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NSW COASTAL ALLIANCE – MEDIA RELEASE

NSW TRANSPORT MINISTER ANDREW CONSTANCE LEAVES BATEMANS BAY COMMUNITY UP THE ESTUARY WITHOUT A PADDLE

In the lead up to the last NSW State elections, the NSW Minister for Transport, Andrew Constance, announced funding of over 5 million dollars for an independent study and mitigation works to correct a long-standing coastal erosion problem that has plagued the Lower Surfside community near Batemans Bay NSW for over sixty years. The Minister was prompted to take this action when the affected community prepared a legal injunction to prevent the new Batemans Bay bridge project from proceeding until their erosion issue was addressed. The Minister appointed a community-based Project Reference Group (PRG) to guide the study, and instructed his Roads and Maritime bureaucrats to appoint consultants to deliver the agreed outcomes in conjunction with the bridge project. After 18 months of failed meetings and fruitless negotiations, the PRG has issued a damning report exposing the unprofessional conduct of Roads and Maritime staff and their appointed consultants. The PRG, that comprised representatives from three separate community groups, plus delegates from the Eurobodalla Coast Alliance and the NSW Coastal Alliance, is now calling for an independent inquiry into anomalies in the process, and the contempt with which they were treated by the responsible public servants.

According to the PRG, the independent study was hijacked from the very beginning by RMS bridge builders. Instead of addressing community needs as outlined in the original brief, the RMS used the study to correct basic deficiencies in the mandatory assessment of environmental factors relating to their new bridge. The PRG reports that the RMS withheld the original brief, that promised erosion mitigation works, and introduced their own assessment criteria. Firstly, the RMS issued an edict that mitigation would only be offered to the community if the erosive effect of the new bridge on the northern shoreline was “no worse” than the existing bridge. When the new bridge failed that assessment, the criteria was altered to include the protected southern shoreline, and the criteria changed to “no worse overall” than the existing bridge.

The bureaucrats completely ignored, a report on erosion within Batemans Bay that identifies the existing bridge as the primary cause of major erosion and the loss of 40 housing allotments on the north shore of the Bay. That report was endorsed by one of Australia’s leading coastal engineers, and highlighted the contribution of past government engineering works and channel dredging to the erosion of Surfside’s natural sand bars that once protected the suburb from coastal storms.

Ian Hitchcock, the Eurobodalla coordinator for the NSW Coastal Alliance has slammed the RMS (now Transport for NSW) for the part they played in the debacle, and the Minister himself for being unable to control and direct the public servants under his control. Hitchcock said, “Although Andrew (Constance) appears to have worked tirelessly to deliver a satisfactory outcome for the Lower Surfside community, he has been obstructed all the way by bureaucrats who believe that they are better placed to make political decisions than the Minister. Unfortunately, the buck stops with Andrew, and he has now unwittingly endorsed a plan that will set the Surfside mitigation plan back by eighteen months, and place it in the hands of another group of bureaucrats who are known advocates of retreat policies for low lying coastal residential areas in NSW.” The full PRG report can be viewed on the NCA website at nswcoastalalliance.org.