

# **HAWKESBURY CITY COUNCIL**

## **BELLS LINE OF ROAD – LONG TERM STRATEGIC CORRIDOR PLAN**

### **SUBMISSION ON CORRIDOR OBJECTIVES**

**DECEMBER 2010**

**A submission by Hawkesbury City Council prepared with the assistance of  
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## 1. BACKGROUND

Issues and proposals for the upgrading or development of a “Super Highway” along the Bells Line of Road have arisen on numerous occasions in the past and have been considered by Council many times. In July 2007 Council facilitated a presentation to Councillors and the public by the Bells Line Expressway Group in respect of their proposal. Subsequently, at its meeting held on 31 July 2007 Council resolved:

*“That:*

- 1. Council not support the proposed Bells Line of Road Superhighway.*
- 2. Council supports safety improvements to the existing Bells Line of Road and the investigation of possible town by-passes.*
- 3. Council supports the improvement of the existing rail crossing of the Blue Mountains and a rail link to Port Kembla.*
- 4. Council notifies interested parties, including WSROC and relevant Federal and State Government Ministers and local members of parliament of its opposition to the “Superhighway”.*

*That:*

- 1. Any future route selection by other tiers of government for a third road crossing across the Great Divide take into account the adopted position of Hawkesbury City Council on 31 July 2007 and avoid any impact on the residents of the Hawkesbury City Council area.*
- 2. Council remind the State Government of the urgent need to upgrade Blacktown/Richmond Road from the M7 to North Richmond via The Driftway.*
- 3. Council request the State Government to develop options for a flood free crossing and by-pass of Richmond and North Richmond.*
- 4. Council inform the Hawkesbury community regarding any information received on the above issues.”*

On 9 November 2009 the Federal Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government and the NSW Minister for Roads issued a Joint Media Statement concerning the development of a “Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan” (LTSCP) for the Bells Line of Road. This Statement was considered by Council on 10 November 2009 when it was resolved:

*“That:*

- 1. In view of a Joint Media Statement issued by the Federal Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, the Hon. Anthony Albanese MP and the NSW Minister for Transport, the Hon David Campbell MP, regarding the proposed development of a long term plan for the Bells Line of Road, that Council write to both Ministers outlining Council’s previous position not to support a proposed Bells Line of Road Superhighway and that the*

*Hawkesbury's state and federal members of parliament also be requested to support Council's adopted position in this regard.*

2. *Clarification be sought on the proposal as outlined in the press release and the impact it will have on the Hawkesbury.*

In late October 2010 the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) released its Community Involvement Strategy for the LTSCP which included a "Broad Consultation Methodology" that indicated that community consultation will occur during November and December 2010.

On 1 November 2010 the RTA released on its website a "Community Update" document that indicated that 3 community information sessions would be held in Council's area in mid November and that comments could be submitted by 8 December 2010. In view of this the Council, at its meeting held on 9 November 2010 resolved, in part:

*"That in connection with the recently publicised community consultation process by the Roads and Traffic Authority in connection with the development of a Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan for the Bells Line of Road Council:*

1. ....
2. ....
3. *Make a submission as part of the current community consultation process in line with and supporting Council's resolution of 31 July 2007 in this regard and that a copy of the submission be placed on Council's website."*

This submission results from part 3 of Council's resolution and concentrates on the key issues and corridor objectives. The intended function of the road needs to be defined, together with any timescales for functions to alter, before a Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan can be developed. In preparing this Submission, the principal reference document has been the "Bells Line of Road Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan: Background Summary and Corridor Objectives" report prepared by Arup and dated 27 October 2010.

Council has also made numerous resolutions regarding the existing problems relating to traffic congestion of Bells Line of Road in the vicinity of Richmond and North Richmond, the need for a flood free crossing of the Hawkesbury River, and the significant constraints that these issues impose to any future development on the northern or western sides of the Hawkesbury River.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

The Bells Line of Road Development Study prepared by Maunsell McIntyre for the RTA in 2000-2001 concluded that medium to long-term demand across the Blue Mountains justified the development of only one primary route and a supplementary route, with the Great Western Highway being the primary route, which is designated as a Road of National Importance. They further concluded that the continued investment in the Great Western Highway should remain the priority, with periodic but limited improvements to Bells Line of Road as a supplementary route.

This study acknowledged that land acquisition opportunities are constrained by the road corridor's proximity to the World Heritage National Parks. While this could be considered as a constraint on land acquisition for road construction purposes, the proximity of Bells Line of Road to the World Heritage National Parks is also an opportunity to develop and promote Bells Line of Road as a major tourist drive and attraction.

The Bells Line of Road Corridor Study prepared by Sinclair Knight Merz (SKM) for the RTA in 2004 concluded that none of the four-lane, B-Double, road upgrade options examined appear feasible from an economic perspective for a range of growth assumptions. All of these options would have significant environmental and social impacts. Further, the reservation of a road corridor for future upgrade works along Bells Line of Road is complex, and likely to result in the need for a detailed and comprehensive environmental assessment and approval from the Australian and NSW Governments. With this conclusion, there is a question whether the current *Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan* will be able, within its terms of reference, to recommend any future road corridor outside of the existing road reserve, particularly in the Central section between Kurrajong Heights and Bell, through the two National Parks.

It is obvious from the background to these and more recent studies, there has been a push by interests west of the Divide to promote a major new expressway, as a means of promoting the Central NSW Regional Organisation of Councils (CENTROC) region. The "Bells Line of Road Expressway Group" commissioned a report by the Western Research Institute (WRI) in 2005 titled Socio-economic Impact of the Bells Line Expressway Report. The current Arup *Background Summary and Corridor Objectives Report* noted that "its findings will be reviewed as part of identifying an appropriate long term role for the corridor". It is noted that the rationale of this report was not to argue that an upgraded Bells Line of Road was needed for normal traffic growth and development, but was being promoted as a catalyst for private investment, to induce economic growth that might not otherwise occur. This study however draws on the results of previous studies in a manner that does not fully reflect those previous studies. It implies that the 2004 SKM report had a preferred option for the construction of the Expressway as a high standard 100-110 km/hr four lane route with gradients generally less than 7%. This could well be the ideal engineering option, but it is not reflected in the conclusions set out in the SKM report. The WRI report acknowledges that SKM concluded that the Bells Line Expressway is not economically viable, given that cost benefit analysis indicates a net cost to road users. WRI support the Expressway as a means to promote the Western Region and provide a catalyst for private investment. It does this in the context that the population

growth projections stated in the report indicate that for the total CENTROC area the annual population growth projected is just 0.3%, a figure substantially less than that in outer Sydney areas.

The comparison of daily traffic flows along the Bells Line of Road and the Great Western Highway in the WRI report is possibly misleading because it takes a screenline along the western escarpment (west of Mt Victoria and east of Lithgow) where 2002 flows were 3037 veh/day on Bells Line of Road and 12,186 veh/day on the Great Western Highway. A more appropriate comparison when the discussion is on the upgrade of Bells Line of Road, is the Central section between Bell and Kurrajong Heights, where Bells Line of Road carries 3,000-4,000 veh/day while the Great Western Highway between towns over this section carries 25,000-30,000 veh/day. The WRI report does indicate that there has been no growth in traffic along Bells Line of Road between 1980 and 2002, with the quoted 1980 figure being 3330 veh/day, compared with the 2002 figure of 3037 veh/day. With traffic decline and a minimal population growth in the CENTROC area (0.3% per annum), this does not make a compelling case for a major upgrade of Bells Line of Road.

The Central West Transport Needs Study prepared by Sinclair Knight Merz (SKM) in 2009 is a recent study on the need for improved road links across the Blue Mountains. It noted that "Since 2004, population and employment growth in the [Central West] region has fallen below the trend assumed in 2004. Furthermore, the NSW Department of Planning has forecast (at October 2008) regional population growth to fall further (to 0.09% pa) over the next 10 years. However, traffic growth and peak congestion in the Blue Mountains towns along the Great Western Highway would need to be managed over this period. This will require further investment in safety improvements to the Bells Line of Road beyond the current RTA safety programme. The current policy of capacity improvements along the Great Western Highway, as the main route over the Blue Mountains, would appear justified."

### **3. CORRIDOR OBJECTIVES**

#### **3.1 A Vision for Bells Line of Road**

The Arup report discusses key issues, and arising from these key issues, the *preliminary corridor objectives*. This is an appropriate procedure. Prior to reviewing these corridor objectives, it is useful to step back and consider the current and future role of Bells Line of Road. It is clear that it is not, and will not be, the primary transport route over the Blue Mountains, from the background reports. It will remain the back-up route to the Great Western Highway, a very useful function should major accidents or events block or partially block the Highway. However, with minimal population growth west of the Divide, additional road capacity is not essential. There is no research that indicates additional road capacity is needed in the next 20 years. This has been the planning horizon to date, and it does not necessarily follow that additional capacity will be required by 2031. However, there is an immediate need for upgrades and additional capacity to be provided urgently in the vicinity of Richmond and North Richmond where a by-pass may be a more prudent option.

Bells Line of Road performs a number of functions, as reflected in the corridor objectives identified by Arup. The Central section of the route travels between two important National Parks of World significance. While this is a constraint in widening the road corridor, it is also an opportunity. A driver on Bells Line passes through very attractive countryside between Kurrajong Heights and Mt Tomah. From Mt Tomah to Bell the scenic experience is world class. In this section there are several track heads for bushwalking, abseiling and lookouts, such as at Mt Banks and the track head above Pierces Pass, with views at least the equal of any on the other side of the Grose Valley. Mt Tomah Botanical Gardens are another significant attraction.

Bells Line of Road is also a road that is enjoyed by the keen driver and rider, not just for the views it offers but also for the driving experience. The horizontal and vertical alignment might be a challenge to some drivers, but it also provides satisfaction for the keen driver/rider. In this sense, Bells Line of Road should not be seen as a means of getting from the Hawkesbury River to Lithgow, but as a destination in its own right. The Great Ocean Road in Victoria draws drivers and tourists to it because of the scenic and driving attractions it provides. The same can be said of coastal roads in Italy and California.

A vision for Bells Line of Road is that while it provides primary transport functions, it also acts as a major tourist attraction in its own right, supplementing an expanding tourism market in the Hawkesbury and in the area between North Richmond and Mt Tomah. However, the area of Bells Line of Road east of Kurrajong is essentially a service road for the existing development in the locality that requires immediate attention to improve the safety and access for the existing residents. If no action is taken in this regard, the situation will only get worse. An additional crossing of the Hawkesbury River and appropriate road corridor should be identified to enable the future bypass of both Richmond and North Richmond to reduce traffic congestion within those areas.

If this is the vision for Bells Line of Road, the corridor objectives need to be appreciated in this light.

“Accordingly, in the light of the acknowledgement of the SKM report that a new roadway is not currently economically viable the Council does not support the construction of a new roadway or the creation of a corridor west of North Richmond.”

### **3.2 Safety**

The Arup report summarises the safety objective as *improve road safety for all road users (including vehicle users, pedestrians and cyclists)*. No one will argue that spending on road safety is very important. There have been recent accidents on Bells Line of Road where the tragedy of inappropriate driving decisions has unfolded. The study should consider the accident history of the route. However with the overall relatively low traffic volumes west of Kurrajong Heights, accident data might be insufficient to see clusters of “black spots”. Some accidents might not have been directly related to the road, but to driver error.

The accident review will need to be cognisant of the limitations of the statistics, while using engineering judgement in the development of a programme of safety improvement works. To some, the realignment of tight bends might be perceived as the best approach. Putting aside the issue of the environmental and topographical difficulties of such a course of action, is it necessarily the most cost-effective measure? Many drivers on Bells Line of Road overtake in unsafe locations because of their frustration whilst following slower vehicles. If this potential accident cause is addressed through additional overtaking opportunities and climbing lanes, drivers might not take chances in unsafe overtaking manoeuvres.

Part of the attraction of a Bells Line of Road Scenic Drive to keener drivers is the current alignments. As an alternative to realignments, central high medians such as those installed in the western section of Bells Line of Road and Chifley Road might be a better alternative for reducing head-on crashes, clearly subject to individual road safety audits of proposed works.

The Arup report also mentions the safety of pedestrians and cyclists, an issue particularly relevant in the Eastern section of the route. The extension and provision of cycle ways and lanes beside Bells Line of Road has obvious safety benefits, as well as supporting tourism development in the area. This is clearly the responsibility of the RTA as Bells Line of Road is upgraded to address additional capacity.

### **3.3 Transport and Access**

The Arup report summarises this objective as *provide an efficient road corridor for moving people and goods*. In this context, Bells Line needs to be considered in its different sections. The Central and Western sections are currently carrying in the order of 3,000 veh/day, from the background reports. A two-lane road provides ample capacity for this level of flow. A peak hour two-way flow of 410 veh/h – generally equivalent to about 4100 veh/day – has a level of service of C in mountainous terrain, assuming 100 km/h design speed and 5% heavy vehicles. (Table 4.5, *RTA Guide to Traffic Generating Developments*). This assumes 60% of the length does not permit overtaking. If the no



overtaking percent is reduced to 40%, level of service C allows 760 veh/h (7600 veh/day), underlining the benefits of improving overtaking opportunities, rather than broader road widening.

For the Eastern section, traffic flows are considerably higher because of the density of residential development. This Eastern section needs to be considered in two sub-sections: North Richmond to Kurrajong Heights, and North Richmond to Sydney motorway network. Indeed the section between North Richmond and Kurrajong Heights may need to have the subsection of Kurrajong to Kurrajong Heights assessed separately due to the quite severe grades which exist between those localities. To provide the horizontal and vertical alignments which would be envisaged with an upgraded Bells Line of Road, a major deviation would be necessary, if located to the north of the existing road corridor would impinge upon the existing rural/residential area and consequent social impacts, and if located to the south would affect existing residential areas and/or the National Park.

The more eastern section, between North Richmond and the Sydney motorway network has capacity restrictions caused by the intersection of Bells Line of Road with Terrace and Grose Vale Roads are an existing bottleneck in peak times. This bottleneck is a significant existing problem that needs to be urgently addressed and not delayed. Delays, particularly westbound in the weekday evening peak period, are significant for current traffic conditions. Compared with the minimal population growth west of the Divide, the current conditions and population in the Hawkesbury area west of the River have already created, and will create, a high priority for additional road network capacity. This upgrade/additional capacity should be considered in two stages. The first, addressing the existing significant problem with traffic flows in the peak times and the second, in the longer term, to cater for any additional development that may occur in the future. A future road corridor which bypasses both Richmond and North Richmond should be identified for that purpose.

The connection from Bells Line back to the Sydney motorway network is also an important issue. It is noted that the map on the Community Update for this project shows a line of the "Castlereagh Corridor Reservation". While connecting with the M7, this corridor would require new crossings of both the Hawkesbury and Grose Rivers, to get to Bells Line of Road, and as such the overall cost would be substantial.

An option to upgrade Blacktown/Richmond Road from the M7 to North Richmond via The Driftway would be worth pursuing. The adopted policy of Council contained in the Community Strategic Plan, is to encourage the State Government to develop options for a flood-free crossing and by-pass of Richmond and North Richmond and Council is keen to pursue these options.

It is noted that the Arup report which mentions "*potential wider economic benefits to the central west region of improved transport efficiency on the Bells Line of Road Corridor*", should take into account the current (October 2008) projections by the NSW Department of Planning of population growth of just 0.09% in the Central West over the next 10 years. There are high priority capacity improvement works required today in the Eastern section of the route, in North Richmond and across the Hawkesbury River. The provision of additional overtaking lanes on Bells Line in the Central and Western sections would also provide a very useful capacity improvement, as indicated by the figures presented earlier. However, the figures also show that in the vicinity of North Richmond urgent attention is required to address existing problems.

### **3.4 Land Use and Development**

This objective is described by Arup as *respond to present and future land uses*. Planned additional development in the North-West Growth Centre will not necessarily increase traffic flows along the Central and Western sections of Bells Line of Road. However, additional residential development in the area between the motorway network and North Richmond, and in the Hawkesbury area west of the River, will increase the need for additional road capacity. The existing capacity restraints within the North Richmond area is an issue that requires a high priority to be addressed as without increased capacity across the River and in North Richmond no additional development should be considered until this existing problem is resolved.

### **3.5 Social Impacts.**

The land use and development objective within the Consultation framework for the Bells Line of Road Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan includes '*consideration of amenity of existing local communities*' as a factor that needs to be understood and assessed in determining options for the reservation of a road corridor for an upgraded Bells Line of Road. In the absence of definitive route options and the proposed scale of any upgraded road corridor, it is not possible to conclusively assess the likely impact of an upgraded road corridor on local communities which may straddle this corridor. For residents within the Hawkesbury local government area, the 'amenity' of local communities is primarily defined by their rural landscapes and the agricultural and cultural heritage implied by these landscapes (perceptions which have been consistently validated by successive community surveys undertaken by Hawkesbury City Council). The heritage, rural and natural landscapes within the Hawkesbury are also a primary attractor for visitors to the area. The reservation of a road corridor for an upgraded Bells Line of Road carries with it the potential to significantly impact on these attributes and will undoubtedly alter the amenity of local communities – both physically and psychosocially. Proposals for road reservations or upgrades to existing routes, will carry the risk of fracturing local communities - many of which have strong historical and social connections. These impacts would need to be rigorously assessed and provision for their sensitive evaluation and management should be explicitly included as a corridor objective.

### **3.6 Environment**

This objective is described by Arup as *respect the natural and built environment and community values*. Arup acknowledges "*specific characteristics within the Blue Mountains National Park/Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage area, as well as areas of natural significance outside designated reserves*". They go on to say "*The characterisation of the corridor environment will be presented on a series of constraint maps. This mapping will provide a valuable tool in future corridor planning*". Council's Community Survey has identified that the regions "Character" and "Rural Amenity" are very important to the Hawkesbury community. These sentiments have also been incorporated into the Community Strategic Plan so that all of Council's operations consider these issues. The recognition of these issues at a State level is very important.

These “constraints” are also opportunities, to promote the scenic drive strengths of Bells Line of Road. Tourism is an expanding industry in the Hawkesbury, and should be supported, not only by not doing inappropriate road upgrades, but also by promoting the Bells Line of Road Scenic Drive.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions can be summarised:

1. Council is opposed to any proposal for a “Superhighway” along the Bells Line of Road; supports safety improvements to the existing Bells Line of Road and the investigation of possible town by-passes and is concerned to maintain the environmental quality of the area which is supported by Council’s Community Survey which has identified that the regions “Character” and “Rural Amenity” are very important to the Hawkesbury community.
2. There is little priority to increase the overall road capacity of Bells Line of Road west of Kurrajong Heights.
3. There is a current high priority need to increase the capacity of the Eastern section of the route, particularly from North Richmond, across the Hawkesbury River, and linkages to the motorway network.
4. A road corridor providing a bypass of Richmond and North Richmond should be identified as part of the long term strategy for Bells Line of Road.
5. Safety improvements to Bells Line should be assessed and a programme of works developed.
6. The capacity and safety benefits of constructing additional climbing and overtaking lanes should be recognised and such works included in the programme.
7. The “constraints” due to the course of the road through two National Parks and World Heritage areas will significantly restrict major construction works and new road alignments. However these constraints are also opportunities, in that Bells Line has significant potential to become a tourist attraction in its own right, as a Scenic Drive similar to others such as the Great Ocean Road, with consequent benefits for tourism.

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