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Nelson Bay Road Upgrade: Williamtown to Bobs Farm Duplication – Route options

TRRA

The Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association (TRRA Inc) represents the interests of the more than 25,000 people living on the Tomaree Peninsula located at the eastern extremity of Port Stephens LGA. Our key objective is to act and be a representative voice in all matters that will enhance and protect their residential amenity and the local environment, both natural and built.

We have an obvious interest in the proposed duplication of Nelson Bay Road as it is for much of its length the **only** access road connecting the Peninsula to Newcastle some 50km away, to the Williamtown airport and Williamtown/Tomago/Heatherbrae employment hubs, to other parts of the LGA and to the Pacific Highway connecting to all other parts of NSW.

We have no objection to this submission being published, unredacted.

Introduction

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the alternative off-line route alignment for the Williamtown to Salt Ash section of this duplication. We note that there are no options for the shorter Salt Ash to Bobs farm section, which is being fast-tracked and for which a separate REF has been prepared – we will review this and may comment separately

We can see many benefits from duplication of Nelson Bay Road, which we support in principle.



However, we feel strongly that the material on exhibition does not provide sufficient information about the new option to allow an informed decision on whether it is preferable to either of the other two options on which you consulted last year

In particular, the presentation of pros and cons in the 'traffic light' table in the document is missing some key information:

Traffic volumes

There is no information about current or predicted traffic volumes, including specifically heavy sand truck traffic, which are major concern for the Port Stephens community. It is not clear what how each of 3 options would affect the volume and distribution of traffic on the various parts of the road network. There should be an analysis comparing how each of the options meet the future demand for access to various destinations such as Newcastle, Sydney, the North Coast, the Upper Hunter and localities such as Medowie, and Raymond Terrace.

The new off-line alternative route may take some of the southbound sand haul traffic off existing roads, but may leave more of the west and north bound haul traffic using those roads – this will partly depend on how many of the existing sand quarry access roads are connected to the off line routes, and where.

TRRA has undertaken its own analysis of the current and predicted volumes of heavy vehicle movements associated with the many existing and proposed sand quarries in the area. The attached document¹ has previously been provided to RMS for comment, but we were unfortunately just referred to the Department of Planning – no-one appears to have seriously considered the overall and cumulative traffic impact of sand quarry operations as part of the planning for the duplication, or if they have the results have not been made public.

We consider it essential for an informed community debate about the options for further information on the traffic implications to be made available.

Ecological impact

There is only limited information provided about Biodiversity, flooding and drainage, and landscape character impacts, and no information at all on the implications of climate change, including the predicted rise in sea level and potential impact of sand-dune migration likely to be exacerbated by more frequent and more intense storms.

¹ The version attached was updated to accompany an August 2020 submission on a Sand Quarry proposal – a previous version was sent to RMS and the Department of Planning.

Any new sections of road in either of the off-line options are likely to require major engineering and drainage works where they cross flood prone land (most of the routes), much of which also lies over an important water supply aquifer. No difference is flagged between the options in the 'Flooding and drainage' row in the comparison table, which notes that further studies would be conducted '*after the preferred option is selected*'. We submit that more information is needed on the flooding/drainage implications of the different options **before** a route is selected.

Similarly, only limited information is provided on the Biodiversity impacts. These should be a major consideration, particularly if there is any differential impact on the habitat or movement corridors of any threatened species such as koalas.

Costs

The only comparison of the relative costs of the 3 options is the limited information in the 'Value for money' row of the table. We compare this with the current consultation document for the Fingal Bay Link Road, which has a '\$' row in the comparison table.

The cost of a completely new road will be very substantial – both for land acquisition and for construction, but we have no idea to what extent this cost would be offset by saving on the complexity of working on the existing road while maintaining traffic flow, as would be required in the other two options. Does the claim in the table that the online 'blue' option would be the most expensive (rated red for worst) take account of the land acquisition cost of the offline 'orange' route as well as construction?

We also have no idea if the overall cost of the new option could be contained within the already budgeted amount (announced in the 2019 State election campaign), or if this option would require further funding which may extend the timetable for completion?

There would also be differential costs of maintenance, including the cost of continued maintenance of the old Nelson Bay Road as well as of the new road if the new off-line option was chosen.

These are significant considerations which should inform community assessment of the options. More information is required.

Other comments

The information provided in the performance comparison table on most of the other identified 'impact' areas, while lacking in detail, appears to capture the main pros and cons of the 3 route options. We make the following comments on three specific issues:

Travel time: The estimates of travel time savings given in the document are counter-intuitive. Surely a completely new and less sinuous road, relatively unimpeded by intersections or frontage properties, with only one major intermediate junction, and presumably with a higher overall speed limits, should cut travel time more than 6 minutes?

Business impacts: The report on the first round of consultation promised socio-economic studies and other studies, including specifically on the division of grazing properties. The route of the new offline (orange) option appears to split large areas of existing farmland – mostly used for grazing. What arrangements would be made either for providing farm access or for compensation if access was cut off? More generally the outcome of such studies, if they have been undertaken, would greatly assist community evaluation of the options.

Cycling: While the document notes that the offline option would allow for improved and safer cycleways along the existing road, we submit that consideration should be given to provision of a dedicated and separated cycleway alongside the new road in this option – cycling along even a wide shoulder would not be a safe option on a higher speed road.

Conclusion

It appears that more detailed studies on many of the impacts are only proposed to be carried out after a preferred route has been selected.

We submit that these studies will be largely wasted if a decision has already been made. While they may help to inform detailed design to mitigate any adverse impacts, it will be too late to change course if they show unacceptable impacts or costs.

We submit that no decision on a preferred route should be made without providing further information to the community on the issues outlined above.

Nigel Waters
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Attachment: Sand mines/quarries in Part Stephens, August 2020 – Table and Map