ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Bright – 19 February 2004

Members

Mr B. W. Bishop    Mr T. W. Mulder
Mr J. H. Eren      Mr E. G. Stoney
Mr A. R. Harkness  Mr I. D. Trezise
Mr C. A. C. Langdon

Chair: Mr I. D. Trezise
Deputy Chair: Mr E. G. Stoney

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officer: Mr P. Nelson

Witness

Mr A. Gasperoni, Development Engineer, Alpine Shire Council.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — We would like to thank the Alpine shire for its hospitality and for allowing us to use the services of the chamber. As you are aware, this is the parliamentary Road Safety Committee. We have two concurrent inquiries: country road toll and crashes involving roadside objects. We have travelled the width and breadth of Victoria at the present time.

This hearing is subject to parliamentary privilege, so what you say cannot be held against you legally into the future. We have Hansard here, so we will be taking transcript and we will provide you with a copy of that transcript in the near future.

Mr GASPERONI — I think you all have a copy of my presentation. I have also left with you a data report that we are going to incorporate into our road safety strategy. I will be concentrating on my presentation, which has the Alpine shire logo on the front. It is only a small presentation, but hopefully there will be some information in there that will be worth while.

Overheads shown.

Mr GASPERONI — I will start off with some geographic information. The shire covers 4837 square kilometres, and out of that area 92 per cent of it is public land, including the two national parks, the Alpine National Park and the Mount Buffalo National Park.

Demographics: the current population is estimated to be around 13 000 people, and they are concentrated in what we consider our three main towns, being Bright, Mount Beauty and Myrtleford. An interesting statistic: we get 2 million visitors per annum. Out of that, 35 per cent, or close to a third of the population, is 25 years old, which is pretty comparable with the rest of Victoria; 11 per cent of that group is in the 18 to 24-year-old age group, which is consistent with the younger driver age group; 42 per cent are aged between 25 and 49 years; and 13 per cent of what we generally classify as the older driver group — that is, the 60 plus group. Population growth is 1.3 per cent per annum at this stage. We believe by the year 2015 our resident numbers will be up around the 15 000 mark. Projections for the next 5 to 10 years: the way things are going we believe that the population looks like it is going to be skewed towards the 60-plus age group and the younger people.

Mr BISHOP — On that figure, is that people retiring here or is the skewing because of the young ones going away and the older ones staying?

Mr GASPERONI — No, you will find that we get a huge migration of older people who retire here.

Moving to the road safety issues, these statistics are over a five-year period from January 1998 to June 2003. In that period we had 327 reported casualty crashes. Out of those reports 445 people were involved, and that covered the areas of fatalities, serious injuries, or just injuries. Out of that number, again 44 per cent of them were local people.

Mr LANGDON — Is that within your shire?

Mr GASPERONI — That is within our shire. Interestingly enough, males were featured in all categories of the road user groups, which I will get to in a minute. The figures were pretty consistent over the five years. There was a slight decrease in 2002. As to crash by road user group, you can see there that we have a fairly high rate for motor cyclists. We have a pretty popular area here for motor cyclists and cyclists. We get this due to the mountainous areas and windy roads; they tend to like those.

Mr EREN — Is that mainly through winter?

Mr GASPERONI — No, it is right throughout the year. They tend to stay away a little bit during winter because they find it hard to access the high mountains during the winter period with the snow.

Mr STONEY — With the cyclists, that is a collision with a car? It is not just running off the road with your cycle, is it?

Mr GASPERONI — No, it is not only collisions with a car; it is also running off the road. Sometimes it can be caused by a car being too close to the cyclist which has forced him off the road.

Mr STONEY — So you can have a single cyclist accident, and it is recorded on the statistics, is it?
Mr GASPERONI — Yes.

Mr STONEY — I was not aware of that.

Mr GASPERONI — It is my belief that it is. Some quick stats: 63 per cent run off the road; 40 per cent are actually on curved roads; 63 per cent are collisions, 25 per cent with vehicles, 38 per cent with objects.

Mr BISHOP — That is 63 per cent run off the road, so that 23 per cent is straight on, is it not? You have got 40 per cent on a curve.

Mr GASPERONI — That is correct; 63 per cent are on roads that are not considered to be on a curve, but straight.

Mr BISHOP — Is that mainly in the ice or snow, or what?

Mr GASPERONI — Not necessarily. We have a couple of areas in the shire where we do suffer from black ice, but this is actually on curved roads.

Objects hit: 31 per cent, which is probably an interesting statistic for this forum, were trees and 26 per cent were embankments; and 60 per cent of those were at high speed — that is, 100 kilometres an hour plus.

Mr LANGDON — What sort of roads were they on — all made roads, or some gravel?

Mr GASPERONI — Some are gravel. We have a combination of both.

I have the 2002 statistics here: I am sorry I do not have the 2003 ones. You can see that under road user type, drivers were up by 11 per cent, but in comparison to metropolitan we are down 14 per cent; we are up 14 per cent in the passengers; we are slightly down on pedestrians; there is a huge increase in motorcyclist and pillion passengers; and up again in cyclists.

The CHAIR — Have you seen the same plus 55 per cent for motorcyclists in 2003?

Mr GASPERONI — I think it is comparable, yes. Again, I have not got the figures with me, but I think it is pretty much the same.

The CHAIR — It is a steep increase.

Mr GASPERONI — We have a bit of a problem with motorcyclists in our shire.

Mr STONEY — It is probably linked to the fact that the Great Alpine Road was sealed and now it has become a very popular motorcycle route going across to Gippsland.

Mr GASPERONI — Very popular. Whether we like it or not, Mount Hotham is a huge attraction because not only does it have a nice highway but there is also the Wandiligong Road over Mount Hotham, which is a bit of an attraction for them.

Drivers were 62 per cent male, 29 per cent of whom were under 25 years, 23 per cent were in the 40 to 49 age group and 50 per cent were in the 60 years plus group. Of passengers, 46 per cent were under 25, 30 to 39, and 60-plus years old age groups seem to stand out a bit. Of motorcyclists, 90 per cent were male. I gather that is because it is a more male-dominated sport.

Mr STONEY — No, the women are better motorcyclists!

Mr GASPERONI — That is what it is, sorry. Sixty percent were between the ages of 30 to 49 years, and I think that is consistent with motorcyclists: 50 per cent of those were involved with serious injuries; 71 per cent were run off the road; 50 per cent with only their bike and 43 per cent with collision. Cyclists: again 80 per cent are male dominated; 34 per cent were of school age and in the 30 to 39 years and 50 to 59 years age range; 79 per cent were collisions; and 65 per cent were serious injury crashes. Pedestrians under 17 years and over 30 years. Sixty two per cent were crossing the road and 75 per cent occurred either on a Friday or a Saturday.

Mr LANGDON — Is that because of the great influx of tourists and a lot of other cars?
Mr GASPERONI — Both, yes.

Mr LANGDON — Are the ones being hit tourists or locals not used to all the cars coming in?

Mr GASPERONI — We have not separated that; I could not say. I would suggest that both would be included.

I have some graphs, more from an information point of view. As you can see, the off-road curve was fairly high. The data indicates that the most commonly occurring crashes were run-offs at 71 per cent, and the on-the-curve was up around 45 per cent.

Crash type: again 50 per cent of the crashes were defined as motorcycle only, involving no other vehicle or object and in 12 per cent of those crashes the motorcycle overturned, which would not be too hard to do. Thirteen per cent of the crashes involved collisions with a vehicle while 30 per cent involved collisions with an object.

Objects struck: trees, embankments and guardrails were the prominent objects struck in motorcycle crashes and a high number of other unidentified objects, which is unusual. As you can see trees and other fixed objects are fairly high. There are embankments and kangaroos.

Mr BISHOP — That embankment. That is downwards, not upwards is it not?

Mr GASPERONI — No, that is upwards.

Mr BISHOP — Not downwards. What do you call downwards?

Mr GASPERONI — We would not consider it an object unless they have struck a tree or a guardrail or something else going down the embankment.

Mr STONEY — So really an embankment can be a cliff face or it can be the roll away from a road on a hill?

Mr GASPERONI — We have not distinguished between a low bank or a high bank.

Mr STONEY — Elsewhere it has been described to us as having guardrails along an embankment to stop cars going down, so there is a bit of a confusion in terminology.

Mr GASPERONI — Okay. We have an area here for crashes that involve hitting a guardrail — —

Mr STONEY — Yes.

Mr GASPERONI — Which is separate to vehicles hitting an embankment.

Mr STONEY — But our query is with the definition of embankment — —

Mr GASPERONI — Yes.

Mr STONEY — Is it both a cliff cutting and where there is just a slope away from the road? Are both of those called embankments?

Mr GASPERONI — Yes, technically, but under this and to do with objects being struck, the embankment is only the face of the embankment.

Mr STONEY — But surely if they rolled down an embankment and were killed, it would be called an embankment accident?

Mr HARKNESS — Because they have hit something else — a tree or — —

Mr STONEY — Well, it might not be. What would you call it if a car rolled down an embankment?

Mr GASPERONI — We would call it a crash, but we would not indicate it under ‘objects struck’ unless it struck a tree or another object on the way down.
Mr STONEY — But if it rolls down the embankment and hits the bottom, that is part of the embankment, is it not? I am just trying to — —

Mr GASPERONI — Technically it could be, but we have not classified it that way.

The CHAIR — So the type of accident that Graeme has described would be a run off road — —

Mr GASPERONI — Yes. Like I said, it just has not been included in the objects struck category.

The next set of graphs is solely on motorcycles.

Mr EREN — Sorry, I just noticed in ‘objects struck’, it says ‘animals’. Is that kangaroo or livestock or — —

Mr GASPERONI — A combination of both.

Mr EREN — Both.

Mr GASPERONI — Collisions involving kangaroos are fairly popular in this area, but it is not only kangaroos. It is also livestock and other animals.

Mr STONEY — Deer.

Mr GASPERONI — These graphs are solely to do with motorcycles. Again a high percentage of run-off-road crashes — 39 per cent — and a high number of head-on crashes — up near 21 per cent. Crash type: 79 per cent of the crashes involved a collision between a cyclist and something else; 55 per cent with another vehicle; 14 per cent with an object and 10 per cent involved pedestrians. Only 17 per cent of crashes may be described as bike-only crashes.

Just to give you an idea of where the Alpine shire is at the moment, in conjunction with our road safety committee, we have a police community consultative committee, Neighbourhood Watch, a chamber of commerce, a ratepayers association, community groups and other government agencies. So we are in the preliminary stages of developing our road safety strategy. That is the end of my presentation.

The CHAIR — Adrian, what is the road safety strategy going to involve?

Mr GASPERONI — That is obviously going to identify our major areas of concern and motorcycle accidents is one of them. We will then identify actions plans on how we believe we can work towards rectifying those issues.

The CHAIR — Does the Alpine shire conduct proactive road safety audits?

Mr GASPERONI — Yes, we do. With most — I would not say all — of our capital works projects we conduct a road safety audit prior to commencement, and then we also undertake a post-works road safety audit on completion.

Mr HARKNESS — What type of education programs or other initiatives are in place either by council or some of the groups locally to deal with things like fatigue, drugs, speed, alcohol and seatbelts?

Mr GASPERONI — We really have not incorporated anything locally, but we see that as being part of our action plan, if you like, when we are developing our road safety strategy.

Mr HARKNESS — Do you see a large problem with, say, alcohol, drugs and speed in the area with the high number of tourists that you have?

Mr GASPERONI — A combination of?

Mr HARKNESS — Yes.

Mr GASPERONI — No, not necessarily. Statistics have not shown that. Maybe the local police might be able to help you a little bit better there, but I do not think so, no. Certainly speed as an isolated case is an issue.
Mr HARKNESS — What is the breakdown again between accidents happening in hamlets and the towns and those on open roads or on the mountain?

Mr GASPERONI — I have not got that breakdown. I am not sure.

Mr BISHOP — The driver respite areas that road safety councils and other volunteers put together, have you got those? You have 2 million tourists.

Mr GASPERONI — Again, that is something I think we have identified in the preliminary stages of our road safety strategy, and we will be encouraging that. We did have one that the Lions Club in Myrtleford used to run. That sort of fell away a bit, and at the moment I must admit we do not have anything in place.

Mr BISHOP — Have you got places for them? Are there clearways for them on the road where they could be set up?

Mr GASPERONI — Yes. We certainly have got identified areas where we could set them up, and that is throughout the shire, obviously concentrating on our three main towns, because that will be the main destination of most people.

Mr STONEY — If a cyclist has an accident on the rail trail, does that go into the statistics? Is the rail trail classed as a thoroughfare? Does it go into the road statistics?

Mr GASPERONI — I was talking to Barry earlier about the road management bill. Under the statistics, no, but when we develop our road management bill we are considering putting the rail trail on our roads asset register.

Mr BISHOP — It would be wise to.

Mr GASPERONI — I am not sure if you are aware, but the rail trail does cross, in particular, the highway in a few areas. If an accident — and off the top of my head I cannot think of any particular one — were to happen at that intersection, yes, that would be included in the statistics.

Mr HARKNESS — Are road crashes seasonal?

Mr GASPERONI — They tend to be concentrated seasonally due to our influx of visitors. We have a very high number during the snow season. One of the issues there is also fatigue. We find that a lot of people try and get in a weekend of skiing. They leave late Friday night after work. By the time they get up here they are pretty tired. They are not necessarily used to the conditions up the mountain.

The CHAIR — So the point you are making there is with fatigue, you will have weekenders coming up from Melbourne who do not actually stop here, but they then head up into the — —

Mr GASPERONI — I remember when I was younger — I am half a local, I have been here since I was six — traditionally what used to happen is a lot of the visitors used to come and stop in Bright and then travel up and down the mountain daily. Now that the accommodation premises are so many and offer so many great deals up the mountain, there is no need for them to stop here in Bright. They just go straight up.

The CHAIR — So the accidents we are talking about are occurring from Bright onwards? Are you able to establish that?

Mr GASPERONI — I think they are concentrated between Harrietville and Mount Hotham on the winding road. There have been some accidents isolated in between, but they are mainly concentrated on — —

The CHAIR — There is an emphasis after Harrietville?

Mr GASPERONI — Yes.

Mr STONEY — Part of our inquiry is objects and trees, and we are particularly interested in ways of making country roads safer. Fixed objects has been a very big part of that. We have been told in other places of the difficulties in perhaps making roads a bit safer and moving some objects — trees and so forth. Have you had any experience or difficulties there with native vegetation requirements?
Mr GASPERONI — Native vegetation is obviously a pretty big issue for us. When you say difficulties — —

Mr STONEY — Just receiving permission under the planning schemes in having them removed?

Mr GASPERONI — No, not necessarily, no.

The CHAIR — Where there is a tree that is identified as a danger — —

Mr GASPERONI — Under the local planning scheme, if it is considered a danger, there is no planning permit required in most cases. We have areas, as an example, such as Wandiligong, which has a historical overlay over it. We cannot do anything out there without a planning permit.

Mr HARKNESS — I noticed driving here yesterday on the way — and I am not sure if it is in Wangaratta or Alpine shire — that the railings along several bridges were being replaced. Are you engaged in a program with bridges and crossings?

Mr STONEY — On the snow road.

Mr GASPERONI — That one is a Vicroads one, that one in particular. Near the intersection with the Great Alpine Road?

Mr HARKNESS — Yes.

Mr GASPERONI — Half a kilometre before the Great Alpine Road. It is in our shire. Vicroads is actually undertaking that. Obviously we undertake inspections every year. We obviously do not have the money to bring all our bridges up to a desirable state, but we do prioritise them, and that was identified some years back and it has come up the list to be done this year. We tend to do a little bit more than just replace the guardrail in most cases. In a lot of our cases, in particular in the past, we have had old timber bridges, so instead of just replacing the guardrail and bringing that up to standard we have replaced the entire bridge, or at least the superstructure.

The CHAIR — Given that you have a high emphasis on motorcycle accidents, do you have any thoughts on what would lower the rate of accidents with motorcyclists?

Mr GASPERONI — Good question. Not at the moment. We think education will play a major part in that. We are trying to get out to these motorcycle groups and tourist groups and let them know that we have a great road network here for motorcyclists but to also be aware of the different conditions as opposed to what they might be used to in the urban environment.

Mr STONEY — Would you say that the accidents are more through rider inexperience or more because of road irregularities? Would you put it down to the roads?

Mr GASPERONI — As far as experience goes, I would not say it is a lack of experience in riding a motorcycle, but maybe a lack of experience in driving on these types of roads.

Mr STONEY — So it is not particularly that the road networks are causing the accidents any more than anywhere else?

Mr GASPERONI — I do not believe so, no.

Mr STONEY — So what would be the solution for the government or the authorities to assist motorcyclists prepare themselves for conditions like this? Is it awareness? Is it education?

Mr GASPERONI — It would be education. I think maybe as a part of that — this is an idea that was brought forward the other day when we had our forum for our road safety strategy — when they go for their licence there might be some kind of an introduction course on driving on winding roads or similar types. It was brought up not only for motorcyclists but for car drivers in general. I know from when I went for my licence that they take you around the urban environment and get you to drive around urban streets with stop signs and traffic lights. That is all great, but you do not get to go out onto a rural road, on a gravel road or a windy road.

The CHAIR — Do you have much truck traffic in the shire — timber trucks?
Mr Gasperoni — Yes, we do. Mainly timber trucks. You do not find a lot of other transport-type trucks.

The Chair — So, is there a problem with timber trucks mixing with lighter vehicles?

Mr Gasperoni — Yes, we find that the timber trucks come out of the plantations, which tend to be isolated in rural areas, and to get out of those areas they need to travel along our rural-type roads, which are not necessarily sealed. They are gravel-type roads. Gravel roads and big timber trucks never mix.

Mr Harkness — What is the breakdown of sealed and unsealed roads?

Mr Gasperoni — I have not got that, with me but I can get that for you. I will bring it in.

The Chair — Thank you, Adrian. We appreciate your input into our inquiry.

Mr Gasperoni — If there is anything else you need to know, just ask, and we can forward the information to you.

The Chair — Thanks, Adrian.

Witness withdrew.
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Mr C. Walker, Deputy Manager, Shire of Indigo.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Clive, thank you for your time and input; we appreciate it. We are taking a transcript and will provide you with a copy of it. You are speaking under parliamentary privilege, which means that what you say cannot be used against you legally in the future. We will now hand over to you.

Mr WALKER — I am standing in for Denis Gallagher, who is the manager of technical services for Indigo shire. Unfortunately Denis got called away to another as-important meeting, and as his deputy I drew the short straw, so to speak.

As Graeme Stoney knows, Indigo shire is very mountainous, and as a result in the main our accidents are run off and hit roadside objects, and that is a concern to us based on the fact that the roads are narrow and winding and have trees very close to the edge thereof, which is one of the major run-off obstacles.

I have provided a brief summary for you, and rather than reading the whole document, the points that I will raise include our infrastructure. We have 1647 kilometres of sealed and unsealed roads, 67 bridges and 217 kilometres of main roads. Our current rehabilitation expenditure is only $425 000 compared to the $882 000 that we believe we need. Rehabilitation improvement maintenance of local roads has been enhanced by the Roads to Recovery program, which we are very thankful for, and of course for the extension of that program. It will enable us to focus on road safety issues. I have attached with the document the supporting information on our expenditure and our need for expenditure.

Road safety audits: we believe that more emphasis on funding should be placed on road safety audits on the road network highlighting areas of safety problems and allowing solutions to be developed using available funds. Just as a brief aside, as an engineer I can drive down the road and see that, if we could remove that tree or put some guardrail on, that site could be removed from a potential accident that is just waiting to happen.

The CHAIR — Clive, does Indigo shire conduct road safety audits?

Mr WALKER — Very briefly, and it depends a great deal on the generosity of VicRoads and its allocations. Each year we apply to do road safety audits on various aspects that we consider are a concern. For example, we carried out three after-construction audits recently on the three black spot jobs that we had completed, and this year we are applying for funding towards a study on the road from Myrtleford to Wodonga, which covers three municipalities. It also carries high timber traffic volumes, milk tankers of course and a lot of inter-regional traffic for people to access facilities in Albury and Wodonga. It is a high traffic volume road that is narrow and dangerous. We believe a safety audit is required on the road to indicate where we can create some passing lanes, for example, to try and improve the safety of the road.

Mr EREN — So do you do audits on local council roads, leaving the state and national ones aside?

Mr WALKER — The short answer is no, only because of limited funding.

Collisions with fixed roadside objects located near to traffic lanes have a high incidence in our municipality. Trees, steep embankments, culvert-end walls and utility poles, due to the natural terrain are by need located close to the traffic lanes. With unsealed shoulders drivers do not have sufficient time to regain control of the vehicle that has lost control before they crash into the objects mentioned above.

Mr LANGDON — Just on the issue of embankments, there is some conjecture with the definition of embankment issues on whether when someone runs into the side of the road you actually hit it or you run off the embankments down a hill. You are saying ‘steep embankments’, so I assume you are talking about going over the edge?

Mr WALKER — In our municipality we can use both of course. There was an accident on the Buckland Gap road approximately three or four weeks ago with two cars involved. The second car could not get off the road, so the person ran into him. I am using conjecture; I happened to be on my way home reasonably soon after the accident and the cars were still on-site. To me, if that person had been able to get off the road, the accident may not have happened.

Mr STONEY — Clive, a bit further over you talk about steep embankments on cuttings or fills. The reason we are pursuing this is that we are just trying to tease out the definition of an embankment. Would you say that an embankment could be either on a fill where it goes down or certainly where the cutting — —
Mr WALKER — To me, it can be either a cutting or a fill — the slope, the downside.

Mr STONEY — So we are talking about both. In the statistics, if a car hits an embankment, could it be rolling down the hill or is it only if you run into the cliff?

Mr WALKER — Hang on, I will have to go back one stop for that. As I said, it depends. I gave the example where the vertical, high embankment created a problem. We also have the situation where steep embankments — again because of the nature of the terrain — do not allow vehicles when they run off the edge of a road to run off safely. The steepness of the bank — —

Mr STONEY — So it is a roll over.

Mr WALKER — Yes, it can be a roll over.

Mr LANGDON — To hit the bottom of the inclined bit, it is more running off the road. Hitting the embankment would be the cliff?

Mr WALKER — Hitting the embankment is the end result after you have run off the road.

Mr STONEY — We are puzzled in the statistics when it says ‘hit the embankment’ to know whether if a car rolled down an embankment and hit the bottom, that would be classed as a run-off-the-road or an embankment. It is an academic argument.

Mr EREN — If you go off the embankment and hit a tree, what would you classify that as — hit a tree or hit an embankment?

Mr WALKER — The question is why did he run off the road in the first place. Is it loose gravel on the shoulder because the shoulder was unsealed or was he talking on a mobile phone and not concentrating, which does worry me. Did he just happen to be in one of those poor unfortunate incidents where a car was coming the other way and he had to move left and the embankment gave way? There are a number of reasons. I am sure the police have a lot of expertise in doing the investigation of those accidents more than I would.

Mr STONEY — We will probably ask them how they classify that, I think.

Mr WALKER — It is a difficult one. I am just indicating here that funding needs to be provided to allow for various engineering solutions, including the protection of fixed side objects by guardrail or sealing and widening the shoulders; construction of embankments to allow vehicle run off without overturning — that is carrying on to what you are saying — shallowing the embankment out; extension of culverts from the edge of the roadway pavement; delineation of the centre line and raised pavement markers, guide posts and edge or fog markings. Why we put that is again if you use the Vicroads definition of A, B and C roads, of course, we as a municipality are not too worried about A and B because they come under the control of Vicroads, but C roads, main roads, do not have a standard where raised pavement markers are mandatory. They do not have a standard where edge lines or fog lines are mandatory and do not have sealed shoulders as mandatory. They are classed as a localish-type road and do not need that treatment. We are arguing that they should. The road from Beechworth to Wodonga is very important to us, and not to have fog lines in Beechworth in the middle of winter time is silly. It is an area that does have a lot of fog, Myrtleford to Wodonga, Myrtleford is the renowned capital of fog in winter time, next to Alexandra, I think.

My next point is that unfortunately there is a collision between road safety and the environment. Indigo Shire Council has in place a roadside management plan which has recognised the importance of native vegetation, flora and fauna that only exists within road reserves. However, this conflicts with the need to remove trees to provide the design clear zone for vehicles from the road pavement. Run-off-road crashes are our most common rural crashes in Indigo shire, and a special funding program would be beneficial. Finally, the road — —

The CHAIR — Before you move off that point, where it is recognised that a tree is a safety hazard, do you have any difficulty in having the tree removed?

Mr WALKER — Yes. We have to go through a planning process to do it, and if that tree is considered significant by the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the answer is usually no, you cannot remove it or remove that group of trees.
Mr STONEY — What happens then?

Mr WALKER — If we have the funding, we try and put guardrail around it.

The CHAIR — Is it more likely to be a particular tree or a stand of trees?

Mr WALKER — In the main it is usually one-off trees.

The CHAIR — Are there examples in Indigo where you have recognised the tree as unsafe, but it remains there?

Mr WALKER — Yes, we actually did some black spot funding work on the Beechworth to Wodonga road. We improved the curve alignment. The tree that the car ended up running into — and the person was killed — is still located there.

The CHAIR — So that tree is obviously now protected?

Mr WALKER — No, it is not protected by guardrail. It is protected by the fact that we have sealed the shoulders and increased the radius of the curve and the elevation to help cars get around that corner at the regulation speed.

The CHAIR — Would you recognise that tree still as a safety hazard?

Mr WALKER — It has been in our road safety audit that that tree and a few others should be protected by guardrail.

Mr STONEY — Just pursuing that, your preference is to remove the tree rather than put a guardrail because it is obviously the best thing to do?

Mr WALKER — No, not necessarily, Graeme. Our preference would be to assess every tree on its merits. Some trees, yes, you put guardrail around. Some trees I believe should be removed.

Mr STONEY — So if you had a tree you identified as ‘should be removed’ and someone hits it, have you looked at your legal position where you knew the tree was dangerous but you were not allowed to remove it and someone hit it and died?

Mr WALKER — We have looked at in the sense that we have brought it up with our insurance company, which does a regular three-monthly regional meeting on insurance claims, saying that it needs to do an assessment on it and a report so that all municipalities in the same boat can look at how we can approach DSE and have some strength in arguing that trees should be removed in the event of the need for safety.

Mr STONEY — So you have had a position where you have been refused permission to take a tree out that you consider dangerous?

Mr WALKER — A planning permit. We have had a number where we believe trees should be removed and we have not been able to get approval to remove them.

Mr STONEY — Not even if you plant other trees and do all that?

Mr WALKER — We have had a situation where we have got a planning permit to remove trees and plant trees. The requirement was to plant some 30,000 trees in an area that was so highly covered in trees that you would not have been able to plant them anyhow. It was so ridiculous it was not funny. It was a stupid permit, and in fact we negotiated the planting of those trees at another location in the shire where there were no trees at all, to re-enhance the environment. To me the person who developed the permit really had not thought about it.

Mr BISHOP — With the road management bill being proposed to come up in this session of Parliament, has the Indigo shire addressed its responsibility level in relation to that particular bill? I bring you to the issue of nonfeasance, which has been exempted until the middle of this year, but it will be addressed in that bill. How far along are you with that?
Mr WALKER — I am not involved with it personally. One of our other engineers is. We are also involved with the north-east group, developing it in conjunction, so we have a standard in the area. It includes Alpine, Indigo, Wodonga, Wangaratta, Benalla and another couple of municipalities; it might even be Mansfield as well. So there is a group aspect looking at it. I understand that they are well advanced and will meet the deadlines for their draft policy process.

Mr WALKER — To finish off, infrastructure safety, grey spot government funding, should be flexible. Council is aware of many areas that could have road safety improved with low-cost fixed solutions. These include: passing lanes on major routes on rural roads; improved delineation with guidepost edge lines; raised pavement markers; removal of roadside hazards, such as trees, poles, culvert ends, steep embankments and cuts and fillings; improved visibility; vegetation control; road advisory warning signs; improved maintenance and upgrading of these signs; and intersection improvements. That is removing what I call Y-intersections and creating improved T-intersections. However, funding for black spot works is driven by statistics, with the focus on casualties rather than a mix, whereby casualties determine a rating; also a local knowledge of potential accident sites can determine an allocation to remove that potential hazard.

Mr STONEY — So you would like some sort of mechanism where the locals have identified — both the shire and locals that live around the area — an accident waiting to happen, and if there is enough pressure and enough anecdotal evidence, perhaps that can be classed as a grey spot, so you are being a bit proactive?

Mr WALKER — I agree. We need to be proactive. People that live in the area will ring the council and say, ‘Look, if we remove this tree or if we improve this bend or widen this road’ or as I drive over a road I say that if I could widen the road over the crest of a hill or do other things — and the costs could range from $1000 to $25 000 — a lot of those potential accidents could be removed. However, I am very cynical, and when people ring me up — especially when they ring up and say that they are concerned about their schoolchildren — I say, ‘When that school bus has an accident I will get the money and I will be able to fix the road’. As I said, I am very cynical. I have been in local government now for 35 years, and unfortunately I believe that these sorts of things have got to happen to fix solutions that I as an engineer have known for a number of years, and it is disappointing.

Mr BISHOP — Clive, quickly working through the paper you have presented, I have not noticed anything about fatigue in relation to accidents. Is that an issue in your municipality, and if it is, have you got clearways that have enough room and are safe where people can pull over? Do the driver reviver programs operate in your municipality?

Mr WALKER — We have not addressed that because I do not believe we are the experts in driver fatigue or alcohol-related situations. There are people more professional in that aspect of it. We are a bit like Bright; we are the end destination. Beechworth or Rutherglen for the wine experience are also end destinations. So by the time that people get there, they are stopping anyhow. The freeway that goes through our municipality has rest areas, but that comes under the control of Vicroads. Again I do not believe we see it as a point where we are expert enough to make a comment on it in this paper.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your input, Clive. We appreciate your time. A transcript will be made available to you in due course.

Mr WALKER — Thank you, Mr Chairman. We appreciate being able to present our case, and also for the road safety inquiry that was conducted a year or two ago; that was good too.

Witness withdrew.
Road Safety Committee

Inquiry into country road toll

Bright – 19 February 2004

Members

Mr B. W. Bishop
Mr J. H. Eren
Mr A. R. Harkness
Mr C. A. C. Langdon

Mr T. W. Mulder
Mr E. G. Stoney
Mr I. D. Trezise

Chair: Mr I. D. Trezise
Deputy Chair: Mr E. G. Stoney

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officer: Mr P. Nelson

Witness

Cr D. Cummins, Mayor, Shire of Mansfield.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Thank you for your time, Don. We will provide you with a transcript of these proceedings in due course. You are subject to parliamentary privilege, which means that what you say cannot be used against you legally into the future. So fire away.

Cr CUMMINS — That is dangerous, isn’t it Graeme? Giving me that sort of privilege.

The CHAIR — Once again, thank you for your time. We appreciate your input into the committee hearing. I will hand it across to you and we will ask questions as you go along.

Cr CUMMINS — Thank you. First of all, thank you to all of you for coming to us, if you like, to the country. I know how difficult it is to organise these things in the bush. I am sorry I was late this morning. I think I would have been on time but I had a lot of trouble finding the office here. I must talk to them outside.

What I want to say to you has to do with a social aspect of what is happening and technical or engineering matters, which are the three items which are listed in front of you. You can read or incorporate those at your leisure. They are written by my engineers; I am the mayor of the shire, but I am not an engineer. I had the technical aspects put together for you, and then I will deliver it in a social context. I think it will produce something in the way of answers. I was very interested in the previous speaker’s comments, and I will elaborate on a couple of comments from where he left off.

Graeme know that we have got a gentleman in our shire who comes from Switzerland and often has friends out, and the first thing they say, according to him, is, ‘Good God, you can drive down these gravel roads at 100 kilometres an hour’, the implication being that there is no limit to this, it is just a matter of how silly you want to be. Unfortunately we are finding — and I think it is right across Victoria — that these gravel roads do not stand 100 kilometres an hour. They stand 100 kilometres an hour while you are going in a straight line, and the moment you deviate from that you get some form of problem. That cannot be made clear to city-based drivers. Then, on top of that, our shire is a tourist shire — and I have got a feeling that that applies to the whole of the north-east. No shire in the north-east will say that it is not a tourist shire. We are particularly inundated with tourists, and consequently our concern is that a lot of our accidents are related to people who do not know our roads. Our road system leads them astray, I think, simply by saying to them, ‘Drive as fast as you like’. They drive well beyond the capacity of the road to take it.

As I was coming here I noted the difference between the tree setback on what you would call the Ovens Highway and a gravel road in my own shire. The tree setback here is a good 20 metres to 30 metres off the road, and it is also 50 metres between large objects — namely, very fat trees.

Back on a gravel road — and I will pick one long lane in my own shire — the trees are more likely to be spaced within 5 to 10 metres and are only 2 and 3 and even sometimes right down to 1 1/2 metres from the verge of the road. The chances, therefore, of hitting a tree are absolutely much greater on a gravel road. The chances of coming off a gravel road are enormous, and on top of that, since all collisions with trees are very serious because they tend not to stop and because you are not restricted in your speed, you have the potential for a major accident causing either blood or serious mechanical damage. We get them all the time. Almost always it is blamed on the council — ‘Your road is wrong’ — or if it is one of yours, they will still blame it on the council but it finally gets around to Vicroads being blamed. But the end result is that the person is not taking responsibility, and even the neighbours will not take responsibility for the fact that these people are driving beyond the capability of the road and beyond their own capabilities. They blame us. Sometimes, of course, I am greatly concerned that this blame could be interpreted through the courts and perhaps will come back to us, which leads me to the other large issue of concern that we have, and that is that — —

The CHAIR — Before you move off that, what you are saying is that the Mansfield shire strongly advocates 80-kilometre-per-hour limits on gravel road?

Mr CUMMINS — Yes. Why we do pick 80? No reason except that at least — —

The CHAIR — It is lower than 100?

Mr CUMMINS — It is lower than 100. Let us not get tied up in that. It sounds a reasonable speed to me. It sounds a speed that, if you are exceeding 80 — and let us face it, you are not going to be caught on these gravel roads; there are not enough police and machines to grab you — your co-passenger or your friends and relatives at
the hospital later will at least say to you, ‘You were speeding’, and there is an aspect of that which will rub off eventually into the social conscience, I would hope.

**Mr STONEY** — What about the argument which has been put to us in other forums that if people see 80 on a gravel road, they will think you can do 80?

**Mr CUMMINS** — The engineer’s point there, and my point — and we raised this at council the other night — was do not put a sign anywhere. The general provision is in the same way as the 50 zones have been brought into the community, gravel roads in the state of Victoria are 80, and you do not put a single sign up ever saying that.

**Mr EREN** — Like they are 100 now?

**Mr CUMMINS** — Yes. Do not even enter into the argument about, ‘This one is 80’, with the implication that that one is not — they all are.

**Mr STONEY** — So you know as part of the culture that when you hit a gravel road, it is 80?

**Mr CUMMINS** — Yes. We would have done the single best thing for country driving that I can think of. I can think of lots of other things that are causing deaths and accidents. Someone mentioned fatigue before, but I do not know how to approach that. You might be at a loss too, because it is about the individual’s relationship with the set-up, but here we are looking at the governmental relationship or the departmental relationship with the user. We have a chance to alter that.

**Mr LANGDON** — From a road safety view, I may totally agree with you. How do you think the locals who use those roads all the time — not the city slickers — would relate to that?

**Mr CUMMINS** — I suppose, to put it in crude terms, every vote you or I lose over it, we will gain one. The people who are driving at 100 on these gravel roads know they are in the wrong. They will not go and try and defend this in the pub, but they will whinge privately themselves. I am sure they will be get a group and whinge collectively, but they will accept it. After all, who would have thought they would all accept so willingly the 50-kilometre zone. What you would get from the 50 is whinges about, ‘I did not know that street was 50’. You do not get any whinges — I do not anyway — about the general concept of lowering to 50 in a town. People get howled down pretty quickly when they come up with a silly idea in road safety. After all, seatbelts and alcohol testing have come in. Just do it. That is the lesson we have learnt. Just do it.

**Mr EREN** — Mansfield shire, is that the Delatite shire now?

**Mr CUMMINS** — It is half of the Delatite shire. You are looking at a person who led the break-up of it.

**Mr EREN** — What would the population of Mansfield be?

**Mr CUMMINS** — The town, 2700. There is some dispute about this. We have a feeling it is more like 3000, but say 2700, and the entire shire would be 10 000.

**Mr BISHOP** — You put a point of view in relation to speed limits on gravel roads. Obviously the requirement to know how to drive on them is important. Have you put the same amount of resource and thinking into that as you have in your view for 80 kilometres?

**Mr CUMMINS** — I have put in a lot of thought. Our shire has discussed it at great length, and the short answer is no, we have not come up with anything intelligent at all. It is the same problem we have with motorbikes. In our shire we had 42 major accidents last year. I do not know what a major accident is, by the way, but it is the one where the police get involved. I am sure you have the terminology. Of those 42, just under half were bikes, that is motorbikes. When you look at the map distribution of it, the motorbikes coming off are spread all over the place, and they are all in the bush. Why I am bringing this up is it is the same problem. How do you tell fuelled-up young men — and it is almost always young men — ‘Be good, and do not drive more than the safe driving speed of your bike’, while they are in a group of 20 and having the best time of their lives hooning each other on? I think in a sense these gravel roads are the same. How do you tell anybody in Melbourne? It is not going to be a topic of conversation over their Weetbix — ‘Did you see what that mayor said about gravel roads in the country? We must be remember that when we go up there’. It is just not going to happen.
I tend to think that the only way you approach it is the other way: set up a system, the gravel roads one, where 80 is a concept. You impose the driving skill on them rather than expect it or discuss it or in any way try to involve them. You could have a campaign, ‘Gravel roads kill’ or ‘Gravel roads are slippery’. I am sure that has a gel of interest in it. The 80 would get you the same result a damn sight quicker and more uniformly and very much cheaper, I think.

Mr BISHOP — In answer to the question, you have not addressed education at all?

Mr CUMMINS — We have addressed education on the bike issue, but not on gravel roads. I cannot say our shire has put out any material on the education on gravel roads other than comments I have made in the press from my position saying that people should be careful. That is an educative process, but when I read that from someone else, I always think that is a bit weak.

Mr LANGDON — I must admit that if you are travelling up from Melbourne for a weekend you do not look up any brochures on how to travel on gravel roads or winding roads; you just go.

Mr CUMMINS — Our shire has that particular problem, and that is a major import of what I want to say today: when you are the destination, particularly in winter, there is an element of insanity about people who want to go skiing. For some reason it is very important that they get there at 5 to and not 5 past, and that obsession leads to a whopping great line of accidents out on the two approach roads — that is, the Merton to Mansfield and the Mansfield to Mount Buller — and they are just littered with little dots about serious and other types of accidents. Our local police have phrases for this. They say, ‘They leave their brains behind at the edge of Melbourne. Snow people are not real people’. There is a whole category of social comments that tell you what is going on in the minds of people who are driving to the snow. I think Graeme can probably add to that.

Mr STONEY — I would be thrown out of the committee with a couple of the phrases.

Mr CUMMINS — You would be thrown out with those phrases, but they are what you hear from people who are in the know. The fact is they do leave their brains behind. You will see them double passing on double lines at 140 kilometres an hour, and when caught, their response is, ‘Gee. Are you impressed?’, or something like that, or there is a bit of giggling goes on in the rest of the car. We are not talking about a Sunday drive. We are talking about a drive of obsession. And why are there so many accidents — because there is changed culture going on there. Again, how you address that culture? I am interested in that, but I think you address that culture with a lot of police and radar guns, frankly. I do not know any other method of dealing with people like that.

Mr LANGDON — Do you think that method of policing with fines is more productive than education?

Cr CUMMINS — Yes, the best education is a fine, because they will never do it again. If we had a good education program about driving to the snow and no police — I cannot imagine the outcome. I think Mansfield Hospital would have to grow in size. In my view there is nothing like a fine for education.

Mr BISHOP — So therefore the majority of accidents would be people travelling through your municipality?

Cr CUMMINS — Yes. I do not have the figures to prove that, and I am sure that you people do, or will. But when I see the dots on the maps, all the car accidents are on that line, whereas the accidents for motorbikes are all over the place, and in fact in very obscure places that are trails rather than roads. So that tells me what is going on. What is going on is that people driving through our shire are having the accidents. While I was the mayor of Delatite shire we had 13 deaths, which was considered quite high. Someone from the radio rang me up and said, ‘What sort of shire are you running up there? You are killing everybody’. I said, ‘No, we are not killing our own people; the ones who are coming through are dying’. And of course the Hume Highway was the major problem, simply through sheer weight of numbers; not because the Hume Highway was a bad road, but you get deaths when you get a lot of people. Looking at this situation, it is about the tourist road.

The CHAIR — Don, do you want to move onto your second point?

Cr CUMMINS — Yes. It is the same point really. Because our tourist roads are high volume for short periods, for three-quarters of the year locals turn off the road as they feel like it, and then suddenly it is a high traffic road and the locals will still turn off as they feel like it. That will cause a situation where if you have not got a secondary lane or a secondary aspect shoulder or well-defined turning systems, then you will have accidents. The
point the engineer is making there, and the point that councillors make as well, is that the thing looks like a freeway right up to the moment when you try to deviate from it or anyone else makes any sort of deviation. In a way it is like having a bunch of houses stuck onto the Hume Highway. You know why we do not do that, and in a sense this is the same. The problem is the small country roads opening off what is becoming an expressway to the snow or the lake.

The large number of accidents on the Mount Buller approach road: all my experience tells me that particularly between Merton and Mansfield they happen as people try to overtake, usually into the western sun going home on Sunday, into a situation were there is no shoulder or the shoulders are imperfect or perhaps less than the capacity of that road. I have sympathy for Vicroads, because why would you build a road to take three or five months worth of traffic? It is a difficult financial situation. I would like to enter on the record that I find that Vicroads does a great job. I am staggered by its ability to get around the whole state and do all the stuff it does. We do not have a continuing, ‘Isn’t Vicroads awful!’ There are government departments that we do have that with, which are not the subject of your inquiry, but to us Vicroads is a well-run department struggling with an enormous and ongoing problem. It always distresses me when I see someone attacking Vicroads. I think, ‘For God’s sake, there is a limit to what it can do’.

However, the job here is to try to redirect that limit, and so I am redirecting it towards shoulders — in this case the engineer has said it perfectly, so I do not need to requote it — but shouldering and bypass laning are crucial where you have unskilled drivers, in the sense that they have never been there before and are tourist-prone in the manner that we spoke of psychologically before and you also have locals doing what they like because for nine months of the year they can do what they like. I think that sums it up from my point of view. If there are no other questions on that?

Chair, do I have a couple of minutes? I just want to say something about a particular issue which I think you will be able to take some note of, and that is the problem of identifying black spot areas and high criteria areas. It is easy to identify black spots. My understanding is that the system relates to a death, not just serious injury. The problem with that of course is that you will get a great number of accidents at great social cost before you will get a death in the country. It is much easier to do a death-based system in the city, where one intersection will claim five people over five years, and it is pretty clear. You will not get that clarity in the country. The gentleman sitting here before me pointed out that he knows that it is a potential, and really we need to move to grey spot — if you want to use those words — because that system suits us in the country. Any revitalisation of the black spot funding — and I have to tell you that it was a great idea and a great sadness to us when it went. We wrote, talked and yelled at the government to keep that, and I would like to see it brought back in any form — but I would like to see it come back as grey spot, not black spot.

I would also like to see it somewhat channelled. This business of the community writing in and getting money and bypassing the council has caused us some disturbance, and my reason for saying that is that money went almost directly to areas that we did not consider as high risk, without reference to us. We could have made better use of the $400 000 in the particular case I am thinking of than perhaps was made. A council knows what its area is, and I think we have to rely on that. If a council does not know that, then hopefully the people get rid of it and get another council.

The CHAIR — What you are saying there, Don, is that with the previous system individuals could fill out the form send it in to Vicroads or wherever it went. That whole system bypassed council.

Cr CUMMINS — You might say, ‘Isn’t that wonderful? It is giving direct and free access to people to solve their own problems’. A person’s perception of their problem is not a shire or state perception of that problem, and it has to be filtered in some way. I feel that the filtering process did not always work in that situation. Surely the shire is the best filter in this case. If it is not, it is not doing its job and people need to get onto that and give it the boot. It seems to me that all these applications should come to the shire in the first instance and be forwarded by the shire. If it does not have the shire’s approval or stamp, then perhaps it is not a goer.

Mr STONEY — So you are saying that in some cases with black spot funding — —

Cr CUMMINS — Grey — —

Mr STONEY — Where there is an intersection and people have complained, that the authorities did not come back to the shire for comment before they did it?
**Cr CUMMINS** — They came back through the engineering section and asked for technical data but did not ask for what I would call a political opinion.

**The CHAIR** — The decision had been made?

**Cr CUMMINS** — Yes. It was done that way, and then we heard about it. The first that councillors heard about it was a note in the paper saying, ‘Isn’t it wonderful that the state of Victoria — or VicRoads or whoever it is — has given us $400 000 for this’. I am thinking, ‘There are a number of other areas where I would have liked to have seen that go. That is a side point, but it is not what I wish to talk about.

I wanted to say that I made a great study of a place called Reef Hills, just outside Benalla. I know it is not quite in my shire but the point it illustrates is important. Every morning as I drive to work there is a dead kangaroo. There are five or six dead kangaroos in a 1.2 kilometre section of road, which borders a forest, where they are busy starving to death or whatever they do, and they come out onto the highway. It is shielded where it joins the Hume Highway, but it is not shielded where it comes round the corner onto the Mansfield to Benalla road. I did some research on this because it used to stagger me that it seemed like that almost every morning — but certainly seven to nine animals a month as an absolute minimum. I went down to the local panel beater and he said, ‘Listen mate, do not do anything about this; I am on a real winner here’. Every accident costs between $2000 and $7000 when you hit a kangaroo because it is very hard to hit one at 100 kilometres an hour and not do $2000 worth of damage to a car. He said, ‘From my point of view, I get the more serious accidents and I get between $4000 and $7000 to fix each of these problems, and I am getting quite a few a month’. I will not go into how many, but he was doing very well. The insurance people are not interested in this. In fact if you think about it, the insurance business is well supported. When you have multiple insurance companies it is best that you have accidents; it increases the reality to people that they had better get insurance or revamp it or up it if they have not got enough. So it is not in the insurance companies’ interests to stop these accidents. You might think that is an odd way of looking at it.

Finally, the accident is not reported in many cases, because almost always you walk away with a bit of damage — the car is parked on the side of the road, it did not hit another person, it is not reported to the police. You guys never hear of it.

The end result of this is that $30 000 worth of fencing would fix this problem — about four months of accidents would fix this problem — but it will not ever get reported. I am not talking about this particular incident. This is a general case of the social cost of accidents compared to what you would call the technical cost of accidents and the way they are reported. I am thinking that there should be a much wider view of what an accident is, because every time these people hit these kangaroos, it is traumatic. They will talk about it for the rest of their lives, but they did not land in hospital in most cases, and therefore no-one will ever know. I might add the kangaroos are not looking too good either, but that is perhaps a — —

**Mr STONEY** — On that issue, in the Mansfield shire, which you and I both live in now, there are several places exactly like Reef Hills. In Pinnacle Valley there is a kangaroo there every morning, and that would be between $2000 and $7000 a day, and the residents of Sawmill Settlement and Mirimbah and Mount Buller that come in every morning or come in during the night for night work, or whatever, go through there at about 20 kilometres an hour, and they know, but they still hit them.

**Mr CUMMINS** — It costs $22 a metre to put high fencing around it, and it costs $15 000 to put in a complicated trap system on the roadways that makes the kangaroo unable to get out onto the highway. Obviously I have researched all this. It works. You can pay for this. But who is paying? Why would VicRoads pay for this? They are not even getting a report. Why would the insurance companies pay for it? It is not their problem. This is a great little thing because it is reinforcing in the community that you had better take out insurance because odd things can happen to you. So in all respects this is not going to be solved until we look at it in a different way. That is my point.

**Mr LANGDON** — Do you think grey spot funding would be used for those sorts — —

**Mr CUMMINS** — I can imagine wording grey spot funding so it could. Grey spot funding could certainly be worded in a manner that, for instance, if you have dead animals on the road, the first thing you should ask is why. And if they are continual and ongoing, why are they always there? Why are they always dead? Who is hitting them? If a truck hits a kangaroo, it is no problem, so perhaps half of what Graeme and I are talking about is not real, but the other half is very real, any car hitting them, and of course every so often you get a death. But you
are not going to get a death in Mansfield shire regularly on a certain pattern because that is the way of the
distribution.

Mr BISHOP — Just picking up the point you made before, the road from Hattah to Wemen has a
kangaroo fence along it which is appropriately placed and certainly I think would reduce the number of kangaroos
on that awkward piece of road. My question to you is one about responsibility. We have heard of difficulties in
municipalities being able to remove what they believe are dangerous trees with the interference, if you like, from
the Department of Sustainability and Environment making it quite difficult. In the new road management bill has
your organisation been able to address what you think might be your responsibilities in relation to those issues, be
they trees that are dangerous that you may have asked to have removed, be they channel crossings, be they bridges
or be they utility poles?

Mr CUMMINS — Just taking the trees first, in a sense, yes. The other things are all man made and are
not placed on us, which we have to remove. If we are silly enough to have put them there in the first place, we need
to think about why we did that, and it is no-one’s responsibility but our own to move them. Going back to the
trees — and I listened to the gentleman before, and he had some good points — I am watching new subdivisions go
on where they curve a road around a tree rather than go through the difficulty of knowing that they will end up in
VCAT on an objection on just that issue but on no other issue. They know that this planning amendment will go
right through, or this planning permit system for the particular subdivision will go right through. It will be one of
those two that I just mentioned. They know it will go right through without objection, except if they try and knock
that tree down. So they then go and redesign the road system. We have outside our town a road that does that. It
looks like that joke about the tsar in Russia with his thumb and the ruler. It is done to avoid the hassle of having to
remove that tree and going through that process.

It seems to me that we are in serious trouble if the only tree system for nature is the one running beside our roads.
Let us think about what a road is. It is that thing that we move at enormous speed down, and you do not put an
immovable object close to it. If you are going to plant trees and have trees there, for sure put trees that never grow
beyond the size of a 4 or 5 inch sapling — that is, put wattles of any sort. There is a whole range of grevilleas and
so on. I am not an expert, but you do all that, and when you run into that, it has a braking effect which is quite
pleasant. You might survive. If you think about how people will look back on us in 50 years — these are the people
who built roads and left an object that cannot be moved when a car hits it within 10 metres, and then they wonder
about the road toll. How ridiculous is it?

We are confusing ecology with safety, and safety is losing in many cases. The ecology can take place on every
other spot except the bend in the road, the side of the road et cetera. If ecology is down to the side of the road, you
had better look at the ecology.

Mr BISHOP — Can I come back to the point of the road management — —

Mr CUMMINS — I have missed the point.

Mr BISHOP — And council’s responsibility in relation to that, because at the end of the day many of us
suspect that this bill will allocate responsibility due to the probable removal of nonfeasance. Can you explain to the
committee how far your council is down the track on that, or do you have any views on that particular issue?

Mr CUMMINS — We have views. We are, I think it is fair to say, pretty frightened of the end results of
the removal of nonfeasance. We have a very low opinion of how the courts will support us — that is, we do not
think they will. We know from our experience in other areas of various risk managed insurance problems that we
have had in our community not related directly to the council that judges are of the view that they try to help the
person who has been hurt, and they will desperately search — and lawyers will desperately search — in this new
system for one spot where the council failed in this process. They will also find it in a country council, in my view.
It is just too big a job for us to manage on rotation our entire road system to a level that would satisfy the various
court words ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ and so on, the reasonable expectation, because we know that these roads are
all underfunded. What is said every second when any group of local government people get together is that the
Roads to Recovery program, which is great, is only just touching the tip of the iceberg. Country roads are not
properly serviced, so of course if you bring up a system that says we will service them on rotation to a particular
standard, and you already know that they are not at that standard, then you are setting yourself up for a complete
legal fall, and that is our fear, and I think it will prove very real. Does that answer your question?
Mr BISHOP — Yes. How far along the track is your council in addressing this particular proposal that will come up — we think probably in this sitting; we do not know? Obviously some parts of the bill in relation to road safety will be very positive — there is no doubt about that — the allocation of responsibilities with Vicroads and municipalities. How far along are you with your assessment of it?

Mr CUMMINS — Our engineering staff know about it, have searched it and have got a cyclic program in place which they say meets the standards that are being put out. But they caution me when they say that with the words ‘we hope’ or ‘we expect ‘or ‘it depends on the courts’, and this brings me to another point. I doubt very much that the courts will not raise the bar to a point that we cannot reach. It is not so much that we are worried about the bill. The idea of responsibility for your own road system sounds fair enough, but it is an open-ended thing. It is like saying that you are responsible for your children forever. Yes, of course you are, but at a certain point you know you are not. It is the same with this road system. We will do that which we do and can do, but at a certain point can we in fact know of every hole that could cause the one accident that causes the court case, and the short answer is no, and under the old system we were protected.

The CHAIR — Have you any further comments?

Mr CUMMINS — No, we have covered the malfeasance, nonfeasance and pushbikes.

On pushbikes, I just want to say that if Vicroads could get an aspect of its funding almost automatically tied to trails beside the road, if it can get that built into its funding system so that it never even lets a contract without putting in the shoulder that has the right designation, it will be doing a great service on a number of fronts, both socially as well as for safety. The point I am making here is that bike use is growing like crazy in every shire, but particularly in ours. If I can get a culture going that Vicroads does not build a road unless it has already got a bike path built into the costing, that would be great. It would save us a lot, and I think it would save Vicroads a lot in the long term. It is not hard to do it when you are doing the road; it is much harder to get a contractor back to do it later.

There are a number of other aspects to this. It is part of the culture in our and many other shires — all the ones that I talk to — that we want to get away from this reliance on the car; this absolute idea that you can only get around by car, and there are other tourist aspects to this which are very beneficial. Obviously if you use a bike you tend to stay overnight; if you stay overnight you spend $270 instead of $140. There are a whole lot of reasons why we want this. It is happening whether we want it or not, so let us address it.

The last thing is contracts. It would be very useful if the public knew what Vicroads contracts were let at — after the event of course, after there is no problem of commercial confidentiality. I do our bit on this, but it would be great if Vicroads told people what roads cost. I think there is a whopping great feeling out there that a road costs a few thousand dollars, when in fact any decent road system is costing $140 000 a kilometre for a sealed road. This is not known to the public. I think the contract details should be reported at periodic intervals, as a general information item, not tied up in difficult tables. So that it says, ‘It costs this much to build this sort of road. To keep this road in refurbishment it costs this much per year’. I think this should be told, because people are asking the impossible because they do not know what these things cost. That is it from me.

Mr LANGDON — I do not think you have covered the issue of fatigue much at all.

Cr CUMMINS — No. I listened to the previous gentleman who was here, and I think perhaps you asked him the same question — or another person did. In my view and our view fatigue is not a problem, and I will disassociate those remarks from those about Mount Buller before and the silliness of the drivers. That could be called fatigue, I am not sure, you can put your own psychological basis on that, but I will just ignore those remarks for a minute.

In all other respects we do not have accidents in our shire because of fatigue in my view. In fact, because of the constantly changing nature of the road — there is a bend every kilometre — you do not go to sleep driving in our shire; you tend to pay attention. In my view it is rarely fatigue that causes an accident; it is the nature of the terrain related to previous experience. Where you have a lot of bends accidents happen for other reasons. I do not remember people saying to me, ‘I went to sleep’. People will tell you honestly later what caused an accident. People do not tell me that they went to sleep or were drowsy. By the way, that is true on the Hume Highway: it is a very boring road right through from Melbourne because there is nothing happening on it; there are no houses and nothing to see.
The CHAIR — No stimulation.

Cr CUMMINS — No stimulation, thank you. That happens a great deal; I would not deny that a bit. But that is about the only problem that I do not have in my shire.

Mr STONEY — I might add to that the only time that fatigue might come in in our shire is with people who have been skiing for two days. They get into the car and everyone else goes to sleep. There are a couple of straight stretches.

Cr CUMMINS — I think it would happen towards Melbourne, would it not?

Mr STONEY — Our family property has a long straight stretch, and there have been several who have gone off into the paddock because they have gone to sleep. That is the only time, and it is not fatigue from driving; it is fatigue from a heavy weekend. They get in the car and they are all tired. They have had a lot of sun in the spring.

Mr EREN — You lose concentration.

Mr STONEY — It is 5 o’clock and they are going into the sun and — —

Cr CUMMINS — I think you have to preclude skiers from our discussions. They are in a class of their own!

Mr STONEY — Yes. I tend to agree with Don on the tricky road, and I drive it several times a week. Those roads do not attract fatigue, but you are very tired when you get home.

Cr CUMMINS — That is right.

Mr BISHOP — On that point, would not the opposite as readily occur? Someone will work all day in the city, as an example, and at 5 o’clock put all the stuff on the top of the car and load up and head off for the hills. Surely that would be a similar issue going the other way?

Cr CUMMINS — My point would be that they will have the accident on the flats. When they get to our part, they will tend to concentrate. But again in all this conversation I have excluded skiing; it is a very specific thing.

Mr BISHOP — A number of issues in evidence before the committee show that time when there is most inattention and most fatigue is when you are nearly there. There is some suspicion that the attention slopes off because you relax, you are not being stimulated by the fact that you have got a fair way to go; you are nearly home to wherever you are going to stay. I would suspect that the same would happen each way.

Cr CUMMINS — We have a problem in that we live 2 1/2 hours from Melbourne, and all the theory says that 2 hours is when you have a problem, and there is obviously a great deal in what you say. I still hold to the original point: if you are not discussing skiers and/or destination-obsessed people, then I do not think it is causing the problems in our shire. Ours is a unique shire in that sense: it is full of bends and twists and interesting spots.

The CHAIR — Don, thank you for your time and input. We appreciate it. We will provide you with a copy of the transcript in the coming weeks.

Cr CUMMINS — You had better delete the comment about the crazies!

Witness withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Bright – 19 February 2004

Members

Mr B. W. Bishop          Mr T. W. Mulder
Mr J. H. Eren            Mr E. G. Stoney
Mr A. R. Harkness        Mr I. D. Trezise
Mr C. A. C. Langdon

Chair: Mr I. D. Trezise
Deputy Chair: Mr E. G. Stoney

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officer: Mr P. Nelson

Witness

Mr P. Lenaghan, Director, Technical Services, Shire of Towong.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — We appreciate your time and input into our hearing. As you are aware, this is the parliamentary Road Safety Committee. We have two inquiries: one involving the country road toll and a concurrent and related one into crashes involving roadside objects. We will be taking transcript and will provide you with a copy in due course. You are subject to parliamentary privilege, so what you say cannot be held against you legally in the future. Having said all that, again welcome, thank you for your input, and we listen with great interest.

Mr LENAGHAN — Road safety is very important to Towong shire, and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. In the written submission we give a description of the shire. It is basically a rural shire that is large in area but very small in population. It is one of the smallest in the state. The topography of it is different to other areas, insofar as we have a few main roads running through the shire and the rest of it consists mainly of valleys.

Mr EREN — What is the population?

Mr LENAGHAN — About 6500.

Mr EREN — And demographics in terms of age? Is it elderly?

Mr LENAGHAN — It is ageing. It is about 6500 square kilometres, 6500 population, and I cannot give you the percentage of the demographics, but it is generally recognised as an ageing population.

Mr LANGDON — If my memory serves me correctly from our last rural inquiry, there is a lot of Crown land in your area as well.

Mr LENAGHAN — A great deal of Crown land. Most of the ridges are Crown land, and the valley floors are what have been developed as private land for various agricultural pursuits. There is a lot of dairy, some beef. They are probably the main industries, and within the towns there are a few small industries, and of course there is the pine industry as well.

What that means is that a lot of traffic is going in and out to the same destinations, and it is predominantly local traffic, although through the shire is the Murray Valley Highway and a road that goes up around the Murray River that is a bit of an alternative route, and more and more people are coming into the area for tourist-type activities.

That leads to there being a mix of traffic ranging from cyclists, motorbikes, cars, school buses, tourist vehicles, tourist buses, milk tankers, log trucks, stock trucks and general freight lorries and articulated vehicles. The road network was predominantly developed in the 1950s and 1960s, slowing in the 1970s. It was pretty well set out in that period. Because of the nature of the land, most of the local roads have not changed a great deal during that period of time, which is inherent in some problems.

Our accident statistics for the shire are generally low in actual terms. For some of the statistics, such as motorcycles, we move up the scale when you convert that to a per 100 000 population, but there is generally of the order of 1 person killed and 16 seriously injured in any given year.

Mr EREN — But that is not the case for 2002; there were five fatalities in 2002. Did that change in 2003?

Mr LENAGHAN — No, we have just taken the average over a five-year period. The point of that is that the accident rate is in actual terms so small that you cannot say, ‘Here’s a problem area, we can do something about it’. It tends to be dispersed through the shire. We know in any year there will be some deaths and some injuries, but we do not know where or — —

Mr EREN — I have in front of me calendar year 2002, Towong, 5 fatalities, 29 serious injuries. Is that over five years or the calendar year?

Mr LENAGHAN — No, for that calendar year. I looked it up on crash statistics, and I think it was showing as 153 accidents over that five-year period, so I went by those. I thought that in any given year there will be a number of fatal accidents and numerous serious injury ones, but across that area it is still fairly random.

Mr EREN — Were they mainly local people that were involved in those accidents, or tourists?
Mr LENAGHAN — That is an interesting part which I think is relevant to this inquiry — we do not really know. That comes through the police statistics, but it does not actually show the type of person that is involved.

The CHAIR — You do mention in the report — and I have a copy of the report — that the majority of accidents occur on the major through routes where council is not the road authority.

Mr LENAGHAN — That is correct. A lot of them occur on the Murray Valley Highway. On the Murray Valley Highway and the river road, probably the major types of accidents are more related to motorcycles. That is where I think we are about the 14th worst per 100,000 population in terms of motorcycles.

Mr LANGDON — How far away are you from Melbourne in time?

Mr LENAGHAN — You can be in Wodonga in 3 hours, and then you have got another half hour to the start of the shire, and it takes around about probably 2 hours to go through it if you go the length of the shire.

Mr LANGDON — Do you think fatigue plays a part in your accidents?

Mr LENAGHAN — No. It can. I think the sort of fatigue that you are more likely to get in our area is going to be from light flicker, bonnet glare, that makes you get tired. I know myself as we travel around the shire, it is quite possible in our journeys on any given day to do several hundred kilometres within the shire, in the late afternoon, even if you are quite fresh, that can be wear you down pretty quickly.

Mr STONEY — Can you explain a little bit more how that works, for the record?

Mr LENAGHAN — I know myself as my eyesight, I guess, is getting worse as I get older, I find that just the glare off the road if I do not have on good sunglasses, you can feel yourself starting to get eye strain, and then of course with the trees on either side of the road, you get that hypnotic flick, flick, flick from the shade, and that just slowly wears you down in a fairly short distance.

We have this problem with the randomness of the accidents through the shire. Any of the accidents that occur, though, I think have been seen anywhere and everywhere. Out of the community satisfaction surveys that we have had done, road management has been identified as a major issue, although most of the community has little understanding or probably even concern for who the actual road authority is for any given road. The thing that came out of it that people really wanted in the road network was no surprises. There seemed to be a feeling that if they could anticipate what was going to happen or how conditions would change that they could deal with it. So that is the sort of approach that we believe needs to be considered, this no-surprises type. We also have a road safety plan which we have done which we work to, but that does not, I do not think, let us get to the implementation of it. It is a difficult thing.

The types of surprises that we see and people come across are things such as road kill — animals, kangaroos, wombats and deer that can appear on some sections of the road, especially if you are travelling at the wrong time of night. The only way you can deal with them is to go slowly enough to stop, because without warning they are just in front of you. The other problem is that a lot get cleaned up and are left on the road and a sizeable wombat or kangaroo on a curve or whatever can catch somebody by surprise.

Vegetation is another major issue and another source of surprise. Seasonally we get a lot of growth on the sides of the roads, and it can also cover other objects such as stumps of trees that have been cut down. They can be on low-volume traffic roads or in close proximity and can disappear into grass and so forth.

The CHAIR — Where the council identifies a tree that is a safety hazard, do you have problems in the process of having the tree removed from a DSE perspective?

Mr LENAGHAN — I suppose we do to some extent just by virtue of the fact that you have to go through the process to get it out. It is not just a matter of getting approval to get it out, you are then usually stuck with planting a whole lot more.

The CHAIR — Are there examples of trees that the council has recognised as dangerous, but because of the planning process they remain today?
Mr LENAGHAN — That is almost a double-edged question. There are a few that we have come across where they have been removed and we have then had to run the gauntlet with DSE. The local community says, ‘You have done a terrific job there’, but it is not always the case. Most of our trees on the sides of roads are fairly mature and have been there for a long time, so we do not have a program of going around and removing those. We try to clear the trees for height, which can cause a problem for vehicles in trying to get off the road if they have to — we try to get the overhang up to 4.5 metres within the road corridor. At this juncture we have just done that. It seems to be a grey area over whether you need approval. We are not asking the question.

Poor alignments at intersections: a lot of our intersections are the old Y-type, so you get traffic coming out of valleys and merging at speed. That is a concern. I think a lot of those were established in the horse and buggy days, and nowadays they are there and the cost of reconstruction and realignment is prohibitive.

Other typical problems that occur with country roads are with the large edge drops. Some of those are caused by narrow pavements and difficulties in maintaining the road shoulder, so as you get heavier vehicles going past the wind from the vehicles starts to remove the gravel and then the rain wets it and so you get a process of deterioration. That requires a fairly constant effort to try and keep those to reasonable limits. One of the common things that you will also notice on a lot of rural roads is that as they are upgraded to meet current standards it reduces the amount of space available within the road reserve, so even on fairly significant highways you will see that they will overlay the pavement so much and then virtually cut it off at the edge. Of course the problem with that is that if somebody happens to go off the edge there is a high risk of roll over, which is a fairly high contributor to serious injury.

One of the problems that we have in keeping the roads to a standard is lack of gravel. It is getting more and more difficult to get gravel. The days when you could go onto a property and take gravel are long gone. There is usually an extensive process of negotiation. They have to be registered and have a management plan in place which is appropriate, but it means that we are restricted to trying to establish gravel sources on private property rather than going through all the hoops on Crown land.

Mr EREN — How much gravel road would you have in your shire?

Mr LENAGHAN — We have about 400 kilometres.

Mr EREN — Have there been any major collisions or accidents on those roads?

Mr LENAGHAN — None that spring to mind. There is a degree of feeling in the community that they are so wary of them that they avoid them. The low traffic volumes restrict that, although there are a number of sites where one day it will happen. There is usually one accident per 100 000 or whatever. It takes a while to get to that number.

Mr EREN — What is your view about speed limits on gravel roads?

Mr LENAGHAN — It depends where I am going. I suppose. From a driver’s point of view, I have done a series of tests on a number of roads and found that at 100 kilometres an hour on a sealed road and just braking — fairly heavy braking, but not ridiculous — the distance taken is equivalent to about 80 kilometres an hour on a gravel road. In wet conditions you can drop that by about another 20 kilometres an hour. One of the problems with speed is that it varies with the conditions that arise. There is another section of road in our shire which is a logging route. It is quite curvy. You drive along that and you might start off doing 40 kilometres or 50 kilometres an hour but you soon get seduced into going a little bit faster and faster, and all of a sudden there is a blind corner with a B-double coming the other way and a very steep cross fall. There are a number of those situations throughout the shire.

Mr EREN — So what is your view about speed? Should it stay at 100 kilometres an hour?

The CHAIR — A number of councils have advocated that there should be 80-kilometre-an-hour restrictions on gravel roads.

Mr LENAGHAN — That would not have a great impact on our shire, because I do not think there are many gravel roads where people would be comfortable travelling at 100 kilometres an hour. Likewise, I do not know that it would stop some of the accidents that could happen, because 80 kilometres an hour tends to become
the standard speed. If you go away from this area out west — and I come from an area where there are those sorts of speeds — people will do it just to get places. But if it varies with the road condition, when the road has just been gravelled and there is light moisture in the ground, it is quite safe.

Mr LANGDON — It has been suggested that there not be 80-kilometre-an-hour signs up, but it be a default, like the metropolitan areas are 50 kilometres an hour, it would become the default. You would not actually advertise it as 80 kilometres an hour; it would be the default.

Mr LENAGHAN — It certainly starts to put the road structure into some recognition that there are variations in conditions on them. It would not be an issue for our council to support it, because very few people would travel on our roads at 80 kilometres an hour.

The CHAIR — I am mindful of the time, and I have the benefit of your report in front of me, but I am interested in your thoughts on speed, fatigue and those types of issues.

Mr LENAGHAN — Sorry about that. In driving around the area I do not see many high speed drivers. Most of the people are driving within the speed limit, but I think there is a fixation on the 100 kilometres an hour. What I see is that with modern technology and instantaneous recording and so forth the recommended speed limit should be 90 kilometres an hour, which then allows a 10 per cent vehicle variation plus the 3-kilometre an hour allowance. If people then choose to drive to the 100 kilometres an hour they are working within a much finer tolerance, which means that their concentration levels should be higher or they will get booked. At the current time it is 100 kilometres an hour, and you tend to get into the car and just switch on to that. On most of the trips around our way it is probably 80 kilometres an hour and the difference in arrival time is probably 6 minutes.

If you try to travel at 100 kilometres an hour, fairly rapidly you come up to a slower vehicle, so you are better off and it is a lot less stressful to drop back a few kilometres and not catch up to anyone. That I think is one of the big things in driving in rural Australia as it stands at the moment.

There are a number of factors, though, with speed that I think create quite a bit of frustration in drivers, where you feel that you have to try and make up time — things like roadworks. Under normal conditions we are expected to stop in around about 2½ seconds, and yet when we come to a roadworks site the lead-in goes on and on for ever. We have just had a situation around our way with widening of shoulders where they put the 40-kilometre an-hour speed limit on for the roadworks for up to 4 kilometres, where there is no apparent work being done. They would be working on an isolated site, so a lot of the extension is not, I believe, to protect works or workmen; it is just to save people having to move the signs around as part of the work.

The other thing we come across with speed which I think is important in our area is the speed differential between vehicles using the roads. A lot of people use our roads for cycling. The modern sports cyclists are all on those narrow little tyres, so they cannot move off the road — they can only use the lane width because of punctures — and I think some promotion of cycle safety is to actually take possession of the road. If you try to sit on the edge, you are exposing yourself to a greater risk, especially if somebody comes past with a wide trailer or something like that. The problems that that can cause are a speed differential of up to 80 kilometres an hour. Invariably that can happen where there are double lines, and nobody seems to be able to tell me what the legal action is that you take at that point of time. If you cross the double lines, you are committing an offence — and I believe that is the case.

Just to give you the scenario which relates to the last two, I was recently travelling and I looked in the rear view mirror and there was a police car behind me. We have gone through a roadworks site and curvy road, around a few curves, absolutely nothing has changed from any other day of the week; they have not done any work there yet, and I am thinking, did I miss the sign that said end roadworks or what? And of course next thing in front of me here is a cyclist, there are double lines, and I have got a police car behind me, and you are wondering, ‘What should I do?’.

So I sat there and thought I hope the police are not in a hurry because I am going to stay on 40 kilometres an hour if it takes me to Tallangatta.

Another thing that I think is important, though, is also that drivers need to have a better understanding of some of the policing strategies. We keep reading about this perception that it is all revenue raising and the like, but I think a lot of that comes about because people do not understand what the strategies are behind those sorts of actions. In our area where you have long sections where you cannot overtake, two things tend to happen. One is that the slow vehicles, when they get to a long straight where there are broken lines and it is legal to overtake, invariably speed up to the road limit, so you are held back again, and we also see policing as quite common — the common spots
where they are set up with the radar will be at the end of those sorts of straights, so you start to feel it is bit like shooting ducks in a barrel.

Some of the other aspects of it are just increased education and making drivers more aware of the scenes. I know I find that things like those little white crosses where there has been an accident are a fairly powerful deterrent or powerful warning. I think people need to understand how to read them and not see them just as a memorial but look at the section of road they are on and think somebody was coming along here and was killed. Do you want me to keep going with this, or do you want to ask questions?

**The CHAIR** — Prosecutions are an important matter for us and enforcement, the second-last point.

**Mr LENAGHAN** — What council supports in a lot of our activities is that model of constructive compliance. We have positive education and incentives on one side and what is seen as the negative — the detection, prosecution and penalties — on the other side. Where there is a risk of detection, the degree of that risk will influence people’s behaviour. What happens when you are committing an offence backs up that deterrent, so if you are finding people doing something wrong and nothing happens, people soon just take no notice of it anyway. The risk of prosecution is important as to what percentage of drivers get a warning. We hear sometimes they will get a warning for a first offence or whatever, but in most things I think once people are detected doing something these days they are expecting that they will receive a fine.

The next part of that is what is the appropriate penalty for people committing minor breaches in keeping with the perception of that breach. Probably everybody knows sections of roads where you will see people who think they are complying with everything — the road environment has told them what they are doing — and next thing somebody steps out from behind a tree and says ‘Pull over’, and you can just see their jaw drop.

I think another important aspect is that there needs to be more communication between the police and the road authorities in terms of what are the high booking areas. If it is really a road safety issue and there a lot of bookings in any particular location, I believe it is more than likely that the road environment is contributing to that, and there are some soft things that can be done to create that effect of speed or whatever so people do work within that limit.

**Mr BISHOP** — To fulfil your responsibilities as a municipality in relation to road safety, do you think you have adequate data supplied to you from the police and VicRoads in relation to any crashes that might occur in your municipality?

**Mr LENAGHAN** — No, I do not. We are not sitting down at any forum and taking an objective assessment of what could be done to make it safer in our area. An example of that is that we just received a grant the other day for some edge line marking and so forth on one of the popular motorcycle routes, and as somebody that has ridden a motorbike in the past, I do not think it will make any difference as far as speed goes.

**The CHAIR** — I am mindful of the time. Any there are further questions of Peter?

**Mr BISHOP** — As to the road management bill, in relation to responsibilities that municipalities have, have you had the opportunity to address that?

**Mr LENAGHAN** — We are going through the process of it at the moment. I suppose it will give people a better understanding of just what condition the road is likely to be in. It seems to be setting up more a legal defence than anything else.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Peter. We appreciate your time and your input. As I said before, a transcript will be made available and we will ensure that a copy gets to you in due time.

**Witness withdrew.**
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Bright – 19 February 2004

Members

Mr B. W. Bishop  Mr T. W. Mulder
Mr J. H. Eren  Mr E. G. Stoney
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Chair: Mr I. D. Trezise
Deputy Chair: Mr E. G. Stoney

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officer: Mr P. Nelson

Witness

Mrs M. Wapling.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Mrs Wapling, before you start we need you to sit down and relax. You have heard the whole spiel before. We need you to state your name and address.

Mrs WAPLING — My name is Marie Wapling. I live on the border of the two shires of Alpine and Indigo.

The CHAIR — We need your address.

Mrs WAPLING — My address is Dederang Road, Bruarong.

My first point is whether there are any statistics that indicate what country road deaths are due to the lack of timely medical assistance. Would people have survived if they had had their accident in the city? I am aware of quite a few accidents where the golden hour does not exist. I think that would be an interesting statistic. So many times you hear of country people getting killed on country roads. I say to myself, ‘Yes, I know why’ in lots of situations.

Clive Walker’s submission was excellent. We came home from Beechworth last night and there was a huge tree not 1 metre off the Beechworth to Wodonga Road.

The CHAIR — Mrs Wapling, I am going to jump in. I had a conversation with you before and we talked about the timeliness of emergency services. Would you like to explain what occurred with your daughter?

Mrs WAPLING — My daughter had an accident about 10 kilometres from Myrtleford on the main Myrtleford to Albury-Wodonga road — —

The CHAIR — That was in 1996.

Mrs WAPLING — Yes, 1996. The investigation revealed that she was doing 80 kilometres an hour. We do not know why the accident happened. She was driving into a westerly sun in September, and some locals say that you just cannot see, but that is beside the point; we just do not know. The accident happened at 5.20 p.m. and she arrived at the hospital at 7.30 p.m. They could not get an ambulance.

Mr LANGDON — What were those times?

Mrs WAPLING — They were 5.20 p.m. and 7.30 p.m.

The CHAIR — She rolled her car into a culvert?

Mrs WAPLING — She ran off the road and there is an 8-foot drop. There is no Armco railing; it was just straight off the road. So much of the Myrtleford–Wodonga road is like that. You do not know it is 8 feet until you roll down there, but there is nothing on the side of the road. On the first trip to Melbourne after her accident I looked at all the Armco railing and thought, ‘How come they can have it?’ I really wonder about emergency services at lots of country accidents.

I think road kill is a reasonable problem here. A kangaroo is fairly big on the road, and often on the Beechworth to Wodonga road they come out of Baranduda and you have nowhere to go. It is just two lanes. If you hit road kill, even at 60 kilometres an hour, you are in trouble. The shire always used to pick up road kill, but it does not any more.

Our property is on a reasonably narrow road, but we have a fairly big frontage to the roadway. We have lots of trees on the road due to storms. Often we open one gate to let people drive through the property to get out the other end so they can use the road when there are trees across the road — —

The CHAIR — Put a toll on your gates!

Mrs WAPLING — We have often said that we will go down with a hat. It is a reasonably busy road. It is an alternative road to Falls Creek, and the trees are very close to the road. My husband decided that he would put up a new fence and he would clear the trees on the road reserve. It is an absolute hassle. Not only do we have to pay for a permit, we have to pay royalty for the timber. If he had cleared the trees it would have avoided the shire having to come out and shift them — and they fall over like ninepins. But that was the problem. Consequently, we
have not renewed our fence. He said to them, ‘If our cattle get out on the road as a result of your trees falling over our fence, who is going to be responsible?’. I think that is a big problem.

We went to a firewood availability meeting at Beechworth last night. They were talking about the overhang onto the road of dead branches — and since the drought there are many, and they just drop on the road. The shire could not do anything so it sent DSE out, and DSE said that there was one branch that could be cut down; all the others could stay. The guy said to him, ‘This is ridiculous. These branches are dead; they are hanging over the road and they fall. How would you like your wife to have to drive down this road’. He said, ‘She left me two years ago’. The branches are still hanging over. We had a branch across the road only a week ago. The shire has shifted it and it is now not 1 metre off the road and it is on a bend. It is 15 feet long, and if somebody hits it, it will go from one end of their car to the other, and it is just pushed off the road. People cannot access that and neither can we. I think the restriction of DSE on trees on the side of the road is a disaster, because I do not think we would have as many trees on the road if farmers were allowed to cut down or get the shire to clear the trees that appear to be a hazard.

Thank you very much.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that.

Witness withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Bright – 19 February 2004

Members

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Mr J. H. Eren  Mr E. G. Stoney
Mr A. R. Harkness  Mr I. D. Trezise
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Staff

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Research Officer: Mr P. Nelson

Witness

Mr H. Alker-Jones.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — I am sorry, I have forgotten your name.

Mr ALKER-JONES — My name is Hamish Alker-Jones. Thank you for the opportunity to talk.

The CHAIR — So Hamish, we are going to need —

Mr ALKER-JONES — Full address?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr ALKER-JONES — Unit 2, 16 Kyle Court, Wodonga. I have mainly got some comments based on some of the points that have been raised. I will give you a bit of background. I was in chemical sciences as a research person for a number of years and have now changed to nursing due to lack of emergency services in accidents, which is similar to the point made by Mrs Wapling. I am now doing something about it.

The main concern I have with a lot of things involving crashes is that we seem to be moving away from the fact that owning a vehicle is a privilege and not a right. We need to get back to the fact that we are taking a risk whenever we are on the road and blaming other people is pointless. I realise that legislation, liability and all that sort of stuff makes my argument invalid, but I think it needs to be stated.

Points about fines and how they are more important than education. The previous speaker said that a warning may give a better result. I wonder: how many fines does it take for people to be adequately educated, and those people who have received a fine, have they gone on to receive more fines or lose their licence? Is it a useful way of teaching people? Will money collected from fines be directly used for the betterment of roads in that area or do they just go into a central coffer? That is another thing; people say, ‘It does not help me, it just goes to the government’.

I am a big fan of education. The speed limit sign is the maximum, and nowhere does it specify that a speed sign is that speed at which you have to travel. It is the recommended maximum speed for the best conditions. We need to get back to the whole idea about education; that you drive to the conditions. If it is raining or snowing, you do not do 100 kilometres an hour. If you do, then you need to be educated that it is not the way to do it.

We need to get back to saying that the road is there to be shared, and that courtesy is a big thing. We need to better understand about fatigue, rests, even hydration, drink–driving and drugs. People go on about fatigue only being an issue if you are driving for more than 2 hours. If I have just come off a double shift at a hospital and I have to drive 10 minutes down the road to my mate’s place, I am going to be fatigued.

I have driven when I have been fatigued. It does not happen because I have been driving for 2 hours, it happens due to other events. In my travelling here I have done about 300 kilometres today already, so I was late. I have encountered farm vehicles, livestock, wildlife, road kill, tree branches, tyre debris, and I am driving in unfamiliar terrain, but I still made it here. I think it all comes down to driving for the conditions and being aware.

The speed differential is an excellent thing. If we start designating having extra lanes for bikes and everyone else, does that not detract from the whole thing about the fact that it is a privilege and not a right? We have to get back to courtesy. We need to get people to understand the road rules. Speeding up when you are being overtaken is illegal. It is education again. If you come to a lane where another car has been behind you — you look behind and there are three or four cars — you can either do the courteous thing and pull over and let them get past or wait for them to go past. You are not being inconvenienced. You have been travelling at 80 kilometres an hour for the last three hours; doing 100 kilometres for the pace of a couple of kilometres is just quite annoying.

I have some comments on motorcycling. I am a keen motorcyclist and have been riding for a number of years. There is a fair perception that think we are all ratbags, that we all speed, and that we have cannot learn. My wife is also a motorcyclist and she is a charge nurse — someone who has seen the effects of carnage. That is probably a fair perception. But a lot of things need to be considered. Motorcycles travel fast. They are designed to lean into corners, and in corners you have debris, gravel, road kill and all these things that can be detrimental. Also, the problem on country roads in particular is that you get large vehicles towing caravans that perhaps are travelling too fast for the road, and they come across the road and run motorcyclists off the road. That has happened to me a number of times, particularly around the Hume weir going towards Corryong. You come into a corner and a car
does not see that you are there, and they go wide and you are left with nowhere to go. You either brake very heavily, go into armco, or you actually start thinking about the situation and look ahead.

The reason that a lot of motorcyclists tend to not have the same easy-to-follow statistics as other crashes is that motorcyclists when they travel do not like to do straight roads. They like to travel around, they like to do big loops, they enjoy the whole getting away from the city thing. I like to attend rallies. For those who are not familiar with rallies, that is basically where you travel to a destination and you celebrate camping, lifestyle and travelling about on you motorcycle. So quite often travelling along the Hume is not an option. You travel the back roads, you go to the back pubs, you stay the night in pubs. You meet up with your mates. It is a very social thing.

I think unfortunately a lot of problems that we do have with motorcyclists and car drivers and any other road users is a lack of education. The way things are going now in Victoria and New South Wales, to get a licence is becoming more and more rigorous. You cannot just walk in like I did a number of years ago, do a paper test and you have got your licence. I had experience on a farm before I rode on the roads, so I had some advantage over other people, but in order to get back to it is a privilege and not a right, I think education is the way to go.

That is about all I have to say. Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate you guys considering that country drivers and country people are very special.

Witness withdrew.
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Witness

Mr P. Tracey, Porepunkah.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
Mr TRACEY — Phillip Tracey, 6910 the Great Alpine Road, Porepunkah. As you can see, I am a victim of a road accident in the country. On the Shepparton–Benalla Road some 30-odd years ago, I was travelling in a panel van. I was asleep in the back of the van. We ran off the road at a V — the road veed, so we veered off to the right and the main road kept going to Benalla. We hit the gravel, supposedly. I am not too sure what did happen exactly. We hit the build-up of gravel in the middle, the car became airborne for 167 feet and hit a lamp post 12 feet in the air and snapped it off and moved it 12 to 14 inches in the ground. Upon impact I was thrown out of the vehicle and broke my neck. Whether I broke it on impact in the vehicle or when I hit the ground, nobody knows, but I did not have a mark on me, and that was how I ended up in the chair.

Since then I have been pretty active and had a pretty good life. I am a past president of Wheelchair Sports Victoria and had probably 15 years as president, and have since moved up here in the last couple of years and am still a director of Wheelchair Sports. In that time from, say, 1981 to now, we have run an accident education awareness program where we speak to kids in the schools and we would probably do 200 to 300 schools a year, both metropolitan and rural.

The CHAIR — How are you funded?

Mr TRACEY — We are not. We are self-funded, and we have a program where we put five or six speakers a year through our program, and then they are allocated jobs within their areas or within their rural district. We have somebody in Wodonga. We have regional branches established in Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Shepparton and Wodonga, and we have just opened in the Latrobe Valley. Basically my plea is education, and having been involved in it from day 1 and having spoken at numerous schools, I know the benefit of it. We also break it up so that it is not all deadly serious. We take out a trailer with wheelchairs, and we get the kids interacting in the chairs to get a feeling of what it is like and what life would be for them if they ended up in that situation.

Mr EREN — What was the name of your organisation?

Mr TRACEY — Wheelchair Sports Victoria.

The CHAIR — What are the issues you cover in your school sessions?

Mr TRACEY — basically that it can happen to you. Most of the speakers are victims of road accidents. I could tell you hundreds of stories of how people have ended up in wheelchairs as a result of motorcycles, cars, you name it. Basically it comes back to the fact that there is a hell of a lot of money raised but none of it goes really into education. I have been involved with TAC over a period of time. They sponsored our national games in 1994, but it took a long time to be able to convince them that we were working hand in hand, not their prevention. We are saying if it does happen to you, life goes on, and they are responsible for the people whose lives go on. So if we can make the people who have the accidents more independent and with more self-esteem, that cuts down on the costs that TAC have to provide them for the rest of theirs lives. It basically comes back to education in the schools at a young age. It is like smoking; it is alcohol awareness. It is all those things. If you can get to the people young enough, they do not have a problem.

The CHAIR — Do you go into both primary schools and secondary colleges?

Mr TRACEY — Yes. And another part of that in which I was involved is in the Western District. They have a road safety week, and I think I have been involved with Portland, Hamilton and Warrnambool, and in that lead-up week I used to go down and do all the schools in that area leading up to the parade in the street with all the emergency service vehicles and the police. That is probably a great program. I think at the time the Western District had the highest number of fatalities in the 18 to 25-year-old bracket.

Mr BISHOP — I am a great supporter of education in the schools in relation to this issue. Can I ask you what sort of response you get out of the students when you go and talk to them?

Mr TRACEY — They are very open. They will ask questions. They want to know everything about how you live your life, what you were before. They are very interested. Some of it must get through because they treat you as an equal; they do not see any difference even though hopefully they take the message on board that it can possibly happen to them or anybody. A lot of the statistics that I used to be able to quote were from the police, and I think one that jumps out after last year’s statistic was that there were 87 people in single-vehicle accidents that ran off the road and were killed hitting trees or poles. That seems to be a figure that is growing but no one really knows
why. Two doors from where I live now a young lady was killed at Myrtleford. She had come through the worst bend and was coming into Myrtleford and ran into that first poplar tree. She had an 18-month-old baby in the car. She was returning from the bushfires after they had finished and she was pregnant at the same time, so three lives were lost in that accident. It was tragic. I used to see her the coming along with the pusher and every time I go past that tree I think that it should never have happened.

Mr STONEY — You said that the Transport Accident Commission sponsored the games.

Mr TRACEY — Yes.

Mr STONEY — But it is not interested in perhaps sponsoring the program that you run in the schools? Have you approached it on that?

Mr TRACEY — We have in the past. It depends on the personnel. Back when we got the sponsorship I knew the CEO, John Stanway, very well. That helped me get my message through to him. But since the change in CEO — I cannot think of the guy’s name — but he came in and the whole philosophy changed. It was not interested in an ongoing thing. We did get some money — I think it was $5000 — through the police program. I am just trying to think who the minister was, although I do not think he is there any more; I think he retired. That is about the only funding we get. Our program costs us over $80 000 a year to run, and we have run it from 1981 to the present, and it is getting harder and harder to continue to run it because we also pay for the speakers to go out and do it, so we run a vehicle and somebody in the office coordinates it.

Mr STONEY — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Before we finish, I suggest you contact Mr David Healy, who is the general manager, road safety at TAC. Mention that you have made your presentation today and that we have suggested that you talk to him about some possible funding.

Mr STONEY — I am very surprised that TAC would not pick up that program. It seems to be a wonderful program because it is a living proof of — —

Mr TRACEY — We have put submissions to them in the past.

The CHAIR — I am mindful of the time, so thanks very much, Philip.

Witness withdrew.
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Witness

Cr K. Klemm;
Mr B. Murdoch, Manager, Design Services;
Mr P. Tucker, Engineering/Contract Manager; and
Mr M. Sanders, Senior Engineering Officer, Wangaratta Rural City Council.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — We welcome the Wangaratta Rural City Council. We appreciate your time and your input into our inquiry. We are taking a transcript of the proceedings and we will provide the council with a copy in due course. Given that this is a parliamentary committee you are subject to parliamentary privilege, which means that what you say cannot be held against you legally into the future. I am also mindful of the time as we have had a couple of add-ons as we have gone along, so we have a relatively tight time line. Having said that, feel free; you have obviously gone to a fair bit of trouble in providing us with your submission.

Mr MURDOCH — May I introduce Cr Keiran Klemm. Cr Klemm holds the portfolio of infrastructure and assets. Paul Tucker is our bridge engineer. Malcolm Sanders is road engineer, and my name is Brian Murdoch, I am the manager of the design services unit.

I have distributed a general map of the municipality showing the total road network; it is nothing more than that. You have a copy of what we are about to present on the screen and I have also provided you with a copy of our roadside management strategy.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that.

Overheads shown.

Mr MURDOCH — Just a few brief notes. The Rural City of Wangaratta has an area of over 3500 square kilometres. We were created from three former councils plus portions of three others. There are some statistics on our annual expenditure; rates and charges. There are eight councillors.

On the infrastructure profile, we have 1142 kilometres of gravel road — if you stretch it in one line that is from Melbourne to Port Macquarie. We have 301 kilometres of formed road — that is simply Melbourne to Wodonga in a line, and so on down the list. There is 710 kilometres of sealed local roads, which would get you from Wangaratta to Newcastle. We have numerous bridges, 365 in total but unfortunately — and I think that is the right word — 54 of those are still timber bridges and are very much in a sorry state as to width and everything else. We need $28 million to replace all our bridges.

The next slide is a bit hard to read, and we might have to refer to the handout. I have collated five years of available accident statistics. They are, of course, reported accident statistics. There have been 127 in our municipality in that five-year period. If we go to the next page — —

Mr LANGDON — Just before you go to the next page, I am intrigued by your statistics here. It says: 18 collisions, 10 trees. I would not have thought that trees were a problem on a freeway but you are indicating that they are.

Mr MURDOCH — I am inclined to agree with your comments, sir, but that is what the printout tells us — trees were involved. They may have been where the central median is quite wide. You get vehicles leaving the southbound lane, for example, careering across that central median to the northbound — —

Mr LANGDON — We have been having some conjecture on the issue of embankments. That is where a car hits an embankment or a car goes over an embankment?

Mr MURDOCH — It is hitting where the road is incut, where the road leaves the sealed portion. It is in a cutting and it collides with the cliff face, shall we say.

Mr STONEY — What do you call it when a car rolls down a hill which is also classed as an embankment? Is that just a run off the road?

Mr MURDOCH — We try to extract from the data that the statistics gave us by punching in key words, the word ‘object’, where the car ended up against an object. If it simply somersaulted, ended up on its roof or back on its wheels, it is not shown in the stats.

The CHAIR — Interestingly, you have the statistics on the next page, that 50 per cent of your accidents are running into trees.

Mr MURDOCH — Or trees are involved, yes.
Mr SANDERS — It may not be your initial cause, but that is the end result.

Mr MURDOCH — It is certainly not the initial reason, and although the trees demonstrate the high percentage, 50 per cent, as to the last comment there, of course there are many more trees per kilometre to run into than bridges.

Mr EREN — What is the population of Wangaratta?

Mr MURDOCH — Wangaratta municipal population is around 25 000. Fifteen plus of that is urban Wangaratta and 9000 to 10 000 in the rural area. That leads the presentation into the roadside management strategy and a copy, as I have indicated, has been provided to you. The main objective is to preserve native vegetation and habitat while accommodating the users of the roads.

Mr BISHOP — That brings up the obvious question: how do you that?

Cr KLEMM — If I could just comment there, I have been a councillor for four years, and before coming on council, I sat on the roadside management strategy. We came from poles apart. I am a farmer by trade, and the conservationists wanted to come out with a document. I know certain sections of the roadway where they had trimmed trees — I think it is part of the Great Alpine Road just out of Wangaratta — they had trimmed them above the road, and the conservationists were shattered by that experience. But when they trimmed them, they found that they had great big hollow limbs and were not safe. But there is still a lot more that can be done.

I will take the opportunity here, and I was telling the other three on the way up, that we got one letter — quite a lengthy submission at that stage — and this chap in the finish quoted, ‘People are a part of the environment and they need to be considered’. Sometimes we hear the environment people think it is only the little animals and the birds and the trees and everything, and when that chap signed his name, which I am not quoting, he also signed his qualifications. He was a Master of Environmental Science. And I think it is worthy to note someone who has gone and got a Master of Environmental Science can recognise and try and put the perspective back that people have to be considered as part of the environment too. Unfortunately, in this day and age with all political parties, everything has to look to be green with governments. I am not against that, but we still have to be considered, too, and I think that is what we are about.

Mr MURDOCH — The five main objectives of our strategy aspect are protection of indigenous vegetation, rare or threatened flora or fauna, cultural or heritage, community assets and the travelling public. So our strategy does pick up on the people aspect. Working through there, we have objectives for maintaining, objectives for enhancing, and objectives for minimisation.

Mr BISHOP — Can you go back to the one before? On the safety function of the road, you do a safety audit?

Mr MURDOCH — On many of our designs we do an audit of our design before we try to build it. We do a post-construction audit when it has been built.

Mr BISHOP — Say, for example, there was a tree there that you thought was unsafe on the road, what is your process now?

Mr MURDOCH — We tend to have our audits done by outside specialists. We do not do them in-house, naturally, and we would have the expectation that that audit would pick up if the tree was a problem in its own health, or whether it was inside the clearance zones, and that it would be earmarked for removal.

The CHAIR — Would you have a problem removing that tree through the process of planning?

Mr MURDOCH — Sometimes. We are coming to one example in this demonstration that will very much highlight that.

Mr SANDERS — We do have an arborist on staff in our council who has got his qualifications, so if he comes out and looks at the health of the tree, we can then explain to the DSE where we are going if we have an issue.

The CHAIR — So we are probably jumping the gun on this.
Mr MURDOCH — The current situation in our municipality — and I think this is pretty much everywhere — is that remnant native bushland now mostly only exists on our local road network, and you will see from our strategy there that 70 per cent of our rural roads are either medium or high conservation value. Less than 5 per cent would be deemed to be actually treeless. That is not coming up very well on the screen, but that was just a way of indicating cleared pastures and the road network.

Cr KLEMM — If I could comment there, when I was looking at this on the way up and I recognised that aerial photo that has been put together by the staff, I said, ‘On that aerial shot alone, I can name two spots where there have been fatalities up against trees’. Fair enough, it might be over 10, 15 years, but that is not a very big area. It is almost in my home locality, so my concern is the solid large object that is too close to the road.

Mr MURDOCH — Just briefly touching on our road hierarchy, council has adopted some plans for both rural and urban areas. They are the fairly standard road classifications that most councils use. With the assignment of any particular road to a category, they are the criteria that assist us in our classification. This slide is on the TIRES funded work, which I will have Mal Sanders speak to. This is specifically relevant to the tree removal situation.

Mr SANDERS — My background is that I have had 30 years in roadworks, of which 26 were with VicRoads. I have been with council for four years. I have always been a country boy. I was born and bred around the area. When the TIRES program came on board in Wangaratta, one particular road was earmarked for 100 000 tonnes of timber to be extracted per year. So this road was one of the first funded. Funds were allocated in October and were announced by the minister, so we could really not do much before then. We did our planning, did our survey, did our works, and that was when we defined how many trees would be a hazard to the traffic volume along that particular road.

We put in our planning application for 50 green trees, some dry trees and some stumps. That only attained a $3\frac{1}{2}$ metre clearance along the edge of the seal. We did not get a permit until March, which meant we lost the window of construction when we had a contract advertised. Tree clearing and drainage are the two early things you do in road construction, so it really stopped the whole contract from getting on site, which pushed it into the winter, but our tree permit came through for 17 trees, a couple of dry trees and a couple of stumps. That left us with a clearance of only 2.3 metres from the edge of the seal. So that is what the road now consists of. The road has been finished, and those issues are just frustrating.

This is just an example of what we have done. This is the particular road in question where we were asked to retain a tree. It was retained within the 2.3 metres and was only 1.8 metres so we put up a piece of guardrail. It is a new design guardrail that has a collapsible end so when you hit it square on, it rolls the end away. We were unable to put the normal rollaway one on because if you look at the bottom view there, we had a triple-cell culvert and were unable to attach any posts to the top of the culvert. So the butt end arrangement was done but it is more expensive. Where the drain had to come around in front of the tree, we tried to — —

Mr LANGDON — Back with the other photograph, you have protected that one tree. Would it not be logical to plant other trees behind it so that in years to come you may be able to remove it?

Mr SANDERS — We have a problem in that we had a 1-chain road reserve and legally the farmer is allowed to clear trees within 1 metre of the farm fencing. We only had about 1.5 metres from the table drain to his fence. So it is not the right thing to do to plant more trees in the 1.5 metres that is left because you have still got to maintain the drain. Where the drain had to come around in front of the trees, I threw a pipe in the drain and filled the pipe over with dirt so the drain was not so close to the edge of the seal. I was able to extend the culverts into the tree line so any areas where people could run off, where there were no trees, we provided a safety culvert head wall that was flush with the road.

There are a couple of other jobs we have built in the last two years. One is an intersection treatment where we have again installed the butt-ended rail — which is shown on the top slide — because we have a table drain there and you cannot have a swing away flared end as on the bottom slide. The tapered flared end has been the standard. This new design has come out. It is $3000 per end without installation costs, so once you put a few of those up — just for the purchase of that roll away end.

The CHAIR — Absolutely.
Mr SANDERS — But as Brian said, we have still got a lot of rural roads out in the flat country which are straight as a gun barrel. In our square mile area, we have hilly roads in our southern area and we cannot do anything with the trees. We have to try and build the road around them and as traffic increases the road needs to be wider and recently we had a serious accident.

Mr STONEY — The middle photograph with the tree right on the road — the road is virtually going around the tree.

Mr SANDERS — Yes.

Mr STONEY — Would you like to take that tree out?

Mr SANDERS — No. I think I would like to shift the road across. The tree is very healthy and as you can see it is probably 2 metres in diameter. We have a bit of road reserve on this particular road to be able to put a twist in the road.

Mr STONEY — You have got another one further down the road.

Mr SANDERS — We are happy to put a bend in the road, but with all these things, where do you start and where do you finish?

The CHAIR — A number of councils have advocated 80 kilometres-an-hour restrictions on gravel roads. I would be interested in the council’s thoughts on that issue.

Mr SANDERS — We have been through the best-value review of our road maintenance, and perhaps Cr Klemm might like to elaborate there.

Cr KLEMM — Thank you, Malcolm. My view on the 80 kilometres-an-hour limit is that once you start putting a limit on, people will think they can drive at 80 kilometres an hour on any dirt road. While there is a Victorian state limit, you know that you have to drive according to conditions.

Mr LANGDON — What if you made it the default, like the 50 kilometres an hour? What if you made it an 80 kilometres-an-hour default?

Cr KLEMM — I always say that it is a double whammy for country people. Not only are you not getting a sealed road, but it is going to take you a lot longer to get there anyway. You can drive safely at 100 kilometres an hour on certain dirt roads. Other times if they are wet or very dry and the gravel becomes loose, you might be down to 50 kilometres an hour or 60 kilometres an hour. I believe it is a part of driver experience and education. I do not think we can use laws to protect everybody from everything. It has got to come back to a bit of education and making sure that people conform.

Mr EREN — I noticed the last photograph where somebody has been killed —

Mr SANDERS — That is correct.

Mr EREN — Do we know why that accident occurred? Was it a consequence of speed?

Mr SANDERS — We suspect speed and overloading and he may have been drowsy, but he finished up on the wrong side of the road —

Mr EREN — That is a gravel road?

Mr SANDERS — It is a gravel road, yes. There are a lot of trees along the road. The top photo is the same road. Trees vary from 1 to 3 metres off the road but he had a very heavy trailer behind his vehicle on that day.

Cr KLEMM — It was not a once-off. He was very familiar with what he was driving and what he was towing. He was fairly familiar with the road. The police have gone through the vehicle for a second time trying to ascertain whether there may have been something mechanical or it may have just been a lapse of concentration. Once you have veered off a little bit objects come up very quickly.
Mr SANDERS — During the drought period last year — there have been two dry summers really — we found it difficult to keep our roads free of loose material. The expectation is that there is no loose material, but in reality a gravel road will have loose material and it generally gets thrown to the side depending on the width — you may have wheel tracks. It only happened a month or so ago and there was very little loose gravel on this particular road. You could kick your foot and you would not kick away more than 10 or 15 stones. We have those issues and we do not know how to deal with them. We cannot water our roads to grade them in the summer time and they have all got trees along the side.

We do some mowing at intersections. We have a lot of accidents at intersections that may not hit objects, but we do a lot of mowing in Wangaratta at our intersections as part of our normal maintenance to try to mow out the sight triangle.

The CHAIR — So that is for vision?

Mr SANDERS — For vision, yes. It helps at night because you can see the headlights. In the day time it is you or the other car.

Any new roadworks that we have done in Wangaratta in recent times have been done by contract. We do a little bit with our own resources but it is all designed, and that shows examples of some recent works where we have got the light pole behind the guardrail. The guardrail is the swing-away, breakaway post arrangement. The bottom shot shows recent T-junction works done with funding under the black spot funding program, not with council funds. We have made the road a T-junction and put street lighting up. It is a state-of-the-art T-junction intersection. Unfortunately, it had an accident history and we were able to get funding.

Mr EREN — With the electricity poles, how is the cooperation between the electricity companies and council when you have a problem in terms of an electric light pole such as this? Do they contribute to any of the cost of putting up any railing? Have you asked them?

Mr MURDOCH — I am not sure that we have specifically asked. If the audit of the design works says that there should be an Armco rail around the post, we include it in the scope of work.

Mr EREN — So you have not contacted them to say, ‘Can you move this light pole? If not, we need to put a rail on it, and will you contribute towards that cost?’. Have you made that approach?

Mr MURDOCH — There are occasions where we have pursued some contribution, but in my experience it is not very often forthcoming.

Mr STONEY — Can you explain the slip-based lighting pole?

Mr SANDERS — The slip-based pole usually has four bolts done up to a particular tension with a piece of thin metal between two plates. It physically sheers out. It is not in holes: the top plate is in holes, the bottom plate is open slots, so it does not matter in which direction you hit it, when the vehicle hits it at normal bumper bar height the bolts are loose enough to allow the piece of tin to be sheered away from the steel plate underneath. There has to be a particular tension on those nuts at the time of erection. They do work. In most cases the pole will come down over the top of the car; it is still a breakaway object. There are breakaway electrical fittings in there which mean that you will not get electrocuted. There are no live wires on the ground.

Overheads shown.

Cr KLEMM — On the bottom slide there, those poles are for the lighting of the intersection.

Mr STONEY — Are those poles suitable to carry high tension wires?

Mr SANDERS — No, they are not. I have been involved with Vicroads who installed lots of these, and you really have to be quite careful. You are installing at below the sump of your car level, so they must not stick up more than 150 millimetres; otherwise it gets caught on the underside of your vehicle, so it is important that nobody comes and overfills it or takes away dirt from around it either. The tensions are important on the four nuts. As far as roadworks go, we have a lot of bridges and Paul will discuss those.
Mr TUCKER — The top slide there is a little bit difficult to see, but indicates a quite recent accident site where the bridge was protected with the steel guard fencing. The car skidded off the road to the right-hand side, and there was a very large tree just to the right-hand side of the photograph. The guard railing was very badly damaged in the accident. All the anchorages broke, but it stopped the car from hitting the tree and also stopped the car from going into the creek. The driver was uninjured in that accident. But about 10 years ago the site in the top photograph had railing similar to the photograph in the bottom, which is just timber railing with horizontal members. There was a fatality there about 10 years ago where the driver was impaled by the timber railing. So at that particular site, after that first accident, the railing was replaced with the steel guard fence.

The steel guard fence in itself can be a hazard if it is impacted by a vehicle travelling in the wrong direction. It can still penetrate. But an installation like the one in the top photograph would probably cost about $20,000. Probably the minimum cost to install a guard fence on a bridge on four corners with a minimum length would be $10,000.

Mr STONEY — Can you recoup that from the motorist who destroyed that guardrail?

Mr TUCKER — You could try. It will depend on the circumstances of the accident — whether there were any charges to be laid, such as culpable driving or dangerous driving and also whether there was any insurance cover. In that particular one at the top, the council will be attempting to recover the repairs costs, but there is no guarantee that they will be forthcoming.

Mr STONEY — I understand the power companies try and recover costs, too?

Mr TUCKER — It is a sort of standard process, you try and recover from the people who caused the accident.

The top photograph shows the bridge that existed about 18 months ago. It was an all-timber structure with very weak timber railing, again dangerous railing, no strength there to retain any vehicle from going over into the creek, and it has the dangerous horizontal members that would cause impaling. The bridge was replaced to that in the photograph underneath, and at that stage the railing is being installed to current standards, so the railing is strong enough to retain a normal vehicle on the bridge if it becomes errant, and also the extension beyond the bridge protects vehicles from going off the road and going down into the creek. It would not be structurally possible to install the railing in the bottom photograph onto a bridge of the condition in the top one. You really have to do major structural works.

The CHAIR — How many examples of those bridges at the top would you still have?

Mr TUCKER — We would probably have about 54 in that situation, but there are many more which you will see shortly that have unprotected railings. There is an example here. The top photograph is a recently constructed bridge within Wangaratta itself. It replaced an old, narrow, weak timber bridge. It has quite strong barrier railings on the bridge, but the concrete end post has been protected from impact by installing a steel guardrail. That is a current standard, and bridges would be built to that standard.

The lower photograph is a similar type of bridge built in about probably the mid-1960s. At the time there was no guard fence connected to the bridge because there were low traffic volumes at that time. The risk of going into the creek which is normally dry probably was not considered to be too bad, but you always have that impact danger of the actual solid concrete post. So again to protect that bridge from impact onto the concrete post would be at least $10,000. There are numerous bridges in that condition throughout Victoria.

Mr MURDOCH — I have briefly touched on our rail trail shared-pathway network. Stage 1 is completed. Stages 2 and 3 await funding. Council also in its wisdom has adopted a rural bicycle path strategy where in that sort of terminology there we consider Wangaratta as the hub, the rail trail from the old disused trails out of Wangaratta as the spokes, and our bicycle strategy now provides the circumferential links from the hamlet towns to those rail trails, but we are struggling for money there.

Mr STONEY — Who do you apply to or have you applied for those other two links? Do you have applications in?

Mr MURDOCH — They are in the pipeline, yes.

Mr STONEY — Has the rail trail project been a success financially in getting cyclists off the road?
Mr SANDERS — It has certainly been a success to a degree over the public holiday weekends. I am not too sure about during the week. At weekends when there is an event on, and a lot of bikes come up during school holidays; school groups bring a load of bikes up. It certainly reduces over the holiday period. I am not sure about the odd cyclist. They tend to get a bit lonely out there riding. They tend to want to ride up the Great Alpine Road. It has improved, but it is not a total success.

Mr STONEY — You mean for keeping people off the road?

Mr SANDERS — No, it is not a total success.

Mr TUCKER — Certainly recreational cyclists will use the rail trail, but professional cyclists, racing bike riders, stay on the road.

Mr STONEY — I think it was always intended that it was more for recreational or mountain bikes.

Mr MURDOCH — We want the cyclists to use it, because it is one thing to get the funding to build it, but the maintenance costs rest with council, and if there is no use, nature can take back the trail.

That is a not so clear slide that attempts to show that circumferential suggestion; and in the last slide, council has some guidelines out which specifically cover roadside mail boxes, which again are potential missiles or projectiles should people stray off the straight and narrow and clean up a mail box or two, so we are attempting to control that by having frangible bases or asking for frangible bases similar to those electric poles.

Mr STONEY — I assume part of that would be to have the mailman pulling off the road to put the mail in as well?

Mr MURDOCH — Yes, a lot of the Australia Post mail contractors do not like to leave the vehicle and they drive down the wrong side of the road to effect deliveries on that side.

The CHAIR — Can you enforce these guidelines or are they guidelines that people can comply with?

Mr MURDOCH — They are guidelines for gentle persuasion.

Cr KLEMM — I would like to add a comment. Council has gone on with pretty well full recycling and garbage collection through the whole municipality. It is not compulsory yet, but it is possibly not far off being compulsory. A lot of people who partake of the service, we found in some places, even get the garbage trucks up certain roads to get even an overhead clearance so that they are not knocking their amber lights off the top. We have run into a bit of a problem with that, and I suppose my view, being a councillor, and I always try to be a realist, is that if we have a tree that is a problem — and as has been stated we have an arborist on board now — we should be allowed to go and either lop that tree to give a safety clearance or if it is a faulty tree on the side that is going to be dropping limbs or something, surely we should be respected enough to be the body to make a decision without bringing in catchment and DSE et cetera. That is one thing that has frustrated me. As I stated before, being a primary producer we see a lot more use being made of double-decker stock crates for cattle.

The operators tell me that they can go along a road where they think there is enough clearance. They go along a bit later in the day when there has been some rain and the clearance has come down possibly by 1 or 2 feet. At the last minute if a truck is coming towards you and he thinks he is going to collect something, he finishes up swerving on the road. So I think it is up to us as councillors or people responsible for the roadway — whether it be Vicroads or whoever else — to give adequate clearance above the road. Within the guidelines where it has been accepted in a lot of cases that the roadway is nice and shaded, we have to protect it at all costs. As well as that, farming has changed so there is bigger machinery. Gone are the days when every primary producer had his little plant. Contractors are now coming in with bigger machinery if they are cropping. Technically the original roadways were there to service properties but needs have changed. That was not envisaged years ago. I think we have to try and accommodate them.

Mr BISHOP — My question is to Keiran. The road management bill is probably coming up in this session of Parliament, and I am mindful of the presentation that Brian ran through showing that you have 54 bridges like the one you showed with the wooden rails. How far along the track are you as a municipality in addressing the risk profile relative to bridges, trees and things like that?
Cr KLEMM — We have tried to get to two or three bridges each year since we have had the Roads to Recovery funding. I think we have been getting about $916 000 a year for the last four years and we now have a promise that that will keep coming. We are also aware that with that coming from the federal government the state might back off from its funding. Just driving around the municipality I certainly recognise that a lot of things are not being achieved. Funding does not seem to keep up with inflation. I do not think we can tax our ratepayers much more, so it is a catch 22 situation to try to get our infrastructure back to the stage where we would say it is safe. We have certainly done an audit on all our bridges and roads, and we know that we have got to spend a lot of money to try to make them safe, and that is without getting to other roadside hazards like trees. If we have to put steel guard railing around them, as Brian showed on that TIERES-funded road, while you are doing that you are not delivering other things. So we can handle all the funds we can get quite well. We are still going to be playing catch-up football for quite a while to get the infrastructure up to the level we would like.

Mr BISHOP — Can I just chase that one bit further? I am really talking about the proposed removal of nonfeasance in relation to local government. I am asking: are you a fair way along the path to having a look at that because we are concerned that this bill will be there and it will certainly affect a large number of organisations, including yourselves?

Cr KLEMM — It is an issue that we are dealing with. Would you like to comment on that, Malcolm?

Mr SANDERS — I have been involved with setting some parameters which we will have up for public display by 1 July. We have one full-time person on that and we have been liaising with the shires of Moira, Delatite and Indigo to try and have a uniform set of rules. We will scrape in but only just with our list of roads and the condition that we intend to try and keep them at.

Mr MURDOCH — We have a staff member — an assets manager — whom we did not bring today. That is his baby.

Mr HARKNESS — I am very interested in what type of educational or promotional campaigns or programs council or other groups in the area are running, but also whether council has employed or intends to employ a road safety officer.

Mr MURDOCH — We have a person — Mike Walsh — who is on next.

The CHAIR — Right, we will talk to Mike about that then.

Mr LANGDON — You did not mention fatigue in your submission. You said that one accident may possibly have been caused by it. Do you believe it is an effect in your area?

Cr KLEMM — Yesterday, at a meeting of the north-east Roadsafe Committee, which Mike might speak on shortly, the police were talking about driving 2 hours out of Melbourne and city drivers not being used to that. That is where it is starting to impact. We are looking to highlight — and I hope I am not stealing anything that Mike might be putting forward — the coffee breaks at holiday weekends when the SES set up the coffee breaks and highlight how far ahead the next one is going to be. We certainly talked about a few catchphrases that Vicroads might look to put on the signs to highlight that fatigue is there after 2 hours. I think I have heard the same thing from other police coming south. Once people get onto the Hume Highway, after the section on the New South Wales side that is not yet duplicated, they go along quite well, they might have cruise control on their trucks and they get as far down as the Benalla to Euroa area and they feel that even transport operators might be fatigued.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your input. We will provide you with a copy of the transcript in due course. We appreciate you time.

The CHAIR — Before we hear from the next witness, I welcome to the public gallery the member for Benalla, Bill Sykes.

Witnesses withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Bright – 19 February 2004

Members

Mr B. W. Bishop  Mr T. W. Mulder
Mr J. H. Eren  Mr E. G. Stoney
Mr A. R. Harkness  Mr I. D. Trezise
Mr C. A. C. Langdon

Chair: Mr I. D. Trezise
Deputy Chair: Mr E. G. Stoney

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officer: Mr P. Nelson

Witness

Mr M. Walsh, North East Community Road Safety Council.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Welcome Mike. We are taking a transcript and will provide you with a copy of it. You are subject to parliamentary privilege which means that what you say cannot be held legally against you in the future. We look forward to your presentation.

Mr WALSH — I really have not prepared anything on a laptop or anything like that, but yesterday the road safety council had a meeting where we discussed some of the issues that Alex prepared for me in regard to the inquiry into the country road toll. We are located in the north–east of Victoria. We are on the Hume Highway and fatigue is an issue up our way. In the past and also presently we liaise with Victoria Police and also motels and service centres along the Hume Highway, and we hand out fatigue vouchers through the police and government departments for drivers travelling along the highway, whether they are going down to Melbourne for business or up to Sydney for business or holidays or whatever. On the fatigue vouchers we offer 20 per cent discount on accommodation and free cups of coffee at the service centres.

We have found they work well, and when the police pull over someone who may have been speeding, they lessen the blow a bit by handing out a fatigue voucher. So we have done a fair bit of research about fatigue. We have information about fatigue on those vouchers. We have had close liaison with a guy named Drew. I cannot think of his second name off the top of my head, but he has done studies that show driving while drowsy equates to driving drunk, and that sort of information is on the fatigue vouchers.

The CHAIR — Are those fatigue vouchers introduced in other areas as well?

Mr WALSH — Other road safety councils have taken that issue up, and I know the Horsham and Gippsland road safety councils have something similar. Obviously people like McDonalds who have service centres along those highways are quite happy to get people to come in, and they are happy to give them a free cup of coffee because obviously there are add-ons as far as they might buy a hamburger, or at the service centres they might buy something to drink.

Mr STONEY — The individual service station wears it?

Mr WALSH — They are happy to give the free cup of coffee. We have the Gold Chain of moteliers involved with this set of vouchers and have asked if they can give some more discount, so be it, depending on their availability of rooms. It is a hard issue to attack, but as Karen alluded to before, our policemen at the road safety council yesterday were saying that they are generally finding that after 2 hours people should be having a break, and they can tell by the attitude when they are talking to them on the Hume Freeway. You probably will not notice it so much in the summer months, but when you travel up the Hume Freeway in the winter, you see the runoffs into the middle section of the Hume Freeway and you see truck tyres and car tyres, and things like that.

The CHAIR — How would you describe the roadside rest areas?

Mr WALSH — I think they are terrific. They are very good. The only thing is I have a wife and young daughter. I do not know at night-time whether I would be encouraging them to stop there. But if you have to stop, you have to stop. Obviously in summer you want a bit of shade if it is hot, so I do not know what the answer is there as far as making them perhaps less — —

The CHAIR — Making them more attractive.

Mr WALSH — I do not know what we can do about that. Obviously during the daytime it is okay.

Mr HARKNESS — Which municipalities does north-east roadsafe cover?

Mr WALSH — We cover five. We have Towong, Alpine, Indigo, the Rural City of Wangaratta and parts of the Moira shire. And now we have Benalla and Mansfield, so we picked those up with that split up there. It does cover a fair bit. To be honest, I am 0.5 in my job and I do find it hard to reach everybody.

The CHAIR — You are employed by Vicroads?

Mr WALSH — I am employed by Vicroads 0.5, and I am also employed by the Rural City of Wangaratta as a community development officer, with a focus on safety, so obviously my jobs cross over a little bit.

The CHAIR — Has it always been 0.5?
Mr WALSH — Yes, it has always been 0.5. It was 0.5 in north-east Victoria and 0.5 in the Goulburn Valley.

Mr STONEY — You are based at Wangaratta?

Mr WALSH — Yes, that is where I live. I work from home with the road safety council. I have an office at home, and obviously with the council, I work at the council.

The CHAIR — As we have gone along this morning, a number of people, as you have just heard, talked about education.

Mr WALSH — Yes.

The CHAIR — They handballed it to you. Would you like to talk about the education side of things?

Mr WALSH — I think in recent times Vicroads has prepared some very good documents and very good programs to deal with issues of drink-driving. One that the road safety council promotes and uses is looking after our mates. I presume you may be aware of that. We have also got a bike education program. This is a very strong bike riding area. In fact my wife is riding up now on the bike trail and coming back today. We have a very strong bike education program.

The CHAIR — How did you implement that bike education program?

Mr WALSH — We are very fortunate that we have a commonwealth gold medallist in Glenn Clarke who goes to the schools and sets up a bike education course which teaches the kids bike handling and manoeuvrability. He checks to make sure helmets are correct and all those sorts of things. He has great rapport with the kids. The shires have been very supportive of the program and have helped financially with getting Glenn’s visits to the schools. We have a trailer full of bikes. We receive sponsorship by the Giant bike company. They have given us eight 26 inch and four 24 inch bikes which the kids use. They are all properly maintained and roadworthy, so it is a very popular program. Schools ring up and ask Glenn to come along and he drops off the trailer on a Monday and goes through the course with the children and the teachers and then picks the trailer up on a Friday. They also map how far they rode and those sorts of things, so it is not just straight safety. They have other benefits as well.

The CHAIR — What about motor bike education?

Mr WALSH — This is really the hot area — the Alpine, Towong and Benalla shires. Since they have sealed the road between Mansfield and Whitfield in the Rural City of Wangaratta, there have been a lot of motor cycle crashes. We are in the process of implementing a program called motorcycle safety, which has been down your way at Geelong with the Barwon road safety council and the Geelong road safety council. We are going to implement that program with the Towong shire initially and then hope that the Alpine and other shires will piggyback on.

The CHAIR — How will you implement that?

Mr WALSH — There is a set of guidelines with the Vicroads program. There are CD-ROMs and all that sort of stuff. Obviously we get the stakeholders concerned with motorbike safety and work out where the hot spots are, where the crashes are occurring. We do engineering works. We do enforcement, trying to slow the bikes down, and we also have a publicity campaign and hand out maps and advice about safe riding where they stop — whether it be a pub or a rest area, or whatever. But they generally find those nice windy roads are what they look for, so that is why it is this area and the Towong area especially. We are joining forces with the Snowy region motorcycle group who are trying to do the same thing in the Tumut area. Similarly they have people coming from Canberra, and they go down to Tumut and through to Corryong and back again. They might have lunch at Corryong and then ride to Canberra in the afternoon. The same thing happens with Melbourne.

Mr HARKNESS — Are there any alternative transport programs put in place particularly during high alcohol times, and also I am interested in the incidence of non-seatbelt wearing in the area?

Mr WALSH — Our road safety council operates some, such as the pick a skipper or the designated driver in some of the towns in north-east Victoria. You are aware we come along and serve free drinks. We are conducting the Looking after our Mates programs at football clubs and netball clubs, and we have presenters going...
out in the near future to football clubs before the football season starts to get the netballers and the footballers involved with that program. We have good rapport with a breathometer company. They make breath testing machines, and Des Malcolm at that company has put about seven or eight breath testing machines into hotels in Wangaratta, and he is willing to expand that throughout the north-east of Victoria, because if you look at all the statistics and the research is that unless you actually use a breath testing machine, you have no idea what your blood alcohol content will be, and people are encouraged to go along at least three or four times and check how many drinks they can have before they are over.05, and that sort of thing. That is a program we are encouraging. It is in the safer driving kit that Vicroads produces for businesses to encourage people to use breath testing machines. We as a council have purchased some handheld breath testing machines, and we lend those out to groups who are having a function, maybe.

We have a good anecdotal story about a school in Benalla where these female teachers had had two glasses of wine every Friday for 15 years. We lent them the breath testing machine, and one was.06 and one was.07. They have been doing that for 15 years, so they were obviously doing the wrong thing. But they were not doing the wrong thing and that is why education is so important. That is what we are doing in that regard.

**Mr HARKNESS** — And seatbelts?

**Mr WALSH** — As far as the road safety council is concerned, we all thought that everybody automatically put on their seatbelts, but there seems to be a tendency of that not happening any more, especially with young males. I think the seatbelt issue is something that we should address as road safety people. But you think, ‘We will move on to do other programs’.

**The CHAIR** — We met one of the councils yesterday, and I forget who they were, but in a 3-hour period they had a blitz and picked up something like 65 drivers who were not wearing seatbelts; some were in the trucking industry.

**Mr WALSH** — Yes, that is right.

**Mr BISHOP** — Mike, can I get an extension of your views on pushbikes and motorbikes into pre-driver education in the school system, both in theory and practically at a course level? I make a clear distinction that this is not advanced driver training; it is the other one.

**Mr WALSH** — Another program that we use is the Keys Please program, and we encourage parents, carers and guardians to promote driver vehicle hours before they go for their licence. That is a program that we are pushing in schools and it is geared to years 10 and 11 in secondary schools. In the last week I have received on my desk some views of Ron Christie, who wrote a study for the RACV and to be perfectly honest, I have not had a good look at it. But there are conflicting views as to how much driver training is needed. Obviously some people become overconfident; they think they are fearless behind the wheel. To others it is very important. I will be guided by the experts in that regard.

**Mr BISHOP** — Some of the conflicting views may well be that there is an area that would support on-road training more than pre-licence training?

**Mr WALSH** — Yes.

**Mr BISHOP** — With your experience in the schools, have you a view on that?

**Mr WALSH** — I think a bit of both, to be honest.

**Mr BISHOP** — A bit of both?

**Mr WALSH** — Once again, I suppose it depends a bit on the individual. It is hard to say that that should be the case. Some boys and girls may need more training but in the country areas they might have been driving cars and trucks on their farms since they were eight or nine-years-old. So they are obviously well skilled.

**Mr STONEY** — What is the structure of the north-east roadsafe council? Is there a council?

**Mr WALSH** — It is called roadsafe north-east community road safety council. It comprises members from all walks of life interested in road safety. We have the RACV, the traffic management unit of the police,
Vicroads, the community, and there is a strong push to get local government involved with road safety so we try to get representatives from all the local governments.

Mr STONEY — How do you interconnect?

Mr WALSH — My position?

Mr STONEY — Yes.

Mr WALSH — I oversee the running of the road safety council. I hand out minutes, agendas and invitations and prepare papers. Obviously we receive a lot of correspondence.

Mr STONEY — My question is: does the council get involved in identifying dangers on some roads — an object or a dangerous road or a dangerous intersection? If it does, what does it do about it?

Mr WALSH — We receive a lot of correspondence from residents who are aware of the road safety council. If there is a road safety issue in their area, then nine times out of ten a letter is sent to the road safety council and we refer it to Vicroads and the council for their information. We do not pretend to be engineers but we are a voice. If it relates to a drink–driving matter we might be able to say, ‘What if we have a *Looking after Our Mates session in your area*’ or something like that. But obviously engineering treatment and intersections are down to the engineers. But the council seems to react when it comes from us.

Mr STONEY — So if you identify a tree that everyone is telling you is dangerous, you would pass that on to council?

Mr WALSH — We would pass the information on and also refer it to Vicroads. Then it is referred to the right body who can deal with it.

Mr STONEY — Do you feel that you have had some success or some influence in righting whatever it was?

Mr WALSH — We have, yes. In Wangaratta they have just built a funeral chapel across the road from the cemetery. It is on an 80 kilometres-an-hour road, so we had issues that people might have just come from the service and walk across from the cemetery. We thought that their mind would not be on the job because they are just going through a grieving process so we organised some signage and all those sorts of things. That is a minor example of what we can do. Also school crossings and those sorts of things. We seek the advice of the experts and fortunately we have a few on our council who can give us advice on where to refer a matter so it is dealt with properly.

Mr LANGDON — If you could do three thing now to improve the road safety in the area, what would they be?

Mr WALSH — I think it is very important that we deal with the education side of things, and some of the programs are expanded out into the community to create more awareness of the problems as far as road safety is concerned. Education, publicity and enforcement are the key areas so far as I am concerned. If you have those things happening you can bring the road toll down. There is probably no magic wand.

Mr LANGDON — Unfortunately.

Mr WALSH — No. It would be nice to think there would be. As a road safety councillor but also personally I am concerned at the lack of manpower in the police force. I do not think there are enough police on our roads. I continually hear about issues about fleet; there are not enough cars and things like that. So that is something that I feel should be addressed if at all possible. It all comes back to money, doesn’t it?

Mr STONEY — Have there been delays with police attending — —

Mr WALSH — I have not heard of that sort of thing, but I know that it has sometimes been hard to get a policeman to go to a program we are running because they have been diverted somewhere else. It might be a school visit or the Keys Please program that I was talking about to years 10 and 11 students and those sorts of things. They
have not been able to get there. Also the crime prevention officer in Wangaratta does not have access to a car and all those sorts of things. It is obviously very important to be out there in the community.

The CHAIR — Absolutely. Thank you, Mike. We appreciate your input.

Committee adjourned.