

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the Impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users**

Melbourne—Tuesday 8 August 2023

#### **MEMBERS**

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

#### **WITNESS**

Troy Edwards, Executive Director, Policy and Advocacy, Municipal Association of Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into the impacts of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website.

While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website. Thank you.

I thought I might start with the Committee members giving you just a quick introduction, and then I am happy to have an introduction from you and a 5-minute opening statement before questions. Thank you.

**Jess WILSON:** Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

**John MULLAHY:** John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

**The CHAIR:** And Alison Marchant, Member for Bellarine. Over to you.

**Troy EDWARDS:** Thank you very much. Good morning, everyone. My name is Troy Edwards. I am the Executive Director, Policy and Advocacy, at the Municipal Association of Victoria, the legislated peak body for Victoria's 79 councils. Thanks for the opportunity to appear before you today on an issue of great importance to local government. I know there is often that throwaway line about roads, rates and rubbish, but councils definitely take their road component very seriously. It is important to acknowledge that.

I know you have read the submission. I might just make a few comments to the pointers that the Committee Secretariat provided. I thought that might just help the conversation on some of those key areas.

I guess the first thing to say is: councils manage around 87% of Victoria's road network. It equates to about 130,000 kilometres in length, and it accounts for about 10% of council budgets, so it is a significant expenditure for the sector. Most road users would, every time they make a trip, spend a fair bit of that time on a local government road—a road that is designed, constructed and maintained by a council—so it is important to note that.

Like most public sectors in Australia and indeed the world, councils are grappling with financial challenges at the moment, and financial sustainability is a real pressure point for local roads and the delivery of local roads. Obviously, dealing with the revenue constraints that councils have got on them is a real challenge, and they are very reliant on financial support from both the Commonwealth and the State Government.

It is important to note that those specific purpose payments for particular roads are well received by councils, although it can raise questions about whole-of-network solutions when you have councils bidding on particular projects within their municipality. If a road runs to the boundary and the council next door does not really have that on their agenda, that can cause a few challenges. It is worth flagging that.

I guess I would also make the point that financial assistance grants from the Commonwealth are almost the Holy Grail for Victorian councils. We receive around \$680 million from the Commonwealth untied: \$501 million in general purpose payments and around \$180 million in local roads payments that councils can use on their local road priorities, which is kind of critical as those financial pressures ramp up to have that capacity to invest where there are local priorities and local needs as opposed to partnering with other levels of government on specific projects. So I think it is important to just note that.

Very much like the State, councils are struggling with a private sector that is pretty much fully saturated from a capacity point of view, and some recent research we have found says that four out of five councils are struggling to get construction companies to reply to tenders and the like. So that puts a lot of pressure on road construction particularly when we think about the impact of the floods and the like as well. That is a real challenge as well. It is worth flagging.

Just some other things that the Committee brought up—Victoria has quite a robust and well-established speed zoning policy. I guess from a local government point of view that is relatively rigid. Councils have to work pretty closely with police on that, but there are probably limited opportunities for local government to lead some of the work around speed. I am not necessarily saying that is a good or a bad thing, that is just more a statement of fact that we have to work through. Two, I think we certainly support the notion that speed limits are clear and easily understood and the number of changes is kept to a minimum as well. There would be some things we would like to see around making sure the policy can be adjusted to trial things like safe speeds at that 30 k limit, so the policy assists with that. I guess trying to reduce the requirement for infrastructure change is important, particularly in the financial context, and then, you know, that significant take-up of 40 k zones in metropolitan Melbourne is probably a broader opportunity for us to go with.

In terms of input into road safety policy. I think local government enjoys strong relationships with state agencies—MAV. We certainly do as well with various departments—Department of Transport and Planning, the TAC in particular as well as VicPol—and those collaborations are really important for the work we do. It is also worth noting we have done a lot of work with Freight Victoria particularly around some of their challenges and their strategies too, and particularly in metropolitan parts of Melbourne that can be quite a safety issue as well as an amenity issue. On that input, we would like to see an integrated transport plan for Victoria more broadly. Publishing that would help councils I think understand their own requirements at a local level too.

Just in terms of walking and riding, obviously the publication of a transport plan would help with a hierarchy of transport modes, and I think the key part of that then would be what sort of funding is required from federal, state and local government to get the mode shift that we are looking for to more active transport modes. You know, it is not always appropriate, but we certainly think there are a lot of opportunities there, and I acknowledge some of the TAC funding for the recent local road safety program has been well received by the sector too. Just in terms of closing out, I would note MAV have not received any particular feedback from councils around GPS and rat runs, though I suspect most people have in the back of their minds how to navigate particular local congestion and those types of things anyway, so I would just flag that.

Just a few points to close: obviously financial sustainability is really important. Councils are under pressure, and often it is the non-glamorous asset management end of the business that can feel the strain of that financial pressure, and that leads to maintenance challenges. I think making sure that we are clear around some of the market limitations for councils at the moment, particularly, as I alluded to, the flood-affected councils on the border. They are going to have challenges repairing and recovering those roads in the current kind of market, and we have to accept that. And then I think my last point would be: making sure we get a Victorian transport plan would be really important for local government. I know that has been flagged by VAGO and others, but that would be of immense benefit for local government as well. I might leave it there, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Yes, thank you very much. We will open up to some questions. I am mindful of time; we have got about 10 minutes for questions, so we will do one question each. And in fairness also I will go to Dylan next, who was ready for a question. So, Dylan, we might start with you if that is okay.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Sure, no worries. I will speak about local road maintenance, and your submission obviously goes to significant challenges with that throughout different municipalities in Victoria. My municipality is no different—particularly when you get into areas such as Tarneit North et cetera, there is sort of a dire need for road maintenance that has not been done. In your opinion what is the main constraint for different councils being able to do that, and does outsourcing of some of those responsibilities and workforce capacity contribute to that?

**Troy EDWARDS:** Yes, it is a good question. Our own research shows that if you take depreciation as a measure of the quality of an asset, there is about a \$50 million gap statewide in the sector between the depreciation line and the asset investment. I think at the moment the financial pressure the sector is under is leading to those conversations to say, ‘We will need to deliver a lower service standard to maintain that’, and

that is probably the headline challenge at the moment. I think the service delivery question is an interesting one; we do not really have any data that shows in-house versus outsourced makes that much difference, necessarily. I think the relationship between the council and a provider, if it is outsourced, is usually the key kind of consideration there. Councils would like to spend more money on asset maintenance more broadly. I think the challenge is where that money is going to come from. The community pressures for service delivery are often kind of loud, too, and the drains, the culverts, the bridges do not necessarily make as much noise, so it can be a challenge.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Wayne, we might go to you.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** Thank you for your submission. The question I have got for you is: do you think there needs to be improvement between councils and VicRoads or Regional Roads Victoria when it comes to speed zones, because quite often one of my councils will say to me, 'We need to decrease this', and I support that? Do you think there needs to be a better avenue where councils and Regional Roads Victoria or VicRoads can actually reduce speed zones recommended by LGAs?

**Troy EDWARDS:** Yes, that is a good question. I think there are definitely opportunities for improved cooperation and dialogue. I understand the rigour and the robust nature of the system is important, but being able to increase the dialogue and perhaps share local intelligence and do some trials and make some changes, I think, would be something the sector would welcome. Like everything, often you find where the regional offices have strong relationships between councils and state agencies, you can have a lot of that; if the relationship is not as strong, perhaps that dialogue is not as clear, and there are opportunities for improvement.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you for your submission and for your evidence. I should also point out that as a former council employee once upon a time with Brimbank and Darebin, I appreciate the work and acknowledge the work of MAV.

**Troy EDWARDS:** Thank you.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Look, I just wanted to draw the Committee's attention and your attention to some of those key stats in your submission there that you cite from the TAC as of 2021, where MAV says 36% of pedestrian deaths across Victoria are aged over 70 years of age, and that almost half of the metropolitan deaths, with respect to pedestrians, are within 60-kilometre zones. So I just welcome your comments and if you could elaborate a bit further around those issues across respective local government areas across the State. In doing so, I guess I would point out and welcome your comments too, and MAV's comments, on a submission that Merri-bek Council has made, which is quite detailed, I am not sure if you had a chance to see it. But in our community, walking accounts for around 20 to 21% of all trips and, sadly, it does have high rates of deaths and trauma and accidents, again amongst that elderly cohort. What is MAV's view around how we can address and mitigate those issues amongst that particularly vulnerable cohort?

**Troy EDWARDS:** Yes, there is no doubt that mixed modes and high speeds are a fatal combination. You know, you have heard from police and others today that have got far more experience than we do. But I think local government would have the view that reducing speed limits to create better amenity and increase safety has a lot of benefit, and we should be willing to do more of that work. I think great separation of bikes and walking from roads is also part of the mix too, and I know Ben Rossiter from Vic Walks will have some particular things to say about that. But yes, we would definitely support more of those opportunities I think, particularly in mixed-use zones.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you.

**Jess WILSON:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr Edwards for your statement this morning. When it comes to the point you made around construction and tenders going out and not being able to find construction firms to take them on, do you have examples of that where that is particularly a problem across the state, or is it a thing you hear consistently from a variety of councils, in that when they are tendering for work it has been blown out in terms of time because of the fact there is just a lack of construction to fill those new roads?

**Troy EDWARDS:** We would say from the evidence we heard, and we did a bit of research last year, and perhaps I can provide that paper to the Committee Secretariat.

**Jess WILSON:** That would be helpful.

**Troy EDWARDS:** following this meeting. It is definitely a whole-of-state issue, although it is probably particularly exacerbated in regional Victoria, and the recovery from the floods has, I think, revealed that the ability of the private sector to respond to that at the moment is a challenge. There has been a lot of discussions about: are there easy solutions? I do not think there are, but there might be some different approaches to procurement and collaborative procurement that could be explored. Will it improve? Yes, maybe it will; it is just hard to say, but it is pretty hard.

**Jess WILSON:** It also takes time. Yes.

**Troy EDWARDS:** Yes.

**Jess WILSON:** If you could provide that, that would be very helpful.

**Troy EDWARDS:** Yes, we can do that. Sure.

**John MULLAHY:** Thanks for your evidence. You mentioned in your submission the \$210 million safe local roads and streets program. How do you see this benefiting local councils and improving road safety for vulnerable road users?

**Troy EDWARDS:** MAV have been calling for some significant investment in local roads over recent years, to the tune of \$230 million, so this TAC program, we think, will do a number of key things around really providing infrastructure grants and providing grants for road safety strategy work—which often councils are keen on but can lack the funds to do, so this will give them a concrete outcome—and obviously there are some variable speed sign elements of that too. We understand that 10 pilot councils have been written to and those meetings might be coming up soon. But we think if we can get some better strategic thinking about road safety and road safety investment at the local level and get that joined up, that would go a long way, and these grants will be an important way to allow that work to happen.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Can I ask about rat-running? I am not familiar with this term, coming from a regional seat.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** I am glad you brought that up because I do not know what it is either.

**The CHAIR:** Can you just tease that out a little bit. I am unfamiliar with that and what that means and what it means obviously in terms of safety.

**Troy EDWARDS:** Well, I think some Committee members will have their own experience. I suppose if I try to be objective, it is using backstreets when significant main roads are blocked or congested or there has been an accident and then people are ducking down side streets and putting a lot more traffic on roads that are not really designed to take it, and as we have discussed, it is perhaps at speed limits that are dangerous too. That is generally what happens. I think the view is that GPS might facilitate that when you get directions to avoid accidents.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Can I ask a follow-up question on that, because I was going to ask the same thing.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Dylan WIGHT:** I have got a significant rat run, Wattle Avenue in Werribee, that people from my electorate use to get off the Princes Freeway into Tarneit. There are obviously a few different things that the Government and council have partnered in doing—you know, reduced speed limits et cetera. In your view, what more can we do to stop that? Is there a way that the Government and councils can work together? Are there better ways that we can work with companies offering navigation systems to stop that? Because I know, particularly for the people that live on that street, it is a significant issue.

**Troy EDWARDS:** Well, I think all of those things probably.

**Dylan WIGHT:** I have answered your question for you.

**Troy EDWARDS:** Yes. Thank you. I think, particularly, say, where you have got developing suburbs in growth corridors where the infrastructure is perhaps not as advanced as it should be and will be over time, you can have those situations where roads that are not really designed to take high volumes at speed are feeding into freeways and the like. I think there are probably opportunities for close cooperation. I do not know, but I would be very surprised if council and police and VicRoads are not already talking about some of those situations.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** A lot of your submission—and I guess a lot of the discussion thus far—focuses on infrastructure and road design and the like, which is definitely fair enough. One of the things I want to ask about is around what role councils may have, or the greater role that councils may have, around road safety education awareness in local communities and also in supporting the delivery of any local programs—you know, through local community groups, neighbourhood houses and schools. We heard earlier from the TAC, in response to the Member for Narracan, around those types of programs for young people being rolled out in schools, but there are a lot of other government and non-government organisations that deliver similar programs, like road safety Australia, for example, who work with local schools and local government in particular and who made a submission also to this Inquiry. I am just keen to hear your thoughts around the opportunity for councils to better engage through those partnerships to get really into the grassroots to help support young people with road safety early on.

**Troy EDWARDS:** Look, I think probably in the last 10 to 15 years councils have moved away to some extent from some of these activities. They do programs like L2P and those types of things. Our anecdotal feedback would be that in rural and regional Victoria there is often a much stronger relationship between the councils and various bodies that are involved in that work. As the peak body we do a lot of things with Vic Walks and VicHealth and others to try and promote as much of that as we can, but often councils are trying to push on multiple fronts to get that work done.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** No worries.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are at time, but thank you very much for the presentation today and for coming and answering our questions. We very much appreciate it. Thank you so much.

**Troy EDWARDS:** Thank you very much. I look forward to reading the report.

**Witness withdrew.**