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COVID19 causes North Shore Community to call for suspension of tunnel consultation

“The thought of coming out of COVID-19 and into a high impact construction project, is just frightening,”

COVID19 virus has turned lives upside down. Families are under intense pressure right now due to the virus but our community groups still need to respond to the State Governments 9000 plus page Environmental Impact Study (EIS), before the deadline.

Five North Shore schools along with 15 Community Representative Groups have written to Premier Gladys Berejiklian requesting an urgent suspension of the EIS consultation processes, in light of the COVID19 virus.

“A suspension will allow families the good grace to focus on priorities such as their children’s health and education at this time. The COVID19 virus has caused great stress to families everywhere, but lower North Shore families are still expected to invest time objecting to an unwanted tunnel,” said group spokesperson Larissa Penn.

“There are a high proportion of working parents in the affected area, many of whom now have extra responsibilities at both work and home. Some are home-schooling, while also supporting elderly parents at this time, and some are small business owners who are struggling.

“Even before the COVID19 virus came along, families living along the affected corridor were very stressed about this tunnel project with its well documented risks and potential to severely damage our quality of daily life and our long-term health. Now they have precious little time to react. We want the projects to be re-exhibited at a time when family, employment and school life has returned to some sort of normality and the community can engage.”

Ms Penn said the tunnel projects’ Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was long awaited by the groups’ members.

“We were very eager for the EIS to be released so that we could have a good long look at the impact the tunnel would have on our local communities and understand it’s justification.

The detailed **EIS document** was finally released and went **on exhibition on 29th January** – the first day of school term – a time that is traditionally frantically busy for most families. The groups were most eager to read the EIS, but when the 9000 plus page tome finally arrived, even the groups’ most qualified and experienced members were shocked.

Ms Penn, who has a background in Biotechnology and International Standards/ Risk Assessment Management Experience, says we always knew that we would find the EIS a challenging document but this document is beyond challenging.

“We all believed the EIS would probably prove what we always knew – that the planned tunnel project would have a negative knock-on effect across our community. But even the hardest of tunnel critics were surprised by the magnitude and the impact of the tunnel project, as seen in the EIS.

“The EIS documents are lengthy and the ramifications are beyond what even we predicted. Despite many expert eyes poring over the documents, we all found it deliberately complicated and not-reader-friendly.

Our goal as a committee is to spend quality time summarising the document, list our concerns, then present them at community meetings. The ultimate goal being to help the community understand the impact of this project, so they can confidently respond.

“But time hasn’t been on our side. Since the moment the document was released in the first week of school term we have been up against it.

“Our focal distribution channel for information on the project has been via schools. Families of children in local schools are the most affected by the tunnel, its emissions and the increased congestion it delivers to local areas.

“The week the EIS came out was the first week of school term and a difficult time to communicate with the school community. P&C’s were not yet scheduled to meet and class-parent lists were not yet available. Communication with local families is vital, but we had reports that many families did not even receive any notification from the government.”

“Given this, we requested an extension to give feedback and were very grateful for the 28 day extended consultation timeframe – which now closes on the 30th March.

“But just as we started to engage the community, the COVID-19 virus began to escalate.

“All plans to meet and consult on this very important community issue, ceased several weeks ago due to the virus and now we are back to square one, struggling to meet the consultation deadline.

“Our main concern is for the safety and welfare of children. The fact that the tunnel is planned to be developed critically close to the five Lower-north shore schools, is most concerning.

“The tunnel route runs along the largest school district in Australia – a total of 26 **schools sit along the planned tunnel route and all stand to be impacted in one form or another.** The long-term effects are far-reaching and we believe this needs to be communicated effectively with proper and careful consideration in consultation with community.

“The impacts are exacerbated by the number of support sites needed and the scale of work required (ie: more than 6000 construction movements per day including a vast amount of night works) to keep the Warringah Freeway operational.

“On top of that **there are 16 other priorities on the ‘Infrastructure Australia List’** (most with business cases) **that are a higher priority than the tunnels.** Many of these priorities are in regions that would genuinely benefit from the creation of more jobs and more investment from an infrastructure project.

Ms Penn said the group believes the tunnel project is being unnecessarily pushed through at time when people are at their most vulnerable.

“The thought of coming out of COVID-19 – having not had sufficient time to respond to the tunnel EIS - to face a 5-6 year large scale construction project, is just frightening,” Ms Penn said.

“This project needs, at the very least, time for proper consultation. Our community groups were formed to ensure that the voice of those who are most impacted by the tunnel project - is heard.

“This year has seen families contend with bushfire smoke, then storms, and now disease. The cumulative impact on people lives cannot be underestimated. People need time to engage in the consultation process when they are not under extreme pressure.

“Compounding this - the online portal to make a submission – is unreliable right now, so those who have had the time, have been unable to lodge their submissions. Our hope is that the government will see reason and hit pause on this high impact project.

“Ms Berejilklian and Ms Wilson have a real opportunity to show compassion for stressed families in their electorates by suspending these projects immediately. It really is a very simple request that would have a positive impact on mental well being.

So far, the group has not had a response to their letter to the Premier.

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On behalf of: Cammeray Public School P&C / Anzac Park Public School P&C

Cammeraygal High School P&C / Neutral Bay School Council/ Other North Sydney School – In Confidence

This request is supported by:

Willoughby Environmental Protection Association (WEPA)	North Sydney Precinct – Neutral North Sydney Precinct – Brightmore North Sydney Precinct – Registry North Sydney Precinct – Lavender Bay North Sydney Precinct – Edward North Sydney Precinct – Harrison North Sydney Precinct - Bay North Sydney Council	Castlecrag Progress Association Naremburn Progress Association Willoughby South Progress Association Castle Cove Progress Association Artarmon Progress Association Northbridge Progress Association Councillor Nic Wright – Willoughby Council
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