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April 2025 - CERef-J3545

Research Note

KURANDA RANGE TRAFFIC HAS FLATLINED

Long-term analysis of traffic counts indicates that the failure to improve the Kuranda Range Road is strongly affecting traffic growth on the route despite the growth of population and industry in the region.

The following chart illustrates that traffic count data from 1976 to 2009 shows strong growth of traffic over the 33-year period averaging 5% per annum. This was above population growth rates in the region which grew by an average of 2.9% per annum.

However, the figures for the last 14 years from 2009 to 2023 indicate a major change of pattern. They show that traffic on the road has virtually **FLATLINED** and grew by a total of only 3% over this whole period.

While average population growth from 2009 to 2023 at 1.3% per annum was slower compared with the earlier 33 years, population still grew by 20% over the 14-year period and on previous trends, traffic growth could have been expected to have been above this and not below.

While international visitor traffic to Kuranda has been down in recent years, most international visitors travel to and from Kuranda by train, cableway or by large coaches without substantial impact on road traffic counts.

Indications that the constraints of the road via Kuranda has been affecting traffic growth since 2009 is supported by the fact that traffic on other range roads in the region - the Rex, Gillies and Palmerston roads has grown over the same period by 27%, 29%, and about 24% respectively, i.e. faster than population growth.

A decision was made about 2007 by the then Labour Government to not proceed with a proposed upgrading of the Kuranda Range Road with an estimated cost of about \$800m at that time.

Since cyclone Jasper's extreme 100-year rainfall and flooding event in December 2023, the road has been further constrained with lane closures. Safety problems with the Barron River bridge at Kuranda have also been causing disruption of traffic flows.

COMMENT

It is difficult to conclude other than that the Kuranda Range Road built 80 years ago during the early phases of World War II has reached its design limit and is providing a bottleneck to traffic that is imposing substantial costs to the region's economy.

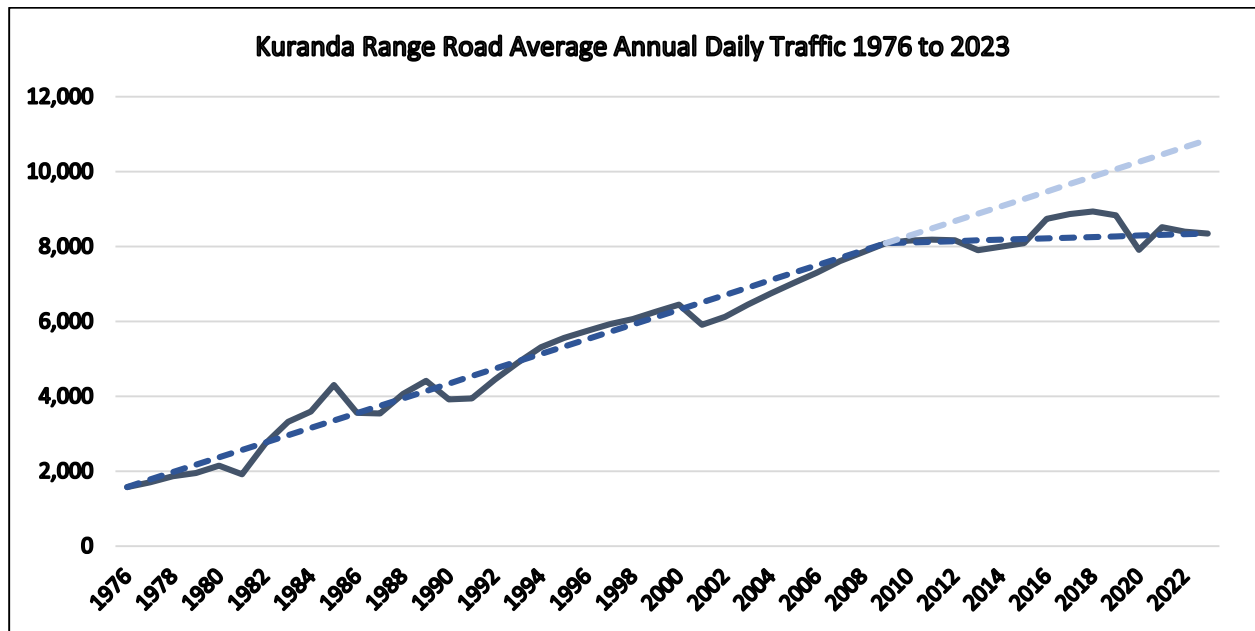
Cairns as the region's main service centre, port, airport, road and rail head, is situated on a narrow coastal plain that has limited room to expand to the north, west and east. Expansion to the south involves taking valuable agricultural land out of production and threatening the viability of Mulgrave Sugar Mill. As a regional capital/hub city, Cairns services the biggest and fastest growing population in northern Australia and is destined to grow.

It is vital that it has highly efficient transport links across the ranges to service the population of 70,000 and growing industries in its hinterland.

It is also vital that Cairns has a short fast transport corridor to enable the city’s urban footprint to expand into the area west of the ranges.

The whole issue has been left unattended for decades. It is going to cost a lot of money and if another route will be more efficient for traffic movements to meet the region’s growth needs over the next 80 years, it needs to be explored.

The job is obviously beyond the resources of the State Government and the first step is to recognise that this is a road project of national importance that would involve extending Highway 1 classification to the Mareeba transport hub and for the Commonwealth Government to meet 80% of the costs.



Source: Cummings Economics from Queensland Main Roads data.

Table: Population and Traffic Growth Compared –

Period 33 Years 1976 to 2009	1976	2009	Difference		Average Annual Growth
			No.	%	%
Population Cairns LGA Area	57,060	145,962	88,902	156%	2.9% pa
Kuranda Range RD AADT	1,580	8,090	6,510	412%	5.1% pa
Period 14 Years 2009 to 2023	2009	2023	Difference		Average Annual Growth
			No.	%	%
Population Cairns LGA Area	14,5962	175,397	29,435	20%	1.3% pa
Kuranda Range RD AADT	8,090	8,347	257	3%	0.2% pa

Source: Cummings Economics from Population-ABS data; Traffic Counts-QLD Main Roads data.

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