

Dear Councillors,

I am not a member of any particular community group, and so don't receive regular updates on issues such as this. However, following the Council's endorsement of the amended Station Street upgrade plan on 25 March 2020, there has been a lot of noise in the community.

Understandably this has centred around the lack of consultation on the new plans which are much changed to those previously displayed. Feelings are also running deep regarding the removal of 8 iconic pin oaks, when Council gave assurances only two would go. You can't tick the consultation box when the information you provided is no longer accurate.

I suppose the Councillors who voted in favour of this motion (9.1 on the agenda) believed that the long-term outcome is worth the short-term loss of community trust. Or perhaps you are worried about losing the funding?

My question is what if you are wrong? It seems to me that many of the assumptions underlying this plan are outdated and unproven. In fact, a long-term trends analysis of transport options should tell you that building new roads and/or upgrading existing roads is not the answer. In an age when even Los Angeles is building an underground rail system this should be self-evident.

When the Station Street plan was first conceived some 45 years ago it probably made sense. In 1975 Bowral really was a country town, relatively isolated from Sydney. The transport options for those wishing to come to Bowral included the railway and the Old Hume Highway.

The transport routes have been hugely influential in the history of our district. When Thomas Mitchell altered the course of the Old Argyle Road in 1830 to avoid the steep slopes of the Mittagong range Berrima was born and lower Mittagong and Bong Bong died. When the railway arrived in the 1860s Moss Vale and Bowral were born and Berrima became a backwater.

The last significant change to the district's transport routes came with the opening of the M5 in 1991. Yet, as far as I can tell, Council has failed to factor the M5 into its planning. It seems obvious to me that the M5 is in fact the only true bypass in the district, in a way that Station Street never was and never can be. I appreciate the current plans have dropped this pretence and instead refer to the road widening as an upgrade. But to what purpose?

The beauty of a bypass is that it keeps traffic out of historic towns and villages and allows them to retain their character while also enabling faster travel between them for visitors and workers alike. The way the Hume Freeway links Albury and Wodonga is a perfect model for how this can work.

The tragedy of the Station Street upgrade is that it is not a bypass - rather it will funnel traffic into the historic centre of town. Once again, for what purpose? Are you trying to manage weekday congestion or assist weekend day trippers navigate the town? The honest answer is the upgrade may fail on both counts.

The data used by Council to justify the plan is based on a very limited sample. The sample was quoted in the Station Street upgrade consultation. From memory it was one survey undertaken on a Friday

afternoon some 10 years ago. From this one limited and surely unreliable data source much modelling was done. But modelling is only ever as good as the data it is based on, which in this case was not very good.

A better source of data comes from the RMS daily traffic volume viewer. It shows that the vast majority of road users during weekdays are not Bowral tourists. Rather they are workers travelling to specific locations mostly not located within the Bowral town centre. This means that the Station Street upgrade, a circulation road, will have little benefit for the majority of road users, commuters, who are simply passing through town.

Another risk of Station Street is that you will encourage more vehicle use and more congestion, particularly during the weekdays. So, the commuters who are simply trying to get from A-B may face greater congestion in a few short years. You might think this sounds far-fetched - surely a bigger road means less congestion? Well you only have to look at the M7 to see how new roads get clogged up very fast. It is an established trend.

The people Station Street may benefit, purely from a transport perspective, are the weekend tourists. However, and this is a big caveat, in order to gain this small benefit, you are compromising something of much greater importance to this very group - the town's history and identity.

Heritage is an interesting word, and much misunderstood. Let's just say that it is something very hard to gain, very easy to lose, and impossible to get back once gone. There is a very real danger that in constructing the Station Street upgrade you will be killing the goose that laid the golden egg. Because, as someone who spends a lot of time in Sydney, I can assure you, kill Bowral and you will kill the Southern Highlands.

But it will be in my view the residents of Bowral who have potentially the most to lose. The proposal will push traffic away from Bong Bong Street straight into Bowral's Central Residential Conservation Area where there are three churches, two schools and a supermarket all located on Bendooley Street. There is a real danger that the pretty streets of Bowral will become speed bumps for commuters.

So, what's the solution? I support the rescission motion- the project should be parked until further consultation has occurred. There are many better ways in which this money could be spent. But this would require Council let go of a few old chestnuts which are now outdated and dangerous - the Station Street upgrade being a prime example.

The money being spent on the Station Street upgrade would be better spent on creating linkages between the M5 and the district's main towns - Mittagong, Bowral and Moss Vale. This would avoid the current situation whereby commuter traffic has to pass through the centre of each of the main towns. And it would leave the towns themselves intact.

Finally, as your council term draws to an end it is important to consider what type of legacy you are leaving. We all hope it is not one that impacts negatively on future generations. If Bowral loses any of its beauty, its character, its charm, then we have failed. Because we are passing on a legacy which is worse than the one we inherited.

Yours Sincerely,
Nick Corbett