

M7 Motorway (Mod 6 Widening)

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to review the Westlink M7 Widening Modification Report.

The proposed widening of the Westlink M7 prompts a re-evaluation of the road corridor and the shared path with respect to the future transport needs for Greater Sydney. The Westlink M7 shared path forms an important active transport corridor linking communities throughout Western Sydney. Disruption to the shared path during construction is inevitable. In the interests of fairness to all road users, Bicycle NSW and affiliated Bicycle User groups (BUGs) would like to know the extent to which the project plans align with fair, safe and accessible active transport.

This submission firstly considers general aspects of the shared path and Westlink M7. It will then discuss the NSW Government's reasons for widening the motorway, and how these are not reflected in current TfNSW frameworks and policies that govern infrastructure projects. There are concerns about the impacts upon active transport during all phases of the widening, particularly regarding detours. These concerns are set out with requests for more information and a series of recommendations for the project team.

We are very disappointed that the project has no ambition to leave a legacy of better cycle facilities along and adjacent to the corridor. **It is essential that the NSW Government leverages the investment in toll road infrastructure to deliver new and improved active transport facilities that will meet the active transport needs of Western Sydney, now, and into the future.**

Bicycle NSW has been the peak bicycle advocacy group in NSW for over forty-five years, and has over 30 affiliated local Bicycle User Groups. Our mission is to *'create a better environment for all bicycle riders'* from 8 to 80 years of age, and we support improvements to facilities for pedestrians and cyclists. We advocate for new cycling routes that provide connections to jobs, schools and services for daily transport and recreation trips. Bike riding provides a healthy, congestion-reducing, low-carbon, economical form of travel great for all ages with the correct infrastructure design.

In preparing this submission, we acknowledge the contributions of the Bicycle User Groups, Bike North and CAMWEST. Both groups have made detailed submissions that should be read alongside this document. Their detailed knowledge of the local area and long years of advocacy are essential to the creation, preservation and renewal of active transport infrastructure throughout Western Parkland City.

The M7 shared path

The Westlink M7 shared path is considered to be as one of the Top 10 cycleways in Greater Sydneyⁱ. It provides an uninterrupted, traffic light-free ride through Western Sydney, much of which via bushland reserve. The shared path is just under 40kms long and stretches from Prestons to Baulkham Hills. It runs alongside the Westlink M7 and is separated from road traffic. It has its own bridges over roads and creeks, allowing users to enjoy a continuous trip for nearly 40 kilometres.

For most of its length, the path is 4m wide giving plenty of space to both pedestrians and cyclists (Figure 1). The path provides important recreational, transport and health benefits. It integrates into surrounding pedestrian and cycle networks, offering an alternative transport option to employment areas such as Norwest and Eastern Creek. It also connects to recreational facilities such as the Western Sydney Parklands. The shared path attracts approximately 400 riders on a weekday and 1000 plus on weekendsⁱⁱ.



Figure 1: The existing M7 shared path
(Source: Westlink M7)

The M7 Widening

The Westlink M7, formally known as the M7 Motorway is a tolled motorway and part of the Sydney Orbital Network. The 39 kilometre-long 4-lane toll road connects the M5 Motorway at Prestons, the M4 Motorway at Eastern Creek and The Hills M2 Motorway at Baulkham Hills.ⁱⁱⁱ

Transport for NSW is seeking a modification to the approval granted for the Westlink M7 to widen part of the motorway 'in response to current and projected future traffic growth, and to address reduced motorway efficiency and enhance safety.' The proposed modification would enable the construction and operation of an additional lane in both directions within the existing median of the Westlink M7, for approximately 26 kilometres from about 140 metres south of the Kurrajong Road overhead bridge at Prestons (southern end) to the Richmond Road interchange at Oakhurst/Glendenning (northern end), excluding widening through the Westlink M7/M4 Motorway (Light Horse) Interchange.^{iv}

As mentioned above, the need for the additional lanes is justified by planners as a response to the 4.5% per annum increased rate of traffic congestion expected due to population growth projected for Western Sydney, as outlined in Transport for NSW Future Transport 2056 Plan.^v

Our knowledge of induced demand - the dynamic in behavioural economics proven repeatedly and universally since the 1960s^{vi} - that increased traffic lanes increases traffic congestion, begs the question: For how long will widening the M7 by two additional lanes manage congestion? This issue has not been addressed in the planning documents.

Future Transport 2056 clearly acknowledges that 'building our way out of congestion is not a sustainable solution. Planning for a dynamic network that improves customer choices and options is key to the sustainability and resilience to our future network' (page 88)^{vii}. Nudging people away from private car use involves providing for public and active transport. On this basis, the M7 EIS, drafted in 2000, identified the 15 metre wide central median as capable of meeting 'growing demand for public transport'^{viii} in Western Sydney.

Two decades later and there are still no bus facilities on the M7 Westlink (page 7-8). The current modification proposal lists all the current public transport options in existence outside of the M7 such as the Liverpool-Parramatta T-way, North-West T-way, Sydney Metro North West, Sydney Metro North-West among others but claims there is no strategic need for bus services along the corridor (page 3-4). This is clearly incorrect. Since 2005, the M7 has been a line of desire for 191,000 persons on average daily^{ix}. Congestion, costs and pollution are climbing. Many of these drivers would use public transport were it available. With the additional traffic lanes now planned for the central median, the M7 will in effect be a private toll road exclusively for private vehicles.

The shared path is therefore crucial to providing transport options on this major corridor.

As discussed below, Bicycle NSW is very concerned about closures and detours during the project period. Suppressing active transport over the years of construction will have a long-term impact on the ability of Western Sydney residents to develop sustainable, healthy travel habits.

It is reassuring that 'no operational changes are proposed to the location or overall alignment of the Westlink M7 shared pedestrian and cycle path as part of the proposed modification'. However, we are shocked to learn that the modifications will 'not directly improve active travel linkages and connections within the wider network' (page 7-32). This entirely contradicts the 2021 [Providing for Walking and Cycling in Transport Projects Policy](#)^x which requires every transport project funded by Transport for NSW to include provision for walking and cycling, which must be delivered from the outset of the project. Restoring the existing shared path to the current condition, with no consideration of much needed upgrades, represents **a huge wasted opportunity to leverage the investment and disruption involved with the widening project to improve connections and facilities for active transport.**

There has never been a better time to build infrastructure for bike riding and active transport. As the new Minister for Infrastructure, Cities and Active Transport, Rob Stokes MP, set out in a recent speech^{xi}, 'Active travel projects that stitch the suburbs together and enable people of all ages and abilities to get around without a car are more sustainable than megaprojects.' He stressed that the NSW Government will focus on completing missing links in the active transport network. Cycling and walking projects have big benefits, and not only for reducing pollution and congestion. Active mobility improves public health, activates communities, helps build social connections and addresses inequality.

Future Transport Strategy 2056

Since the M7 opened in 2005, innovative thinking within NSW Government around 'place' has superseded 70 years of car-centric planning that focused on movement to the detriment of community, urban amenity, walkability, public health and air quality. Before discussing concerns about the proposed changes to the M7 shared path, it is worth revisiting Future Transport 2056 and the current TfNSW frameworks that guide major infrastructure projects:

Movement and Place

The concept of 'Movement and Place' underpins Future Transport 2056. It is a planning framework that ensures 'movement' and 'place' are considered together as part of a 'place-based' approach to the planning, design, delivery and operation of transport networks. Movement and Place puts our customers and the community at the centre of transport planning and delivery' (page 89). Movement and Place takes a cross-governmental integrated approach to planning and no longer considers roads and movement in isolation to community needs.

Future planning means encouraging mode shift towards sustainable transport

'Planning for the future means preserving suitable options for future uses and travel behaviours. It also means improving the way we integrate land use management, demand for travel and utilisation of all transport assets to optimise safety and performance, and maximise carrying capacity as passenger and freight volumes grow. Walking and cycling will play a key role in reducing congestion and supporting customer journeys.' (page 88)

'...ensure walking and cycling are the most convenient option for short trips to key destinations and within centres, reduce congestion on our roads and public transport networks by delivering projects that encourage a shift to walking and cycling' (page 94)

Build the 30-minute city

'Realising the 30-minute city will require a sustained and staged investment program to protect corridors and then develop an **integrated** transport system that includes city-shaping, city-serving and centre-serving corridors and strategic freight networks. It will also require more efficient use of the current network to reduce travel times and meet customer demand.' (page 126)

Supporting the Western Parkland City with more public transport

'The developing Western Parkland City will require investment in the mass transit network to shape a sustainable urban form and grow jobs, and support 30-minute access to centres by public transport.' (page 129)

Towards Net Zero means mode shift away from private car use

'To encourage more people out of their cars we need to continue to make walking and public transport more attractive options.' (page 147). New and emerging service models, such as car sharing and automated shuttles, need space on the transport network. A viable, connected public transport service on a privately tolled road would be a strong nudge away from private car use.

Social sustainability and accessibility

It is essential to ensure that transport contributes positively to society, the environment and the economy. An accessible public and active transport network will mean more choice for people with mobility constraints and will make travel easier for everyone, whatever their age, ability or personal circumstances (page 161).

For all of the above reasons, any changes to the M7 shared path must enhance rather than detract from its role as a key active transport corridor for Greater Sydney.

Shared path impacts during construction

The construction phase of the M7 widening will run for years. Sections of the shared path will be temporarily impacted by construction activities and reinstated afterwards (page 4-13)¹. These activities will require **ongoing consultation and communication with Bicycle User Groups**. We respectfully request that TfNSW refer to the submissions of Bike North and CAMWEST for concerns raised and possible solutions.

We seek clarification from TfNSW regarding the following aspects that will affect access to the shared path during the widening of the M7:

- **Use of the shared path for construction:** Bicycle NSW asks that the shared path not be used for construction access (page 4-42). This would inconvenience and deter bicycle riders along the path with the added risk of collision between vulnerable road users and heavy construction vehicles. In line with current TfNSW policies that consider walking and cycling as priority transport modes we request that due regard be paid to the safety convenience of cyclists, just as it is for motorists.
- **Construction ancillary zone:** 'Zone' construction ancillary facilities will be established within and adjacent to Westlink M7 for stockpiling, construction support at bridge- and median-widening locations, project offices and compounds, as well as 'site' ancillary facilities within the existing motorway alignment (page 4-1). We ask that this ancillary zone not interfere with the shared path. If at any point it does intersect, how can this best be managed?
- **Detours:** There will be at least 10 detours (page 4-46). Each will add between 300m and 1.3km to the closed section of shared path (see table 1). The Modification Report acknowledges that several detours may be in place simultaneously. The Report also mentions noise wall works. As these are often close to the shared path, it is assumed additional as-yet-unspecified detours will be needed.

Bike North notes that some detours are very lengthy. For example, detours completely reroute the existing pathway from the Prestons end of the M7, all the way to Elizabeth Drive (10km). The table is misleading – the diversions involve 300m to 1.3km additional length. For example, the detour labelled as 1,300m, is actually about *7km long*. With several detours in operation at once, there will be an unacceptable disincentive to active transport along this key corridor.

Bicycle NSW is very concerned that not enough thought will be given to the design and signage of detours. The temporary routes are likely to provide a very different style of cycle infrastructure to the current shared path. Some may even prove unusable. This risks a huge impact on recreational and commuter usage and, given the years under construction, a setback to mode shift towards active transport.

Please confirm the detours and the timeframes in which they will operate as soon as possible.

¹ It is noted that cyclists will be prohibited from using the roadway between the M5 junction and Richmond Rd, both during and after construction. All bike riders will need use the M7 Westlink shared path instead (page 7-32). Although some of our Members prefer to cycle on the shoulder of the motorway, Bicycle NSW agrees that it is best-practice to separate bikes from high speed traffic. Given previous fatal and critical cycling incidents, the shared path is a safer, well-lit alternative connected with the local road network.

ID	Westlink M7 shared path closed section	Detour description	Travel distance impact (meters)	Detour route assessment
1	Between Kurrajong Road and Bernera Road	Kurrajong Road and Bernera Road	300	Recommend upgrades to Bernera Road footpaths to facilitate detour
2	Between Ash Road and Bernera Road	Ash Road, Jedda Road, Bernera Road	700	Recommend improvements to Ash Road to facilitate detour and extension of Jedda Road shared path
3	Between Bernera Road and Hoxton Park Road	Jedda Road ramp, Joadja Road and Hoxton Park Road, Wilson Road	900	Uses existing shared path infrastructure
4	Between Hoxton Park Road and Cowpasture Road	Yarato Road, Hoxton Park Road, Cowpasture Road	1,100	Uses existing shared path infrastructure
5	Between Cowpasture Road and Elizabeth Drive	Cowpasture Road ramp and Elizabeth Drive ramp for M7 shared path	1,300	Uses existing shared path infrastructure
6	Between Old Wallgrove Road and Wonderland Drive	Old Wallgrove Road, Hannibal Street, Wonderland Drive	1,250	Recommend a new shared path to be constructed on Hannibal Street between Old Wallgrove Road and Wonderland Drive
7	Between Woodstock Avenue and Power Street	Woodstock Avenue, Rooty Hill Road North, and Power Street	400	Uses existing shared path infrastructure, except Rooty Hill Road North where footpath widening is recommended
8	Between Lamb Street and Florence Street	Lamb Street, Rooty Hill Road North, and Florence Street	200	Uses existing shared path infrastructure, except Rooty Hill Road North where footpath widening is recommended
9	Between Florence Street and Simms Road	Florence Street, Rooty Hill Road North, and Simms Road	800	Uses local roads with low traffic volumes, except Rooty Hill Road North where footpath widening is recommended
10	Between Florence Street/Woodley Crescent and Simms Road	Woodley Crescent, Armitage Drive and Simms Road	290	Uses local roads with low traffic volumes

Table 1: 10 known detours with detailed route proposals. (Source: *Appendix D, Traffic and Transport Assessment, page 94*)

Recommendations:

- Align the active transport elements of the M7 Widening project to current Transport for NSW movement and place frameworks and policies. People walking and cycling must not be inconvenienced in favour of driving, either during construction or once the widened motorway is operating. Remember that improved safety, directness and comfort in the cycling network is a net gain for the road network through decongestion.
- Reduce traffic congestion by using the two additional lanes for an integrated public transport service within the central median as recommended by Future Transport Strategies 2056.
- Temporary detours to the existing shared path must be direct and convenient. It is essential to maintain the shared path's viability as an active transport corridor.
- Project planners need to consult with Bicycle NSW and BUGs about how to avoid or at least minimise detours. This will require bicycle-based site tours to ensure a best-practice outcome in line with current thinking around movement and place. Please take advantage of our local knowledge, engineering and planning expertise to develop plans for the detours.
- New shared paths or separated bicycle facilities should be constructed on the relevant local or State roads before a detour begins. It is important that a level of safety equal to the existing shared path is provided. Such new infrastructure would have a long-term benefit, improving and adding linkages into the local area. Funding is warranted by Providing for Walking and Cycling in Transport Projects Policy^{xii}
- The project team must construct its own access paths to work sites at minimal inconvenience to *all* road users.
- As highlighted by Bike North, TfNSW must make use of the periods when the shared path is closed to undertake maintenance and fix existing issues. Of particular urgency is the need to resolve the flooding issue at the Prestons end of the M7 shared path. If bike riders are to be prohibited from using the main carriageway, it is essential that the shared path is always accessible and free of flooding. Please ensure this happens while construction teams are on site.
- More facilities are required for pedestrians and cyclists along the M7 shared path. Bike North and CAMWEST that there are currently very few water stations and no toilets. These facilities are essential, along with rest/change areas and e-bike charging stations.

Conclusion

The Westlink M7 shared path is an extensive active transport corridor weaving through 40km of Western Sydney. The proposal to widen the M7 motorway, in response to growing traffic congestion, will sadly not deliver enhancements to integrated public and active transport systems. It is clear that the priorities of toll road operators do not align with the best outcomes for the sustainable development and growth of the Western Parkland City.

It is therefore important, for reasons of public accessibility and fairness and to meet Sydney's future mode share targets, that expansions of the tolled road network are not made at the expense of cycling and walking. It is our expectation that construction work will proceed with minimal interference to active transport.

In the longer term, Bicycle NSW hopes to witness substantial improvements to the cycle network in the area, just as the motorway upgrades will see improvements, albeit short-lived, for driving.

We look forward to close and collaborative consultation with the project team to deliver the best possible results for all stakeholders. In particular, we expect all detours to be developed with input from CAMWEST and Bike North.

ⁱ Spring Cycle, 2018, July 18. <https://springcycle.com.au/top-10-cycle-tracks-in-sydney/>

ⁱⁱ Galston, Glenorie and Hills Rural Community News, <https://galstoncommunity.com.au/new-years-resolution-ride-the-entire-m7-bike-path/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Westlink M7 Widening Modification Report 2022, Introduction, 1.1, TfNSW, <https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=SSI-663-MOD-6%2120220801T052957.561%20GMT>

^{iv} Westlink M7 Widening Modification Report 2022, Need for the modification, 3.1.1, TfNSW, <https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=SSI-663-MOD-6%2120220801T052957.055%20GMT>

^v NSW Government, Future Transport 2056 [Online 1/4/2020] <https://future.transport.nsw.gov.au/plans/future-transport-strategy/future-transport-greater-sydney>, Points 3-5

^{vi} Mann, A. 2014, Jun 17. Wired. What's Up With That: Building Bigger Roads Actually Makes Traffic Worse <https://www.wired.com/2014/06/wuwt-traffic-induced-demand/>

^{vii} NSW Government, Future Transport 2056 [Online 1/4/2020] <https://future.transport.nsw.gov.au/plans/future-transport-strategy/future-transport-greater-sydney>, Points 3-5

^{viii} Westlink M7 Widening Modification Report 2022, Need for the modification, 3.1.1, TfNSW, <https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=SSI-663-MOD-6%2120220801T052957.055%20GMT>

^{ix} Westlink M7 Widening Modification Report 2022, Need for the modification, 3.1.2, TfNSW, <https://majorprojects.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/prweb/PRRestService/mp/01/getContent?AttachRef=SSI-663-MOD-6%2120220801T052957.055%20GMT>

^x NSW Government, Providing for Walking and Cycling in Transport Projects Policy CP21001, <https://s23705.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/providing-for-walking-and-cycling-in-transport-projects-policy.pdf>

^{xi} Stokes, Rob. 2022, Feb 10. Footpaths and cycleways are an act of democracy – ask Steph. Fifth Estate. <https://thefifthestate.com.au/urbanism/planning/footpaths-and-cycleways-are-an-act-of-democracy-ask-steph/>

^{xii} NSW Government, Providing for Walking and Cycling in Transport Projects Policy CP21001, <https://s23705.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/providing-for-walking-and-cycling-in-transport-projects-policy.pdf>