

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users

Melbourne—Thursday 24 August 2023

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

John Mullahy

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Dylan Wight

Anthony Cianflone

Jess Wilson

Wayne Farnham

WITNESSES

Kerryn Ellis, Chief Executive Officer, and

Tony Peterson, Director, Sustainable Infrastructure, South Gippsland Shire Council;

Paul Rooney, Acting Manager, Works, and Civil Works Coordinator, East Gippsland Shire Council;

Rob Stewart-Murray, Engineering Service Officer, Moyne Shire Council; and

Sanam Chhusyabaga, Traffic and Transport Engineer, Mildura Rural City Council.

The CHAIR: I would like to start today by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the various lands on which we are all gathered today. I acknowledge that in this virtual environment we are gathered on many different lands. I pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

I would also like to advise that the sessions today are being broadcast live on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of hearings is only permitted in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's standing order 234.

Welcome to this round table for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into the impact 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 of 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. I just remind Members to mute while they are not speaking, just to minimise any interference.

Thank you very much to all that are attending this hearing this morning. In a timely manner I will just introduce the Committee members. I am Alison Marchant, Member for Bellarine. We have the Deputy Chair, who will be joining us in a moment, Kim O'Keeffe, Member for Shepparton. We have Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan; Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale; Jess Wilson, Member for Kew; John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley; and Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit.

What we might do, because we have got a large group of rural witnesses today, is instead of talking to your submission, go straight into questions, if that is okay. If you feel that you could answer one of the questions from the Committee members, just raise your hand on the Zoom function, and we will go to you. We might have about two or three people answer each question, for time, and then if there is anything further you feel has not been covered today or you would like to explain a little bit further, we are more than happy for you to write to the Committee after this hearing.

Thank you again, everyone, for your time. It was a really interesting submission. It is really great today to hear from regional witnesses as well. We have had a bit of a metro focus in the last couple of hearings, so I am really looking forward to hearing your perspective today. Jess, I might head to you first for the first question, please. Then, if you feel like you can answer it, please put up your hand in that Zoom function.

Jess WILSON: Thank you so much, Chair, and thank you, everyone, for your submissions and for taking the time to be with us today. I think it is great that we have got such a diverse group of regional councils this morning. We have heard a lot from inner-city and suburban councils, so we will be grateful for your perspective today. I know my colleagues from regional Victoria are very excited to have you here. In that vein, I might do a bit of a broad opening question around some of the key issues you see from a regional perspective. We have heard a lot about inner-city public transport, cyclists and pedestrian use in the inner city, but getting your perspective as a regional council would be really, really helpful. I will just leave it really wide and open.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Tony and Kerry.

Tony PETERSON: Good morning. I suppose from our point of view—from a regional point of view—around road safety, we are seeing the number and the size of heavy vehicles increase significantly in regional areas, and the standard of the road construction has not kept up with that to accommodate that size and volume of vehicle. We are seeing a lot of poor road conditions that contribute to safety issues on our roads, as well as stormwater management. The main thing is to get water off our roads as quickly as possible. A lot of the shoulders on our arterial roads are not being maintained that well, so water is trapped on the pavement, which means that the pavement decreases in strength, causing potholes, rutting and that sort of thing. So we get a lot of pooling and ponding of water, which when you are travelling at 100 kilometres an hour is quite dangerous. Our main thing is just increasing the standards of road construction to accommodate the increased volume and size of traffic as well as the weather conditions.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much. Paul, would you like to add to that?

Paul ROONEY: Yes, thank you. Through the Chair, I am probably coming from a little bit of a different perspective there. Reading most of the submissions that were put forward, there seems to be a common theme, and the common theme is mobile phone use. Obviously that is a challenge for us as well in terms of that contributing to a lot of our incidents. Just as an observation, looking at and discussing this a little bit over the last few months in different forums, New South Wales recently introduced overhead detection cameras that detect seatbelts and mobile phone use. They made the public aware of those, and they were operational for months before they became actually live. When they became live, in the first two months they issued more than \$7.1 million in fines to approximately 21,000 motorists. So I think that is a major challenge for all communities and rural ones especially.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much for that, Paul. Anthony, I might head to you next, please. Thank you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks, Chair. And thank you to all of you from the regions for appearing or for submitting. As Jess said, we have heard a lot from inner-city LGAs. I represent an inner-city LGA suburban area, so I am really keen to hear more from the regions well. But in that context, I wanted to actually ask about tourists on regional roads. Obviously during school holidays and peak periods, a lot of people getting out, especially after COVID, for a trip or a holiday are really coming from the inner city and the suburban areas to the regions. So in that context, I guess my question is around: what additional challenges do these high volumes of tourists pose for safety in your communities, and also, have you noticed any differences in tourist behaviour following COVID? What measures do you think the Government can do to make roads safer during those peak periods when tourists are frequenting your beautiful areas across the state?

The CHAIR: Tony. Thank you.

Kerryn ELLIS: No, it is Kerryn this time.

The CHAIR: Oh, Kerryn. Thank you.

Kerryn ELLIS: Thank you so much for the question. You have picked up on a really important theme, I think, for regional areas, particularly in Gippsland, and South Gippsland in our case, where we have a couple of really major tourist attractions—Wilson's Prom being the obvious one—and a number of other areas that are very highly valued by both locals and visitors alike. The roads that tourists use to access those visitor attractions are the same roads that we have dairy tankers and freight trucks on very, very often. To just reinforce Tony's point earlier about road condition, the other element with tourists is they are often not as used to driving in a rural environment. If a road is 100 kilometres an hour, they will be expecting the south-eastern arterial, they will not be expecting a road that is also carrying a lot of heavy freight and where the condition is not particularly good. Couple that with the distraction and the use of mobile phones and, unfortunately, drug and alcohol use and some of those things that sadly are features of local road users but certainly are amongst tourists as well, particularly in peak periods. It can lead to quite dangerous driving conditions. From our perspective, we think it would be terrific to partner with the Government to address some of those issues either through improved infrastructure and/or through better education.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Kerryn. Wonderful. Paul.

Paul ROONEY: Thank you, and through the Chair—just to reinforce that again, obviously some of the arterial road conditions over the last two years, based on some major weather events we have had in East Gippsland, have been challenging for the tourists, and obviously around that COVID time, when lockdowns were on and people were trying to get out to the rural areas to sort of escape that lockdown at that time. I think, again, yes, the challenge, as South Gippsland just did express, was that they struggled to understand the road conditions—especially in alpine areas—that we have in terms of what is expected when you are driving to those conditions on those roads. But also I think one of the other things that is a concern for us is—as you come into East Gippsland on the Princes Highway there are probably two overhead VMS boards that notify of road conditions, advise, that kind of thing. I think some more of those on the rural arterials, specially heading up through those alpine areas, that actually give live reports of actual road conditions would help in terms of people better understanding what they should be expecting as they drive up and down these roads.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Paul. Sanam?

Sanam CHHUSYABAGA: I think I agree with our previous speakers as well. In Mildura we have a higher volume of rural roads which are unsealed, and yes, when they come to our region they might be expecting, since it is 100 kilometres per hour, that it will be an unsealed road, which is not. So I think yes, if we could partner with government and if we could upgrade those infrastructures which lead to our main tourist attraction areas, that would be great.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much for that. Rob.

Rob STEWART-MURRAY: Thanks. I was just going to add that there is a tendency to perhaps follow GPS—well, basically it has already been mentioned—down roads that we do not necessarily want them to go down, the single-lane sealed or unsealed. There is also that issue that they are still paying attention to that more than the actual road condition itself, so they are ignoring things like reduced speed, sharp curves, that sort of thing. I do not know whether we actually can, I do not know, map those things, so that the GPS app that they are using warns them of that as well. I am not sure. I do not tend to use that sort of equipment, but yes, that might be something as well.

The CHAIR: Yes, and technology has been raised throughout the hearing—about how we can use that better to support better roads and safe driving. So yes, great point, Rob. Thank you for that. Kim, I might head to you for the next question, if that is okay.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Good morning, everyone. Sorry, I had a bit of a technical issue. I missed a little bit of the start, but I have read it. Thank you so much for your submissions; they are really helpful. Look, it is really important—obviously we are starting to chat a bit about the roads, which I was interested in. But the black spot program: how could the State and Federal Governments' Black Spot criteria be improved to identify dangerous areas for vulnerable road users before accidents occur?

The CHAIR: Paul, thank you.

Paul ROONEY: Yes, it is something I was going to jump in very quickly on, this one. Sorry, and through the Chair—from a rural perspective, and we have discussed this several times, the black spot program's main criteria is basically fatalities, so again, our issue bases around having a low population area where we are identifying dangerous roads. We are putting submissions through and basically we are sort of disadvantaged, and our rejections are coming through based on low fatality rates. Again, we will identify a dangerous intersection or a dangerous road and then basically be rejected because there are no deaths. So, you know, the funding should identify high-risk areas which come at a social and financial cost if there are deaths; it should focus on road improvement rather than fatalities being a main criteria for that funding.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Paul. Tony and Kerryn.

Tony PETERSON: I would like to just reinforce what Paul was saying then. But as well, in a regional area doing the traffic or safety studies is quite resource hungry and expensive, and often we do not have the resources to do those studies. So it would be great too if funds could be allocated under the black spot funding program to do those studies. My understanding through the Federal Government is that it is undersubscribed at the moment, so there could be capacity within that fund to do those sorts of studies rather than wait, as Paul said, till there is a fatality to react.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Sanam.

Sanam CHHUSYABAGA: Yes. So there is a criteria for crash history time period for this black spot application as well, but during that time period we did not have any fatality in our LGA. There was a fatality in 2022, but we cannot put that forward into this application. So I think maybe that would be great if we do not have that kind of criteria, like, from 2017 to 2021, because now we are in 2023, and there was a fatality in 2022, but we cannot use that data and apply for funding.

The CHAIR: Yes, okay. That is a good point.

Sanam CHHUSYABAGA: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. Another wonderful regional Committee member we have is Wayne. Wayne, I am happy for you to ask your next question.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, everyone, for your submissions, and it is so nice to speak to regional people. I am from Warragul, so Gippsland area. One thing that has been a common thread coming through the Committee is separation of vulnerable users from road users, and especially it has been very prevalent in metro areas. But I suppose my question around this is: what are the challenges, you believe, in regional Victoria to separate vulnerable road users, and what measures do you think the Government can do to invest for regional cyclists and pedestrians?

The CHAIR: Okay, Tony and Kerryn.

Tony PETERSON: Hello. A couple of things: I suppose around cycling, and it goes back to my earlier point around road condition, it is sealing of shoulders in terms of separating cyclists and motorists. At the moment not a lot of arterial roads have sealed shoulders, so you have actually got the cyclists cycling on the roadway with heavy vehicles at the same time. So that would be an advantage as well as improving the condition of the road by getting the water off the road quicker.

Crossing points on arterial roads are pretty important as well. We have got a high proportion of elderly residents in South Gippsland, so often for them to cross roads it is quite difficult and a bit more time consuming. So having splitter islands and pedestrian refuges in the centre of some of our intersections and roads would be great.

The CHAIR: Okay, Paul.

Paul ROONEY: Yes, thank you—and through the Chair. Again, what we would like to reinforce is that, yes, we do have the same issues in terms of separation of motorists and cyclists, and we just simply in rural areas do not have the same sort of cycling infrastructure. For someone who has spent 15 years at the City of Melbourne and then coming into a rural area in the last five years, understanding the infrastructure that is put in the city in terms of shared cycling routes and the connection of those cycling routes to schools, we do not tend to have a lot of that in rural areas. I think we are lacking a little bit in that.

And probably one of the other issues I would like to raise, which I have had some concerns with over my period here in East Gippsland, is school drop-off and pick-up zones. So a lot of these school drop-off and pick-up zones are on arterials or not far from arterial roads, and those roads are always at a higher speed. The school zone might be a 60 rather than a 40. And we have done some work with local schools in terms of trying to fix or create temporary drop-off, pick-up zones and then say, 'Look, you need to advocate for a little bit of funding to try and make these areas permanent, make them safer.' But there just does not seem to be that opportunity for them, you know. The board of education, if you go to them, will just say, 'No, we don't have money to do that kind of thing,' so it then reverts back to them coming back to council saying, 'Well, you're the only option for us to try and get funding for this.' So I think some sort of program that allows some of these rural schools to upgrade their pick-up, drop-off zones would be ideal.

The CHAIR: Wayne, do you want to add to that?

Wayne FARNHAM: Yes, just a follow-up question, Chair. Thank you. One of the problems I see, and I would like your opinion on it, is because regional areas are so much bigger—my electorate is 450,000 square kilometres, and I know East Gippsland is a lot bigger—if we had to have separate cycling areas could council even afford to do that, being that you have to cover so much area in regional Victoria?

The CHAIR: Thanks, Paul.

Paul ROONEY: Thanks, Wayne, and through the Chair, we have started those programs. We engage with local community groups, cyclists and pedestrian groups once every three months, and I think at the last meeting we had two weeks ago the action and discussion to follow up from that is actually me engaging with the local community groups to start to understand—we do not need City of Melbourne, we do not need Copenhagen lanes, we do not need a great deal of cycling infrastructure, but we do need some major routes, and we are starting to get some shared paths put on arterial roads. If we can get more of those links, then we would be happy as a council to try and find that funding to try and link up to those major routes. Again, creating these cycling paths and shared paths is great, but some of the issues you again have are there is no dedicated crossing point, so you are creating paths that children have got to cross two lanes of the Princes Highway to get to and

cycle down to school, so I think some more consideration just needs to be given to giving us the major part of the framework and we can work on it as a council from there to try and connect to those major routes.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Paul. Sanam, do you want to talk to this question as well?

Sanam CHHUSYABAGA: Yes, I totally agree with Paul and what he has mentioned before. In our council we have started creating a walking and cycling plan and it has started from one of the townships in our region, which is Merbein. The major highway passes through that township as well and we have the same issue. We do not have a safe pedestrian crossing, as well as crossings for school, and even if we have created that strategy, the final outcome is based on funding, so basically I would strongly focus on maybe if we could get funding for cycling infrastructure as well. That would be great.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Tony and Kerry?

Kerry ELLIS: Just a couple of extra comments to specifically address Wayne's question—thank you for the question, Wayne. In terms of the infrastructure that we provide, we have invested really heavily in the Great Southern Rail Trail in our shire, which does provide a lot of linkages between some of our major towns and is terrific in terms of tourists and visitors as well as locals. But again, the challenge is that that is the part that we can provide, but then there is the issue with linkages particularly across really busy major arterial roads. And just to reinforce the point Tony made before, when it comes to road-based cycling or cycling that is near roads, it is usually state roads and they just need the bigger shoulder so that people can ride safely, which would not be something that council would be in a position to fund, nor is it our infrastructure. So it would require the Department of Transport and Planning to take the lead on those larger roads and just separating cyclists, because we do have a number of routes, for example, from the penguins to the prom, where people do love to cycle and they are using those major arterial roads, but they are not particularly safe and they are cycling in spots that are really designed for cars and trucks, which is quite dangerous.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks for that. John, I will head to you next.

John MULLAHY: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, all, for appearing, and obviously we have got representatives from almost as far and wide in Victoria as we can see. My question relates to the TAC Local Government Grant Program, and I just wanted to get some feedback from the different councils with regard to how effective the grant program has been for building and upgrading infrastructure to protect vulnerable road users. Secondly, are there any areas where the program could be improved?

The CHAIR: Thanks for that, John. John, we just had a little bit of a technical issue, so I am just going to explain that that was about the TAC Local Government Grants Program—the question was about that program. Is there a council that would like to talk to that? Thanks, Paul.

Paul ROONEY: Yes, thank you. Through the Chair, I think some of the issues we have had with the TAC grant program and some of the recent applications we put forward were that, again, we were getting knocked back because the criteria was based around fatalities. Again, it reverts to that same issue when we come to some of these local communities. We are trying to put applications forward, but we are disadvantaged based on low population in some of these rural communities.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thanks, Paul. Tony and Kerry.

Tony PETERSON: Thank you. We have actually been successful recently with two applications. They have been around traffic and safety studies around school zones. From our point of view, it has been working quite well. Yes, we are reasonably happy with that grant funding program.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. I am just mindful of time, so Dylan, I am going to let you ask the last question.

Dylan WIGHT: Yes, sure. Thank you. I will be quick, given the time. Hi, everyone, and thank you so much for your submissions. To echo Wayne's comments, and Alison's, it is great to hear from some regional councils. We have heard a lot from the inner city and some inner-suburban councils over the last few weeks, and obviously, as you know, the issues are quite different. My question is around road safety for young people

and whether you have noticed much of a difference with young people using the roads after COVID-19. During COVID there were obviously probably some barriers to road safety education, whether that be programs that were happening in schools that were unable to happen or maybe kids on their Ls were not able to drive as much as what they would have previously. I am just wondering if you have noticed a real difference with that.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Tony and Kerryn.

Kerryn ELLIS: Thank you for the question. I would say yes, we have, and it is both young people that are drivers who are driving perhaps for the first time as P-platers but also young people that are mixing with traffic as pedestrians or cyclists in other environments. It is definitely the case that what we are observing is that young people are more distracted drivers. They definitely are using mobile phones and other devices more. And also, for young drivers that are fairly inexperienced, there were real challenges during COVID with young people getting opportunities to really practice enough, so it is certainly the case that we have got young people that are perhaps driving independently but perhaps not as well experienced or as experienced in different conditions as what they might have been before. The other element that I think is almost a bit of a sleeper is the mental health aspect. We have quite a few young drivers in our shire that are driving quite recklessly, and there are underlying mental health issues, which potentially were exacerbated through the COVID experience as well, which causes risk for them but also risk for other road users.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Kerryn. Sanam.

Sanam CHHUSYABAGA: Thank you. I agree with Kerryn. In our council as well we have young drivers, and obviously, as Kerryn mentions, they are distracted. But in our case we have partnered with Community RoadSafe Mildura. That group really focus on educating young drivers. They organise learner to P-plate something—I cannot remember. They are educating our young drivers, which is really helpful at the moment.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thanks for that. I am really sorry, we have to wrap up this session now. I think we could ask a lot more questions of you, because you do provide a different perspective to this Inquiry. Thank you so much for your time, your submissions and answering our questions today. Again, if there is anything we have not covered, please come back to the Committee. We would love to hear any more if something today has sparked something you would like us to know. Thank you again, all, for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.