

Wednesday, 1 March 2023

Dear Sir/Madam,

My wife and I live in Mount Victoria. I was formerly the Principal Behavioural Scientist at the NSW Centre for Road Safety, although I no longer have any formal role in road safety. My wife has a career in public health. We are members of the Mt Victoria Community Association. We and our children are keen cyclists. We both cycle and drive in the area. Our property is not directly affected in any significant way by the proposal, as the proposed tunnels are very deep at the point where they pass beneath our home.

We are supportive of the proposed tunnel development but have some comments that we hope will help lead to refinement of the proposed design and a better outcome for local communities.

The current Great Western Highway, as the EIS correctly notes, serves two main roles. It is a principal local road, often indeed the only road connecting communities, and it is a major state transport route. We support the tunnel proposal because it effectively separates these two roles, which are largely incompatible, and for a range of other reasons that are identified in the EIS.

The EIS mentions, at numerous places (e.g. p39) that one of the main benefits of the project will be a reduction in traffic volumes on the surface road, benefitting active transport users. Underpinning this claimed benefit is an unstated assumption that needs to be challenged: namely that the existing surface road is suitable for active transport users once traffic volumes are reduced.

We would suggest that this is not the case and, moreover, that it not satisfactory to claim (as on p46) that active transport between Blackheath and Little Hartley will be considered as part of the assessment and design process but that any infrastructure would be delivered by others, presumably local government.

Cyclists will always ride on roads, because they are, almost always, the most direct, fastest, smoothest and most level route. Hazards arise when cyclists share a traffic lane with motorists or are otherwise insufficiently separated from motorists. Separation within the road is therefore the objective. For much of the lower Blue Mountains, this has already been achieved. Gravel cycle paths that follow the contours of the terrain (such as the one between Katoomba and Medlow Bath) provide little encouragement for cyclists to leave the highway. Most simply take their chances on the main road.

The best solution for cyclists (and indeed motorists and emergency service vehicles) is a wide, well-drained and properly paved road shoulder, allowing cyclists to use the road in relative safety. A suitable shoulder exists on much of the current surface road, but there are some significant gaps that create life-threatening hazards and, at times, cause motorists to choose between narrowly missing a cyclist or veering across the centreline. Very few if any motorists seem content to proceed at a cycling pace, in my experience. This is not unreasonable, and we should not expect this to change. A safe system is always better than trying to encourage safe behaviours.

In my view, the renewed Pacific Highway north of Coffs Harbour provides a fine example of best practice. The former highway, much of which is now a local road (now known as Solitary Islands Way) carries local traffic on short journeys. It has a dedicated and largely separate cycle lane. The Pacific Highway itself has a well-paved and well-drained shoulder that is at least 1m wide at all places. Cyclists on local journeys use Solitary Islands Way but, and this is the important point, many

more ride, in safety, on the side of the highway itself. The highway has clearly been designed with active transport in mind. There is good signage and good provision for cyclists to cross slip roads safely.

Good drainage is important for two reasons. Silt will accumulate from roadside run-off if the shoulder does not shed water effectively, resulting in a very dangerous hazard for cyclists, especially for those with narrower tyres. Secondly, the air pressure wave associated with moving vehicles tends to sweep debris of various sorts and sizes to the side of the carriageway. This can quickly build up to hazardous levels until the finer material at least is removed by rain, providing the shoulder drains effectively.

If the Great Western Highway is to support safe active transport, it needs significant improvement. It is dangerous now and it will still be dangerous when the tunnel is built, notwithstanding reduced traffic volumes on some sections (and increases on others), because cyclists will still be sharing lanes with motor vehicles ... unless something is done.

Between Explorers' Tree (Katoomba) and Evans Lookout Road (the eastern tunnel portal at Blackheath), the existing road is particularly dangerous. This section will have increased traffic. The shoulder is also narrow from the northern outskirts of Blackheath to Mount Boyce. There is also a small section just south of Mt Victoria, in the vicinity of the bridge over the railway line, where there is no shoulder at all. Mitchell's Causeway in particular and Victoria Pass in general are also treacherous, although the heritage constraints here are acknowledged and no widening is feasible in many places due to the steep terrain.

We have three suggestions:

1. In many places, it will be possible to fix the problem with paint! Some sections have an inadequate shoulder because the pavement is really only wide enough for two traffic lanes but three have been squeezed in, taking motorists right to the edge of the pavement on one or both sides. Once the surface road is no longer a major highway, it can revert to a single, reasonably wide lane in each direction with no change to motorists' travel times but greatly increased safety for cyclists. This has been achieved successfully on Solitary Islands way, for example. If a rumble strip could be used in addition to paint, so much the better. In either case, reverting to two vehicle lanes with an adequate shoulder on both sides will also facilitate the movement of emergency vehicles and the management of snowfalls. Several sections of the existing surface road, including much of Victoria pass can be inexpensively made safe in this way. There may also be an opportunity to increase the width of the centreline, reducing potential trauma to motorists as well.
2. Where it is not possible to allocate more of the existing road pavement to the shoulders, then the road pavement should be enlarged so that an adequate shoulder can be created as part of the tunnel project.
3. In places where a sufficiently wide road pavement cannot be achieved, due to terrain or heritage reasons, or if complete separation is felt to be desirable, then a well-paved, well-drained and reasonably level sealed cycle path should be provided again, as part of the tunnel project. This was the case with the M7, for example. A high-quality shared path was integral to the project.

Active transport infrastructure is also an integral feature of the Rozelle Interchange project currently being delivered by Transport for NSW. When major road infrastructure is being developed, active transport should not be sidelined to local government, which (in the Blue Mountains, at least) clearly

lacks both the resources and the necessary experience and, in any case, has a huge and expensive backlog of urgent road maintenance resulting from inundation, erosion and landslips.

In case it is not obvious, where a choice has to be made, uphill sections should be prioritised, because cyclists are slower uphill (resulting in longer risk exposure and bigger speed differentials) and are also less able to maintain a perfectly straight line of travel.

Although it is outside the scope of the EIS, River Lett Hill, on the Great Western Highway to the west of the project area, will also carry increased traffic volumes and has a very unsatisfactory shoulder, frequently covered with gravel and debris, with no practicable alternate cycle route available between Hartley and River Lett Hill Rest Area.

Thank you for considering this submission.