

2 Need for the Proposal

This chapter explains why the upgrade of the highway between Sapphire and Arrawarra is needed. Issues assessed include potential future population, land use and traffic. It also addresses government policies which support the need for an upgrade of the highway.

2.1 Strategic planning

The framework of strategic planning relevant to the Proposal incorporates both transportation planning and land use planning as both are intertwined. A number of strategies and policies have been released by the NSW Government identifying the need for an updated and improved road network. These include:

- *NSW State Plan* (NSW State Government 2006).
- *State Infrastructure Strategy* (NSW State Government 2006).
- *Draft Mid North Coast Regional Strategy* (NSW Department of Planning 2006).
- *Action for Air 2006 Update* (NSW Department of Environment and Conservation 2006).
- *Road Safety 2010* (NSW Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) undated).
- *North Coast Road Strategy* (RTA 1993).
- *Upgrading the Pacific Highway: Ten Year Pacific Highway Reconstruction Program* (RTA 1997).

The Mid North Coast has been identified as one of the fastest growing regions in NSW. The NSW Government expects the population of this region to increase by 91,000 over the next 25 years (*Draft Mid North Coast Regional Strategy 2006-31, 2006*). The Pacific Highway is heavily utilised for the movement of freight and holiday traffic between Sydney and Brisbane, as well as providing the main north-south corridor for travel within the Mid North Coast.

The urgency and the need to continue the upgrade of the Pacific Highway is reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding, signed in December 2005 by the NSW and Federal governments, to explore future funding options for the upgrade of the Pacific Highway. The agreed benefits of upgrading the highway, as outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding include:

- Delivery of a new high standard motorway including fully grade separated connections and separation of local and through traffic.
- Reduced travel times.
- Improved freight transport operations.

- Increased safe overtaking opportunities.
- Improved alignment and elimination of narrow bridges.
- Provision of an alternative route for local traffic.
- Complementary land use.
- Improved inter-regional function of the corridor.
- Agreed process to resolve issues relating to cross border connections and tri-partite implementation.
- Utilisation of appropriate intelligent transport systems.

2.2 Need for the Proposal

The Pacific Highway Upgrade Program is being undertaken to eliminate blackspots, improve road safety; and reduce overall journey times along its length. The Sapphire to Woolgoolga section of the highway is a key link in the overall framework of the Pacific Highway corridor, providing for both through traffic and local traffic and light and heavy vehicles. The proposed upgrade is required to address the existing and predicted road and traffic deficiencies of this section of highway through the northern part of the Coffs Harbour local government area.

2.2.1 Environmental and social impacts

The Coffs Harbour local government area population is predicted to increase to approximately 100,000 by 2030 (CHCC 2004a). Associated with this increase in population is an increase in residential and commercial development. This further population increase will result in a further increase in local traffic demand, particularly on the Pacific Highway.

Without any improvements, the increasing traffic through the study area would result in declining traffic and safety conditions for both vehicular and pedestrian/cyclist traffic and increases in delays (particularly during the school holiday periods) and vehicle emissions. The upgrade of the highway would result in improved road safety and traffic conditions through the provision of a high standard dual carriageway highway incorporating a local access road network to separate local and through traffic. Improvements to amenity would occur as a result of the Proposal, including an improved noise environment for a majority of residents along the proposed alignment and the existing highway through Woolgoolga, an overall improvement in air quality and a reduction in green house gas emissions (compared to the do nothing case).

2.2.2 Economic growth

The development of a high standard highway would facilitate economic growth for the area. Regional benefits include the increased efficiency of freight movement along the highway. Local benefits include the increased efficiency and safety for local traffic as well as additional benefits through the reduction of transportation times and costs, providing better access for goods and services to markets and the sourcing of goods and services from other regions.

The Mid North Coast is a popular tourist destination. Upgrading the highway would improve travel times and safety, as well as significantly reduce traffic congestion during school holidays, particularly in the Woolgoolga township and at other key intersections along this section of the highway. The reduction in noise impacts due to the diversion of much of the through and heavy vehicles onto the Woolgoolga bypass would contribute to the improvement in amenity in the township.

2.2.3 Road and traffic conditions

Within the study area, the Pacific Highway is currently a two-lane single carriageway road with overtaking opportunities approximately every five kilometres. There are a number of intersections with various local roads servicing coastal communities such as Sapphire, Moonee, Emerald Beach,

Sandy Beach, Woolgoolga and Arrawarra, in addition to several rural residential communities and numerous private accesses. Many of the intersections have poor sight lines and inadequate merging lanes. Over the five year period from July 2001 to June 2006 between Campbell Close and Arrawarra Beach Road there was a crash rate of 29 crashes per 100 million vehicle kilometres travelled. The highway is the only arterial road available to serve and connect the existing residential settlements located at Sapphire, Moonee, Emerald Beach, Sandy Beach and Mullaway and to provide access to the town centres of Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga.

Predicted population growth on the northern beaches and for the local government area in general would result in increased traffic volumes on the road network. Through traffic is also expected to increase as the Pacific Highway Upgrade Program proceeds to the north and south. Dual carriageways, together with upgraded access arrangements, would improve transport efficiency by reducing travel time and costs, and would significantly reduce the number and severity of accidents.

2.3 Implications of doing nothing

No action or deferral of the Proposal would result in an unacceptable decline of safety conditions and deteriorating community amenity along the existing highway between Sapphire and Arrawarra. Predicted traffic growth would further exacerbate problems currently experienced with the existing road and traffic environment.

Without major upgrading of the Pacific Highway between Sapphire and Arrawarra, the predicted traffic growth would increasingly expose the deficiencies of the existing road environment over the forecast period. Specific consequences would include:

- The deterioration of traffic conditions to unacceptable levels particularly at holiday times.
- A likely increase in vehicle accidents.
- Increased travel times for both local and through traffic.
- Increased conflict between local and through traffic.
- An inconsistency in road standard between the section of highway within the study area and the remainder of the upgraded Pacific Highway.
- Worsening road and traffic conditions with consequent adverse environmental effects such as noise, vibration and community disruption.
- Increased limitations for pedestrian access and risk of pedestrian accidents due to traffic growth.
- Exacerbation of community severance as the standard of access to and from the highway deteriorates.
- Failure to achieve the objectives of planning and transport strategies, in particular the Pacific Highway Upgrade Program and the Coffs Harbour Highway Planning Strategy.

2.4 Summary

The need to upgrade the Pacific Highway between Sapphire and Arrawarra can be substantiated by:

- The strategic planning objectives of the NSW Government – specifically its January 1996 \$1.6 billion commitment to the 10 year Pacific Highway Upgrade Program, its commitment to shared funding with the Australian Government of a further \$1.3 billion over the three years to mid 2009 and the Memorandum of Understanding signed in late 2005.
- The declaration of the Proposal (one of 13 Pacific Highway projects) on 8 December 2006, as critical infrastructure projects under Clause 75C of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*. These projects were triggered under Clause 75C as they are considered essential to the State for economic and social reasons.

- Within the study area, the Pacific Highway shows a number of deficiencies. It is currently a two-lane single carriageway road, with overtaking opportunities approximately every five kilometres. There are a number of key intersections with various local roads servicing coastal communities, several rural residential communities and numerous private access points. Many of these intersections have poor sight lines, inadequate merging lanes and a high accident rate.
- Predicted population growth on the northern beaches and in the local government area in general would result in increased traffic volumes on the road network. Through traffic is also expected to increase as the Pacific Highway Upgrade Program proceeds to the north and the south. Dual carriageways, together with upgraded access arrangements, would improve transport efficiency by reducing travel times and costs, and would significantly reduce the number and severity of accidents.