

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Coburg—Wednesday 9 August 2023

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESSES

Dr Andrea Bunting, Convenor, and

Pauline Galvin, Deputy Convenor, Walk on Merri-bek.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing 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. 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 will just do some quick introductions and then we will go to maybe some opening statements and then questions. I am Alison Marchant, Member for Bellarine.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

Dylan WIGHT: Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit.

Wayne FARNHAM: Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan.

Jess WILSON: Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

The CHAIR: And maybe if you would like to introduce yourselves, then I am happy to hear a 5-minute statement and then we can go to questions.

Dr Andrea BUNTING: Thank you. We are here to represent Walk on Merri-bek, a group of residents that advocates for the safety and amenity of walking, particularly in our municipality. My name is Andrea Bunting.

Pauline GALVIN: I am Pauline Galvin.

Dr Andrea BUNTING: Per capita Merri-bek is one of the most hazardous municipalities for pedestrians, and three quarters of our road fatalities have been vulnerable road users, mainly pedestrians. That may explain why so many people are concerned. I forgot to say, thank you for coming to Merri-bek too. We are very grateful that we could have this hearing. Of course a lot—over half—of Merri-bek's pedestrian deaths are over 70, and nearly all of these deaths are occurring on arterial roads controlled by the State Government. The council's submission showed the location of the 29 pedestrians killed and seriously injured since 2020. All but two of those 29 were on state government roads, or on Lygon Street, Brunswick, which is a council road in an activity centre. So Lygon Street is a special case, very busy at night—it possibly should be an arterial road. We believe road safety should be evidence based. The evidence is that arterial roads are the main issue, and at night-time on Lygon Street, where it is very busy at night at intersections, where there are a lot of crashes.

We are currently working with the council on looking at street lighting, and we think this really could be beefed up the way that it is specified by VicRoads. As to evidence base, there is clear evidence that at 30 k most pedestrians would survive a collision. Most of our arterial roads are double that speed. We have shopping strips at 60 k. That was mentioned by Merri-bek. Glenroy shops has 60 k during much of the weekend—a high crash zone. The length does not even meet the required standard in VicRoads. I am not sure why. It is meant to meet the requirement, which is 400 metres of shopping, but that needs urgent attention.

The warrants to justify new pedestrian crossings are not appropriate. That was spoken to by the Merri-bek council. We have a place in Moreland Road where people would like to get across to go to the supermarket, and there is a longstanding campaign, but to be safe you add another 20 minutes to your journey. I could give a dozen locations in Merri-bek where we need pedestrian crossings on arterial roads so people can be safe and not have to take another 20 minutes out of their day.

Governments talk about people being able to move around safely and efficiently, but that is not for pedestrians. If we want to be safe, we cannot be efficient. Our journey takes much longer. Our time is not valued. We also have concerns about this notion of balance that VicRoads does refer to. Last year in an article on pedestrian road trauma they were quoted as saying that:

When setting speed limits we need to carefully balance keeping everyone safe on our roads and keeping people moving around their communities ...

Well, the road system does not help keep people moving on foot efficiently. As I said, our time does not seem to count. But I think this notion of balance—we should not be talking about balancing safety with moving around. Surely safety is an absolute. We support the Government's vision for zero road deaths and serious injuries by 2050, so that is not balancing.

Access to data has been spoken about a lot. Advocacy groups such as ours would like access to good data as well. At the moment it is very out of date. There are a lot of gaps in your data. Pedestrian casualties in car parks do not seem to be counted in the road toll. We have to find out from the media about these things. Two people have been killed in car parks this year by being hit by a car, and car park crashes may be low speed, but they can involve people being crushed. Warragul recently had the incident of a very serious injury where someone was crushed in a car park. They have survived, I understand. We would like to see more data on crashes into buildings and on footpaths where people congregate. The US has data on storefront crashes. They say about 4,000 people are seriously injured from being hit by a vehicle going into a store. Why don't we have data on that? We know there have been some serious injuries locally. We depend on media reporting. Should perpendicular car parking be modified? We do not know. We do not have the data. We know that some of these crashes that we do not have data on are caused by pedal confusion—people confuse the accelerator and the brake and so when trying to manoeuvre around, suddenly they go into people or buildings. I think this is more prevalent in older drivers, but we do not have the data, so that could be included.

Finally, the penalties for drivers at fault when they kill and seriously injure pedestrians need to reflect the seriousness of the crime. There needs to be a significant deterrent. We can give an example of one of our members who was horrifically injured in a crash. She has survived, she is okay, but she has fears of another one. Of course when she was hospitalised, she could not give her side of the story because she was fighting to stay alive. The driver, meanwhile, could present something that conflicted with her views—she thought she had right of way, they said something else. The pedestrian is not able to give that evidence because they have more important things on their mind. So there is a bias in the system. How to resolve that—I think that just needs some more attention.

The CHAIR: Pauline, do you have something to say?

Pauline GALVIN: I would just like to add that actually one of the crucial things for overall safety is a safe climate, and the whole of Australia needs to reduce its carbon footprint for safe transport. The Climate Council make clear that we need to halve our trips by car in order to achieve that, and that means mode shift. Some people will be working from home, so doing fewer trips, but most of the trips we will need to be doing in ways other than internal combustion engines. Also just converting to EVs is not going to achieve the changes that we need. It is really important as part of this overall safety to really look at how we are doing a mode shift in the way we get around. We need a transport system that is not costing us the earth.

There is also an issue with equity of access to public transport in the City of Melbourne. I would be suggesting that equity of access should be monitored by the public transport authorities and that those issues of equity be reported to local councils and the State Government in order for those issues to be addressed. Areas to the north of us and to the west—the outer suburbs, I am talking about—have real deficits in public transport, and that is a real issue for transport within our municipality.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. That gives us a really good start to then ask you some further questions and dig a little bit deeper. I might go to John. Thank you.

John MULLAHY: Thank you both for your statements. That was very informative. Dr Bunting, you raised biases in your statement there, and I just want to explore that theme a little. In what way do you think drivers are prioritised over pedestrians in regard to road design and infrastructure, and how could this be turned around?

Dr Andrea BUNTING: When we cross the road, we have to depend on drivers doing the right thing. We have a conflict at most intersections where we are depending on right-turning drivers, for example, to look out for us when they are looking out for oncoming traffic, and that is how our friend was terribly injured. This has certainly come up for bicycles, where there was that death recently. We also have this conflict. The new pedestrian crossing at Sussex and –

Anthony CIANFLONE: Gaffney.

Dr Andrea BUNTING: Gaffney, right near Anthony Cianflone's office, does not have that conflict. I walked around it and was delighted that I could walk across it and not have to look out for the right-turning vehicles. Why can't that be rolled out everywhere?

Pauline GALVIN: One of the crucial issues with the severity of injury is vehicle size and the trend of Australian private vehicles becoming larger and heavier. Electric vehicles will also be heavier due to the batteries. That is really an issue that we need to flag. It is an important factor in the conditions that are on the roads that really leaves vulnerable road users like pedestrians at a severe disadvantage. We would really like things put in place to reduce the size of the vehicles that are on the roads.

Dr Andrea BUNTING: I will just also mention lighting. I mean, I do not understand lighting well. We are working with the council on this now, but I think I understand that it is there to benefit the drivers, and we need to consider far more where pedestrians are, to ensure that they are visible and also can safely use the streets. Some of our streets I walk around are very dark. So I think a lot of that is considered by drivers as visibility for themselves. So yes.

John MULLAHY: Thank you both.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Jess.

Jess WILSON: Thanks very much, Chair. And thank you for your very informative statement to kick off today. Just picking up on your point, Ms Galvin, around the need to reduce emissions, as part of that we will see an increase in the uptake of electric vehicles over the coming years, as an important part of that emissions reduction strategy. We heard evidence yesterday around the fact that electric vehicles can be very, very quiet, and that pedestrians sometimes do not hear the approach of electric vehicles, particularly when they are travelling at lower speeds. And I think yesterday we heard evidence that the cusp of that is about 30 kilometres an hour—when they are largely silent on the roads. Do you have any thoughts around how to balance the increasing uptake of electric vehicles, which will help tackle our climate issues, with greater use by pedestrians and that noise level?

Dr Andrea BUNTING: Well, I just want to say electric vehicles only reduce one problem. The problems with motor vehicles are many—so yes—and they introduce new ones, as you say. So yes, we are seeing an uptake in those, but we do want to see far more of the active transport and public transport.

Pauline GALVIN: The only thing that occurs to me is that maybe they need to actually have a sound being produced.

Jess WILSON: That is something they are actually looking into.

Pauline GALVIN: Yes. It reminds me of when they used to have to have people walking in front of the cars to alert people that there was a car coming.

Dr Andrea BUNTING: Again it puts the onus on the pedestrian to look out, which is part of the problem.

Jess WILSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks, Chair. Thank you so much for appearing, and thank you for your submission and thank you for the work of Walk on Merri-bek. You are a very strong advocacy group, which I acknowledge and commend, so thank you. And thank you for mentioning the Sussex–Gaffney streets intersection there as a good example and case study that we potentially could look at further as a Committee.

My question actually is around putting the infrastructure aside for a second but going back to some other themes that have come up through the Inquiry. In your view, how can we better work to educate and raise awareness through drivers? Whether it is the driver-licensing process or the renewals process, how can we amend or look at those processes to basically look at embedding ways to have vulnerable road users front and

centre and front of mind as part of drivers going through the licensing process, whether it is the learners or probationary or later on as part of the renewal process? What is your view on those opportunities?

Dr Andrea BUNTING: Yes, I think there are some road rules that are very poorly understood, and I do not see many education campaigns around those. We have a shared zone near us, and virtually no vehicles give way, even though the pedestrians have priority and cyclists second. It just does not happen. I do not think people actually understand that. I have not seen any education campaigns around that. I do not think people understand rules around leaving public car parks. When leaving a car park, you are leaving private property. I think that is not well understood. People do not understand, at T-intersections, when a pedestrian versus a car has right of way—and that is a problematic thing too because it depends which leg you are on.

Let us face it: I did my licence many, many decades ago. I do not remember what—and things change of course. So I think there need to be far more education campaigns. As to licence renewals and, as has been mentioned, an online test, I agree with that, except that as a long-term—I was a lecturer; I know about online tests and people who may not be doing it for themselves. So there is a concern with that.

I want to say something about older drivers' licensing. I heard the Council on the Ageing yesterday, who were vehemently against the retesting of older drivers. I would suggest, based on some anecdotal evidence, that failing to deal with concerns about older drivers is creating tension within families and within communities. If there was a mandatory medical assessment each year, I think it would give older drivers the confidence to say, 'Yes, I'm fine,' or to identify the few that are not. We have to face it—I am getting older—there are medical issues and other things that are correlated with age. Most older drivers are perfectly fine and probably better than some younger drivers; however, it is not always the case. So it would be a medical assessment and perhaps retesting after a certain age. But older drivers need options. Now, I know in Warragul—sorry, my parents are in Warragul, so –

Wayne FARNHAM: I am glad you are mentioning Warragul.

Dr Andrea BUNTING: Warragul is a beautiful regional town.

Wayne FARNHAM: I actually feel like part of your family now.

Dr Andrea BUNTING: You are, and we can talk some more about that in Warragul, where the buses seem to stop around 4 o'clock. The options for people who want to give up driving—it is difficult, and that is partly why there is a resistance. You need to have carrots for people to give up their licences. We have suggested half-price taxis. An extension of public transport is vital, but that is not always possible. I know it is very hard to get even an extension of the East Warragul bus line to go to the new shopping centre. I think you would need to look at ways to incentivise people so that it is not so wrenching to give up your licence. Make the whole process easier—governments can do that. At the moment there is this tension among families and a fear of dobbing: 'We're not going to dob in my neighbour who's a bit ordinary when driving, because we don't do that.' Really you have got to take away that reticence, and governments can do that.

Pauline GALVIN: I would just like to mention two things that occurred to me. Currently the advertising for road vehicles is very aggressive. The imagery is of all these massive vehicles driving over anything in their way, and I think that they are culpable for the consequences of people doing exactly what is demonstrated that they can do. I think that is a really critical issue that should be brought up.

I wonder if the licensing, testing and the renewal process—the education part of that—is actually really to draw people's attention to the consequences of a momentary lapse for the vulnerable person. We note and we are very pleased to see the campaign to have people not be on their phones when they are driving, because with a momentary lapse where you go through a tram stop and you hit somebody getting off the tram there are consequences for those people that are hit. Or something that happened to me last week—I was on the Upfield path, which is supposed to be protected, and somebody came through right in front of me. I actually had decided to turn down that road even though I had a green light—I was turning—so we went through the intersection at the same time. I actually caught up with her, and her response was, 'Oh, did I go through a red light?' I was like, 'Yes. I was nearly smashed onto your windshield.' A momentary lapse—I did not ask if she was on her phone, but I am guessing that she was, because she literally drove through a red light right in front of me. I think about the consequences of those momentary lapses. You are driving this large hunk of metal around, and the consequences of just not paying attention for a split second are potentially huge.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms Galvin and Dr Bunting, for your submissions. I just wanted to speak to you about pedestrian crossings—you mentioned them in your opening statement. I just want to go to the recommendations in your submission and hope that you can elaborate on a couple of them for me. The first one is the distance between pedestrian crossings not exceeding 400 metres. I am assuming that is on arterial roads and is a mixture of zebra crossings and pedestrian lights. I was hoping you could also just elaborate on the recommendation there around no fixed red-light cameras at pedestrian crossings, which is something that I was not aware of, and how those two things may help people that are walking and vulnerable road users in general.

Dr Andrea BUNTING: Sure. Yes, there are various places in Merri-bek where the distance between signalised pedestrian crossings on arterial roads is 800 metres or more, requiring an extra, as I said before, 20 minutes walk if you want to just cross in the middle on your return journey. On arterial roads it would generally be signalised rather than zebra crossings. There are many such locations. As I said, pedestrians need their time prioritised too, not compromising their safety. Look, I live in Brunswick. Merri-bek is a busy urban area. A lot of people are wanting to cross the roads, and not just to go to schools too. I have got that before. Schools are prioritised, and that is fantastic that we look after the safety of children and encourage them to walk, but older people do not seem to get pedestrian crossings. If we want to cross over to the shops or there are some seniors facilities, it is much harder to argue for a pedestrian crossing. It is very hard to argue for a pedestrian crossing if nobody is crossing there because they are all too scared. That was raised by council. They are too scared to do that, so they have to walk. A few will take the risk, but there are not the numbers to justify it. So I think it should be far easier to get frequent pedestrian crossings so that our time is valued.

The red-light camera—we have a couple of crossings in Merri-bek where people are very concerned that vehicles sometimes do not stop. For some of those I think it is visibility, and I think mast arms should be mandated on all pedestrian crossings. There are a few, and I have spoken to Anthony about one in particular, but there is another one on Murray Road with no mast arms, and people go through them. So you have got to improve the visibility but enforce it as well. Red-light cameras should seem an obvious thing to protect pedestrians. There was one red-light camera at a pedestrian crossing in Victoria and it has just been removed. That was in Lilydale. I do not understand why Victoria cannot put them at pedestrian crossings where there is a history of non-compliance, particularly in a busy activity centre or where there are kids crossing and so on. South Australia has 30 red-light cameras—I am talking about the permanent ones—at pedestrian crossings. We have none. Maybe they have the mobile ones occasionally. I am not sure why that is. We also do not have them in school zones. We just have them at intersections. Maybe they will protect some pedestrians, but really I think where we want pedestrians to be safe we need to enforce it, particularly when there is a history of non-compliance.

Pauline GALVIN: It is actually another classic example of how pedestrians are not prioritised. When cars are going to hit each other, ‘Oh, we need red-light cameras.’ A car hitting a pedestrian, we cannot do that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Wayne.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you. Thank you both for coming today, and thank you for your shared love of Warragul. I am glad someone in the room loves Warragul as much as I do. I am going to come back to what the Member for Kew was talking about earlier. When we talk about technology—obviously EVs are one of them—another thing now that is in the mix is the e-scooter, which we are finding more and more. You talked earlier about phones and driver distraction with phones. This may not happen with the older generation, but are you finding there is the possibility of pedestrian distraction—things like when they have got their ear pods in when they are walking and they cannot hear things coming? Have you found with the walking community that maybe they need a little bit more awareness of what is around them when they are walking and not being distracted as well? And your thoughts on e-scooters, too—I would like to hear that.

Dr Andrea BUNTING: Older pedestrians do not want to share paths with cyclists or e-scooters. It can be very scary. We have heard a lot about that from Victoria Walks. We need separated infrastructure, so we fully support protected bike lanes and separate footpaths and bike lanes. We know that there is a tension with the road space, particularly in Merri-bek. Authorities need to address the allocation of road space. Otherwise, if they are not willing to take this up—and we have seen some tensions lately around this—if they are not willing

to actually allocate the road space fairly, we end up with proposals for shared paths and you are deterring older people from walking, which is the last thing you want to be doing. We need to support e-scooters and all sorts of mobility—but separate it.

As for the distraction thing, yes, there is an awful lot of media focused on distraction. I have heard drivers say this. It is difficult for drivers to judge if people actually are distracted. I sometimes walk across the road with my phone and will stop talking and say, 'I'm crossing the road now.' A driver would not know. Drivers do condemn people for being distracted. Perhaps they have in earphones, but how do you know that they have not switched them off? We actually do not know what is happening, but is there much evidence that people are being hit because they are distracted? Sometimes, yes, okay. I know there was a case on Sydney Road a while back where somebody was distracted and walked into a car. What I have seen is it is not so much the distraction from devices—everyone can walk, so we are not regulated. It may be other things where people have a momentary lapse of attention, and I think that may be more of an issue than young people with headphones. But again, this needs to be evidence based: do we have evidence that these devices with pedestrians are causing crashes? Do we have evidence? We also have to have the onus on the driver to be careful, because anyone can walk, no matter what their condition. We have people near us at a home who walk onto the road—they have to be protected. We need safe speeds so that if they do walk onto the road, drivers can stop in time. There is a lot of onus put on making our streets safe so that anybody can walk safely, no matter what their condition or age.

Pauline GALVIN: I would just add, as I remember Andrea saying earlier, that a lot of the fatalities and injuries of people in Moreland who are walking are older people, who are probably less likely to be on their phone. They are the ones that are actually being hit, so that evidence for severe injuries is actually no.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately we have actually hit our time. We could keep the discussion going.

Dr Andrea BUNTING: Sorry, I have gone over.

The CHAIR: No, no, I really appreciate it. It was a really interesting conversation. Thank you for answering questions today and your submissions. It is much appreciated.

Witnesses withdrew.