

Public Works Inquiry into the state controlled roads from Birdsville to Bedourie and Birdsville to Windorah

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13 July 2023

Transport and Resources Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000
trc@parliament.qld.gov.au

Attention: Shane King MP

Dear Shane,

RE: PUBLIC WORKS INQUIRY INTO THE STATE-CONTROLLED ROADS FROM BIRDSVILLE TO BEDOURIE AND BIRDSVILLE TO WINDORAH

On behalf of the Diamantina Shire Council, thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the public works inquiry with regard to the works on the state-controlled roads from Birdsville to Bedourie and Birdsville to Windorah.

The Birdsville to Bedourie (Eyre Developmental Road & Diamantina Developmental Road) and Birdsville to Windorah (Birdsville Developmental Road & Diamantina Developmental Road) are roads of critical importance that allow access through the Channel Country of Western Queensland. The townships of Bedourie & Birdsville are located significant distances from the closest urban centres, Birdsville to Adelaide (1171km) is closer than Birdsville to Brisbane (1579km)! Diamantina Shire residents regularly travel to Mt Isa, Adelaide or to Toowoomba for medical appointments, bulk supplies and many other health and recreational activities that are not available in the region.

The below information is related to the sections of the road that are located within the Diamantina Shire boundaries.

Bedourie – Birdsville:

Eyre Development Road – Birdsville to Intersection near King Creek. This road is 164km long, with 148km of seal and 16km of gravel road remaining to be sealed. A significant amount of pave and seal works has been undertaken in the last decade resulting in this link being nearly all sealed.

Diamantina Developmental Road – King Creek Intersection to Bedourie is 22km in length and this section of road is fully sealed.

Birdsville – Windorah:

Birdsville Developmental Road – Birdsville to the intersection with the Diamantina Development Road near Morney is 265km in total, with 183.5km falling within Diamantina Shire. Within Diamantina Shire, only 47.35km of the road is sealed, with 136.15km still maintained as a gravel road.

Diamantina Development Road – Intersection with Diamantina Developmental Road (near Morney) to Windorah is 180km in length. This section of road falls completely within Barcoo Shire.

- a) The stated purpose of the works and the apparent suitability of the purpose of works.

As a large portion of the roads are unsealed gravel roads, the majority of work undertaken is maintenance activities as required by the Department of Transport and Main Roads (DTMR). Due to the large increase in traffic volumes throughout the tourist season, these gravel sections are significantly damaged on a regular

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Mike Hayward

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MH:SB:20230712:247016

YOUR REFERENCE:

basis resulting in increased maintenance requirements between major community events such as the Big Red Bash and Birdsville Races. The largely unsealed road between Birdsville and Windorah is not fit for purpose for the large numbers of tourism and freight traffic that this road is required to support. This gravel road is susceptible to wet weather and as of the date of this letter, the Birdsville – Windorah Road has been open with no restrictions for only 61% of the calendar year so far.

Over the last decade, a significant amount of pave and seal works on the Bedourie – Birdsville road has seen this link nearly completely sealed (16km remaining). When this link is sealed it could be considered fit for purpose. This will provide a sealed link to Birdsville for the first time and will enable continued growth in tourism and improved resilience to rainfall events and flooding. This road is also susceptible to wet weather and as of the date of this letter, the Bedourie – Birdsville Road has been open with no restrictions for only 10% of the calendar year so far.

The poor reliability of both of these links has massive implications for tourism/ freight/ productivity and accessibility to health services.

b) The necessity for, and advisability of, the works:

The upgrade works completed to date on the Bedourie – Birdsville link has made a significant improvement to the link and meet the requirements of not only Diamantina Shire Council but also the Outback Regional Roads and Transport Group (ORRTG). The ORRTG consists of 7 Local Governments in the region, including DTMR and has collectively Categorized the Eyre Developmental Road as an Investment Priority 1 road due to the significance of the link. The works are still not complete and additional funding is required to completely seal Bedourie – Birdsville.

In reference to the Birdsville – Windorah Road, very little upgrade work has been done on this road. The last pave and seal project on this link was in 2018, when 1km was sealed on the outskirts of Birdsville. The capital investment in this road, excluding maintenance, has been negligible for many years. Significant funding is required to pave and seal this link to provide a more resilient link that is fit for purpose. The ORRTG has categorized this road as an Investment Priority 2 road for the region.

c) Value for money achieved, or likely to be achieved, by the works;

Diamantina Shire Council achieve remarkable value for money and cost-effectiveness when performing contract maintenance or construction works for DTMR. By utilising internal plant and labour and local contractors where required, large mobilization costs of contractors based in eastern areas are avoided.

Council also has arrangements in place (such as Council owned gravel pits and water points) to access and utilize water and gravel resources at convenient locations along the road, which greatly reduces material supply costs by minimizing haulage distances.

d) Revenue produced by, and recurrent costs of, the works or estimates of revenue and costs for the works;

The Big Red Bash and Birdsville Races generate several million dollars of revenue every year. Once road upgrade works are complete, the revenue from tourism is projected to increase dramatically. Savings from the reduction in travel time and vehicle operation for road users are several million dollars per year.

e) The present and prospective public value of the works, including, for example, consideration of the impact of the works on their community, economy and environment;

Economics:

Tourism and livestock are the primary industries that support the economic growth in the Central West Region. The two major annual events – Big Red Bash and Birdsville races alone brought over 18,500 visitors to the Shire in 2019. The majority of the tourists (83%) travelled by private vehicle, and as the road network becomes accessible to more types of vehicles through the construction of sealed roads these numbers are projected to increase.

Stations within Diamantina Shire are famous for contaminant-free natural beef. However, the lengthy travel time and high freight costs due to the unsealed road network result in limited market access. In addition, the Eyre Developmental Road is a popular route for cattle from Mt Isa to cities in Southeast Queensland. Improving road conditions will allow for livestock to be transported efficiently and safely to the wider Australian market.

Liveability:

Completion of the upgrade works on these roads will have the following benefits for residents in the communities:

- a. Basic access to goods and services will be provided to towns efficiently.
- b. Provide access to social, recreational and sports services and infrastructure such as swimming pools and libraries.
- c. Provide consistent and reliable transportation to boarding schools for children's education (Bedourie & Birdsville only have primary school from Prep up to year 6).
- d. Provide access to non-emergent/ specialist, medical services in Mt Isa or Longreach
- e. Improve community cohesion between neighbouring towns
- f. Travellers have the option to use roads for transportation to avoid costly air travel expenses.

Travel Safety:

Vehicles travelling on unsealed roads are more susceptible to damage due to the flying rocks and uneven running surface, resulting in chipped/ cracked windscreens and damaged chassis/ suspension and tyres. Also, increased traffic volumes create large amounts of dust, which reduces visibility, this becomes a major factor in the tourist season and presents a high risk of incidents, especially for those travellers not experienced in driving on gravel roads. Unfortunately, yet again this year Council has become aware of another family on their way to the Big Red Bash involved in a vehicle incident caused by low visibility due to dust.

During flood seasons or isolated rain events, vehicles can get bogged on wet or slippery sections if unprepared, also being cut off due to flood waters is a significant risk when travelling.

- f) Procurement methods for the works

Works undertaken on these roads are procured by DTMR through sole invitee tender arrangements with Diamantina Shire, as Council has the required local knowledge and workforce to undertake the works within a timely manner while maintaining the quality required given the remote location and limited resources within the region.

Diamantina Shire typically undertakes work with their own workforce supplemented with local contractors from the region. Any specialist works that Council is unable to undertake in-house, like bitumen surfacing or larger concrete structures, are released to open tender and awarded in accordance with Council's procurement policies and the Local Government Act.

- g) The balance of public and private sector involvement in the works.

As mentioned above in (f), both the public and private sectors are involved in these projects at varying levels.

- h) Performance of –
 - a. The construction authority for the works

Diamantina Shire contracts DTMR who is the road authority, to undertake these works. DTMR and Council work collaboratively to assess priorities and the scope of works based on the available budget. Materials used in the construction are sourced from the local gravel pits and water points and are of the best quality available. Quality is maintained by using local knowledge in the use of these types of materials that are only gained by years of experience in the Central West Region.

- b. The consultants and contractors for the works; with regard to the time taken for finishing the works and their costs and quality of the works.

During the pave and seal upgrade projects undertaken from 2019 – 2022, a total of 45km of new bitumen road was constructed and delivered for \$ 15.4 million. This equates to \$342,000 per km of pave and seal road construction which is exceptional value for money and a result of the efficiencies achieved by Council.

Between 2019 – 2022 all five projects were delivered, which is a significant achievement for Council, given the overall size of the available workforce. An additional challenge encountered was that the projects had to be planned around flood seasons (late November – early April). During the four years, these projects were under construction, at least four major flood events occurred, which resulted in either delays to the commencement of projects or delays caused by these sites being inaccessible.

Council managed and coordinated a range of resources, including internal staff and local contractors and consultants, to ensure the works were completed within time/ quality and budget constraints.

- i) The actual suitability of the works in meeting the needs and in achieving the stated purpose of the works.

As all projects have been constructed to the standard required by DTMR the net result is an increase in the overall condition and resiliency of the network. The works that have been constructed are fit for purpose, however, more funding is required to complete the sealing of both links.

Yours faithfully



Mike Hayward
INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Enclosures : (1)

CC: 1. Mayor, Cr Robbie Dare 