

Planning Department Dumps Freight Network Review Principles

Tonkin Highway/Abernethy Road On-Ramp Proposal Exposes Planning Department Inconsistencies

Background

The Department of Planning and Infrastructure has backed a Main Roads WA appeal against the EPA's decision to stop the proposed Tonkin Highway/Abernethy Road on-ramp in Forrestfield.

Main Roads WA argues that a ramp is required so trucks can access the highway system from Abernethy Road. While there is little argument on this aspect, the design and the land required, is subject to debate.

Included in the EPA's decision to stop the proposed on-ramp was that the on-ramp would significantly impact on rare vegetation and wetlands in a Bush Forever site. The EPA also rejected Main Roads WA proposed Bush Forever land swap stating that protecting a Bush Forever site does not constitute a mitigation strategy for a proposal that impacts on another Bush Forever site.

Planning Department, Highways and the Environment

The Planning Department's decision to support Main Roads WA attempts to overturn environmental protection is confusing. In recent times the Planning Minister has rejected two highway projects due to impacts on urban woodlands and important wetlands.

The Fremantle Eastern Bypass was cancelled as one impact was the destruction of Clontarf Hill urban woodland. Roe Highway Stage 8 was also rejected (although an unambiguous decision is awaited) via the Freight Network Review due to negative impacts on the Bibra Lake Wetlands.

That the Planning Department is not applying a similar process to the Tonkin Highway on-ramp proposal is astounding given the areas environmental significance. What makes this targeting of rare wetlands and flora for the on-ramp more insidious is that there is land, mostly road reserve land, available for alternative highway on-ramp connections.

Lack of Cost/Benefit Analysis

Also of concern is that the Planning Minister is relying on an outdated 1997 study to justify the current ramp alignment. There should have been a current triple bottom line cost/benefit analysis carried out like that established in the Freight Network Review. Main Roads' claim that the alternative ramp alignments have safety problems is spurious. Main Roads' current on-ramp proposal has similar safety problems. Furthermore, the alternative ramp options are similar to current ramps along most highways and similar to those being proposed by Main Roads along Tonkin Highway and Roe Highway extensions.

Main Roads WA has rejected alternative ramp options using its questionable narrow and limited version of 'efficient' design. The current on-ramp design is an example of Main Roads' excessive 'over-engineering' of design.

The Minister needs to ensure consistency in road assessments. The Minister must also ensure that previous commitments to put road proposals to a thorough cost/benefit analysis and not to trade away important environmental areas are adhered to.

Minister's Conflict of Interest

There is also the conflict of interest in the Minister's portfolios. Minister MacTiernan is charged with implementing the Bush Forever policy, a policy centred on protecting rare and threatened flora communities. The area, now proposed for the on-ramp, was included in Bush Forever for its wetland and flora significance. When questioned about this by Greens MLC Giz Watson, the Minister replied that there was no conflict of interest and that Bush Forever acknowledges the need for development. (Question Without Notice No.69, 9/03/2004).

This could be seen as an admission that no Bush Forever site has any level of protection as 'development' has priority.

The Department of Planning and Infrastructure is also ignoring the proposed on-ramp area is an Acid Sulfate Soil (ASS) high-risk zone. The W A Planning Commission recently released a policy bulletin on Acid Sulfate Soils. The policy states that bridge and road building should be avoided in high-risk Acid Sulfate Soil zones.

Disturbance of acid sulfate soils in Stirling in 2001 led to large-scale acid and heavy metal contamination of groundwater and local lakes. Failure to acknowledge the ASS issue is now being felt throughout WA with acid problems being experienced from Bayswater to Yunderup and the Peel Harvey catchment.

Local Roads

The Minister has claimed that the proposed on-ramp would remove trucks from Hale and Hawtin Roads and residential areas of Forrestfield. Such misleading statements are reminiscent of those used in the discredited Liberal Party push for the construction of Roe Highway Stage 8 and the Fremantle Highway. It also needs to be pointed out that when the section of Roe Highway near Abernethy Road was planned the same claims were used.

It appears that the Department is moving away from full, and public, cost/benefit analysis for road proposals. The Planning Minister needs to ensure the Department expands the process not dumps it. The Planning Minister's 'Dialogue with the City' process also identified protection of the natural environment as a very high priority. What is the point of public participation if the bureaucracy and Government ignore it?

The Planning Minister also needs to act on Government environmental protection policies and reign in the 'Mad Roads Department'.