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Black Mountain and the Gungahlin Drive Extension

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Abstract. The Gungahlin Drive Extension was chosen by the ACT Government as one of the preferred options for upgrading major road infrastructure between Gungahlin and the southern suburbs of Canberra. The road was highly controversial and generated strong community opposition because of concerns over its environmental impacts, including on Black Mountain Nature Reserve. This paper outlines the history of the road's development, government consultation and environmental impact assessment processes, the main environmental concerns of the community and how the impacts on Black Mountain were addressed.

Introduction

The Gungahlin Drive Extension has been one of the most controversial developments in the history of Canberra, raising major environmental concerns within the community and generating opposing political opinions. While the controversy related primarily to the section of the road north of Belconnen Way, affecting Bruce Ridge, O'Connor Ridge and the Australian Institute of Sport, the potential impacts on Black Mountain Reserve and nearby parts of Aranda were also of concern.

The road proposal originated from the Y-Plan for Canberra, developed in the late 1960s and presented by the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) in its publication, *Tomorrow's Canberra*, in 1970¹. It was one of several freeways (euphemistically described as 'parkways') which were designed to facilitate vehicle movement between the towns of Canberra, while keeping through traffic out of the urban areas. The Preliminary Development and Management Plan for Black Mountain Reserve prepared in March 1972 and published in 1974² showed a 'proposed future freeway' cutting through the north-west corner of Black Mountain Reserve and crossing Caswell Drive at the location of the high bridge.

The NCDC undertook some preliminary studies of the 'Gungahlin Parkway' during the 1970s and reaffirmed the peripheral parkway principle in its 1984 *Metropolitan Canberra Policy Plan [and] Development Plan*³, when the road was now identified as the John Dedman Parkway. It was not until the late 1980s, when the development of Gungahlin was commencing, that serious consideration of the need for the road and its location began.

Because of their complexity, consideration of the external road linkages was deliberately excluded from the environmental impact statement for the development of the new town of Gungahlin⁴. Instead, this issue was addressed through the Gungahlin External Travel Study (GETS), a major public consultation exercise set up by the NCDC, which involved 30 different community groups from various parts of North Canberra and Belconnen, each attending a series of three meetings, as well as a range of institutional stakeholders. Not surprisingly, most of the groups focused on issues of local concern to them, particularly in relation to support for or opposition to the various road options

¹ National Capital Development Commission. *Tomorrow's Canberra*. ANU Press, Canberra, 1970.

² Elliott, M.A. and Douglas, J.S. *Black Mountain Reserve. Preliminary Development and Management Plan*. Second edition 1974. Conservation Series No.1, March 1972, Department of the Capital Territory. AGPS, Canberra.

³ National Capital Development Commission. *Metropolitan Canberra Policy Plan and Development Plan*. July 1974, Canberra.

⁴ National Capital Development Commission. *Gungahlin Environmental Impact Statement*. Draft for discussion. Commonwealth of Australia, 1987.

on the table. The John Dedman Parkway option and its implications for Black Mountain Reserve were of particular concern for the Aranda participants.

The study commenced in July 1988 and the final report was completed in October 1989, by which time the NCDC had been abolished by the Commonwealth Government. The GETS report⁵ was completed for the newly established National Capital Planning Authority (NCPA), and supported the early construction of the John Dedman Parkway as one of several peripheral parkways or arterial roads serving Gungahlin. Overall, 86% of study participants favoured a John Dedman Parkway option, compared with 36% supporting Monash Drive and 62% supporting the Majura Parkway. The support for John Dedman Parkway, however, was split among three different route options, primarily affecting the area north of Belconnen Way.

Between 1991 and 2001, public and political debate raged over these options, but the impacts on Black Mountain Reserve were not a major consideration in that debate. The main issue, apart from justification for the road, was whether it should be located to the east or the west of the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) where it passed through the Bruce area. In 1997, following a further extensive public consultation exercise, a Preliminary Assessment (PA) report⁶ was prepared on behalf of the ACT Government for public comment. That PA was confined to the section of the road between the Barton Highway and Belconnen Way, and examined three parkway options which joined Belconnen Way at the Caswell Drive intersection, as well as two other options based on existing roads and/or a proposed Majura Parkway.

Gungahlin Drive Extension environmental assessment

In 1999 a Legislative Assembly Planning and Urban Services Committee Inquiry reviewed the options for what was now described as 'Gungahlin Drive Extension' (or GDE), instead of John Dedman Parkway. An 'Aranda Residents Group' made a submission to the inquiry opposing the upgrading of Caswell Drive adjacent to Aranda and instead proposed a route for the GDE about 200 m into Black Mountain Reserve. That route would join Caswell Drive south of Aranda and north of the high bridge — a route similar to that shown in the 1972 Preliminary Development and Management Plan for the Reserve. The Committee did not make a specific recommendation on the Aranda section of the road but recommended careful examination of either lowering Caswell Drive or moving the GDE to the east of Caswell Drive.

In 2001, studies undertaken for the ACT Government addressed the need for upgrading Caswell Drive between Belconnen Way and Glenloch Interchange and providing an interchange at Belconnen Way as part of the GDE project. Engineering and environmental studies identified the potential impacts of different options on the western edge of Black Mountain Reserve and on nearby parts of Aranda, with a view to minimising the encroachment of any new roadworks on the Reserve⁷. The interchange options included a cloverleaf interchange, one loop of which would have intruded well into the north-western corner of the Reserve⁸, but that option was subsequently rejected in favour of a more compact design.

A route cutting the corner of Black Mountain Reserve, but located further east of the previous Aranda Residents Group proposal for engineering reasons, was also evaluated⁹. This was rejected, partly

⁵ Lansley Hayes and Storer Pty Ltd. *Having a say. Report of a community consultation on the Gungahlin External Travel Study*. Report prepared for the National Capital Planning Authority, October 1989.

⁶ Maunsell Pty Ltd. *John Dedman Parkway Preliminary Assessment*. Prepared for the ACT Government, October 1997.

⁷ Lyons Consulting Engineers. *Caswell Drive upgrade feasibility study*. Unpublished report to Roads ACT, December 2001.

⁸ W.P. Brown and Partners Pty Ltd. *Belconnen Way/ Caswell Drive intersection upgrade engineering feasibility study*. December 2001; Hogg, D. *Belconnen Way/ Caswell Drive intersection upgrade. Environmental assessment*. Report to W.P. Brown and Partners, 26 October 2001.

⁹ W.P. Brown and Partners Pty Ltd. *Aranda Residents Group Caswell Drive intersection upgrade engineering feasibility study*. December 2001; Hogg, D. *Aranda Residents Group option for Gungahlin Drive extension south of Belconnen Way. Environmental assessment*. Report to W.P. Brown and Partners, 26 October 2001.

because it would isolate approximately 20 hectares of forest from the main part of the Reserve. The Aranda Residents Group's concerns were instead proposed to be addressed through noise protection and other design measures for the upgraded Caswell Drive.

In November 2002, a further PA report, this time covering the whole GDE project from the Barton Highway to Glenloch Interchange¹⁰, was released for public comment, and was accompanied by an extensive public consultation program. That PA differed from the 1997 PA in specifically proposing a preferred route to the west of the AIS, and in addressing the impacts on Black Mountain Reserve and adjacent areas. The controversy over whether the road was justified and its location in the Bruce area continued, resulting in the ACT Government returning the road to the east of the AIS despite strong opposition from some sectors of the community and a legal challenge from the Save the Ridge group, which delayed but did not materially change the project.

None of these actions affected the potential impact of the road on Black Mountain Reserve. The Aranda Residents Group, however, remained concerned about the noise and visual impacts of connecting directly with the end of Caswell Drive, which would be upgraded to freeway standard.

The engineering concept of a section of the GDE project south of Belconnen Way as assessed in the 2002 PA report resulted in the least practicable impact on Black Mountain Reserve. The concept confined direct impacts to the area opposite Aranda, with an estimated loss of approximately 6 ha of native forest, approximately 4 ha inside the reserve and 2 ha on the eastern side of Caswell Drive outside it. A subsequent review was undertaken of four engineering designs for the GDE and connections to Aranda in 2003¹¹, but these retained the GDE alignment as close as practicable to the edge of Aranda and did not significantly alter the impact on Black Mountain Reserve.

Some further changes to the connections between the GDE and the streets in Aranda were made in the course of subsequent detailed design, but these did not significantly alter the impacts on Black Mountain Reserve opposite Aranda. A major redesign of the Glenloch Interchange works, however, resulted in approximately 3 ha of mainly grassland being trimmed from the south-west corner of the Reserve, partly to accommodate a relocated cycle path.

The clearing of forest along the road alignment resulted in the loss of a corresponding amount of wildlife habitat, including tree hollows¹². During the tree felling process, which was scheduled to take place prior to the spring nesting season, hollow-bearing trees were marked and felled as gently as practicable, with hollows inspected for wildlife immediately after felling. Few animals were found to be present in the hollows at the time of felling, and most occupants were probably driven away by the noise of the approaching felling operation. The inspections were undertaken primarily for animal welfare purposes. No dead or seriously injured animals were found in any of the hollows after felling. Animals found remaining in hollows of felled trees generally left on their own accord or, in a few cases, were moved outside the construction corridor.

Lasting impact on access to Black Mountain

The greatest impact on Black Mountain Reserve as a result of the GDE project related to recreational access. While the reserve area available for recreation was reduced by less than two percent, getting into the Reserve from the western side became much more constrained. Prior to upgrading of Caswell Drive, there were three locations along the road suitable for parking and access – informal parking areas either side of the road at the end of Wangara Street, a small carpark on the edge of the Reserve on the lower part of Caswell Drive, and Rani Road (the stub of a former section of Caswell Drive), which provided a large parking area for group events. In addition, it was not difficult to cross Caswell Drive anywhere along the eastern edge of Aranda to access the Reserve.

¹⁰ W.P. Brown and Partners and Purdon Associates. *Gungahlin Drive Extension Western Alignment, Belconnen, ACT. Preliminary Assessment*. Prepared on behalf of Roads ACT, November 2002.

¹¹ W.P. Brown and Partners and Purdon Associates. *Gungahlin Drive Extension Eastern Alignment. Further studies Aranda Precinct. Comparison of options*. Prepared on behalf of Roads ACT, April 2003.

¹² Hogg, D.McC. *Gungahlin Drive Extension biodiversity monitoring. Summary report*. Unpublished report to Roads ACT, June 2005.

With upgrading of Caswell Drive to a freeway, it became no longer safe or practicable to cross the road at grade, and the existing parking areas were lost or made more difficult to access. The engineering concept presented in the 2002 PA report provisionally provided car parking west of Caswell Drive at Aranda near a proposed underpass, but this was not carried through to the final design. Instead, a new road overpass was constructed, providing the only safe crossing point between Aranda and Black Mountain Reserve, apart from the Belconnen Way traffic lights. Access for pedestrians and cyclists was retained via Aranda Bushland under the high bridge, which was duplicated and serves also as a wildlife crossing.

The small carpark on the edge of the Reserve in the lower part of Caswell Drive was not directly affected but is now accessible only for southbound traffic. The Rani Road carpark was removed to accommodate the ramp from Caswell Drive to Parkes Way, and was replaced with a smaller carpark west of Caswell Drive, with access to Black Mountain via a cycle path through the reconstructed Glenloch Interchange.

Restriction of access along the upgraded Caswell Drive has also affected use by management vehicles, including firefighting vehicles. While the upgrading of Caswell Drive was designed to maintain access into the Reserve at or close to the previous access points, all of those access points became accessible only to southbound traffic using Caswell Drive or its on- or off-ramps.

Conclusion

There was never any doubt that locating a freeway somewhere between Aranda and Black Mountain Reserve as key part of Canberra's metropolitan structure would have some impact on the Reserve. The eventual outcome after years of deliberation and community input has been one of which achieved the essential function of the road with the least practicable impact on the integrity of Black Mountain for nature conservation and recreation.