



Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

ABN 38 686 119 087

PO Box 29 Wentworth Falls NSW 2782

Phone: (02) 4757 1872

E-Mail: bmcs@bluemountains.org.au Web Site: www.bluemountains.org.au

Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

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Mount Victoria to Lithgow Alliance,
Reply Paid 164
St Leonards, NSW 1590.

By email: MV2information@MV2L.com.au

Mt Victoria to Lithgow

Great Western Highway upgrade: concept design and road boundaries

1. Introduction

The chequered history of the Mt Victoria to Lithgow Great Western Highway (GWH) upgrade started in 2008. It is now 2012 and the RMS (formerly RTA) has produced its concept design for information and discussion at community meetings, and for public comment (open until Friday 26 October 2012). But let's step back a stage.

In September 2011, the O'Farrell Government commissioned Evans & Peck to evaluate the proposal by the RTA (now RMS) for upgrading the Great Western Highway (GWH) between Katoomba and Lithgow. Evans & Peck sought the views of the Society (amongst many others) in terms of whether the proposal offered the 'best value for money'. The Society's answer was that it did not!

In elaboration of its position, the Society emphasised its commitment to the best environmental outcomes as embodied in the following:

- Investment in rail is preferable to investing in 'highways' when Australia and the World are facing 'peak oil' and climate change linked to greenhouse gas emissions.
- Expenditure on the Mt Victoria-Lithgow upgrade should be restricted to essential safety requirements and excess funds should be transferred to rail infrastructure improvements.
- Strong opposition to any attempts to re-kindle interest in the Newnes Plateau-Darling Causeway corridor.
- Total rejection of any moves (beyond limited safety measures) to upgrade the Bells Line of Road to a viable freight-route standard.
- Implacable opposition to 26m B-doubles and even larger truck-types crossing the 'sandstone curtain', irrespective of current and envisaged improvements to the Great Western Highway.

In responding to the Evans & Peck Independent Review of 19 January 2012¹, the Federal and State Governments apparently determined to apportion the joint commitment of \$250 million to a program of works comprising:

¹http://www.rta.nsw.gov.au/roadprojects/projects/western_region/mt_victoria_lithgow/documents/gwh_upgrades_west_katoomba_independent_review.pdf

- Finalising the concept design and road boundaries (this being the basis for the current exercise!)
- Undertaking a 3-lane upgrade of the GWH at Forty Bends.
- Applying any remaining funds to the other envisaged upgrades **between Mt Victoria and Katoomba**.

The concept design and road boundaries² have effectively been informed by the Evans & Peck Independent Review, but it is emphasised that the document provided for comment is restricted to **Mt Victoria to Lithgow**, despite dot-point 3 immediately above.

Once the RMS has considered feedback from the community in the process of refining the concept design and confirming the road boundaries, the latter will go to BMCC and LCC for inclusion in their respective Local Environment Plans.

The present document constitutes BMCS' formal response to the RMS proposals.

2. The Society's response

2.1 Mt Victoria by-pass

The Society notes from the flow-sheet on p19 of the RMS document and the other information on pp2 and 19, that there will be work on the Forty Bends upgrade; and that, under the 'enhanced safety works' program, there will be ongoing work on Victoria Pass, soon to start work within the Mt Victoria township, and to be advised work on Hartley Valley. It would very much seem that the long-term improvements linked to the Victoria by-pass (pp16-17, RMS document – see footnote 2) will remain as an interesting design exercise.

The Society believes that the inhabitants of Mt Victoria should be formally advised that the prohibitively expensive by-pass has effectively been abandoned and will 'never' be built. They will then be able to relax and go about their lives rather than be further disturbed by the reservation of road boundaries.

2.2 Remainder of the proposal

The Society acknowledges the funding constraints, but notes that: (i) the GWH constitutes the only significant road-freight route to the Central West from the Greater Sydney region; and (ii) an upgrade should aim for the safe and efficient movement of traffic. The following items are therefore identified as design inadequacies as they seemingly generate safety challenges which should not be permitted within a major highway.

- (a) A restriction to two traffic lanes only (one each way) with a median but no barrier from McKanes Falls Road north-westward to Magpie Hollow Road at South Bowenfels (pp3 and 8, RMS document) is deemed unacceptable. This is a narrow, dangerous section with a tight bend which could easily become blocked through a truck overturning or any other form of accident. The capacity to divert around such an event is very limited.
- (b) The three-lane concept (two west and one east with a median and barrier) eastward to the Whites Creek viaduct at Forty Bends (pp3, 8 and 18, RMS document) is deemed unacceptable. A significant accident on the east-bound lane could cause a substantial hold-up. There is little room for any diversion and the barrier would limit the possibility of temporarily taking over one of the westbound lanes.
- (c) A similar problem relates to the three-lane concept (two east and one west with a median and barrier) from the Whites Creek viaduct at Forty Bends eastward to where the four-lane configuration comes in at the top of River Lett Hill (pp3, 9 and 10, RMS document). An accident on the west-bound single lane could cause significant hold-ups. There is little room for a diversion and the median barrier would inhibit temporary use of and east-bound lane.

² *Concept design and road boundaries, Invitation to comment*, RMS, July 2012; this is available on the RMS website at http://www.rta.nsw.gov.au/roadprojects/projects/western_region/mt_victoria_lithgow/documents/great_western_highway_revisedpackage_july2012.pdf

- (d) The intersections and feed-ins shown on pp8 and 9 (RMS document) are generally unacceptable from safety viewpoints. At the McKanes Falls Road (p8), those wishing to enter from or exit to the east-bound carriageway must run the gauntlet of the west-bound carriageway. The Forty Bends Road intersection (p9) has the same problem, while the intersections at the top of River Lett Hill (p9, top) have a lesser problem in that only entry from the opposing carriageway is permitted.

In all cases feed-ins from the side-road to the nearer of the two carriageways are too short.

- (e) In relation to the Little Hartley section of the upgrade (p14, RMS document), the Society believes that the Baaners Lane intersection is totally unsatisfactory in that access to and from the east-bound carriageway involves crossing the west-bound carriageway. Furthermore, access to the west-bound carriageway from Baaners L has a ridiculously short feed-in.

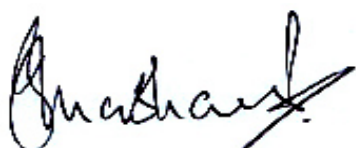
The Coxs River Road feed-ins to both west and east-bound carriageways are similarly too short.

- (f) In the Soldiers Pinch section (p15, RMS document), the Victoria Falls Road intersection requires those wishing to enter or leave the west-bound carriageway to cross the east-bound carriageway; while those wishing to enter or exit the east-bound carriageway from the GWH and Browntown oval must cross the west-bound carriageway.

In both cases, the carriageway feed-ins are too short.

3. In conclusion

The speed limit for the whole of the tract from the bottom of Victoria Pass to the bottom of River Lett Hill on the **existing GWH** has been changed to 80 km/h from 90 km/h as a result of RMS speed-limit reviews (p2, RMS document). If the RMS intends to retain that speed limit for the **upgraded GWH**, there could be some justification for the limitations identified in section 2.2. Nevertheless, the Society contends that given the Mt Victoria to Lithgow concept design involves an upgrade of a highly dangerous portion of the GWH. The objective should therefore be to aim high with the design, so as to avoid further changes such as traffic lights and grafting on extra lanes and longer feed-ins as accidents and delays mount, rather than to aim low to meet a price. **Such an approach does not give value for money!**



*Dr Brian Marshall,
For the Management Committee*