

CUMMINGS ECONOMICS

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May 2021 / CE Ref J3381A

CONNECTING CAIRNS Article For Connect Cairns Magazine

The development of transport and communication links has been vital to the city's progress. The city and region have historically, and still remains, remote from major markets within a continent that is remote from major global markets. While Cairns has led the way in northern and regional Australia in achieving connectivity by air with the rest of Australia and internationally, it has lagged behind other regions of the north in achieving road and rail connectivity, both within the region and with the rest of Australia.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ROAD LINKS

While the city is going through a major upgrading of its internal road structure to make it function more efficiently, the city needs to come to grips with major challenges to improve its connectivity within the region and to the rest of Australia. If the region is going to diversify its economy in fields like agriculture and manufacturing, it is vital that it improves its freight links within the region with the rest of the nation.

ROAD CONNECTIVITY WITH SOUTHERN AUSTRALIA

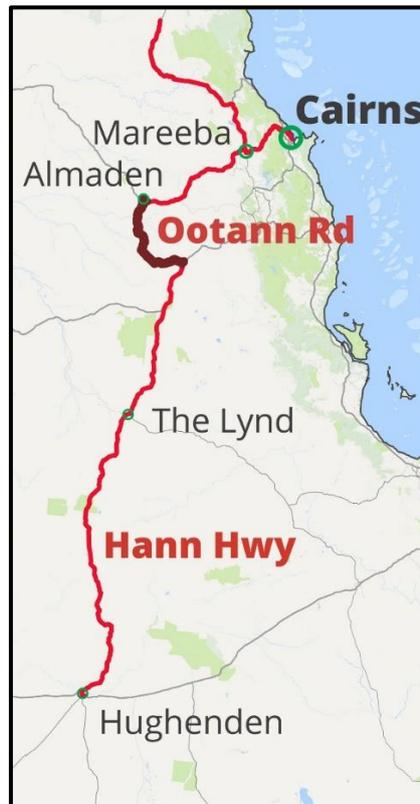
The sealing of the unsealed section of the Bruce Highway in Central Queensland in the 1970s and the development that occurred first in semi-trailers and subsequently B-Doubles, has had a major impact in diversifying the region's economy.

Lower transport costs compared to other costs, especially for time sensitive produce, proved wrong Davidson's "Northern Myth" 1960s' gloomy outlook for agricultural expansion in the north. Since the 1980s, the Cairns region has developed rapidly in horticultural and offseason produce production. These days, the Cairns region is the third largest fruit producing region in Australia with most of the output transported by road to major southern markets.

However, the east coast of Australia bends out to the east. The Cairns region is due north of Melbourne and a direct inland route from the Tablelands via the Hann Highway to Hughenden, Barcaldine, Charleville and Griffiths will cut off about 800km travel distance. This route will also be able to take highly freight efficient triple road trains from the north into New South Wales. The route avoids "built-up" areas.

Opening up this route will make substantial cost and delivery time savings for product from the Tablelands destined for Melbourne, Adelaide and across the Nullarbor to Perth, as well as for freight coming north from those centres. Sealing of the last unsealed section between Hughenden and the Lynd Junction is underway and is scheduled for completion in a few years.

Currently, triple road trains are able to come into Mt Garnet. A further improvement would be to seal the Ootann Road further west to enable triple road trains to come right up to Mareeba within 65km of Cairns (see Map).



In the meantime, pending completion of the Hann link, the Federal Government has committed additional funding to the Gregory Highway south through Charters Towers and Emerald that is closer to the coast.

Apart from freight, it can be expected that the direct Melbourne Cairns route would result in an increase in drive tourism, especially linking Waltzing Matilda country around Longreach and Winton with Cairns and the Tablelands. Also of interest to Cairns for tourism and freight movements, will be the Outback Way from Winton to Alice Springs that is progressively being sealed. The remaining unsealed sections of the Outback Way between Alice Springs and Laverton in Western Australia are also progressively being sealed and in the coming decades, of benefit to Cairns' connectivity, will be a sealed direct route between Cairns and Perth through the Centre.

ROAD CONNECTIVITY ACROSS THE NORTH

At present, if you want to travel on sealed roads between the two major cities in Australia's far north, Cairns and Darwin, it is necessary to travel south to Townsville then across the Flinders and Barkly Highways route and then north again.

The Savannah Way route from Cairns across to Burketown and Borroloola in the Northern Territory cuts off about 500km between Cairns and Darwin. A further sealing of 125km between Normanton and Burketown (provided in the 2020 budget under the Roads of Strategic Importance funding), will reduce the unsealed distance to about 200km across the Queensland/ Northern Territory border (see Map).



It is very much in the interests of northern development for the existing air connectivity between the Cairns region (the largest in population in the north) and Darwin to be paralleled by an efficient sealed road that will pass through the new Beetaloo Gas Basin development. Sealing this route will make Cairns the closest city by road to Darwin and 700km closer than the nearest metropolitan centre, Adelaide.

REGIONAL ROAD CONNECTIVITY

With the Peninsula Developmental Road now in the process of being sealed to Weipa, the “Elephant in the Region” is the Kuranda Range Road.

This road is critical to Cairns efficiently servicing the Tablelands, Gulf and Peninsula regions - by far the largest hinterland population across northern Australia and in Queensland north of Brisbane and the Darling Downs. The need for this road to be an efficient freight transport route is highlighted by the fact that the range railway no longer carries freight. Yet currently the Kuranda Range Road cannot even take the major standard long-distance freight vehicles used throughout Australia - B-Doubles.

Cairns is located on a relatively narrow coastal plain with substantial environmental pressures. It is vital to the region’s growth that the city spread up over the range in the future. At traffic levels of about 9,000 vehicles a day, the Kuranda Range is now way up towards its design limits with regular accident problems. Problems with the Kuranda bridge heighten the constraints.

Studies are underway including into alternative routes and approaches. It is vital to the region’s progress that we come to grips with this issue.