

**REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 4**

**INQUIRY INTO THE PACIFIC HIGHWAY UPGRADES**

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**At Sydney on Friday 18 November 2005**

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**The Committee met at 11.00 a.m.**

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**PRESENT**

The Hon. J. A. Gardiner (Chair)

The Hon. J. C. Burnswoods

The Hon. D. C. Clarke

Mr I. Cohen

The Hon. G. J. Donnelly

The Hon. A. R. Fazio

Ms L. Rhiannon

**CHAIR:** Welcome to the third public hearing of the inquiry by General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4 into the Pacific Highway upgrades. Before we commence I need to make some comments about procedures for today's hearing. The Committee is currently undertaking two inquiries into the Pacific Highway upgrades: one relates to the far North Coast and the other relates to the area around Coffs Harbour. Questioning at today's hearing will be limited to issues concerning the far North Coast. This is because today's hearing is intended as an opportunity for the Roads and Traffic Authority [RTA] to provide the Committee with additional information on the far North Coast upgrades prior to tabling of the Committee's interim report on the far North Coast, which we have scheduled for 21 December.

The Committee has previously resolved to authorise the media to broadcast sound and video excerpts of its public proceedings. Copies of guidelines covering the broadcast of the proceedings are available from the table by the door. In accordance with the Legislative Council guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings, members of the Committee and witnesses may be filmed or recorded, but people in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photographs. In reporting the proceedings of this Committee the media must take responsibility for what they publish or what interpretation is placed on anything that is said before the Committee.

Witnesses, members and their staff are advised that any messages should be delivered through the attendants or the Committee clerks. I also advise that under the standing orders of the Legislative Council, any documents presented to the Committee that have not yet been tabled in Parliament, may not, except with the permission of the Committee, be disclosed or published by any member of the Committee or by any other person.

The Committee prefers to conduct its hearings in public. However, the Committee may decide to hear certain evidence in private if there is a need to do so. If such a case arises I will ask the public and the media to leave the room for a short period. Would everyone please turn off their mobile phones for the duration of the hearing.

I welcome to today's hearing witnesses from the Roads and Traffic Authority of New South Wales. On behalf of the Committee I thank the witnesses for making themselves available to give evidence today. I note that Mr Higgins and Mr Job have appeared previously.

**ROBERT GEORGE HIGGINS**, General Manager, Pacific Highway, Roads and Traffic Authority of NSW, and

**RAYMOND FRANKLIN SOAMES JOB**, General Manager, Road Safety Strategy, Roads and Traffic Authority of NSW, on former oath:

**MICHAEL JOHN HANNON**, Acting Chief Executive, Roads and Traffic Authority of NSW, sworn and examined:

**BRIAN JOHN WATTERS**, Acting Director, Road Network Infrastructure, Roads and Traffic Authority of NSW, affirmed and examined:

**CHAIR:** Mr Hannon and Mr Watters, are you familiar with the terms of reference?

**Mr HANNON:** Yes.

**Mr WATTERS:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** If any of you consider at any stage that certain evidence you wish to give or documents you may wish to tender may be heard or seen only by the Committee, please indicate that fact and the Committee will consider your request. Mr Hannon, have you got a brief opening statement on behalf of the RTA?

**Mr HANNON:** Thank you for the invitation to present before the Committee. We have come today prepared to talk about the projects on the far North Coast. The approach we would like to take is that we have addressed the questions which are attached to the invitation to attend and we are in a position to address all of those. Specifically, I would like to say that the Pacific Highway is a project

which is of extreme importance to the State. The recent bilateral agreement that was signed—the AusLink bilateral agreement signed between the State and the Federal Government—identified the Pacific Highway now as a part of the AusLink network.

The White Paper produced by the Federal Government indicated that it was the objective of the Federal Government to have the Pacific Highway completed by 2016. The first of the arrangements between the States, based on the AusLink agreement, indicates that the Federal Government in the first five years will give us an additional \$480 million, which, when added to the State Government funds, will give us \$960 million to spend. The subsequent five-year parts of the agreement between the State and the Federal Government have not been resolved. The Federal Government and the State are now actively working on the corridor assessments as well. It is important for us to be able to identify exactly where the road needs to go so we can conduct appropriate consultations and negotiations so that we can attempt to meet the objective of having the Pacific Highway finished by 2016.

Our intention today, if the Chair desires, is to go through the questions that were attached to the invitation to attend. We have a document prepared that we can distribute, which will draw attention to the various documents that were requested. Mr Higgins will be able to take you through the questions which relate to the Pacific Highway specifically. Brian Watters will be able to address the specific questions that were asked in relation to the New England Highway and the Newell Highway.

**CHAIR:** As you say, the Committee did give some indicative questions so I might start off with asking some questions about the community consultation process. But Committee members should feel free to open it up beyond those indicative questions. Throughout the inquiry on the far North Coast we have heard quite a bit of evidence about the community consultation issues. Could you summarise the criteria for selecting the community liaison group [CLG] members, and if you could take us back perhaps beyond that. Before you get to the point of selecting CLG group members, what do you do in terms of looking at the need for particular routes in the first place? How wide is the scope in work that you do before you start to narrow down your options and then start to appoint particular CLG members?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Our first step in the process is to identify a study area. That looks at a start point from, say, one end to the other extremity, looking at a range of issues in terms of topography, communities, environmental values, the condition of the existing highway, where there is a possibility of developing a route, and those sorts of things. From there, we develop a study area, which we then announce to the wider community. At that point we go through a process of giving a whole range of community information sessions. We then start to invite members of the community to participate in a community liaison group.

**CHAIR:** Do you take into account documents such as regional development group studies that might have been undertaken in the past?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Yes. But the first step in this process is that we take that into account and we try to come up with a study area, and then we advertise it quite widely. We then get submissions from people, commenting on various aspects. We have to start somewhere, and the starting point is to release a study area.

**CHAIR:** Do you take councils, for example, into your confidence in the first place in assessing where the starting point might be?

**Mr HIGGINS:** We do not go out and specifically talk to councils about that issue, because at some point we need to start on an even keel with the whole community, including councils. The first step is to release a study area.

**CHAIR:** In relation to the Far North Coast, how does the work you do at that very early stage link in with, say, the work the planning department is doing on the Far North Coast Strategy, and how does it link in with work that is being done on an integrated transport strategy for the North Coast?

**Mr HIGGINS:** We work very closely with the Department of Planning, and we have been doing that as we are developing the highway from Hexham through to the border. We have meetings and discussions on issues, and we try to take those into account, being mindful that we have this objective of upgrading the Pacific Highway between Hexham and Tweed Heads.

**CHAIR:** Is there any freight strategy for the Northern Rivers or the Far North Coast?

**Mr HIGGINS:** In terms of a freight strategy in itself, no, but there is an overall objective of the highway to improve it, not only for regional communities but also for interstate movements. That has been part of that overall objective of upgrading the highway since the 10-year program commenced.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Mr Hannon, does the RTA have a freight strategy that combines with freight requirements for Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales before looking at such a major infrastructure development like this? Have you looked at the needs of interstate freight and worked out any sort of strategy that dovetails into other States' requirements?

**Mr HANNON:** The RTA has been working with the Ministry of Transport and other agencies in looking at freight—

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Is there a strategy, a document, or a specific study that shows Queensland's freight requirements, Victoria's freight requirements, even South Australia's freight requirements, which are obviously linked in with New South Wales' freight requirements, so we can see where there is appropriate direction of funding for what is required between all the States?

**Mr HANNON:** I would have to take that on notice.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Does the RTA simply go it alone: upgrade New South Wales roads and hope they link up?

**Mr HANNON:** No. The New South Wales Government obviously liaises with the freight industry. And, of course, the freight industry itself is a major—

**Mr IAN COHEN:** So the freight industry dictates the direction of your highway development—?

**Mr HANNON:** No, it does not dictate that. It is one of the agencies or parties we speak with to assess what is going on.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Is there any official document that shows clear communication between the various States with regard to an integrated freight strategy, prior to your proposed developments?

**Mr WATTERS:** Before the current 10-year agreement was signed by the State and Federal governments in 1996, a major study was done by the Bureau of Transport Economics, a Commonwealth body, which looked at national freight movements and recommended to the Federal Government that the Pacific Highway be upgraded to carry freight as part of our national network, which included the Hume Highway from Victoria.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** But this was before 2002, when we did not even have B-doubles on the Pacific Highway.

**Mr WATTERS:** Yes. It was prior to the agreement signed by the New South Wales and Federal governments that we would have an upgrading program for the Pacific Highway. The RTA's job has been to deliver that government policy.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Which government are we talking about here?

**Mr WATTERS:** The New South Wales and Commonwealth governments.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Is there a document to which we can refer to see what are the most effective and efficient methods of freight transport between the various States?

**Mr WATTERS:** I can refer you to that document.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** That document will explain the most effective and efficient methods of freight transport—?

**Mr WATTERS:** You asked whether we were going it alone without any basis for the decision on the upgrading of the Pacific Highway. That work was done prior to the 1996 decision to upgrade the Pacific highway.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** So we do have a freight strategy between the States?

**Mr WATTERS:** I cannot recall the name of the document, but it identified the freight movements, particularly on the Pacific Highway, and the need to upgrade the Pacific Highway for freight purposes.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Did those movements include Victoria and Queensland, or just New South Wales?

**Mr WATTERS:** They included Victoria and Queensland.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Nine years ago? Is that what you would call up to date to base a major highway development in New South Wales? Is that what the RTA is basing its information on?

**Mr WATTERS:** It is when the decision was made by both governments to upgrade the highway.

**CHAIR:** Can you find out what the name of that document is?

**Mr WATTERS:** Yes.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** The upgrade of the Pacific Highway is not just to cope with freight; it is to cope with the increased traffic movement of vehicles as well, is it not, and to eliminate black spots?

**Mr WATTERS:** Exactly.

**Mr JOB:** I might comment on the black spots and the safety value of the upgrade. You are quite right in identifying that one of the significant values of upgrading the highway by making it a dual carriageway is to give a safety value. The history of the upgrade so far verifies that we are getting that. If we look at the data from the beginning of this upgrade in 1996 when we have good data flowing through it, say we take 2002 as a more recent year and compare them, over that period from 1996 to 2002 our traffic counts indicate that there has been a 28 per cent increase in traffic, in usage of the highway, and there has been a 13 per cent increase in crashes on sections that have not been upgraded to dual carriageway. So it is worth noting that that increase is not proportional to the increased in traffic flow. Even though there is an increase in crashes in those sections, it is not as large as the increase in traffic.

So we are still making safety gains there, relative to the increased use. But the most striking figure is that on the sections which have been changed to dual carriageway through the upgrade, over the same period there has been a 19 per cent decrease in crashes. So we are achieving a 19 per cent decrease in crashes on those dual carriageways in the face of a 28 per cent increase in traffic. Clearly the dual carriageways give us a safety benefit, and they give us a safety benefit over and above the benefits of our other actions occurring on the non-dual carriageway sections, which have shown a 13 per cent increase in crashes.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** With regard to the movement of freight, is it the case that with the increasing population centres along the North Coast, both cities and towns, there is a requirement to increase intrastate freight along the Pacific Highway?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I believe in a response we gave to the Committee some time ago we actually provided some figures from the ABS data in terms of the movement of freight, which showed that from the information that we were able to collect it was about 50 per cent of the movement of freight into those growing regional coastal communities and 50 per cent for the communities outside that coast area, the interstate movement type exercise. What we are seeing is that there is a lot of freight movement going to support those regional communities.

**CHAIR:** When you get under way with starting to finetune the possible routes that an upgrade process might take, is there any scope at a later stage of the considerations for the community coming up with completely new options that may not have been considered by the RTA?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I will give some examples on other sections of the highway. What has happened is that we go out, we release a number of route options. From that we actually select a preferred route and then members of the community have come in or there could be environmental issues that are raised to adjust or modify that route to minimise the impact, and we go back and have a look at it. For example, the Kempsey upgrade section, 40 kilometres, we came up with an eastern route as the preferred route but there were issues with regard to flying fox colonies and issues in terms of impacts on properties. By working with those individual property owners, the environmental specialists and so on we were able to modify and adjust that route, and try to lessen that impact. That is a process that we are always looking at to try to improve and lessen the impact on communities and habitats.

**CHAIR:** What about the proposal that you would have read in our transcripts, for example, re Ballina to Woodburn and the so-called flood free route? How do people get to be able to put such a proposal? When they have looked at your proposals and they say, "There's a better way to do it", how can they get their thoughts into the system?

**Mr HIGGINS:** That is a good example. In terms of the community there, it was raised with our project team. They went ahead. It was not dismissed lightly. It was investigated as a very preliminary nature and there were a range of issues that were identified in terms of archaeological, in terms of national parks. This issue of whether it is flood free, as you go in and look at it, it is not flood free as it was being promoted because there were sections that came back in towards the floodplain of the Richmond River. We actually explained that to those groups and through the CLG, and they have not taken on board our comments. What we have done now is gone ahead and done a very detailed investigation into it, as we said we would, and that is part of the deliberations in terms of coming up with a preferred route for the Woodburn to Ballina section of the highway.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** In relation to the expansion of the study area for the Tintenbar-Ewingsdale section for upgrade, when we went to Ballina and had a community forum and a public hearing, there seemed to be little understanding in the community as to why the study area had been expanded. There had been a very extensive community consultation process on the original study area. Can you give us some clear answers on why the study area had to be expanded?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I believe the Committee has asked that question before and we have made a response on that basis. But to put it succinctly, when we released the original study area in October of last year, as part of the community information sessions and the feedback we were getting from members of the community, they were asking us, "Why should we stay within this area" and "Why shouldn't you be considering it much more broadly?" After those comments were raised we went away and did some desktop work. Desktop work is not to go out and visit individual property owners but to see if there is something there. What we were able to identify was that you could put some feasible routes out there. So from that a decision was then taken to expand the study area. No decision has been made on a preferred route, but it is incumbent upon us to investigate those options that people put forward to make sure that we go through a process and we have considered them.

After we expanded the study area we were able to go out and talk to a lot of people and gauge community feeling about those particular issues. We understand that but we were able to go out there

and do the field investigations. We have analysed all that and we have come back and said, "There are a few feasible routes out here. They should go on display, as well as the other feasible routes in terms of the original study area." We are now in the position of seeking community comment on those options so that we can come to an informed position before making a decision on where the preferred route should be.

**CHAIR:** With respect to the tunnel at St Helena which is proposed in all the RTA's options, I am interested to explore the philosophy of the RTA in terms of at what point you take potentially affected people into your confidence as to what might happen to their lives and their livelihoods. For example, the Jarrett family on the top of the hill claim that at least one family member saw a map, I think it was a year ago, which indicated that a tunnel would go through their property, but there was, it seems, constant denial from the Government and its agency that any such thing would happen. Then a couple of days before the Committee arrived the maps and the final options were published, and all of them went through a tunnel there.

**Mr HIGGINS:** I would have to take on notice the issue about a map appearing a year before. What I can say is that as you would appreciate there was the Bangalow-St Helena investigation that was done, which generally concluded to follow the existing highway. Remember a couple of years ago as a result of concerns by the community about highway noise, that is noise emanating from heavy vehicles and the compression brakes from those heavy vehicles. One particular area of concern was the noise emanating from the compression brakes from trucks coming down St Helena Hill. That issue was raised as part of the noise task force, and there were many representatives from the community on that noise task force. One of the recommendations from that was to review the alignment for St Helena Hill: Can we improve it in some way?

That recommendation was accepted so we have started to look into it to see what can be done. The issue we have is that if you look at the climb for trucks and vehicles climbing St Helena Hill they go up to an elevation of about 180, so they have to do a big climb up and over. The issue was how we could resolve this issue of the compression brake. The logical answer there is: Can you reduce that climb? We then started to look at it to see if there is any feasible way of doing it. It came to us, after looking at the topography and the geotechnical issues associated with it, that one logical way is to put a tunnel at a lower level. Why a tunnel versus an open cutting type exercise? St Helena Hill is part of an escarpment that has some important scenic qualities, and the last thing we would want, and we believe the general community, would be a massive cutting there.

So, how do we get the highway down and avoid building large cuttings, and this led to the conclusion of putting a possible tunnel through there. For us to move forward and see whether this is viable we have to do geotechnical investigations. Those geotechnical investigations involved drilling there to understand what the rock formation is, the geology, and see whether or not we can support it and where you would position a tunnel and at what level, and so forth. We have been able to do that now as part of the field investigations and we believe it is a feasible option to reduce the elevation by putting a tunnel there. We are sensitive to the impact on property owners but we need to take our investigations to a point to see whether there is something viable there or not before we go and talk to people. It is an unfortunate situation but we have to complete them to a point before we physically go out and talk to people.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** You say you are sensitive to the values and the property owners. That tunnel option obviously sterilises some significant A-grade agricultural land, including the Jarrett's land. If you are sensitive to it, why has the RTA ignored the impact of route options on property values in your valuations?

**Mr HIGGINS:** At this stage we have a series of route options out there for community comment. But no decision has been made on anything at the moment. We are seeking comment and they are issues raised by the community. We take land values into account in assessing options. I believe if we go back to some of the previous responses here—

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Have you written that in your evaluation? Have you looked at property values? Is there something in writing in your reports?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Property values are interesting things. You are after individual values of property so we do look at that as part of our investigations in coming up with the preferred route, and what that land is used for—agriculture, residential. Those factors are taken into account and they are in the report. If our reports are not adequate enough, there is the opportunity for the community to comment. We have situations on these projects where people raise things and what happens from there is we say that is a good point they have raised and we will go back and do further investigations, feeding that into a decision on a preferred route.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** Is there any feasible alternative to tunnelling under St. Helena?

**Mr HIGGINS:** We could always go back to the existing highway, which was proposed in the environmental impact statement some years ago. If we were to look at another option there, not a tunnel, what is the next step to reduce down? It is a large cutting. If you move it down to say 30 or 40 metres, a deep cutting, and you look at the slopes we have, then you start to look at the nature of that visual impact. You generally find there, because of the impact, it has a much greater impact on property owners because you need much more land to build the cutting or the fill.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Are you considering both A and M-class upgrades on the T2E section?

**Mr HIGGINS:** In the overall Pacific Highway upgrading program a combination of A and M is being considered for various sections.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** I ask specifically in this case the T2E section?

**Mr HIGGINS:** What we have put out there for community comment is a class M standard, which is basically a freeway type standard which is compatible with sections to the north and where the local traffic would be able to use the existing highway as a local road or as an upgraded service road.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** That is the upgraded service road in the A component, but that is in conjunction with an M-grade upgrade? Is that correct? So the answer is it is an M-grade upgrade?

**Mr HIGGINS:** The M-grade is like a new highway, and the existing highway would then be used as a local road.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** As you know, there are a lot of community concerns, wanting an upgrade on the highway, which is essentially an A-grade upgrade. You are saying clearly that on the T2E section you are looking at an M-grade upgrade?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Could I raise that, and there is some information in the route options report. We did a bit of a deficiency analysis of the existing highway. If you look at the horizontal alignment and the vertical alignment you will see does it make the current standards? That is an issue we have with the existing highway, whether the curves are vertical or horizontal. The other issue is we have the 90-odd private access points along that section of the highway. This is where property owners front onto the existing highway and they come onto it directly. Coupled with an alignment we have a series of safety concerns in relation to that. I do not have the figures—I can go into the report—and there are a series of local intersections as well. This is local roads coming onto the existing highway as well. There are quite a number of them. All of them bring up the potential for accidents as we upgrade the highway. In looking at that deficiency analysis, one of the difficulties we have is upgrading along the existing alignment while meeting current design standards.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** You are clearly saying here, on that section it is a motorway option plus the existing Pacific Highway as a service road and a local road?

**Mr HIGGINS:** It is not an A-grade. The existing highway will remain as is, like a local road.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Is it or is it not an M-grade upgrade on that section?

**Mr HIGGINS:** That is what is proposed.



**Mr IAN COHEN:** It is an M-grade upgrade?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Yes.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** What did you think about this morning Mr Tripodi, your Minister, saying to ABC radio on the North Coast that he wants an A-grade highway upgrade that everyone wants. He said that this morning. Is he completely in the dark of your design of motorway in that area or is he so naive that he just thinks everything is upgraded to A-grade?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I am not in a position to comment on that.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** That was said on the radio this morning. If you have not worked that out, he also said that the Government or the RTA—and perhaps Mr Hannon would like to answer this—have not worked out how the Government will fund a motorway, but is working out the route first. Is that the normal way of going, that you work out the route and then work out how you are going to fund that motorway?

**Mr HANNON:** Clearly, before you look at the funding you have to look at what needs to be delivered first, before you can look at exactly how you are going to fund the propositions. That is the way this project is being progressed. We need to look at the corridor, we need to look at the various projects that remain on the corridor, select some routes, come up with some estimates and look at some time frames, because this project is very much related to what the Federal Government is prepared to contribute. It is part of the Auslink network. Having done that we can then sit back and look at the funding scenarios and the procurement scenarios.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Page 3 of your report, following the heading "T2 Tintenbar to Ewingsdale", states, "Two highway strategies are being considered ..." and it goes on to discuss A and M options. Is that out now? Has that changed since that report?

**Mr HANNON:** Are you referring to the Minister's comments this morning?

**Mr IAN COHEN:** No, I am referring to the written reports that have been put up in this process. Page three states, "Two highway strategies are being considered ..." and you go on to discuss A and M. now I understand you are telling this Committee that that particular section is an M-grade.

**Mr WATTERS:** Can I ask for the name of the report that you are referring to?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I am aware of that comment. You have to put it into context. It talks about design standards for the Pacific Highway upgrade program. In other words, we are talking about from Hexham to Tweed Heads. It requires two lanes in each direction with consideration for future addition of another one in each way separated by a median, and so forth. Two highway upgrade strategies are being considered, and that is, in the context of the Pacific Highway upgrading program, a class A and class M. That is talking about the total highway. So, there are sections of the highway where what was proposed was to take a class A and there are sections which are class M. I think this question was asked by the Committee once before. Generally where we deviate away from the existing highway it is taken to that higher standard such as Yelgun to Chinderah but there are other sections between Karuah and Raymond Terrace which have upgraded the existing highway where it is taken to that class A standard. So, it is variable up and down the highway.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** But you would agree, would you not, that in that document there is a certain lack of clarity in the heading, so that it is understandable that people, in good faith, would be putting in submissions looking at both A-grade and M-grade upgrades to that section of the highway? Is that not a reasonable confusion there?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Not necessarily because as you read into the rest of the report it is very clear what the proposal is: it is in terms of a class M. You have to take that into the context in terms of the overall upgrade program.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Mr Higgins, you are well aware of the community angst in the area. I know that you have been at some of the community meetings I have been to. What is the impediment to the RTA considering an A-class upgrade? Obviously there is community support for this and there have been some 10,000 submissions in favour of an A-grade upgrade. What is the impediment?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I thought I outlined it before in some of the deficiency issues that we have identified with the existing highway in terms of the access issues. There are a large number of access points along that section of highway. Coupled with the alignment deficiencies and the number of intersections, it is a question of looking at what is appropriate there. From the work that we have done to date we have put out what we consider to be an appropriate standard.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Let me put it to you, Mr Higgins, that a lack of access means a motorway and a motorway means a tollway, and there will be a deliberate lack of access on that section to encourage the potential for some sort of public-private partnership development of a motorway there. So the limited access will allow for tolls.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** Are you asking a question or putting forward your view?

**Mr IAN COHEN:** I am asking a question. Will the limited access allow for tolls, and is that part of your strategic planning on that section?

**Mr HIGGINS:** No, you are moving into government policy here. What I have been asked to do is to try to come up with a preferred alignment for the highway and a concept design for that highway in terms of the remaining undeveloped sections. What we have been doing is looking at the issues and coming up with a proposal.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** Mr Higgins or Mr Hannon—I am not too fussed who answers this—I have been given this form by residents on the North Coast in the Ballina-Byron Bay area. It is some sort of triplicate submission. The one I was given is numbered 27,653, so obviously a lot of these have been circulated. In fact they were asked to sign a copy of this when they were having breakfast in a cafe at Newrybar. The submission asks, first, move the interstate freight back to the New England Highway now, second, government to start investigation of alternative inland freight routes and rail options immediately, third, upgrade Tintenbar-Ewingsdale to a class-A highway in the existing highway corridor, fourth, supports the Ballina Council for an immediate start to an A-class Ballina bypass. People are asked to complete the form and post all three copies to a post office box in Byron Bay to be hand-delivered, presumably some time this week, to both you and the Premier. Have you received many of these, and do you know who the "Jan" is on the phone number given on the form who is co-ordinating this? Is this a particular lobby group that has been doing this? I imagine these are some of the 10,000 referred to by the Hon. Ian Cohen in terms of submissions received from the community.

**CHAIR:** I do not think that we need to know individual people's phone numbers.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** That is why I did not read it out.

**Mr HIGGINS:** All I can say is that I am aware of the form and we are aware from the information that is given to us that it is being circulated by specific groups on the Tintenbar to Ewingsdale section. A copy has been presented to my office by my project team to say that I need to be aware that this is being distributed. Yes, I am aware of it.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** Were you also aware that backpackers were being paid to take them around to have them signed?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I have heard a lot of comments about those things. It is getting to the point of hearsay. I do not think it is appropriate for me to say those sort of things. All I am hearing is hearsay.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Mr Hannon, has the question of a toll ever been raised with you in respect of the Pacific Highway?

**Mr HANNON:** A toll has been suggested, yes.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Who suggested that?

**Mr HANNON:** I have seen it suggested in the local newspapers and some of the mayors on the North Coast were suggesting tolls.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Have you have any discussions with the Minister about a proposed toll?

**Mr HANNON:** I have had no discussions with the Minister about a toll for the Pacific Highway, no.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Are you aware of any discussions between the Minister and any of your officers regarding a proposed toll?

**Mr HANNON:** I am not aware of any discussions with our current Minister about tolls.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Have you had discussions with your current Minister? You have not been in the job that long, I understand.

**Mr HANNON:** A toll road has been suggested in various releases by all sorts of parties as a way of getting this project delivered in quick time. But I am not aware at this point in time—there have been no decisions, no discussions that I am aware of. The process that has been followed by the RTA at the moment is actually to come up with a project to find out what the project is. What we are progressing at this stage is a very thorough investigation of the complete highway. We have been progressively doing that under an arrangement with the Federal Government for the last nine years. That is coming to a closing 2006. What we need to do now is find out exactly what is involved in completing the project. That is why 12 to 18 months ago we kicked off these major studies so that we could find out precisely what is involved in delivering the project. Until such time as we know what the project is going to cost in terms of cost estimates that flow from this process and we have an indication from the Federal Government as to what sort of funding will come from it, and as I indicated earlier with the Auslink arrangement that is in place the Federal Government has indicated that its objective is to finish it by 2016, which would require a significant funding increase—well beyond the current proposed spending levels—then we will have to sit down and work out exactly whether that objective is going to be achieved or whether we will have to look at other options. But we certainly have not got to that stage.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** You have said that you have had no discussion with the current Minister regarding a proposal for a toll. Have you had a discussion with any previous Minister on that issue?

**Mr HANNON:** I am not in a position to say what I have discussed with the Minister on that issue in that the facts are not on the table for us to go forward and make clear calls on where we go forward.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** You have been able to confirm that there has been no discussion with the present Minister on tolls. I am putting to you whether you can confirm whether there has been any discussions with a previous Minister. Is that something you do not wish to answer?

**Mr HANNON:** Tolling has been a methodology for funding the road if it is going to be finished earlier.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Yes. Has that been discussed with a previous Minister?

**Mr HANNON:** I am not in a position to say.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Does that mean that you do not know or that you would prefer not to say?

**Mr HANNON:** In terms of tolling, what I can say is that there has been a push from the governments up the coast, local governments up the coast—

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Local governments up the coast, Mr Hannon.

**Mr HANNON:** Local governments up the coast. When the 10-year program came to a close, as it is coming to a close, and there was a need for us to meet the expectation of the community up there and get the Pacific Highway finished quickly in terms of the funding regime that we had in place there was a significant shortfall with the timeframe that was being talked about. In terms of tolling, why I am not responding directly is that until such time as we do the costs and until such time as we know what funding is likely to come from the Federal Government, and we are only in the first five-year stage of the Auslink agreement, tolling or a greater injection of State and Federal funds is a matter which will have to be resolved downstream.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** I am just a little bit confused here. Setting aside local government's view of there being a toll and getting back to the State Government and the question that I raised, when I asked you whether this had been discussed with a previous Minister you said that you were not in a position to say. I repeat my question: Does that mean that you do not know or you would prefer not to say?

**Mr HANNON:** It would be my understanding that there has been discussion about tolls, because tolls are a way of funding all sorts of roads. But in terms of the detail, until such time—as I have now indicated several times—as you know exactly what you are talking about, obviously all sorts of scenarios are talked about.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** When you say it is your understanding, has there been any specific discussion with you regarding tolls with any previous Minister?

**Mr HANNON:** Not that I can remember, no.

**CHAIR:** Obviously, the last time the Roads and Traffic Authority appeared before this Committee, Mr Forward was the Chief Executive. He has now departed. What was your previous role?

**Mr HANNON:** I was the Director of Road Network Infrastructure.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** I want to take up some issues with local transport, but I will start with the New England Highway. Considering that so much of the way it has been presented for the upgrade is linked with the need to improve safety, which is where we have a common position, would you agree that redirection of all interstate freight back to the New England Highway would make the Pacific Highway much safer?

**The Hon. Jan Burnswoods:** Closing Victoria Road would make it safer. Are you going to ask a sensible question?

**CHAIR:** Order!

**Mr JOB:** I think it would be right to the extent that if you take any kind of vehicle off any given road you will, generally, increase the safety of that road. The obvious factor determining the safety of our roads is the number of kilometres travelled by vehicles on it. The more kilometres of travel you have, the more fatigue you have, the more mistakes you have, the more people you have speeding, the more crashes you get. However, that does not mean that we would get a net safety benefit. It may simply shift to having a lot more crashes on the New England Highway. As the State Government we have to consider all of those factors, not just one.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Can you tell us how many fatalities over a five-year-period, or whatever figures in to hand, have occurred on the New England Highway?

**Mr JOB:** I do have some figures to hand on the New England Highway. From 1995 to date or the last few days, it may or may not include today, I am not sure about that, there have been 179 fatalities the New England Highway.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Over about a 10-year period?

**Mr JOB:** Yes.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Do you have similar figures for the Pacific Highway?

**Mr JOB:** I can give you some specific years and we can compare directly, if you wish. So far this year there have been 29 fatalities on the Pacific Highway from Hexham to the Queensland border, and there have been 10 on the New England Highway in the same period. For the previous year there were 32 fatalities on the Pacific Highway, again from Hexham to the Queensland border, and on the New England Highway there were 13 fatalities in the same period.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** It is true that about one-third of the Pacific Highway accidents involve trucks?

**Mr JOB:** I have not calculated that as a direct figure, but, again, I could not quote trucks, but semis and B-doubles combined. For this year there have been 29 fatalities on the Pacific Highway from Hexham to the Queensland border. Of those, 12 involve B-doubles or semitrailers.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Considering that trucks and B-doubles make up a much smaller proportion of vehicle traffic using our roads, I understand that is so even on the Pacific Highway, does that not suggest that we have a greater proportion of accidents caused by these bigger vehicles?

**Mr JOB:** No, it suggests that we have a greater number of accidents involving them, which is importantly distinct from being caused by them.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** On that point, are there any statistics or information—those issues were raised in the Parliament even yesterday—about trucks and B-doubles causing the accident, but not being in the accident directly? Commuters are complaining about situations where people try to pass B-doubles and suchlike where serious accidents have occurred that did not physically involve the B-double or the heavy truck. Nevertheless, an accident was caused in part by their presence on the road. Do you have any indication of that in police or RTA reports?

**Mr JOB:** What we have is a lot of hearsay to exactly the effect you are identifying. I am a researcher—that is my background. I deal in objective evidence. I see a minuscule amount of objective evidence for what you are saying. That is not to say that it does not happen, as perhaps there are instances when it has happened. I cannot identify in my time at the RTA an instance of such a serious crash when a truck, by virtue of its being involved in some unreasonable way, has caused someone else to do something and the truck not being involved in the crash. I cannot identify such an incident. When I said there was a distinction to be made in their causing them and their being involved, I meant in the opposite direction. In a lot of these crashes there may be heavy vehicles involved—a semitrailer or a B-double—but they are not, in a broad sense the way the community would take it, the cause of the crash. They are the one that has been hit by a light vehicle on the wrong side of the road. That is a common scenario in a head-on crash. Indeed, that is one of the greater values of upgrading the highway to dual carriageway—we cut out those kinds of head-on crashes. In most instances when we have fatalities involving a head-on crash and involving a B-double or a semitrailer, it is the B-double or semitrailer that is on the correct side of the road and the other vehicle that has moved to the incorrect side of the road.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** I go back to the way you have conducted the upgrades to date. You have some sections of the road, I assume as the RTA would want it, with considerable upgrades and then you come onto areas of the highway that are as they have been for a long time. That was raised with us many times when we visited up north. What consideration did you give to this problem and its effect on traffic when people are coming off these very modern motorways onto the narrow traditional highway and the impact that would have on safety?

**Mr JOB:** One of the consequences of upgrading the road is that you get a change in the location of crashes. If you upgrade one section of the road then you improve the crash rate on that section of the road. However, you do not improve the crash rate on the sections of road that are not improved. What you get in addition to that, as you upgrade your road, is greater use of it. If people find they can get from Sydney to Brisbane in less time than it would have taken them otherwise, and because we are taking out some of the traffic snarls and improving the flow of traffic, more people are inclined to drive. The road gets greater usage. The consequence of that greater usage is that, even if you have the same rate of safety per vehicle kilometre on the non-upgraded sections of road, you will get an increase in crash rate because there are more vehicles on the road. However, the data I cited earlier indicates that we are getting safety benefits even on the non-upgraded sections of road, that is a 28 per cent increase in usage versus a much smaller than that increase in crashes on the non-upgraded sections of the road.

Our awareness of this issue has prompted a very detailed investigation from the safety perspective of the Pacific Highway from Hexham to the Queensland border, which we conducted in late 2003 and early 2004. A report on that was released in May 2004, and the then Minister announced expenditure of \$35 million for safety works, specifically safety works rather than upgrade and development works, on the Pacific Highway over the subsequent three years. Those safety works have yielded us considerable benefit on the non-upgraded sections of the road through widening, improved delineation and realignment of curves, such as the notorious Wrights Corner near Macksville, and through, in effect, separation of the traffic by virtue of wire rope medians at various sections where we have had a significant rate of head-on crashes. Indeed, the one we were considering earlier in relation to the tunnel option is such a road. St. Helena Hill and the slope on it is the cause of a significant number of crashes, or has been, and it is one of the sections we have now put median wire rope down to try to avoid that problem. That is one of the considerations why you do not simply stick to the current alignment. The current alignment has curves and steep slopes like that, which gives us significant road safety problems.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** I would like to deal with the issues relating to St Helena Road. Are you aware that the corner below St Helena Road has a design speed of only 60 kilometres an hour and that that information is detailed in the environmental impact study for the Bangalow to St Helena upgrade?

**Mr JOB:** No, I am not aware of the design speed. I am not an engineer.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** To whom would it be best to direct that question?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I would need to take the question on notice if I am to tell you exactly what is the design speed. I would need to go back into what the report said. But we do know that we have a sharp curve there.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** I am sure you recognise how serious this issue is. How is it that after all the planning work undertaken on the Brunswick Hill to Ewingsdale, section and the opening of that section, a new, upgraded section of the highway can be fed straight into this black spot?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Could you clarify that question?

**Mr IAN COHEN:** The section just south of Brunswick to St Helena Hill is a newly upgraded, high-speed section of highway.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** When we were there we could not proceed because there had been an accident right at the point about which I am asking a question.

**Mr HIGGINS:** Is that is the section from Ewingsdale to Tyagarah?

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Yes, that is the upgraded section.

**Mr HIGGINS:** Yes.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** If we are going to feed into these black spots that is where we are continuing to see accidents happen at an alarming rate.

**Mr HIGGINS:** I do not know whether you have seen where the proposal for the tunnel is. There will not be any curve; it is just coming straight onto that section.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** I appreciate that. I am just trying to explore what is happening right now.

**Mr JOB:** What is happening right now is we have addressed the crash rate on St Helena Hill by virtue of separation along the median. We believe that will remove it as black spot. We also plan to put a speed camera there because speeding is part of the problem.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** That camera has been requested for a long time now. When will that happen? When will it be in place?

**Mr JOB:** I could not give you a precise date as to when the camera will happen. It is not a simple process to align and ensure you have camera in the right spot.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Is it being worked on now?

**Mr JOB:** Yes, it is being worked on.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Is anyone able to give us an idea of when that will be? Again, the community is very keen to have it, as you are aware.

**Mr HIGGINS:** We will take that question on notice.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Given that heavy freight trucks continue to flaunt the speed limit on this corner—I imagine you have all seen the *Stateline* program in which that was shown to an extraordinary degree—I wanted to emphasise that point. That is why it is believed there is a need for that speed camera there. Is that one of the factors you have taken on board in making this decision?

**Mr JOB:** Has what been one of the factors?

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** It has been found that trucks are flaunting the speed limit time and again.

**Mr JOB:** When we consider whether or not to put up a speed limit sign, we do not single out a particular group of road users for the purpose of the speed camera. We identify two things relating to whether we would locate a speed camera in a particular location. First, do we have a particular crash rate so we know there is a safety problem that ought to be addressed? Second, are the vehicles going through that area commonly speeding? Speed is one of the behavioural factors along that piece of road. We would not choose to put camera there if a particular kind of vehicle was speeding and another kind of vehicle was not speeding. If vehicles are speeding that is a consideration for a camera.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** When you put in the speed camera will you be looking to limit the speed at that point?

**Mr JOB:** When we put in a speed camera it is to get people to stick to the speed limit. That is its purpose.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** My question was: Will you be limiting the speed limit there? There has been a request that it be limited to 70 kilometres.

**Mr HIGGINS:** At the moment the curve there has on it a posted speed of 60 kilometres an hour. I do not know whether you realise that.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** I will check that. I thought in that area there was a higher speed limit.

**Mr HIGGINS:** No, it has been reduced. You go from 100 kilometres an hour down to 80 kilometres an hour and then there is a 60 kilometre an hour section on the curve.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** Some people seem to have a very simplistic view about the upgrade of the Pacific Highway in that North Coast area. They believe that all the problems would be solved and virtually no upgrade would be required if only the B-doubles were all sent back to the New England Highway. What alternative routes are available for B-doubles to use in New South Wales, before they were gazetted to be allowed to use that North Coast section of the Pacific Highway?

**Mr WATTERS:** B-doubles can use the New England Highway to go from Sydney to Brisbane. Semi-trailers and B-doubles now use both routes. Truck operators find there are cost savings in using the Pacific Highway. They do not all use the Pacific Highway but there has been a transfer of trucks across to the Pacific Highway. Their vehicle operating costs are a lot lower; they do not have to go to the same elevation as they do on the New England Highway.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Has there been any investigation by the Roads and Traffic Authority in relation to that matter? Has it looked at the cost of implementing a strategy to upgrade the Pacific, the New England and possibly the Newell highways to facilitate more efficient truck transport?

**The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS:** Could the Hon. Amanda Fazio continue asking her questions?

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** You referred earlier to the elevation of the New England Highway. Were you referring to the range just past Armidale that causes some problems, or is it the whole of the northern section?

**Mr WATTERS:** There are several ranges. If you look at the height of the road at various points you see that the Liverpool range is a major range. There are several points at which the road goes quite high and trucks obviously use more fuel. Truck operators prefer to use the flatter routes when they are available.

**Mr JOB:** I wish to comment further on that. I think the safety issue of B-doubles is misunderstood here. Let us look at the reality of the alternatives for transporting goods. An appropriate measure of the safety of the vehicle would be: How many crashes do we get per vehicle kilometre tonne, that is, per tonne of freight moved over a certain distance? What is the crash rate of these vehicles? Our data identifies what we would expect from the principles of the configuration and safety of the vehicles. B-doubles are actually a much safer way to move freight than semi-trailers. So the view that B-doubles are the core safety problem is actually a mistake. B-doubles have, per kilometre tonne of freight moved, a crash rate that is less than one-third of other articulated vehicles. That is not some kind of strange fluke. By virtue of the articulations of the vehicle and various other features of it, it is inherently a safer vehicle. So we would expect a lower crash rate and our data confirm that we get a lower crash rate.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** Because the New England Highway is a designated national highway would it require a lot of upgrading? I travel on both the Pacific Highway and the New England Highway. I know that the Roads and Traffic Authority has created a number of truck rest stops, in the same way as driver rest stops have been created on the Pacific Highway. From my observations of the road freight industry, many more garages and truck stops for petrol, food, and showers have already been established on the New England Highway. Is it simply that fuel cost savings are causing them to use the Pacific Highway, given that there are better facilities for drivers on the New England Highway?

**Mr HIGGINS:** One of the other issues that we have is this time saving. They are saying that they are starting to pick up about an hour's saving over the New England Highway than they are over the Pacific Highway. It is the logistics. We, as a society, want things almost immediately. So it is being able to move freight quickly. We need to be able to move it from where we are getting it to another point as quickly as we can. I believe that is where the Pacific Highway is playing a role in moving the freight. That is not only to Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane; it is also to the regional communities that we have growing up along that whole coastline. Whether you take Coffs Harbour,



whether you take Port Macquarie, whether you take Taree, whether you take the coastal communities around Ballina, it is that accessibility issue that people are chasing.

**Mr JOB:** In addition to that, this also has significant safety implications. If the trip takes an hour less, you get less driver fatigue and that gives us safety benefits. As I have said before, the data identified clearly that a dual carriageway is a safer form of road than a non dual carriageway. A much higher percentage of the Pacific Highway than the New England is already dual carriageway, and we get safety benefits from it. The most severe crash types are always going to be head-on crashes. They involve the maximum momentum in terms of two vehicles approaching. We minimise the occurrence of those with a dual carriageway, so there are significant safety benefits to these vehicles using the Pacific rather than the New England in their current state.

**CHAIR:** Would you mind just filling us in also on the new role that the Newell Highway plays in terms of freight task and heavy transport?

**Mr WATTERS:** The New England Highway, as Dr Job said, has virtually only got 47 kilometres of dual carriageway on it and the Newell Highway has less than one kilometre of dual carriageway. From the point of view of road safety and the extent of upgrading that would be needed, it would obviously be a massive task to bring those up to dual carriageway standard. Leaving that aside—

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Are you saying that the Newell Highway is more dangerous than the Pacific Highway?

**Mr WATTERS:** No, I am saying that the Newell Highway has less than one kilometre of dual carriageway on it.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Yes, but I am asking: Are you saying then that the Newell Highway is more—

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** How about just letting him answer the question without putting your spin on it?

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Excuse me. I am asking the question. I do not need to have you interrupt. I did not interrupt after you had made your point.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** You did. Of course you did. You are always doing it.

**CHAIR:** Order!

**Mr WATTERS:** In answer to that last question, no, I do not have any statistics with me on road safety comparisons between the Newell and the Pacific Highway.

**The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS:** Could I ask that Mr Watters continue with the answer he was actually giving before Mr Cohen interrupted him? He has now answered Mr Cohen's interruption but he had actually finished what he was saying before.

**CHAIR:** Before we get to that, Mr Watters, would you mind is taking on notice, not necessarily for the Far North Coast interim report that we are working on, but I would certainly be interested in any comparisons that you have across the three roads that go through northern New South Wales so that we can fill in the broader picture. That would be helpful.

**Mr WATTERS:** Certainly.

**Mr HANNON:** Just to clarify that, you are looking at what—the road safety statistics for the heavy vehicle impact on road safety?

**CHAIR:** Both.

**The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS:** Can I still ask that Mr Watters be permitted to finish the answer that he was giving before any of you interrupted to him, including the Chair? We ask these witnesses to come here. They try to answer the questions and you are not interested in the answers they are giving.

**CHAIR:** Order! Mr Hannon, are you clear on my question?

**Mr HANNON:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Mr Watters, had you finished?

**Mr WATTERS:** I believe the question is: what is the freight role of the Newell Highway. The Newell Highway primarily serves the road freight between Melbourne and Brisbane. Some of that freight comes via Sydney but traditionally the most direct route is via the Newell Highway.

**The Hon. GREG DONNELLY:** I have a question in regard to the AusLink funding that was discussed earlier this morning. My understanding is AusLink funding is directly associated with the upgrading of the Pacific Highway. That being the case, it is not possible to transfer any of that funding to the upgrading of the New England Highway. Is that the case?

**Mr WATTERS:** I could answer that. Under the AusLink agreement, there is the so-called national network, which includes the Newell Highway and the New England Highway and the Pacific Highway. Federal funding can be allocated by the Federal Government to any one of those roads, for whatever purpose it chooses.

**CHAIR:** Plus the—

**The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS:** Just interrupt again, go on. Just do it all the time.

**Mr WATTERS:** Plus the Hume Highway, the Sturt Highway and highways in other States—the Federal Highway, the Barton Highway and the Sydney to Wollongong part of the Princes Highway, but no other part of the Princes Highway. So there is a national network which is determined by the Federal Government. It has allocated funds for the first five years to specific projects on that national network and in some cases to corridors on that national network. In answer to the question, the State cannot transfer between one project and another project or between one corridor and another corridor so the Federal Government has allocated \$480 million for the next three years on the Pacific Highway. They have allocated much lesser amounts to projects on the New England and Newell highways, and that is a Commonwealth decision on where the funds get allocated. It is not a State decision.

**CHAIR:** Gentlemen, could I go back to the question of the study areas and why they are expanded or not expanded. While obviously the study area for the Tintenbar-Ewingsdale upgrade was expanded, can you clarify whether the Ballina to Woodburn upgrade study area can at this stage be expanded to include the submissions that I understand you have received, and certainly that this Committee has received, in relation to a so-called the flood -free route? Can actually happen from now on?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Whether we expand it or not, what we have done it is a detailed investigation into that proposal, as I mentioned earlier. We have prepared a report on that, a very detailed report, looking at the issues associated with it. That report will form part of the deliberations on a preferred route for the Woodburn to Ballina section. Normally in those cases we also release a report on the preferred route, and that report would form part of it, so it would become public. We have done an investigation into the viability of it, and the feasibility.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** May I ask a question?

**CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** I think it is my turn.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** I thought we are not having turns then?

**CHAIR:** I am just trying to be fair. Just on that particular route option that various residents have come up with, what do you say about their suggestion that the Roads and Traffic Authority [RTA] is avoiding going through national park area virtually at all cost?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I could sit down and give you other examples up and down the highway where we have actually gone into national parks with the highway, but clearly for us to go into a national park, there is an act of Parliament involved in that particular process. It also needs the Minister for the Environment to give approval to that. Not wishing to go into the actual process, but there are some major triggers there that are required. My understanding is that one of the issues that we need to address for the Department of Environment and Conservation [DEC] is to demonstrate that we have looked at all viable other options before we actually go into a national park.

In cases where we have had to go into them, we have shown how we have gone through a process of having looked at other viable options. We say they are not viable and therefore the conclusion is that we think this is the way to go, but we have to put that on the table. In terms of the national parks sections out there, they are considerable in terms of what is proposed. The work that we have identified shows that we do affect a number of species and habitats and so forth from the work that we have done. It does raise major concerns.

**CHAIR:** In terms of the Ballina to Woodburn upgrade, can it be said that all other viable options have been looked at without going into a national park? Is that where you are at?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Where we are at now is that we have a number of route options, all with their own particular issues associated with them. We also have another route that has been put forward by sections of the community. We have investigated that now and we have got that altogether where we are looking at making a recommendation in regard to where the preferred route is. That is where we are at, at the moment.

**CHAIR:** With respect to that same upgrade, how does the environmental impact of the upgrade get assessed in the study area? Do you or the RTA's consultants take into account the information that is provided by community members?

**Mr HIGGINS:** The simple answer is yes. In that particular project there are some very sensitive environmental issues, just like sensitive agricultural issues—flooding and a whole range of geotechnical issues that have been raised. What we have done is set up a special ecological focus group. As part of that process, our teams, our consultants have been working with a number of representatives from within the community, with Ballina shire and DEC and then working it through in terms of presenting our representations to date and then asking them to review that process. I believe we have been very open in that process in terms of presenting that information.

What has happened from there is that members of that have been critical of the work that has been done and they have asked from us more intensive investigations—and I will refer to that later. We have gone away and actually asked them to review our reports. They have come back with specific comments—where we have got errors, where we have got mistakes. We actually go through a process of correcting that because we are all about trying to get the best information so that we can actually make an informed decision. So that is what we have been doing.

Equally, on top of that, there is the issue about the level of investigation we do. You have got to understand that we go through a process—we start from a study area, come to route options and then come into a preferred route and then as we move to the preferred route we come to detailed design. As we go through that process we do much more intensive investigation of those particular sections. Some members of the community are asking us to do the detailed investigations upfront, but that is not the process we actually follow because they are very expensive-type processes, they take time and a whole range of issues. We try to look at the big picture issues. In terms of its effect on the route options, our first steps are: try to avoid; if we can't avoid we try to minimise; and if we can't minimise we go through a process of mitigation, and I can talk about that from there. So we actually go through a process, and I can give examples up and down the highway if you wish.

Recently in terms of our response, we have actually got a list of those issues that have been raised, and how we have addressed them and, what we call, the phase two part of the investigation. We believe that we value input from the community and specialists in that regard and we do take them into consideration as we arrive at route options, preferred route and so forth.

**CHAIR:** In terms of that big picture you mentioned, does that mean, for example, that suggestions from some community members that there should be serious consideration given to upgrading Summerland Way as part of the solution to the through-traffic issue on the Pacific Highway, can be coped with in the current planning?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I thought I was addressing an issue in regard to the environment?

**CHAIR:** Yes, you were.

**Mr HIGGINS:** Now we are moving into another issue in terms of the Summerland Way alternative proposal?

**CHAIR:** Yes, in the bigger picture.

**Mr HANNON:** I understand there were discussions yesterday in which our Minister was involved. At this stage we are waiting on advice as to how we proceed with the Summerland Way. Certainly I should say it is not part of the Auslink network. If anything were to be done on the Summerland Way, it is a project that is fully funded by the State Government.

**CHAIR:** When you say you are waiting for advice, do you mean as a result of yesterday's meeting?

**Mr HANNON:** The reported meeting yesterday, and we are waiting on advice, yes.

**CHAIR:** Was that a meeting with Minister Tripodi and the honourable members representing the electorates of Ballina, Lismore and Clarence?

**Mr HANNON:** As I understand it, yes.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Are you aware of concerns about methodologies employed by consultants doing environmental studies and geotechnical reports, particularly in the Ballina-Woodburn area upgrade?

**Mr HANNON:** Certainly the consultants that the RTA uses are the best consultants that this country has got. We have got a huge program of works on the North Coast. We have selected consultants against a comprehensive brief, and the best consultants in Australia are working on those projects. They are the same consultants who are working on similar sorts of projects throughout the country. So in terms of the consultancies that we have selected, I am confident that we have got the best available consultants, and they have got international linkages as well so they are able to bring to bear their international experience as well.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Have there been any concerns expressed about those consultants?

**Mr HANNON:** Generally whenever you are doing a project of this sort there are always people who have a contrary view. At the end of the day we pick the best available consultants who look at all of the options and come back to us with advice. And at the end of the day a judgment is made as to how we go forward. But you are obviously talking about some specifics so I will hand over to Mr Higgins to address those.

**Mr HIGGINS:** I will start with the geotechnical issues. The sub consultant that was engaged on the Woodburn to Ballina job is a firm called Coffey that is well experienced in terms of geotechnical work. Coffey was employed because of that expertise but also because of the knowledge it had on the Ballina to bypass project because of the soft soil issues there. In our submission to this committee, in terms of the Woodburn to Ballina project we say we have done quite extensive

investigations on the geotechnical issues. We have included a map showing the geological mapping for the study area, together with where we have drill holes, bore holes.

I mention in passing that we drilled about 15 bore holes with piezometers installed in each bore hole. Those piezometers are there to measure the ground water level because that is an important issue in terms of the environmental aspects. We have augured about nine holes. We have done excavation of about 29 test pits and we have tested about 18 locations with what we call CPTs—cone penetrometer tests—where we actually get a cone penetrometer and push that down through the soft soil at a constant rate and we measure its resistance. So it then gives us an idea of the nature of the soil underneath, its stability and ability to build embankments and so forth.

I understand one issue that was raised from a member of the community was a suggestion that we had not done any testing along the existing highway. I think the words were bore holes. I show you a map which actually shows that we have done testing with five CPTs along that section of the highway where route F was. So we have done quite a bit of work there because the issue of the ground conditions is important to us so that we can assess the associated risks. I believe we have done a suitable level of investigation at this stage, at this route development phase. When we actually pick the preferred route we then do much more detailed investigations but we have taken it to a level by which we actually feed that in to come to this informed position on the risks associated with the geotechnical conditions of each of the route options.

Madam Chair raised the matter of environmental issues and concerns that have been raised. We have treated that very sensitively. We are very conscious of the issues. We have employed a professional consultant by the name of Geolyse who works for Hyder. I understand there have been some issues between one particular person and that consultant. That has led to specific issues that we have found out afterwards, which I will not go into because that is an issue between them and our sub consultants. But the issues that have been raised, yes, we have and we are considering them very carefully. One of issues I may have mentioned earlier was with regard to the level of investigation. Some members of the community or group asked for much more detailed investigations. We do not do that at this stage, but we do believe we do sufficient investigations in order to make an assessment of where the preferred route ought to go.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Have you investigated all the complaints that have been received regarding consultants used in the Ballina to Woodburn upgrade area? Are you satisfied there is no cause for concern?

**Mr HIGGINS:** The geotechnical issue was brought to me on the side, and therefore I have gone away and looked at that in some sort of detail and it is presented there. In terms of the environmental issues, the person involved was on radio, and I was asked to respond at that time on the radio. One thing that I then asked was to make contact with him, the name of the person made contact, and we discussed the issue. I then attended one of the ecological focus group meetings to understand his concerns.

Then I went through a process with my teams to make sure that we addressed the issues associated with that. There has been an ongoing process on that to try to resolve the issues. I understand that a person has made a detailed report on this particular issue. At this stage that report has not been presented to us, we have asked for it but it has not been presented to us. All we have at this stage is a summary report together with a series of emails that he has presented to us. Through my project team we are addressing the issues that have been raised.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** I was surprised to see when the Committee went there and looked at the road that was affected, Tintenbar and Ewingsdale, by the proposed routes that had been released. I was surprised to see that the property of the Don Page, the honourable member for Ballina, was directly impacted by one of the proposed routes. I was surprised also to note that the area at Broken Head, where the Hon. Ian Cohen lives, would be impacted by noise, if option D were to be adopted. When any special consideration is given when both expanding the study route or when looking at those four options to the fact that those two local members would be affected by that?

**Mr HIGGINS:** No.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** They were treated in the same manner as any other properties in the area? They will look at strictly on an objective basis?

**Mr HIGGINS:** That is correct.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** Have you received any special representations from either the honourable member for Ballina or the Hon. Ian Cohen in relation to the proposed study routes and how they would impact on their properties?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Firstly, no.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** Would you be aware if the Minister's office had received any representations by that which mark or are you not in a position to comment?

**Mr HANNON:** I am not aware of any.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** You kept that one alive for a long time.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** I also wanted to ask another question which follows on from the issues you were talking about at Woodburn and Ballina environment. At the Committee's public hearing in Ballina one person made some very derogatory comments about the measures that the RTA put in place in areas such as the upgrade near Karuah and the area north of Bulahdelah where you had special fencing erected to stop wildlife from getting on the road. You have constructed some also underneath to provide access for wildlife to get from one side to the other. You have erected possum bridges at Karuah. He claimed that those measures did nothing to improve road safety for native animals. That seemed odd, because in those areas there is not have lot of road kill as there is in other areas. Do you have any comment to make on those allegations?

**Mr HIGGINS:** We put a lot of effort into making sure we did cost-effective environmental measures. In doing that would work very closely with our own environmental specialists, the DEC and consultants in the field. We put a lot of effort into it. I have one person in my office, the manager for environment, who is very keen on ensuring we get a very cost-effective environmental design in terms of working. If you take the Karuah example, the mitigation measures put in place were fencing, koala-proof fencing, and we go through and monitor road kill on those sections. We did the same thing at Yelgun to Chinderah. We also put sand traps where the tunnels go across to track animals, so we can see what is going on.

The rope bridges for glider and possum crossings have infra-red cameras at night. What we have been able to demonstrate from those infra-red cameras is that animals are using the crossings. That was a new trial, and we were not sure whether it would work, but we gave it a go. We have worked very closely with our consultants and DEC to come up with a design. Preliminary indications are that it seems to be starting to work. We are reasonably confident about the work we have been doing to the south of Karuah around Bulahdelah and Coolongolook, where we have monitoring programs in place through infra-red cameras, sand traps and all that. The same thing up in Yelgun to Chinderah where we have sand traps and are monitoring road kills. Animals are using the facilities.

The other part that goes with the measures put in place for mitigation is that we provide significant compensatory habitat where we impact upon the habitats. We have built parcels of land at Yelgun to Chinderah, at Cudgen Lake, for protection. There is another at Mount Karuah, which was earmarked for a major quarrying operating. About 500 hectares of land was purchased, which has now been handed over to the National Parks to form part of its total system. That land is being protected. They are some of the measures put in place in the highway program—but we are always willing to learn. If we can come up with a better way of doing things that is cost effective, we are more than happy to give it a go.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Mr Higgins, what is the range or distance from the proposed routes that the RTA or its consultants would consider for noise impact? What distance?

**Mr HIGGINS:** That depends on the nature of the project.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** What is the maximum distance you would consider for which there is a reasonable objection on the grounds of noise impact?

**Mr HIGGINS:** And the levels. If you take Tintenbar to Ewingsdale within the study area, we have done a lot of mapping. You can see in our report the houses and properties within the area. In that route selection phase we were looking at it in totality in the study area so we can understand the big picture. Noise is a big consideration.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Yes, it is. How far are the properties from the various proposed routes that there is a reasonable argument for noise consideration, in your opinion?

**Mr HIGGINS:** We have certain standards which we apply that we have to meet.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** What are your standards?

**Mr HIGGINS:** It talks about a dBA levels we have to achieve, whether it is an existing route or an upgraded route.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** When talking about a suggested route, are noise levels impacting one kilometre, two kilometres or half a kilometre from the suggested route? What do you consider would be reasonable? These are real issues.

**The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS:** Have you done Mr Cohen's house?

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Excuse me!

**Mr HANNON:** I suggest that rather than trying to guess, we will take that on notice.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Do you have any idea, is it up to five kilometres?

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** Are you not only three kilometres from route D?

**Mr HIGGINS:** In Tintenbar to Ewingsdale we have tried to assess all the noise considerations on properties within the study area, which could be five kilometres wide.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** You are saying, therefore, that a property five kilometres from a route would be noise impacted?

**Mr HIGGINS:** No.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** I would like to be clear about that. Some accusations were made.

**Mr HIGGINS:** Noise from the existing highway currently affects properties up to 300 to 500 metres from the existing highway alignment. You will find, in terms of noise constraint classification, that table 5.16 gives a distance to meet the criteria, which has been specified under the ECRTN guidelines, in terms of noise goals that we have to achieve.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Can you give the distance?

**Mr HIGGINS:** There are some distances there, from 40 to 140 metres.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Just 40 to 140 metres?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Yes. Earlier I mentioned the study area. A copy of the report has been presented to the Committee, and it has a map of the study area. You will see that we have plotted every house on the map and looked at that from a big picture in terms of the overall impact, and that is important. As we go through a process of assessing the route options. That is put out to the community and they can comment on that and so forth.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Would you agree that noise impacts on a dwelling five kilometres from the nearest road option through a kilometre of rain forest would be somewhat frivolous?

**Mr HIGGINS:** It would be of less of an impact than it would be on some property—

**Mr IAN COHEN:** You would not be measuring an impact for someone five kilometres away, would you?

**Mr HIGGINS:** No, we have tried to look at it from the big picture in terms of the houses within the study area.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** There has been some concern that the desktop study relating to the extended study area for the T2E contained information that was factually wrong. In terms of the Northern Rivers Regional Development Board is quoted as supporting an extension of the study area to the east—and that was study area of view page one—and this was refuted by the chief executive officer at the parliamentary inquiry in Ballina. Can you comment on that because I know that you have been at pains to say that there was a high degree of accuracy in the reporting so far?

**Mr HIGGINS:** That issue has been raised. I did not attend the meeting with the then person from the board, but it has been reported from members of my team that attended that meeting and I have been assured that the person who attended from the board did suggest an extension of the study to the east in terms of the meeting that was held.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** The route option development report page 4 for T2E says, "Two highway upgrade strategies are being considered. Class A and M gets back to the issues I raised earlier on". You as the project manager at a CLG meeting 14 denied that a class A upgrade will be considered for T2E. Do you see any contradiction there at all?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I would need to go back and have a look at that. I look after the whole upgrade. There is another Mr Higgins who is the project developer.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** I see. There might be a mistake.

**Mr HIGGINS:** I think we need to take that on notice.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** There could be confusion. I would be happy for you to take that on notice.

**Mr HIGGINS:** By the way, we are not related.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Mr Hannon, you said that there is a high degree of transparency. There has been a lot of angst in the local community around the T2E area that CLG representatives were made to sign an agreement not to in any way divulge information to their local community. Do you think that is satisfactory in terms of transparency of process?

**Mr HANNON:** With a large project when many things are being discussed, until decisions are made or you are moving towards decisions, it can certainly cause a lot of angst in the community when it might not, at the end of the day, be a concern. I can understand why, in the very early stage of the discussions to say that these are the considerations—

**Mr IAN COHEN:** I appreciate that but it is hardly a transparency process.

**Mr HANNON:** It is something that you need to manage well, I suspect. We have actually got copies of the documentation that were actually provided at that time. Bob might be able to explain exactly what the full detail of it is, but certainly we do not want to terrify too many people early in the piece, but certainly they need to know exactly what is going on and they need to be informed early so that they have plenty of time to input to the final decision-making process; I certainly agree with that. In terms of the commitment that was given, Bob?



**Mr HIGGINS:** I have in front of me a document and you asked for a copy of it. I will read the words from the charter that was signed—and it was one component of many issues. It talks about disseminating non-confidential information as provided by the RTA via existing community networks and disseminating non-confidential information as provided by the RTA on the project to the local community. That is the wording in there. The question is: What is confidential information? What happens, as you would be aware, is that the minutes of these CLG meetings, once they are agreed to, are then posted to our web site for everyone to see in terms of members of the community and distributed to the members. The issue of what is confidential information generally falls into three categories. There is information of archaeological importance, and the Aboriginal community is sensitive about the release of locations of where they are within the study area. I think we can all appreciate and understand that.

The other one is when we actually start to put lines on maps. The idea of sharing that with CLG members is to test them and try and get their views on those particularly issues so that we can see whether we are heading in the right direction or not. The last thing is that we are very conscious about maps getting out there amongst the community which then show there is a line through a particular property when we have not made any decision or anything by that, because that creates a lot of uncertainty and angst as well.

The other category that you find is another group where you have people who make requests or the Department of Environment and Conservation to keep information confidential, for example, the locations of threatened species in particular areas of the study area. They do not want that released because there is the possibility of vandalism and so forth. We have come across that on other projects before. They are generally the three categories that information falls in. Most of the other information is available. Normally what happens is that at the CLG meetings the project team indicates what is confidential and what is not.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Mr Higgins, you mentioned three areas of confidentiality, the third was that you referred to people who might have a line going through their property. Why should not people know that their properties are being considered? Why is that confidential? Why should they not be the first to know that their properties are being considered for resumption?

**Mr HIGGINS:** We are not even at that stage. We are at a stage of trying to identify it and if you read the reports here, when we start off, we end up with constraints over the study area. Then we come up with a long list of options from that information and then we go through an analysis process to shorten it down to what are feasible routes. As soon as we get them down to a short feasible route, then we release it widely to the community for comment, but not at that stage.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Why not? Why should it not be released from the very beginning? Why should there be confidentiality with regard to these maps at any stage?

**Mr WATTERS:** Can I give an example from another project? There is a bit of computer software that is quite widely used in Australia and overseas. It actually comes from the CSIRO research. It is a very useful bit of software called Quantum. That software produces feasible lines. If you want to develop a road between A and B, it will identify, in an engineering sense, feasible lines. It looks at the topography; it looks at the constraints. The trouble is that it comes up with perhaps 100 lines between A and B, which the study team then has to go through and look at all the other factors. And there are many factors that this particular computer software does not consider.

But what it does do is that it eliminates other areas that are not feasible from an engineering point of view. At that early stage—and this is not a Pacific Highway example—on other studies elsewhere in the State we have been very cautious about letting that information become widely public because it unnecessarily worries a lot of people in the community that their land might be affected. When we go to the next step of doing the assessment of various other issues, we eliminate 90 per cent of those lines that the computer has come up with. That would be just one example of why you would not necessarily want to put out for everybody's information a lot of lines which really are not going anywhere.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** But what if a property owner wishes to know whether there is any suggestion that their property is being considered? Why should they not know from the very beginning? Why should you make the decision for them that they might be concerned or upset?

**Mr WATTERS:** We know that they will be concerned and upset.

**The Hon. DAVID CLARKE:** Yes, so we hide it from them. We do not tell them.

**Mr WATTERS:** No, we as quickly as we can eliminate options. The stage we are at here now with these short-listed options, with four or five options on display, is a very stressful period of time for most property owners, as you would appreciate. We want to, as quickly as we can, get to a preferred option so that we have remove that anxiety from most of the affected property owners.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** There is a feeling from the property owners that the RTA has actually ignored the impact of this on valuations of various properties—they are calling it freedom of choice—of those people who chose to live away from the highway, or the original highway or the expected upgrade at the original highway, to those who actually have been on the highway—in some cases for many years. There is a concern that those people could be rewarded somehow at the expense of people who originally chose to live away from the highway. Has the RTA taken that into consideration in terms of property values?

**Mr HIGGINS:** We are aware of the issue and we do take it in. The question is how do you take it in because we are then moving into this issue of lifestyle. I think we have talked once before about this issue. Do we follow the existing highway or do we move away from it? That will be one of the considerations we will consider when we come up with the preferred route.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Perhaps Mr Hannon can answer this question. A large number of communities along the coast are concerned about the heavy-handedness of the RTA. Is it the case—I understand it is—that the RTA is pursuing a segment representative, Mr Mark Graham, with litigation for his speaking out? Can you comment on that? Will that litigation continue? Is that normal practice for the RTA?

**Mr HANNON:** I am not aware of us taking anybody to court.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Mr Higgins, perhaps you are aware of the situation.

**Mr HIGGINS:** I am aware of the situation. The first time we became aware of it is when we were advised by our consultant, Hyder, that the sub-consultant involved had issued a letter—a cease and desist type letter—because it was concerned that the person involved was very defamatory towards the company.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** Yes, that is right. I have seen that letter.

**Mr HIGGINS:** From our point of view, we are not involved in that. I also have a letter from Mr Graham asking us to intervene and not to proceed any further. We are now considering that issue in terms of the sub-consultant and trying to intervene and influence them. But I understand that Mr Graham has made certain allegations against the firm. They feel very upset about it and they have taken certain actions. That is what I am aware of.

**Mr HANNON:** In terms of the community consultation process, it is not an easy exercise. The RTA has been doing it for many years.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** We are aware of that.

**Mr HANNON:** It is a continuous improvement regime where we learn things on every project we are involved in. When you are putting in a project like the Pacific Highway and putting in many of the projects that we do in Sydney, people will be impacted. It is a matter of making judgments as to how we go forward.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Thank you. I was wondering about that. In referring to the "Pacific Highway" the Committee is really referring to a "Pacific motorway" upgrade. Do you think that is a reasonable way of describing it? I think there is a lot of confusion in the general community as to what sort of upgrade we are getting.

**Mr HANNON:** As Mr Higgins said earlier, we are looking at As and Ms in terms of the project that will be delivered.

**Mr HIGGINS:** It is a combination. Generally what you find—and you only need to go back in terms of what has been done in the past on the sections that have been upgraded—if you take Yelgun to Chinderah, where it was a deviation away from the existing highway and we moved away from the Burringbar Range and all those safety issues and it was a new route, it was taken to that higher class M standard. Whereas on other sections where you are just upgrading the existing corridor, it was taken to a class A. A classic example of that is from Raymond Terrace to Karuah, where we try to rationalise property access as well but we have a number of key at-grade intersections. So it is a combination.

Interestingly, as we move forward we are now getting representations from those sections of the community that have been upgraded to class A that they now want grade-separated interchanges. When they access the highway they want to do it safely. So we are under increasing pressure to move to a higher standard for their safety as they access that highway. We are under pressure even on some of our projects that we are building now, which we believe are safe for at-grade intersections. They are saying to us now, "We want you to move to an at-grade separated interchange now". So one of the things that we are doing on the class A sections is trying to get it planned in such a way that it can be upgraded to that higher standard in the future. In 20 or 30 years time when traffic builds up the regional communities will have grown rapidly. We do not know what will happen in 10 or 20 years. We need to be able to plan ahead so that we can actually provide that safe access. We can rationalise those median breaks on the dual carriageways. As areas grow, you need to prepare your highways for that future growth.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** In terms of preparation, has the RTA ignored suggestions about investigating alternative freight options and potential incentives—for example, fuel subsidies—for interstate freight to use other highway options? Given that there is a 20 per cent subsidy on the Pacific Highway—tell me if I am wrong—and an 80 per cent subsidy on the New England, is it not the case that major upgrades on the New England and safety upgrades on the Pacific Highway would be a worthwhile option? You could at least look at the feasibility of that.

**Mr WATTERS:** Under the AusLink program a series of corridor studies have commenced. One of the next corridor studies will be the Sydney to Brisbane corridor. AusLink now includes rail funding as well as road funding. That study I fully expect will look at rail options and the full range of options.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Therefore, is not a motorway putting the cart before the horse in terms of going to that extent of upgrading the corridor before those other options are assessed properly?

**Mr WATTERS:** As I explained earlier, there was a joint State and Commonwealth decision 10 years ago to upgrade the Pacific Highway, and I am not aware of any reversal of that policy decision. It is possible, of course, following this corridor study that the Commonwealth plans to commence next year that there could be a reversal of that policy, but I would be very surprised.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** You have mentioned a number of times the original decision to upgrade. Was it decided in those days to upgrade to A grade or to M grade?

**Mr WATTERS:** To dual carriageway standard.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** Which could well be A grade.

**Mr HANNON:** It could be either.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** It could be either but an upgrade at that time is just as likely to have been to an A-grade dual carriageway similar to what we are seeing from south of Brunswick—

**Mr WATTERS:** No, I would contradict that. Some of the earliest projects were built to full motorway standard; others were built to dual carriageway with at-grade intersections standard. The real difference between A and M—we are probably using some jargon here—is whether you have intersections and access points along the dual carriageway or you do not. If you take the Hume Highway, for example, that goes from Sydney towards Canberra and Melbourne, initially when you leave Sydney it is a full motorway standard and progressively as you get further away from Sydney you start encountering at-grade intersections and property accesses. Clearly, safety diminishes when you have such access points but the usual rationale is: where the traffic is heaviest you require the least amount of access for safety reasons. Going back to the original decision to upgrade the Pacific Highway, it was to achieve four-lane dual carriageway and the earliest projects were of both types.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** I have one quick question.

**CHAIR:** We have almost reached our finishing time. Ms Lee Rhiannon and the Hon. Amanda Fazio have a question each and I have a couple of quick questions.

**The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS:** Our finishing time is 1 o'clock. A number of Committee members have various commitments and we have to have a deliberative meeting when we finish. Obviously the RTA people are happy to take questions on notice. When we reach our finishing time I get very anxious when you start saying that numerous people still have questions. We have a 1 o'clock finishing time.

**CHAIR:** The less time we spend talking about the finishing time the quicker we will finish.

**The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS:** I ask that the questions be placed on notice. I also ask that the RTA people tell us how long they are able to stay.

**Mr IAN COHEN:** You are like a broken record. You do this every time there is questioning in a Committee.

**The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS:** If I have done it before it is because this Committee is notorious: We start late, we often waste a great deal of time and then we appear to have no concept of time at the end.

**CHAIR:** Order!

**The Hon. JAN BURNSWOODS:** That is not the way that other Chairs run committees.

**The Hon. AMANDA FAZIO:** When the original agreement between the Commonwealth and State Governments to update the Pacific Highway was signed, what was the primary consideration? Was it to try to save lives by having a dual carriageway, or was it a combination of saving lives, reducing crashes and improving access?

**Mr WATTERS:** It was both. There were two major road safety events—two bus crashes on the North Coast, which were uppermost. There was a recommendation from the Coroner about a dual carriageway, and there was also the Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics report that recommended, on economic grounds, the importance of the Pacific Highway for the movement of freight. I believe both of those were factors in bringing the Commonwealth and the State together towards the end of 1995, and agreeing in early 1996 on a 10-year program to upgrade the Pacific Highway to dual carriageway standard.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** My question is to Mr Hannon. Is the Roads and Traffic Authority [RTA] in discussion, or has the RTA had discussions with any private investors or toll operators to fund any part of the Pacific Highway upgrade?

**Mr HANNON:** I am not aware of any discussions, no.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** As you have just come into the job, are you confident that Mr Forward did not have those discussions? Would you prefer to take this question on notice?

**Mr HANNON:** I am not aware of any discussions Mr Forward had, but I will take that question on notice.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** To add to a question that I would like you to take on notice, has the RTA been approached by any private investors or toll operators with a proposal to build a toll road or put a toll on upgrades the RTA is already planning?

**Mr HANNON:** I will take that question on notice.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Thank you very much. Just to move on to the white paper, how much account is the RTA taking of the June 2004 Auslink white paper in developing the Pacific Highway? To put it another way, is the RTA considering the freight management program set out in the white paper on the Pacific Highway?

**Mr HANNON:** In terms of going forward, the current arrangement with the Federal Government will end in the middle of next year. The reason we have initiated all of these major studies is so that we will be in a position to talk to the Federal Government about finishing off the Pacific Highway. They have indicated that with the significant increase in funds for the next three years that they are committed to go down that path. Certainly, previous federal Ministers have indicated that they are keen to address the Pacific Highway issue. We are working closely with our consultants to come up with strategies and we will be feeding those into the corridor studies, which the Federal Government is about to introduce.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Getting back to some local matters, I would like to ask you about the safety issue relating to St Helena hill after the motorway tunnel is built—just to work through some of your own information. On page 15 of the T2E route options development report, the traffic numbers are stated as: 16,500 north of Bangalow and 11,500 at Knockrow. That seems to indicate that approximately 5,000 or one-third of vehicles are joining or leaving Bangalow. Presumably, a proportion of that traffic is to and from Lismore. Under the four proposals it would appear that this traffic would need to access the old Highway between Ewingsdale and Bangalow. Given the continued high use of this dangerous section of road in the future, is it not prudent that the St Helena to Bangalow section be upgraded to make it safe?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Could we take that question on notice?

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Yes. So, the essence of the question is—

**Mr HIGGINS:** I think I understand that question.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Right. I will just add a bit more to it. If the section is not safe now, is it all right to assume that it will be safe after the motorway diverts only half of the traffic? You have been presenting the safety issue strongly. Your own figures show that the decrease in traffic is not going to be huge. We know that traffic is increasing and that we will still have safety problems in this area.

**Mr HIGGINS:** We will take that question on notice and come back with our response.

**Ms LEE RHIANNON:** Just a little bit more for you to take on notice. What percentage of trucks will use the new Highway in the T2E section? What percentage of cars will use the new Highway in the T2E section? Will you take that question on notice?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** In interests of time I ask this question on notice. A Mr Camille gave evidence at the Ballina hearing about the Tintenbar to Ewingsdale section. He referred to the fact that the RTA seems to know account of the 1997-98 Ballina bypass ideas put forward by Connell-Wagner for the RTA. Could I ask you to respond on notice to that claim?

**Mr HIGGINS:** I believe that in one of our earlier responses we addressed that, but we will go back and have a look at that, just to make sure. I believe we have responded to that issue.

**CHAIR:** Are you able to tell the Committee when the preferred routes will be announced for the two far North Coast upgrades? What is the latest estimate?

**Mr HANNON:** We will take that question on notice.

**CHAIR:** Going back to the question I asked you about Summerland Way, you said you were waiting for advice on that matter. From whom are you awaiting that advice? Are you awaiting advice from the Minister?

**Mr HANNON:** I understand, as I indicated earlier, that there were meetings yesterday between the Minister and some local members. The Minister is in Hobart at the moment, so we will talk to the Minister when he returns. I indicated that Summerland Way is not part of the Auslink network.

**CHAIR:** I understand that. Would it be possible for you to respond to the questions you have taken on notice within 10 days, that he is by 28 November?

**Mr HANNON:** We will do our best. Will you provide the questions?

**CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr HANNON:** We have brought to daily answers to the questions that were posed earlier.

**CHAIR:** Which we are also very interested in.

**Mr HANNON:** We will give you a copy of those.

**(The Committee adjourned at 1.08 p.m.)**