



## **Submission**

### **Infrastructure Australia and the National Transport Commission "The Proposed National Ports Strategy" May 2010**

#### **Introduction**

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) is the united voice of Local Government in Western Australia. The Association is an independent, membership-based group representing and supporting the work and interests of all 139 Local Governments in Western Australia, plus the Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Island Councils.

The Association provides an essential voice for almost 1,400 elected members and over 12,000 employees of the Local Governments in Western Australia.

#### **Background**

Local Government is not responsible for the management of Ports in Western Australia. That aside, Local Government do have a substantial interest in how Port operations affect local communities, and can play an important role in developing better planning strategies to accommodate Western Australia's freight needs.

Local Government is responsible for 127,049 kilometres of local roads, which comprises 72 per cent of the WA road network. In 2007-08 Local Government spent \$331.3 million on the local road network. The local road network is vast and diverse. It includes significant roads in metropolitan and regional areas, used for hauling grain, minerals and other products to port.

The reality is that while Local Governments do not any have responsibility for Ports in Western Australia. The majority of truck movements that service Western Australia's Ports, begin and end on local roads. Additionally local communities must deal with the negative effects from the substantial freight task far beyond the boundary and responsibility of the Port. Also the interface between Ports and Local Government Town Planning schemes are critical to efficient port operations and protecting public and community amenity.

WALGA is a member of the Freight Logistics Council of Western Australia, and supports the submission made to Infrastructure Australia by the Council. This submission seeks only to add a Local Government perspective, as a relevant stakeholder typically affected by port and freight operations.

## **Planning for Port and Freight Infrastructure**

Local Government does not have a role in Port planning or operations. It is often perceived that Local Governments and local communities frustrate the expansion of Port operations. This is an unfair and inaccurate perception. Difficulties in Western Australia have been a result primarily of conflicting State Government priorities that have impacted upon the development of major freight routes through the Perth metropolitan area to the Fremantle Port, WA's major container Port. The State Government, through the Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC) and the Minister for Planning has always had final approval over any Local Government planning schemes or policies.

In Western Australia, Local Governments have traditionally strongly supported the growth and operation of the Ports, particularly in regional areas, where the Port may be the town's largest employer.

The reality is that in Western Australia, the eight Port authorities are all located adjacent to residential communities. This is a historical fact, and a situation that is unlikely to change. It does present WA Port Authorities, and responsible State Government Authorities with the challenge of operating and expanding port and freight activities near residential communities.

While this is not ideal, this challenge is not insurmountable, but requires a more involved and consultative approach to developing and upgrading the freight corridors that will service the needs of the Port. One that protects the local community from the negative consequences implicit in increased freight traffic and heavy industrial activities.

In the development of new regional ports, this can be easily avoided by establishing larger port precincts, and ensuring that residential developments do not encroach on the new port or freight corridor, as will be the case with the Oakajee Port development.

In order to protect future freight corridors for existing ports, it is essential to develop long term planning strategies that can be put into place preserving these areas for future demand and development. In the case of Western Australia, it requires the development of a State Transport Strategy that can anticipate the demands of growth.

## **Freight Movement**

Western Australia, through the Freight and Logistics Council of WA is in the initial stages of formulating a State Transport Strategy. The reality that efficient port operations don't end at the Port boundary necessitates that a wider and more comprehensive state transport strategy is developed to address our growing freight needs, and to increase overall state productivity.

Local Government as a Road Authority has a substantial role to play in the movement of freight across the WA road network. Local Government has consistently supported increased State productivity by allowing heavy vehicles access to the vast majority of local roads across the State. However, Local Government is simply not funded to maintain all of these roads to the standards needed to support these vehicles.

In 2007-08, the estimated cost of maintaining the local road network at its current condition was \$473.7 million. Local Government spent \$331.3 million that year, a shortfall of \$142.6 million. This shortfall in road expenditure has massively increased from \$83.6 million, in the previous five years, from 2003-04.

The increase in tonnage being carried, and further increases under consideration, comes at almost no increase in cost to transport operators. It should be noted that there is no corresponding increase in funding to Local Government (or State Government) to pay for the increased damage to the road network.

With the predicted increases in freight movement over the next 10-20 years, the time is coming for a real road pricing debate. With the rapidly increasing freight task, the current situation, where State and Local Governments meet virtually all costs of road maintenance and repair is simply unsustainable.

In Western Australia, this issue is particularly prominent with the expected closure of un-economic grain freight rail lines through WA's wheatbelt. This will mean more grain will need to be moved by road, and will substantially increase the number of trucks on the roads, moving through towns and communities, and needing to access grain ports.

Rail transport has always struggled to keep pace with road transport because of the additional cost of transporting produce using rail. A primary reason for the cost disparity, is that rail operators (passing costs onto their customers) are required to contribute to the cost of maintenance of the rail infrastructure, but road transporters (and their customers) are not. The cost of maintenance and repair is borne almost entirely by Government.

The challenge of dealing with the freight task, is not just in the transport route but in the method of transport. Unless WA is able to build in different modes of freight transport into its network and corridors, an efficient and productive freight system will not be achieved. The methods of transport need to no longer be seen as competing with one another, but rather supporting each other.

### **Community Consultation**

The Western Australian experience has shown that ongoing community consultation and engagement by Port Authorities with their local community can be successful in educating the community about the operational needs of the Port and the benefits associated. Where this has occurred, the Port has usually been able to generate widespread, though never complete, support from the local community.

Additionally, community consultation has the regulatory benefit of transparency in Port and freight operations which are a strong incentive to ensure proper regulatory practices are kept up.

Community expectations and attitudes have a real ability to influence and sway decision makers, and ultimately are the real measure of the full capacity of a port. While a port and transport network may be able to move greater tonnage or containers, if the community isn't prepared to

accept the additional trucks and freight being moved through their communities, the Port will come under strong pressure to slow or cease expansion.

#### **Addressing concerns of Local Communities**

WALGA supports the work of the Freight Logistics Councils of WA and will continue to participate and contribute to developing a more productive and efficient transport network.

However, it is worth recognising in the development of any strategy, either State or National, that the following points are key to addressing the concerns of local communities, and winning their support and trust:

- **Early consultation with local communities on planning transport corridors or freight routes.**

Informed communities that are involved in the development of planning, are more willing to support expanded operations and freight activity, if they feel they have some ownership of the process. In developing and protecting new freight corridors this will be vitally important to ensure support for these projects.

Equally, the impact of freight corridors must also be considered. Intelligent design has the ability to minimise the visual and amenity impacts felt by the community. In this way, very large corridors catering for road and rail can be created that aren't simply a giant wall of cement and track cutting through towns and communities. Intelligent designs can alleviate many of these issues.

Consultation, on the design as well as the route, and the willingness to take on board local views and make changes where reasonable is vital to delivering an outcome that will be supported and accepted by the community.

- **Ongoing and meaningful engagement between the Local Government, community and the responsible agency (e.g. Port Authority, or Relevant State Govt. Dept.) regarding ongoing port and freight operations. Local Government must be engaged as a key stakeholder.**

In WA, each Port Authority has a community consultation group that meets regularly. These meetings or forums, must be approached seriously, not merely as a means of placating local residents, but as a concerted attempt to be transparent and up front about port operations and address community concerns. This ongoing consultative work builds a relationship with the community, and creates a forum to air issues in an open and accountable manner.

- **A commitment to the highest Environmental and Public Health Standards from Port Operators.**

Western Australia has learned first hand how important environmental monitoring of port operations really are. The Esperance experience has shown that without regular and rigorous environmental sampling and air monitoring there is a real and serious risk to community safety and public health, and well as environmental damage. All Ports either import or export

dangerous goods of one kind or another and residents living near a Port of freight corridor have the right to expect that best practices are being observed, and that the likelihood of a serious accident occurring that will endanger them is low.

- **Strategies to develop and increase freight by rail to reduce heavy vehicle movements to and from the Ports**

The need to expand the use of freight rail links to Ports in WA is essential. Community concerns over the increasing number of trucks on our roads, particularly suburban roads, are becoming increasingly prominent. Making rail a more economically viable alternative for customers is vital to achieve increase rail usage, getting produce off roads and to reduce the increase in heavy vehicle movements. This may well require State or Federal Government to carry some of the costs, at least initially, until freight rail use can grow to reach a long term sustainable level on its own.

- **Separation of heavy vehicles and passenger cars**

The development of freight corridors is particularly important for the separation of heavy vehicles and smaller passenger cars. The mix of heavy and light vehicles on the road network has the potential to increase the risk of road crashes causing death and serious injuries. The differential size of the relative vehicles involved, can have a significantly greater impact on the severity of injury in the event of a crash, and increased likelihood of fatalities.

Beside the obvious dangers inherent in the mix of vehicles, the public perception of the high numbers of trucks (particularly on local roads) and the danger they represent, is a serious issue that needs to be delicately handled.

### **Conclusion**

Western Australia has benefited from Federal funding of Port and freight corridor initiatives. Although, WA is yet to see the level of investment from the Commonwealth that is required to support the massive scale of development of resource and other projects in the West, compared with the impact the State has on the Australian economy relative to other State and Commonwealth investments.

The objectives and priority actions identified in the draft national strategy are certainly desirable. However, it's reasonable to question what benefits a national strategy will deliver for WA. The Western Australian ports and freight task are very different to those on the east coast of Australia, and different approaches are required.

This is not to suggest that Port and freight planning in WA can't be improved.

However, from a Local Government perspective it is considered that with regard to Port Infrastructure, planning and operations, it is more likely that Local Government in WA, and the local communities and local issues they represent, will be better addressed through State run initiatives and processes supported by Federal funding, rather than through Federal strategies.