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The long, red road to Weipa in Far North Queensland - known as the Peninsula Developmental Road (PDR) - was once a boggy road in the wet season and a corrugated dusty road in the dry season.

But it is changing.

That remote track – once only accessible by four-wheel-drive for about seven months a year – is evolving into a sealed bitumen road that will shape the future of Cape York and its Indigenous and local communities.

The 570km PDR, 527km of which is state-controlled, is the key transport route in Cape York, linking Lakeland to Weipa via Laura, Musgrave and Coen.

The $260.5 million Cape York Region Package (CYRP) is a vital national project connecting Cape communities and changing lives well into the future.

Funded by the Australian and Queensland governments on an 80:20 basis, $200 million of the CYRP has been invested in progressively sealing sections of the PDR, from Laura north to the Rio Tinto mine lease boundary at Weipa.
The package also includes $50.5 million for priority community infrastructure works identified by the Cape Indigenous Mayors Alliance and $10 million to seal 7.5km of the Endeavour Valley Road (EVR) to Hope Vale.

The Queensland Government has allocated an additional $4.5 million (separate to the CYRP) to complete the final 2.8km of sealing of the EVR in 2018.

Some of the key challenges faced by the Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads (TMR) in delivering the program include working in a remote location with limited telecommunications (often only satellite phones work), the increased costs and difficulties of sourcing and delivering materials to the region and the wet season – it floods for about four months of every year and we’re unable to progress sealing works during this time.

CYRP works began in July 2014 and, within its first year of operation a native title claim, known as the Native Title Cape York United Number 1 Claim (QUD673/2014), was lodged across Cape York on behalf of named Native Title applicants by the Cape York Land Council (CYLC).

An interim agreement - the Peninsula Developmental Road Priority Agreement - was reached between the State, the named Applicants and relevant Traditional Owners while negotiations continued for an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA), covering the state-controlled section of the PDR.

The agreement has helped close the gap through training and employment opportunities. Its success was recognised when TMR and CYLC won an award under the Partnership category at the 2016 Queensland Reconciliation Awards.

A Cultural Heritage Protection Agreement was also developed as part of the PDR Priority Agreement to satisfy the State’s duty of care under the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003.

TMR now provides a pre-mobilisation awareness briefing to every operator working on PDR job sites to assist them identify artefacts during the course of their work and to realise their duty of care towards cultural heritage.

The agreement provides for a cultural heritage field survey of the ‘disturbance footprint’ and monitoring during high impact activities.
As of September 2017, more than 7000 hours of cultural heritage monitoring and surveying has been undertaken by Traditional Owners. Protecting cultural heritage has led to identification of scar trees and rock carvings at Laura.

Meanwhile, discussions continued towards an ILUA for the PDR and, on 12 July 2017, the National Native Title Tribunal wrote to TMR advising the ILUA had been registered.

The agreement now also includes the provision of workshops for Indigenous businesses and scholarships for Indigenous secondary and tertiary students, particularly for study in the fields related to road construction.

The impetus behind the multi-million dollar package of works is to facilitate economic growth in the Cape York region by upgrading key roads and infrastructure and to better connect areas of economic opportunity with Indigenous and local communities.

The program aims to improve social effects through better access to health care, employment, education and training opportunities.

It is not inconceivable to think that building a road can do this. When it takes three weeks for a barge to deliver food to the Western Cape, reducing travel time and costs to a day’s drive will have a major, positive impact on people’s quality of life.

A key focus of these CYRP works has been providing business and employment opportunities to ensure capability building for Indigenous people and Indigenous and / or Cape York local businesses.

For example, in 2015:

- 22 Indigenous trainees were engaged on PDR works
- At the peak of construction during 2015, there were more than 80 Indigenous employees working on the PDR
- 15 Indigenous businesses were engaged in 2015 on the PDR. That is almost 25 per cent of the contract work.

TMR has prioritised Indigenous employment and training through the use of tailored Key Result Areas (KRA), with incentivised contract payments, for the 2015, 2016 and 2017 PDR projects.

Local Indigenous job seekers are, for the first time, carrying out road construction on the PDR while gaining certified on-the-job training.

The three KRAs are: Indigenous and non-Indigenous training and upskilling; implementation of an Indigenous Economic Opportunities Plan; and Local Industry Participation.

By incentivising the KRAs, principal contractors have been encouraged to meet these requirements, with the targets for KRA1 and KRA2 being well exceeded in 2015 and 2016, and good results being achieved for KRA3 in consecutive years.

The Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships has set a minimum target of 1.5 per cent for projects (largely building works) that are being delivered in Indigenous communities. For the civil construction works being carried out on the PDR, this percentage is able to be increased because the projects include plant hire and other significant costs.

On the 2016 PDR projects, TMR exceeded 28 per cent Indigenous business engagement (note: the figure varied according to the works underway and the stage of the delivery of the projects).

One of the ways of leaving behind a different legacy through the CYRP has been the construction of 31 water storage structures along the PDR in line with environmental requirements.

Water is necessary in road construction but it is also important for pastoralists, so to resolve problems with competing for water resources in the dry season, storage structures were created alongside the road during the dry season so as they could fill during the wet season.

It can be a very long haul to access gravel which can be expensive and time-consuming. It can also cause wear and tear to our road asset.

So in 2015 and 2016, TMR carried out gravel investigation ahead of the delivery of the following year’s projects. They were carried out in compliance with the PDR Priority Agreement, with TMR and Traditional Owners working alongside one another.

Sourcing gravel nearby the road has helped ensure that all gravel pits used for TMR works are compliant, and developed and managed in an environmentally sustainable manner.

By the end of December 2017, weather permitting, more than 130km of the PDR will be sealed through the CYRP, bringing the total amount of sealed road on the PDR to more than 50 per
By June 2019, it is estimated that 170km of the PDR will be sealed, under the CYRP, leaving about 200km to be completed, as funding permits. And, despite annual wet seasons, TMR is on track to complete delivery of the CYRP by 30 June 2019.

Good progress has also been made on the $10 million project to seal the remaining gravel sections leading to Hope Vale.

These works have been completed under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between TMR, with Hope Vale Aboriginal Shire Council (HVASC) as a subcontractor. The MoU arrangement has provided a valuable opportunity for Indigenous employment and training, and improved HVASC’s construction capability.

Together, 7.51km of the remaining gravel sections have been sealed. In addition, some HVASC employees have gained qualifications, while two former employees have started their own businesses.

By way of maximising benefit to the local community, this project is improving safety, as well as providing huge benefits for the agricultural and tourism industries. It will bring particular benefits to the banana plantation in Hope Vale through reduced transportation costs and delivery of improved product to market.

As part of the $50.5 million allocated to projects to improve priority community infrastructure (such as roads, barge and boat ramps, water and sewerage), projects are in various stages of completion at eight Indigenous communities in Cape York, including in Pormpuraaw, Napranum and Aurukun Shire Councils.

A good example of how these projects are shaping communities and changing lives can be understood through Ralph Kendall Senior.

Ralph was born in Pormpuraaw and has been working every dry season with the road crew since 1995 when the access road was a two-wheeled track. He is competent in operating a grader, backhoe, roller, loader, skidsteer, excavator and the water truck.

He achieved these competencies through on-site training with TMR.

Ralph says that working for the community “has allowed me to be a positive role model and to support my family”. All five of Ralph’s children are permanently employed in the community with one son currently the Mayor and his daughter a qualified mechanic.

CYRP is an example of where, in partnership with Indigenous communities and businesses, TMR is making a real and lasting difference to the lives of Indigenous Queenslanders and their families, and the region as a whole.

The CYRP was highly commended in the Innovation in Design and/or Construction of a Local Government/Public Works Project category in the IPWEAQ Excellence Awards 2016.

For comprehensive information on the PDR, including regular newsletters, see TMR website: https://www.tmr.qld.gov.au/Projects/Name/C/Cape-York-Region-Package-Peninsula-Developmental-Road