

Newell Highway Upgrade at Coonabarabran

Submission by

Warrumbungle Shire Council

4 February 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Review of Environmental Factors (REF) for the proposed Newell Highway Upgrade at Coonabarabran. Council's submission will deal with several areas of the REF.

These areas are to include:

1. Socio-economic, property and land use
2. Signage
3. Traffic and transport
4. Design
5. Relevant legislation
6. Other

1. Socio-economic, property and land use

Coonabarabran is a town with a high reliance on the Newell Highway, with three petrol stations, numerous motels, caravan parks and other accommodation premises along with a number of food outlets, including those associated with the motels. Added to this there are other traffic related services being provided such as tyre repairers.

Council appreciates that a number of studies have been undertaken on the impacts of highway bypasses and how communities have adapted and changed in response to these impacts. The general finding of these studies indicated that in the longer-term highway bypasses do not have adverse economic impacts on towns that are bypassed and what economic impacts did occur tended to be minimal and of a short-term duration.

However these studies have also indicated that small towns, identified as less than 2,500 population, are generally more at risk of adverse economic impacts from a highway bypass than larger towns.

The REF identifies Coonabarabran (6.4.2.1) as being a town of 3,290 people in 2016. While this may be the district population the town population is of course less than this figure and would be closer to 2,537 in 2016. Hence Coonabarabran would, and should, be considered a community at risk of adverse economic impacts from a highway by-pass, as such a greater effort needs to be put into the potential economic impacts.

The impact from the loss of trade will likely contribute to the communities already poor socio-economic standing. As identified in the REF Coonabarabran has a lower than average SEIFA Index.

Proposal: That Transport for NSW (TfNSW) conduct a more detailed assessment of the potential impact on Coonabarabran of the proposed by-pass and prepare a strategy for dealing with these impacts.

Proposal: TfNSW to work with Warrumbungle Shire Council and the Coonabarabran and District Chamber of Commerce to identify potential impacts to local businesses from loss of trade and have solutions identified prior to the pre-construction phase.

Proposal: That the NSW Government provide funding to implementing the actions of the strategy.

Local service providers need to be informed of potential local materials and resources to be used in the construction process. Where possible TfNSW must require the appointed project contractor to use goods and services procured from within the Warrumbungle Shire. Information should be provided to local businesses on what items, services and equipment will be required including volumes well in advance and how the construction company will source these, that is quotes or tenders and where these will be advertised so local businesses have a chance to bid for the work. It will also allow these firms to gather all appropriate paperwork, including insurances and WHS.

Sourcing goods, services and materials locally is important to the local community and business operators. Local service providers should be given fair opportunity to benefit from the construction activities.

Proposal: That TfNSW ensure that every opportunity be given to local service providers to contract to the contractor, if necessary establish targets for local suppliers within WSC LGA. Contracts should not be so large that it prevents small operators from supplying services including plant and equipment.

Proposal: That TfNSW hold forums with businesses within the Warrumbungle Shire who may be capable of providing services to the project.

Events are an important feature of rural communities and especially so for Coonabarabran. These events may be affected during the various phases of the project

Proposal: That TfNSW work with Council and the Coonabarabran and District Chamber of Commerce to identify and minimise impacts on various events within the Shire.

No doubt the Bypass will have economic impact to Coonabarabran as a standalone event. However it needs to be highlighted Coonabarabran's local economy has just experienced the negative flow-on effects from worst drought in over 100 years, and then the corona pandemic resulting too reduced town expenditure, reduced visitation, increased unemployment, and business closures. The bypass impacts cannot be analysed just as a standalone event. Businesses are still recovering from previous events and many are not in the position to plan, develop and put in place mitigated measures compared to a standalone event of Bypass construction and operation. TfNSW needs to acknowledge this and find solutions to support local businesses pre-construction.

Indirect impacts to suppliers and business linkages is another point to highlight, for example referrals to eateries from accommodation operators. If there's a decrease in accommodation bookings there will a decrease in sales eateries.

The survey conducted by Aurecon which is the basis for the REF is not considered to be sufficient to establish concrete findings. Reasons include:

- 2 days allocated for data collection for businesses and shoppers
- 45 shoppers interviewed, of which only 5 were visitors

- Rain on the survey days which limits visitors
- The survey was only conducted in Coonabarabran with no inclusion to surrounding towns who frequent Coonabarabran. For example Baradine and Binnaway.
- Survey was conducted in February which is generally quiet time for visitors due to the heat and National Parks closed.

Proposal: That TfNSW work with Council and engage a consultant to conduct an independent survey/data collection with local businesses to establish an economic baseline prior to construction of Bypass.

Proposal: That TfNSW provide Council with copies of the surveys undertaken and any future surveys.

Council had previously made a submission on the draft proposal concerns about the fragmentation of land parcels as a result of TfNSW acquiring land to create the road corridor for the bypass. The REF has responded to these concerns and states under section 5.4 ISEPP Consultation *Land acquisition would be limited to the smallest extent required. TfNSW would continue to consult with Council and landholders regarding acquisition requirements and any severed or remnant land.*

Further to that the REF also goes on to state under section 6.4.4 Property severance - *TfNSW would consider each owner's remaining holdings accounting for the impacts of severance and/or the residual functional use of any remaining land. TfNSW would engage an appropriately qualified property and/or agricultural specialist to assess these impacts and to identify alternative opportunities for their remaining holdings. TfNSW would manage any residual land in accordance with its disposal processes. This would involve considering landowner requests for land swaps.*

Council requests that the smaller remnant land areas (such as slivers that boundary the bypass) be acquired by TfNSW (as opposed to remaining in private ownership) and amalgamated into the road corridor. These land areas will likely be heavily impacted by the proposal rendering unsuitable for habitable purposes.

PROPOSAL: That TNSW acquire small remnant fragmented land that remain from the By-Pass land acquisition process.

2. Signage

Council acknowledges that signage along the alignment would be implemented in accordance with the TfNSW Bypassed Town signage initiative. Council will be seeking improved signage, including for the town of Baradine.

Proposal: That TfNSW consult with Warrumbungle Shire Council and the Coonabarabran and District Chamber of Commerce in relation to the implementation of improved signage for the By-Pass to promote Coonabarabran and surrounds, including:

- **Sign location and design, including at all potential exits to Coonabarabran not just North and South intersections**
- **Lighting of signs, e.g. downward facing lights so visual at night**
- **Last chance signage at northern and southern exit points.**
- **Providing digital signage both directions for road closures – fire, flood, accident e.g., out of Goondiwindi**
- **That signage also includes the town of Baradine**

- **Supply and install large entry statement signs for Coonabarabran in both directions along the Bypass plus also signage for Baradine. Ownership of these designs would then be transferred to Council, or at least permission be granted to Council for use of the signage**

3. Traffic and Transport

East west traffic flow is also important to Coonabarabran for this reason further consideration should be given to access to and from Baradine Road. B-Double access to Purlewaugh Road between proposed bypass and John Street. From discussions at previous workshops it was proposed to prevent access to this section of Purlewaugh by B-Double trucks and instead forcing B-Double trucks, and Restricted Access Vehicles in general, to use the proposed intersection of the Oxley Highway and Newell Highway.

Proposal: That TfNSW review and consult with Council on the impact on the flow of east-west traffic through Coonabarabran.

4. Design

The proposal design provides several concerns for Council, these include:

- Intersections at the Oxley Highway, River Road and Purlewaugh Road being a staggered T-intersection
- Access and exits for the above intersections would be a sign posted as 60kms per hour with a design of 70kms per hour
- The Bypass will be designed and sign posted as 110kms per hour

Many heavy vehicles currently use the Oxley Highway and Purlewaugh Road and to a lesser extent River Road. The present design has six staggered T-intersections junctions with cross traffic, including large trucks having come to a stop and then enter a busy 110kph roadway, merge and, in a very short distance, cross the oncoming traffic travelling at 110kph to leave the bypass. This is seen as a potential significant safety hazard. A better safety resolution would be to provide an overpass/underpass.

Proposal: That TfNSW design the Coonabarabran By-Pass with vehicle overpass/underpass arrangements for the intersections of Oxley Highway, Purlewaugh Road and River Road.

It is acknowledged that access to some properties will likely change however property owners need to be able to maintain the same or very similar level of access to their properties.

Proposal: That TfNSW ensure that property owners are provided with like for like access to their properties.

There are concerns that stock underpasses will not drain water adequately and therefore become hazards, stock will be hesitant to move through them and create perfect breeding grounds for mozzies.

Proposal: That TfNSW ensure that the stock underpasses are constructed to ensure that water is adequately drained and properly maintained.

Travelling the Newell Highway. Coonabarabran lies 158km north of Dubbo and 97 kms north of Gilgandra and 120kms south of Narrabri. Along the Oxley Highway Gunnedah is 107kms to the north

east. Unless travellers deviate from the Highway they could be expected to travel up to 217kms (Gilgandra to Narrabri) to seek petrol, food and/or accommodation, thus a service centre along the Highway at Coonabarabran would be beneficial.

Highway service centres encourage drivers to 'stop, revive, survive'. Strategically located service centres provide opportunities for drivers to take breaks when they recognise the warning signs of fatigue, which contributes significantly to travel safety and efficiency.

Strategically positioned highway service centres located close to bypassed towns also provide economic benefits for those communities. While there are many highway travellers that are happy to divert into bypassed towns others will want to seek fuel, food or convenience.

Consideration should be given to possible sites for a service centre(s) along the Bypass of Coonabarabran that give easy access to traffic travelling both directions plus quick access to Coonabarabran.

Proposal: that TfNSW identify sites along the Newell Highway Bypass of Coonabarabran to serve as possible Highway service centre that gives easy access to traffic travelling both north and south along the highway along with easy access to Coonabarabran.

Noise, vehicle lights and dust will impact on local residences.

Proposal: That TfNSW establish a structure for dealing with noise, light and dust issues during the design; construction and operational stages of the project.

Proposal: That TfNSW consider the impact on the use of oversized farm machinery by the By-Pass on routes and ensure that they are not unnecessarily affected.

5. Relevant Legislation

To provide water to the project it is proposed that a water bore(s) be installed. While the Minister has the authority to exempt the need for water licensing to construct and use a specified bore water supply the impact on other consumers still needs to be assessed and mitigated.

A number of residents in the area rely on bore water for their water supply this should not be unduly interfered with.

Proposal: That TfNSW:

- 1. Establish a regular consultation program with residents who's bore water supply may potentially be affected by bores put down for the project;**
- 2. Monitor the impacts of its bore supplies on the aquifer and nearby properties; and**
- 3. Liaise with Warrumbungle Council, the RFS or other relevant group about the water bore infrastructure becoming a legacy asset for the local community, e.g. potentially remain equipped and used by RFS if required as an extra fill point for fires or emergencies.**

6. Other

There are a number of Environmental, Heritage, infrastructure and other items that need to be further considered.

Proposal: That the Coonabarabran Aboriginal Land Council be advised of any indigenous heritage items discovered throughout the process and a keeping place agreed as an option for display.

Proposal: That if approval is given to remove the historic Blaze Tree that it be relocated to an agreed site and protection provided.

The financial burden on Warrumbungle Council with the transfer of some major infrastructure items will be significant, e.g. the transfer of the Mary Jane Cain Bridge and highway through Coonabarabran.

Proposal: That TfNSW ensure that infrastructure items being transferred to Warrumbungle Shire Council be at an appropriate standard and maintenance and replacement plans be provided to Council.

The location of the highway will split some properties and create ongoing difficulties in managing those properties, in particular the adjustments of internal fencing.

Proposal: That TfNSW assist property holders with internal fencing to ensure that they may be operated efficiently.

Proposal: That TfNSW clarify if Travelling Stock Routes (TSRs) are being impacted by the project and how these will be overcome.

In 6.1.2.7 the report identifies a number of hollow bearing trees and potentially to be destroyed. These can provide a habitat for some animals.

Proposal: That TfNSW engage local groups, e.g. the Mens' Shed to make man made hollows to replace the destroyed tree hollows.

In 6.1.2.8 it is identified that the area is a 'highly suitable Koala Habitat'.

Proposal: That TfNSW install koala warning signs along the By-Pass.

In 6.1.3.5 concerns are raised about fauna injury and mortality.

Proposal: That TfNSW provide information and signage about managing such fauna.

6.1.4 Safeguards and mitigation measures.

Proposal: That TfNSW or its contractor source plant material from Warrumbungle Shire plant propagators.

7.1 Environmental management plans

Proposal: That TfNSW provide advice to the community on the period of weed control following construction of the By-Pass

Proposal: That the Diamond Firetail relocation be planted prior to move.

New intersections will be created as a result of the By-Pass, including those at Purlewaugh Road and River Road. Clarification will be required on where responsibilities lie between Warrumbungle Shire Council and TfNSW.

Proposal: That TfNSW provide clarification to Warrumbungle Shire Council on the areas of responsibilities for newly created intersections with the By-Pass.