

Submission

Avalon Estate, Thornton and the New England Highway

Executive Summary

This submission is specific to the Avalon Estate, Thornton, starting at Avalon Drive, approximately 100 metres from the new Weakley's Drive Intersection, however the author is aware there are a number of other communities along the New England Highway that this relates to.

3.2 What are the Problems?

- About 20 years ago at least one if not two children died crossing the New England Highway to catch the school bus between Weakley's Drive and Avalon Drive. As I was not a resident at the time, I am unsure of the date, but it was a case of older children crossing the highway to get to school.
- It is impossible even with 60km limits currently set for road works to cross the highway by foot during peak periods. One of my staff who does not drive (a neighbour who crosses the highway often during non-peak periods) offered to take my children across the road one day by foot to catch the 7.45am bus so I could attend a business event. The children (aged 6 and 8) and she got across the road well in time, however by the peak time of 7.50am, after the bus had left, she had to wait 30 minutes to get back across the highway and in the end had to end up calling her parents to pick her up in a car.
- Earlier this year I underwent serious abdominal surgery and was unable to drive for six weeks. During this time I had to rely on the kindness of friends and relatives to take my children over the road to catch the bus. Most of the families in our estate that have their children catch the bus have them go to Newcastle to ensure that the children do not have to cross the Highway to come home in the afternoon when it is likely that there would be occasions there would not be parents available to meet them.
- The Estate is totally land locked by the highway and no other road or pedestrian walkway is available to move traffic or people out of the estate.
- Last year there was a major accident involving the Westpac Helicopter on the road, and involved two fatalities with a car and a truck.
- There is a road pedestrian bridge at Metford which I have never seen anyone use, however Avalon estate residents have nothing.
- In the last year or so a woman died at the intersection of South Seas Drive and the New England Highway and a set of lights was installed, even though these people could go further down the highway to Maitland and join at these traffic lights. No such solution has been offered to the residents of Spotted Gum Grove.
- Visibility at the end of Spotted Gum Grove, which adjoins Avalon Drive and the New England Highway is poor and there is often scope for cars to be hit as they come out of Spotted Gum Grove as there is no stop sign at the end of Spotted Gum Grove.
- We have been advised that the RTA is looking at stopping right turns out of the Avalon Estate, however this was overwhelmingly rejected in the secondary development of the Avalon estate when it was approved by Maitland City Council earlier this century. I attended a public access in about 2003 to address the Council on this matter. I was told that this

was just an option and nothing had been determined to make this a fait accompli. Indeed, turn out lane and turn in lanes from Avalon Drive were extended to assist traffic exiting and entering the estate.

- My company, Northern Highland Travel is moving out of the estate, for the reasons of growth but also because we are concerned about possible deaths as we have a large number of older people who come to our depot.

3.3 What are the impacts of these problems?

The actual and potential death of children and adults. This area has a record of approximately 30 deaths in 30 years, a figure quoted by the former member for Maitland and Waratah, the Hon John Price, MP in a speech to the NSW Parliament.

There are other economic impacts, for instance, my company is having to make an investment of some \$2 million dollars to move across the highway, as we cannot risk a death of an older passenger trying to access the highway from our road. In addition, our buses will find it very difficult to make their way across the highway when the traffic speeds return to normal once the roadworks are completed.

In terms of social impacts, people on the estate are less likely to walk to the Thornton Railway station or to the bus stops or over to the industrial estate because of the risk of death or injury on the highway. This will result in increasingly bad health outcomes for them as they become more overweight and less fit as they lose opportunities for passive exercise. It is universally acknowledged that pedestrians and public transport users have better health outcomes.

Children who live in the estate who attend private schools in the Newcastle area in order to facilitate road access over the highway are less likely to be able to form strong out of school relationships with neighbours and also school friends, leading to more social isolation and other negative social outcomes.

Regardless of the financial, economic or social impacts of the traffic problems, the most serious, and the one which has motivated this submission is the real probability of further deaths from the estate if the issue is not addressed.

3.4 How did these problems come about?

The traffic lights at Weakleys Drive served an important role in slowing the traffic down and providing gaps for traffic exiting the Avalon estate. With the completion of the overpass, scheduled for 3am on Friday 10 October 2008, the traffic lights will be surplus to requirements and the gap will no longer exist.

I attended the Community Cabinet Meeting at Lambton High School and met with Minister Anthony Albanese who suggested that I address my concerns to the Infrastructure Australia and Lower Hunter Transport Needs Study.

These issues were reported in the Maitland Mercury that week, and

also earlier on the 19th of August 2008 in the Maitland Mercury. At that time the Member for Maitland, Mr Frank Terenzini MP advised the Mercury of the following:

Maitland MP Frank Terenzini said the overpass was designed to limit traffic stoppages.

But he said his first priority was safety for motorists and pedestrians around the Avalon Drive intersection with the highway.

"First and foremost the RTA will be looking at the intersection – the residents fear that when the Weakleys Drive overpass is finished, there's going to be traffic coming through at higher speeds," he said.

"The RTA will determine whether that intersection is adequate or whether it needs upgrading.

"The RTA will also be looking at options for pedestrians and there will be a public consultation process before the completion of the overpass at the end of the year."

I am not aware of any public consultation process starting, and the overpass is due to be used first tomorrow morning (Friday 10th October 2008) at 3am.

3.5 What can we do?

- A set of pelican lights during peak hour would assist parents in getting their children to school in the morning.
- Pedestrian Foot Bridge would enable students and others to walk across the highway.
- A set of traffic lights for cars would be helpful. Whilst the aim of the Weakley's Drive overpass was to get rid of traffic lights across the highway, it is important that those people who live in areas that cannot access the Highway from other traffic light areas should be given an option.

I understand the concerns regarding taking more time for through traffic to get through the area of the highway, however the Government needs to prioritise human life over time spent commuting.

Basically it is a no win argument for the Government as if estate is too small and the number of motorists do not justify the lights, then installing them would not make a large impact on the traffic flow anyway, so they should be installed. Conversely, if the estate is too large, and the delays in traffic will be large, then it is definitely is an urgent problem and traffic lights should be installed.

I have raised this issue with Peter Blackmore the Mayor of Maitland and he advised me that a warrant would need to be undertaken to assess the need for the lights. I believe that any action which could lead to a quicker resolution of the problem should be attempted.

- As there is no other option for Avalon Estate Residents to get out, the RTA should stop talking of removing the right hand turn out of the

estate, as this would mean that people would then attempt u-turns at the Heritage Gardens intersection down the road, near the 4 Mile Creek. The effect of this would be to move the problem down the road.

3.6 Given the situation, what should be done first?

As school returns from holidays on Monday the 13th of October it is urgent that the Government address the safety of young children and all residents of the Avalon estate. It is vital that the Government install some temporary traffic lights at the Avalon Drive intersection, pending the outcome of a warrant and installation of pedestrian overpass, pelican lights or ideally, permanent traffic lights.