

# 'It doesn't look like it's going to fit': \$13m cassowary crossing blunder

**ARUN SINGH MANN**

WORK on a key section of a \$13m Bruce Highway upgrade has stalled after reports parts of the project design had been plagued with "issues".

Cassowary Coast taxpayers, including former councillor Wayne Kimberly, have demanded answers after work stopped on part of the Smith's Gap upgrade, which started in July last year.

Mr Kimberly, who owns the El Arish Tavern, said he believed a cassowary bridge crossing planned as part of the project was being built in the wrong spot.

"It's not an area where it's known to be a dangerous crossing for cassowaries. They already cross under the Maria Creek bridge," he said.

Plans for the upgrade in-

cluded a southbound overtaking lane on the Bruce Highway between El Arish and Tully, as well as the first-ever bridge for cassowaries.

Once completed, the cassowary bridge would link tracts of world heritage-listed rainforest for the endangered birds, which have become frequent road-strike victims in the region in recent years.

Work has now stalled on the bridge and Mr Kimberly said questions had been raised around whether the structure would fit into the allocated space.

"A lot of locals were questioning how they would finish it with the Queensland Rail (track) right there (running parallel to the Bruce Highway). It doesn't look like it's going to fit," Mr Kimberly said.

"The workers agreed with

those concerns during conversations and I was told they were told to stop work. They're just doing their job.

"But someone has obviously said this is a viable project and 'we need to commit \$13 million,' but everyone is asking 'who made that call, who designed the bridge, and (who) didn't notice there's a railway line there.'"

Tully Chamber of Commerce secretary Jessica Anders agreed the location of the bridge was "bizarre".

"I personally haven't ever seen a cassowary there and if you talk to the locals they'll tell you that they already use the tunneller, so maybe they could've built another tunnel.

She said the hill where the works were was very steep.

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"Just with how steep the hill is at that point, it does make you question the research, and as far as I'm aware, there's been complaints from (Queensland Rail)," Ms Anders said.

"The overtaking lane is great and we need more of them between Cairns and Townsville," she said.

Queensland Rail head of regional Jim Benstead said the railway operator was working with the Department of Transport and Main Roads to identify and investigate any potential impacts originating from the Smith's Gap overtaking lane plans.

"To ensure the Smith's Gap overtaking lane does not impact the North Coast rail line between El Arish and Tully, both hydrology systems will be aligned," Mr Benstead said.

The Department of Transport and Main Roads did not respond to questions on who was responsible for the design, whether workers had been told to stop work and if the bridge dimensions were an issue and would need to be redesigned.

However, in a statement a department spokeswoman said works were due to restart after the wet season.

"We are currently undertaking additional slope stabilisation works on batters in the project area due to heavy rain this wet season," she said.

"Slope stabilisation works cannot be undertaken in wet weather to ensure worker safety. Construction work will resume following the wet season as planned. A fauna crossing will be built as part of the works."

She said construction was expected to be completed by early 2022 and remained on budget. Work on the project has been contracted to RMS Engineering and Construction.

When asked about the project's status, general manager Mitch McMullen said "with all big projects, issues arise," but declined to comment further.