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PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

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PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS

# Northern Roads Package

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*Brought up by Mr Ellis and ordered by the House of Assembly to be printed.*

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## MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

Legislative Council

*Ms Rattray (Deputy Chair)*

*Mr Valentine (Chair)*

House of Assembly

*Ms Butler*

*Mr Ellis*

*Mr Tucker*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Committee has the honour to report to the House of Assembly in accordance with the provisions of the *Public Works Committee Act 1914* on the -

### Northern Roads Package

## 2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 This reference recommended the Committee approve the Northern Roads Package which involves upgrading an existing road corridor and focuses on safety and travel time efficiency improvements. The proposed works involve upgrade works on sections of Birralee Road, Frankford Road and the Batman Highway, with the aim of improving road safety for all users and increasing freight productivity.
- 2.2 The Batman Highway – Frankford Road - Birralee Road corridor has been identified as a key regional freight route. It provides a strategic connection between the north east and north west of Tasmania. The roads included in the Package all have a significant percentage of heavy vehicles in their daily traffic volumes. The Batman Highway has an approximate traffic volume of 2,500 vehicles per day with 21 percent heavy vehicles. Frankford and Birralee Roads have traffic volumes of approximately 1,800 and 842 vehicles per day, respectively and both have in excess of 20 percent heavy vehicles daily.
- 2.3 Currently, however, many heavy vehicle operators travelling between the industrial and port precinct of Bell Bay and the Bass Highway travel via Launceston, rather than the more direct route via the Batman Highway, Frankford Main Road and Birralee Main Road. Through industry consultation, the Department of State Growth has determined this is primarily due to the safety concerns of operators travelling on these roads. The safety concerns arise from a number of factors including insufficient sealed pavement width, lack of overtaking opportunities or turn-out bays, and poor pavement quality.
- 2.4 Appropriate upgrades have been identified along the corridor to address these safety concerns and to improve safety for all road users. The measures include road widening, pavement strengthening and localised curve improvements on specific sections of the Batman Highway, Frankford Main Road, and Birralee Road. A heavy vehicle rest area is also being incorporated at Sidmouth Hall. These measures will enable the corridor to cater for an anticipated increase in heavy vehicle movements supporting business and industry and to improve safety outcomes for all road users.
- 2.5 The Northern Roads Package is expected to deliver the following benefits:
- safety improvements for all road users travelling on the Batman Highway, Frankford Main Road, and Birralee Road corridor, including a reduction in crashes;
  - improved access for freight vehicles using this route;

- freight operational cost savings due to;
  - shorter trips;
  - reductions in travel time;
  - reduced vehicle maintenance costs; and
  - enabling use of higher productivity vehicles;
- time savings for all vehicles and occupant types;
- lower road maintenance costs; and
- a reduction in the number of heavy vehicles travelling through the Launceston Central Business District (CBD), and therefore a reduction in traffic congestion.

### 3 PROJECT COSTS

3.1 Pursuant to the Message from Her Excellency the Governor-in-Council, the estimated cost of the work is \$50 million.

The following table details the current project cost estimates and have been prepared on concept design and option analysis information.

	P50 (\$m AUD)	P90 (\$m AUD)
<b>Base Cost Estimate</b>	38.4	38.4
<b>Contingency</b>	5.4	9.0
<b>Total Project Cost Estimate</b>	43.8	47.4
<b>Escalation</b>	0.5	1
<b>Total Outturn Cost Estimate</b>	44.3	48.4

## 4 EVIDENCE

4.1 The Committee commenced its inquiry on Tuesday, 3 August last with an inspection of the various locations the proposed works will be undertaken. The Committee then returned to the Committee Room, Henty House, whereupon the following witnesses appeared, made the Statutory Declaration and were examined by the Committee in public:

- Robyn Hawkins, Project Manager, Department of State Growth;
- Sven Meyer, Project Management Team Leader, Department of State Growth;
- Jane Hicks, Manager Transport Network Planning, Department of State Growth;
- Elizabeth Skirving, CEO Rural Business Tasmania.

The following Committee Members were present:

- Hon Tania Rattray MLC (Deputy-Chair);
- Ms Jen Butler MP;
- Mr Felix Ellis MP; and
- Mr John Tucker MP.

### Overview

4.2 Ms Hawkins provided an overview of the proposed works:

*Ms HAWKINS - ... Today we are seeking approval for the Northern Roads Package which consists of three roads: Birralelee Road between the Bass Highway and Frankford Main Road, approximately 18.49 kilometres in length; Frankford Main Road between Birralelee Road and the West Tamar Highway, approximately 13.53 kilometres in length; the Batman Highway between the West Tamar Highway and East Tamar Highway, approximately 10.87 kilometres in length, noting that the 5.5-kilometre section between the Batman Bridge and the East Tamar Highway commenced in early 2021. The total corridor length is 42.89 kilometres.*

*The Northern Roads package is a road upgrade aimed at increasing freight productivity and road safety for all road users. The Tasmanian Integrated Freight Strategy released in 2016 identified the Batman, Frankford, Birralelee Road corridor as a key regional freight route. It is a strategic connection between the north-east and north-west of Tasmania.*

*In April 2019, the Australian Government committed \$24 million to upgrade Birralelee Road from the Roads of Strategic Importance or ROSI initiative. In order to maximise the benefit and consistent with the 2016 Tasmanian Integrated Freight Strategy, the scope of the original Birralelee Main Road commitment was increased to include the Batman Highway and the connecting section of Frankford Road. The roads included in this package all have a significant percentage of heavy vehicles in their daily traffic volumes. The Batman Highway has approximately 2500 vehicles per day with 21 per cent heavy vehicles. Frankford and Birralelee Roads have traffic volumes of approximately 1800 and 842 vehicles per day respectively and both have in excess of 20 per cent heavy vehicles daily.*

*The recorded crash history for the Northern Roads corridor has been obtained for the last 10 years as part of project development and investigations and is as follows: 27 crashes on the Batman Highway, 37 crashes on Frankford Main Road, 34 crashes on Birralelee Road, including one fatality. The proposed improvements for this project include road widening, pavement*

strengthening and localise curb improvements for the Batman Highway, Frankford Main Road and Birralelee Road to enable the corridor to cater for increased heavy vehicles movements, supporting business and industry and to improve safety for all road users.

A heavy vehicle rest area is also being incorporated at Sidmouth hall. The Northern Roads Package will effectively open a shorter freight route in the north of Tasmania, especially providing freight vehicles a more efficient route. Non-freight vehicles will also benefit from the improved route. Major benefits include: freight operational cost savings; shorter trips and the enabling of higher productivity vehicles; time savings for all vehicles and occupant types; crash reductions and safety improvements; environmental benefits; reduced greenhouse emissions due to fuel savings and lower maintenance costs.

In terms of cost, the total project excluding the Batman Highway east of the bridge is forecast to cost \$50 million dollars at a P50 value for the corridor. Costs for the proposed improvements - based on estimates - are consistent with similar projects recently completed on a per kilometre basis. Once delivered, road users will see a consistent cross-section on each of the roads with sealed shoulders, pavement strengthening where required and curve widening to improve freight productivity and road safety for all.

The proposed improved widths for each of the roads are as follows: for the Batman Highway is a 3.5 metre lane width with 1 metre sealed shoulder and 0.5 metre unsealed verge. A total seal width of 9 metres. Currently, the average seal width on the Batman Highway is 6.3 metres.

Frankford Main Road will have a 3-metre sealed lane width with a 1 metre sealed shoulder and 0.5 metre unsealed verge. Total seal width is 8 metres. Currently Frankford Road has an average sealed width of around 6.75 metres.

Birralelee Road will have a 3-metre sealed lane width with 1 metre sealed shoulder and 0.5 metre unsealed verge. Total seal width of 8 metres. Currently the average Birralelee Road seal width is 6.1 metres.

Overall we submit this project is an important freight productivity and safety upgrade. The upgrades will provide a consistent traffic lane and shoulder width to improve safety and efficiency and curve widening. It will also provide a heavy vehicle rest area for drivers on the corridor. We have worked with stakeholders and will continue to do so to reduce convenience impacts of the project, both during and after construction.

### **Project Scoping and Concept Design**

4.3 The Committee noted that the project design was not finalised and highlighted how this made it difficult to evaluate a project. The Committee sought to understand why the Department was presenting projects when some or all of the design elements had not been finalised:

**Ms BUTLER** - Just a quick overview question. Is the concept design and scoping for Frankford, Main Road and Birralelee Road complete?

**Ms HAWKINS** - No, it is not at this stage. The concept design is currently being developed.

**Ms BUTLER** - And a subsequent question. You understand as members of the Public Works Committee, we are asked to evaluate whether it is a good use of taxpayer funds, but we do not have the concept design or scoping for those two sections. This leaves us in a difficult situation when trying to make an assessment on whether or not it is a good use of taxpayer funds.

We also had this problem in a recent project we oversaw on Illawarra Road where there was not an actual concept design. Is this going to be a new way information is presented to the Public Works Committee?

**Ms HAWKINS** - I can speak for this project. In terms of what we are actually delivering for Birralee and Frankford Road, whilst yes, we do not have a concept design at this stage, we have given you the typical cross sections of what is intended to be provided and it demonstrates a significant improvement of both freight productivity and safety. Whilst it is not at concept design stage it certainly does demonstrate what is to be provided.

**Mr MEYER** - For the last two or three years, State Roads has been actively progressing an accelerated infrastructure program. COVID-19 made that even more accelerated. A lot of these large projects are programmed and packages of works. That is why we do not necessarily have the whole program designed. We try to work through the concepts and the program delivery. At each tender season we try to release tender packages in May-June for delivering works that summer and would work up the physical components of the program to get a package of work out. We have changed how things might have been delivered five or ten years ago.

### **Cost Estimates and Project Funding**

4.4 The Committee understood the overall budget for the project was \$50 million, and also noted the p50 and p90 estimates for the project which were \$44.3 million and \$48.4 million respectively. The Committee sought further detail on these estimates and how they are used in scoping and designing the project:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - ... .. Moving on to the really important one, which is Project Costs, 3.1, the overall project cost summary table. We do have a table and this is always the interesting one, about P50 and P90. So, I think it would be good to have that on the public record again, that difference in costings.

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes, so basically the project funding that we have is to P50 level and we have an opportunity to request P90 funding from the Australian Government, if needed. So, we are essentially working to the P50 at the moment.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - So, that request to go to the P90 and those additional funds from the Commonwealth. Would that be in the design stage or is it when you get into the work and then you realise that, gosh, you know, we had an assessment on that piece of pavement but that's not going to cut the mustard here and we need to upgrade? When do you decide, when do you make that decision?

**Mr MEYER** - Yes, the project is designed to the P50 and the further you go through a design phase the less contingency you have and the more accurate you are in your costings and then once you receive the tenders you have the final costs. The aim is to have all tenders delivered within the P50 budget. So, the P90 budget is the ultimate government commitment of ... funds that you might use for a project. So, generally you wouldn't access anything between P50 and P90 unless it was during construction and there was some major issue, it could be a latent condition, like it could be rock or some other aspect that no-one was aware of during the design phase that arises only during construction. And so once -

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - I think we would have noticed a bit of rock around.

**Mr MEYER** - Yes, so once you've exhausted the P50 -

**Ms BUTLER** - The dolomite.

**Mr MEYER** - You then have to seek the use of additional funds to the P90.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - So, drilling down into those figures, it's \$44.3 million. It says, total out turn cost estimate and then it goes on to the P90 is \$48.4. So, am I to take it that these figures are just a tad out of date?

**Ms HAWKINS** - As I said, we're still working through the concept design. Obviously, we've got to work to the P50 in terms of the design.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - Which is around \$50 million?



**Ms HAWKINS** - Fifty million is ... .. the P90.

**Mr MEYER** - So, the P50 budget is the estimate and then within the estimate there are risks identified and one risk, as an example may be a latent condition for rock. So, then they go through a risk profile assessment to work out how much would that rock potentially cost and you get an upper and a lower limit. We do that for all the risks and then the end outcome for the upper and lower limit, in this case of \$48.4. So, it is not, I guess you could go to 50, but it is based on a risk assessment process. So, it generally comes close to the ultimate budget, but not necessarily on the same dollar figure.

- 4.5 The Committee was interested to understand the process should the project require an additional commitment funds, how this might be accessed and whether this would cause any delays:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - So, if you have to put in a request for additional funding to the Commonwealth, how long does that normally take? Does it hold up the project, if you like? Would that hold up a project or would the state just go ahead and have the request sitting there with the Commonwealth and just hope that, or just wait for the additional funding to be provided?

**Mr MEYER** - Yes, the Commonwealth does a commitment of funds. To access that you generally have to write ... .. a good submission to justify why you need to access those funds. There is no set time frame for how long it takes to access the additional funds.

**Ms HICKS** - But it is something that we look at as soon as possible and it runs concurrently while the project is going if we identify. It is not something that would stop the project.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - Would it not stall a project?

**Ms HICKS** - Not unless it is absolutely unforeseen.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - That was really what I was looking at, the answer. It is not going to hold it up, that it will not commence.

**Ms HICKS** - No, and we meet regularly with the Australian Government and give them updates on the projects and what milestones they are hitting. So, they are aware of where is it at and what is happening, so they are along for the journey as well... ..So, if there are issues identified, they are aware of those as we move along.

### **Use as a Freight Route**

- 4.6 The Committee noted a key driver of the Northern Roads package was to increase the use of the corridor as a freight route rather than heavy vehicles traveling through Launceston, and sought to understand why this was important:

**Mr ELLIS** - ... .. In a broader overview question, would you be able to give us a sense of who the road users of this corridor might be and why they might choose to go through this road rather than, for example, on the Tamar Highway?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Basically, as part of the Tasmanian Integrated Freight Strategy, it was identified as a more efficient link between western Tasmania to eastern Tasmania, to Bell Bay. There was an opportunity in terms of improving the roads to open up an alternate route other than going through Launceston.

**Mr ELLIS** - Maybe someone like, for example, a pine plantation or a log truck driver might take that from the north-west through to Timberlink at Bell Bay?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes. I cannot speak to exact users but certainly from our site visits and the information we have on the percentage of heavy vehicles, logging trucks and movements are a significant component of that heavy vehicle traffic.

**Mr ELLIS** -.... My reading of the two alternative routes going down the East Tamar or alternatively through this highway has it about 14 kilometres shorter going through Birralee Road and across the Batman Bridge. One of the interesting things, currently it goes through the East Tamar Highway, goes straight through Launceston, we pick up a number of traffic lights going through there and increased, say, peak hour congestion, as opposed to the other road which would have zero traffic lights -

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes.

**Mr ELLIS** - - and probably unlikely to have any congestion?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes, so I guess that travel time would be dependent on time of the day as well in terms of peak hour, that kind of thing.

**Mr ELLIS** - So, this would give operators more consistency and certainty about road conditions and traffic conditions?

**Ms HICKS** - In the original scoping one of the benefits that was identified was that it would decrease the number of heavy vehicles travelling through Launceston, which of course would have impacts upon congestion, but also amenity.

**Mr TUCKER** - And safety as well.

**Ms HICKS** - And safety, exactly. Less interaction.

4.7 The Committee understood that Birralee Road may have previously been identified as having safety deficiencies. The Committee sought an explanation on the appropriateness, from a safety perspective, of using Birralee Road as a high productivity freight route:

**Ms BUTLER** - I have a question on the Birralee Road section again. Birralee Road was addressed as safety deficient by DIER in 2010, although it is now the preferred route for freight vehicles, including high productivity vehicles. At the moment, does it meet the national standard for HPVs [High Productivity Vehicles]?

**Ms HAWKINS** - I believe the national standard is not relevant to this road because it is not part of the national network.

**Ms BUTLER** - It does meet the State Growth's own guidelines for road geometry for HPVs?

**Ms HAWKINS** - It does.

**Ms BUTLER** - Is there much of a difference between the national standard and the state standard?

**Ms HICKS** - ... The national highway standard is usually an AusRAP 3, which is a mixture. You put into a box all the different parameters and it gives you an AusRAP star standard according to sight distance, width, use of the road and so forth. The roads are designed and have specifications according to their category. We have our road categories that talk about what the road is used for and the amount of vehicles per day on that road.

**Ms BUTLER** - Will the upgrade of this road make it safer for those vehicles? Could you explain some of the improvements that will be leading to it being a safer road?

**Ms HAWKINS** - It is known that by providing sealed shoulders it is a demonstrable safety improvement in that it gives vehicles an opportunity to recover if they happen to drift out of the lane. It reduces run-off road crashes. There is a demonstrated safety benefit in the shoulders.

From a maintenance point of view also, the increased lane width and the shoulders mean that you see less things like edge break-up from having heavy vehicles running along the edge of the seal.

**Ms BUTLER** - I am a bit stuck on the fact that DIER stated in 2010 that Birralea Road they say was safety deficient. It is now not seen as safety deficient. I am concerned about whether or not these improvements would still make it appropriate for those heavy vehicles to be using it.

**Mr MEYER** - A lot of these larger projects do have a long duration in planning. I was not actually aware of that statement but it makes logical sense then if in 2010 this was identified that it sometimes can take 10 years to progress through the planning and to secure funding commitments from the Tasmanian and Australian governments and for everything to come together to bring the projects to fruition.

Even though it was identified as a heavy vehicle freight route it does not necessarily mean that it was suitable for all heavy vehicles and I guess that statement you mentioned identified some of the deficiencies which this project will rectify.

**Mr ELLIS** – ... If a road is regarded as safety deficient, would you then have a safety upgrade to make it safety sufficient? That is sort of a point of what we are doing.

**Ms HICKS** - Safety is the underlying intent of this road and heavy vehicles are secondary.

**Ms HAWKINS** - But definitely too, the freight context for this project or this package of work is about making it efficient for the larger vehicles but also improving safety. That safety upgrade has got to be in the context of available funding as well.

## **Heavy Vehicle Rest Areas**

4.8 The Committee noted the project would provide 1 formal heavy vehicle rest area in each direction, with one of these located approximately 80 metres northeast of the Sidmouth General Store, and which would replace the informal rest area directly outside the General Store. The Committee sought an explanation from the Department's witnesses on why this location was chosen in preference to formalising the current informal rest area directly outside the General Store:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - Part of this project, there is a heavy vehicle rest area, there are actually two in this section, aren't there? It is not just one. There is one on the same side as the Sidmouth Memorial Hall, then one on the opposite side further down, closer to the Batman Bridge. Is that correct?

**Ms HAWKINS** - No, the only heavy vehicle rest area that has been provided as part of this project is at Sidmouth hall. It is providing a parking area in both directions. .... It is considered to be one, east and west.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - .... When that was identified as a need, has it been identified as a sleepover area, if you like, or is it more just a pit stop, like a rest area, a coffee and across the road to the hall for conveniences? I want to understand how that rest area, one either side of the road, was arrived at?

**Ms HAWKINS** - I believe the purpose of the rest area is to provide drivers with an opportunity to use facilities, for meal breaks and that kind of thing. It is more short term rather than long term.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** – .... There are already what we would probably refer to as informal areas where heavy vehicles, particularly heavy vehicles, stop around the Sidmouth shop. There is one that is quite functional at this point in time, but that is not where the formal proposed rest area is going to be. Can we have the rationale behind that, thank you?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Certainly. The design of the heavy vehicle rest area took into consideration the number of vehicles that we would need to accommodate, as in being parked on both

directions, east bound and west bound. It took into consideration sight distances for property accesses, including the store and the community hall.

Given the size of the vehicle, the parking areas were positioned to ensure that there was sufficient sight distance for people exiting those driveways, so that they could safely do so, considering the road environment at that location and the speed environment as well. To facilitate drivers' access, there is provision for drivers to walk on the passenger side of their vehicle to access both the store and the facilities.

### **Pavement Improvements**

4.9 The Committee noted that pavement improvements may be needed and sought to understand if this could be integrated with planned maintenance to ensure it was undertaken in a cost effective and timely manner:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - One of the questions I asked when we stopped at the exit of the Visitor Information Centre related to some of the poor quality of existing road pavement and how the Department sees that as being part of an upgraded integrated approach. I would be pleased to have the response you gave me at Exeter on the record.

**Ms HAWKINS** - Sure. Part of the design development has included pavement investigations. We are looking at existing pavement strength and we are undertaking things like deflectograph and test pitting to examine the quality of the existing pavement. As the concept design is worked through we will look at widening in any areas that may need pavement strengthening as well.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - That, in itself, could cause the project to go over its budget? Would that be fair to say?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Potentially, but there are opportunities to look at ways that we can address any pavement issues. That will be formed as part of the concept design and as it is worked through.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - In saying that, does that mean that there could be some shoulder widening taking place? Then you would have to come back at another time and do the strengthening or would it always be done in conjunction with the works being undertaken in that particular area at any given time?

**Ms HAWKINS** - I guess it will be part as we work through the concept design and be able to fulfil the aims of the project within the budget. From a Department point of view, we would also look at opportunities to save costs if any of the roads are included on maintenance schedules.

**Ms HICKS** - We try and integrate where we can any existing known maintenance issues and build them into the project at the same time, so we are not coming back and reworking. Sometimes, if it does not fit within the scope the maintenance budget will cover some of those pavement items and helps us to stay within the budget. We integrate it where we can.

### **Potential Reduction in Maintenance Costs**

4.10 The Committee noted that one of the potential benefits attributed to the project was a reduction in maintenance costs. The Committee sought to understand what type of maintenance costs might reduce and why this might occur:

**Ms BUTLER** - ... .. I have a quick question about the major benefits and the lower maintenance costs. Can you run through or give us some examples of how this infrastructure will reduce maintenance costs?

**Ms HAWKINS** - I previously mentioned, the increased sealed width will mean that you will not have these larger vehicles running on the edge of the seal, which is a saving in terms of edge

break. That is a significant saving considering how wide the seal is at the moment, so if you think about the larger vehicles that are operating on these roads, they would be running quite close to the edge of the seal at the moment. As the committee mentioned, they drove east of the Batman Bridge, you would have seen if you happen to follow a truck or a truck coming the other way, what a difference the increased seal width and the sealed shoulder makes.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - It means I can give them more room on the road and suits me fine.

**Ms HICKS** - As we discussed, we are also strengthening some of the pavement as we go along, which actually gives the pavement a longer life and another added benefit.

**Mr MEYER** - I am not sure if it relates specifically to this project, but quite often with the freight efficiency route upgrades, lower maintenance costs also relates to the trucks themselves. With a wider cross section they can generally be more efficient in their speed environments. Rather than slam down for corners and those sorts of things, they might be able to sit closer to a consistent speed, which is probably around 90 for those ones.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - That is reducing the fuel consumption.

**Ms HAWKINS** - And also wear and tear on the pavement itself.

**Mr MEYER** - Freight is looking at a consistent speed environment from A to B as the main driver.

**Ms HICKS** - There is also benefit of when it is wider, of different truck configurations are being used by, say, logging and so forth, that often runs better on the pavement than some of the other configurations.

### **Staging and Traffic Management during Construction**

4.11 The Committee recognised that interruptions to traffic were unavoidable during roadworks. The Committee sought confirmation from the Department's representatives that appropriate measures would be taken to minimise any inconvenience to the travelling public:

**Ms BUTLER** - ... .. Could you run through what the plans are on sequenced works which would make it more user-friendly for vehicles on that road?

**Ms HAWKINS** - In terms of letting tenders and constructions packages, the Department would be looking to consider overall delays for works happening concurrently to try and reduce inconvenience to the travelling public, noting with road works, unfortunately there is some inconvenience which cannot be avoided.

**Ms BUTLER** - There will be public notifications about road changes, won't there?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Definitely. The Department is proactive in terms of keeping the project pages on our website up-to-date and obviously, advertising in the Roadworks Roundup when there are going to be road work, the duration and what the impact is likely to be on the community.

### **Birralee Road Speed Limit**

4.12 The Committee understood there may have been some discussion amongst the local community about reducing the speed limit on Birralee Road from the current 100km/h. The Committee sought to understand if the Department had received any feedback from the community about reducing the speed limit and if there was any intention to do so:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - .....it is guaranteed that the speed limit on the Birralee Road for all traffic, once these improvements are made, will be at the 100 kilometres per hour? Is that correct? Has there been a conversation around reducing the speed limit on that road?

**Ms HAWKINS** - ..... Not as part of this project but we would be happy to take that on notice to confirm if there have been any other discussions with any different areas of the Department.

**Mr MEYER** - Generally, with highways we don't encourage reduction of speeds for freight routes but during the community consultation phase if that arises as a particular concern then that is something that can be forwarded on to the Transport Commissioner for further review.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - I certainly understand that there has been a community conversation, amongst the community who drive the road to and from their destinations. I am interested to know.

**Mr MEYER** - I wasn't aware if anything came up in the community consultations. Are you aware, Robyn?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Obviously there was discussions about some of the corners on Birralee Road and the heavy vehicles using them. That was some of the commentary coming back from the community.

### **Stakeholder Consultation**

4.13 The Committee noted the community consultation the Department had undertaken on the project, and sought further information on the consultation process and the feedback that had been received:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - ..... Stakeholder engagement is one of the most important aspects of any project that we do on behalf of our communities and so, 7.1 is the Public and Stakeholder Participation Consultation. I note from the booklet that was provided that about 47 members of the community attended a session at Sidmouth community hall on their section of the road. Can you talk about that feedback because we don't have any real information about what was said there? You indicated earlier that it was well supported. Also, the Birralee community, about their consultation process.

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes, the public drop-in session at Sidmouth was for the entire project.

We did have people visit the consultation session from ..... Birralee Road and Frankford Road and the Batman Highway. To support that session we also had two static displays, one at West Tamar Council's offices in Riverside and one at Meander Valley in Westbury, which were up for basically a month. So, it gave an opportunity to people who couldn't actually come in person to the drop-in sessions to provide comment.

Overwhelmingly the feedback that we received from the consultation session and from the consultation more generally is that the community sees this as a worthwhile project.

4.14 The Committee also noted consultation was undertaken with a list of identified key stakeholders, including asset owners with infrastructure located within the project boundaries. The Committee sought further information on how the Department worked with these asset owners to manage the service relocation:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - Moving onto 7.2 and the stakeholder consultation. There is a significant list there of about 12 including TasWater, Telstra, TasNetworks and the like. So, the engagement with TasNetworks about removing or replacing poles, is that done at the time when you do the design, or have you already had a conversation with them, given that they are part of your stakeholder consultation group?

**Ms HAWKINS** - It needs to be done concurrently with the design. Basically, once the design identifies that there is a need to remove or relocate a service asset, we will contact the service owner and start to discuss how we might do that. Where possible, the design may be adjusted to avoid an impact on services but sometimes that is not possible.

**Ms BUTLER** - ... ..Is there a set timeframe dealing with any other stakeholders from your Department, that each Department has to meet deadlines? Is there a month or is there a two-week kind of deadline? Can things sit in people's in-trays and hold up the process or is there a systems approach?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes, it probably varies depending on the activity.

**Mr MEYERS** - ... ..It depends on the authority. Development applications have a set timeframe. TasWater has legislation, they have set timeframes for responses. Not every acquisition has set timeframes.

**Ms HAWKINS** - Sometimes we are a bit reliant on ministerial approval for acquisitions. TasNetworks do their own thing.

**Mr MEYER** - TasNetworks generally do their own thing. They are very responsive. We work quite consensually with TasNetworks.

**Ms BUTLER** - There are no penalties that apply to not meeting deadlines from stakeholders or anything in place?

**Mr MEYERS** - There are no deadlines.

### **Impacts on Adjacent Landowners**

4.15 The Committee had earlier driven along the route of the proposed works and noted that a number of residences were quite close to the road. The Committee was keen to understand how these residences would be impacted by the works and the measures that might be taken to minimise any impacts:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - ... .. Obviously, that will be a one to one conversation with landowners. I did notice there were quite a few landowners who are very close to the road. I am sure, if you went into their bedroom, you would probably be able to work out how much rumbling was on the road. They were very close. They will need quite a conversation, I expect.

**Ms HAWKINS** - As I mentioned, in terms of the whole road corridor, we have been in contact with every landowner and will continue to do so as the project develops.

**Mr ELLIS** - What sort of property are we talking? Is it likely to be homes or rural properties on their land? What is the typical person we are dealing with in this situation?

**Ms HAWKINS** - The nature of Birralee and Frankford Road, even the Batman Highway, it is not an urban kind of environment. They are typically rural with commercial properties also. There is an orchard on the Batman Highway we have been dealing with as the project has developed. It can vary, and farming.

**Mr MEYERS** - Generally, with these rural types of shoulder-widening projects you are talking about taking maybe five metres off each side.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - That would put you in a couple of bedrooms in a couple of places.

**Mr MEYER** - We generally avoid houses in these sorts of environments. I am not aware of any house implications.

**Ms HAWKINS** - I am not aware either at the moment. We have opportunity to go to the other side.

### **Drainage Issues**

- 4.16 The Committee understood that drainage issues on the Batman Highway, in particular north of the Sidmouth General Store, had been raised during the community consultation process. The Committee questioned the Departmental representatives on measures that could be taken to mitigate drainage issues:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - Do you want to talk about the drainage issues ... ..?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Regarding the project on the Batman Highway west of the bridge, and indeed works that we will be doing on Frankford and Berrilee roads, we do consider impacts of the project on drainage and any drainage issues that are happening in the project area. We take them on in terms of the project scope and available budget and the issues that are around to determine if they are included or not.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - If there is a drainage issue and it is going to compromise the project, then it does not matter how much it costs it is going to have to be addressed, isn't it? Otherwise, the project will not be worthwhile in that particular area.

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes, that is right.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - So, you will not make an assessment on whether you can afford it. It would just have to be afforded, wouldn't it?

**Ms HAWKINS** - We would make an assessment of the drainage issue and how we might deal with it.

... .. I guess to add to that are the opportunities that may be available in planned maintenance works and how they may be incorporated into the project.

#### **Matters Raised in Submissions to the Committee on the Northern Roads Package**

- 4.17 Ms Elizabeth Skirving, the Chief Executive Officer of Rural Business Tasmania, made a written submission to the Committee outlining that organisation's concerns, as expressed by local rural communities. These concerns related to ensuring that road upgrades were undertaken in a manner that recognised local needs and practicalities.

- 4.18 The key concern presented was that road upgrade works should ensure that the road pavement has shoulders that are sufficiently wide and flat enough to safely accommodate the movement of large agricultural machinery, to ensure the safe and efficient interaction with other road users. The submission highlighted other recent road upgrades that had upgraded the road pavement, but, while the pavement may also have been widened, the height of the new pavement had resulted in a loss of useable space. This had created a larger drop off at roadside verges, affecting the ability for all vehicles to pull over to the left to accommodate the movement of large machinery:

*Local citizens are understanding of the movements and are comfortable with pulling to the side of rural roads to let large equipment to pass. With recent design this option has been removed and the only alternative is reversing, sometimes for significant distance, of the vehicles to a gate way.*



Whilst observing speed limits, lead time may still compromise a driver's ability to determine space for passing when meeting oncoming traffic on narrow country roads with no readily accessible alternative, particularly on rises and corners.<sup>1</sup>

Current design of roads that have been built in the last 12 – 18 months in at least two regional areas (Northern Midlands and Dorset) have not incorporated areas to safely pull off in a timely manner. Deep ditches either side of road edges have removed safe access to road verges. Road design has decreased usable road area in some instances. Although bitumen road area may have been widened by some 30 cm, the loss of verge has impacted on movement. Design has roads at considerable height with up to 200 – 500 cm ditches either side.

The key concern raised has been in safe passing opportunities. Large farm and transport machinery movement on these roads is common with harvesters for example taking over 4 metres of the road with full road approx. 6.2metres.

A passing driver may see oncoming traffic and look to pull to the side. They may not be aware of ditches in the side area or the built-up nature of the road and when on steep slope there is potential for rollover (as occurred recently with a delivery truck). No thought has been given to access for emergency situations and verge/curb requirements – e.g., tyre blowout, cyclist access, medical emergency, rubbish bins.

Compromised or hesitant drivers who are faced with oncoming traffic with little room to move to the side are impacted in their confidence to even utilize these roads or are more prone to accident when trying to traverse this newly designed roads. Rural landholder access and safety where a road intersects and is part of daily farm work is hazardous, does not enable smooth flow of traffic and has already resulted in accident.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.19 Ms Skirving expanded on these concerns at the hearing:

**Ms SKIRVING** - .....The submission came about with the fact we have a number of clients. Rural Business Tasmania looks after the financial and business management of clients, around 200 in rural and regional Tasmania. So, forest, fishers, farmers and small businesses that are affected. We also involve - and are engaged with - rural stakeholders, about 15 of those rural stakeholders and have a bi-monthly discussion group. As part of that and as ongoing feedback from our clients and stakeholders, we see the benefits of the increased work on the roads and acknowledge the input and the money that is being spent on that.

Our concerns that we've heard through a number of different parties have been about some of the practicalities of the roads, particularly for large slow-moving vehicles; for harvesters which are over 4 metres in width. Some of the informal lay-bys and areas that are being used that may be compromised through deep drains and the table drains as you spoke of earlier.

They're the main concerns that we're looking at. It's about the practical use, about those slow-moving vehicles and how they may impact, particularly in this instance in the Birralee Road where they are talking about increased freight. How a tractor or a harvester that might be slow moving, 4 metres in width, not on a float, but a float would be a similar sort of situation in width. It might be moving a little bit quicker, particularly through peak periods of seeding and harvesting through the September period, potato harvesting for the Birralee-Batman Highway corridor where potatoes might be harvested in the Scottsdale area, your background.

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<sup>1</sup> Rural Business Tasmania, Submission to Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works-Northern Roads Package, page 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 5.

.....And moved through to Ulverstone or Smithton processing factories. That's a key corridor. You've got multiple trucks coming through and if there are slow-moving vehicles, such as tractors, in that Birralelee area that are moving from one paddock to another, going 30-40 kilometres an hour, and you have two trucks that would regularly move and just - it is a regular use of heavy vehicles and those slow-moving vehicles. So, how that would impact to make sure that where traditionally there have been informal areas that are unsealed that they would be still available for use, rather than that deep drainage that will help with the drainage. And that's really good that we don't have the water over the road from a safety point of view, but are there still sufficient areas for passing?

- 4.20 The Committee questioned Ms Skirving about her view on the width of Birralelee Road and whether the new cross-section would adequately cater for the movement of large rural machinery:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - It is a significant growing area and also a transport area for the state. Do you have any concerns about what has been proposed and whether that road pavement width on the Birralelee Road particularly, which is a metre less than it is on the other part of the reference today, that that won't be wide enough to manage those vehicle movements?

**Ms SKIRVING** - I am certainly encouraged by what I've heard today with regard to the consideration of that. I think it's still going to be tight in some areas if you have a large harvester that's in that four metres, if two; or you have a truck that is actually passing there, particularly if you've got small vehicles following that perhaps aren't used to the rural roads. We are seeing an increased prevalence of drivers who perhaps aren't used to those rural conditions. So, if they're meeting a harvester and then there's a truck behind them, that metre less would actually put a little bit more pressure on that.

Certainly, the ability to have some unsealed area to continue to that pull-off would be very useful and to ensure that the road surface is at a level to provide access easily for those larger vehicles in gateways and those sorts of areas.

**Ms BUTLER** - .... I wanted to have a quick chat to you about the design with Birralelee Road. We know that there is not a set design at this stage. It is about widening. With the research you have done - and thank you again for the submission. I read that prior to our last hearing and found it really useful, so thank you. Do you think an overtaking lane or some kind of capacity on Birralelee Road would provide some form of relief if you were, say for instance, trying to get through a harvester or a heavy vehicle?

**Ms SKIRVING** - It may be useful. Probably also to consider - and something you see a lot on European roads - are those informal passing bays where someone can actually pull over. It may be a little bit wider more frequently rather than an overtaking lane that would be only one section.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - Slow-moving vehicle turnouts.

**Ms BUTLER** - There are some on the Tasman Highway and they seem to work quite effectively.

**Ms SKIRVING** - Yes.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - That is a really good suggestion and it would be worth asking the Department, when we come back, if there might be an opportunity. They only need to be appropriately signed and people are not so anxious and in a hurry.

- 4.21 The Committee sought a response from the Department's representatives to the matters raised by Ms Skirving relating to the movement of agricultural machinery on Birralelee Road:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - .... You obviously heard the suggestion by Elizabeth. I absolutely endorse that.... Is there an opportunity - without saying yes or no right now - to look at something like that when we know heavy machinery is going to be used on that road?

**Ms HAWKINS** - I appreciate the submission and the information provided by Ms Skirving. One thing I would like to make the committee aware of and they obviously are, is the Northern Roads Package is a significant length of road. We have in our discussions today identified some issues that need to happen such as road widening and also pavement strengthening. Any additions to the scope would have to be considered in terms of the available budget, given we are currently working through concept design to look at areas of pavement strengthening.

The overall widening we are going to undertake on the Batman Highway, Frankford main road and Birralea Road is going to significantly improve safety and usability for larger vehicles. As was mentioned, there is an 8-metre seal width on Birralea Road plus an extra half metre on either side of the road, so 9 metres overall in terms of width, which will make it much more usable for those larger vehicles. Any additional work would have to be considered in terms of the available budget.

.....Also be aware as part of this corridor, the committee mentioned the West Tamar Highway is part of the corridor, and I accept it is not near the Birralea, but there is actually going to be an overtaking lane that will form part of this corridor which will be completed in the coming summer on the West Tamar Highway. I think probably it can be considered, but has to be taken into the context of the available budget and the primary objectives of the project.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - I know I am not speaking for the committee, but I am asking for that consideration. And it only has to be factored in, if it is somewhere on that Birralea road stretch where you could have a slow-moving vehicle turnout on either side of the road, that would elevate the safety aspect to the next level.

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes, but that is an individual view and obviously must take into consideration where it might be located and impact on property owners and environment.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - But we do that every day.

**Ms HAWKINS** - Certainly.

**Ms BUTLER** - ..... To confirm if that could be looked at and investigated? I agree it could assist with safety when frustrated drivers making silly rash decisions, pull out, and also provide a lot more comfort to drivers of large vehicles that there is a place they know along there and they do not have to do 15 kms at a really slow pace holding up a lot of traffic.

If there is to be a prison built there would be increasing traffic and I imagine an increase of heavy vehicles also. I would appreciate that being considered.

**Ms HAWKINS** - Certainly.

#### 4.22 The Committee also questioned the Department's witnesses on the steepness of the roadside verges, as highlighted by Ms Skirving:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - ..... about 4 kilometres coming towards the Exeter township there are very steep road verges with a lot of water laying in those table drains. How are those wide heavy vehicles that meet where a vehicle has actually had to pull off the road but they cannot get right off the road accommodated? Mr Tucker can explain a lot better than I can, when large vehicles meet and there is also something parked on the side of the road which has very deep edges. Can we have some understanding of how that situation is going to be addressed through these road works?

**Ms HAWKINS** - With the increased seal width, if you take into consideration for example, on Birralea Road where a current seal width is a bit over 6 metres will be increased to 8 metres plus an extra metre of unsealed verge, half a metre on each side. You are talking about an emergency kind of situation, not an everyday parking kind of arrangement and with that alone you have a significant increase in terms of area for vehicles to be able to manoeuvre around maybe a vehicle broken down or that kind of thing. In terms of batters and the table drains, obviously, the Department in the design development tries to work within the available road

corridor space. Things like acquisition do come into this and the steepness of those batters. But they are certainly designed within Austroads requirements and Department standards.

4.23 Mr Terry Eaton also made a written submission to the Committee in support of the proposed works:

*My understanding is the Northern Roads Package works refer to upgrades on the preferred heavy vehicle route between East of Scottsdale and the Bass Highway at Westbury as outlined as a category 2 Regional Freight Route in the DSG [Department of State Growth] – State Road Hierarchy. Please note, as a road planning concept the DSG Road Hierarchy is supported as a realistic framework to cater for heavy vehicle freight movements around the state and as such supports economic activity in regional areas.*

*The northern road package route with extensions via the Bass Highway and East Tamar Highway provides an ideal heavy vehicle link between the agricultural production and resource extraction from the north east of the state to the major ports at Bell Bay, Devonport and Burnie. Upgrading substandard construction links on this route as this proposal addresses is considered as an ideal candidate for road construction funding.<sup>3</sup>*

**Does the Project Meet Identified Needs and Provide Value for Money?**

4.24 In assessing any proposed public work, the Committee seeks assurance that each project is a good use of public funds and meets identified needs. Ms Hawkins confirmed that the project was the best solution to address the identified needs and delivered value for money in using public funds:

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - ... .. Does the proposed works meet and identify need or needs or solve a recognised problem?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes, it does.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - Are the proposed works the best solution to meet identified needs or solve a recognised problem within the allocated budget?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - Are the proposed works fit for purpose?

**Ms HAWKINS** - Yes.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - Do the proposed works provide value for money? We don't know yet, do we?

**Ms HAWKINS** - We believe so.

**DEPUTY CHAIR** - Are the proposed works a good use of public funds?

**Ms HAWKINS** - I believe so.

**Ms HAWKINS** - ... .. The per kilometre costs are appropriate and in conclusion this project is a good use of tax payer's money..

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<sup>3</sup> Submission from Mr Terry Eaton, page 1.

## 5 DOCUMENTS TAKEN INTO EVIDENCE

5.1 The following documents were taken into evidence and considered by the Committee:

- *Northern Roads Package*, Submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, Department of State Growth, June 2021;
- Submission from Mr Terry Eaton;
- Submission from Elizabeth Skirving CEO, on behalf of Rural Business Tasmania; and
- Submission from Mrs Jill Skirving.

## **6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

- 6.1 The Committee considers the inclusion of a slow vehicle turnout in each direction on Birralee Road would be a welcome addition to the project scope and improve the safety outcomes of the project, by providing a safe opportunity to pass large slow-moving vehicles, thereby reducing high-risk driver behaviour caused by driver frustration. The Committee notes the commitment made at the hearing by the Department of State Growth representatives that the opportunity to include a slow vehicle turnout lane in each direction on Birralee Road will be considered as part of the continuing project scoping task.
- 6.2 However, the Committee is satisfied that the need for the proposed works has been established. Once completed, the proposed works will improve road safety outcomes for all road users on the Batman Highway - Frankford Road - Birralee Road corridor and will improve freight transport efficiency.
- 6.3 The proposed works will employ a number of measures to improve safety and freight productivity. These include providing a wider sealed road cross-section, pavement strengthening, localised curve alignment improvements where necessary and provision of a safe, formalised, heavy vehicle rest area.
- 6.4 The Northern Roads Package is expected to deliver a more safe and efficient freight route in the North of Tasmania, by providing a shorter route with improved travel times, the ability to use higher productivity vehicles, reduced fuel and vehicle maintenance costs and providing the opportunity to improve current traffic congestion issues in the City of Launceston. Non-freight vehicles should also benefit from a more efficient and safe travel experience along this route.
- 6.5 Accordingly, the Committee recommends the Northern Roads package, at an estimated cost of \$50 million, in accordance with the documentation submitted.

**Parliament House  
Hobart  
15 September 2021**

**Hon Rob Valentine MLC  
Chair**

