



# WestConnex – M4 East

Submission by the Healthy Built Environments Program  
February 2014

Never Stand Still

Faculty of Built Environment

Healthy Built Environments Program



THE HEALTHY BUILT ENVIRONMENTS PROGRAM

## **Summary of Key Points in this Submission**

1. The built environment has a critically important role in supporting healthy behaviours as part of everyday living.
2. The construction and subsequent operation of the WestConnex – M4 East, has significant implications for the physical and mental health of the community.
3. A health impact statement (HIA) must be conducted as part of the assessment requirements for the WestConnex. HIA is a rigorous and systematic assessment methodology that focuses on the health implications of major projects. Given the magnitude of the WestConnex project, and the significant health implications that it poses, an HIA must be undertaken alongside the EIS.
4. Undertaking an HIA will ensure that overall matters for consideration comprehensively and appropriately embrace the physical and mental health implications of the WestConnex. An EIS and/or the Director General's Requirements can be open to interpretation regarding health implications. An HIA ensures that health is the focus, thereby safeguarding the proper evaluation of physical and mental health issues.
5. The longer term health implications of major road building, in lieu of significant investment in public transport and associated active transport, needs to be considered as part of the WestConnex assessment.

## Introduction

The Healthy Built Environments Program (HBEP) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the WestConnex Project.

The HBEP is an innovative collaboration that brings the built environment and health together. The Program is situated in the City Futures Research Centre, Faculty of the Built Environment at The University of New South Wales (UNSW). The HBEP receives its core funding from the NSW Ministry of Health. It is directed by Associate Professor Susan Thompson, and supported by a team of inter-disciplinary partners from across the health and built environment professions working in the public, not-for-profit and private sectors. The Program fosters cross-disciplinary research, delivers education and workforce development, and advocates for health as a primary consideration in built environment plan, policy and decision making. It brings the combined efforts of researchers, educators, practitioners and policy makers from the built environment and health sectors to the prevention of contemporary health problems.

The Program's website has more information about the integration of human and environmental health considerations with the built environment. It also provides links to useful resources, many of which present evidence for the inclusion of specifically focused health policies, provisions and actions in the urban planning process.

See: <http://www.be.unsw.edu.au/programmes/healthy-built-environments-program/about>

For questions about this submission please contact Associate Professor Susan Thompson, Director, Healthy Built Environments Program. Email: [s.thompson@unsw.edu.au](mailto:s.thompson@unsw.edu.au); Phone: 9385 4395.

## The Built Environment and Health

It is well accepted that there are significant physical and mental health benefits from built environments that support active lifestyles, access to fresh, nutritious food, and opportunities for communities to be socially connected in safe and well-designed public spaces. These environments are also recognised as environmentally sustainable. In the short, medium and long term, the economic and social burden of chronic disease will be reduced. Research and practice evidence to support healthy built environments is mounting both internationally and within Australia. The HBEP has published a systematic and comprehensive literature review which brings together much of the salient research on the built environment and health<sup>1</sup>. The focus of the Review is on the key built environment interventions or domains that support human health. These are:

1. The Built Environment and Getting People Active
2. The Built Environment and Connecting and Strengthening Communities
3. The Built Environment and Providing Healthy Food Options

These built environment domains address three of the major risk factors for contemporary chronic disease, namely:

- Physical inactivity
- Social isolation
- Obesity

The full Literature Review can be downloaded from the HBEP's website:

<http://www.be.unsw.edu.au/programs/healthy-built-environments-program/literature-review>

A series of fact sheets summarising the key research, policy and practice issues from the Review can also be downloaded:

<http://www.be.unsw.edu.au/programs/healthy-built-environments-program/fact-sheets>

**The evidence in these documents affirms the critical role that the built environment has in supporting healthy behaviours as part of everyday living.**

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<sup>1</sup> Kent, J, Thompson, SM & Jalaludin, B 2011, *Healthy built environments: a review of the literature*, Healthy Built Environments Program, City Futures Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

## **Implications for Health from WestConnex**

It is critical that the health impacts of the West Connex are rigorously and systematically considered in the assessment process of this major roadway proposal. The research is very strong on this issue – there are significant physical and mental health implications associated with major roadway building and operation. These include:

- Air pollution – significant impacts on physical health (in particular, respiratory and cardiovascular health). Air pollution reduces neighbourhood amenity, making it less pleasant to be physically active (which is critical for good physical and mental health).
- Additional traffic noise – with more vehicles comes more noise. This has implications for mental health due to stress and loss of sleep. In turn this impacts on physical health as those with inadequate sleep have greater risk for obesity and related complications (such as elevated blood pressure, increased risk of Diabetes Type 2).
- Increased danger from traffic – implications for the community’s health (especially vulnerable groups)
- Loss of open space – green space is crucial to human health – both physical and mental; loss of parkland will mean that there is less space for both passive and active recreation, as well as less nature in the city for stress reduction and associated mental health benefits.
- Community severance and dislocation – this has implications for all community members who will find it difficult to maintain established social relationships if physically separated by large roadways. This is particularly problematic for vulnerable groups such as children, the aged and those with disabilities.
- Loss of familiar neighbourhood places – the destruction of well-loved and familiar structures and open areas has adverse impacts on sense of belonging with subsequent negative health implications.
- Loss of opportunities to engage in healthy behaviour in the longer term – by investing in roads to support car use, opportunities to use public transport and associated active transport (walking to bus stops and rail stations) are reduced. The culture of car use is reinforced over and above public and active transport. This has longer term health consequences and needs to be factored into an assessment of the health implications of WestConnex.

**The construction and subsequent operation of the WestConnex has significant implications for the physical and mental health of the community. The decision to invest in major roadway construction in lieu of public/active transport has longer term implications for health.**

## Health Impact Assessment

A health impact statement (HIA) must be conducted as part of the assessment requirements for the WestConnex. HIA is a rigorous and systematic assessment methodology that focuses on the health implications of major projects. It can be used to assess a wide range of projects, such as roadways, before they proceed. HIAs predict the health impacts of such projects and importantly, make recommendations for changes to the proposal to warrant that positive health impacts are maximised and negative health impacts minimised. An HIA contributes to the creation of social, economic, and environmental conditions for health and their equitable distribution.

The HIA Connect Site has many resources about HIAs as well as examples of HIAs: <http://hiaconnect.edu.au/>

Given the magnitude of the WestConnex project (the largest road building initiative in Australia), and the consequent and significant health implications that it poses, both during construction and when in operation, an HIA must be undertaken alongside the EIS. Undertaking an HIA will ensure that matters for consideration – both in an EIS and included in the NSW Department of Planning and Infrastructure’s Director General’s Environmental Assessment Requirements – comprehensively and appropriately embrace the physical and mental health implications of the WestConnex. Requirements for assessment are open to interpretation, especially those that have human health implications which are not well understood nor acknowledged. Examples of these considerations included in the NSW Department of Planning and Infrastructure’s Director General’s Environmental Assessment Requirements are as follows:

- Neighbourhood amenity
- Loss of familiar heritage buildings and open spaces
- Visual impact and urban design
- Connectivity
- Ecological sustainability.

The health consequences of such considerations can be overlooked if they are embedded within an EIS or subsumed in DG Requirements. An HIA guarantees that health is the focus

of such an assessment, ensuring that specific health issues are evaluated in relation to health consequences and not wrongly or narrowly interpreted.<sup>2</sup>

**A health impact statement (HIA) must be conducted as part of the assessment requirements for the WestConnex. Undertaking an HIA will ensure that matters for consideration comprehensively and appropriately embrace the physical and mental health implications of the WestConnex.**

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<sup>2</sup>. If a separate HIA is not undertaken, at the very least health has to be feature as a separate chapter in the EIS.





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