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PRESS RELEASE

RTA's Pacific Highway Project – Woolgoolga By-Pass

Prepared for CRC & Media by the Secretary of Sikh Council of Australia, Mr Bawa Singh Jagdev

BACKGROUND

RTA is preparing for the Pacific Highway Project – Woolgoolga By-Pass and has selected a more expensive option as their preferred option, without consultation with the Sikh Community of Woolgoolga. Sikh community of Woolgoolga will be most effected by this project, especially if this 'preferred' option is to go ahead.

A joint meeting between the representatives of RTA and the Sikh Community was held, convened by the Community Relations Commission (CRC), at the Pelican Resort Coffs Harbour on 13th September 2005, chaired by Mr Stephan Kerkaysharian AM, Commissioner, CRC. Sikh Council of Australia (SCA) was asked to attend the meeting to help sort out the matter.

SUBMISSION BY THE SECRETARY, SCA

Mr Kerkasharian, representatives of the RTA, members of the Sikh community, ladies and gentlemen:

SCA, being an apex representative body of the Sikhs in Australia, was invited by the Woolgoolga Sikh community and the CRC to attend these two meetings about the Pacific Highway Project, Woolgoolga By-Pass.

From the facts presented at the last night's presentation, by Ms Rashmere Bhutt (of the Woolgoolga Residents Action Group) and Mr Wayne Clouten, held at the Woolgoolga Neighbourhood Centre, which was also attended and chaired by the CRC Commissioner Mr. Kerkasharian AM.

I, Bawa Singh Jagdev, Secretary of the SCA have the following observations to make for the record:

- Woolgoolga is a town of very close-knit Sikh community and the main source of income and employment, specially of the elder members of the community is Agriculture and most of the farms are owned and managed by the members of the extended families of the farmers, which also provide employment to other people in and around Woolgoolga.
- The proposed by-pass of the Pacific Highway Project by the RTA will acquire part or whole of the farming lands of about 16 farmers, which will deprive them and the people who work on the farms, of the only means they have to support their families.
- It is a fact of life that to gain an employment in any field except to work on the farm as a farm labourer, one has to have an appropriate level of education. These farmers and their families have lived and worked, all their lives on their farms, without giving any thought of getting even the basic education. They have very poor command of the English language – and for them to find a job once they have been uprooted, will be next to impossible and an uphill battle.

- From the facts presented at the last night's meeting and the subsequent discussion which ensued, SCA believes that Sikh community is being unfairly treated by the RTA, because:
 - No consideration was given by the RTA to involve the Sikh community in the development and decision making procedures and discussions which led the RTA to believe that the **OPTION E** would be the preferred option for the project and the community. Even though there are other options (some offering up to \$15 million saving to the government and people of NSW, e.g., **OPTION C1**) the RTA is not willing to consider other options.
 - There are three representative bodies of the Sikhs (Gurudwaras) in Woolgoolga. Instead of writing to or asking these representative bodies to appoint/send their representatives on the "Community Focus Group", RTA appointed some one of their own choice; and that too not from the Sikh community but from the. The representatives of the "Banana Industry Group" have only attended one meeting of the "Community Focus Group" for this project and weren't even present at the crucial "Value Management Workshop" to raise concerns of the Sikh community.
 - Since there was no representation or input from the Sikh community, there is no justification in RTA's proposal and claim that the **OPTION E** would be the preferred option.
- Instead of imposing their unilateral decision, of the preferred option (the **OPTION E**), on the Sikh Community, had the decision been made with the full participation and involvement of the Sikh community the outcome would have been more acceptable, less hurting and controversial.
- Whereas the SCA agrees that the Pacific Highway Project has to go ahead, RTA should give due consideration to safeguarding the livelihood and well being of the people who have spent their life times on their farms, so that minimum number of farmers are uprooted by their choice of the preferred option for the by-pass.
- Adoption and implementation of RTA's preferred option (the **OPTION E**) will have devastating affect on the, displaced Sikh families, socio-economic set up and the socio-cultural environment of the region and the heritage and cultural values of the Sikhs, which they have preserved so dearly over the years will be lost for ever.

Sikh Council is strongly of the view and submits that the RTA should reconvene the consultation process with the full involvement of the Sikh community and option E should not be the preferred option.

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