Andrew King
Infrastructure and Transport Planning Manager
The Hills Shire Council
PO Box 7064
Norwest NSW 2153

5th August 2022

Dear Mr King,

Re: The Hills Shire Bike Plan Review

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Urban Area Strategic Review for the 2022 Hills Shire Bike Plan.

Bicycle NSW has been the peak bicycle advocacy group in NSW for over forty-five years, and has more than 30 affiliated local Bicycle User Groups. Our mission is to *'create a better environment for all bicycle riders'*, and we support improvements to facilities for pedestrians and cyclists. We advocate for new cycling routes that incorporate dedicated paths within both green corridors and the road environment, to provide connections to jobs, schools and services for daily transport and recreation trips. Bike riding provides a healthy, congestion-reducing, low-carbon form of travel that is quiet, efficient and attractive for all ages with the correct infrastructure design.

We welcome the work that has begun to update the 2009 Hills Shire Bike Plan. A new plan for delivering active transport facilities is long-overdue, given the massive changes in The Hills over the last decade with the growth of greenfield residential development in North Kellyville and Box Hill, increasing density in many established areas, and expanded commercial and industrial precincts. Even more significant was the arrival of Sydney Metro Northwest, offering true multi-modal transport options to most residents of The Hills.

The population has increased to 192,000 in 2021[i] from 162,500 people in 2016. Another 98,000 residents are expected to call The Hills Shire home by 2036, and jump of 52%. Future Transport 2056 does not identify any major new road connections to or through The Hills within the next 20 years[ii]. The transport network is already under pressure. To maintain the cherished bush lifestyle, it is imperative not to continue with a business-as-usual approach to transport where 78% of trips are made by private car[iii]. Shifting a proportion of short car journeys from cars to walking, cycling or micromobility will make better use of existing roads and ensure easy access to daily needs for those who still need to drive without covering more green space with concrete.

Most residents live within a 3 km of an activity centre where daily needs such as shops and schools can be accessed within a 10- to 15-minute bike ride[iv]. Unfortunately, far too much of road network is dedicated to the movement and storage of private vehicles, creating a hostile environment for people walking and cycling, with dangerous intersections, narrow footpaths, fast-moving noisy traffic and long distances between crossings. The Hills remains a difficult area to traverse safely by bicycle. Bike North, a large and active Bicycle User Group, has worked hard over many years to advocate for better conditions for active travel. While some improvements have been made, the Council has failed to prioritise safe infrastructure for walking and cycling.

A positive note

The Urban Area Strategic Review contains many elements that can be built on for the final Bike Plan. In particular, Bicycle NSW is pleased to see:

- A clear strategic objective of **more people riding more often in The Hills Shire**, including increasing the percentage of children walking or cycling to school (Section 4.4).
- A detailed overview of the strategic planning and policy context that highlights the importance of active transport to regional, district and local strategies. The Hills Future 2036 Local Strategic Planning Statement[v] has several planning priorities that are interwoven with the delivery of high-quality cycling and walking facilities. Planning Priority 13 seeks to "expand and improve the active transport network".
- A discussion of the Green Grid as an overarching open space and movement network. Wide off-road paths with separate space for pedestrians and bike riders are suggested for open space corridors, creating a unique feature for The Hills.
- Good explanations of the different types of cycling facilities and how they have changed over time. The new infrastructure will aim to reflect guidance in the Transport for NSW Cycleway Design Toolbox[vi] wherever possible.
- Five key precincts identified for priority delivery of new and improved routes within 5km of existing and emerging activity centres.
- An intention to develop mapping, wayfinding and education projects to stimulate more bike riding.

However, we share many of the concerns outlined in the excellent submission by Bike North.

Some concerns:

- There is confusion around the intentions for this document. Is the Urban Area Strategic Review to be considered the new Bike Plan or is it a background study to inform the Bike Plan? It contains a strange mix of proposals and recommendations, and reads as a very detailed internal document to guide Council in the next stage of active transport planning. The final Bike Plan should be more graphic and accessible with a list of priority actions under guiding themes. It must give the community confidence that a cohesive network will be delivered over a specified timeframe, with attention paid to bike parking, wayfinding and education. Excellent recent examples include bike plans from Northern Beaches[vii] and Ryde[viii].
- The mapping is inaccurate and unclear. Bike North has detailed the errors extensively in its submission. There are particularly serious issues with accuracy in the southern path of the LGA around Castle Hill. It appears the consultants have spent very little time in The Hills; they admit that the current cycling facilities have been assessed with a desktop study (Section 2.4.4) using Google Maps and Council ArcGIS geospatial data. Bike North also provided dozens of comments on existing and proposed facilities during the first round of engagement in late 2021 but these have not led to many updates. It will be impossible to plan for future infrastructure delivery without accurate knowledge of the terrain.
- A network hierarchy is discussed but the associated map is a useless collection of bendy arrows (Fig 1). The map may indicate high-level intentions but surely the routes should form a network, aligned with actual green corridors and roads? Why are there 'recreational loops that don't actually loop? There is no sense of the final network ambitions for stakeholders to understand and use in planning projects.

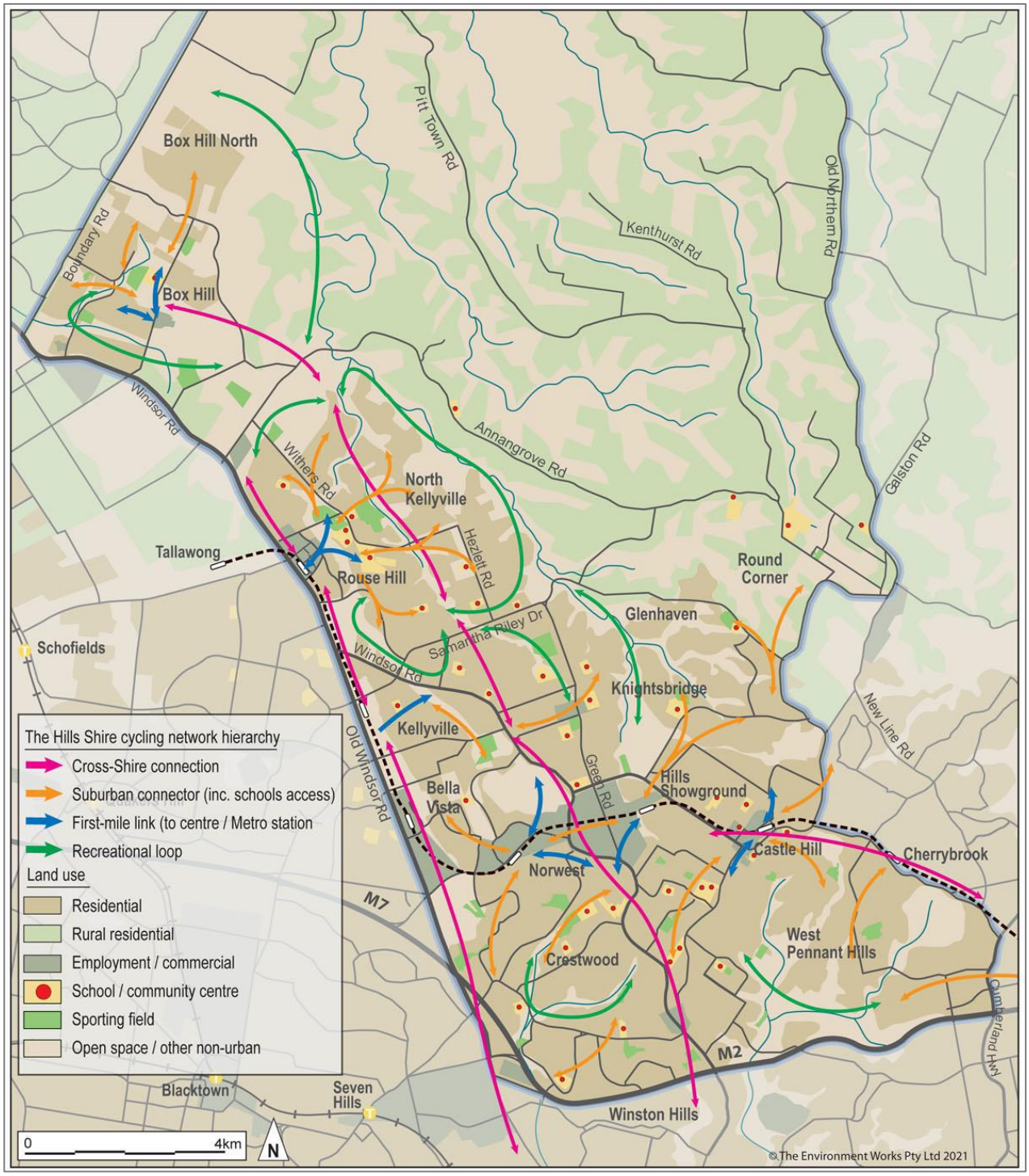

Figure 1: The Hills Shire cycling network hierarchy (Source: THSC)

- The map in Figure 1 highlights that little thought has been given to connections to major existing or planned cycle network in neighbouring LGAs, particularly west across the Old Windsor Road into Blacktown.
- Mapping in Appendix 1 is very difficult to read. There is no indication of different types of cycleway treatments, the priority routes or the sequence of delivery. Lines are thin and a magnifying glass is need to see which are dotted.

- The cycleway project development opportunities in the 5 precincts include many valid and sensible ideas (Section 6.2). However, Bike North has suggested changes to some routes, the omission of others and the inclusion of other options.
- The lack of data about current cycling participation, trends, needs and attitudes is very concerning. The last attitudes and needs surveys date from 1994 when the first Bike Plan was being developed. Only one bike counter has ever been used in the LGA (although 5 are planned to be installed in collaboration with TfNSW), on the shared path at Crestwood Reserve in Baulkham Hills, and this has apparently been inactive since 2009 (p.29)
- The report refers to the Principal Bicycle Network, envisioned in Future Transport 2056 as a safe system of strategic cycling routes. The PBN will be superceeded by the Central River City Strategic Cycleway Corridors, currently being developed by Transport for NSW to connect key centres and major points of interest. Exact routes will be subject to detailed design and collaboration with councils and the community.
- There is little ambition beyond delivering more 2.5m shared paths. THSC has no plans to provide any separated paths except two short sections near Castle Towers.
- The entire rural metropolitan area is omitted. This is crazy when there is so much tourism and visitor potential for the scenic northern part of the LGA. Long-distance off-road recreational routes, improved shoulders on country roads and mountain biking facilities should all be part of the The Hills Shire offer.

Suggestions for the next step

Bicycle NSW supports Bike North's proposals that:

- This iteration of The Hills Shire Bike Plan, as amended following public comment, should be treated as an interim document for the next two years. It is essential the development of the cycling network does not stop dead.
- THSC immediately take steps to recruit an experienced and passionate transport professional who can drive active transport planning in The Hills and:
    - ensure all mapping of existing cycling infrastructure is accurate
    - design and conduct a data collection process aimed at accurately identifying active transport needs in The Hills, as well as trends and attitudes. The research must include workplaces as well as residential areas
    - design a viable network that includes the Strategic Cycleway Corridors, Green Grid routes and a hierarchy of local connections
    - develop a proper needs-based Bike Plan for implementation from 2024
    - review all Council policies and guidelines to ensure they are consistent with active transport outcomes. This would include DCP amendments to mandate end-of-trip facilities in new residential, commercial and retail developments
    - identify all potential funding sources, make applications and lobby State and Federal governments for funding
    - develop and implement community engagement initiatives
    - manage the implementation of projects
    - liaise with other Council staff to ensure Council activities (e.g. construction, maintenance) don't conflict with the active transport plan
- THSC distills the information into a user-friendly and legible Bike Plan that stakeholders can use going forward. The plan must contain clear priorities, actions and implementation timeframes. It is essential

that Council can communicate what is proposed to ensure that it is on the front foot when applying for funding.

- In the meantime, cycle facility design and development should focus on Norwest, where so much residential and commercial development is occurring, and central Castle Hill, which cannot be accessed by bike safely, despite the efforts of cycle advocates over 2 decades. Priority routes for cycleways are Norwest Boulevard (but the cycleway should be on northern side where there is more space and fewer intersections) and Old Northern Road.
- A strategic reference group / cycling advisory committee is set up with local active transport advocates, BUGs and residents.

General recommendations:

- **Ensure bike riders are fully separated from vehicles and pedestrians on most streets**

According to the best practice 'cycling segmentation' model, developed in Portland USA to identify the type and needs of existing and potential bike riders[ix], separated bicycle paths will allow 70% of local residents to consider journeys by bike (Figure 2).

Figure 2:
Four general categories of comfort levels for cycling as transportation.
(Source: North Sydney Council)

The Bicycle NSW *Build it for Everyone* policy pillar[x] sets a standard that bicycle infrastructure should be fit for eight year old children or elders to ride on. Door zone bike lanes, bike stencils on the road and dangerous intersections will continue to deter the 48%[xi] of people who are 'interested but concerned', from making the switch to bike riding.

Bicycle NSW does not generally support shared paths in the road-related environment unless pedestrian activity is very minimal. There are several reasons why shared paths are not appropriate for important and well-used sections of a cycling network. These include conflict between people walking and cycling, which will get worse as population and active travel increase; the loss of verges, vegetation and, in some instances, mature trees; the uncomfortable pinch points caused by bus stops, power poles and retained trees; and constant interruptions when crossing side streets where vehicles effectively have priority. Importantly, no attempt is made to change the dial on car use when bicycles are squeezed into pedestrian spaces. By leaving the road between the kerbs as the unchallenged domain of private cars, with wide vehicle lanes and ample parking, car travel is encouraged, unsafe speeds are common and the modal shift needed to meet climate, health and liveability imperatives may not occur.

Segregated bicycle paths have many benefits over shared paths:

- People riding bikes are separated from pedestrians and vehicles, reducing conflict.
- Street trees and green verges are not impacted.
- The narrower vehicle lanes will slow traffic, reducing noise and improving safety for all road users.
- No additional asphalt is required, reducing issues with urban heat and stormwater.
- Sufficient space is created to enable a significant modal shift to active transport.
- New landscaping and important pedestrian safety features such as kerb extensions can be incorporated into the buffers and the parking lanes.
- The cycle paths can be prioritised over driveways and minor road intersections.
- Motorists exiting driveways have a better sightline to approaching cyclists, improving safety.
- Dedicated bicycle paths are proven to entice new riders of all ages and abilities

The Hills Shire Council must initiate brave discussions with Transport for NSW and the community about reallocating road space from private cars to reflect the priorities set out in the Road User Space Allocation Policy CP21000[xii] and Council's own policies.

In our recent meeting, the Minister for Active Transport, Rob Stokes MP, stated his preference for properly separated walking and cycling infrastructure[xiii]. He expressed his strong belief that **the road-related environment is a public asset** that must be shared equitably between all road users. Any increase in inconvenience to car drivers, created by reducing road space for driving and parking private vehicles, will incentivise the mode-shift that Transport for NSW and Council seek. This will benefit local residents with quieter streets, and less pollution, noise and through-traffic.

An alternative to separated bicycle paths, only suitable for quiet residential streets with low traffic volumes, is a shared space 'bicycle boulevard' or 'quietway' treatment where traffic calming interventions ensure very slow vehicle speeds. Most bike riders will feel safe using the vehicle lanes if traffic speeds and volumes are low.

Shared user paths will continue to be appropriate for off-road green corridors. It is important to future proof shared paths by allowing for increased demand at the outset. Paths should be wide enough for overtaking and must accommodate a range of mobility options such as cargo bikes and disability scooters**. A minimum width of 3m** should be achieved at all times with extra width considered where volumes of people walking and cycling may be high[xiv] (see Figure 3). It is important that faster cyclists can overtake and that pedestrian comfort is never compromised. In busy areas, or on steeper sections, paths should be wide enough to provide separate space for pedestrians.

Figure 3: Suggested shared user path widths (Source: Austroads Guide to Road Design Part 6A: Paths for Walking and Cycling AGRD06A-17

	Suggested path width (m)		
	Local access path	Regional path(3)	Recreational path
Desirable minimum width	2.5	3.0	3.5
Minimum width – typical maximum	2.0(1) – 3.0(2)	2.5(1) – 4.0(2)	3.0(1) – 4.0(2)

1. A lesser width should only to be adopted where cyclist volumes and operational speeds will remain low.
2. A greater width may be required where the numbers of cyclists and pedestrians are very high or there is a high probability of conflict between users (e.g. people walking dogs, in-line skaters etc.).
3. May be part of a principal bicycle network in some jurisdictions.

Bicycle NSW recommends referring to the new Cycleway Design Toolbox[xv] and the 2017 Austroads Cycling Aspects of Austroads Guides (AP-G88-17) to ensure that the paths are constructed to current best practice.

It is also recognised that a small percentage of 'strong and fearless' bike riders prefer the direct routes offered by busier roads and are comfortable in traffic. Cycling can be made safer on these roads with reduced speed limits, forward stop lines at intersections, wide shoulders, head start green lights, and regular maintenance to ensure smooth surfaces.

- **Be strong about removing on-street parking**

Removal of street parking will be necessary in places to create safe raised crossings, wide shared paths and separated bicycle paths. Council must be strong when faced with resident opposition. On-street parking is fundamentally the storage of private property in the public domain. It makes driving easier and generates car trips. When on-street parking is prioritised over safe cycling, active transport for the whole community suffers.

Studies show that parking spaces in commercial areas are less significant for customers than many businesses expect, with owners overestimating the proportion of customers arriving by car by a factor of 3[xvi]. Visitors themselves overwhelmingly prefer widened footpaths, even if it means sacrificing some parking spaces. Cyclists and pedestrians are better customers, spending over twice as much time in the area and 40% more money per month than people driving. A report from London showed that improvements to the public realm to enable safer walking and cycling lead to a 30% increase in trade[xvii].

A parking survey can be useful to determine precise usage patterns for on-street parking. With accurate data to reflect on, the community may find it easier to accept the loss of parking to allow the installation of a best-practice bicycle path which benefits the wider community.

- **Ensure that new cycle infrastructure is inclusive**

All types of bikes should be accommodated by the cycling infrastructure, including cargo bikes and tricycles. Again, the width of the paths is critical and it is important to consider turning radius, dropped kerbs, ramps and the design of modal filters to ensure that non-standard bikes not excluded from the network. Cargo bikes will increasingly be used for deliveries and have huge potential to play a key role in a sustainable transport system. Non-standard bikes such as hand-cycles, recumbents and wheelchair bikes offer disabled people independent mobility but are a rare sight on urban streets due to barriers caused by poor urban design. Any measures enabling cycling by disabled people will support a growth in cycling by novice cyclists, children and older people, and improve conditions for those using mobility scooters[xviii].

- **Prioritise pedestrians and cyclists at all intersections**

Traffic light phasing and sensors must favour active modes to encourage more people to walk and cycle. In line with the Road User Space Allocation Policy and other State and Council strategies, small delays to vehicle traffic should never prevent the delivery of safer, more efficient and more attractive active transport infrastructure. Pedestrian and bicycle level of service should be optimised with the following features:

- Instant green on demand for pedestrians and bicycles at mid-block crossings, with induction loop detectors for bicycles/wheelchairs/mobility scooters and fully accessible push buttons.
- Longer crossing times so that pedestrians of all ages and abilities have time to cross safely and without stress.

- Automatic green for pedestrians/bicycles at all signalised intersections so there is no need to press a 'beg button'
- Raised crossings at unsignalised intersections will slow cars and improve safety.
- Bicycle paths must continue across the raised and signalised crossings so people riding bikes are not required to dismount.

- **Reduce speed limits to 30km/h on all local streets**

Residential streets form a critical part of any active travel network, connecting homes to safe cycle routes. 30 km/h speed limit reduce the need for bicycle infrastructure on local residential roads. 30km/h has been shown as an optimal speed limit to allow people driving and cycling to share the road safely[xix] and is becoming a standard speed limit in many parts of the world. All single lane roads in Spain have been under a 30km/h limit since May 2021 and 30% of UK residents live in 20mph areas[xx].

The design speed of the roads and intersections needs to match the posted speed limits, and discourage travelling and turning too fast. Appropriate traffic calming with visual and physical cues are required to slow drivers down.

Lower speed limits are an important building block for Vision Zero, an approach to road safety that was launched in Sweden in 1994 with the simple premise that no loss of life is acceptable. The Vision Zero approach has been highly successful and has spread to many other countries. The key policies include prioritizing low urban speed limits, pedestrian zones, physical separation between bicycle and car traffic, data-based traffic enforcement and behaviour-change education[xxi].

- **Use temporary materials to demonstrate best-practice infrastructure**

Bicycle NSW suggests that The Hills Shire Council uses pop-up methods to trial separated cycle paths. Moveable lane barriers can be installed quickly to create stretches of protected path (Figure 4) and demonstrate how unfamiliar cycle infrastructure fits into the street. Ridership can be observed over several months using electronic counters to monitor use, and issues with parking and buses can be resolved before permanent infrastructure is constructed. Many councils, including Randwick, Parramatta and City of Sydney, demonstrated the demand for safe cycling using the pop-up bicycle paths established as a COVID-19 response. Permanent changes to kerbs, parking and landscaping can then be made when funds allow.

Figure 4: Pop-up infrastructure in Sydney (Source: Bicycle NSW / Randwick Today)

- **Maintain a focus on the important details of the cycle network**

It is the detailed design of cycle routes, end of trip facilities, wayfinding and education that will encourage the uptake of cycling and reduce dependence on private vehicles.

It is important to ensure that popular daily destinations such as shopping centres, restaurant and café strips, schools and stations are easy to reach by bicycle for all residents of all ages and abilities. In particular, connections with all education facilities along the routes must be incorporated.

Integration of the route with train stations and bus stops is essential to ensure easy access by bike and foot. All public transport journeys start and finish with a walk or cycle. Providing high-quality, safe conditions for active travel to bus routes and Metro stations will break down the first/last mile barrier which can inhibit take-up of public transport.

Parking and other end of trip facilities should be provided at journey end locations to further support riders and encourage participation. Future iterations of The Hills Shire DCP must ensure that sufficient cycling parking is provided in future developments, including facilities for charging e-bikes.

The cycle routes must aim to be delightful, lined with trees to provide shade, and peppered with benches, water fountains, and bike racks. Artworks and memories of indigenous and colonial heritage can be incorporated to emphasise the sense of place and reflect the character of the locality.

Wayfinding supports visitors by clearly articulating and communicating the most efficient and safest route. Signage style for wayfinding should be consistent throughout the LGA and reflect the diversity of the community. Figure 5 shows a great example from the UK!

Figure 5: Fabulous graphics by advocacy group Walk Ride Bath that celebrate the diversity of people cycling (Source: Wheel for Wellbeing)

Finally, education, information and events to promote walking and bike riding as a form of transport are an important part of any plan to increase participation in active travel.

Conclusion:

There has never been a better time to build infrastructure for bike riding and active transport. As the new Minister for Infrastructure, Cities and Active Transport, Rob Stokes MP, set out in a recent speech[xxii], walking and cycling projects that stitch the suburbs together and enable people of all ages and abilities to get around without a car can be more sustainable than megaprojects. He stressed that the NSW Government will focus on completing missing links in the active transport network. Such smaller projects have big benefits, and not only for reducing pollution and congestion. Active mobility improves public health, activates high streets, helps build social connections and addresses inequality.

Bicycle infrastructure has a low cost per km, offering better value than road projects and supporting Councils' financial sustainability. Over 100km of bike paths can be delivered for the cost of 1km of new road[xxiii]. Studies have shown that 70% of people in NSW either ride a bike now or would start to ride if safe infrastructure was provided[xxiv].

Bicycle NSW looks forward to working with The Hills Shire Council to progress the delivery of an integrated cycle network. Please reach out with any questions or help needed. If requested, we would be delighted to assist with advocating for new bicycle infrastructure though our connections with politicians, Transport for NSW and neighbouring metropolitan councils.

Yours faithfully,

Sarah Bickford

Active Transport Planner
Bicycle NSW

Peter McLean

Chief Executive Officer
Bicycle NSW

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