Access to the Cairns airport and seaport from the north, south and west is adversely impacted by a highly inefficient road network, with all directions constrained by the need to travel directly through the Cairns CBD.

There is significant traffic congestion on the Captain Cook Highway and along the Cairns Western Arterial Road, both of which lead from the northern beaches into the city, and this makes the transport of freight to, from and between the key port locations difficult.

While there is significant potential to expand export activities for the Tropical North Queensland (TNQ) region, particularly to Asian markets, connectivity between ports is a critical enabling factor in the future development of Cairns as an export and service hub.

The need to upgrade Captain Cook Highway to enhance connectivity was acknowledged by the Queensland Minister for Transport and Main Roads, Mark Bailey, who wrote to the Deputy Prime Minister, Michael McCormack on 19 September 2018 to request an extension of the national highway in Cairns during the 2018-2019 National Land Transport Network (NLTN) Determination Review. The extension will free-up State Government funding that would previously have been required for Captain Cook Highway upgrades.

However, the State-owned Western Arterial section of the Cairns Ring Road carries 36,550 vehicles per day and is not included in the 2018 National Land Transport Network extension request. Upgrading this section is essential to connecting Cairns’ freight routes with the region’s premier agriculture producing areas (Atherton Tablelands, Cape York Peninsula and Mossman), while also meeting demand for daily commuter traffic.

The Bruce Highway is part of the National Highway A1, providing the vital link between Cairns, other Queensland coastal cities and Brisbane. The National Highway A1 currently terminates in the Cairns CBD at the corners of Comport and Draper Streets, but the Federal Government is expected to deliver on its promise to extend the Highway to the intersection of Captain Cook and Kennedy Highways and Mount Milman Drive, Smithfield, north of Cairns, leading to a major upgrade of the Captain Cook Highway.

However, the effectiveness and safety of the road transport network in and around Cairns will be adversely impacted until the State-owned Cairns Western Arterial Road is also upgraded.

The Cairns Arterial road network has been underfunded for many years in terms of capacity upgrades, with residential and industrial land development outpacing road project investments. In January 2019, Cairns Regional Council identified a number of underfunded State-owned roads and listed them as priority infrastructure projects for the region. The Cairns Western Arterial Road is a significant component of this list as the road is heavily congested on a daily basis and when the Captain Cook Highway is flooded during wet season or natural disaster, is the only flood free access route between Cairns, the northern beaches and Kennedy Highway.
**NEXT STEPS**

Investment in key roads infrastructure is critical to ensuring sustained economic growth for the region, which will lead to greater diversity in incomes and job security. The required infrastructure upgrades can be achieved through:

- Creating Stage 2 of the Cairns Ring Road by upgrading the Bruce Highway and linking the northern-most part of the National Highway to the Cairns Port and Airport;
- Upgrading three major intersections along the Western Arterial Road through a combination of overpass, traffic signal and slip lane projects;
- Duplicating the full length of the road to increase traffic lanes from 1 to 2 in each direction;
- Duplicating the Barron River Bridge at Kamerunga and the Redlynch overpass; and
- Constructing the McCoombie Street connection road between Ray Jones Drive and Mulgrave Road.

It is estimated that a $365.5 million investment is required to cover the cost of the Western Arterial Road upgrades.

A combined State and Federal investment of $359 million has already been indicated in the Queensland Transport and Investment Road and Rail Program for Cairns Ring Road Stage 1. However, the funds have not been committed in the Capital Budget Statements and remain indicative only.

While an initial investment of $12.5 million has been committed by the State over 3 years for detailed planning for the Cairns Western Arterial Road, the remaining $353 million is yet to be confirmed.

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**OUR RECOMMENDATION**

- That the Queensland Government include capital funding of $437.3 million for the Cairns Ring Road and Cairns Western Arterial Road projects in the 2020 State Budget, to be invested over four years to 2023-2024.
- That the Queensland Government fast-track detailed planning of the Cairns Western Arterial Road to ensure plan completion by December 2020.
- That the Federal Government commit to commencement of capital funding of $287.2 million for Cairns Ring Road in the 2020 Budget, to be invested over three years to 2023-2024.
- That the Commonwealth Government confirm in the forthcoming amendment of the National Land Transport Act 2014 its promised extension of the Highway A1 to the junction of the Kennedy and Captain Cook Highways at Smithfield.

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**ESTIMATED PROJECT COST $749M**

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