

Our ref MC9967

Your ref 401-04

Mr Neil Laurie
The Clerk of the Parliament
Parliament House
George St
Brisbane Qld 4000

Dear Mr Laurie

Re: Petition No 401-04
The proposed upgrade of the Kennedy Highway, Smithfield to Kuranda
(Kuranda Range Road)

I refer to the petition number 401-04 lodged in the Legislative Assembly office on 10 November 2004 by Dr Lesley Clark MP, Member for Barron River, on behalf of Ms Sarah Isaacs regarding a request to stop the proposed upgrade of the Kuranda Range Road.

I will address each of the four points as they were raised in the petition.

Cabinet will decide on funding for the project, taking into consideration the funding needs of other services in the region such as health and education. It is premature to speculate about funding until environmental approvals have been obtained.

There are two main reasons why the upgrade is needed. The existing winding, two-lane road is nearing its traffic capacity and is unable to accommodate future urban development on the northern Atherton Tableland.

The road is being upgraded to implement recommendations from the Far North Queensland Regional Plan (adopted by state cabinet in 1999), which sets out how the continuing strong population growth in Cairns will be managed. The plan has identified land in the Myola and Koah/Clohesy areas as being suitable for accommodating some of the region's future population growth. The plan also calls for access for freight-efficient vehicles to support regional development through increased agricultural and industrial activity in the wider tablelands area.

The upgrade will also deliver improved safety and more reliable access, as well as addressing environmental impacts caused by the existing road.

Public transport options were investigated in earlier phases of the Integrated Transport Study for the Kuranda Range Road as a way of reducing traffic volumes. The finding was that, even with optimistic use of improved public transport, the road would still need to be upgraded to improve its traffic capacity for regional development and increased population on the northern tablelands. Queensland Transport is currently investigating public transport and freight options that may be carried out in addition to the road upgrade.

While recent growth projections have been downgraded since 2000, the population of Far North Queensland and traffic volumes on Kuranda Range Road are continuing to grow strongly. The current growth projections still justify the need for the settlement pattern proposed by the Regional Plan and the project.

The Department of Main Roads is well aware of the importance of the Wet Tropics World Heritage area that the upgrade crosses. Main Roads has thoroughly considered and investigated environmental impacts and incorporated extensive measures into the preliminary design of the upgraded road to minimise negative impacts on the environment and provide substantial benefits where possible.

The most significant of these measures is extensive bridging. About 40 per cent of the length of the upgrade are bridges. The project's preliminary design includes bridges at the most important corridors for animal movements, including Avondale and Streets Creeks and the "north-south ridge". This will allow native animals to cross safely below the road and help to minimise road kills. Fences will be built to guide animals to safe crossings.

The extensive bridging also means the amount of vegetation clearing can be reduced and the amount of earthworks is also minimised. This means the upgrade will be much more stable during the wet season than the existing road. Bridges in highly sensitive areas will be built 'top down' so that most of the vegetation under them will remain. Native vegetation will be able to grow under most of the bridges. All remaining areas of the existing road will be rehabilitated once they are no longer required.

While bridging is the most significant environmental measure, Main Roads has also adopted other engineering and environmental features for the preliminary design, including:

- locating the road alignment to avoid important plants and/or animal habitat wherever possible
- minimising the road 'footprint' (the area covered by the road), particularly in environmentally important areas
- developing particular construction processes designed to protect environmental values
- protecting water quality by treating polluted water.

James Cook University Rainforest Cooperative Research Centre has independently assessed the impacts of the project and concluded that the project will lead to a net environmental

benefit to the area. This is a result of the improvement in ecological connectivity, made possible by the large number of bridges.

Social impacts will be mixed, with some negative impacts associated with increased traffic and positive impacts due to increased safety and reliability.

Main Roads has made its submissions for environmental approvals to the federal Department of the Environment and Heritage (DEH) and Wet Tropics Management Authority. A public notification period, during which the public can comment for or against the project, has begun and will conclude on 31 January 2005.

To help the public better understand the project and provide comment, Main Roads has developed a comprehensive consultation package including static displays, a website at (www.kurandarangeupgrade.com), an interactive computer-based information aid and CDROM.

Hard copies of the project material will also be available for viewing in public libraries in Cairns, Smithfield, Kuranda and Mareeba. Information sessions have been held in Cairns, Kuranda and Mareeba.

Yours sincerely

PAUL LUCAS MP
Minister for Transport and Main Roads