

# TRANSCRIPT

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

### Subcommittee

### Inquiry into infrastructure projects

Melbourne — 19 October 2016

#### Members

Mr Joshua Morris — Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh — Deputy Chair

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Nazih Elasmr

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr Shaun Leane

Mr Craig Ondarchie

#### Participating member

Ms Samantha Dunn

#### Staff

Secretary: Lilian Topic

#### Witness

Mr John Merritt, Chief Executive Officer, VicRoads.

**The CHAIR** — I will declare open the Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing. I welcome Mr Merritt and members of the gallery. Today the committee is hearing evidence in relation to our infrastructure inquiry, and the evidence today is being recorded. This hearing is to inform the third of at least six reports into infrastructure projects, and witnesses may well be invited to attend future hearings as the inquiry continues. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this same privilege. Once again, welcome, Mr Merritt. Thank you for your attendance today. I might ask you just to state your name and title for the record and then move into any introductory comments, and we will follow with some questions from the committee. Over to you, Mr Merritt.

**Mr MERRITT** — Good afternoon, Chair, and to the committee. Thanks for the opportunity to appear again. I am the chief executive of VicRoads, and I am here representing the organisation. Perhaps if I could start by updating the committee on some of the key infrastructure projects, and then I will be happy of course to take any questions.

Since last appearing in front of the committee, in relation to the CityLink-Tulla widening project we have now both awarded that contract, or the final stages, and commenced work, and work is now well underway on all of those stages for completion in mid-2018.

On the M80 or Western Ring Road upgrade — the E. J. Whitten section — we have both awarded and commenced work on that now. We commenced work about a fortnight ago, and that is due for completion in late 2018 as well.

On the Chandler Highway project, we are in the tender phase now. We look to award that project in early 2017 and commence work soon after. That is due to be completed mid the following year.

On the West Gate distributor project, the work on Whitehall Street and Footscray Road and Shepherd Bridge is well underway there now and due for completion in the middle of next year.

Also on the western distributor, that section which is the Monash upgrade, since last appearing that contract has been awarded and that work is well underway. That is due for completion in 2018 — just that Monash Freeway section.

On some of our rural roads, on the Western Highway we have closed tenders on the next section there, which takes us from Buangor out to Ararat. That will be awarded later this year and commence early to mid next year for completion in mid-2019.

On the Princes Highway west duplication we are currently due to start work later this year on the section most of the way to Colac, and we are also out there looking to award the next tender about the middle of next year on that last section into the town of Colac itself. That will complete most of that work.

On the Princes Highway east heading from Traralgon out to Sale, we have closed tenders now on three sections there. We will be awarding on two of those later this year, notably Traralgon East and Nambrok and that section at Fulham too. We are due to commence later this year. The other two sections will start early next year.

In addition to that, on projects that we have previously discussed, notably Thompsons Road, we have awarded stage 1. That is due to commence in a couple of months and complete late 2018. There is a second section there that we will advertise for tender late this year.

Regarding Yan Yean Road, there has been a lot of work on services there and around the land act. We will be going to tender early next year for that, award it middle of the year and start work later in 2017, to be completed in 2019.

In addition to that we have a range of other upgrades on key arterial roads around both the north and western suburbs.

I wanted to just briefly discuss some of the road safety work that we are doing. Since we were last here the government has announced its Towards Zero work, which contains significant funding on high-speed rural roads. There are potentially about four sections to that. We will be installing continuous perimeter barrier on around 230 kilometres of road. There are nine key roads that will be protected by that: the Hume all the way to

the border; Calder heading out to Bendigo; the Western Highway to Ballarat; Princes Highway west, Little River to Corio; the Geelong Ring Road; the Bass Highway from Lang Lang to San Remo; Princes Highway east; Traralgon to Sale; and the Mornington Peninsula Freeway.

We will also be treating about 100 kilometres of undivided high-volume road with median barriers. That is a first for us, and there are 11 roads that will be treated. We have already started work on the Goulburn Valley Highway and Geelong-Bacchus Marsh Road. Then on those medium-volume undivided roads we will be installing tactile edging and wide centre lines on around 2200 kilometres of road, and there is a fourth section looking at speeds on some of those roads as well.

So I am happy to take questions on those or any of that work. There is a lot of detail on the road safety initiatives since we were last here, and we are underway on many of the projects that I think we might have discussed when last I was here as well.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Mr Merritt. You have certainly run through quite a lot of projects there, and I am just hoping to dive into a little bit more detail on a couple of those projects — some that you have mentioned, some you may not have. On the Yan Yean Road, I understand that you stated construction commencing in late 2016. Is that correct?

**Mr MERRITT** — No. It will not commence until the second half of next year on Yan Yean Road.

**The CHAIR** — Sorry, the second half of 2017. With completion in 2019?

**Mr MERRITT** — That is when it is due at the moment, yes.

**The CHAIR** — Any idea of which quarter 2019 perhaps?

**Mr MERRITT** — Second half, I have got here. Probably the biggest single challenge on Yan Yean Road is proving to be the land acquisition. If you can visualise the road, it takes a number of quite severe bends out and then straightens through, so there are some significant imposts on those residents along there. There are not an insignificant number of trees along that area as well, so I think that is probably going to be a big challenge. There are a number of major services relocations in that corridor as well, I am advised. That should be more straightforward, but just working with the residents will be a lot of work.

**The CHAIR** — We will have a look at some of those tree challenges in a moment with the Western Highway as well. I am curious as to whether or not you might be able to shed some light on the significant discrepancies between the minister's briefing and the VicRoads fact sheet for Yan Yean Road. Can you give us some more — —

**Mr MERRITT** — Can you highlight what that discrepancy was?

**The CHAIR** — I do not actually have those discrepancies in front of me, but I understand that there were some discrepancies there. I am happy to provide that to you, and we can have a look.

**Mr MERRITT** — I am happy to take that on notice and respond if you can let me know what they are.

**The CHAIR** — That would be fabulous. I will provide some further information for you on that one as to what we are doing there, but you were saying land acquisitions were a significant concern or significant difficulty.

**Mr MERRITT** — The issue in that area is the value appreciation of the land, and there is a not insignificant quantity of land to be purchased there as well. It will primarily be the escalating property value in that corridor.

**The CHAIR** — I am hoping to have a look at Bolton Street. I am just wondering: has a business case been submitted to government at this point?

**Mr MERRITT** — I do not have that detail in front of me, but I am sure I can respond quickly on that just to get an update on where the business case is on Bolton Street.

**The CHAIR** — That would be great. I am also interested in the construction commencement and expected completion dates, which I am assuming you will take on notice as well.

**Mr MERRITT** — Yes, and I will furnish that quite quickly.

**The CHAIR** — Very good. On the Drysdale bypass as well, has a business case been submitted to government for that particular project?

**Mr MERRITT** — I will have to check on where we are with Drysdale. I know that obviously we have got funding for that road and the completion of that case, but I will be able to turn that information around quite quickly as well.

**The CHAIR** — Great, and again if you could take the commencement and completion dates on notice as well. Similarly, on Thompsons Road, I have similar questions in terms of business case, commencement date and completion date.

**Mr MERRITT** — I am happy to take those and furnish those quite quickly.

**The CHAIR** — That would be great, and detail on the final alignment for Thompsons Road if you have that as well. I understand there has been community and stakeholder engagement with regard to Thompsons Road and the alignment of the road.

**Mr MERRITT** — I understand there have been some community forums out there discussing with the community the impact of that. There are a couple of sensitive issues there, as there are on everything that we widen.

**The CHAIR** — I am just wondering if you might be able to provide the committee with detail of the results from those particular community surveys, which would be very much appreciated. At that juncture I might see if Mr Leane has some questions.

**Mr LEANE** — Thanks for your evidence today to help our committee. I was just going to ask you a bit more about Thompsons Road if you do not mind, Mr Merritt. I understand the commencement date has already commenced as far as people wearing boots and red jackets — —

**Mr MERRITT** — We have awarded the contract, and they will be out there on site. The formal commencement is due I think in or around this month or two. That contractor will be on site doing their pre-works, getting it ready.

**Mr LEANE** — Can you expand more on what stage 1 delivers?

**Mr MERRITT** — It is that section which is east of the railway crossing there. It is earmarked as one of the level crossing removals as well, so we are incorporating that into the project. There is an existing four-lane section, if you can picture Thompsons Road, and then it problematically joins up with what are just the two-lane roads there. So the first section deals with that eastern section of the road there from the railway out, incorporates the existing duplicated road and takes it further. The second section takes it from there out towards Frankston-Dandenong Road, as I understand it. I am happy to furnish some map about that if that will help on that. Is there a specific issue about timing or sequencing?

**Mr LEANE** — I was just interested because it is obviously a project where, as I said, your expectation is that there will be builders, sheds and people on site soon.

**Mr MERRITT** — I can get you a precise date for that if that would help.

**Mr LEANE** — That is fine. I was just interested in that as being a road that there has been long discussion about getting this work done, so I was just interested in what stage 1 entailed.

**Mr MERRITT** — I will have some detail of that back in the office, because you are right that it is a much-anticipated upgrade. That road is really straining under the load there, and particularly with those residential estates that are trying to get onto that road as well and then, when they do get onto it, find it very slow going. So it is much anticipated.

**Mr LEANE** — I understand that part of the Towards Zero plan is the wire barriers. Has there been a program of installing them on different highways and so forth in recent times?

**Mr MERRITT** — Well, we have a significant program of wire rope barrier works. We are particularly excited, of course, about the funded 100 kilometres of centre median barrier. This follows on from the work that we have done on the Goulburn Valley Highway between Yea and Molesworth, where we took this action following I think six fatalities that we had had in about 12 months there. Shortly after installing the centre median barrier, we had that incident which was subsequently filmed by TAC, where a gentleman on the way back from jetskiing at Eildon fell asleep and went into the barrier as a couple were approaching him from the other direction. So what is particularly exciting for us is for the first time we have got funding there to do about another hundred kilometres of that — more of it on the Goulburn Valley Highway, and as I say, we are already working on the Geelong-Bacchus Marsh Road.

On top of that we have got funding for around 230 kilometres of perimeter barriers, which will see us complete the Hume to the border, which we are obviously pretty excited about. I think we have had on the Hume so far this year — we would have had — probably between 70 and 80 strikes already on that wire rope barrier that we have got on the Hume, so it works, but we do not have the full length of it done, so that is particularly exciting for us.

To be able to have a foolproof system around the Calder running up to Bendigo and the Western Highway all the way to Ballarat, as well as significant sections of the Princes Highway, east and west, and the Bass Highway between Lang Lang and San Remo, is quite an important aspiration of ours, really, because we know that these wire rope barriers work. We know that we have got a really high incidence of drivers, either through fatigue or distraction, drifting off the road. These are quite understandable human errors that people make, which can often come with a diabolical consequence.

**Mr LEANE** — Not just for themselves.

**Mr MERRITT** — That is right, because if you look at our road fatality reports that are generated by Victoria Police, somewhere between 15 and 20 per cent of our fatalities are someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. They have actually done nothing wrong; somebody else has, and they have strayed. Where we have got such a high preponderance on our high-speed rural roads of vehicles crossing the centre line, this work, whether the barriers or the wider medians and the tactile edging to wake you up if you do stray, the evidence says is a big improvement to it. So we have got a huge rollout of capital works on that to come between now and 2021.

**Mr LEANE** — That is evidence of improvements in our state, but that is an evidence base from a number of jurisdictions regarding, as you said, the tactiles — the wire barriers and so forth?

**Mr MERRITT** — Yes. There was an enormous amount of work done throughout last year, both engaging with the community and through MUARC and the research community, to identify what would give us the best likelihood of achieving the target of getting the road toll below 200 by 2020, and so it is very much evidence based. That is why these more significant treatments that we are doing, such as wire rope barrier, are on the high-volume duplicated roads, which are the ones I have named. Then there are treatments on different roads, depending on the volumes as they go, because we just need to put our effort where we can get the biggest return on reduced trauma.

**Mr LEANE** — You mentioned 80 incidents with the wire barrier. Was that just on the Hume?

**Mr MERRITT** — That is just on the Hume.

**Mr LEANE** — So once there has been a collision with a wire rope barrier, does that mean there is a long section of wire rope barrier that needs to be replaced?

**Mr MERRITT** — Well, whatever they have struck we have to stand back up again quite quickly. Once it is hit, it does not work, so a lot of our work is to maintain the barrier set out there. One of the interesting aspects of wire rope barrier is that I think only about 5 per cent of those vehicles who strike it are known to us — everybody else drives off — and so we find it laying down with our daily surveillance on those roads, and we have to very quickly get there and stand it back up and repair it.

**Mr LEANE** — I suppose it is not too disappointing not to find who is culpable for knocking down our wire. It is probably better that 95 per cent drive off; it is probably a good thing.

**Mr MERRITT** — Again, it is the extraordinary feature of this stuff. Not only do you not die; you do not even lose that much time. It is an amazing thing, really. All that we will see is maybe a skid mark and a bent pole and some wire on the ground. Bear in mind that, because we have not got a full treatment of that road at the moment, it largely exists in those areas where it is immediately adjacent to a gully, a culvert or a stand of trees.

**Mr LEANE** — But the aspiration is to — —

**Mr MERRITT** — We are going to line the whole thing.

**Mr LEANE** — Fantastic. Thank you.

**Ms HARTLAND** — I have a few questions. If I can start with a group of residents who have approached me, they live on the corner of Francis and Hyde streets. In front of them is the Mobil tank farm; at the back of them there is the old SEC substation.

**Mr MERRITT** — Yes, I know that site.

**Ms HARTLAND** — They are going to be impacted by the western distributor. Many of the houses have already got VicRoads acquisition overlays on them from other projects. They want to be acquired. They have approached government. They have written to VicRoads. They cannot sell their houses, nobody wants to live there, and several of them actually bought their houses not knowing that they had acquisition overlays on them, so there is also a problem with their contracts. How would you suggest that they actually deal with this? They have come to me incredibly frustrated, and once the western distributor happens, if it happens, especially with the contamination that is at the back of them, they are in a really — —

**Mr MERRITT** — They are concerned about that.

**Ms HARTLAND** — They are in an intolerable situation.

**Mr MERRITT** — This is not an unusual situation. Where one of our acquisition overlays makes it very difficult for someone to sell their land, there are specific provisions. Where a landowner experiences obvious hardship, they are able to apply to us to acquire their property. We would execute a not insignificant number of those each year. It has to be approved by me. I would probably see one or two of those a month. It is not routine, but it is not uncommon. There is a process by which they need to establish some hardship, such as the house is unsuitable for their health so they need to get out. They will then need a valuation of it. Often it will be accompanied by a letter from a local real estate agent that says, ‘I’ve tried to sell it and I can’t because of this’. That then activates a process by which we would acquire the property. My advice would be for them to make contact with the organisation and get advice on that process. It will be through the region, and they will ultimately make a recommendation.

**Ms HARTLAND** — They have actually already done that, and they have told me that they were told — —

**Mr MERRITT** — Not eligible?

**Ms HARTLAND** — Yes. So it would be really good — —

**Mr MERRITT** — If you could provide me with some names, I am happy to — —

**Ms HARTLAND** — Yes, and is there someone within VicRoads who could meet with them? I think too because obviously with the tank farm, the contamination and the western distributor nobody should actually be living on that corner. I have always been surprised that a truck has not taken out a few of those houses as it comes around.

**Mr MERRITT** — It is quite a severe bend. If there are names that you would like to provide, we can make contact with them through our region.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Yes, I will contact you separately about that.

Obviously with the western distributor coming up the local community are very concerned that without curfews trucks will simply not use it; they will not pay the tolls. You know these streets — Francis Street, Somerville Road, Moore Street, Buckley Street. The government has refused to say that there will be a curfew. They have

been asked I think probably a dozen times now by either me or residents. How can we assure the residents that without a curfew trucks are not going to continue rat-running on their street and refusing to pay the toll?

**Mr MERRITT** — Obviously the business case for the western distributor contemplates curfews on those streets, and we certainly are contemplating curfews on those streets. Our work around that has partly been with some of the representatives of that community, but we have also been in discussion with the truck companies who rely on that route. Notwithstanding the business case recommendation, the way we try and work on these, rather than coming down quickly on a solution that completely suits one but alienates another, is to work through.

I have been personally in some discussions with some of the container transporting companies in the Brooklyn area. They make the point that they have been on those sites for more than a century. Their businesses are fairly marginal, and it is a complex situation. They are not divorced from reality about the future of this, but it has just been our commitment to try and work through with them what the implications might be, whether they can be mitigated and how we might do that, because they are significant employers. In some respects they are one part of the group, but there is also another group of self-employed people, who it is almost impossible for us to engage with. These are working people. Their jobs are at stake. As I said, I was surprised how long these businesses have been there; they are multigenerational. We are just trying to be respectful of their situation and work through it with them. We have some time to do that, obviously, with the duration of the western distributor project, but I recognise that until such time as we can set a date and confirm that to the residents, there is a degree of anxiety about it.

**Ms HARTLAND** — But of course the problem is that the houses have been there as long, if not longer, and as you know, the problem with truck movements has got particularly bad in the last 15 years. We are up to about 7000 movements a day on Francis Street. That is not insignificant. The government is saying that they are building the western distributor to solve this problem, but I have actually been in VCAT to get a number of documents the government have refused me. I want to see how they prove that they will take 5000 trucks off the road, and that is the information the government will not give me. If they will not give it to me, it does not give the community any confidence that this project is actually going to achieve what it is supposed to achieve.

So with the western distributor, are VicRoads asked for their advice on this? Are they involved in the process? Again, because I cannot access the documents and because the consultation has been so poor with the community, it is really hard to know what impact this project is actually going to have. Obviously at the start of all this the local residents were quite excited because they thought maybe this would be a solution, but every day it goes on and the less information or the more confusing information we get, that confidence goes down dramatically.

**Mr MERRITT** — We are heavily involved in it, both as VicRoads and through our staff who are working with the project team. I would still maintain that the residents have reason to be excited about the project in terms of its ability to significantly improve the livability of that area. From a VicRoads point of view there are a number of attractive elements of this project — obviously being able to provide additional routes for the bridge and cope with growth — but from our perspective the prospect of significantly improving the livability of those neighbourhoods is one of the most attractive elements of the project from our point of view.

I certainly do sympathise with the community that they would not be satisfied fast enough that that will materialise, which is what you are putting, but our experience in dealing with any road that either is expanding or its purpose is shifting is that there is almost nothing that we deal with that meets with universal acclaim, and there are people's very strong interests at heart about that. What we are trying to do is make sure that we respect those different interests in working it through. I completely expect the community to suspend their excitement about that until they see it, but I can assure them that we are working to get a good result and we do place a high value on the uplift in the livability of that area. It is something that we just see as being one of the most attractive parts.

This is an area of Melbourne that is very popular and is held back by, I think, the trucks moving through it and the impact on the urban environment, whether it is just the feeling of safety and concerns about air quality, the noise — those sorts of things. We feel that this project has a lot to offer to improve that, and with that will come a big boost to the city of Melbourne.

**Ms HARTLAND** — The problem is that none of that has been proved to the residents. Government and Transurban will not give them basic information about how they came to the figure of 5000 trucks a day would come off the road, and I have to spend large amounts of money to go to VCAT because government refuses me an FOI. Give me the modelling. Tell me how it is that you have come to that number, then I can tell the residents. But I cannot get that information, and I have gone to a number of the consultations and they are really poor — they are some of the worst I have ever seen — because Transurban wants to make money. They do not really care about the residents, so they are giving them as little information as they can. Yes, you are right; there was excitement at the start, but it is wearing off pretty quickly. People are not convinced now, and without the curfews the trucks are not going to use it. That is pretty simple.

**Mr MERRITT** — I think what is public is the business case, which certainly contemplates that curfew.

**Ms HARTLAND** — But it does not commit to it, nor does government.

**Mr MERRITT** — We are working through for those who are affected by it. I know that is not anywhere near definitive enough, but just going back to the valid point that you make around Transurban and their incentive in regard to the project, a strong element of the finances of the project are trucks using that tunnel. So if you like there is an overlap of interest from both the proponent and the residents that a large number of trucks use that road.

**Ms HARTLAND** — But without the government saying that there is going to be a curfew. The Premier has said they will consider it after the project is open. Statements like that do not help people's confidence. Clearly Transurban has a lot more influence than the residents do.

**Mr MERRITT** — Mmm.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Well, no, clearly they do, because if they did not we would actually have the information that we are looking for. But without the curfew they are not going to pay the toll, which is what we have seen with other projects. I was also with a group of residents last night on Beach Road — I do move around a lot — so there are similar issues around trucks refusing to use tolls and so diverting and coming along Beach Road. I understand there are night curfews.

**Mr MERRITT** — There are night curfews, and there is a vote locally about the weekend curfew, wanting to extend it as well.

**Ms HARTLAND** — They are wanting weekend curfews. The other thing they were saying to me was that there are actually 13 weekends each year that already have curfews because of festivals, fun runs and all the rest of it, and why could it not just be extended for weekends, which is when people are using that area the most.

**Mr MERRITT** — That is right. We have been, I think in conjunction with the City of Port Phillip, doing truck counts and origin-and-destination surveys on trucks in that area to try and verify again what the impact of the curfews is. As we would have discussed on previous areas, we are trying to understand: where will the trucks go? How many of those are actually on that road because the destination is within the area and how many are there when they should be using Nepean Highway, I suppose it would be, and if we push them off, what will it be? I am happy to get an update on where that monitoring of trucks is and what the latest is there.

**Ms HARTLAND** — That would be good, and obviously the policing of the curfew. How many trucks have actually been fined for breaking the curfew — all of those kind of details would be really helpful.

**Mr MERRITT** — I do not have anything on Beach Road. I know I had a report just the other day. I think we find going back to the earlier area, on Francis Street where we have recently — this year, I think — introduced that school drop-off time curfew, I know there were seven infringements issued I think in the last month on Francis Street. I know residents are particularly keen to see us enforce those curfews around there, and we have been doing that.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Because people tell me it has made a massive difference, the curfew.

**Mr MERRITT** — It only works as long as it is observed, and it is only observed as long as we enforce it. I think it goes back to our earlier discussions. The curfews, as you say, make a massive difference. I just repeat: one of the exciting things about the project is to see a massive difference in the livability of that area. It is

already a great area, but it has enormous potential. With that, it creates the sorts of suburbs in another part of inner Melbourne that people want to live in, and the people who live there and work in and around the city are a critical part of the economy now, so there is a lot at stake here.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Hello, John. Sorry I was late.

**Mr MERRITT** — Hello, Mr Ondarchie. Good to see you.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — In the last week the federal Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development said there was some doubt as to whether the western distributor would do much to ease congestion. Has VicRoads done any modelling around that project?

**Mr MERRITT** — The modelling for the project is in the business case; we have not done anything separate to the business case. I did see some reporting — I think it was the secretary of the federal department had expressed some reservation; I just noticed that in the press the other day — but I do not know what that is about. Obviously the business case has been submitted to Infrastructure Australia, and they have it, but I do not know what he is referring to in that concern

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — He was talking about whether the case stacked up in terms of easing congestion. What is VicRoads's view about that, given your modelling?

**Mr MERRITT** — Based on the business case it does, because it provides the two extra lanes in each direction on the West Gate, which is already carrying a huge amount of work, and will carry a lot more because of the growth in the western suburbs. It provides the alternate route to the port rather than going through the streets of Yarraville or heading over the bridge, and the bridge has limits in its capacity. So they are both very important. I was not sure when I saw those comments whether the secretary was referring to the longer term recommendations which first emerged in the Eddington report about the need for a more northerly link from the Western Ring Road into the port as well as the southern link, which is what western distributor is. I would need to ask him about that and see what he was referring to.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Interestingly enough, Infrastructure Victoria's report talked about the need for the east-west link some time over the next 30 years, and I am not sure the residents of Parkville and Carlton North et cetera would agree with that. Do you concur with their view that it is probably not needed for another 30 years?

**Mr MERRITT** — Infrastructure Victoria have issued — I think it is — their penultimate draft report, and they will complete their recommendations to government — by the end of the year is their timetable. Then the government has indicated it will provide a single response to that report, so we will be contributing to that single response. At this stage, though, it is still their penultimate draft report.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Yes, that is true. I know what their time line is and I know what the government is going to do; I was more interested in VicRoads's response to Infrastructure Victoria's view that it is probably not needed for another 30 years.

**Mr MERRITT** — As I say, I think the government has announced that there will be a joint single response to the report, and we will contribute to that. At this stage we have seen the penultimate draft and we will contribute ultimately to the joined-up government response to it.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — You do not have a candid view right now?

**Mr MERRITT** — No.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — I want to talk about then the metro rail construction project and its impact on road users. How many lanes are expected to be closed on St Kilda road during the metro?

**Mr LEANE** — We had this before with the metro.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — But I was not here for that.

**Mr LEANE** — Okay. You do not believe in metro?

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — I was not here for it.

**Mr LEANE** — Well, you have got to attend all day, and then we do not have to go through the same questions.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — John might be very capable of answering the question.

**The CHAIR** — I am sure Mr Merritt would like to answer the question.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Maybe I should ask you instead.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, gentlemen. Back this way.

**Mr LEANE** — These things become very boring for us who actually commit to the whole day if someone comes in and regurgitates something we have already heard. But after you.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Mr Leane.

**Mr MERRITT** — I have been in meetings with metro rail about the impact on St Kilda Road and the closures, but I would need to check back on their advice as to what that impact will be.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — And do you expect that after the metro rail project is completed — with permission, Mr Leane — the existing lanes on St Kilda Road will remain as the number of lanes on St Kilda Road?

**Mr MERRITT** — Yes.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Nothing further. Thanks.

**The CHAIR** — Mr Merritt, you will be pleased to know that I found some background to the Yan Yean discrepancies between the VicRoads fact sheet and what the minister has said. Basically what we have had is in November 2014 Labor said that \$95 million was going to be allocated to the duplication. The minister then briefed that it would take three and a half years to complete the project. VicRoads confirmed in November 2015 that \$95 million would be committed to the project. However, in April 2016 we saw the budget allocate \$126.16 million to the project, an overrun of 32 per cent. The budget papers stated the project is due to be completed by the fourth quarter 2019, or June 2020. Then in July 2016 a VicRoads information update states that the project will now cost \$131.2 million, which indicates a 38 per cent overrun in costs and then, obviously, the concerns around the completion date. That was the basis for my question in regard to the discrepancy. I am happy for you to take that information on notice and then provide some further information.

**Mr MERRITT** — I am happy to provide it. It will relate to the two issues I alluded to earlier. There is a significant escalation in land value in the corridor that accounts for the discrepancy, because I am not sure the date of the original cost estimate of it for 95. But there has also been some significant escalation of the services relocation in that corridor as well. But I am happy to take that on notice.

**The CHAIR** — That would be great. Two further questions that you may need to take on notice as well, the first one being: how many staff have transferred from VicRoads to the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources between 1 January 2016 and today?

**Mr MERRITT** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — And also: how many staff have resigned from VicRoads during these 10 and a half months, not including retirements due to age or health reasons or that type of thing?

**Mr LEANE** — What has that got to do with infrastructure?

**Mr MERRITT** — Delivery.

**The CHAIR** — The turnover of staff is going to impact on an organisation's capacity to deliver infrastructure, Mr Leane. They were just the other questions that I would like you to take on notice if you could.

**Mr MERRITT** — We will provide that.

**The CHAIR** — I am also interested to ask about a pedestrian crossing in Buninyong. I am not sure if you are aware of the pedestrian crossing in Buninyong. There has been quite a — —

**Mr MERRITT** — Look, I am aware that we are working on a Buninyong pedestrian crossing, yes.

**The CHAIR** — There has been quite a bit of a to-do about it. It appears the local member, Geoff Howard, has gone to war with the community there about this particular pedestrian crossing. The concern surrounds the village atmosphere that currently exists in Buninyong, and many of the residents are concerned that a signalised pedestrian crossing would significantly impact upon that village feeling in the community there. I am just hoping you might be able to provide an update on where that project is to this point — on notice.

**Mr MERRITT** — Yes, I am happy to take that on notice. I am not up with that.

**The CHAIR** — That would be fine.

**Mr LEANE** — Just disregard the bit about the local MP going at war with the community, because that is just not true.

**The CHAIR** — It is just a good bit of context, Mr Leane.

**Mr LEANE** — Because that is just rubbish.

**The CHAIR** — Well, you should ask the community in Buninyong, Mr Leane.

**Mr LEANE** — I know. It is just not true.

**Mr MERRITT** — I will get an update on where that is at.

**The CHAIR** — The Midland Highway overtaking lanes between Ballarat and Geelong: I saw there were some announcements about possible alignments for those, but I was just hoping you might be able to, on notice, provide some updates about that particular project.

**Mr MERRITT** — Certainly.

**The CHAIR** — And the Western Highway and the trees: what happened?

**Mr MERRITT** — When you say ‘what happened?’ — —

**The CHAIR** — There was the initial study done in terms of the number of trees that were likely to be removed as a result of the upgrade, and then when the project was coming closer to fruition the number of trees dramatically increased by a magnitude of four times or something like that, if memory serves me correctly. I am wondering how that occurred.

**Mr MERRITT** — When we commissioned the initial estimate of the trees, there was a significant underestimation of it; partly — and it is our responsibility — the methodology that was used to do the counting has subsequently been found to be flawed, and when we came to do a much more detailed count on those trees we found significantly more were there. It is an issue which obviously has caused a significant degree of angst for those residents that would prefer that we did a different alignment.

You are probably aware that the alignment that was ultimately chosen by the panel, which does not use the existing corridor there, was not the alignment we originally proposed; but taking into account the environmental considerations, the panel recommended that we take the alternate route, which has a significant impact on a number of properties, and not surprisingly the people who own those properties are concerned about it and question the environmental values of different routes.

It has been a really difficult process, I must say. I would certainly say that the material which we have had before us still indicates that the environmental impact on the route that has been pursued is less than it would be if we had used the corridor, because we simply cannot fit the road down the corridor that we have got. But it has been a really difficult process.

**Ms HARTLAND** — There were 221 trees that were going to be taken in the original project and it was 885 trees that were lost, and these were all mature trees.

**Mr MERRITT** — That is right; yes.

**The CHAIR** — When Michel Masson came in today from Infrastructure Victoria there was some discussion around the proposed north-east link. I am hoping you might be able to inform the committee of any work that VicRoads has done in looking at the route of that particular link.

**Mr MERRITT** — Look, we are not doing any work on the issue of the route because we are awaiting the final recommendations from Infrastructure Victoria and then the government's response to that. I think that is the logical use of having Infrastructure Victoria: it is for them to ultimately advise on the infrastructure rankings over the next 30 years. This is obviously a really significant part of that. But, no, we are not working on the project at the moment until that process runs through.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. From memory I think there have been some positive comments from the government about the possibility of a north-east link outside of the work that Infrastructure Victoria have done. There has been no directive or anything like that come from the minister for roads about the opportunity to look at it?

**Mr MERRITT** — No. I would say they are following a process.

**The CHAIR** — Okay. I was also hoping to ask you about an announcement in March 2014 by the then Premier, Denis Napthine, in Ballarat that VicRoads would be relocated to the Civic Hall site in Ballarat. I think the last mention from the government about this was probably in March 2016, when the Treasurer said that the government was still looking at relocation of VicRoads but to where was still being evaluated, and that VicRoads — yourselves — were going to conduct an assessment about the potential relocation of your headquarters elsewhere from Kew. I am hoping you might be able to update us on where that is at.

**Mr MERRITT** — I do not think I can update you further from when I was last before the committee. I think, as I advised then, VicRoads had commissioned a cost-benefit analysis of moving options; we have furnished that to the government, and it is a matter for the government to determine.

**The CHAIR** — So that has been completed; it is with government?

**Mr MERRITT** — We have provided them with a cost benefit of the options. It is with the government to determine.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Can the committee have a copy of that?

**Mr MERRITT** — It is a matter for the government.

**The CHAIR** — Could you inform us when you provided that to government?

**Mr MERRITT** — I would have to check back.

**The CHAIR** — If you could and provide that to the committee, it would be very much appreciated. I think that is all I had to that point. Mr Leane, any further questions?

**Mr LEANE** — Oh, yes, I would love to actually be able to ask a question.

**The CHAIR** — Right.

**Mr LEANE** — Are we just here so you can ask — like I counted then — about 15 questions? That is fantastic. How generous of you to offer to another member of the committee to be able to ask a question.

**The CHAIR** — We have another 25 minutes allocated for this witness. Feel free to ask a question.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — It is a big preamble.

**Mr LEANE** — Well, there are a lot of questions. If we are just supposed to come in here so the Chair can ask all the questions and take up all the time, then I think we will reassess what is the point of this committee whatsoever. Maybe you can just send some questions on notice to the department and then save us all a couple of days.

**The CHAIR** — Are you quite finished, Mr Leane?

**Mr LEANE** — I will let you know when I am finished.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — On a point of order, Chair, is there a question in the offering here?

**The CHAIR** — Well, we will see if Mr Leane is going to offer one.

**Mr LEANE** — So anyway, to go back to some of the misinformed comments from some of my colleagues, as far as the east–west link goes, Infrastructure Australia have put a question mark on whether that particular project would be needed in 30 years as far as this report goes. I want to know if that is your understanding, Mr Merritt, or not.

**Mr MERRITT** — I can only quote from the report. I think that they have indicated it might be or something.

**Mr LEANE** — So just to reinforce the two, your response to the question about whether our congestion would be eased from the western distributor was — could you repeat that — two extra lanes?

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — It has already been asked. You told me that.

**Mr LEANE** — I tell you what: you guys just put all your questions on notice, right?

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Go and ask your question.

**Mr LEANE** — Because I tell you what, there is so much work I could do, so if you just put your things on notice, John will send it back through his department.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Ask your question. Stop stamping your foot.

**Mr LEANE** — Anyway, over to you.

**Mr MERRITT** — So we have the two additional lanes on the West Gate section, which are obviously significantly needed. We have got quite a lot of heavy congestion there. The ability to take certainly the heavy vehicles off going over the bridge and out of the western suburbs — that should provide significant relief there. It also will be important to us because we are well advanced in planning around upgrades to the Western Ring Road obviously, and the ability to have that extra capacity on the West Gate section to receive some of that coming around from the Western Ring Road will also be of benefit to us. So we would expect it to have a material impact on congestion at the moment because we have got such significant growth. We have already got mixed outcomes for journey times there as well.

**Mr LEANE** — And I suppose just the two extra lanes themselves is just — —

**Mr MERRITT** — It is a huge uplift.

**Mr LEANE** — Just common sense indicates that would relieve congestion to quite a bit of a degree.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — You are editorialising now.

**Mr MERRITT** — I think also with the configuration of that road there is the potential, and as you build into the design, to separate the traffic which is heading down the West Gate corridor over the bridge and out from that traffic which will come on through the ring and then head off towards either the Bolte or that corridor.

One of the issues on these freeways is managing weave across them, so it is not just about more lanes, it is about managing that capacity, whether that is the Monash or others. It is important because we do lose productivity on these roads through excessive movement across them. I can go into some detail about it, but it is not just the

width; it is the capacity to try to keep those cars in their corridors as well. I can talk as much or as little as you like about that.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — You are happy to talk about modelling now! You did not talk about it with me.

**Mr MERRITT** — That is not modelling; it is just the functionality. Sorry, I did not mean to confuse the two.

**Mr LEANE** — The opposition seem to get all the questions here; I am sorry to ask a few. As far as managing existing lanes goes, the clearways on Punt Road — how has that developed?

**Mr MERRITT** — Obviously the results have been really encouraging on the Punt Road clearway, with improvements in travel time that have been really exciting for us. I think what has been particularly pleasing for us is we did go about this Punt Road clearway in a much more intensive process with those residents. It partly comes back to the general answer I was giving around curfews — that what we find now is in order to make changes to how these roads work it is much more intensive in working with those people who are directly affected by it.

Along Punt Road, for example, we did knock on every door along that section of road to establish where everybody parked and what the impact of a clearway might be and what solution we could enact for those people so as to get it through, and that is what we were able to achieve in the end on a literally case-by-case basis. Where there are people who park there who are not residents, most notably staff from the Alfred, we have been able to commission and are commissioning some land that we have along there to create some additional parking to reduce the impact on those staff who do not fit into the hospital car park. This is the sort of level of work that we need to do now, but it has been really pleasing that, having gone through that work, we were able to get a result that met the expectations of everybody, and I think we are seeing the traffic flow improve as a result. So that is what we will be trying to do in any other area that we look at.

**Mr LEANE** — So as you have mentioned this afternoon, there are a number of projects on some main arterials and there are, as has been mentioned before by witnesses before you, a number of heavy rail improvements on the go. So how do you interact to make sure that there are avenues for people to come into the CBD from the outside while all this is happening?

**Mr MERRITT** — Obviously a lot more work goes in through the department, particularly under the umbrella of what is now Transport Victoria to make sure that we are all working much more closely on that. In the first instance, on projects such as the widening of the Western Ring Road or the CityLink-Tulla project or the widening of the Monash, drivers on those roads will notice that we have framed those contracts so as to maintain the number of lanes during construction. They will experience inconvenience because we are using emergency stopping lanes and therefore we are dropping speeds down to about 80 kilometres, but nevertheless we are committing to keep the same number of lanes open during that time so as to make sure there is throughput.

We are just doing work I think this week supporting V/Line in getting buses down the Calder by using the hard shoulder there while there is interruption at St Albans, on both Main and Furlong. We are making sure that beyond that there is a timing sequencing so that we do not end up in an uncoordinated way where we cause some strife there. So a lot of work is going into mapping and sequencing these projects to minimise it, and then where we do have impacts, such as the CTW project between the Bolte and tunnel, where we did see a reduction in lanes — we are one lane less at the Montague Street ramp — we are putting a lot more work into real-time measurement of journeys and alternate routes as best we can to give those drivers information on the best time and best route to take, and we are providing that in real time and online. Similarly, with the widening of the Tulla, if you go there you will see variable message signs — they are giving real-time journey times out to the airport — just to do everything we can to minimise the disruption that these projects will cause.

**Mr LEANE** — Thank you.

**Ms HARTLAND** — I just want to add some information in regard to what happened at estimates yesterday. Senator Janet Rice has written to the Premier and cc'd me in:

I write in regards to information provided by Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development relating to the western distributor toll road proposal at Senate estimates on 17 October 2016.

The committee was told several pieces of information, including that the department has requested a copy of the independent assessments of the project but has not received them, that the department is concerned about whether the project is 'really is a long-term solution to the issues', and that the commonwealth is not considering funding the project.

I ask that your government ... release the independent assessments that have been undertaken of the western distributor so Victorians can judge for themselves whether the project adds up. These include the independent peer reviews of the transport and economic modelling and the review authored by Kerry Schott and Tony Canavan.

Clearly yesterday in estimates, documents were asked for but were not produced. Clearly there is this issue around the peer review, which has also not been released. I think there are significant pieces of information about the western distributor that are missing.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — John, today I met with officers of a local council, and they relayed to me a story in relation to a discussion they were having with VicRoads about the development of an industrial estate in their municipality to drive investment and jobs in that local area. They had a discussion with VicRoads in relation to the accessibility of a VicRoads road and an estate they want to develop. The response they got was a bit gobsmacking for them. They were told by VicRoads, 'We don't really support this, because we don't think that's a good use of that land'. Is it normal practice that VicRoads would direct councils on appropriate land use?

**Mr MERRITT** — That does surprise me. Normally our input would be confined to the practicality of moving the traffic in and out of that piece of land. If you can give me the details afterwards, I am happy to follow that up.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Thanks. Can you tell me where you are at with the plans for the duplication of Mickleham Road in Craigieburn?

**Mr MERRITT** — I am not sure off the top of my head about the progress. I am happy to take that on board.

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — The other one I had was High Street, Epping, from Epping north through to Wollert.

**Mr MERRITT** — You are after an update on where any work is?

**Mr ONDARCHIE** — Just where we are at with that, yes.

**Mr MERRITT** — Okay.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Mr Merritt, for your attendance and for the evidence you have provided to the committee today. We very much appreciate it. You will receive a transcript of evidence for proofreading, which will ultimately make its way onto the committee's website. Once again, thank you for your attendance today.

**Witness withdrew.**