

Overcoming the Brisbane River: The Cross River Commission of 1926

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Abstract

The Cross River Commission report published in 1926 was the first major strategic transport planning document published by the newly formed Brisbane City Council (Council). It recommended 12 new crossing points across the Brisbane River to relieve congestion and the vulnerability of the city with only one crossing point for general traffic. Its first two recommendations were implemented within 15 years but not without controversies over responsibility for delivery, affordability and ideological arguments over tolls and private sector involvement. Post-war the focus was on responding to the growth of the motor car as the primary mode of transport for the city and the development of freeways and expressways. More recently, a renewed focus on public and active transport to cater for growth in the inner city had led to implementation of new crossings, culminating in Council’s Green Bridges Program and Brisbane Metro and the Queensland Government’s Cross River Rail Project. Nearly 100 years later, some of the recommendations of the Cross River Commission are still in development.

1. Introduction

1.1 Bridging the River

Since humans first settled in the vicinity of the Brisbane River or Meeannjin as it was known, the river has provided both a resource in terms of hunting fishing and riparian vegetation and a transport challenge. Crossing points were known to the First Nations people, the Turrbul and Jagerra and pointed out to the first Europeans¹.

As the towns of Brisbane and South Brisbane grew following the arrival of settlers after 1839, when the original convict settlement was closed down, a pressing need became apparent for a permanent river crossing. In 1865 a temporary timber bridge was opened whilst a permanent iron bridge was constructed which opened in June 1874 and named the Victoria Bridge.

Upstream, the extension of the railway line from Ipswich to Brisbane necessitated the crossing of the Brisbane River at Indooroopilly and an iron bridge, the Albert Bridge (named after the Prince of Wales) was completed in July 1876.

¹ Narrative of Thomas Pamphlet, Aged thirty-four years, who was with two other men wrecked on the coast of New Holland in April, 1823, and lived among the natives for seven months. “On the third day we arrived on the bank of a huge river, at a place where it was evident the natives use to cross over; but it was too wide for us to attempt to swim, and we could not find a canoe; we therefore resolved to go up the river until we should find some means of crossing it.” Taken down by John Uniacke, Esq. (Field 1825).

Both bridges were washed away in the floods of February 1893, leaving Brisbane once again divided as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Remains of the Victoria and Albert bridges in the flood of 1893 (Source Brisbane City Council and QR)

1.2 The establishment of the Brisbane City Council

In 1924, the Queensland Government passed the *City of Brisbane Act* amalgamating 20 local governments into one city government covering over 1,300 square kilometres. As well as administration over roads and bridges (including the Victoria Bridge which had been reconstructed and re-opened in 1896), the new administration within the following years took over the tramways, buses and ferries, water supply and sewerage, and electricity generation, distribution and retailing.

2. The Cross River Commission

With a population now approaching 253,000 Brisbane was still dependent on one road bridge through the city centre. In April 1925, the inaugural Lord Mayor, William Jolly, being aware of the vulnerability of the city to one congested cross river link, which may be again destroyed in another flood heavily damaging the city's economy, referred to the creation of a Cross River Commission (The Commission).

The Commission was comprised of the following members:

Chairman²: R.W.H. Hawken, Professor of Engineering, University of Queensland

W. M. Nelson, Chief Engineer, Tramway Department, Brisbane City Council

R. Martin Wilson, Architectural Engineer. Partner in Alex B. & R. Martin Wilson, Architects and Architectural Engineers

2.2 The brief

The Commission was “honoured” with the following instructions from the Brisbane City Council:

to investigate what further facilities for crossing the Brisbane River either by Bridges, Tubes, or other means, as are now necessary, and also as to the best sites for erecting and constructing such Bridges, Tubes, or other means as are now necessary, or which may be necessary for the future development of the Greater City of Brisbane (Cross River Commission 1926).

² Dr. J. J. C. Bradfield was originally invited to chair the commission but declined as he was fully engaged on the planning and design of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney metropolitan railway expansion. He did, however, make a submission to the Commission.

2.3 Consultation

The Commission quickly went to work with a series of consultation meetings with various stakeholders including the City Engineer, the Commissioner for Railways, the Commissioner of the Main Roads Board, the Chief Engineer of the Harbours and Rivers Department, shipping industry representatives, progress association representatives, Chambers of Commerce as well as taking written submissions from private individuals. As the merger of the various local councils was not until 1 October 1925, a number of submissions were received from officers and elected representatives of the old municipalities.

2.4 The recommendations

The Commission tabled its findings on 11 January 1926. Its recommendations were for the following eight crossings to be delivered over the next 18 years (1926-1944). The Commission's numbering format in roman numerals and bold text is used.

- I. (a) A **Double-Deck Continuous Girder Bridge** between Adelaide Street at the northern end of the CBD and Main Street Kangaroo Point. This bridge would be "low level" (i.e. 45 to 48 feet above Harbours and Rivers Department Low Water Datum, and therefore only allowing small ships to pass underneath).
(b) A **Shipping Canal** 150 feet wide and 30 ft, deep, to be cut through Kangaroo Point with a single deck 190 feet span bascule bridge to allow shipping to access the South Brisbane and Town reaches of the river
- II. A **low level Bridge** on piers from the level of Quay Street (now called North Quay) on the North side to the end of Grey Street South Brisbane
- III. A replacement Victoria Bridge which would better cope with traffic congestion and improved structural capacity³
- IV. A **Transporter Bridge between Sydney Street New Farm and Wellington Road, East Brisbane** in the short term with a **ferry** and a **low-level bridge** as a long-term solution following the opening of the canal.
- V. A **bridge over Oxley Creek** at Sherwood
 - a. An adaptation of the **railway Bridge** at Indooroopilly to carry road traffic and the construction of a new railway bridge adjacent to it with higher strength capacity
- VI. a **transporter bridge** between **Barton Road, Bulimba** to **Chermside Street, Teneriffe**, as a **short term solution** with a **tube between Barton Road Bulimba and Doggett Street New Farm** as a long term solution. The Commission also considered an opening bridge as an alternative option.
- VII. Replacement of the Moggill Ferry near Ipswich with a low level bridge.

³ Engineering reports tabled to the Commission documented concerns about the structural integrity and remaining life of the bridge and recommended its urgent replacement. The bridge remained in service until 1969 (43 years later) when it was replaced with the current bridge.

VIII. A low level bridge between Glenny Street Toowong and Montague Road West End.

Beyond 18 years, the following crossings were recommended:

- IX. A Vehicular Ferry from Racecourse Road, Hamilton to Apollo Road, Bulimba and later a tube with 20 ft. roadway from Beatrice Terrace Hamilton to Oxford Street and Lytton Road, Bulimba.**
- X. A Transporter Bridge from Edward St. in the CBD to Kangaroo Point for local vehicular traffic**
 - a. A Tramway Tube from George Street to the Main Street / Vulture Street corner.**
- XI. A ferry, and later a low level bridge from Carmody St. (St Lucia) to Dutton Park**
- XII. A high level bridge between New Farm and Galloways Hill to connect James Street New Farm with Cleveland (now Wynnum) Road on the south.**

The locations of these crossings are shown in Figure 2 which reproduces the Cross River Commission map. A transporter bridge is shown in Figure 3.

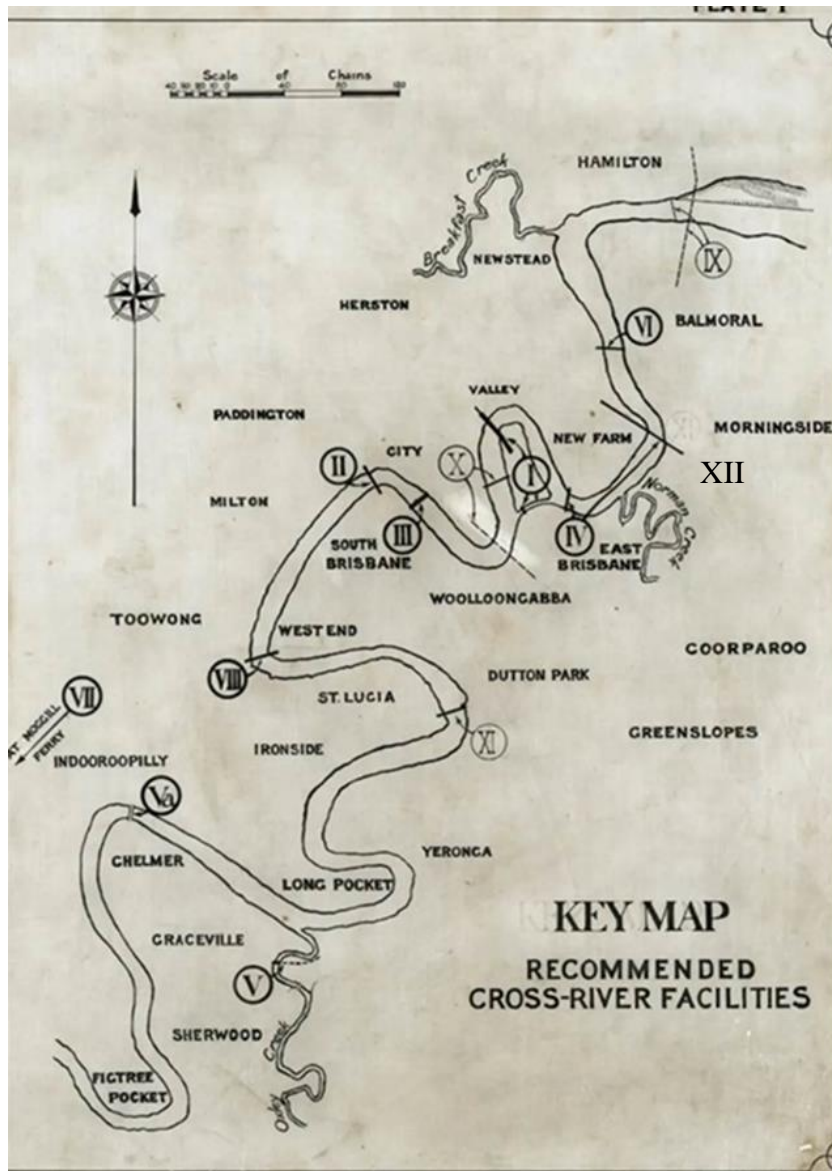


Figure 2 – Locations of the Cross River Commission Recommendations (Source: Cross River Commission)



Figure 3 – A transporter bridge. Three were suggested for Brisbane to overcome the heights required for shipping to access the CBD (Source: Pinterest)

3. The Cross River Commission Aftermath

3.1 A “quick win” – The Grey Street Bridge

Although the bridge at Kangaroo Point (Recommendation I) was the Commission’s highest priority, Council saw that the bridge at Grey Street (Recommendation II) as a higher priority due to:

- the new interstate rail terminal being constructed at South Brisbane was going to generate a significant increase in freight traffic in the area
- the need to duplicate the Victoria Bridge to cater for this traffic
- concerns about the structural condition of the Victoria Bridge
- the ability to provide a route around the CBD
- affordability with a low level bridge
- minimal issues with the height clearances to shipping, being upstream of the Victoria Bridge.

Council subsequently sought a loan from the Queensland Government for £700,000 by June 1926, and plans were approved by Council by December 1927 with approval to go to tender. Council called tenders and MR Hornibrook Ltd submitted the lowest of £384,850 and this was accepted on 8 May 1928. Work commenced in August 1928 and the bridge opened for traffic in March 1932.



Figure 4 – The Grey Street Bridge (now the William Jolly Bridge after the City of Brisbane’s first Lord Mayor) shortly after its opening in 1932 (Source: Brisbane City Council)

3.2 A larger challenge – the Central Bridge

The Commission originally proposed a combination of a low level bridge at the northern end of Kangaroo Point combined with a canal across the base of the Kangaroo Point peninsula. This was abandoned in concept in favour of a single higher level bridge with a working name, the Central Bridge. An indicative estimate of £3 million was quoted in the Brisbane Courier of 5 September 1928 with the comment that the bridge “would be a most remarkable profit maker for the city”. The question was, how high, on what alignment, who was going to fund it and who would finance it. These questions were going to be dictated primarily by politics.

The 1929 financial crash brought changes to Queensland when the State Labor Government, which had held power for the previous 14 years was voted out and replaced by the Country and Progressive National Party led by Arthur Moore as Premier. Sometime in 1930, Moore was approached by the constructors of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Dorman Long and Company with an unsolicited proposal to build and operate a toll bridge between Kangaroo Point and Bowen Terrace. Council, with the majority party being the Nationalist Civic Party also supported private enterprise to build the bridge and supporting a 90 foot clearance to allow for shipping to reach the city centre and South Brisbane.

The Moore Government invited Dorman Long to commence negotiations in February 1931. In March 1931 a Committee was formed to review their proposal and assist Dorman Long to develop their proposal. Key information that the committee sought were, details on the financing, the type of bridge and construction details, and the franchise terms. Council was consulted in these deliberations as a major stakeholder, and from the literature the proposer and underwriter of the bridge.

However, Dorman Long were not prepared to put in a definite costed proposal until the Queensland Government and Council decided on a preferred alignment. At this time there were two proposals, one being the alignment to Adelaide Street favoured by the Commission, and an alternative alignment favoured by others to connect with Bowen

Terrace. A joint State / Council committee chaired by Prof. Hawken quickly decided on a Main Street – Bowen Terrace alignment at a higher level. However, this was not sufficient to mollify shipping interests who were still concerned about bridge clearances. Moreover, the Labor oppositions in both State Parliament and Council were against tolled bridges. To not adversely affect shipping Council subsequently passed a resolution that ‘Brisbane’s primary reason for existence is to serve as the principal seaport of the State...’.

In April 1931, Dorman Long were formally invited to submit a proposal by the Queensland Government for a privately built, owned and operated tolled bridge and the Moore Government passed the *Tolls on Privately Constructed Road Traffic Facilities Act* in August of the same year. Dorman Long tabled a formal proposal in March 1932 which was passed to Council for consideration as the State Government considered that it was up to Council to facilitate the delivery of the bridge. Within two weeks the Dorman Long proposal was voted down in the Council, as by this time the conservative parties had lost their majority.

In June 1932, Labor regained power in the Queensland Parliament and the Dorman Long franchise proposal was completely shelved. In September 1932, the Brisbane Courier reported that another company had approached the Queensland Government with the involvement of Dr. Bradfield, who by this time was coming off the Sydney Harbour Bridge project. This proposal followed a different financing model that the company hoped to be more attractive to the Labor Government. Instead of a franchise, the company would construct the bridge as a loan to government who would collect the tolls to repay the debt. In this way the bridge would be government owned rather than privately owned. Premier William Forgan-Smith immediately referred the proposal to Council, reiterating a month later that “the matter is solely one for the Brisbane City Council and not the Government” (Brisbane Courier 13 Oct 1932). Council did not have the means to finance such a project and the project languished for some months until June 1933 when Forgan-Smith announced the creation of an authority to control the construction of the bridge, as well as the seeking of loan funds from London. The necessary legislation was passed in November 1933.

In March 1934, approval was made for the raising of the necessary finance and Dr Bradfield was appointed as designing and constructing engineer to the Bridge Board of the Bureau of Industry. He presented a concept design to the State Government the following month. Tenders were called in January 1935 and in April 1935 a consortium of two Queensland companies, Evans Deakin and Hornibrook Constructions, won the tender with a bid of £1,150,000. A key aspect of the bridge was that it was to be built with Australian steel, fabricated in Brisbane, with a local workforce. The bridge, named the Story Bridge, after a prominent public servant (not a politician) was finally opened in July 1940.

The final total cost including property resumptions was £1.6 million, £1.5 million of which was borrowed from the AMP Building Society at 4% interest over a 25-year term. The toll operated only until 1947 when Council purchased the bridge from the State Government for £750,000.



Figure 5 – The Story Bridge under construction (Source: Brisbane City Council)

3.3 The Indooroopilly (Walter Taylor) Bridge

At the same time as the Moore Government was proposing to accelerate infrastructure delivery by private investment, a construction contractor and entrepreneur, Walter Taylor put forward a proposal to address Recommendation Va. The prospectus of Indooroopilly Toll Bridge Limited was issued in 1931 and the company, despite the depression, managed to raise £75,000 to enable construction to commence. Construction cost savings were made by using second hand materials such as the cable used to support the segments of the arch on the Sydney Harbour bridge construction project⁴. When the bridge was opened in February 1936, the Indooroopilly Toll Bridge Company were franchised to collect a toll on the bridge for a period of 35 years until it was handed over to the Brisbane City Council in 1963.

Bridge building came to a hiatus during World War II and the post war period with only one bridge across Oxley Creek (Recommendation V) being opened in 1964.

4. The Freeway Revolution

With the rapid rise in household wealth in the post-war period and the increasing affordability of private vehicles, the existing Brisbane road network was facing increasing congestion. In 1964, Wilbur Smith and Associates, a US transport engineering consulting firm, was commissioned by the State Government and Council to undertake a strategic transport study of Brisbane. Its report tabled in November 1965, recommended that a system of freeways be constructed (Figure 6), the rail system be modernised and electrified

⁴ Local rumour has it that Walter Taylor paid £25 for them

although reduced in scope. The most controversial of its recommendations was the replacement of the tram and trolley bus system with a diesel bus network.

The Wilbur Smith Report recommended five new traffic bridges:

- the **Gateway Bridge** to the east of the city to form part of an outer ring road
- the **New Farm Bridge** to connect an inner eastern ring, the Central freeway
- the **Point Bridge** to provide direct private vehicle access from the South East Freeway at Woolloongabba into the CBD
- the **Merivale Bridge** to supplement the Grey Street Bridge (now called the William Jolly Bridge)
- a **St Lucia Bridge** linking the suburb of Yeronga with St Lucia south of the University of Queensland campus.

None of these crossings were recommended by the Commission as they only considered slow speed motor vehicles on arterial roads, rather than vehicles travelling at high speeds on expressways which was a focus of the Wilbur Smith study. However, the Commission did consider a submission for a vehicular tunnel between Woolloongabba (at the corner of Main and Vulture Street) and George Street.

Planning for the first stages of the freeway system commenced soon after and the first section consisting of the South East Freeway and the Point Bridge (renamed the Captain Cook Bridge) was opened in January 1973. Much of the freeway system envisaged in the Wilbur Smith study was not developed as Commonwealth Government assistance for freeway development ceased in the mid 1970's as the Whitlam Government favoured public transport development for cities (Krosch 2008).

In 1980, the Queensland Government began construction on the Gateway Bridge as a tolled facility with ownership through a State Government Corporation Queensland Motorways Limited (later sold to Transurban) and this opened in 1986. Construction of the eastern ring road commenced at the same time, now the Gateway Motorway.

In 2004, Campbell Newman won the Lord Mayoral election with a promise to develop an inner ring road system in a system of tolled tunnels, branded as TransApex (Figure 7). These linkages were to be delivered through build-own-operate-transfer (BOOT) concessions with the asset reverting to government at the end of the concession period. In 2006, the Queensland Government amended legislation to permit a local government to create toll roads. Relative to the attempt to create toll roads in the 1930's this legislative change was far less controversial.

The first tunnel, now known as the Clem Jones Tunnel or CLEM7, was opened in March 2010 and forms the function of the Wilbur Smith Central Freeway proposal. Wilbur Smith's proposed Merivale Bridge was opened in July 2010 as the Go Between Bridge, a tolled bridge connecting South Brisbane with Hale Street and the Inner City Bypass. Unlike CLEM7 which is owned by Transurban, with ownership reverting to Council at the end of the concession, the Go-Between Bridge is owned by Council with Transurban undertaking the tolling with a dividend to Council.

The East -West Link which would have fulfilled the function of Wilbur Smith's St Lucia Bridge was not found to be viable in the near future⁵.

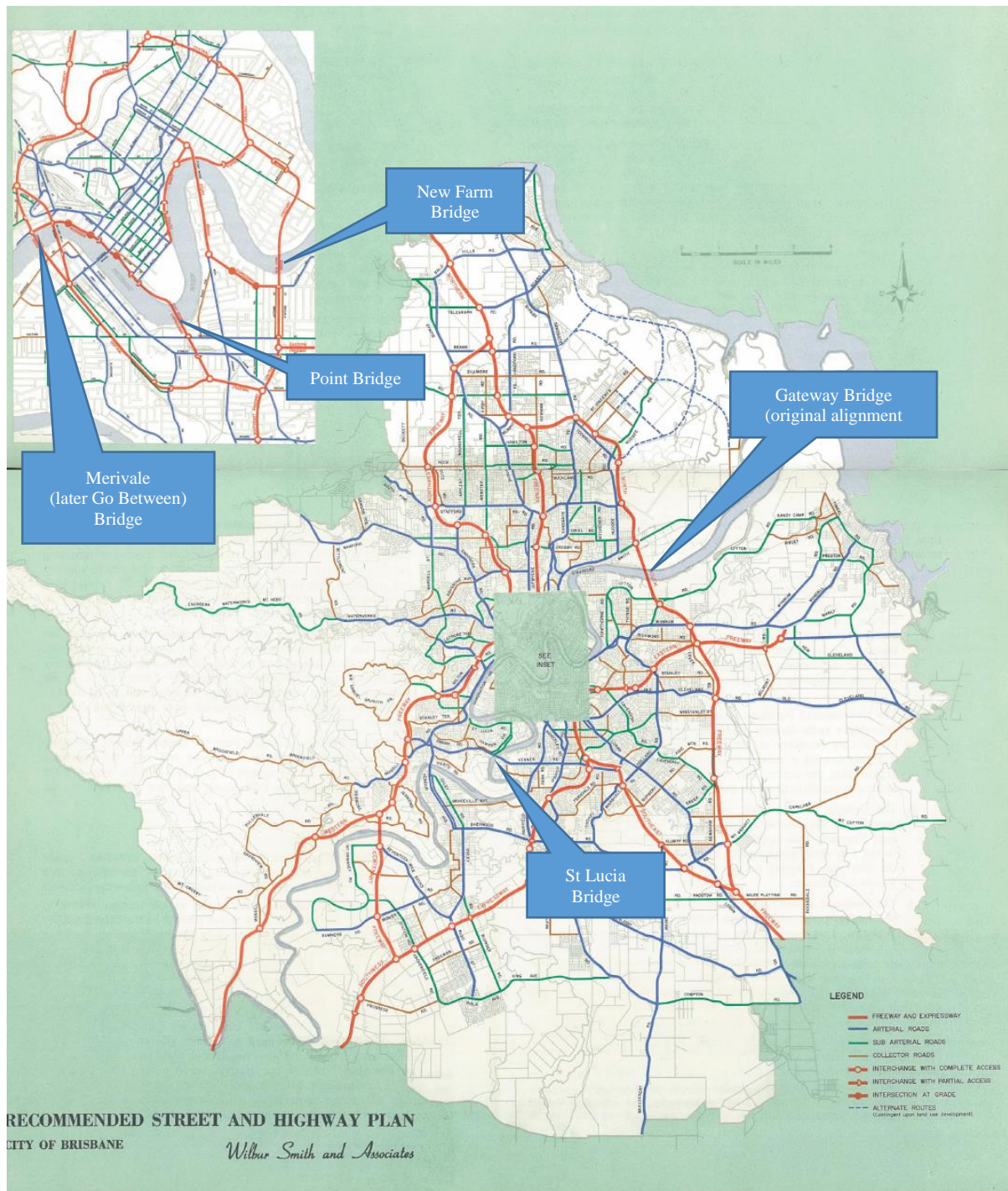


Figure 6 - The Wilbur Smith Plan. The network of freeways and expressways is shown in red.

⁵ Brisbane Times (18 June 2014) TransApex is dead - bring on the River's Edge
<https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/queensland/transapex-is-dead--bring-on-the-rivers-edge-20140618-zsdrv.html>



Figure 7 – TransApex (Source: Brisbane City Council)

5. The Public and Active Transport Revolution

5.1 “Green” bridges

While initial planning and market sounding was being undertaken for the CLEM7, the Transport Plan for Brisbane 2002-2016 proposed an extension of the busway system that was being developed by the Queensland Government, with a new connection to the University of Queensland to provide much greater accessibility to the St Lucia Campus. This connection named the Eleanor Schonell Bridge (Figure 7) (labelled as Recommendation XI in the Commission’s report) was opened in December 2006, as Brisbane’s and Australia’s first “Green” bridge; a bridge for pedestrians, cyclists and buses, but closed off from the road network and private vehicles.



Figure 7 – The Eleanor Schonell Bridge. Australia’s first green bridge (Source: Brisbane City Council)

In 2014, following the commencement of the last of the TransApex project, the new Lord Mayor Graham Quirk, focussed Council attention on the river's edge and announced funding for a new pedestrian and cycling bridge linking Kangaroo Point with the CBD, a variation on the Commission's Recommendation X.



Figure 8 – The Kangaroo Point Green Bridge (Source: Brisbane City Council)

In late 2018, a new Transport Plan for Brisbane was launched. The transport plan has a renewed focus on public and active transport, essentially providing for any growth in the inner city with provision of public and active transport rather than additional road capacity. Within this context, a key initiative was the provision of further green bridges to make public and active transport a quicker and more convenient option to get around.

In March 2019, the incoming Lord Mayor Adrian Schrinner made a commitment to the construction of five new green bridges for Brisbane. Of these bridges two were first recommended by the Cross River Commission:

- the Kangaroo Point Green Bridge (Recommendation X), and
- the Toowong to West End Green Bridge (Recommendation VIII).

Another of the Commission's proposal, a Bulimba to Teneriffe Bridge (Recommendation V has had concept planning undertaken by the State Government. Despite of a lack of commitment to construct the bridge by both Council and the State Government, the proposal has considerable community support.

In the community consultation for a proposed Bellbowrie to Wacol green bridge in the outer western suburbs, there was comment from residents about the replacement of the Moggill Ferry with a bridge (Recommendation VI).

The Green Bridges Program is also proposing a bridge between St Lucia and West End. Although a location here was not proposed by the Commission (but suggested as a possible alternative to Recommendation XI) it will complement the Eleanor Schonell Bridge and the Toowong to West End Green Bridge (Recommendation VIII) to provide greater accessibility in this part of the city.

5.1 Public Transport into the City Centre

The Commission considered the congestion of the tramway system in the south between Woolloongabba and the CBD through South Brisbane streets and the Victoria Bridge. In response to this issue it proposed Recommendation Xa for a tramway tube under the river between Woolloongabba and the CBD.

This issue was one policy makers continually grappled with in Brisbane and in 2000 the Queensland Government opened a dedicated busway that funnels all bus movements into the city via the Victoria Bridge. However, the success of this network meant that by the end of the decade, congestion of the busway system was again becoming a problem. In response Council worked on a possible solution that involved constructing a parallel bridge to the Victoria Bridge. With the election of former Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman as Queensland Premier in 2012, the previous Labor Government's response to public transport congestion from the south of Brisbane, Cross River Rail, (an underground rail link across the river from the suburb of Yeerongpilly south of the river to Bowen Hills north of the river passing under the CBD) was abandoned. Instead a new project that combined bus and rail in a tunnel under the Brisbane River between the suburb of Dutton Park on the south side and Herston on the north side. This project, known as the Bus and Train project or BAT, was further abandoned when Labor regained office in 2015, and revised planning for Cross River Rail recommenced. Construction of this project is now well advanced.

At the 2016 Council election the Liberal National Party proposed as its election platform a rubber tyred metro system within the inner city. This concept was developed into Brisbane Metro, which builds on the success of the existing busway system by taking the system to the next level of bus rapid transit with large electric vehicles with a capacity of up to 150 passengers, additional bus tunnels under the city and the closure of the Victoria Bridge to general traffic to create it as another green bridge. Construction has commenced with early works (including the closure of the Victoria Bridge to general traffic and the creation of a dedicated cycleway adjacent to the busway) and vehicle procurement.

With the implementation of these two projects, the Cross River Commission's Recommendation Xa is being achieved.

6. Conclusion

It is nearly 100 years since the convening of the Cross River Commission. In that time, out of the twelve recommendations, four have been delivered, two have been delivered in a modified form, four have not been delivered, and one is of a modified form under construction. Whilst it was expected that eight of the recommendations were to be delivered by 1944, seven will have been delivered by 2023. Impacts of depression, war and changing policies resulting in a much longer delivery period.

Following the post-war impact of Wilbur Smith with its focus on the private vehicle, current proposals by both the State Government and Council have almost come full circle, not only in the evolution of the actual projects but on the renewed focus for active and especially public transport as a way of dealing with the transport difficulties posed by the Brisbane River.

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