

OUR LOCAL ROADS – A CALL FOR URGENT ATTENTION

By Roger Turner, Councillor, B Ward, Tenterfield Shire

For many residents in B Ward and other rural areas, the only visible service we receive from Council is the maintenance of our local roads. Unfortunately, these roads are deteriorating at an alarming rate. Repairs, when undertaken, are often temporary, poorly executed, and failing to provide long-term solutions. Local roads are not a luxury, they are essential infrastructure. Whether travelling to work, taking children to school, or simply accessing necessary services, the quality of our roads directly impacts our daily lives.

When roads are left in poor condition, it imposes a hidden tax on our community in the form of vehicle repairs, higher fuel costs, and lost time. I recently had to spend nearly \$2,000 on repairs to re-register my four-wheel-drive vehicle due to damage caused by continued use on rough local roads. As a pensioner and a ratepayer (like many in our region) this is a significant and unexpected expense. For families already struggling on low incomes, these costs are unsustainable.

We've been informed that there is no planned increase in funding for the maintenance of local roads in the near future. This means we are likely facing more years of potholes, patch jobs, and continued deterioration. Even the quality of roadwork appears to be declining, many repairs are simply re-patches of previous poor fixes. This is not cost-effective; it's a short-term approach that compounds long-term costs. People are getting frustrated and angry about this example of council wasting funds. Meanwhile the cost of labour and materials for repairing roads has risen and will keep rising. This has become a statewide problem affecting many council areas.

What happens when we next face major flooding? Will our communities be expected to fend for themselves? I know of a young family who travel 15 kilometers each way to get their children to and from school, there is no school bus service available. This means two round trips a day, totaling 60 kilometers daily on degraded, rough roads. The cost, stress and damage to their vehicle plus the lack of employment opportunities for the children has pushed them to move out of the Shire. They are not alone. Stories like these are becoming more common.

Adding to this burden, ratepayers on 100-acre lots have seen their rates increase by nearly \$100 annually. Most of these lots are only accessible by local roads. Will the extra revenue raised be used to fund repair of local roads we have to use? If local roads are the only service many of us receive, and those local roads are declining, it is difficult for most to see how this rate rise serves our best interests. Waste disposal is a separate charge, and local use vouchers have been reduced over the last 20 years from five to three annually, which is not enough for a rural family, so we still have to pay more to use the waste station for general waste. We receive no curbside collection, meaning we must use these deteriorating local roads just to dispose of our own rubbish.

Our local roads are our lifeline, comparable to the veins and arteries in the human body. Without them, we are effectively cut off. Most residents must travel significant distances just to purchase basic necessities. In some cases, home food deliveries and home-help for the invalid and elderly have stopped because the services have decided the local roads are just too unsafe for their

vehicles. The skills of self-sufficiency and food production have diminished, and reviving these should be part of our broader strategy, but it will not negate the essential need for reliable road access.

This leads to a broader concern: new subdivisions. If current funding is insufficient to maintain existing local roads, how can we justify adding more infrastructure that Council cannot afford to sustain? Developer contributions are minimal and rarely cover the extra cost of local road construction and maintenance. Moreover, the current State Government policy of rate pegging and rate capping means that even if we see an increase in ratepayers, Council's revenue may not increase proportionately unless a Special Rate Variation is applied for and accepted by State Government. In fact, according the General Manager, an increase in ratepayers could lead to a decrease in individual rates—further reducing overall funds available for the extra infrastructure needed by development.

Some argue that development will support local businesses, but will it support the infrastructure needs of our community and Council's ability to provide this? What of the additional wear and tear on local roads caused by increased traffic, including heavy vehicles from other industries such as logging, mining, and construction? Will these sectors contribute fairly to the cost of maintaining the infrastructure they rely upon? Rural businesses cannot operate effectively without passable local roads to deliver produce to markets in good condition. The businesses that rely on the growing sector of Tourism also rely on local roads for access to their venues and attractions.

It's also worth noting that the State Government is increasingly shifting the financial responsibility for roads (and other infrastructure) onto local councils. Cost Shifting is adding \$1.5 billion annually to the costs of NSW local councils, approximately the amount of \$495 each year to every ratepayer in NSW. Meanwhile, the State continues to collect substantial revenue through road-related taxes, license, and registration fees and their slice of fuel tax and the GST. With the severe weather events we've experienced in recent years, the entire state road network has suffered, even though, it's clear that local roads are being deprioritised, and we are bearing the consequences. This is a hard but necessary problem to solve, it affects all of us.

In Summary:

- **Local roads are critical to the wealth, and wellbeing of our community.**
- **Poor local road conditions result in significant financial and emotional stress for local residents and ratepayers.**
- **Road maintenance is the most essential and tangible service Council provides in our area and it must be prioritized.**
- **New developments must not be approved without a clear, funded plan for infrastructure including local roads.**
- **Council and the community must work together to advocate for fairer funding models at the State level.**

As a Councilor, I urge our community to speak up. Local roads should not be allowed to deteriorate further. The future of our region depends on ensuring the services we rely on are properly funded and effectively delivered.