

3. Community Consultation

3.1 Introduction

Since the announcement of the CHHPS in September 2001, there has been extensive interaction and involvement of a wide range of community groups and individuals. This combined with the activities of lobby groups who have strong preferences for or against particular options in both the northern and southern sections of the strategy area has resulted in a high level of awareness of the strategy throughout the Coffs Harbour Local Government Area (LGA).

3.2 Community involvement activities

There have been five (5) key information milestones in the CHHPS development. These have been:

- September 2001 – Information Sheet No.1 and Summary Brochure - corridor options for the southern (Coffs Harbour) section and a broad study area for the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section announced
- March 2002 – Information Sheet No.2 - corridor options for the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section, assessment of corridor options for the southern (Coffs Harbour) section and an assessment of a far western bypass running through the Orara Valley to Halfway Creek or Grafton announced
- December 2002 – Community Update No.3 - route options for the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section announced
- February 2004 – Community Update No.4 - route options within the inner corridor for the southern section, new and revised options for the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section and assessments of an upgrade of the existing highway through Coffs Harbour and the Coastal Ridge Way proposal announced
- June 2004 – Community Update No.5 - the assessment of the feasibility of route options with CHCC's preferred corridor announced

With each key information milestone, a number of community involvement activities have been held including:

- public notices and media coverage (both print and electronic) informing the community of various stages and reporting on the progress of the project
- meetings with the Community Focus Group (CFG) for the Coffs Harbour section of the Strategy area in addition to the two CFGs in the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section
- advertised open information sessions
- distribution of the information updates to members of the public
- provision of a Freecall project information line for direct enquiries
- updating of a project website
- static displays and open house displays attended by the study team
- interviews with individuals, business, property owners and community groups
- invitations for written submissions and completion of survey forms by individuals and interest groups
- meetings and presentations with authorities and interest groups eg Coffs Harbour City Council (CHCC), the Woolgoolga and Coffs Harbour Chambers of Commerce, Sikh community, Probus, Quota and Rotary groups, Ulitarra Conservation Society, Coffs Harbour and District branch of the Banana Growers Association, Coffs Harbour Bicycle Users Group, Indigenous community elders, Western Alliance bypass lobby group, and residents' groups at Heritage Park, Sapphire and Korora

Throughout the CHHPS development, a number of key community lobby group activities also have been held including:

- establishment and updating of a website
- extensive media coverage (both print and electronic)
- regular meetings, three of which were each attended by more than 500 stakeholders
- unofficial staffed displays
- duplication of survey forms and distribution of pro forma submissions
- production of car stickers and T-shirts promoting favoured options
- intensive lobbying of candidates for both the State Election in March 2003 and the Local Government Election in March 2004
- a rally in August 2003 estimated to have attracted a crowd of between 900-1500 participants
- petitions including a 10,000-signature petition calling for a proper bypass 'aligned essentially to the west of the coast range'
- a blockade of the Pacific Highway in June 2004

3.3 Community feedback

Since the project's launch in September 2001, feedback from the community has been invited at each key information release and also accepted for assessment at any time. Submissions and survey forms received before, during and after each information release have been assessed and incorporated into reports on the community consultation process.

Much of the feedback throughout the development of the Strategy has been from stakeholders potentially directly-affected or nearby the various corridors and routes. As corridors and routes have been ruled out, responses from stakeholders no longer potentially affected by the options have significantly declined. Relatively few responses have been received from environmental groups and stakeholders not potentially directly-affected or nearby the corridors and routes.

The membership and unity of the various lobby groups also has changed during the Strategy's development as corridors have been ruled out and new corridor and route options investigated. The combining of outer route options in the southern section with the outer route option in the northern section to provide a western bypass of the total coastal area also has resulted in fracturing of support for the lobby groups with some stakeholders preferring to have them assessed as 'stand-alone' options.

Similar issues have been raised regarding the various corridors or options with each strategy milestone. The main issues raised have been:

- effects on residential property
- effects on agricultural land use
- effects on business and tourism
- effects on forestry activities
- noise and vibration impacts
- visual and urban design impacts
- indigenous heritage impacts
- non-indigenous heritage impacts
- effects on geology and soils
- flora and fauna impacts
- air quality impacts
- community impacts
- access effects
- road safety impacts
- effects on travel time and efficiency
- effects on the quality of waterways

- the cost of construction
- construction duration and related disruptions

The issues consistently of most importance to respondents since the CHHPS announcement have been:

- residential property take
- socio-economic impacts
- noise and vibration impacts and concerns about the ability to mitigate them
- air quality impacts
- road safety impacts

With each key information milestone, respondents also have consistently seen the invitation for submissions and completion of survey forms as an opportunity to record a preference or a 'vote' for the various options, including options previously ruled out or not considered to be viable.

Many respondents also have recorded such preferences before technical investigations of a corridor or an option have been carried out and their impacts determined. For example, in March 2002, Information Sheet No.2 advised that the inner corridor in the southern section was the only corridor worthy of further investigation and would be compared with an upgrade of the existing highway. Another option, the People's Choice (which was later reworked and renamed to become the Coastal Ridge Way proposal) had also been raised by the community. This option was the option preferred by more than half of the respondents who recorded a preference in the March 2002 exhibition period. The report on the Coastal Ridge Way proposal was not completed and exhibited until February 2004.

Similarly, in February 2004, Community Update No.4 advised that the RTA had agreed to assess the feasibility of a corridor that CHCC had adopted as its preferred option for a bypass of Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga. This corridor was one of the most preferred by respondents who recorded a 'vote' in the February 2004 exhibition period. The assessment of CHCC's preferred corridor was not completed and placed on exhibition until June 2004.

When upgrades of the existing highway corridors through Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga were to be assessed, the preferences consistently recorded by respondents were for options that either represented:

- an upgrade of the existing highway corridors, with respondents consistently citing the reasons for their support being 'because the highway is already there and those living next to it bought there knowing the impacts'
- a bypass located to the west of the coastal plain with respondents consistently citing a number of reasons for their support including that such a bypass would allow a growing regional area with a perceived shortage of urban land to further develop and that noise and vibration, air quality, and road safety impacts would be minimal

When upgrades of the existing highway corridors were found to not merit further consideration due to their social and economic impacts on the urban areas of both Coffs Harbour and Woolgoolga, the preferences of respondents showed two trends:

- those on the more densely settled coastal areas preferred options to the west of the coastal range
- those on the more sparsely settled rural areas of the LGA preferred options closer to the settled coastal area

The level of response to each key information milestone has fluctuated. Peak responses have occurred following the announcement of corridor options for the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section in

Information Sheet No.2 in March 2002; route options for the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section in Community Update No.3 released in December 2002; and the new and revised options for both the southern and northern sections in Community Update No.4 in February 2004. Some of the reasons that have contributed to peaks in responses have been the:

- duplication of survey forms and creation of pro forma submissions by lobby groups distributed at unofficial staffed displays at shopping centres and through neighbourhood letterbox drops
- length of the exhibition period

The least number of responses has occurred following the exhibition of the assessment of the feasibility of CHCC preferred corridor in Community Update No.5 in June 2004. Contributing factors to this may have been:

- the relatively short exhibition period
- the key announcement in Community Update No.5 that while the route options within CHCC preferred corridor had the lowest socio-economic impacts, the feasibility assessment had shown they also had major adverse impacts and were not considered to be viable options for the Highway Planning Strategy

Some over-arching issues related to the Pacific Highway or transport industry also have been consistently raised by respondents. These have been:

- an increase in heavy vehicle movements, particularly B-doubles, on the Pacific Highway since the opening of the Yelgun-Chinderah bypass and associated noise, air quality and road safety issues from the mix of local and through traffic
- the ability of the various options assessed to serve as a functional bypass for many years
- obtaining more Federal Government funding for the Pacific Highway, particularly through it gaining national highway status
- encouraging more freight to be transferred by rail
- the ability of the various options to allow for urban expansion in a growing regional area

More recently, two trends have emerged in the responses received and assessed. They have been:

- an increase in support for an upgrade of the existing highway from Sapphire to South Woolgoolga, primarily to cater for local traffic, with most respondents consistently citing improved road safety and the current and predicted growth of the Northern Beaches area as the reasons for their support
- requests for a decision on a preferred option to be made as soon as possible. These requests have been received from respondents potentially directly-affected by options as well as respondents not directly-affected and possibly reflect the length of time of development of the Strategy

Throughout the development of the Strategy, a number of issues or options have been raised by the community or CHCC which have been responded to by the project team, either by investigation or implementation.

The community or CHCC-raised options investigated by the project team have been:

- Option A in the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section
- a far western bypass running through the Orara Valley to Halfway Creek or Grafton
- the Coastal Ridge Way proposal
- Option C1 in the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section

- Option E in the Sapphire to Woolgoolga section
- options within CHCC's preferred corridor including Coastal Ridge Way / Option A, Western Bucca Valley / Option A, Western Bucca Valley / Corindi River, Western Bucca Valley / Sherwood Creek

The project team also has responded to community input regarding:

- additional open information sessions and displays
- review of community-taken traffic counts
- extension of submission periods

In June 2002, CHCC appointed Arup consultants to carry out an independent Peer Review on the adequacy of the decision-making process and the sufficiency of technical assessment undertaken as part of the Strategy to March 2002.

The Peer Review principally addressed the findings presented in the Working Papers accompanying the March 2002 information release as well as the stakeholder involvement process. The Peer Review concluded that "... *the Inner Corridor was the preferred of the options for a bypass of Coffs Harbour and that the planning process had provided for the delivery of the best option for the Coffs Harbour local community.*" The review also included a series of recommendations to be implemented during the next stage of the Strategy. The following key actions were included in the recommendations:

- production of a strategic environmental constraints map for the southern section of the Strategy area
- communication of key information about development and delivery of the Strategy at all CFG meetings
- review of the CFG Charter to improve the relationship between the project team and southern (Coffs) CFG
- enhancement of the communication program to ensure accurate updates were provided to the wider community.

In November 2002, CHCC convened a workshop with Arup and CFG members to discuss these findings. The focus of the workshop was on improving the communication process between the Council and the CFG members.

A range of activities were undertaken by the project team in response to the recommendations of the Peer Review and the workshop, including:

- the inclusion of environmental constraints maps in community updates prepared subsequent to the Peer Review
- inclusion of information regarding future steps in the process for the development and delivery of the Strategy at CFG meetings
- review of the Charters of the three CFGs
- widespread advertising of and distribution of information at key information releases, including staffed displays and the distribution of approximately 10,000 community update brochures

Feedback from the community has been assessed and incorporated into reports on the community consultation process (Pramax Communications 2002a, Pramax Communications 2002b, Pramax Communications 2003, Pramax Communications 2004a, Pramax Communications 2004b).

Each of the consultation reports sets out:

- an overview of the project

