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# ***TRANSPORT AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Mr SR King MP—Chair  
Mr JR Martin MP  
Mr LL Millar MP

**Staff present:**

Ms D Jeffrey—Committee Secretary

## **PRIVATE HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE PENINSULA DEVELOPMENTAL ROAD (LAURA TO WEIPA) PROJECT**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

(Private)

**WEDNESDAY, 8 JUNE 2022**

**Cooktown**

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**The subcommittee met in private at 9.07 am.**

**CHAIR:** I declare open this private hearing. I will introduce the team here. I am Shane King, the member for Kurwongbah and chair of the committee. Also with me is Lachlan Millar, member for Gregory and deputy chair; and James Martin, member for Stretton.

**BURNS, Mr Peter, Councillor, Cook Shire Council**

**CARDEW, Ms Linda, Chief Executive Officer, Cook Shire Council**

**DUKES, Mr Glen, Shire Overseer, Cook Shire Council**

**SCALES, Mr Neil, Director-General, Department of Transport and Main Roads**

**SCOTT, Mr Peter, Mayor, Cook Shire Council**

**TONKES, Mr Peter, Director, Infrastructure, Cook Shire Council**

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much for having us. We have some questions, but this is basically an informal discussion about the pros and cons of what has been happening with the Peninsula Developmental Road and what you think could be done to improve it, the staging of further works and that sort of general information. Thank you very much for having us. Over to you.

**Mr Scott:** Thank you so much, ladies and gentlemen. I cannot remember having a parliamentary inquiry here in my time of 18 years in local government. It is great to have you here. It is good to see that we are the centre of attention, as we think we should be all the time. I would like to welcome you on behalf of our Traditional Owners to Waymburr, the country we are on. It is also the Cooktown area. It has a fascinating history. Before Captain Cook even came here, this area was a mutual meeting ground for the various clans and tribes. They used to come in here occasionally and swap stories and have births, initiations and other things. No blood was allowed to be spilt in Waymburr, in Cooktown. They reckon if Captain Cook had landed on the other side of the river he would have been in all sorts of strife. As it was, he landed here and they have that beautiful relationship.

That is just the people of the local area. It is the largest shire in Queensland. We also represent an awful lot of other tribes and clans, Indigenous groups, out there as well. When you are talking about something like the PDR, which goes for 1,000 kilometres through our shire, it is interfacing with an awful lot of those different clan groups, tribe groups, which we represent from a local government perspective. On top of that, we also have the Indigenous communities around us, like Kowanyama, Pormpuraaw, Aurukun, Lockhart River, Napranum and the NPA. The roads that lead off the PDR to those communities are also owned by Cook Shire Council so we have that direct interface. We like to think we work very well with the Indigenous people. We do.

We set up a regional organisation of councils about 30 years ago. That has morphed into TCICA, the Torres Cape Indigenous Council Alliance. I am the treasurer of TCICA and we have a great relationship with those guys. It is something that can only expand and get better. On behalf of all of those clans and tribes, welcome. On behalf of Cook Shire Council, welcome, too. I am Peter Scott, the mayor.

**CHAIR:** As I said, this is just an open and casual discussion—we can hear from anyone—about what you see as the road has developed. As you said, it services a lot of other communities as well. We had some questions yesterday when we were driving: ‘Where does that go? Where does that go? Where does that go?’ It is an amazing bit of infrastructure. We met the other day with the Weipa Town Authority, as well as Rio Tinto, who informed us that their 30 kilometres is the best part of the road. Having driven the whole lot, I am not going to argue, but it did not really stand out.

My colleagues will probably assist me, but I found that the one thing for me personally was that the dirt or gravel sections are very distracting. You are on the bitumen and then you hit the gravel. I do not drive off-road that often. The more bitumen the better, obviously. It did tend to keep you alert: you have a section of gravel and ‘Whoa!’, then back to the bitumen. It was in very good condition considering what I had expected. Are there any priorities that you would like to see done earlier?

**Mr Scott:** I think you made a good point as to why it was done like that. We have the Cape York Regional Plan taskforce and working group which meets regularly and we talk about the next tranche of road and the next funding. Allan Dale pushes that along, and also David Kempton from RDA. We have good involvement from all around the place, including DTMR. We came up with plans based on, I think, pragmatism—what is available as far as resources go, what is in the best interests of the travelling public, and whether we are going to destroy a road by trying to fix it up, up there. Glen could probably talk a little better than me about that, as far as doing that bit, and then allowing that much gravel, and then allowing that much bitumen for overtaking purposes, at the same time as trying to protect the road a little bit. Is that right?

**Mr Dukes:** Yes, that is how it all mainly started off: doing sections so you have somewhere to overtake a road train. That is how it all started and slowly but surely it has linked together which is great.

**CHAIR:** As more and more bitumen is put down, tourism will open up more and more. The tourism dollar would be of benefit for you, but then there is the infrastructure. That is one thing that was highlighted in Weipa, that they really do not have the facilities for the influx of tourists that they will be expecting as this road develops. Is there anything you would like to add to that?

**Mr Scott:** That is the Weipa Rio Tinto conundrum. They are not a mainstream town. The Weipa Town Authority is set up to look, smell and feel like a local government, but it is not. When anybody goes into Weipa to do anything—to set up a business or do anything—they have to go cap in hand to Rio Tinto and say, 'Please, Sir.' The 1963 Comalco act gives Rio Tinto just about total power to do whatever it likes within its lease boundary. It actually sits in Cook Shire Council. I think the only authority we have over Rio Tinto is some sort of building approval. Is that right, Linda—building and plumbing type approvals for works done there?

**Ms Cardew:** It is. We do not have any authority.

**Mr Scott:** There is no planning scheme. They basically do what they like.

**Mr Scales:** We have powers in the port through MSQ. Maritime Safety Queensland has oversight of the port. They have just moved the port as well to Amrun. We helped them set up that port.

**CHAIR:** There will be a lot more people travelling to the tip as well as Weipa. Once again, there is a tourism benefit but also there is a lot of infrastructure that you will no doubt have to provide.

**Ms Cardew:** We have had many discussions regarding the complementary or ancillary infrastructure that is needed. There are some big-ticket items, some of which obviously do fall outside the control of the state. Telecommunications and safety are paramount because, as you say, as the road is progressively sealed more and more vehicles are going up that are not equipped for that environment. The risk of accidents up there and the inability to call emergency services is critical. We have frequently discussed the fact that when TMR is sealing the road we need to take a whole-of-state-government approach to look at the whole of the amenity and the whole of the consequences. Safety is obviously paramount, as is the ability of Queensland police to service the road. I think Coen, for example, has one police car. If that car is out on duty that means nobody else is available to race down the road. There is a question about Queensland ambulance and their ability.

The other thing we have noticed is that when you travel on TMR controlled roads throughout Queensland, particularly outback Queensland, there are really well placed and well designed, accessible facilities. There are clear off-road areas with tables and chairs, clean toilets and accessible toilets, garbage bins and so forth. When you drive, for example, down to South-West Queensland—Haldon or wherever—they are a feature. Last night I was driving through Mount Carbine and I noticed that the pub has an even bigger sign saying, 'These are not public toilets.' From Mount Molloy all the way through more or less to Lakeland, unless you stop at a commercial roadhouse—perhaps Palmer River—there are no public facilities. I know that the shortage of public facilities going north is mirrored with what is missing in the south.

It seems to Cook Shire Council that the amenity, the ability to collect garbage that is coming from the increased number of people and the expectation, as the mayor has said, that one is able to travel quite easily and quickly between major stops is a complete furphy. People do not understand that once they are out there there is possibly nowhere to eat. We recently went up to Coen and found that every roadhouse was closed. There was no food between Lakeland and Coen and when we got to Coen the only pub was shut and the supermarket was shut because it was the weekend. You have people actually travelling with no knowledge, no food, no amenities, no communications, no access to emergency services, but there will be a terrifically sealed road.

We would like to take a whole-of-government approach and have that conversation across government, which we have tried to initiate at various times. The perception, I suppose, is that each government department is seriously and diligently undertaking its work within its terms of reference but in a very narrow silo.

**Mr MILLAR:** That is a very good point.

**CHAIR:** In terms of the facilities you mentioned—and maybe the member here could expand on that—such as the rest stops, for want of a better term, once they are built would they be maintained?

**Mr MILLAR:** I come from the seat of Gregory, which stretches from Duaringa, which is 100 kilometres west of Rockhampton, all the way to Birdsville and up to Boulia. I take in Central Highlands, Longreach, Barcaldine and down to the Diamantina. You are right: we are well serviced with facilities such as toilets, benches et cetera. That has been a great thing for us. I guess the reason that has happened is there has been a long period where we have become an outback tourism icon with caravans, campers and people coming out. I think you are right: when you have a significant road like this you need a whole-of-government approach. You cannot just rely on TMR to do the heavy lifting. You also have to look at other services like the police. We also have to engage with the federal government on telecommunications because I did not have phone service basically from Weipa until I got just outside of—

**Mr MARTIN:** It popped in at Coen but then it went again.

**Mr MILLAR:** I think there needs to be a discussion with the new federal government about their blackspot telecommunications and packaging that up with TMR—not only a whole-of-government but a whole of local, state and federal government coming together on these projects. I would be happy to advocate on your behalf. That could be a process, yes.

**Ms Cardew:** It is a very real need. Thank you if that could happen. The other thing that needs to be recognised is that with the increased tourists there is an increased demand for water and sewerage in the main town. So when you are talking about Coen, for example, we have aged infrastructure; we have a limited ability to provide water. The whole question of market-led housing/accommodation is another discussion altogether. We have recently had discussions around the town reserve, which is massive. There are hundreds of hectares which are reserved for town purposes which are currently locked up, unavailable for town purposes or expansion within the town, because of the land tenure issues that go back many decades. We are working away with the state government in trying to effectively unlock that.

Most certainly the key issue when people arrive in town is that they need water, they need food and they need sewerage. The capacity for the Cook shire to move garbage effectively is very limited. Our rate base is not growing or is only growing at a very minimum or negligible rate and we have no other own-source revenue.

**Mr Scott:** To summarise, it is a great case study. It is a great idea to improve tourism, accessibility and business opportunity and 'build it and they will come'—and they sure have; however, that highlights, as Linda is saying, all those problems we have, as do most regional remote councils that have that tiny rate base. We are financially stressed and challenged at every turn. We cannot afford to say, 'Righto, let's put a toilet block or a barbecue or some amenities out there.' We cannot afford to do that. I love this idea of working more closely and more collaboratively with the various government departments, state and federal, to say, 'Okay, TMR has this much to do, but we also need this from you and this from you and this from you,' to make it a more holistic operation altogether.

We are very conscious of the fact that there are limited funds. We are trying to get that bang for buck whilst creating the work opportunities as well. Linda has highlighted them. My big one is rubbish. People come from Victoria and Tasmania and chuck things out the window, and we are responsible for that. National Parks take fees off people and say, 'Thanks very much for taking your rubbish into Cook shire', or to Aurukun or to Lockhart River. As you know, most of Cape York is now becoming national park or Aboriginal freehold—that Aboriginal Land Act, CYPAL and all that sort of thing. It is very much tying up the cape as national park, but we do not have the wherewithal to actually monitor, look after and maintain it. Sure, we are making it a lot more accessible with the help of DTMR, but there are those ancillary and trilateral needs. I am on the LGAQ as a remote area guardian for the small regional and remote type areas. This is just typical of all of us out there: we are expected to do a job on behalf of the federal government but we do not have the means to do it. That is where the state obviously needs to come in and support us with all those little sidelines, if you like.

Let's move on to some of the positive things that have happened. I think it is fabulous that the road has increased tourism, but it has also created a lot of business opportunities for our Indigenous partners there. Glen, what are some of the companies and businesses that have done well?

**Ms Cardew:** Yusia is an example.

**Mr Dukes:** Yusia do a lot of work for us. I think the last project was the Aurukun turn-off and Bama were working on that. That is an Indigenous-run group. Of course, they get subcontractors from all over. There are a lot of people getting a lot of work, so that is a good thing.

**Ms Cardew:** We are working more closely with the Indigenous councils as well. For example, Lockhart is hopefully going to be doing some of our work along Portland Road. I think it is important to distinguish the cape as well from many other western areas that might only have one road to a western council or a western shire. We have those roads, as the mayor has said, to all of the surrounding Indigenous councils, not just to Weipa, which is obviously along PDR. We are also responsible for all the traffic that comes in across those main roads.

**Mr Scott:** It is a very important differentiation, too. If we have \$100 million—so 80 from the feds and 20 from the state—the way it is broken up is 80 goes towards the PDR and 20 goes towards the Indigenous community access type progress. It is not just spent on access, either. This is where this group gets together and we decide what we are going to do with that 20 per cent of available funding. One time we did a transfer station at Wujal Wujal. Another time we did a wharf in Bamaga. The one we really love is the road between Cooktown and Hope Vale. Money was put towards that. It was the worst road in Australia in the wet season.

I went to a roads forum down in Ballarat or somewhere like that and we had to show pictures of our worst roads. I had one of that Hope Vale road from about 20 years ago. There is the road which was a river and all the cars were bogged in the paddock trying to go around; it was a beauty.

The actual work done is fantastic. For people commuting in and out of Cooktown, the kids coming to school, people coming to hospital or for sport and that sort of thing, now it is a straight run through on a beaut sealed road. The other big benefit was that the Hope Vale works crew actually got the job and were mentored and trained by DTMR to do that job. Not only did you have a great outcome as far as the road is concerned; you had a great outcome inasmuch as that works crew is now on our list of preferred suppliers. If the DFRA funding comes in and we need to do work out that way, they are an obvious target for us because they are there, it is their traditional country and they have the gear, the experience and the runs on the board.

**Mr Scales:** Further up, the Endeavour Valley Road took four years to seal. As the mayor said, we trained up the Hope Vale council to do it. Two of the young fellows—one has a roller and one has a grader—have their own businesses and now they are fully trained up through our colleagues in RoadTek to actually maintain our roads but also work for Peter and his crew. We did it originally because it was a pretty grim road. The second reason was that we had the banana plantation. In transporting the bananas from the plantation at Hope Vale to the sealed bit of the road, they were bumped all the way down and got bruised to bits. That was one of the reasons for sealing the road: by using an opportunity to train the council up so they got benefit out of it as well, and it was an ongoing benefit. There is the parable that you give a fellow a fish and he can feed his family for a day, but teach him how to fish and he will feed his family for life.

**CHAIR:** It sounds like there is a real collaborative approach. One of the questions I had was about the consultation process when DTMR comes through to bitumen the sections of road to the communities that the shire manages. You might be planning an upgrade yourself to part of the road and the way would be to work together on those. Would those opportunities be presenting themselves?

**Mr Scott:** We would take any opportunity. We have R2R and the TIDS. We have DRFA. We also have the funding from the Cape York Region Package. Wherever we can we throw that in together, we need to take advantage of any opportunity up here. We make every dollar count. I am also a Scottish ex bank manager, so I have long pockets and short arms.

The other one I loved was the Aurukun Road. For example, when Rio Tinto were doing the Amrun project there they said, 'We want to access your road going to Aurukun to take all the gear in.' We did a deal with them—it was a contractual agreement—that they had to leave that road in better shape than when they started. Is Aurukun fully sealed?

**Mr Dukes:** Not yet, no.

**Mr Scott:** It must be getting close.

**Mr Dukes:** Eight kilometres to go.

**Mr Scott:** Eight kilometres left. Aurukun now has this fabulous corridor out to the PDR. It is to Weipa but also down to here. The PDR is transport; it is freight; it is medicine and hospital services; it is accommodation; it is tourism; it is health and education—everything. It is so important to us.

**CHAIR:** That is one thing we heard the other day as well. The cost of transporting things with Sea Swift is often prohibitive but it is easier sometimes than transporting things by road because for 80 days a year the road is impassable, so that is the only way it can happen. As it gets more and more bitumen, Sea Swift will be less reliant because you will be getting more trucks on the road.

**Ms Cardew:** I think the difficulty is that part of the PDR is obviously impassable in the wet anyway. If the Laura bridge and McLeod bridge go under, it is impossible. The other thing is that Coen is not accessible by water.

**Mr MILLAR:** Yes, it is landlocked.

**Ms Cardew:** While the coastal council areas and towns are accessible and they have that option, the central part along the PDR does not have any other option.

**Mr Scott:** The land tenure issue has been interesting for us for a couple of reasons. One is the access to gravel and water on road reserves—and Neil knows all about this. The ILUA that DTMR did with the Indigenous groups is, I think, industry best practice just about. That is talking with Cape York Land Council and the individual groups as well. There is something that I am trying to get him to take on board. When you get to the Y, that goes to Weipa and then that goes to the Northern Peninsula Area. That is the PDR. That then becomes Cook Shire Council road up to the Jardine. What I suggested to Neil is that DTMR take on that stretch of council main road—

**CHAIR:** There is a free road on offer, DG.

**Mr Scales:** I said to them I am trying to give roads up, not accept more.

**Mr Scott:**—and use the existing ILUA system, carry it forward, with what the state has there. Anyway, that discussion is still ongoing. As far as gravel access and water access goes, that has again given our Traditional Owners opportunity for business. We are just as happy with our own roads, as Neil would be as well—we would prefer to be paying the Traditional Owners money for their gravel than the state. That is the way it is moving along as well. Glen, do you have any issues?

**Mr Dukes:** There are lots of different groups to take royalties to as well as the state.

**CHAIR:** That was another question you have answered about the relationship with the Traditional Owners and working with them. It sounds fantastic.

**Ms Cardew:** Over the past few years councillors negotiated very sound, equitable gravel agreements with the Traditional Owners. It was something that was sorely lacking going back a few years. Now that has been pretty much put in place—equitable lease terms, proper payments, proper increments, proper measuring of gravel taken. It has improved significantly.

**Mr MILLAR:** You have great governing structures around the process.

**Mr Scott:** It is also a maturity and sophistication that has developed within their own groups. A lot of that has to do with DTMR working with these people and helping to set up some sort of structure around prescribed bodies corporate and trusts to effect the ILUAs and agreements and that sort of thing. The collateral benefit has been good.

**CHAIR:** Obviously because you have that collaboration there are no real cultural issues to do with developing the road—the road is already there, but in terms of any works or anything. It sounds like it is all done very well.

**Mr Scott:** We take it very seriously up here. Our mantra is ‘two cultures, one people’. Old Eric Deeral was our first Indigenous member of state government. He was a fabulous guy. We have a number of staff and Indigenous work crews as well. We do take our role here very seriously. We are the only mainstream shire in the cape. The rest are discrete Indigenous communities. Weipa is a question mark.

**Mr MARTIN:** Peter, could you elaborate on how you see the Cook shire 10 years down the track after the road is completely sealed? What benefits do you see? We have heard a lot about economic benefits. I think you touched on some of the social benefits like school sport. We have heard that along the way. It is not just about business and economic benefits. There will be a whole bunch of social benefits too.

**Mr Scott:** Yes. I think it is demonstrated by Hope Vale, as we were talking about before. That is on the smaller scale. On the larger scale it is exactly the same. It is access. It is freight costs. It is safety. In 10 years time I would love to see the Battlegamp Road extended across there. That has Cooktown

been done progressively. You get to Cooktown and to go up the PDR you have to go back to Lakeland and out in the wet season, whereas we have a road straight over there to Laura which connects up. It is a fantastic drive. We are progressively doing that. We have done the hard bit.

**Mr Dukes:** Yes, we have a couple of creek crossings and river crossings. We are slowly but surely getting it sealed.

**Mr Scott:** Yes. In 10 years time perhaps we will have a bridge over Myall Creek. Linda mentioned McLeod Creek, Little Annan, Leichhardt Creek and places further down the Mulligan Highway. We get a lot of complaints from people over a very short period of time. Most of the year they are okay. Particularly in the tourist season they are okay. That is the dry season. Obviously we want to try to extend that. The numbers are very conservative—80,000 a year are coming up the road. I think it has been a lot higher than that in recent times. As the word gets out, there are going to be more and more people coming up.

From a tourism benefit point of view, the bush bashers—the people in their big Rams with bullbars and tents and ATVs on the back and everything like that—are not worth much to us at all. They fuel up down in Cairns. They stock up down there and come up here. They rip the roads, drive through the fences and shoot the cows. They are not good value. The people who are good value are the mums and dads in their little Getz and things like that who can get up here. They can go on the town tours. They can go to the restaurants. They can stay at the accommodation. They are the ones we are really chasing. As far as value goes, the more bitumen we get on the road up there and the further it goes the better.

**Mr MARTIN:** I want to ask a question more in practical terms about the amenities. You were talking about rubbish and toilets. How do you see those being managed? Are you suggesting that the state manages those or do you manage them with some extra funding?

**Ms Cardew:** The Cook Shire Council has no own-source revenue to be able to manage those facilities. That is the bottom line. There are circumstances at the moment—most certainly we could have a shared funding arrangement or something like that. Parks, for example, have some facilities on council road reserve within the shire—not toilet facilities but camping facilities. They take the money for that. We get nothing from it. I think we can have a good look, again going back to the whole-of-government approach. The reality is that we do not have money. This is not crying poor; this is just stating the fact. We do not have money to send people up and down the cape to manage what is effectively a state government road.

**Mr Scales:** Just for the record, neither do we have funding to do that.

**CHAIR:** The Weipa Town Authority made a suggestion—and I would never use the words ‘toll road’ but it was along those lines—that tourists travelling the road would get a licence or something to travel the road. That tourism dollar would then come back to—I am sure they were thinking of themselves—the shire to manage those facilities.

**Mr Scott:** You beat me to the punch. At the moment, the tip is the bucket list. Anybody going over the Jardine River has to pay \$100 for a car or \$130 if you have a trailer. If we manage to get a bridge over the Jardine and can do a deal with the NPA people, we see that there is a real opportunity for a toll type operation. It is all about caring for the cape.

**CHAIR:** It promotes safety. As you said, there is safety as well as amenities, and the amenities add to the safety.

**Mr Scott:** Yes.

**Ms Cardew:** We have been discussing this for about the last four years on and off. It was loosely called the ‘passport to the cape’, and the intention was that tourists would be able to contribute something. The idea has not really gone anywhere. There has been a lack of time to fully consider it and lots of curly things that needed to be considered as part of it.

When you think about the access, for example, to beachside areas, to national parks and, as the mayor says, across the Jardine River and across the Daintree River, it is acceptable to pay for a level of amenity. The council has discussed it not so much recently but going back a couple of years. The idea that people pay a little towards their bucket list trip is not an unrealistic expectation, particularly if the amenity is improved as a result.

**Mr Scott:** At the moment we are paying \$10 million a year. If there are 100,000 people going up there paying 100 bucks each, that is 10 million bucks a year. If we build a bridge over the Jardine and do a deal with the NPA and say, ‘You keep 50 and we keep 50,’ that is \$5 million a year we could have towards amenity, towards rubbish collection, towards keeping things on track a bit.

**Mr MARTIN:** But that is not the PDR though, is it?

**Ms Cardew:** Yes, it is the PDR.

**Mr Scott:** That is the PDR.

**CHAIR:** That allows you to harness the ones that you are talking about that provide no value. All of a sudden their tourist dollar comes back to you somewhat.

**Mr Scott:** True.

**Ms Cardew:** I think it is very doable. There are toll roads all over Australia.

**CHAIR:** Yes, but just do not call it a toll road.

**Mr Scales:** Our policy is that you cannot toll an existing road.

**Ms Cardew:** You cannot toll a road unless there is an alternative, hence the name 'passport to the cape' as a working title. That is the ability to go up when you are a tourist.

**CHAIR:** It is about making a contribution to the amenities along the road rather than the use of the road. It was something that came up that I wanted to raise with you and obviously you are very supportive.

**Mr Scott:** Save the cape, protect the cape—all sorts of things.

**Mr Burns:** I was going to follow up on the rubbish business because that is one of my areas of interest. Most of our facilities are transfer stations. The rubbish that goes up has to come back. It ends up in the only landfill, which is at Mareeba. You have just driven from Weipa. A lot of the rubbish that will be taken up and left there has to go back. We pay for that as a council. The expense is considerable. Even for places like Portland Roads, we have to take rubbish out of there and bring it back because it is not a registered landfill.

The other point, which I think Linda mentioned earlier, was national parks. They even pump out their septics and dump it in our system at Coen and things like that. We get the double whammy, and we are the poor cousin because we do not have any money to provide these services. It would be great to get money somehow. A toll road would be a good way, but I do not think it will be palatable. I just thought I would point that out to you.

**CHAIR:** I appreciate that.

**Mr Burns:** The other thing is: when you are going back through Lakeland, please stop at the Gateway to the Cape. If you look at a plan view of that, it is the PDR with all of the communities off it. Each of the communities provided a sculpture or a work of art, so you get a really good idea of what the peninsula looks like. It is a pathway. You just walk there. It will only take you 20 minutes. I think you will enjoy it. That will give you a good feel of what the peninsula is about.

**CHAIR:** I appreciate that. That sounds good.

**Ms Cardew:** If I could make a comment back on your comment about the local and social amenity that comes out, Councillor Burns, Peter and I were at a discussion regarding the expansion of the Weipa Town Authority hospital and the maternity birthing services. When one stops to consider the difficulty in getting from Coen to Weipa or Coen to Cooktown—and currently the birthing services in Cooktown are not operating at full capacity, so a mother has to go down to Cairns—those mums often cannot afford to get into a plane from Coen and fly Hinterland down to wherever. The care and attention that can come for families by greater access to the hospitals and the maternity birthing services needs to be considered.

The other thing we have noticed is the desire of kids to be able to travel for sporting reasons. We have a lot of talented children up the cape, and there is an inability for those children to cost-effectively travel throughout the cape or maybe come down here to general football, PCYC events and so forth. We have to look at a way of expanding all of that.

We have recently had approval through the federal government to establish the Country Universities Centre. We are one of only two councils this year in Queensland that have been awarded that opportunity. That means there will be four country universities in Queensland altogether. There is Balonne and Longreach, and Mount Isa has just been awarded along with Cooktown. Cooktown's centre, which will be established shortly, will be an attracter for people from all over the cape. It is funded to have a centre manager and to have properly set up computers and all those sorts of things. Again, we are thinking of the opportunity to expand educational services. A student—whether they are a young student or a mature age student—will be able to study pretty much any course in Australia from a choice of 90 universities from within Cooktown. The ability to come into Cooktown means there is all of that social fabric.



**Mr Scott:** I want to mention Weipa again because it is so important to us and it is so important that we get that road through to Weipa and finalise some good access, particularly over Myall Creek. Weipa is the biggest population centre on Cape York. It is far and away the biggest contributor to gross regional product with the mine up there. It has the Scherger air base up there, the defence base, which is ready to go at the drop of a hat.

It is the only deepwater port on the west coast of Queensland. It is strategically so valuable, so important. North Queensland Bulk Ports own that harbour and they are looking for other things to do with it now that the mining operation is moving further south, down to Aurukun. They have a new loading facility out there at Thud Point, so they are looking for something to happen there. I know the US Navy have been very interested in sticking their nose in around there too.

It is about aspirations and Weipa's aspiration to become a normalised town. We have been backing them for the last 20 years, as far as I know. We are very keen for that to happen—just to allow the economy to develop there in a normal fashion and also to look at life after the mine, which has a finite time frame as well. Weipa is also the biggest voting bloc in Cape York, sitting up there with about 4,000 people. It is very important to us. Access to it is imperative for everybody across the cape. The evolution of that port I think is a huge opportunity. The most important bit of infrastructure on Cape York by a mile is that deepwater Weipa port. Again, all-round access to it is very much part of our thinking when we are saying, 'Let's push it through.'

**CHAIR:** Lachlan, do you have any questions?

**Mr MILLAR:** All I can say is thank you for allowing us to meet here because I think you have given us some good things to look at. With the chair and James, I think as the deputy chair it is important that we get an on-the-ground look at what is going on. These boys over there did a great job yesterday, but now we are talking to the local government so I thank you.

**CHAIR:** It is appreciated. We set terms of reference and we are basically a public works inquiry to see if we are spending taxpayers' money properly, but there is so much more to it. We have come here and spoken with you and we really appreciate your time so we can hear all of the things that will go in the report. Obviously, this is a private meeting but there are things we have gained here that I think will be of value to the report. We will be in touch, but there has been nothing said here in secret either and it can add a lot of value to the report so the government can look at it to do further and DTMR can look at all of these things.

**Mr Scott:** You really have to bear in mind that it is a regional influence. When I say that, it is not just Cape York either. I am the chair of the regional roads group up here with FNQROC. We do bulk purchasing and bulk contracting for supplies, for chemicals, for bitumen sealing contracts and all those sorts of things. For each dollar that we put into FNQROC we get probably \$23 back as a return on investment. That is Wujal and Hope Vale as well. I will leave it at that.

**Mr MARTIN:** I have one final question. To be honest, I do not actually know the process for Weipa to go from a company town to a normal town. Has there been background discussion on that? Am I opening up a can of worms? I do not know the background but it sounds interesting.

**Mr Scott:** It is a fascinating process. It just means the Weipa community, Rio Tinto and the state government signing off on a bit of paper to normalise it. It has happened all around Australia with mining towns everywhere. We have been looking at it for 18 years. Max Barry from Treasury did a very focused financial assessment of whether it would work or not. We have three or four different models on the table. One was that Weipa become their own shire, but they were not financially sustainable without a lot of support from Rio. The second was that they joined with Aurukun, Napranum and Mapoon and become a little west coast conglomerate there. The Indigenous communities up there are very well looked after under the WCCA agreement, the Western Cape communities collaborative agreement. They get royalties from that. They said, 'No, we don't want to be part of a redneck mining town.'

The third one was to become part of Cook Shire Council, which is just so simple to do, but, again, the assessment from Treasury was that the Cook shire is a basket case, Weipa on its own is a basket case and if you put those two together you are not going to get a positive benefit. The last one was just the status quo, which is the easiest thing for the government and Rio to do. Rio are making a quid and the state government is making a quid. It ain't broke, as far as they are concerned, but there is such strong aspiration from the people of Weipa to become a normalised town and not be so dependent. It is also a pragmatic look into the future—that if the mine suddenly went 'pop', what would happen to us?

**Ms Cardew:** A very practical consideration is the quality of the infrastructure and the general transfer of all of that and how that would be maintained, upgraded, owned and so forth. There is a lot of on-the-ground work that needs to be done. I thought a first stage was ready to be signed off at the end of the last state government term but it was not for some reason.

**Mr Scott:** Rio Tinto actually were the ones that bucked it in the end.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much for coming today. I declare this meeting closed.

**The subcommittee adjourned at 9.54 am.**