

NorthConnex EIS Submission

The NorthConnex concept

My principal concern with the NorthConnex concept remains the route selection.

While I realise there have been several major studies for the preferred route over the last decade, I believe they have been too narrowly focussed on the objective of completing an orbital north-south connection to the west of Sydney. It appears this objective has, to some extent, been driven by Commonwealth Government road program objectives for high standard roads connecting the capital cities. I believe this focus has resulted in a very much second best route for NorthConnex that does not adequately consider more local effects. Given that these studies were initiated over a decade ago, it is not clear that they have adequately considered contemporary developments such as the commencement of construction of the North West metro rail, the construction of the Hunter Expressway and continuing commuter traffic growth from the central coast and lower Hunter.

I don't believe there has been sufficient attention given to engage with motorists from the Hunter and the central coast in developing the NorthConnex concept, including the earlier route section studies. There are thousands of motorists from the Hunter and the central coast who use the M1 every day to connect to the Sydney CBD, Sydney airport and southern and inner west suburbs and businesses. These motorists are very significant stakeholders who have a strong interest in road connections at the southern end of the M1 and with whom there should have been more consultation in developing the NorthConnex concept.

The Pacific Highway – Sydney's northern gateway

In brief, the route selected with the southern NorthConnex interchange at the M2/Pennant Hills Road junction at Carlingford fails to provide a direct and appealing alternative to the main northern entry/exit route from the end of the M1 to the Sydney CBD, the southern suburbs, KSA airport and the city's inner west.

The main northern entry and exit to these areas is the Pacific Highway between the M1 at Wahroonga and the Bradfield Highway at Artarmon. This is one of the most congested roads in Sydney and, as the northern road gateway to the CBD of Australia's largest city, it has to be a national embarrassment.

The Pacific Highway is used daily by thousands of vehicles travelling to and from the Central Coast and the lower Hunter region. A large proportion of these vehicles are regular commuters using the road each day. In addition, the Pacific Highway is the main entry/exit route to/from the CBD for visitors from all parts of northern NSW and from Queensland.

I believe that, in addition to the objective of completing the western orbital route around Sydney, the NorthConnex should also have the objective of providing a viable, direct and appealing (to motorists) alternative to the Pacific Highway and that this latter alternative should be weighted at least equally with the first. I don't consider the planned NorthConnex route, with the southern M2

interchange at Carlingford to be appealing to a large number of regular travellers from the central coast and the lower Hunter.

Certainly, as the EIS points out, travelling between the M1 and the Bradfield Highway using NorthConnex, the M2 and the Lane Cove Tunnel (LCT) will eliminate the frustration of 40 sets of traffic lights found along the Pacific Highway route. However, that seems to be the only significant advantage and appeal to motorists travelling between the CBD and the M1.

The LCT, M2, NorthConnex route between the M1 at Wahroonga and the CBD is approximately 34 kilometres, making it around 11 kilometres longer than the Pacific Highway route. As a result of this additional distance, there does not appear to be a material travel time advantage under average traffic conditions.

The online directory *Whereis.com* shows the average travel time between the M1 at Wahroonga and the CBD (Martin Place) using the Pacific Highway to be 29 minutes.¹ *Whereis* calculates the average travel time from the CBD to the Pennant Hills Road/M2 interchange at 21 minutes using Bradfield Highway, LCT and the M2. I estimate the travel time on NorthConnex will be around 7 minutes based on a distance of 9 kilometres and a speed of 80 kilometres per hour – the speed limit suggested in the EIS. This suggests the average journey time between the CBD and the M1 at Wahroonga using LCT, M2 and NorthConnex will be 28 minutes.

In other words, there is no material time saving when compared to the average travel time on the Pacific Highway, although I acknowledge that in heavily congested peak periods, the NorthConnex route may have some travel time advantage.

With little material time saving and three extra tolls – LCT toll, M2 toll and NorthConnex toll² – NorthConnex as part of an alternative northern route between the CBD and the M1 is unlikely to be appealing to many motorists, particularly those using it on a daily basis. In this context, I don't believe the Pearlman report purple corridor option (the NorthConnex route proposed in the EIS) will provide the degree of traffic relief to the Pacific Highway projected by the Pearlman report in 2007. It is not clear that Pearlman considered the effect that multiple consecutive tolls may have on private car user behaviour and their route selection.

Some motorists may choose to limit the toll cost and avoid the Pacific Highway choke point at Chatswood by using the M2 and LCT only - connecting with this route at North Ryde. This would avoid the NorthConnex toll and the longer M2 toll and reduce the travel distance significantly. In this context, the existence of NorthConnex would do little to alleviate Pacific Highway congestion between Gordon and Wahroonga.

¹ *Whereis* is also the software used in my in-car satellite navigation system. Over a number of years, I have found its travel time estimates and calculations to be very accurate and reliable. In my opinion they would be as robust as any consultant's desk top estimates.

² In today's terms \$15.56 each way - \$6.23 NorthConnex + \$6.23 M2 + \$3.10 LCT.

It may be that some form of toll adjustment is needed for the proposed NorthConnex route to achieve the sort of traffic relief projected by Pearlman for the Pacific Highway. Such toll adjustment could be provided where motorists pay consecutive LCT, M2 and NorthConnex tolls as part of a continuous journey. Such an arrangement would require some form of regulatory intervention given the different toll road operators involved.

Preferable site for southern interchange

It seems fairly obvious that the NorthConnex concept could have provided a more direct and appealing alternative to the Pacific Highway and met the need to complete a high-standard orbital connection if the southern interchange had been located East of Epping rather than at Carlingford. That is, I believe a preferable route would be in the red route corridor identified by the Pearlman report.

A site for the southern interchange between Epping and Macquarie Park would seem to have other advantages. Potentially, it would:

- require a shorter tunnelling distance of less than 6 kilometres, with associated capital cost savings, compared with the 9 kilometre tunnel in the EIS proposal
- possibly require less resumption of private homes than the Carlingford interchange site
- avoid any conflict with the routes of North West metro underground rail and northern rail line, possibly reducing the need for the 90 metre deep NorthConnex tunnel, again with potential capital cost savings, and
- provide a more direct alternative to the whole Pacific Highway, including the northern stretch between Gordon and Wahroonga.

It is not too late to revisit the route selection and provide a NorthConnex solution that better meets the need for both an orbital motorway link and a viable and appealing alternative to the Pacific Highway.

User consultation

The M1 connects Wahroonga and Newcastle and now, with the Hunter Expressway, the lower Hunter generally. Thousands of Hunter motorists use the M1 every day to travel to Sydney destinations such as the CBD, the airport and southern and inner west suburbs. As such, they, and central coast motorists, are very significant stakeholders in the route connections planned for the Wahroonga end of the M1. Despite this, there appears to have been little attempt to engage these users in the earlier studies (SKM, Pearlman) on route selection and during the development of the current EIS.

Regarding the earlier studies, the EIS outlines how the corridor selection was subject to a two-day value management (VM) workshop in September 2003 and that the consensus outcome of this workshop was that the purple corridor best satisfied the project objectives. The EIS lists the participants at this VM workshop and it is noteworthy that there is no user representation at all – not at peak body level (eg NRMA, Road Freight Industry Council), local government level (eg from

Gosford or Wyong Council) or from individual light or heavy vehicle interests (eg major trucking companies).³

Having copies of the EIS on display in 2014 at central coast councils is not sufficient recognition of the stakeholder significance of motorists from the central coast. Copies of the EIS are not on display anywhere in the Hunter.

Consultation since October 2013 seems to be heavily focussed on the engineering and construction aspects of the project and has mainly occurred with residents and businesses in, and near, the project corridor. While the views of residents and businesses in the project corridor are vitally important, so too is the perspective of road users, particularly those who regularly use the routes for which NorthConnex will be an alternative. Although there have been briefing sessions for peak groups like the Road Freight Industry Council and the NRMA, I don't believe those briefings constitute active consultation with road users, particularly private motorists. As a resident of the Hunter and a regular user of the M1, Pacific Highway, Pennant Hills Road and M7, I have a strong interest in this project but have seen little publicity in this region. Even going back to the Pearlman study, there appears to be very limited consultation with users and those outside the project construction area.

While I acknowledge it is difficult to get road user views, I believe community engagement is about more than the construction and operational aspects occurring within the project area. As far as the NorthConnex project goes, decision making, including route selection, has been very "top down" with insufficient effort devoted to obtaining input from road users, who are, in the end, the stakeholders for whom the road is being built.

Despite increasing investment in public engagement over the years, it seems many infrastructure decisions still are being made without the benefit of robust end-user consultation and input. The recent decision to truncate the Newcastle rail line is another decision made without any end user consultation, in this case without consultation public transport users. It is difficult to understand how the best decisions can be made without involving the stakeholder group most directly involved and affected.

Final comment

If the NorthConnex project goes ahead as planned with the southern interchange at the M2/Pennant Hills Road interchange at Carlingford, it will not offer the best alternative to the Pacific Highway through the North Shore. As a result, the Pacific Highway is likely to remain a highly congested route indefinitely and an embarrassing northern gateway to the city of Sydney.

A preferable solution would be to adopt the 2007 Pearlman report red corridor and for the NorthConnex tunnel to be constructed with the southern interchange located between Epping and Macquarie Park. This provides a far more direct alternative to the Pacific Highway and maintains the

³ EIS page 44

objective of having an orbital motorway that connects the Hume Highway and the M1 via the M7, M2 and a NorthConnex tunnel from the Epping/Macquarie Park area to the M1.

As outlined in the submission, it would be desirable for route selection to be revisited, with more robust user input, before the project moves to further design stages.

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