



TRANSPORT AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr SR King MP—Chair
Mr LL Millar MP
Mr BW Head MP
Mr JR Martin MP
Mr SJ Minnikin MP
Mr LA Walker MP

Staff present:

Dr J Rutherford—Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—PUBLIC WORKS INQUIRY INTO THE STATE CONTROLLED ROADS BETWEEN BIRDSVILLE AND BEDOURIE AND FROM BIRDSVILLE TO WINDORAH

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Thursday, 17 August 2023

Birdsville

THURSDAY, 17 AUGUST 2023

The committee met at 10.25 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's public works inquiry into state controlled roads from Birdsville to Bedourie and Birdsville to Windorah. Thank you for your interest and your attendance here today. I start by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet and pay our respects to elders past and present. I acknowledge any representatives who may be present or who may turn up from the Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation, the Wangkangurru Yarluyandi Aboriginal Corporation and the Mulligan River Aboriginal Corporation.

My name is Shane King. I am the member for Kurwongbah and chair of the committee. With me here today are: Lachlan Millar, the member for Gregory and our deputy chair; Bryson Head, the member for Callide; James Martin, the member for Stretton; Les Walker, the member for Mundingburra; and Steve Minnikin, the member for Chatsworth, who is also the shadow minister for customer service and the shadow minister for transport and main roads and is substituting for the member for Toowoomba North for this event. On 22 May 2023, the Transport and Resources Committee resolved to conduct a public works inquiry into state controlled roads from Birdsville to Bedourie and Birdsville to Windorah. The purpose of today's hearing is to assist us with our consideration of this inquiry.

The committee's proceedings are proceedings of the Queensland parliament and are subject to the standing rules and orders of the parliament. We will not require evidence to be given under oath, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. You should have been provided with a copy of instructions for witnesses so we will take those as being read. The proceedings are being recorded by Hansard. Media may be present. I do not know if they are, but if so they will be subject to my direction at all times. All those present today should note that during the proceedings it is possible you might be filmed or photographed by the media and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I remind everyone to turn mobile phones to silent or off. The answers to any questions taken on notice should be provided to the committee by 4 pm on Thursday, 31 August 2023, which is a week from today.

LOLLBACK, Mr Mike, Chief Executive Officer, Barcoo Shire Council

O'NEIL, Ms Sally, Mayor, Barcoo Shire Council

PITMAN, Mr Bill, Group Manager, Operational Works, Barcoo Shire Council

CHAIR: I now welcome witnesses from the Barcoo Shire Council. You may like to make an opening statement, after which we will have some questions for you.

Ms O'Neil: Thank you for the invitation to present before the committee today. With me today are the Barcoo Shire Council Chief Executive Officer, Mike Lollback, and the Group Manager of Operational Works, Bill Pitman, who is directly responsible for the Barcoo Shire Council's roads program. We appear here today as we view upgrades to the Diamantina and Birdsville developmental roads as critical and long overdue. In particular, as per the committee's terms of reference, I would like to discuss with you the Diamantina Developmental Road from the intersection with the Birdsville Developmental Road near Morney to Windorah; the Birdsville Developmental Road from Birdsville to the intersection of the Diamantina Developmental Road; and the Diamantina Developmental Road from King Creek to Bedourie.

As the mayor and a local of the Barcoo shire, I want to firstly give you an overview of the continually increasing use of those roads over the past several years. For many Australians, a visit to Birdsville has become a highlight road trip. For those travelling from south-eastern Australia, this means travelling through Windorah and using the Diamantina and Birdsville developmental roads. Australia's famous grey nomads travel in great numbers throughout the year. They visit events such as the Birdsville Races; the Big Red Bash; the Birdsville bronco branding, campdraft and rodeo; the Birdsville Horse and Motorbike Gymkhana; the Bedourie campdraft and rodeo; the Bedourie horse races and camel races; and the Betoota races.

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Beyond these events, the lure of a visit to Birdsville continues to see ever-increasing numbers make the iconic trip. The three townships in the Barcoo shire of Stonehenge, Jundah and Windorah have seen increases in traveller numbers in recent years. During the COVID pandemic those numbers increased significantly, and increases continue. Visitors to our visitor information centres and the council owned and operated roadhouse at Jundah grow year by year.

The Diamantina and Birdsville developmental roads are in part the main transport corridor from South-East Queensland to both Birdsville and Bedourie. This means that large-scale and critical transport is required and is constantly using the road. This includes both freight and stock transport to many rural properties within the Barcoo and Diamantina shires and supplies to Birdsville and Bedourie. The inadequate and inconsistent standard of the road presents dangers to all road users. The roadway is the cause of countless occasions of damage to vehicles including broken windscreens, tyres and undercarriage damage. Even the most experienced drivers on these roadways find them difficult. This is manifest for the many tourists and those who have limited experience on single-lane bitumen, gravel roads and constantly changing road widths.

Closures on the unsealed sections of the roadway are common and ongoing, particularly after rainfall. Even minor falls of rain result in road damage and frequent closures. Since August 2022 to the present time, there have been 25 full closures on the roadway between Windorah and Morney and 22 full closures on the roadway between Windorah and Birdsville. In addition, the roadway has had restricted use to four-wheel drive vehicles only on 17 occasions between Windorah and Morney and 28 occasions between Morney and Birdsville.

The Barcoo Shire Council is proud of its work crews and the standard of works that are undertaken on both state and local roads. The agreement that the shire has with the department of transport through our road maintenance performance contracts makes us jointly responsible for the good order of the road. Maintaining these roads represents an ongoing and expensive challenge.

Since September 2022, further complexities have been encountered with decisions by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries to only relicence 14 of Barcoo shire's 88 endorsed quarry areas, aligned with an interpretation of the Native Title Act. Since then, council has worked with DAF and traditional owners to have 43 of the shire's pits operating under an interim agreement. This is a contentious issue for councils across Queensland, and real impacts on the cost of road maintenance are occurring due to the significantly increased distances to transport gravel. It follows that the ongoing maintenance of the roads, which is the subject of this inquiry, will see increased costs in the transport of gravel in the coming years unless this matter is resolved.

I would like to give you an overview of the maintenance works that Barcoo shire has carried out on the Diamantina and Birdsville developmental roads between Windorah and Bedourie and from Morney to Birdsville over the past five years under the RMPC. On the Windorah-Bedourie section of road, which is 109 kilometres, Barcoo Shire Council has completed shoulder grading across each year to a total cost of \$1.263 million. On the Morney-Birdsville section during the same period, council has undertaken gravel resheeting to a total of \$2.643 million and formation grading to a total of \$2.498 million. In all, \$6.405 million worth of work has been undertaken by the Barcoo Shire Council. The road maintenance program delivered by Barcoo Shire Council is considered by DTMR as being of the highest standard.

I bring to your attention the many and varied types of roads that exist between Windorah and the Diamantina shire and on the Diamantina and Birdsville developmental roads. We actually have a map here if anyone would like to have a look. The 108.9 kilometres between Windorah and the intersection of the Birdsville and Diamantina developmental roads is primarily a four-metre seal. The Birdsville Developmental Road from that intersection to the border of the Diamantina shire is 89.3 kilometres long. There are several sections of wide sealed road and unsealed sections: 36.26 kilometres has a wide six- or eight-metre seal, whilst 62.64 kilometres remains unsealed. The Diamantina Developmental Road from Windorah to the Diamantina border has 46.7 kilometres of unsealed road.

Those areas of unsealed road represent a real challenge for council in not only meeting its funding obligations but constant and regular repairs to sections of road that are constantly damaged. The size and type of vehicles—particularly large road trains and vehicles towing caravans—damage the road regardless of rainfall or otherwise. Recently, after the Big Red Bash, council crews remained onsite to repair road damage for eight days beyond the scheduled allotment for that job, delaying the commencement of other works under council's RMPC. If this road were to have a consistent wide seal between eight and 10 metres, that maintenance and overall cost would in the long term be

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reduced. This is not to say that costs in repair and maintenance would be eliminated. Maintenance and repair would always exist on these and any other roads, but the constant and ongoing works to render the road safe would reduce significantly.

Through feedback from travellers, the Barcoo Shire Council hears about the challenges people face due to the inconsistent build of the road. Council road crews regularly travel the roads to check for damage and effect minor repairs. I ask that efforts be made to: expedite a consistent eight- to 10-metre sealed road from Windorah to Birdsville and Windorah to Bedourie; upgrade the roadway in known areas of consistent flooding inundation, such as the Farrars, to reduce the period of road closures; and fence in areas of high numbers of feral animals and/or stock without cost burden on local landowners.

As the mayor of Barcoo shire, I respectfully ask the committee to consider the matters I have raised with you. It is my view, on behalf of the residents and travellers travelling through the Barcoo shire, that both the Diamantina and Birdsville developmental roads should be safe and reflective of the high use they receive. The roads which are the subject of this inquiry are simply not fit for purpose. I also ask that this committee consider the entirety of the Diamantina Developmental Road. I particularly refer to that section of roadway from Quilpie to Windorah. Whilst sealed, that portion of road is also a mix of wide overtaking areas but is primarily a four-metre seal. Upgrading those areas of roadway which are the subject of this inquiry without consideration of the stretch between Quilpie and Windorah will be doing a disservice to those same road users. I thank you for your time today. My team and I will take any questions you might have.

CHAIR: That is appreciated. I thank you for the document as well.

Mr MILLAR: Thank you for coming from Barcoo. It is a long way, being five hours to get here. As we have seen with the Diamantina shire, we have had a massive increase in tourism, with the grey nomad caravans and LandCruisers. What impact do you think that has had over the last 10 years on your ability to maintain your part of the road?

Ms O'Neil: I would say it is the cost. We used to get given two lots of funding a year to do the road up before the Birdsville Races and the Big Red Bash. What we find is that, because of the huge volumes of traffic, we need to fix the road after they have been. The local road users, the livestock and the freight are left with a trashed road, so it has doubled the impacts and the costs.

Mr MILLAR: What was that budget figure?

Ms O'Neil: I think it was two lots a year. Is that right, Bill?

Mr Pitman: It was about \$200,000 each. That was from TMR.

Ms O'Neil: To do twice. I think we are back to once now, aren't we?

Mr Pitman: Yes. We are back to one now because they cut it all out. It comes out of the RMPC maintenance now.

Mr MILLAR: So before the Big Red Bash you would get into it, but what you need now is after the Birdsville Races—

Ms O'Neil: No. We have to do it after the Big Red Bash, to put it back.

Mr Pitman: We got all that rain on it and they just chopped it right up.

Ms O'Neil: It was a real mess. Then we have the Birdsville Races coming, so anything that needs touching up there will get fixed again. After the races, we will go back and touch it up again to make it safe.

Mr Lollback: As the mayor mentioned earlier, after the last event—there had been minimal rainfall, not a lot of rainfall—because the road had been so damaged, that meant eight additional days had to be spent on that road. That deflects crews from other critical RMPC works.

CHAIR: That funding was on top of normal maintenance funding for those events?

Ms O'Neil: Yes. It was on top of the RMPC contracts. Now what we are using is the RMPC money to make the road safe. Other roads are getting neglected, of course, because you cannot stretch the money far enough.

CHAIR: There were discussions yesterday about whether a small increase in the ticket price could come back for the roads and particularly the services in the towns. I know that this inquiry is about roads, but obviously there are public toilets, amenities and everything that you have to service that have an increase in use. Do you have thoughts on that?

Ms O'Neil: That was only last year. I am on the board of OQTA. We approached Greg Donovan about clipping the ticket. They were very resistant to it. They did not want to go there. They just said, 'Where do you start and where do you stop? You've got traffic coming in from South Australia on those roads. You've got traffic from Quilpie. How far back do you go? What shires do you start clipping the ticket for?' That was our response but we tried. It was worth a try.

CHAIR: I think it is something worth considering.

Mr MARTIN: I have a question about priorities. We heard from some of the other contributors about which parts of the roads they would prioritise to seal first. It is obviously a very long road and you cannot seal the whole thing in one go. Could you explain to the committee how you think that should occur? Which bits should happen first? Is it the bits that cause the roads to be closed, or is it the low-hanging fruit where you can get a big distance done?

Ms O'Neil: No. Generally with Main Roads we would target the spots that from a rain event, for example, would keep the road closed the longest. Like I said, the Farrars, which is on the Diamantina Developmental Road towards Bedourie just past Morney Plains, can be closed for months. It is just a series of channels from the Diamantina River that come through there and it can be up and down, but if it is over 200 millimetres we have to keep it closed. It can sit there for weeks and weeks and weeks at 200 millimetres. That just needs a series of culverts. I know that Main Roads have been with hydrologists already and have done some research into lifting it just that little bit, and that will reduce that closed time. That is the area you would target first.

CHAIR: Just on the culverts, we also heard yesterday from some property owners that you can build a section of road and then it stops the water getting to them. The culverts would alleviate that; the water would still get through to the property?

Ms O'Neil: Yes, absolutely, so long as they put enough culverts in. I know the issue you are talking about.

Mr MINNIKIN: May I first of all reiterate my thanks to the three of you for coming here today. Five hours here and five hours back is just incredible, so thank you very much for your time. I would like to raise with you a topic dear to my heart, and that is access to gravel. As the three of you know, gravel and water are the two secret ingredients. What is your access to gravel pits like in the Barcoo shire? Is it a real issue going forward for you to try to keep the cost per linear kilometre at a reasonable level, as opposed to extending it by maybe 20 or 30 per cent due to gravel costs? What is the access to gravel like?

Ms O'Neil: As I stated, we recently had 80-odd pits close. Our sales permits expired last year, in October or late September. We were given three weeks notice to not touch our gravel pits. The guys went hell for leather to get as much gravel out as they could to keep the jobs going that they were on, which they did. In the meantime, Mike has been brokering interim agreements with Mithaka—they are very cooperative; we are very lucky we have Mithaka to work with—and DAF while the ILUA are sorted out over the next however many years it takes. We have about half of our pits back. We still have the other half roughly on unallocated land. That is one of our big issues.

Down in the south-west corner, we have a resheet to do on the Arrabury Road and we will have to do extra hundreds and hundreds of tonnes. It will add about half a million dollars to the job to go to gravel pits that we are currently allowed to access, without going to the pits that are there that we cannot touch at the moment. Our other issue is having stockpile material. We had Warwick Agnew visit us at our council meeting yesterday and we explained it to him. Bill said that in our gravel pits we have stockpiled already-pushed-up material that will last us five or six years. We are not allowed to touch it. It is stockpiled. The land is disturbed and it is sitting there, but we cannot touch it. The Arrabury Road project is one where we have a resheet on, plus on 11 October we plan to shut the Windorah Airport for about three months to do an upgrade on the strip. At Currareva pit we have the right amount of material to do the job. We have put a grizzly in there and processed it. It is ready to go for the job. We did that last year, prior to the pits being closed, but now we cannot touch it. That really jeopardises the funding we have to do the job.

We have partial federal funding, state funding and our own funding. I am sure we cannot go back to the funding body and say that it is going to cost us an extra half a million dollars because we have to get gravel from somewhere else now. That will come out of our little savings account that does not have much in it. We are constantly being told to make ourselves as financially sustainable as we possibly can, and things like that happen where project costs are going to get blown out.

Mr MINNIKIN: In relation to costs, then, at the moment, what would an eight-metre-wide, one-kilometre-long road cost per linear kilometre to produce?

Ms O'Neil: A five-kilometre section at the moment costs us about \$3 million.

Mr MINNIKIN: That is \$600,000 a kilometre.

Ms O'Neil: To do 10 kilometres, yes.

Mr Lollback: As the mayor alluded to, we did send some specific costing changes to DAF, to make them aware of it. The Arrabury site work we have had to delay for some time until we can access the gravel that we need. There is an immediate transport cost addition of \$350,000, just in transport. Then we have to re-win the 16,000 cubic metres of gravel that has already been stockpiled specifically for those jobs. As late as yesterday I spoke to the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries again and requested them to speak to the representative bodies of the Aboriginal corporations for south-western Queensland to make a request that we be allowed to remove the stockpiles without further disturbing the land.

To be quite honest, what we are entering into is uncharted waters in terms of the legalities and the application of the Native Title Act in this area. In support of what DAF are doing, they are actually recommending to the Aboriginal body that, under the terms of the legislation, they see that as a viable short-term solution until the brokerage of the necessary agreements can be undertaken.

Mr MINNIKIN: Whilst that is very encouraging, from a legal perspective this issue of gravel access needs to be absolutely worked out for all shires, particularly Barcoo.

Ms O'Neil: We were the first shire in Queensland to have our sales permits expire, with three weeks notice. They did not come to us with a solution. I said to Mike coming here that they should have gone through all of that legislation first and said, 'This is what we have to do but these are some of the solutions. We can do this to make that work for you.' I have a feeling that those people who made this decision did not have a clue of the impacts it was going to have on us. Mike was talking about the extra cost, but the road that we wrecked by driving that extra 200 kilometres we have to go back and fix, too.

Mr MINNIKIN: It is a catch 22.

Ms O'Neil: Yes.

Mr Lollback: We have also asked, as late as yesterday, the director-general of the Department of Resources for the latitude to ask the government to be as courageous as they asked local governments to be in decision-making. They are asking us always to step up, to be financially responsible, to make sure that we make tough decisions in terms of the community. We are asking the government to afford us the same by making some difficult decisions in terms of how we will do this so that you can keep your road program going.

An important thing that we need to add is that the Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation CEO has directly raised with me and DAF that they have never been brought to the table to have the discussions. They found out about the pit closures through locals who abused them on the basis of, 'Why have you closed your pits to the council? You're going to cost us jobs.' There has been an absolute lack of due diligence in the whole process from the starting point. Three weeks notice, without giving us any real legal resource whatsoever and initially telling us it was up to us to broker ILUAs, demonstrates just how convoluted the entire last 11 months of this project have been.

Mr WALKER: Does the outback Regional Roads and Transport Group prioritise the different sealing of roads? A question was asked earlier about how you cherrypick those priorities.

Ms O'Neil: I was the director of works so I was in a technical committee and now I am in the strategic committee. Unsealed roads are a priority 1 because we believe that every community should have a sealed road to it. Then your four-metre seals become your next priority. Then I think it might be sixes. There are three priorities and about four or five different hierarchies in that road map.

Mr WALKER: Is that four-metre seal what you really want to go for? We also talk about sixes and eights.

Ms O'Neil: No, I mean just an upgrade of four-metre. Go from four to 10 or four to eight or whatever. Anything that is currently unsealed is a priority 1. Anything that is a four-metre-wide seal or a three—we have some threes that are narrow—

Mr WALKER: For the record, you are saying that if there is an existing four then it is targeted to make it a six?

Ms O'Neil: No, eight or 10. I do believe Main Roads now are saying 10 only.

Mr Pitman: Main Roads say eight metres or 10?

Ms O'Neil: I believe since Gavin Hill came in, he told me that. They were doing eights, but they said while they were there—

Mr WALKER: So the new standard is 10; is that what you are saying?

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Ms O'Neil:—they might as well just do a 10 moving forward.

Mr WALKER: That is good to know. There has been a lot of confusion because we have seen fours, we have seen some new seals and then you see it step out again to a 10. Thank you for that.

Ms O'Neil: Moving forward, I believe that it is 10. If we do a section, whether we do a rehab—like the one that we did at Morney; that is 10.

Mr WALKER: It makes more sense, Chair, because you keep mentioning the line mark in the middle. If we go on the 10, that really helps.

Ms O'Neil: And it protects the shoulders when you have two road trains passing and they have to give themselves a bit of space. When you go only to six, which is good because two vehicles can pass, the shoulders get chopped out, which means that we have to do a lot of medium formation grading for maintenance along the sides just to keep those shoulders together. If you go to 10 metres it is protected and all you have to do is clean the sides of the road just for grass and shrubs to make it safe.

Mr WALKER: That is critical information. Thank you for that.

Mr MARTIN: Following on from questions on the gravel pits, you mentioned you negotiated some interim agreements.

Ms O'Neil: Correct.

Mr MARTIN: For the benefit of the committee, can you outline the process—how that negotiation works and what it looks like?

Ms O'Neil: I will let Mike answer that. He did all of that.

Mr Lollback: Where there is native title ownership on land—and 'ownership' I use in the broad term in terms of the act—you are obliged to undertake an ILUA, a local agreement. However, there are provisions to put an interim agreement in place. In the process we undertook to have the 43 pits that we currently have licensed, 14 of those were on lands that had already been resolved so we had 14 on road reserves et cetera.

Initially we were asked to do it ourselves but we introduced them to the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. Both the Boonthamurra people and the Mithaka people introduced to us a limited term agreement. In our case, it expires on 1 January; however, there is the possibility of an extension beyond that. As I am sure the committee is well aware, ILUAs do not happen overnight. Even ones that are not contested can take some time because of the legal processes involved. We anticipate that we will probably see an extension on those pits probably until mid to late 2024.

Mr HEAD: Thank you, Barcoo, for coming. You live in a great part of the world. I am curious: of the last few years of works, the last decade where there has been a bit more money invested in sealing certain sections, have you seen any measurable improvement in access to the west since the works have been done or has it not got to a point where you have been able to identify those improvements for wet-weather access?

Ms O'Neil: I would say it is too patchwork to say it has made some significant improvement. Like I said, that road from Quilpie to Windorah is four-metre sealed but it is seriously shocking. There was a fatality on it a few years ago just before the Big Red Bash, through traffic. You would have driven it, Lachlan. It is not a good road and that is the entrance into the roads that we are talking about now. That is the lead into it.

Up to Quilpie, the road is great. Out to Charleville and Quilpie it is a great road, and that is where the bulk of the traffic comes through. Once you get to Quilpie, the road narrows down and all the way you have little bits of overtaking. The sad thing is that tourists—grey nomads, caravanners, whoever they are—do not know how to drive on roads and share them with road trains. They really need educating, because these roads are not designed for either of them to go past one another. They will not get off for a road train. I have sat behind them and gone, 'This is about to turn messy.'

CHAIR: Education has been raised a few times. Everyone is sick of signage but it needs to be there. We travelled some of these roads yesterday, and it was good that we did so that we could see what you are talking about.

Mr Lollback: Chair, it is really a case that there needs to be more than just buy a \$150,000 Viscount caravan. There needs to be something in the licensing provisions, because there is absolutely no understanding from most people. In answer to your question earlier, the numbers have definitely increased and they are increasing. However, not a week goes by when we do not have travellers coming into the council depot looking for private works to be done for repairs to their vehicles. The romance of the trip to Birdsville sours very quickly on the third broken windscreen.

CHAIR: We heard about tyres and so on from the service station proprietor yesterday.

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Ms O'Neil: And welding and boilermakers, yes.

Mr HEAD: There is only ever so much available at any given time or that is allocated to different works. A key focus of this inquiry is the works that have been done and what could have been done better so that we can learn from that going forward. Have there been little bits of money allocated that have been spent in an area and you, as a shire, have said, 'We have to put it down here because there is not enough to do a project that we would rather do'? Have there been bits of money for patchworks? We heard yesterday that it should be prioritised to the areas that hold the road up in a bit of wet weather—a couple of the claypans and things like that. Have you received funding that you were forced to put down when you would have rather prioritised it in other areas, or did you have a fair bit of freedom there?

Ms O'Neil: I could not agree with that, no. It is actually through our roads group that we have a prioritisation tool. Those roads are already sitting in there waiting, five years or 10 years down the track. They have been identified, in conjunction with Main Roads and the shires, as to what sections we want next. Those sections of road are sitting there waiting for funding, in that tool. Through RAPAD, the seven regions, we get to have our turn. That next job gets ticked off and that is what we go off and do. I would not say that they have done sections of road and everyone has shaken their head and said, 'Why would they do that over that other bit?' I would not say that has happened because we have been part of that decision.

Mr Lollback: Importantly, though, it is finite funding. We would like to do a lot more with more funding as far as improving the standard of the road. What we tend to do—and I will use the dreadful term—is almost like the 'regular suspects'. We are continually fixing flood damage and rain damage. After 2011 and the Brisbane floods, the whole process of betterment in repair became a key component of the funding sources. It just seems to fly in the face of common sense that, when you are looking at road maintenance, we are continually fixing rather than improving the roadways, and that is where the funding seems to go in its entirety.

CHAIR: And the improved road is more resilient.

Mr Lollback: Absolutely.

Mr HEAD: So if they just add another \$10 million on each time they give you some money then you will have it done a lot quicker.

Mr Lollback: Driving out here it is quite clear that there is a lot of road to do, but unless there is a project and a plan put in place then it is never going to happen. It is never going to start. I think that is what our argument is: there needs to be some surety that there is a—I do not know—10-year plan for this road to be upgraded to a standard that will be safe for all users, particularly when you have those compounding problems of large road trains, different seals, inexperienced and experienced drivers, and the sheer transport for the supplies that are needed in communities such as this.

Mr MILLAR: You get better bang for your buck out here when you seal roads because it is a good pavement to seal a road. Where I come from, in the Central Highlands, we have blacksoil and basically the road lasts only a finite time and you have to go back and do it again. However, if you seal these roads once then they are sealed and there is likely to be very little maintenance.

Ms O'Neil: I would have to agree. Once you go back to the Longreach-Jundah road subgrade and you get into that blacksoil, those roads do not last. If you go from Stonehenge back on that red cap rock country, you have great subgrade. To build a road on that you are good for a lot longer, I would imagine.

Mr MILLAR: Do it once and do it right.

Ms O'Neil: I do not know the exact time frame for how long it would last, but you can see that roads on blacksoil would not last like they would on this hard country.

Mr MILLAR: Do you think the hierarchy understands that philosophy out here, that if we seal that road now it will remain very cheap to operate going into the future?

Ms O'Neil: I do not think that would be incorporated into the prioritisation at all. I do not think that is one consideration of the subgrade, no.

Mr Lollback: There are a few arguments that always exist when it comes to large-scale spending for roads such as the ones we are talking about. They include the terms of government, the amount of money that is available at a given time—all of those things come into play. The road to Bedourie and Birdsville all the way from Quilpie is now a very different road to what it was 20 years ago in terms of its usage. Whereas a lot of the roadworks that occur in South-East Queensland are

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about traffic congestion and improving traffic flow et cetera, the improvement of the roads out here is about increasing the overall safety and capacity of the roads to deal with not just—this is why the mayor highlighted it—matters that are attached to special events but an ongoing array. We passed half a dozen caravans just outside on the road out here. Without sounding overly dramatic, it is a heart-in-your-throat situation: ‘Are we going to lose a windscreen now?’ That is the reality of these roads.

Mr MILLAR: We had that yesterday.

Mr MINNIKIN: We lost one yesterday with the mayor of Diamantina.

Mr MILLAR: We lost one with the mayor’s car.

CHAIR: You lost a windscreen?

Mr MINNIKIN: A big stone chip.

Mr Lollback: It is not necessarily a bad thing to have happened to you—and I say that with all due respect—to see the reality of life out here. Even from a council perspective, we spend more money on replacing windscreens than just about any other level of maintenance on our vehicles.

Mr WALKER: The mayor slowed down!

CHAIR: In line with the terms of reference, which is value for money and whether government money is being well spent, what you have highlighted makes absolute sense. You spend the money to seal the roads and it saves money later. That does really resonate.

Ms O’Neil: Those figures I had—I think it was \$6.2 million that we have spent on maintenance just on that road over the last five years—

CHAIR: That \$6 million would have been for 10 kilometres.

Ms O’Neil: That is 10 kilometres that we would not go back to for 10 years.

CHAIR: I think that point is well made. Are there any other things that you would like to get off your chest at the moment, for want of a better term?

Ms O’Neil: No, I think we have been there. We have the gravel pits in. That is good.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. I know it is such a long drive. We do really appreciate it.

Mr WALKER: In your network of roads, are any Royal Flying Doctor Service airstrips in your section?

Ms O’Neil: Yes.

Mr WALKER: We saw one before we got to your border.

Ms O’Neil: Yes, we have a couple. We have another one towards Windorah, between Morney and Windorah. We have one at Moothandella, which is between Windorah and Quilpie. They are the main roads ones. Then we have one at Warbreccan which is on a shire road.

Mr WALKER: We heard yesterday there is a new standard for the width. They are asking for a bit more width now.

Mr Lollback: They have new aircraft coming in, the King Air 360s. They will probably not be out here for another 12 to 18 months, but even at our airports at Windorah and Stonehenge we have to do some modifications and get some more regular checking on them. Yes, they have spoken about having the roads extended so that those larger craft can land. We have about 12 to 18 months notice on those and the Department of Transport and Main Roads are aware of that.

Ms O’Neil: Our strips are wide enough, though, aren’t they?

Mr Lollback: Our strips are wide enough for the current craft.

Ms O’Neil: Not for the 360s?

Mr Lollback: They may not be for the 360s, so they have to be completely reserviced by our provider, Jasko, just to determine that they fit the necessary provisions that are needed for these new 360s.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Thank you all once again for your participation. We really appreciate it. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript and it will also be published on the committee’s webpage. I declare the hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 11.03 am.