

## STATUS OF THE \$100 MILLION BELLS LINE OF ROAD FUNDING: AN INVESTIGATION

### Introduction

The Bells Line of Road (BLOR) in New South Wales is a key route across the Blue Mountains, providing an alternate link between Sydney's northwest and the Central West. Two years ago, the Australian Prime Minister announced a **\$100 million funding commitment** for critical safety upgrades on this historic road.

However, since that announcement, **questions have arisen about why the funding has not materialized on the ground**. Local communities and stakeholders are growing anxious as road conditions remain subpar, with continued safety risks and economic implications. This report examines the status of the BLOR upgrade funding – focusing on government accountability for the delay, the impact on local communities, the political dynamics at play, and expert insights on the project's importance and the consequences of inaction.

### Government Accountability: Promises vs. Progress

**Funding Announcement and Commitments:** In January 2023, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese – alongside NSW officials – **committed \$100 million for safety works** on Bells Line of Road. The plan was to install overtaking lanes and other upgrades to improve safety for the thousands of locals and tourists using the road daily. This investment was touted as a joint effort by the Commonwealth and NSW to secure the road's future.

Federal MP Susan Templeman (Member for Macquarie) welcomed the funding, noting it would **"continue to improve the safety of this very key road"** for communities that have "done it tough" through bushfires and floods. State MP Robyn Preston (Member for Hawkesbury) likewise praised the announcement at the time, saying local farmers, truckers and families would "appreciate this upgrade" to such an important lifeline road.

**Lack of On-Ground Progress:** Despite these promises, **little tangible work had begun**. A year after the commitment **"work has yet to begin and the project's scope is still being determined by Transport for NSW"**. In fact, the \$100 million earmarked for Bells Line was **planned as a four-year program**, not an immediate cash injection ([Budget Paper No.3 - Infrastructure Statement-Budget 2023-24](#)). NSW budget papers for 2023–24 confirmed "\$100.0 million over four years for the Bells Line of Road Upgrade program to enable a safer journey" on the route ([Budget Paper No.3 - Infrastructure Statement-Budget 2023-24](#)).

This suggests the funding is being staged and may explain part of the delay – detailed planning and design work are likely ongoing before construction ramps up. Federal and state authorities have justified the slow pace by emphasizing the need to **scope the upgrades properly** and coordinate with ongoing disaster-repair works. For example, Transport for NSW has been busy with **slope stabilisation and repairs** after repeated landslides and flood damage on the road, which are funded separately through disaster recovery programs). Officials imply that the safety upgrade project will follow once those emergency works and investigations are completed.

**Political Responses and Justifications:** Key politicians have weighed in on the funding status. **Susan Templeman MP**, a local federal member, has stressed that the Albanese Government delivered the commitment and is working with NSW to see it through. She noted that the disaster recovery works currently underway are “on top of the \$100 million that we have provided to NSW for additional upgrades to Bells Line of Road,” reiterating that **the federal money is there waiting to be used**. Templeman insists both levels of government are cooperating to ensure the road is made “safe and reliable” for the community ([Mammoth project to improve resilience along key western road corridors | NSW Government](#)).

On the other hand, **Robyn Preston MP** for Hawkesbury has been more critical. By March 2024, Preston complained that the new NSW government had gone quiet on the project. She told Parliament she was “*receiving representations from the Bells Line of Road Business Council, asking for an update, and there is nothing I can tell them.*” She accused the Minns (NSW Labor) Government – which had promised “no never-never road projects” – of failing to deliver on this much-needed upgrade ([Legislative Assembly Hansard - 18 March 2024 - Proof](#)).

In short, **accountability for the delay has become a point of contention**, with the Commonwealth signalling that funds are committed and ready, while the state’s implementation timeline remains vague. Both Templeman and Preston have pressed for answers, but official reasoning centres on necessary planning and the phasing of works, rather than any cancellation of the project.

## Community Impact: Safety, Economy and Daily Life

The Bells Line of Road communities have felt the **real-world consequences** of the funding holdup. Local residents, businesses, and motorists were hopeful that \$100 million in improvements would address longstanding issues – from dangerous driving conditions to traffic bottlenecks – yet those fixes have not arrived.

- **Safety Concerns:** Bells Line of Road has a troubling safety record. **Frequent accidents and road closures** have underscored the need for upgrades. In fact, the NRMA identified BLOR as having one of the worst fatal crash rates in NSW. “*In 2021, the NRMA said Bells Line of Road was the state’s road with the second-highest fatality rate, with 10 fatalities in seven vehicle crashes,*” according to road safety data ([NatRoad welcomes Bells Line of Road safety works - Owner Driver](#)).

- Local people have tragically experienced multiple fatal accidents – a horrific triple-fatality crash in 2022 prompted some to label the road a “death trap” in its current state. Every delay in delivering safety upgrades like overtaking lanes, better markings, and road surface improvements leaves drivers exposed to risk. Community members are growing frustrated that, despite government acknowledgements of the problem, **they are still navigating the same perilous bends and limited passing opportunities** that have claimed lives.
- **Isolation and Emergency Access:** The BLOR is one of only two direct routes between Sydney and the Central West ([Mammoth project to improve resilience along key western road corridors | NSW Government](#)). When disasters strike or accidents occur, the road's closure can **isolate communities and cut off emergency services**. Susan Templeman noted that through bushfires and floods “we have seen just how vital the Bells Line of Road is for locals” and for emergency responders ([Mammoth project to improve resilience along key western road corridors | NSW Government](#)). If the road is impassable, towns on the mountain and west of it may be stranded or forced into very long detours. Residents of Bilpin, Kurrajong and surrounding areas worry that without the promised resilience upgrades, the next extreme weather event could again **shut down their only lifeline**. This vulnerability affects community confidence and preparedness – people are anxious for infrastructure reinforcements that will keep the route open and safe in the future.
- **Economic Repercussions:** The delayed funding also has **economic implications for the region**. The Bells Line corridor is home to many small businesses – including orchards, farm gates, tourist attractions and hospitality venues – which rely on steady visitor traffic. Prolonged road disruptions or the perception of an unsafe journey deter tourists and day-trippers, directly hitting local incomes. *The Bells Line of Road Business Council (BLOR BC)* formed in 2022 precisely because businesses felt “ignored, neglected and poorly led” in terms of infrastructure support ([Who we are | Bells Line of Road Business Council](#)). They have been lobbying for investment to boost the regional economy. While the \$100 million announcement initially raised hopes, community leaders say the slow follow-through has been disappointing. Every season that passes without improvements is a lost opportunity – for example, fruit growers in Bilpin worry that inadequate roads will limit the number of visitors coming for “pick-your-own” experiences, especially if travelers fear road closures or long delays. In short, **local businesses are in limbo**, planning for growth on the assumption of road upgrades that have yet to eventuate.
- **Daily Commuting and Logistics:** For residents who commute or transport goods, the ongoing issues on BLOR translate to **longer travel times and logistical headaches**. The road's current condition – narrow lanes, landslip-prone sections, and congestion at known choke points – means that even routine trips can be slow or hazardous. When serious crashes occur (not uncommon on this winding route), the road can be closed for hours or days. For instance, a single truck accident at Bilpin has in the past

forced traffic to divert via the Great Western Highway, adding significant time and inconvenience ([Truck crash closes Bells Line of Road at Bilpin | Bathurst, NSW](#)). Truck drivers and tradespeople who use BLOR regularly are finding that until upgrades are delivered, they must factor in extra time or risk missing schedules. This everyday impact reinforces the community's sense that they are being left behind: despite a much-publicized funding promise, **their daily grind on an outdated road continues unchanged.**

## Political Dynamics Behind the Delay

The stalled \$100 million for Bells Line of Road has become entangled in broader political dynamics at both state and federal levels.

Understanding these factors helps explain why progress has been sluggish:

- **Federal-State Coordination:** The BLOR upgrade is a joint venture – federal funding delivered through state implementation. Initially, the announcement in early 2023 saw a rare alignment of political rivals: a federal Labor government (PM Albanese) partnering with a NSW Liberal government (then-Premier Dominic Perrottet) ([Doorstop interview - Mount Tomah | Prime Minister of Australia](#)) ([Doorstop interview - Mount Tomah | Prime Minister of Australia](#)). Both leaders, despite their party differences, touted the cooperation as a win for the community ([Critical Safety Upgrades Set For Historic Road | The Hawkesbury Phoenix - Hawkesbury Region News and Current Affairs](#)). However, within months the landscape shifted. The March 2023 NSW election brought in a new Labor state government under Premier Chris Minns. While one might expect smoother alignment with the federal Labor administration, in practice the transition introduced delays as priorities were reassessed. Large infrastructure pipelines in NSW were put under review due to budget pressures, and the incoming government was cautious about commencing new projects. **The BLOR upgrades, fully funded by Canberra, ostensibly remained on the books, but likely lost some momentum amid the post-election shake-up and numerous competing projects vying for attention.**
- **Election Promises and “Never-Never” Projects:** During the campaign, Chris Minns criticized the previous government for what he called “never-never” projects – road plans announced with great fanfare but scheduled far in the future or without clear timelines. Ironically, opponents now accuse Minns’ own government of treating the Bells Line funding in a similar way. Robyn Preston seized on this in Parliament, arguing that **Labor’s lack of action on BLOR is a “betrayal” of their pledge to avoid never-never projects** ([Legislative Assembly Hansard - 18 March 2024 - Proof](#)) ([Legislative Assembly Hansard - 18 March 2024 - Proof](#)). The subtext is political point-scoring: the former Coalition government (and its local representative Preston) want to highlight any failure by Labor to deliver infrastructure, especially in regions like the Hawkesbury that are traditional battlegrounds. Meanwhile, Labor’s Susan Templeman emphasizes that **the funding was secured by her government** and insists the project is on track – subtly ensuring credit goes to Labor when work finally begins ([Mammoth project to improve resilience along key western road](#)

[corridors | NSW Government](#)). Thus, the issue has been politicized: each side frames the delay to either blame the other or claim responsible stewardship.

- **Competing Priorities and Bureaucratic Hurdles:** New South Wales has had to juggle a massive slate of transport projects – from urban motorways to regional highways – under tightening budgets. A high-profile example is the Great Western Highway upgrade (including a proposed tunnel under Blackheath), a multibillion-dollar project that the Minns government paused for review. By comparison, the \$100 million Bells Line program is modest, but it still requires planning resources and alignment with other initiatives (like the **Richmond Bridge duplication** and **Hawkesbury traffic improvements** in the same corridor). **Bureaucratic processes** can significantly slow down such projects: Transport for NSW must undertake environmental assessments, community consultations, design work for each proposed overtaking lane or safety treatment, and potentially land acquisitions at certain spots. It's likely that these processes – which often take years – are ongoing behind the scenes. While not as visible politically, they represent a **technical cause for delay**. The government has cited the need to “determine the project scope” and ensure the upgrades address the right issues, rather than rushing in haphazardly ([What happened to the \\$100 million for Bells Line of Road upgrade?](#)). This cautious approach, while prudent from an engineering perspective, has fed public perception that the funding “hasn't materialized.” Importantly, there is no indication that the \$100 million has been withdrawn; indeed, a recent federal infrastructure review in late 2023 confirmed that the Bells Line of Road safety improvements will “*be built as planned,*” preserving the full allocation ( ). The challenge lies in translating that budget line into asphalt and guardrails on the ground.
- **Local Advocacy and Pressure:** Political dynamics aren't just top-down; local advocacy groups are also influencing the narrative. The Bells Line of Road Business Council (BLOR BC) has been very active, conducting surveys and lobbying for transparency on the project ([BLORBC Media Centre - Greater Bells Line of Road](#)). Their campaign, often working with local MPs of both stripes, keeps the pressure on the government to deliver. Media coverage in the Blue Mountains Gazette and Western Advocate has echoed the community's impatience, effectively holding officials accountable in the court of public opinion. As time goes on, and particularly with another NSW election due in a few years, **the political cost of inaction may rise**. Each side will want to avoid being seen as neglecting the region. This could spur accelerated action (for example, announcing visible works or awarding construction contracts) as a way to claim “runs on the board.” In summary, the fate of the BLOR funding is shaped by a mix of intergovernmental cooperation and rivalry, shifting budget priorities, and the watchful eyes of local constituents – a complex web that has so far led to careful, if frustratingly slow, progress.

## Expert Analysis: Why the Project Matters and Options Ahead

Infrastructure and Transport Experts broadly agree that upgrading Bells Line of Road is important for safety and regional connectivity – but they also note the project's limitations and warn of consequences if delays continue. Here are some key perspectives from experts and industry observers:

- **Safety and Engineering Perspective:** Road safety experts highlight that **targeted upgrades on BLOR could save lives**. The route's winding alignment and mix of slow-moving trucks with faster cars is a recipe for collisions. Engineers have long recommended adding **overtaking lanes and pull-off areas** to reduce risky passing maneuvers, as well as improving road shoulders and signage on sharp bends. The \$100 million package is expected to address exactly these points. *National road safety data underscores the need – BLOR had one of the highest fatality rates in NSW, with 10 deaths in seven crashes in a single year* ([NatRoad welcomes Bells Line of Road safety works - Owner Driver](#)). Experts warn that **each year of delay is another year that drivers face avoidable dangers** on this road. "This funding is money well spent if it prevents further tragedies," one transport industry group noted, emphasizing that the cost of inaction can be measured in lives lost ([NatRoad welcomes Bells Line of Road safety works - Owner Driver](#)). The **consequence of continued delays**, in experts' view, is that accidents will continue at the same alarming rate, and the road's reputation will remain poor. From an engineering timeline standpoint, specialists also caution that postponing works can lead to **cost escalations** – construction costs are rising, so a \$100 million project in 2023 could cost significantly more if not started until 2025 or 2026. To maximize the safety return on investment, they urge authorities to move from planning to construction as soon as practicable.
- **Regional Connectivity and Alternative Solutions:** Infrastructure planners consider Bells Line of Road an important but inherently **constrained corridor**. In the long run, some advocate that a more ambitious solution is needed to truly solve cross-mountain transport challenges – such as a new **expressway-standard link** or **utilizing the proposed Outer Sydney Orbital corridor** to better connect with Sydney's motorway network ([Historic road set for critical safety upgrades](#)). Indeed, past feasibility studies have examined building a freeway along or near the BLOR route ([Bells Line of Road - Wikipedia](#)). However, such a mega-project (often dubbed the "Bells Line Expressway") would cost many billions and faces environmental hurdles through national parkland. Given those barriers, experts generally support the current \$100 million safety upgrade as the **most viable short-to-medium term solution**. "*We're not getting a new highway out there anytime soon, so we must make the existing road as safe and reliable as possible,*" is the common refrain. Some transport analysts also tie the BLOR issue to the broader **West Sydney and Central West transport strategy**. They note that enhancements to Bells Line should go hand-in-hand with other improvements – for example, upgrading the **Richmond Bridge and approach roads** (to unclog the bottleneck where BLOR meets the Hawkesbury River) and ensuring the **Great Western Highway upgrade** proceeds, so the two mountain crossings can each

serve distinct needs. If the BLOR funding remains stalled, experts worry that pressure on the **Great Western Highway** will grow, and there will be no viable alternative when that route is at capacity or under maintenance. Thus, **the consequence of continued delays is a missed opportunity to increase overall network resilience**. In terms of alternatives if delays drag on, experts suggest interim measures: even simple low-cost safety fixes (better road markings, rumble strips, targeted speed limit reductions in hazardous sections) could be deployed to improve safety while the major works are pending.

- **Economic and Social Analysis:** Regional development specialists point out that infrastructure investment like the BLOR upgrade has multiplier effects on the local economy. By improving travel reliability, it can boost tourism and encourage new businesses (such as farm stays, cafes, and adventure tourism in the Blue Mountains foothills). **Delaying the project delays these economic benefits**. An analyst in a local business forum noted that the Greater Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury area is trying to promote itself as a tourist destination, and *“the road is the gateway – if the gateway is seen as unsafe or frequently closed, visitors simply won’t come”*. This sentiment is backed by the BLOR Business Council’s own research: their 2023 survey of businesses and residents aimed to advise the government on **where the \$100 million should be spent** for maximum impact ([BLORBC Media Centre - Greater Bells Line of Road](#)). The implication is that locals have a clear idea of priorities (fixing known danger spots, better signage to encourage tourist stops, etc.), and they are eager for the government to act on those insights. **Experts in regional planning advocate for close consultation with these communities** so that the eventual upgrades deliver not just highway safety, but also support local economic development (for example, incorporating scenic lookouts or signage that encourages passing motorists to explore towns along the way). If bureaucratic holdups continue, some experts suggest exploring *alternative funding or delivery models*: could the NSW Government expedite parts of the work using its own funds (given the federal money is assured to reimburse), or could certain upgrade elements be bundled into maintenance contracts to get started sooner? Such creative solutions might help bypass red tape and accelerate visible progress.

In summary, the expert consensus is that the Bells Line of Road safety improvements are both urgent and well-founded. The project won’t transform the road into a four-lane highway – nor was it meant to – but it can significantly reduce accidents and closures. Specialists warn that the cost of delay will be paid in continued crashes, stagnant local growth, and mounting future expenses. They encourage authorities to consider all avenues to kick-start the upgrades, while also planning holistically for the region’s long-term transport needs (since BLOR alone cannot handle all future demand). The \$100 million is seen as a crucial down payment on safety and resilience for this corridor, and **further procrastination is viewed as untenable from an expert standpoint**.

## Conclusion and Key Takeaways

The case of the \$100 million Bells Line of Road upgrade highlights the challenges of turning political announcements into real-world outcomes. On paper, the funding remains in place and the project is officially proceeding – the NSW and Australian governments both affirm their commitment to safer, better infrastructure on this road ([Mammoth project to improve resilience along key western road corridors | NSW Government](#)) (). In practice, however, the slow pace since the initial promise has tested the patience of communities that depend on BLOR.

**Government Accountability:** So far, neither level of government has fully owned the delay. Federal officials point to state implementation processes, while state authorities cite careful planning and other urgent works taking precedence. The lack of transparency has drawn criticism, with local representatives like Robyn Preston pressing for answers on behalf of concerned residents ([Legislative Assembly Hansard - 18 March 2024 - Proof](#)). For true accountability, clear timelines and progress updates are needed going forward – the community wants to know *when* they will see work begin in earnest.

**Community Impact:** The delayed upgrades have very tangible effects – **unsafe driving conditions persist**, and locals feel vulnerable and overlooked. Businesses awaiting a tourism boost from road improvements are instead left coping with the status quo. Safety statistics are a stark reminder of what's at stake: without upgrades, the Bells Line of Road will continue to be high-risk. Each additional month of delay is felt on the ground in Bilpin, Kurrajong, Mount Tomah and beyond, whether through another near-miss crash or another weekend of lost visitors due to road anxiety.

**Political Dynamics:** The situation underscores how political shifts and priorities can sideline even a fully funded project. It serves as a lesson that bipartisan cooperation – such as that initially shown – must be sustained to see projects through. As the next elections loom on the horizon, we can expect the BLOR funding to become a talking point. Ideally, both sides should compete not in blame-gaming but in accelerating solutions for the community. The “**no more never-never projects**” mantra needs to be honoured by converting this promise into tangible progress on the ground.

**Expert Perspectives:** Specialists reinforce that the BLOR upgrades are critical, and delay is detrimental. There is no technical dispute over the value of the project – it is universally seen as necessary for safety and resilience. The expert advice is clear: **get moving on implementation**, even if it means starting with incremental packages of work. In parallel, think long-term – consider how BLOR fits into the wider transport network and ensure complementary projects (like the Hawkesbury bridge improvements) proceed, so the benefits are amplified.

In conclusion, the \$100 million Bells Line of Road funding is at a crossroads. The money is allocated, and the need is undeniable; what remains is for government agencies to deliver on their pledge. The local community, having waited for years, deserves a definitive timeline



and the sight of bulldozers and road crews at work, not just words. Restoring trust will require not just **accountability for the delay**, but swift, concerted action to make this historic road safer and more reliable for all. The coming months will be telling – either the Bells Line of Road will finally see the upgrades it was promised, or it risks becoming yet another case study in infrastructure promises unfulfilled. The hope among residents and experts alike is that it will be the former, with 2024 and 2025 marking a turning point where plans turn into pavement, and a long-awaited investment in community safety and connectivity is realized.

#### References:

- Prime Minister of Australia – *Media Release: "Historic road set for critical safety upgrades"* (18 Jan 2023) ([Historic road set for critical safety upgrades | Prime Minister of Australia](#)) ([Critical Safety Upgrades Set For Historic Road | The Hawkesbury Phoenix - Hawkesbury Region News and Current Affairs](#))
- NSW Government – *Media Release: "Mammoth project to improve resilience along key western road corridors"* (Feb 2024) ([Mammoth project to improve resilience along key western road corridors | NSW Government](#)) ([Mammoth project to improve resilience along key western road corridors | NSW Government](#))
- NSW Parliament Hansard – Robyn Preston, *Adjournment Debate, 18 Mar 2024* (calling out lack of progress) ([Legislative Assembly Hansard - 18 March 2024 - Proof](#))
- NSW Budget 2023–24 – *Infrastructure Statement* (BLOR upgrade \$100M over four years) ([Budget Paper No.3 - Infrastructure Statement-Budget 2023-24](#))
- Bells Line of Road Business Council – *About Us* (community feeling “ignored” and need for advocacy) ([Who we are | Bells Line of Road Business Council](#))
- NRMA Road Safety Data via OwnerDriver – (BLOR second-highest fatality rate in NSW) ([NatRoad welcomes Bells Line of Road safety works - Owner Driver](#))
- Hawkesbury Gazette – *Local News: BLOR funding survey and community feedback* (Mar 2023) ([BLORBC Media Centre - Greater Bells Line of Road](#))
- The Hawkesbury Phoenix – *"Critical Safety Upgrades Set for Historic Road"* (summary of \$100M announcement with quotes) ([Critical Safety Upgrades Set For Historic Road | The Hawkesbury Phoenix - Hawkesbury Region News and Current Affairs](#)) ([Critical Safety Upgrades Set For Historic Road | The Hawkesbury Phoenix - Hawkesbury Region News and Current Affairs](#))

- Ministers for Infrastructure – *Media Release: "Federal funding activating local priorities in the Blue Mountains"* ([Federal funding activating local priorities in the Blue Mountains | Ministers for the Department of Infrastructure](#)) ([Federal funding activating local priorities in the Blue Mountains | Ministers for the Department of Infrastructure](#)) (context on project being delivered by TfNSW).

## Where Is the \$100 Million? Investigation Reveals Delays in Bells Line of Road Upgrades

Bilpin District, NSW - A long-awaited \$100 million investment to improve the Bells Line of Road remains largely unseen, leaving communities frustrated and demanding answers. A new investigative report exposes the truth behind the delays, the political inaction, and the impact on local residents and businesses who rely on this critical transport corridor.

In 2023, the Australian Prime Minister announced the major funding commitment to enhance safety and infrastructure on Bells Line of Road, a vital alternative route across the Blue Mountains. However, more than a year later, **there is little evidence of progress**. Government responses have been vague, and while the funds were allocated on paper, no significant works have begun.

The report investigates:

- Where has the money gone?
- Why has construction not started?
- How are the delays affecting local communities, businesses, and road safety?
- What do key political figures say about the issue?
- Expert opinions on the importance of this project and the consequences of further delays.

Local community groups and business representatives are calling for **greater transparency and action**. "We were promised safer roads, but all we have is uncertainty and excuses," said a spokesperson for the **Bells Line of Road Business Council**. "This investigation highlights the need for immediate accountability."

The **full report** is now available and provides an in-depth look at the **political and bureaucratic hurdles** stalling this essential infrastructure upgrade. We encourage all residents, business owners, and road users to read the findings and join the push for answers.