

The Northern Freeway

Overview

Extending 20 kilometres from Bowen Hills to Bald Hills, the Northern Freeway was to become the trunk of northern Brisbane's road system. Designed with the commuter in mind, it would have revolutionised car travel across the north with up to eight lanes and numerous connections to other freeways and arterial roads along its length. This freeway was also set to become one of Brisbane's busiest, with traffic projections showing up to 100,000 vehicles using the freeway each day on some sections by 1981.

The concept of a northern suburbs freeway was first mooted in the 1961 Town Plan. In this document, the Brisbane City Council proposed the construction of a 20-kilometre expressway between O'Connell Terrace (Bowen Hills) and Aspley.

Wilbur Smith and Associates, in its 1965 Brisbane Transportation Study, took Council's plans to the next level by including the construction of three northern suburbs freeways in its recommended plan: the Northwest, Northern and North-South Freeways.

The Northern Freeway was very similar to Council's Northern Expressway in that it was to commence just north of O'Connell Terrace, at the Central Freeway (a ring road around the CBD). From there it was to run along the eastern side of Lutwyche Road to Park Road at Kedron. North of Kedron, the freeway's path was roughly due north to Chermside and thence north-westerly to Carseldine. The freeway was to then connect with the Bruce Highway north of Bald Hills.



Staging under the BTS

Brisbane's freeway system was to be constructed between 1965 and 1985 in four five-year stages. The Northern Freeway was to be a 'stage two' freeway – that is, construction was to begin between 1970 and 1975 – but it was not until the end of stage four in 1985 that the freeway was to be fully completed.

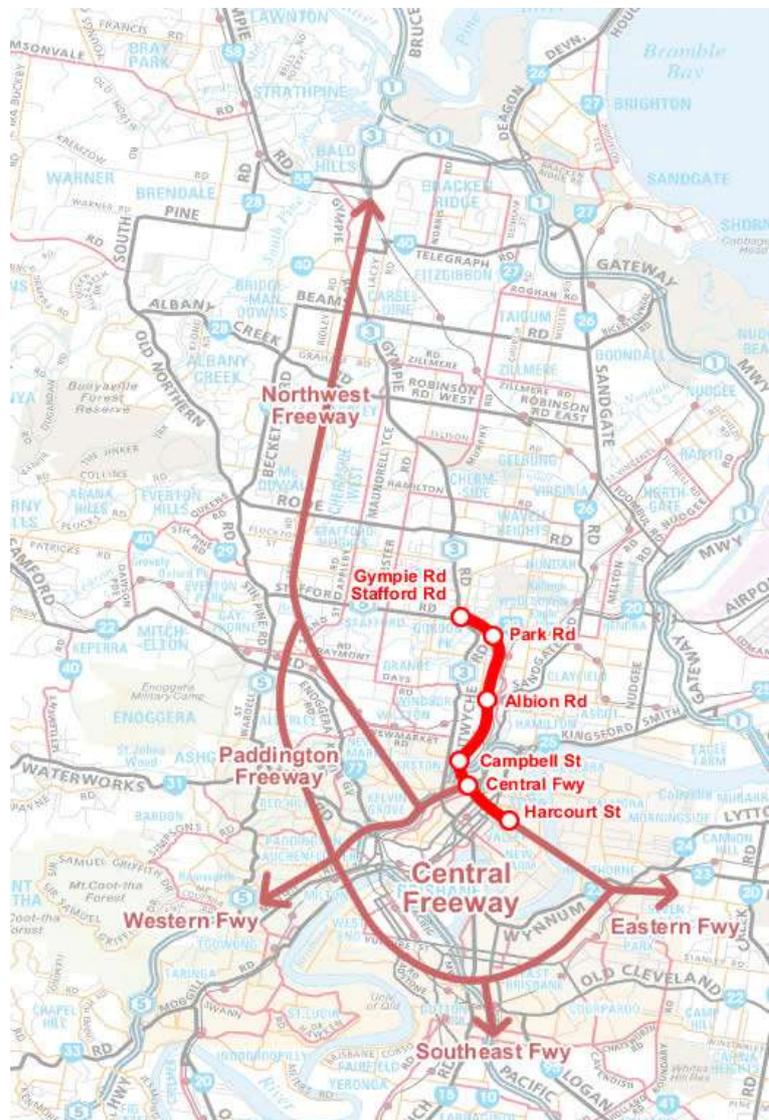
In stage two, four lanes of the freeway's southern half were to be built, with the northern portion being completed to a four-lane standard by the end of 1980. In the latter part of stage 3, the southern portion of the freeway was to be widened to at least 6 lanes. In the final stage, the freeway was to be widened to 8 lanes as far north as Albany Creek Road and to six lanes as far north as Telegraph Road.

The Brisbane Central Freeway Review

During 1969, a review of Brisbane's freeway plans was undertaken by Wilbur Smith and Associates – the Brisbane Central Freeway Review. This review was primarily concerned with the Central Freeway, its routing and connections to the CBD. However, at the same time, the need for each of the other freeways was also reassessed. Following the review, significant changes were made to the freeway plan due to changes in the public's attitude towards freeway construction, the adoption of higher design standards and the escalating costs of road construction.

Cutting the fat and keeping the peace

Following the review, the Northern Freeway was shortened to just 6 kilometres (terminating at Kedron) and its number of lanes reduced to six. The freeway's route was also changed so that rather than running due north through Bowen Hills, Albion and Woolloowin, the freeway hugged the western side of Enoggera Creek and the North Coast Railway instead. Rather than dividing communities, it was argued that the new route would



simply reinforce the barrier created between the two halves of Albion and Wooloowin by the construction of the North Coast Railway in 1888.

While the new route was more ideal for residents, from an engineering standpoint it was inferior as standards had to be compromised when designing the freeway through Bowen Hills. Not only that, the new route presented significant engineering challenges for the Main Roads Department (MRD) as Brisbane's largest and most complex freeway-to-freeway interchange (the Central/Northern Freeway interchange) was to be built on swampland surrounding Enoggera Creek.

Design changes

The location and design of the freeway's southern terminal was also revised so that the freeway terminated further south at Harcourt Street, New Farm, rather than Campbell Street, Bowen Hills. This change occurred because under the original freeway plan, much of the Central Freeway, which provided access to the main districts of central Brisbane, was to be completed well in advance of the Northern Freeway. However, this never happened. So to avoid terminating the Northern Freeway at a minor street in the suburbs, a portion of the Central Freeway was integrated into the Northern Freeway project. However, this new southern terminal still allowed for the completion of the Central Freeway at a later date.

Another interesting feature of the revised design was the possibility of developing the air space over the freeway's southern terminal in Fortitude Valley and New Farm. According to the MRD, several firms were interested in joint development activities which included the construction of office blocks and shopping centres on top of, or alongside, the freeway in these areas.

Revised staging

Rather than building the freeway to a lower standard and then upgrading it later (as recommended by Wilbur Smith and Associates), it was decided to build the freeway to its ultimate size, but to open it progressively over four stages. The first stage involved building the Markwell Street overpass in Bowen Hills and preparing the surrounding area for the insertion of the southern terminal. The second stage involved building the southern terminal and the mainline freeway as far north as Campbell Street. During the third stage, the freeway was to be extended north to Albion Rd, and in the final stage, the freeway was to be fully completed to Gympie Road at Kedron.

Route Numbering

In December 1971 the Main Roads Department developed a route numbering plan for Brisbane's freeway network. The Northern Freeway was designated the F-5.



Construction, protest begins

In 1972, the MRD began resuming properties in Bowen Hills to make way for the Markwell Street overpass. It was at this time that the Brisbane Freeway Protest and Compensation Committee (BFPCC) formed. The committee's secretary was Betty Counslow, a resident of Bowen Hills. The group opposed the construction of the Northern Freeway on the following grounds:

- 1. Inadequate compensation** – The compensation offered by the State Government to affected residents was inadequate. Many were only offered \$8,000-\$10,000 for their properties which was well below market value at the time. For many residents, this was the only reason they opposed the freeway's construction as in the mid 20th century, freeways were seen as a symbol of progress. Many were happy to relocate provided they received fair compensation.
- 2. Worsened the housing crisis** – Due to the city's high rate of growth during the '60s and '70s, a housing crisis existed in Brisbane. The committee believed that by resuming thousands of homes for freeway construction, the problem would only be exacerbated. This assertion was based on the fact that the MRD typically demolished homes as they were resumed, rather than renting them out until construction was programmed to begin.
- 3. The public transport system was being neglected** – It didn't make sense for Brisbane, supposedly the city of progress, to build a freeway system because it was a decades-old concept that had failed to solve the traffic problems of cities which had built them in the past. The committee believed that an improved public transport system was the better way to go.
- 4. Circuitous routing that required more resumptions than necessary** – The freeway was to be routed around the Queensland Newspapers Group (the publishers of Brisbane's sole daily newspaper, The Courier-Mail) building on Campbell Street in Bowen Hills, making the freeway 400 metres longer than necessary, and requiring the resumption of an additional 90 homes.

In relation to the first point about inadequate compensation, many residents (mainly younger and immigrant families) did sell out at the lower prices. When the government attempted to demolish these houses, the protest committee obtained a union order which for a short time brought the demolitions to a halt. The government overcame this by employing non-union labour and conducting demolitions under the cover of darkness.

When looking at plans for the freeway in the vicinity of Bowen Hills, it appears that the last complaint from the BFPCC is in fact valid – the freeway was to make a sharp turn around the QNP building. However, that section of freeway is actually the portion of the Central Freeway that was integrated into the Northern Freeway. This section of freeway was to eventually form part of the Central/Northern Freeway interchange. Had the freeway been built right through the QNP building, the 'shape' of the Central Freeway would have been distorted, and its interchange with the Northern Freeway would've had a much larger impact on the local area, both visually and in terms of land requirements.

It's dead

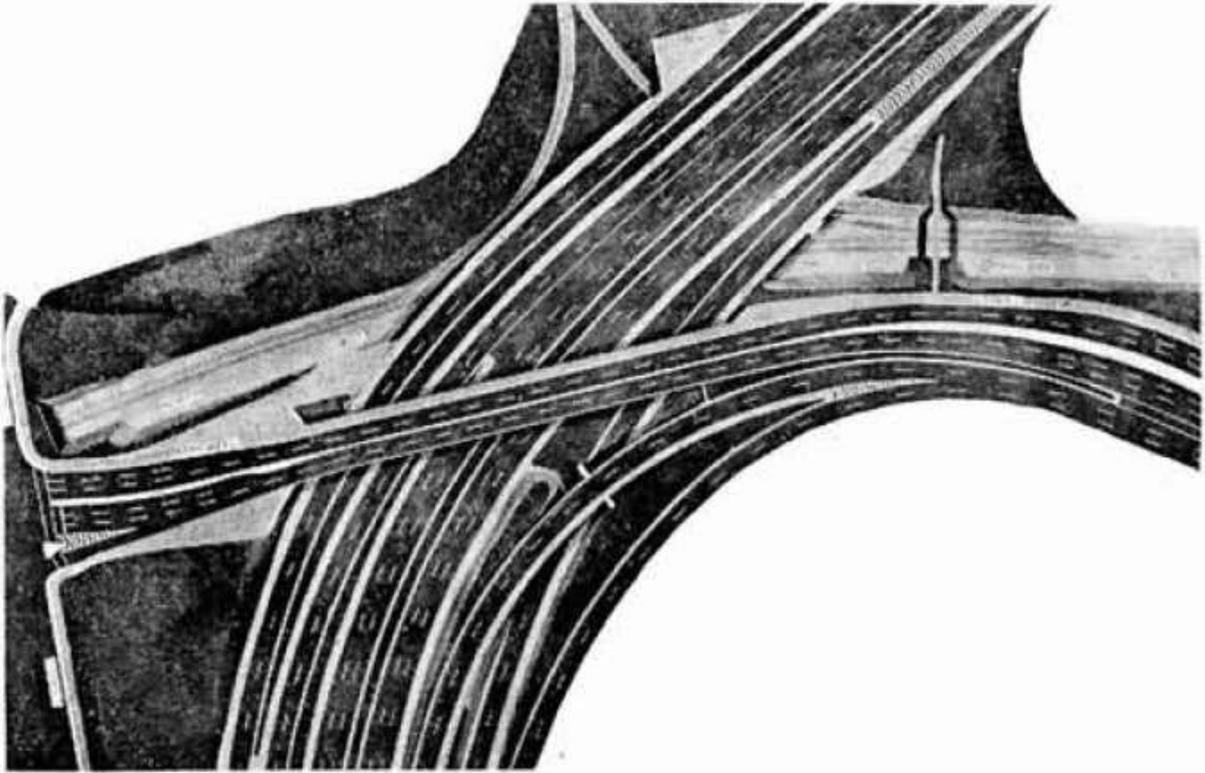
By 1975 the freeway plan had been scaled back to the bare essentials, and by 1985, the plan had been cancelled altogether due to community opposition and funding issues. It should be noted that on the Northern Freeway, the Markwell St overpass was completed, and today carries traffic over vacant land.



Above: The Markwell Street overpass in Bowen Hills, 2006.



Left: View from the Markwell Street overpass. **Right:** The view had only the Northern Fwy been built.



***Above:** What the Central Freeway would've looked like near the Northern Freeway interchange in Bowen Hills had both the Central and Northern Freeways been built. There would've been up to 15 lanes spread across up to 7 carriageways. The Markwell Street overpass runs east-west, the Central/Northern Freeway runs north-south. The North Coast Railway is located just above the Markwell Street overpass.*

While all plans for a surface freeway in the inner northern suburbs have been abandoned, the Northern Freeway's route is still a gazetted transport corridor north of the Inner City Bypass/Lutwyche Road interchange in Bowen Hills. Many of the resumed properties which were cleared are still vacant and owned by Main Roads today.



Above: Land that was cleared for the freeway in Bowen Hills, 2006.



Above: Signage on a cleared block at Bowen Hills, 2006.

Resurrection

Numerous attempts have been made to revive the Northern Freeway over the years, with the most notable attempts being the North-South Bypass Tunnel (first proposed by former Lord Mayor Jim Soorley), and the Airport Link that was proposed by current Lord Mayor Campbell Newman.

North South Bypass Tunnel

Near the end of his tenure in 2001, Soorley proposed the North-South Bypass Tunnel – a 15 km tollway linking Kedron and Woolloongabba – as part of a solution to central Brisbane’s traffic problems. The tollway was to be a multistage project, with the first stage involving the construction of a tunnel from the Pacific Motorway at Woolloongabba to the Inner City Bypass at Bowen Hills. Under stages two and three, the rest of the tunnel to Gympie Road at Kedron was to be completed, roughly following the post-1969 Northern Freeway alignment.

Soorley’s original proposal never saw the light of day as following his retirement in 2003, his successor, Tim Quinn, was defeated by Liberal candidate Campbell Newman in the 2004 local government elections.

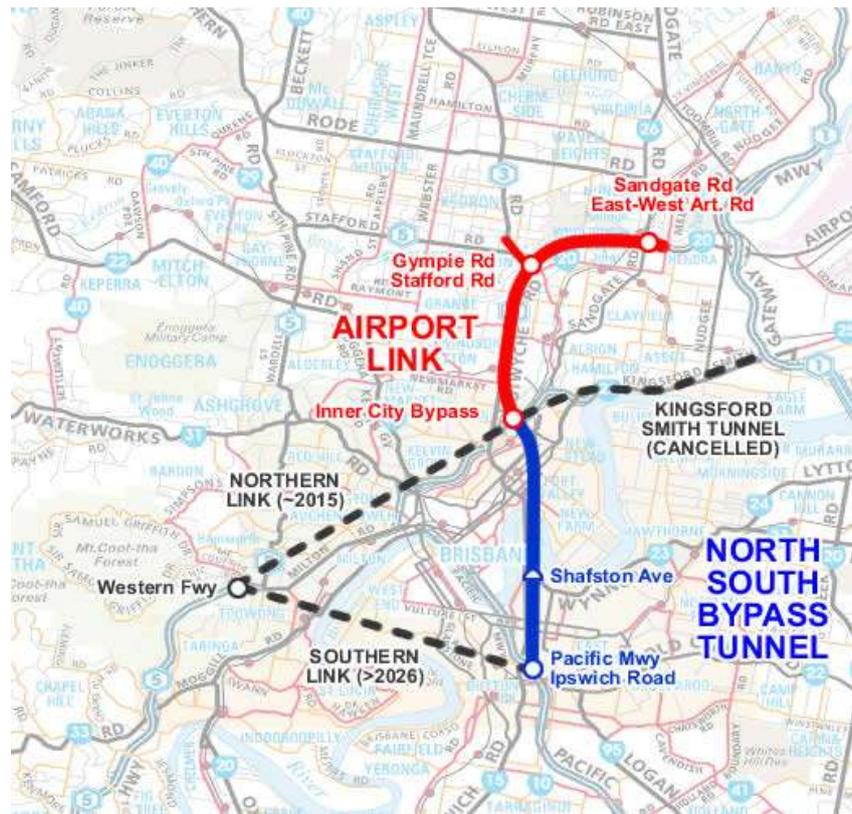
TransApex

Just prior to the elections, Campbell Newman announced his own multibillion-dollar tunnel plan dubbed TransApex. The TransApex plan consisted of five tunnels linking major roads in central Brisbane, including the first stage of Soorley’s North-South Bypass Tunnel. In lieu of stages two and three (which were to serve the northern suburbs), Newman proposed a tunnel underneath Kingsford Smith Drive linking the Inner City Bypass to the Gateway Motorway at Eagle Farm. The idea was to kill two birds with one stone, with the proposed Kingsford Smith tunnel catering for northbound and Airport-bound traffic.

Shortly after his election victory in 2004, Newman commissioned a review of his tunnel plan. Among other things, it was found that the Kingsford Smith tunnel was not viable for a number of reasons. In light of the study findings, the TransApex plan was altered. The staging of the plan was revised and the Kingsford Smith tunnel replaced with an underground Airport tollway roughly following the 1965 Northern Freeway alignment. This Airport tollway is now known as the Airport Link.

Airport Link

The Airport Link environmental impact study was completed in late 2005 and preliminary designs were released for consultation in October 2006. Rather than building a tollway in a cut and cover tunnel beneath the Northern Freeway reservation, it was decided to build the tollway underneath Lutwyche Road in a driven tunnel, roughly following the original 1965 Northern Freeway route. So essentially, Airport Link combines elements of the Northern Freeway and the latter stages of Jim Soorley's North-South Bypass Tunnel plan.



The Proposal

As it presently stands, the Airport Link will consist of two three-lane tunnels running beneath Lutwyche Road to Kedron. North of Kedron, the tunnels will revert to two lanes each way and follow Junction Road to the East-West Arterial Road at Toombul. There will be interchanges at Bowen Hills (Inner City Bypass), Kedron Brook (Gympie/Stafford Roads) and Toombul (Sandgate Rd). A journey between the city and the Airport will take just six minutes at 80 km/h.

In order to deliver the project in a timely manner, it is likely that the road will be built as a public-private partnership (PPP) with the private sector financing, building, owning and operating the road for several decades. Once the concession has expired, ownership of the Airport Link will transfer to the Brisbane City Council.

Northern Busway

TransLink has announced that the first stage of this busway, running between the Inner Northern Busway at Herston and Gympie Road at Kedron, will be designed at the same time as the Airport Link. The 7-kilometre two-way busway tunnel will be sandwiched between Lutwyche Road and the Airport Link and there will be six stations; at the Royal Brisbane and Womens Hospital, Mayne (Federation Street), Windsor, Albion, Lutwyche and Kedron Brook.

Unlike Airport Link, the busway will be funded using public money and the state government will retain full ownership.

Conclusion

The Northern Freeway was to revolutionise transportation in Brisbane's northern suburbs. Of all the Wilbur Smith freeways, this one was to be the largest and busiest radial freeway, having eight lanes for the majority of its length and carrying in excess of 100,000 vehicles per day.

While we will never know how the northern suburbs would've developed had this freeway been built, we can draw on experiences with freeways in the southern suburbs. There, the freeways increased the pace of development and degraded public transport usage considerably. However, the road would've improved traffic flow and travel times, but at considerable expense to society.

However, for the roadgeeks out there, the future is bright, with two new motorway-standard tunnels coming online over the next decade. And for the public transport fans, a new busway will be coming online during this period as well, along with improved rail services to Caboolture and the Sunshine Coast.

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