

News media in focus: news media prompting government action

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A series of serious road accidents on the Princes Highway in 2017-2018 resulted in critical injuries and fatalities.

This spate of accidents put the condition of the road into the spotlight, fuelled by strong coverage by Australian Community Media mastheads. South Coast Register editor John Handscombe worked with his counterparts at other papers to launch the FIX IT NOW campaign in March 2018.

South Coast Australian Community Media mastheads, particularly the South Coast Register, the Milton-Ulladulla Times, the Bay Post, the Moruya Examiner and the Narooma News, threw their reporting weight behind the campaign.



The campaign's statement of purpose ran in print and online in South Coast mastheads:

"For too long people have been dying on the Princes Highway.

We have seen major improvements between Gerringong and Berry and will soon see a dual carriageway extending all the way from Sutherland to the Jervis Bay

turnoff. We believe improvements now need to extend all the way to the Victorian border, starting with an upgrade between Nowra and Batemans Bay.

Emergency services workers are telling us they predict more accidents as more traffic pours into the South Coast. They say this extra traffic reaches the most dangerous part of the highway two-and-a-half hours after leaving – exactly into the fatigue zone.

Our FIX IT NOW campaign aims to exert pressure on the state and federal governments to put aside their differences, strike a fair funding deal for the Princes Highway, commit to and commence urgent safety upgrades.

As local news outlets, we play an important role advocating for our local communities. Fighting for the safety of our friends, families, colleagues and community members who rely on the Princes Highway is important and urgent.

By combining our resources and presenting a unified voice, we can ensure our message is heard loud and clear in Canberra and in Sydney.”

Newspaper editors involved in the project worked together to publish more than 70 breaking news stories, interviews, analysis pieces, letters and editorials relating to upgrading the road. This included dedicating front pages to crash coverage and calls for action. Publishers sought the views of victims, grieving families, emergency services crews, witnesses, engineers, road safety lobby groups and experts to develop the coverage.

Results

The campaign resulted in unprecedented bipartisan funding commitments for the highway upgrades that the NRMA says will save lives. Until that time, both major political parties had neglected the Princes Highway, from Nowra to the Victorian border.

The highway upgrades, developed by the NRMA, include:

- a divided dual carriageway to the Victorian border and;
- in the interim, wire dividers installed in high-risk sections.

ACM's South Coast mastheads say they will hold the politicians to account for their promises: "The battle will not be over until our communities no longer suffer the trauma of needless deaths on an underfunded road."



Photo: Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack, South Coast Register and Bay Post editors John Hanscombe and Kerrie O'Connor and Shadow Infrastructure Minister Anthony Albanese in Canberra.

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