

# *Mildura Transport Strategy Paper*

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## Preface

- This study was prepared at the request of the Mildura Airport Management Advisory Committee
- The Strategy is developed :-
  - As a Desk Top Study to represent a strategic overview of the medium to long-term transport needs of the Sunraysia region.
  - To provide options to protect land that might be needed to develop the transport system.
  - Recognising that the proposed rail connection to the national rail network might be unpalatable to the present government but identifies the need to adopt a global perspective of our future.
  - In the knowledge that it involves Wentworth Sire and the Sturt Highway deviation would require support of that Municipality as well as Roads and Traffic Authority NSW in addition to VicRoads.
- Should this study receive favourable support the next step will need a cost/benefit analysis by transport planner/economist to establish the viability of the project.
- Australian Trucking Association might be lobbied early to garner its support for the road elements proposed.

## Key Outcomes

- Protects CBD/Deakin Avenue and Fifteenth Street business strip from heavy commercial through traffic, which has little or no destination in the vicinity.
- Benefits the above environment in terms of noise; pollution; congestion; perception of problems/emotive issues brought by heavy vehicle operations in urban environments.
- Provides operational benefits to through traffic which will only grow with increased fuel costs and the growth in “just in time” inventories rather than the traditional warehousing of goods.
- Will provide a third regional river crossing in the vicinity of the horticultural growth area of the municipality.
- Promotes the Airport as an intermodal passenger transport hub.
- Would enable Mildura to be the tri-state hub for transport distribution via the new Thurla Gateway.
- Relocation of the railway will release valuable urban land for alternative private development/community uses. Eg: fuel farms/depots, rail sidings reserves between Red Cliffs & Merbein.

- Eliminates a large number of level crossings with the added safety benefits.
- Would allow future northern extension of the railway to connect with the national rail network in the Broken Hill region – benefit for South East and Northern Asia (export and import) trade – may benefit the South Australian Riverland and New South Wales Riverina regions.
- Beneficial impact on the Monak-Buronga section of the Sturt Highway now largely 50km/hr due to residential development.
- Services the needs of the Thurla Gateway / Industrial development proposed in the Maunsell study.
- Forestalls the duplication of the Chaffey bridge.
- Route and river crossing could provide an energy/communications corridor in addition to the transport corridor rendering an ease of providing services in the future eg: the Tapio Station solar/thermal development will presumably require a transmission route for its output.
- Would enable a suitable truck stop to be developed outside the urban area – subject to a proven demand but remembering that existing facilities at Buronga would be made redundant by the proposal being implemented.
- Most importantly, this proposal is entirely consistent with Federal Government's recently released Austlink White Paper on the National Transport Strategy. Further, it may well be timely to promote the railway relocation as a matter of urgency given the allocation of a \$20M contribution for the standardisation and upgrade of the Geelong – Mildura railway (2004-2009).

## Rationale

There have been a significant number of reports produced over the last decade which deal with elements of regional transport planning but not at a holistic macro level. The North West Freight Transport Strategy, May 2002, appears to be the most comprehensive and regionally significant report – it has a twenty-year planning horizon and invites review in 2005.

In order to build on the initiative to move Mildura's Industrial Gateway to a greenfields site at Thurla and to centre the long-term industrial development in that area, it is highly desirable that the total transport network be considered in the same context.

Current planning targets Benetook Avenue as the Sturt Highway alternative to Deakin Avenue, which at best can only be an interim solution. The Calder Highway alternative as identified in the Maunsell Industrial Land Implementation Strategy is a reference to the Meridian Road.

This paper identifies a potential transport / energy / communications network that provides efficiencies, development certainty, economic and environmental benefits for all stakeholders for the foreseeable future.

A consortium of responsible authorities, namely Federal Government, Victorian and NSW State Governments, Mildura Rural City Council, Wentworth Shire Council, as well as Energy providers need to act now to secure the future of the region in terms of these service outcomes. To not act quickly and decisively may see the opportunity lost and disruption to fundamentally sound planning.

Relevant Key Issues out the North West Freight Transport Strategy are:-

- The development of an additional two lane bridge abutting the existing Chaffey Bridge once traffic demand approaches 15000 vpd – estimated to be 10 years from the time of the report with a decision to be made once the National Highway Alignment is settled.
- Identifies that Deakin Avenue is not a suitable route for the national highway and notes that the Council preferred alternative is Buronga – Mildura South Road (Benetook Avenue).
- Identifies the need to develop the Meridian Road to a two-lane standard.
- Does not contemplate the total relocation of the railway from its present route through Mildura to Yelta.

The major curiosity of the report is the statement “The case for a bypass of Mildura involving a new Murray River Crossing is not strong even into the longer term”. There is no support for this statement, which seems contra to the detail contained in support of most other elements of the report.

Most significantly, in late 2002, the Federal Government announced its Auslink initiative, inviting the country to look beyond the short-term and focus on land transport needs that build a better national transport system.

The Auslink Strategy is strong on intermodal initiatives; strong on transport efficiencies; recognises the importance of air links where distances of 400km plus are relevant.

The proposed concept has all the Auslink prime ingredients. Whilst it can stand alone on a regional basis, it is likely to have significance on an inter regional basis.

Mildura has a unique opportunity at this point in its development to grasp long term solutions to its transport, economic, environmental and social needs. As the region approaches a critical population mass, the ability to provide for our transport system will reduce proportionally.

There still exist greenfields sites for industrial development at Thurla; major expansion of Mildura airport; the ability to link these facilities with National Highway and National Rail networks as well as the focus on the state systems linking Sunraysia with Melbourne.

The attached concept plan represents the key proposals of this concept. No attempt has been made to cost the concept.

## Road Elements

Are broken into three distinct components:-

1. Sturt Highway Alternate.
  2. Calder Highway Alternate.
  3. Other Strategic regional roads.
- a) Sturt Highway Deviation (National Highway)

The urban development of Mildura is constrained to a radial pattern by virtue of the location of the Murray River. In parallel with Mildura's growth, there is now significant urban growth occurring in adjacent areas of Wentworth Shire between Buronga and Trentham Cliffs and expected to extend to Monak.

This development logically leads to a deviation of the Sturt Highway between Monak and South Merbein.

The major benefits of this route are:

- It is of very similar distance to the existing route.
- Avoids the impacts of National Highway traffic through urban/commercial development on both sides of the river.
- Would show significant transport economic benefits to through transport operations.
- Connects directly to the proposed Thurla industrial gateway.
- Provides opportunity for efficient transport intermodal operations.
- Locates a third river crossing central to the horticultural growth area to the south east of Mildura.
- May become very significant as a future energy/communications corridor, particularly with the proposed solar/thermal development at Tapio Station.

There is an opportunity to utilise existing road reserves over much of the route; protect areas from future development where land would need to be acquired to accommodate this concept; to widen reserves where necessary in conjunction with developments eg: at Thurla. The majority of affected land is either vacant or supports low intensity/horticultural agricultural uses at this time; possibly crown land in the vicinity of the river crossing.

The community/environmental benefits derived from the relocation of the Sturt Highway are obvious and it would likely enjoy strong community support. Adoption of this route would resolve the issue of providing an appropriate truck stop in the region. It best lends itself to South Merbein or possibly Thurla. However, this would be a largely commercial decision, which could be made in the light of a committed planning decision by Council.

The need for duplication of Chaffey Bridge will be predicated by traffic operational constraints (ie. level of service). This duplication could be deferred by the removal of heavy transport traffic to a by-pass route but it would ultimately be required. However

the provision of a third river crossing might prove attractive to local and inter-regional traffic depending on demographics, growth patterns and transport technology changes, apart from the heavy transport benefits

b) Calder Highway (State Highway)

Essentially the Calder Highway would terminate at its intersection with the Sturt Highway south of Red Cliffs, with a requirement to extend it north of the Sturt Highway along the Meridian Road from South Merbein to Abbotsford Bridge to retain the status quo.

The Calder Highway between Irymple and Merbein is increasingly being constrained by ribbon business development; imposed speed limits inconsistent with its status; with resultant transport disbenefits.

The major benefit of the Sturt/Calder alternate is that the majority of funding for the new route would be a Federal Government responsibility and not that of the State Government; an issue that seems to be a major impediment to previous dialogue between Council and VicRoads whenever the Calder Highway deviation has been raised.

c) Other Strategic regional roads.

Whilst not being an identified component of this study, it is worthy of note that this report might provide a catalyst to mature the hierarchy of local roads.

If this present strategy is adopted, the former sections of Sturt and Calder Highways are a good backbone to commence the strategy. Dow Avenue enjoys a road reserve of some 60 metres and as an orbital around the majority of district development should be granted high status such that future abutting and intersection development does not compromise its future function. It is noted that the Maunsell Study also identifies Benetook Avenue as having strategic importance.

Clearly more strategic work is needed in this area.

## Rail

The relocation of the railway to a common transport corridor with the highway deviation between Red Cliffs and Yelta is a simple concept, and is partly identified in the Maunsell Study. However, there are a number of additional issues that need to be canvassed at this time.

1. The rail north of Thurla becomes significant in that it could service limited industrial development at H Block (by spur line or directly), particularly if the present fuel depots were consolidated to this location.
2. A spur line to the airport would support a future intermodal freight hub if demand is such to warrant this. Further, there is an opportunity to relocate all future rail passenger services to an intermodal passenger transport hub centred on the airport. This might include inter / intra state coach services as well.
3. Extension of the rail from Yelta to join the National Rail network west of Broken Hill.

Whilst this prospect might be politically sensitive to the current Victorian Government, it is likely to be attractive to the current Federal Government and its Auslink program.

The most important elements of relocating the railway between Red Cliffs and Yelta are:-

- Safety in terms of elimination of some 20 plus level crossings impacted by irregular rail services.
- Release of significant tracts of land that could be sold to offset relocation costs or dedicated to community use.
- Removal of the fuel depots and rail yarding from within urban development. Affords the opportunity to advance the connection of the CBD with the river by removal of the large embankment between the Seventh Street crossing and Deakin Avenue, thus opening a significant natural vista of the river.

The risk of diverting the industrial railway to Thurla and perhaps Yelta whilst leaving the passenger service to the CBD (Maunsell Study) is that it will not achieve the above benefits, and it would provide the perfect opportunity for the fuel companies to avoid relocation. It would also demand the industrial transport connection to Merbein be retained via the existing route and would double running costs of this section of the rail.

## Energy / Communications

As much of our Energy and Communications networks move to a national grid eg: electricity, gas, perhaps water and other commodities, we should not overlook the option to provide for the incorporation of an abutting corridor in support of these services. The reality of the Tapio Solar/Thermal power generator might provide the impetus for such a corridor – the timing of which might be close to the transport network demands.

## Overview

This paper is a desktop proposal, which presents concepts for further detailed analysis and development.

Cursory review of a number of planning and transportation documents produced over the last 10-15 years have a common theme – “Sunraysia as an inland port”; “Sunraysia as a significant player in the tri-state development of our unique resources”.

Mildura’s geographic location and current level of development represents a unique opportunity to be part of the Federal Government’s Transport Strategy. To capitalise on this opportunity whilst there is available land to achieve the vision, and before further unco-ordinated infrastructure investment renders the opportunity lost, the planning decisions need to be enacted urgently.

A connection to the national rail network might provide significant export opportunities through north Australian ports which face the bulk of Asia (not the South Pole) and bring opportunities for distribution of Asian imports to southern Australia. We are ideally located; have the land and social infrastructure to do it. This issue is of the lowest priority in terms of time but development in the Wentworth Shire should not jeopardise the route.

There is a likelihood of a concern from our tourist industry that a traffic bypass will provide a negative impact on tourist traffic. Realistically, it is difficult to support this

concern. The location of Mildura and its attractions are such that there is no incentive for tourist traffic to bypass Mildura there are no alternatives for provision of services such as accommodation, food, fuel, recreation, and entertainment. Similarly, businesses presently supporting interstate transport in Buronga may see the proposal in a negative light. Nonetheless, there are issues that would need sensitive management at the appropriate time.

Attachment: Transport Strategy Concept Plan