

**Centroc Submission to the
Bells Line of Road
Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan**



**CENTRAL NSW
COUNCILS**

Foreword

Thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution to the Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan for the Bells Line of Road.

The development of the Bells Line of Road to motorway standard is the first priority of the Centroc Board, which represents the regional interests of the communities of Central NSW, an area the same size as Tasmania with about half the population and a bigger GDP.

Currently the routes to western NSW from Sydney, that is the Great Western Highway (GWH) and the Bells Line of Road (BLoR), are characterised by very steep grades, tight curves and limited overtaking opportunities. In addition to these limitations there are also numerous speed zone changes causing confusion, frustration and stress. The increasing number of traffic lights is slowing the drive times for the commuter trip to Sydney. Indeed it is arguable that the GWH can only ever be a “local” road for the communities over the Blue Mountains that it bisects. This is due to the topography of the area.

It is understood that the upgrades to the GWH have progressed as various studies have identified this road link as the priority to connect Sydney and Central NSW. While, for example, *The Bells Line of Road Development Study* by Maunsell McIntyre (2000/2001) concluded that medium to long term demand could be met by an upgraded GWH, it is hard to imagine that the thinking at the time would have envisaged the current congested and increasingly congested GWH as the solution to the problem. The Centroc Board suggests that the GWH can never provide a safe swift link between Sydney and the adjacent communities west of the mountains as there is no scope for such an upgrade along the GWH alignment.

Currently Central NSW is the only region adjacent to Sydney without road access of an appropriate standard. An adequate route between the Sydney Basin and Central NSW would give rise to economic growth and relieve the safety and congestion issues on the GWH. Such a route would also provide advantages to outer urban areas in the Sydney Basin such as the communities of Windsor and Richmond.

Ultimately Centroc would like to see an upgrade that incorporates a high standard 100-110 kph four lane expressway with a gradient generally less than 7%. This type of road would be suitable for all types of vehicles including B-Doubles. The corridor for this road may or may not be along the alignment of the current Bells Line of Road for significant sections of the road.

An investment in road infrastructure that sees this would increase productivity, provide greater flexibility, facilitate innovation, reduce costs, improve efficiency and provide the businesses of Central NSW with an improved capacity to compete.

The Centroc Board’s position is as follows:

- 1). A staged approach should be undertaken in the development of a motorway standard link between the Sydney motorway system and Central NSW.
- 2). The first priority is the securing of the corridor in the Eastern section of the road.
- 3). All improvements should be in light of the long term need for a motorway standard road.
- 4). The next steps in the strategic process to secure the corridor should be undertaken upon the completion of the Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan, ie:

- i). the establishment of route options;
- ii). selection of preferred route;
- iii). reservation of preserved route option on LEPs and
- iv). environmental assessment and concept design

The Board's position is based on the following:

- Safety
- Population and economic growth
- The freight task
- Tourism
- Equity

Safety

The Central West NSW Transport Needs Study (2009) identified that crash rates (per 100 mvkt) along BLoR and GWH being higher than the State average the construction of the proposed Bells Line Expressway would improve road safety along this route.

According to the *NRMA Bells Line of Road Route Performance Report 2003*, the Bells Line of Road is a 74.6 km stretch of road from Lithgow to North Richmond. Speed limits along the route range from 50 to 100 km/h, the most part of which is speed limited to 80km/h. The majority of the Bells Line is steep and curved, however the majority of bends are concentrated in the Blue Mountains. Less than 10% of the route is safe for overtaking in both east and westbound directions.

According to the *NRMA Great Western Highway Route Performance Report 2003*, the Great Western Highway (Penrith to Bathurst) is a 148.6 km stretch of road, it is the primary arterial route through the Blue Mountains. A majority of the route is four or five lanes. Speed limits along the route range from 60 to 110 km/h. The majority of the Great Western Highway is curved, with an average of one curve every 2km. Around 55% of the Great Western Highway is safe for overtaking in both east and westbound directions.

While it goes without saying that dual lane divided carriageways offers a safer driving experience, the Board suggests that in the short term a great deal can be done about the safety of the Bells Line.

This includes:

- 1). A review of speed signs to allow as much 100K as possible and more appropriate use of 80K sections – more detail in this regard can be provided suffice to say there are some sections of the road which the Board finds remarkable to be 100K while other 80K sections offer driver frustration as they appear more suited to a faster speed. This leads to drivers taking chances with overtaking with tragic results.
- 2). Providing more overtaking opportunities.
- 3). Improving alignments, gradients, pavement and widening the road where possible.

In 2005, the average travel time from the M7 to Lithgow was 85 minutes on the GWH, and 70 minutes on the BLoR (RTA, 2005). Once the Bells Line Expressway is completed, the crossing of the Blue Mountains will be cut by approximately 35 minutes, with savings in fuel bills, reduced wear on vehicles and improved safety.

Accident cost savings have been estimated to be in the vicinity of \$2.7 million per annum (WRI, 2005), while Sinclair Knight Merz (2004) project average annual savings on vehicle operating costs and travel time to be \$9.9 million per annum.

The Bells Line Expressway will provide a much safer road than the GWH and BLoR due to:-

- Decreased driver fatigue as a result of travel time reduction.
- Reduction in the number and sharpness of bends.
- The provision of four lanes rather than two allowing safe overtaking opportunities.
- Reduced congestion and road gradients meaning faster traffic flow with fewer off ramps.
- Greatly reduced number of speed variations.

Population and economic growth

The ABS provides data that growth has been positive in Central NSW for the past 6 years ranging from .3% in 2006 to 1.3% in 2009.

Centroc has recently commissioned the AEC to update advice on the Centroc population projections produced in 2008. This advice suggests that population in the region will grow by nearly 50,000 people between 2006 and 2031 on current data.

Central NSW has just experienced the drought of record followed by the recent flooding event. While a greater number of drought years are anticipated under climate change, smarter farming technologies are showing continued growth in our agricultural product. The region is also experiencing a growth in interest for manufacturing as rents and lifestyle prove more attractive to a region adjacent to Sydney. WRI and others have suggested that this growth will spike should there be a better road linkage between Sydney and Central NSW. In its *Socio-Economic Impact of the Bells Line Expressway on Sydney and Western Sydney*, WRI said the benefits to the Centroc region were estimated to include employment growth of over 3000 full time jobs and a boost to regional product of around \$270m.

Water security has been identified as a locational preference indicator. The Centroc Water Security Study has identified what needs to be undertaken to deliver secure water supplies to the communities of Central NSW – some of whom do not have a security problem even with climate change. Communities across Central NSW have commenced implementation of the program including infrastructure and on-infrastructure initiatives.

This will have the net effect of ensuring that population drift from Sydney to the west will be enabled. Interestingly the “Evocities” campaign is getting a remarkable response suggesting that there is an interest in moving to a regional city in NSW – three of these are on the Great Western Highway – Bathurst Orange and Dubbo – with smaller centres such as Lithgow, Parkes, Cowra and Forbes all close by.

Traffic counts have always been at the heart of the discussion around the need for an upgraded Bells Line. The Board would like to take this opportunity of thanking the Steering Committee for the Bells Line Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan for having ARUP undertake the work to show the traffic volumes that would be achieved should the road be built. It has long been our contention that measuring existing traffic counts will not tell the story of the development that will occur once the road has been built – similar to the development at the end of the M2 and M5.

The freight task

As suggested above, the freight task for the region is increasingly being managed by road. The position of the Centroc Board is that there should be a linkage between Sydney and Central NSW that provides access for B Doubles. Consideration should also be given to the trend for trucks to become bigger and the linkage between Sydney and Central NSW should allow for this.

According to the AEC, the region is currently experiencing growth. In 2008/2009 the GRP grew by 15%, primarily as a result of mining.

While all member Council support the transportation of product by rail as preferable, there is no infrastructure to deliver this in the short term either within or without the region (see for example the 5 Grain Rail Line issue or the Maldon Dombarton Rail Link issue). Indeed it is arguable that the State has to date had a policy of dismantling rail. Our members are working hard to turn this around.

Even assuming there was an adequate quality rail freight network in the region, there would still be a need for road freight access into Sydney as it offers much greater flexibility and affordability in many circumstances.

Improvement to motorway standard "would also allow improved access to agriculture (valued as \$6bn annually) and other produce (valued at \$7bn) in regional NSW that is consumed by Sydney each year (Committee for Sydney, 2003)

Tourism

The Central West NSW Transport Needs Study identifies tourism as the third largest industry in the region. The demographic of the typical tourist to this region is the weekend traveller from Sydney. As the electric rail ends at Lithgow and bus/rail connections for the tourist to the west are limited in both time and place, the tourist to Central NSW needs to travel by car.

With improved accessibility to the region from Sydney there will be benefits to the entire region to some degree. The domestic tourism market is vital to tourism in regional NSW, especially the Sydney market, with an average of 41% of all visitors to the Central NSW region coming from Sydney. It is felt that the reduced time travelled across the mountains and ease of trip would breakdown the mindset of Sydney residents that life over the mountains doesn't exist. It will therefore be easier to attract tourists from Sydney and the regions products and services will have to be developed to attract niche markets from Sydney. In the long term, this could encourage increased investment in the region. The WRI 2005 Report anticipates that there may be up to a 33% increase in tourism output across the region as a result of a Bells Line Expressway.

Currently the tourist sits in snaking lines of traffic through the mountains as they traverse traffic lights, speed changes and other impediments as they journey home on a Sunday afternoon. This is a big turn off for the tourist and no doubt has impacts on return visitation. As an interesting comparison noted by the Bells Line of Expressway Group in its 2009 publication "Bells Line of Expressway" - in a 1920's car rally, Perry Donnelly drove from Sydney to Parkes in 4 hours and 56 minutes.

Despite the dramatic improvement in the quality of cars, technology, tyres and safety combined with better roads, in 2006 the NRMA reports that the travelling time from Sydney to Parkes via the BLoR is 5 hours and 8 minutes.

Equity

Centroc is seeking equity with other regions to the north and south who have motorway standard access into Sydney.

It should be noted that Western Sydney is growing more rapidly than any other part of Sydney. Building a swift safe linkage between Sydney and the west will enable a transfer of economic activity currently throttled by the slow and unsafe road linkage.

Looking at the big picture, a motorway standard road “could also be a catalyst for the transformation of Sydney from global cit to a global city-region. Such an entity, comprised of Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong and Central NSW, would be far more competitive on the global economy than Sydney alone.” (WRI 2006)

While the upgrades to the Great Western Highway are essential, the topography of the Blue Mountains ensures this road will always bisect the ribbon of communities it traverses. This means more traffic lights, changing speed zones, schools zones, pedestrian crossings and the like. The populations of Sydney and Central NSW are growing and therefore the pressures on the GWH will only increase, exacerbating the current situation.

Finally, it should be noted that while there is a difference of opinion over the need for a motorway standard linkage between Sydney and Central NSW, stakeholders are in agreement regarding the need to sort the eastern section of the linkage as the first priority. See for example the commentary from page 11 of the Hawkesbury Council submission to this process:

- 1. 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.*
- 2. A road corridor providing a bypass of Richmond and North Richmond should be identified as part of the long term strategy for the Bells Line of Road.*
- 3. Safety improvements to Bells Line should be assessed and a programme of works developed.*
- 4. The capacity and safety benefits of constructing additional climbing and overtaking lanes should be recognised and such works included in the programme.*

The way forward

To summarise the above in terms of short, medium and long term priorities, they would be as follows:

- 1). Short term (1-5 years):
 - the securing of the Corridor – particularly in the eastern section;
 - review of speed zones;
 - safety upgrades including more overtaking opportunities, road realignment and widening on the Bells Line of Road.
- 2). Medium term (5-10 years) –work in the eastern section to Kurrajong complementary with a future motorway link.

- 3). Long term (10-20 years) – commence motorway standard link between Central NSW and the Sydney motorway network.

The Centroc Board recognises that a sequence of strategic steps needs to be undertaken to sequester the corridor for a future motorway linkage between the Sydney motorway network and Central NSW.

It commends to both the State and Federal Governments who have jointly commissioned the Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan that the next steps be taken at the completion of this Study. That is, monies should be set aside in budgets and other resource allocations made as required.

At its meeting of 25 November 2010, the Board resolved interalia that Centroc seek support to from the Bells Line Long Term Strategic planning process to:

- a). commit to the next steps in securing the corridor, that is:
- i). the establishment of route options;
 - ii). selection of preferred route;
 - iii). reservation of preserved route option on LEPs and
 - iv). environmental assessment and concept design.
- b). provide advice on time frames where the establishment of route options should occur immediately after the completion of the Long Term Strategic Corridor Plan.
- c). have commentary in LEPs along the route addressing the need for a future corridor.

Once again, thankyou for providing this opportunity. Please contact Ms Jennifer Bennett on 0428 690 935 with any queries regarding this submission.

Yours sincerely



Cr Phyllis Miller
Chair