



## **Bypass Corridor Subcommittee Final Report**

**Eight years ago, the RTA Began the first of the consultations with the community up the Camden Haven High School at Kew.**

In these 1999 and 2000 early meetings, the main issues were, as they are today, the impact to residences and businesses in Johns River and surrounding agricultural properties.

As you can all imagine, through the many years since, almost all issues and opinions have been expressed and we think it's important for all of us to briefly go over how our village of Johns River has been represented with the bypass.

In the community focus group meeting of March 2000, preservation issues were discussed. The high significance of the Brother Mountains was identified, and it was discussed that the upgrade would follow along the existing route at the base of Middle Brother mountain. Stewarts River, Stoney Creek, and Camden Haven River were all designated as significant waterways.

By May of 2001, environmental impacts of the four route options through Johns River were explored, and the first Value Management Workshop was set up specifically for Johns River, with our own community members meeting up here at the school.

This Johns River village group included our postie Joe Melvecino from Isaac's Lane, Daintree Gerrand and Rod Heath from Wharf Road, and the former store owner, Col Anderson. They met week after week with the RTA to hash out local issues and to represent all of us in the process.

Many issues were raised at both these early meetings from 1999 to 2001, including median openings, bus and bridge construction too.

### **July 2001: Johns River Bypass Options**

After the four new options were displayed at our General Store, the RTA received almost one hundred submissions, with 10 coming from Johns River across a variety of issues. Community Newsletters were issued by the RTA throughout this process, so Johns River village residents would better understand how their local representatives were involved in the planning process.

The J-D Option was seriously hated by residents of Thomas Street, Sue Malcolm and Bev Yates in particular, as well as that Station Street lot, who immediately started a campaign to fight this option. A short newsletter was circulated and given to the RTA to make the sentiments of the village heart known.

The October 2001 meeting addressed even more issues of community concern, such as RTA policy to avoid cross roads on the new highway (meaning they preferred the Staggered-T configuration), and the possibility of school bus safety pamphlets was raised with the aim of providing them to schools for the advice of parents pick up and dropping off children.

The then-mayor of the Greater Taree City Council, Mick Tuck came with Graham Gardner and met with us all at this hall, and after the formal meeting, we all took a walk around Johns River, going down to the rail line to look at that option, then along the main street to consider that option, and then up Stewart's River road to view how that corridor option might impact residents and businesses.

Environmental impact studies were done for both the rivers and the surrounding land, the rail corporation was consulted about relocations of signal boxes, and the issue truck stops was address too at this early stage.

We are only summarising the points discussed at this point, and if any of our members here would like a full copy of these meeting minutes, or of the summary here which involves only the Johns River issues, please pick up a copy after the meeting or e-mail or phone the Progress Association later. Sorry, but this is only available if you're membership is paid, it just costs a bit to produce.

## ***The Preferred Corridor Selected***

New Johns River Members joined the Community Focus Groups in early 2002, with Joe Malvicino and Daintree Gerrand joining, along with Merv Isaac and Brian Fletcher.

This is when the preferred option for bypassing Johns River was announced with detailed plans for the bypass, including the staggered T option at Stewart's River road, which was later replaced by the northbound-only interchange and overpass, based mostly on safety considerations.

It was actually our own Joe Melvecino who originally pressured the RTA to reconsider how they wanted to handle Stewart's River Road, as he questioned the RTA about the adequacy of the originally planned acceleration lanes at intersection of Stewarts River Road and new highway.

And I'll just take a second out here to say that on reading through all of these meeting minutes over eight years of meetings with the RTA, Council and here at the hall through time too – that the main aim of the RTA though all of this is safety first to the maximum their limited budget allows. When you consider that even Harrington and Coopernook only got a Staggered-T arrangement, the fact that Johns River got an overpass at all is really quite remarkable.

The original bypass preferred option plan also had Bulleys Road just connecting with a T-intersection – again, this was later considered to be a “less safe” option. As it stands today, Bulley's road is going to be fully extended south to the intersection, adding quite a bit to the road works they must do, but offering a safer option for all highway users.

At that time too in March of 2002, the new bridge on west side at Stewarts River was announced, and it was announced too that Algona Road and Watson Taylor Road will have median openings. The issue of safety pamphlets about the school bus zones had been referred to RTA road safety management staff for further reply, and as yet, nothing has happened with that to our knowledge, we'll have to follow up with the community liaison group for that possibly.

## **Village Businesses**

As you might expect, village businesses were very concerned about the western-most corridor route being selected, and our village business

operators were concerned that Johns River shop and the then-operating service station would close. Our Allan Kennedy opined that while businesses would be disappointed with the newly selected Johns River preferred route, the general feeling was that the right decision had been made, and both Merv Isaac and Joe agreed with that view.

It was agreed by Ron Clapton that they would need to look very closely at intersections, acceleration/deceleration. And Joe once again brought up the adequacy of acceleration lanes at intersection of Stewarts River Road and new highway, as well as having a school bus lay by at Rossglen. Joe, very familiar with local conditions, just was *not* convinced.

### **New Interchange Being Considered**

Lo and behold, in June of 2002, John Hamilton with Arup announced that the staggered T intersection at Johns River was under review primarily based on safety issues. One potential alternative under investigation was a grade-separated intersection. Ray Dallen had advised that the RTA Safety Group would be reviewing the proposals for this intersection.

John Hamilton with Arup also advised lay bys are to be provided every one kilometre, which would also provide for stopping busses. It's unclear if this promise has been kept.

Ray Dallen confirmed that technically all traffic passing a bus with flashing lights must slow to 40kph. The requirement for highway traffic to slowdown when passing busses is not just particular to this project but is a state-wide road safety issue.

At that meeting too, Alan Grady advised he is leaving Johns River and therefore also the CFG. As a CFG member Alan had actively disseminated information amongst the community following CFG meetings, including advising release of newsletters and the 1800 phone number, much as the others had through those years in 2001 and 2002.

## **Signs and Surveys**

Further on in 2002, the issue of interchanges was raised, in particular the need for Gateway signage (Johns River is the “Gateway” to the Manning Valley).

Daintree Gerrand had actually asked at this early stage, whether the Community Focus Groups would participate in the urban design process, and how that worked for Johns River, to which Ray Dallen advised that the recommendations could be discussed at future CFG meetings.

ERM and Arup announced that they had taken highway user surveys to explore the socio-economic impact of the bypasses at Kew and Johns River.

The surveys done identified who is stopping, why and for how long (Kew 92, Johns River 30), to better understand the users, impacts and mitigation measures needed to incorporate into the urban design plans.

In fact, they even did a detailed business study across 27 businesses in Kew and Johns River to see how the bypass might impact these communities. We have no idea what happened to these studies, I’ve asked John Hamilton with Arup for them along with the minutes of the Values Management Workshops, but has yet to reply. Presumably the survey results were not particularly good news!

## **Community Involvement**

Getting the community involved has always been a rough issue, and in 2002 the Community Focus Group members were urged again by the RTA to get some more feedback from the Johns River community, particularly about the Preferred Option.

Yet village residents seemed by and large pleased with the preferred option corridor, and any dissent was actually fairly difficult for the focus group members to either find or know about, other than Col Anderson's clear displeasure with the preferred route option.

By late 2002, Johns River was represented ably by Allan Kennedy, Merv Isaac, Rod Heath and Joe Malvicino, and it was at this time the Stewarts River Road grade separation was proposed.

Even though the newly proposed roundabout would be relatively small, with a central island diameter of about 20m, it was at least a big win for the village and for safety, with Johns River residents now not having to cross the highway when going up the valley or coming down to the store for residents living that way.

At the same time, Wharf Road was to be realigned at its western end to connect to the Highway off-ramp leading into Johns River, again a safety consideration. At this time, they still hadn't come up with the final solution for Boral trucks, which followed later in 2005.

## ***Urban Planning and Taree Council***

A meeting was held with Greater Taree City Council (GTCC) in September 2002 to discuss business impacts at Johns River. A further meeting was also organised by Council with the Johns River community to progress the issues. The discussions are aimed at identifying mitigation measures such as advanced signage, streetscape design.etc.

Allan Kennedy asked about erosion and sediment controls at Stewarts River, and at the June 2003 meeting our Rod Heath advised that the people of Johns River were looking forward to no B-doubles passing through our new main street (which we have yet to name by the way) as well as reduced traffic noise particularly sleep disturbance issues from braking and differing tones from the various road surfaces.

Rod also gave his opinion that he believed that if adequate signage is provided by the RTA for our village, people will continue to stop at Johns River.

Later that year, Merv Isaac, Rod Heath, Joe Malvicino and Brian Fletcher were regularly attending the meetings. Then there was a gap in meetings during most of 2004, as the RTA had to deal with the long process of getting the preferred options approved and starting the ministerial approval process. The next meeting with our Johns River representatives were at the ever-delightful Steaks on Kew, there at the Visitor's Info Centre in Kew. Rod, Merv, Joe and Daintree were in attendance.

At this July 2005 meeting, the Bulleys Road safety issue was finally resolved, so that it connects through to Stewarts River Road at our new roundabout on the overpass. This is a much safer solution to having the average 45 trucks a day which go through there in there pulling out onto the highway from a T- intersection. This leaves roughly 1 truck every 20 minutes using the southbound access through the village in the future, during business hours, which is certainly less than the hundreds of trucks going through today.

The impact to our local businesses was again discussed, and with highway-related trade reducing significantly, the focus group acknowledged that there would be a negative impact. The focus group felt this impact would, to some extent, be off-set by the design of the proposal, as well as future planning by Council and the community to deal with the changed circumstances, as Glen and Chris will discuss a bit later here.

### ***An Eight Year Planning Process***

So, it's all been a detailed and long eight-year planning process. During these long years the RTA did listen to our community's preference to have the highway corridor arc gracefully to our west, leaving our village quiet but not isolated. And Stewarts River road is no longer a "Coopernook Solution" type of plain T-junction, but a far safer grade-separated interchange. Bulley's Road no longer dumps heavy truck traffic directly onto the highway near Wharf Road, but uses the more controlled roundabout at the overpass.

As the final step for public comment, the RTA opened it's offices to us next to the old Police Station and Courthouse in Kew, on Tathra Road there across from the Visitor's Information Centre.

Many of us have gone there to Kew to view the current plans on display, and to talk with Louise Neville. Louise has even come out into our

community to meet with business owners and residents, to listen to their concerns and inform them on current plans.

So, after 8 years of community consultation on the planning phase of the project, we were given this one last opportunity to gather opinions and comments from Johns River. As most of you know, we sent out notices for these last few weeks of community input along the long eight-year process, and we got several calls across a handful of main issues.

Almost everything mentioned had been previously handled by the planning processes involving the community focus groups, and the values management workshops, although a few construction related issues, such as signage during construction were raised as new issues.

Community concern about the bypass corridor planning centred mostly on the intersections and access at Algona Road, Wharf Road, and Stewarts River Road. These locations have been points of particular concern by the affected residents.

As with the Stewarts River Road compromise, with the reconfiguration of Bulley's Road and Stewart's River Road, so too have there been other more recent changes to the RTA corridor plans.

The Algona Road planning process had seen several configurations tried out, from an original left-in, left-out only arrangement, to a fuller seagull type pattern allowing full access and a turnaround up Algona Road which was submitted on the EIS approval plan, to it's current compromise configuration, which is basically a "three-quarters" solution, with a north-bound turn bay to maximise safety for locals and highway travellers alike.

Some residents were likewise concerned that Wharf Road would be too close to the southbound exit on the new highway corridor, and that the deceleration would be too quick before turning. The RTA has shown that the new Wharf Road intersection was over 300 metres from the turn-off point, and that this was well within safety guidelines for such a turn.

Many comments we received focussed on the Stewart's River Road intersection. As you know, this has gone from a Cooperhook Solution staggered-T in the early 2002 plans, to the much more expensive grade separated interchange plans in early 2004, with the road now going over the new highway and northbound egress and ingress lanes serving the roundabout on the western side.

Even in these late final days of the planning process, there was a petition drive to get the RTA to consider installing an additional

southbound roundabout. This new plan had not been discussed during the planning processes since 1999, and presented the RTA with a challenging new issue well after the focus group planning process which ended in mid-2005.

This last minute proposal had the benefit of diverting the roughly 25 daily quarry trucks away from the village main street, as well as consolidating access to Johns River in a single place. This plan originally saw the new southbound ramps replacing the Johns River exit just north of Wharf Road, although leaving that open as with the now-final highway plans was also considered.

Such an intersection would indeed be more suitable too for a highway service centre should that ever be feasible for the village, and the RTA currently has two large vacant lots to the northeast of the Stewart's River Road overpass which could accommodate the additional southbound ramps and any additional frontage roads required.

However, even down in Taree, it has taken two years since the original bypass work was completed for their service centre to break ground, and it may well be as long for Johns River to get a similar complex going.

The issues of whether Johns River wants a future as a highway service centre will be discussed in future planning meetings. The trade off between jobs and economic benefits clearly must be weighed against impact on residents and other businesses.

As most of you know, the Bypass Corridor subcommittee was set up to help everyone in the village have one last say, and we did not push any particular agenda on any of the last-minute issues – we're simply not the RTA and we don't approve road projects.

So, at the end of this eight year process of planning, it is clear that all issues have at least been heard by the RTA, and that the RTA and their Alliance companies have actually compromised and met us half way across several key issues.

**It's been a long road, and now they are going to build it!**

**Which brings us to the construction phase and the Community Liaison Group, who will keep our voices heard during the actual construction phase of the project from now through 2009.**