

The Long and Winding Road Project

The Urban Development Project's new team leaders admit things could be much better

By Dan McGarry

The Port Vila Urban Development Project—or the most publicly visible parts of it, at least—have been subjected to withering criticism of late. Recently, the government has taken steps to bring the project's many stakeholders into line, and to avoid letting the situation deteriorate any further.

Numerous sources with a clear insight into the project have expressed reservations concerning the contractor's staffing, its technical skill and capacity, and the planning and coordination of the project.

More recently, drivers and property owners have raised a number of concerns about road safety, closures, new traffic flow requirements and repeated disruptions caused by ongoing work.

We sat with the members

of the Design, Supervision and Capacity Development Team, who role is to bridge the gap between RMS and the Vanuatu Project Management Unit, who have overall administrative oversight of the project. DSCD, as they're known, have a fairly broad mandate to wrangle day to day issues, to coordinate efforts between the contractor and other stakeholders, including property owners and local power, water and communications utilities.

According to the materials provided to the Daily Post at the briefing, "Overall project budget is US \$35.5 million, with \$20.59 million budgeted for improvements to road networks and drainage systems".

In a subsequent written follow-up they added, "The project cost when the project was negotiated in November 2011 was US \$39.1 million, including taxes and duties. The

current cost estimate, with a reduced project scope, is \$35.5 million. The decline of the Australian dollar and currency exchange were the primary issue for the reduction.

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Road safety concerns

Confronted with numerous complaints concerning road safety and inconveniences, Team Leader Greg Chambers, only recently arrived in Port Vila,

admitted that things had been sub-standard in the past, but stressed that they had their priorities straight.

"The expectation is the safety of the public must be

preserved. Safety is number one. Continued movement and ease of service is up there. There's obligations on the contractor to do things, and obligations on us to supervise that."

Pressed to say if they were content they were fulfilling their obligations, he replied, "Yes, but there's always challenges on a daily basis."

"I've driven the road [descending to Europe Corner] a couple of times this past week. There's aspects there I'm discussing

with the guys here. It's a question of priorities."

Asked if he felt the road was safe enough, he said, "There's always room for improvement."

Asked how he would improve it, he replied, "There's a lot of aspects to it. There's the physical safety aspect to it, and clearly my expectation is that it's number one.... I can sympathise with the contractor, but that doesn't mean you can neglect these things."

Another team member confirmed in a written statement that, "RMS has undergone a recent and major overhaul of their key personnel and the project is optimistic that this will lead to improved traffic

management and site safety.

Erosion & run-off

Mr Chambers was asked to comment on the continuing problems of run-off depositing large volumes of sand and gravel downhill from areas under construction. He argued that the problem was with the materials used, but with work methods. He agreed that heavy rains early on in the process eroded some road areas dangerously, and said, "You will note that those areas have since been bitumised."

"This is not something the contractor neglects, because every time it rains you have to pick stuff up and move it back up the top of the hill. It's costing them time and money."

He concluded, "We just have to work better and smarter, I suppose."

His colleague Carol

Dover added later than improvements had been made in sandbagging practices to protect the roadsides.

Seal, dig, re-seal

Asked why some sections of road were surfaced and then subsequently dug up again, Greg Chambers suggested there was method to the apparent madness. Team members explained that water getting under the road surface is the primary cause of potholes. The point behind throwing an initial treatment on the roadway, therefore, was to protect the remainder of the surface while drainage and sidewalk work progressed on the margins.

Buried 'treasure'

Team members cited significant problems actually identifying where buried cables, pipes and other key pieces of infrastructure were located.

They emphasised that space in many areas was quite constricted. They blamed a lack of urban planning in the past for deficiencies that included very limited space roadways, sidewalks, cable conduits, pipes and sewers.

In some cases, they said, "we've had to sort of pull the conduit to one side, install our storm sewage pipe and then ease the conduit back into place."

As a pre-emptive measure, they've taken to what they call 'pot-holing'—a lack of useful maps and charts has left them gingerly drilling out bits of the road scheduled for work in order to find exactly where the buried treasure is.

The team has established weekly coordination meetings with all involved in order to ensure that nobody treads where they shouldn't.

TVL, UNELCO and Digicel

have since identified about 50 locations where they will collaborate to establish shared crossing points with appropriate conduit and piping in order to avoid breaking the road seal in the future.

Road hazard markers

Downer, a major subcontractor on the project, has complained that out of 200 orange traffic cones purchased to mark problem areas on the road, only 40 remain. They rest, they claim, have been stolen.

Many roadside hazards are now marked up with plastic mesh fencing material wrapped around iron t-bar.

DSCD accepted that inadequate road hazard marking was a safety risk, and appealed to the public to respect work areas and materials.

Timeline

Pressed to provide a detailed completion schedule, the DSCD team replied that it's difficult to complete the work in discrete pieces. It's not feasible, Carol Dover said, for crews to complete all of Manples, for example, then move on to Tebakor. "It just doesn't work that way."

Work is scheduled for completion at the end of 2017.

Highlights

Team members insist the project will provide numerous benefits to the city:

- 13 km of improved roads
- 7 km of improved drainage
- 14 km of footpaths
- 7 km of 40mm asphalt seal
- 13 km of rubberized double bituminous seal
- 10 pedestrian crossings built to statutory requirements
- Minimum 30 new bus bays constructed
- Vehicle cueing lanes at common chokepoints
- Improved traffic flow at roundabouts
- Improve signage

Overview

The PVUDP comprises more than just road works. It includes:

- A septage facility near the Bouffa landfill site in Etas
- Community sanitation facilities (upgrades & installations) in Blacksands, Seaside and opposite the Warwick Le Lagon
- George Kalsakau Drive
- Urban roads and drainage

