

1 Introduction

1.1 Project Background

In early 2001 work commenced on the development of the Coffs Harbour Highway Planning Strategy (CHHPS). The Strategy, which addresses the need to upgrade the Highway between Sapphire and Woolgoolga, while planning for future traffic needs within the Coffs Harbour urban area, covers a study area from Sawtell in the south to Arrawarra in the north.

Objectives for the Strategy are listed in Table 1.1 as they relate to the principal objectives of the Pacific Highway Upgrading Program.

Table 1.1 Project Objectives

Pacific Highway Program Objectives	Coffs Harbour Highway Planning Strategy Objectives
Significantly reduced road accidents and Injuries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A dual carriageway road with potential to reduce crash rates to 15 crashes per 100MVK over the project length.
Reduced travel times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A design which would allow sign posting at a minimum of 100km/h in rural areas and 80km/h in urban areas. Provide flood immunity on at least one carriageway for a 1: 100 year flood event
Reduced freight transport costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A design that minimises vehicle operating costs. A design that meets or exceeds B-Double requirements, including at intersections where required.
A community satisfied with physical development of the route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate input from local communities into development of the Project through the implementation of a comprehensive program of community consultation and participation A solution at all potential conflict points with local traffic that meets community expectations and maintains local connectivity.
A route that supports economic development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide transport developments that are complementary with land use Consider delay management strategies to minimise disruption to local and through traffic and maintain access to affected properties and land during construction
Upgrading of the route managed in accordance with Ecologically Sustainable Development principles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cumulative impacts assessed and addressed Best environmental practical incorporated. RTA Guidelines for managing environmental issues (biodiversity, noise impacts, water quality, acid sulphate soils, etc) are met.
Maximum effectiveness of expenditure objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximise the use of the existing road asset where consistent with the Project Ensure the project outcomes achieve value for money

The Strategy was publicly launched in September 2001 and, in March 2002, an information sheet containing the following key announcements was released:

- identification of four initial corridor options for the northern section of the strategy area from Sapphire to Woolgoolga
- a decision that the inner corridor in the southern section of the strategy area between Sawtell and Sapphire / Moonee was the only potentially feasible bypass option suitable for further consideration
- commencement of a detailed comparison of upgrading the existing highway in the southern section of the strategy area as an alternative to an inner corridor bypass

Following a decision by CHCC to conduct a peer review of the work completed up to March 2002, work in the southern section of the study area between Sawtell and Sapphire was deferred, while work proceeded in the northern section between Sapphire and Woolgoolga. Following Council's receipt of the peer review in October 2002, investigations have recommenced in the southern section. The peer review made a number of recommendations and broadly endorsed the technical findings from the work previously undertaken.

A community update released in December 2002 described five route options for the Sapphire to Woolgoolga Upgrade Project (refer Connell Wagner, 2002) and a decision on a preferred route was expected to be announced in mid 2003. This was delayed while CHCC conducted a series of public forums that reviewed options for the Highway through the Council's area.

In parallel with these activities, a review of a community generated proposal for a western bypass of Coffs Harbour, known as the Coastal Ridge Way, was undertaken. The review of that proposal is reported separately in the *Review of the Coastal Ridge Way Proposal* (Connell Wagner, 2004a).

As part of the investigations in the southern Coffs Harbour section, two indicative route options have been developed in the inner corridor and a range of studies has been undertaken to determine the performance of these inner route options in comparison with a major upgrading of the existing highway to an urban motorway standard. These strategic corridor options have been developed to a level sufficient to establish the broad feasibility of each in terms of transport function, socio-economic implications and environmental consequences.

1.2 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this Strategy Report is to document the overall process of identifying, developing and evaluating the corridor options for the Coffs Harbour section of the Planning Strategy. The report will provide input to a decision on the Preferred Strategy.

1.3 Study Area

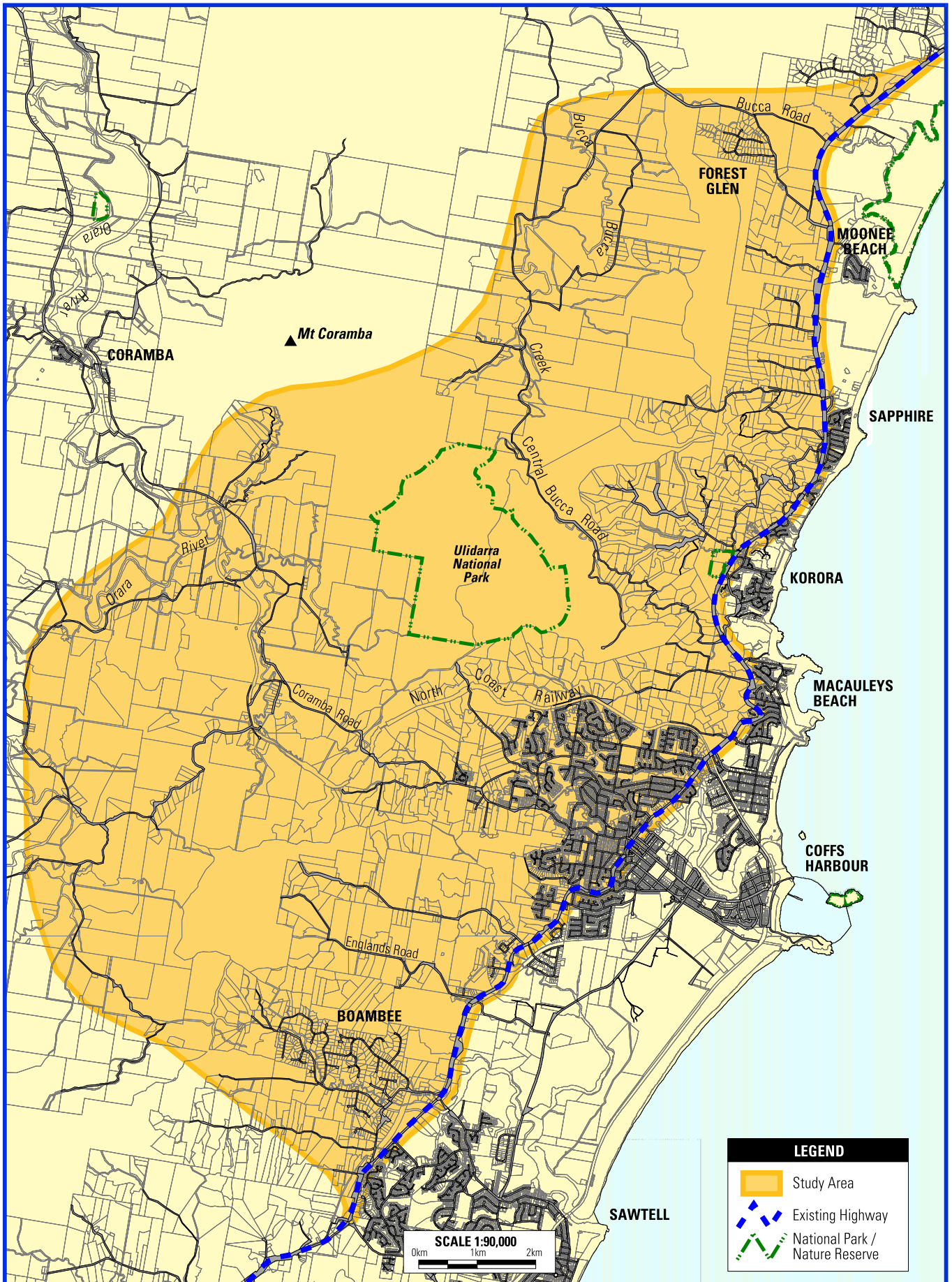
The broad study area for the Coffs Harbour section of the Planning Strategy area was identified in September 2001 as extending from Sawtell in the south to Moonee in the north. The eastern extent is the existing Pacific Highway corridor, and the western extent is the Orara River, Mount Coramba and Bucca Bucca Creek. The study area is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

1.4 Need for and Objectives of the Project

The coastal strip between Sawtell and Woolgoolga has continued to change over recent years as a result of economic development and a growing population. Economic and population growth is expected to continue, resulting in increased local and long distance traffic on the Pacific Highway.

The Pacific Highway section between Sawtell and Sapphire has been extensively upgraded and is already dual carriageway. Together with recent and proposed local road improvements on the eastern and western distributors, the capacity of the highway through the main Coffs Harbour area is likely to be adequate for many years. However, given the high population growth rate and demand for residential land, a strategic approach to land-use and transport planning is essential to ensure that provision is made for long-term highway needs through the Coffs Harbour urban area.

The Strategy will consider whether the provision for a long-term bypass of Coffs Harbour is justified and desirable or whether it is preferable to adapt the existing highway and local road system to meet long-term traffic demands. Should the Preferred Strategy conclude that a bypass is the appropriate solution, reservation of land is likely to be necessary to allow construction of a bypass should it be warranted in the future.



1.5 Study Methodology

The development of strategic options followed a two-stage process. The first stage was the initial corridor identification of the Inner Bypass and the Existing Highway as publicly exhibited in March 2002. The second stage involved developing and evaluating feasible route options that are indicative of what could be developed generally within these broad corridors.

The following activities were undertaken as part of this process:

- *Refinement of design:* The design of the indicative route options was refined in terms of horizontal and vertical alignment to ensure that the options would meet relevant design guidelines and RTA requirements for safety and traffic performance. Issues that have been considered include the radius of curves, gradients, earthworks and major structures (bridges and possibly tunnels), interchange locations with the local road network and the need for ancillary features such as arrester beds and safety ramps.
- *Traffic assessment:* Analysis of traffic and transport performance of the Inner Bypass and Existing Highway Upgrade including consideration of traffic volumes, travel speeds, attraction for heavy vehicles and vehicle operating costs.
- *Cost and economic performance:* Preparation of strategic cost estimates and broad economic analysis to determine road user costs and benefits of the proposal.
- *Environmental and social assessment:* Technical studies have been undertaken to address a range of socio-economic, planning and environmental issues. Consideration of the factors raised in these studies and the influence of their findings on the design/development process are summarised in this report. Issues addressed include:
 - non-indigenous heritage
 - Aboriginal heritage
 - planning and land use
 - traffic noise
 - biological (flora and fauna)
 - geotechnical
 - agricultural land
 - socio-economic issues
 - air quality
 - urban design and visual assessment
- *Evaluation:* The relative merits and impacts of the Inner Bypass and Existing Highway Upgrade have been assessed and conclusions drawn in regard to the Strategy which is most appropriate for a future highway through the area.

1.6 Structure of the Report

The Strategy Report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 provides an overview of the project and the purpose and structure of the report
- Section 2 summarises the stakeholder involvement interaction and how stakeholder input has influenced the planning and option development process
- Section 3 outlines the evolution and development of the strategic corridors and options, detailing the processes which have lead to the refinement of the indicative route options
- Section 4 describes the Inner Bypass and Pacific Highway Upgrade indicative options
- Section 5 describes and analyses traffic and transport issues
- Section 6 provides details of the cost estimates and road user economic analysis of the options
- Sections 7 and 8 summarise the findings of the technical investigations prepared for the various environmental and social aspects of the corridor options

- Section 9 contains an assessment of the relative merits and impacts of the Inner Bypass and Existing Highway Upgrade and draws conclusions in regard to the Strategy which is most appropriate for a future highway through the area.

2 Stakeholder Involvement

2.1 Scope of Activities

Since the project launch in September 2001, there has been extensive interaction and involvement of a wide range of community groups and individuals. This has included:

- public notices and media coverage (both print and electronic) informing the community of various stages and reporting on the progress of the project
- formation of and regular meetings with the Community Focus Group (CFG) for the Coffs Harbour section of the Strategy area in addition to the two CFGs in the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section
- advertised open information sessions
- distribution of Information Sheet No 2 in March 2002, a community update newsletter in September 2002 and Community Update 3 in December 2002
- formation of a contact list on which members of the public were able to register to receive community updates
- provision of a Freecall telephone hotline for direct enquiries
- establishment and frequent updating of a project web site
- static displays and open house displays attended by the study team
- interviews with individuals, business, property owners and community groups
- calls for written submissions and completion of survey forms by individuals and interest groups
- meetings and presentations with authorities and interest groups (eg. Council, Woolgoolga and Coffs Harbour Chambers of Commerce, Sikh community, Probus groups, Ulitarra Society)

Details of community involvement activities and feedback from stakeholders have been documented in various reports prepared as part of the Coffs Harbour Planning Strategy (Pramax Communications, 2001, 2002a and 2002b and 2003).

2.2 Peer Review

On 24 June 2002 CHCC appointed Arup consultants to carry out an independent peer review on the adequacy of the decision-making process and the sufficiency of technical assessment undertaken as part of the Strategy to March 2002. CHCC's concern was to ensure the process represented a proper consideration of the issues concerning the local community, and that it met the requirements of sustainable development.

The peer review principally addressed the findings presented in the Working Papers accompanying the March 2002 information release, as well as the stakeholder involvement process. The Peer Review concluded that "the Inner Corridor is the preferred of the options for a bypass of Coffs Harbour and that the Planning process has provided for the delivery of the best option for the Coffs Harbour local community." The review also included a series of recommendations to be implemented during the next stage of the Strategy. The following key actions were included in the recommendations:

- production of a strategic environmental constraints map for the southern section of the Strategy area
- communication of key information about development and delivery of the Strategy at all CFG meetings
- review of the CFG Charter to improve the relationship between the project team and CFG
- enhancement of the communication program to ensure accurate updates are provided to the wider community

In November 2002, CHCC convened a workshop with Arup, and CFG members to discuss these findings. The focus of the workshop was on improving the communication process between the Council and the CFG members.

2.3 Community Focus Group

In response to requests from members of the community in the southern section of the Strategy area, the Coffs Harbour CFG was formed in January 2002. Between January and the end of May 2002, five meetings of the group were held to exchange information on the Strategy planning process, technical details and various issues raised by CFG members. Following CHCC's decision to commission a peer review of the Strategy in May 2002, work on the southern section was deferred. A meeting of the CFG in July discussed the implications of the peer review of the progress of the Strategy and no further meetings were held until December 2002 when investigations in the southern section recommenced.

Membership of the Coffs Harbour CFG has fluctuated during this time, with a number of members withdrawing, and some proxy and replacement members joining the group. Members of the group represent a range of interests and localities within the community and some have been active in developing and promoting an option that bypassed Coffs Harbour further west than the Inner Bypass option. This route now known as the Coastal Ridge Way.

Notes of each meeting are posted on the web site following the meetings and members are active in disseminating information and recording feedback from the particular group they represent. The feedback and information from the group has provided valuable input on issues and community reactions to the Strategy.

Several of the meetings have involved presentations on technical subjects by RTA specialists or project team members. Issues and topics covered in the CFG meetings have included:

- findings from technical investigations
- Strategy planning process
- Highway upgrade scenarios
- key issues concerning the community
- Quantum system for route identification
- RTA land acquisition process
- Pacific Highway traffic growth including heavy vehicles
- socio-economic issues

In response to concerns raised by the community during the Peer Review, a workshop session of socio-economic issues was included in the February 2003 CFG meeting. The following socio-economic factors were nominated by the project team as being relevant:

- community cohesion – physical or psychological separation
- amenity factors – noise, visual and air quality impacts
- access and movement patterns – vehicular, pedestrian, cyclist
- land use and property – broad and individual levels
- effects on business activity – direct and indirect factors
- effects on tourism – a subset of business activity but warranting separate consideration given its importance to Coffs Harbour economy

Following discussion on how socio-economic assessments were carried out, CFG members agreed to carry out a SWOT analysis with their respective groups and circulate the results for discussion at the next meeting. The issues raised are described in detail in the Social-Economic Working Paper and summarised in Section 7.6 of this report.

To update the wider community on membership, key activities and progress of the investigations and planning strategy, items for inclusion in a draft media release are identified at the end of each CFG meeting.

2.4 Planning Focus Meetings

One of the initial consultation activities following the Strategy launch was a Planning Focus Meeting held in Grafton on 8 February 2002. The meeting was attended by interested State Government agency representatives as well as officers from Bellingen, Coffs Harbour and Pristine Waters Councils. This meeting was concerned with development of the whole Planning Strategy – including the northern section from Sapphire to Woolgoolga. The purpose of the meeting was to allow exchange of information between the relevant government agencies and the study team to facilitate identification of key issues and constraints that may influence development of the strategy.

Subsequent Planning Focus Meetings have been held for the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section (refer Connell Wagner 2002) and another Government agency meeting is planned for the Coffs Harbour section prior to the Value Management Workshop.

2.5 Forthcoming Activities

Community involvement activities including regular CFG meetings will continue during the evaluation and selection a Preferred Option. Following the public exhibition of a Preferred Strategy, feedback from the comment forms will be processed and incorporated into the Draft Preferred Options Report. A structured Value Management process will be used to assess the options by evaluating and comparing various information sources including this report. This process will take place through a facilitated workshop involving technical and non-technical participants with a diverse range of interests and expertise.