show faith in its own strategic directions rather than pursue poorly-considered options that, despite the enormous cost, disruption and environmental degradation, are unlikely to solve the identified problem.

The inadequacy of governance and community consultation

Compounding the failure to consider alternative solutions such as public transport and act in accordance with the NSW Government's own guidelines, no community consultation was

undertaken prior to key decisions being announced, such as the proposed route of the tunnel. For example, no traffic modelling was made available and no consideration was given to the transport objectives of the council areas that would be affected by the project. The information provided by Roads and Maritime Services officials at the so-called "pop-up displays" was woefully inadequate because the officials were not able to answer simple questions such as the process followed to conclude that another motorway tunnel was the best solution. They did admit, however, that they had been tasked not to develop the optimal *transport* solution but rather the optimal *road* solution, and this says much about the woeful nature of our state's governance. And the less said about the pretence at community consultation through the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process the better, other than that the outcome was a *fait accompli* and that no consideration whatsoever was given to the thousands of submissions that highlighted the disastrous impact on the environment this project would have.

New motorways, which will need 40 or 50 years of tolls to pay for them (and in the case of the WHTBL will require a commensurate toll of around \$5.00 on northbound traffic over the Sydney Harbour Bridge - a reality that the NSW Government has been keen to hide), are not sustainable. Transport technology is moving so fast we are unlikely to be needing so much road infrastructure in the near future. One need only consider the data on the number of young Australians who are not obtaining a driver licence when they become eligible to understand the seismic shift that is underway. To lock future generations into paying for outdated and unnecessary road infrastructure would therefore be irresponsible. Technology-led change and a resulting reduction in car dominance is very much the theme of the NSW Government's Future Transport Technology Roadmap 2016. The Government should be held to account by requiring it to demonstrate its adherence to its own roadmap.

An opportunity to deliver a transformative public transport system to the Northern Beaches

One alternative option that would transform Sydney's northern beaches would be to revisit Bradfield's original idea of a rail line to the northern beaches, the start of a tunnel for which still exists in North Sydney. In considering such an option, one need only look back at the development of the North Shore Line in the 1880s to understand the transformative potential of rail transport. When the line opened on 1 January 1890 as a single track between Hornsby and St Leonards, few could imagine that Sydney's north shore would become home to well over 1 million people. One can only imagine what a retrospective cost-benefit analysis of this project would demonstrate regarding its benefits, but the outcome is likely to be in the hundreds of billions even if the only calculation were the reduction in land valuations if the line suddenly ceased to exist. Mass-transit systems facilitate population growth in a way that is far more sustainable than any alternative.

While the discussion around mass-transit versus road projects should be framed by the input from transport experts, the option of a rail line between Dee Why and Chatswood that could connect with both the North Shore Line and the North/Southwest metro line has a number of compelling components and should be considered as part of the mix.

The cost of the project at a time when calls for government assistance have never been higher

While the direct and indirect employment benefits of such a large project would be welcomed by some, the tens of billions of dollars that would be poured into this project, whose complexity will certainly result in substantial cost overruns, could be far better spent supporting those who

continue to struggle as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and other disasters, including floods, bushfires, coastal erosion, and mouse plagues, to specify just a few examples. There is also a need to support job growth in the emerging green revolution while mitigating the impacts of shutting down carbon-intensive industries. The WHTBL, by contrast, is all about increasing emissions and wedding the people of NSW to outdated road solutions that will fail to meet any objective other than lining the pockets of the shareholders of a select few companies..

Conclusion

I would most strenuously urge the Committee to advise the Premier to demonstrate leadership by putting the WHT, BL and WFU on hold while a comprehensive, holistic transport plan for northern Sydney is developed. This plan should be consistent with the forward-looking Future Transport Roadmap in that it should be transformative and should focus on innovative solutions that benefit all citizens in NSW according to the "next steps, no regrets" approach adopted in the roadmap. It should, unlike the current motorway/tunnel plans, avoid a "winners and losers" mentality under which the amenity of citizens living close to the city is sacrificed in the interests of more roads and tunnels to increase traffic flow to and from the outer suburbs. The plan should develop options based on best-practice city making and integrated transport and land-use planning and should be the subject of detailed community consultations in order that it be improved through public input. To date, public consultation prior to decisions being taken has been entirely lacking and has been of the "tick-a-box" variety in the post-decision phase.

The arguments in favour of the WHT, BL and WFU project being put on hold pending the development of a comprehensive analysis of options that are consistent with the Future Transport Roadmap are overwhelming. I trust that the Committee will urge the Premier of NSW to reflect on the logic of the arguments presented to you and to acknowledge that the future transport options for the people of NSW are too important to be rushed into. Given our State's current budgetary position and the need to prioritise funding to assist those worst affected by climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, we have before us a once-in-a-generation opportunity to get this right. It would be a tragedy for the generations to come if we were to adopt 20th century solutions to the problems we face today.

Yours sincerely

David Watt