ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Country Road Toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Melbourne – 24 May 2004 10.30am – 1.00pm

Members

Mr B. W. Bishop  Mr T. W. Mulder
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Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officers: Mr G. Both and Mr P. Nelson

Witnesses

Assistant Commissioner R. Hastings;
Superintendent P. Keogh, traffic operations and support department; and
Chief Inspector J. Robinson, Victoria Police

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee

24 May 2004
Road Safety Committee
The CHAIR — I would like to welcome and thank Victoria Police for its time and input into our inquiry. I welcome Assistant Commissioner Bob Hastings; Superintendent Peter Keogh; and Chief Inspector John Robinson, who I understand has come up from Warrnambool, so thank you for your time to speak to our inquiry.

As you are aware, we are running two concurrent inquiries. The first refers to the country road toll and, obviously related, the second refers to crashes involving roadside objects. We are taking a transcript and will provide Victoria Police with a copy of that in due course. We are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot be used against you legally into the future. Once again, I appreciate your time and input and hand over to Bob.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — Thank you, Mr Chairman and members of the committee. Can I say that this is the first time that I have appeared before one of these hearings, so I hope what unravels today from the perspective of Victoria Police is beneficial for road safety and the outcomes.

Overheads shown.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — Clearly, traffic enforcement is being undertaken to change driver behaviour. Although we have had a significant change in those sorts of attitudes and behaviours over time, there are some out there who still do not want to comply and put others at risk. From where we sit we are always about how we can improve: how we can do it differently, how we can do it better, and how we can work with local government and all the other strong partners that we have in achieving that outcome for road safety in Victoria.

This chart would not be new to any of the committee. It gives a 33-year history of where Victoria has come from in terms of road deaths. We started way back in 1969 when we got up to over 1000 deaths on our roads. You can see up on the top left-hand corner the number of initiatives that came on line over a 30-year period — from seatbelts, random breath tests, radar guns, speed cameras, booze buses, TAC ads and so on until finally last year, as we all know, Victoria achieved its lowest fatality outcome of 330 since those records commenced back in 1951. That was a great outcome for Victoria. Each year some 24 000 Victorians are either killed or injured in road collisions. The major causes of the road collisions are again, nothing new to any of us around here. Speed, alcohol fatigue, poor visibility, high traffic volumes, minimum traffic control and fixed roadside objects often contribute to a lot of those outcomes on the roads.

The next slide identifies the targets that need to be reached by 2007 to accomplish the goals identified in the Arrive Alive document. The targets were achieved in 2003, when the fatal road toll was reduced to 330 deaths. This result needs to be maintained and serious injuries need to be reduced by 20 per cent. Last year the reduction was 5 per cent in serious injuries, so that further target of 15 per cent needs to be obtained by 2007 if we are to come in on that 20 per cent target. Often the serious injuries are the hidden component in all of these that we sometimes do not highlight. We tend to focus on the fatalities because the average person out there links up with fatalities easier than they would if we were trying to explain serious injuries and what the outcomes of those are.

The CHAIR — Referring to the middle line on that chart, the figure was 8.7 per 100 000 in 1999–2001, and the target for 2007 is 6.6. I think you would find that right at the present time, or for 2003, it is actually 6.7; so it has come down in the last two years.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — Yes, and with all the other things going around with road trauma, Victoria has achieved great outcomes. We are sometimes missing the mark there, and the last thing we want to be doing is to become complacent with these sorts of figures because you can very quickly take your eye off the ball and it trends up. Just this year alone, if we keep travelling the way we are, we are projecting a death rate of about 380, which will be 50 up on last year; so there are some issues for us as out there as an enforcement agency to deal with as well.

The CHAIR — But that 6.7 is an encouraging trend when across Australia I think it is still around that 8.5, so it is peculiar to Victoria.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — Yes. Can I say, from a policing perspective we are still getting people coming from overseas and from other jurisdictions across Australia to look at what we in Victoria is doing and why it is working here and it is not working elsewhere. Peter went to the traffic police forum which was held recently in New Zealand, and they are looking very closely at what we are doing in Victoria. In some ways we are still leading
the world in the ideas that are coming out of reducing road trauma; but in other ways we must not take our eye off the ball and become complacent with where we are at, because we could very quickly lose it.

**The CHAIR** — Can I jump the gun by asking why you think we have achieved that 6.7 rate in the last two years, why has it dipped dramatically compared to other states in Australia? Is it speed?

**Assistant Comm. HASTINGS** — It is probably a number of things. We have gone in pretty hard with the TAC education program; the ads that are in people’s face. Clearly VicRoads is working through a whole host of the engineering and infrastructure treatments, and from where we sit we are certainly focusing target on speed and trying to change the culture on speed, similar to how we turned around drink driving over the past 30 or 40 years. It was not uncommon, 30 or 40 years ago, for everyone to get drunk, to get in a car and go out and aim it on the road somewhere. It is now socially unacceptable for people to do that, but we have not made that quantum leap with speed. It is happening but it will take some time. The research supports those sorts of initiatives — if you wipe off 5 you reduce the incidence of being involved in a serious crash, those sorts of things. I know it is not popular with some, but we do have a camera program operating in this state that I think has made a huge impact on changing those sorts of behaviours.

**Mr EREN** — On the way up I heard you talking on 3AW about the perceptions of speed cameras. How do we get concrete evidence from over the past 10 years — as you said, since 1990 — to conclusively prove that the speed cameras are not there for revenue raising but for the safety of the road users. How do we change that that perception in the community?

**Assistant Comm. HASTINGS** — I think we focus too much on the negative part of it, the revenue part of it. I say from the policing perspective I would be happy if we did not contribute 1 cent to the government coffers. If we could get people slowing down so they are not committing those sorts of offences we would achieve our aim. As I said on Neil Mitchell’s program today, when the camera program started in Victoria our detection rate was up around 23 or 24 per cent of all cars going past the cameras. It is now down to about 2.5, and that is after we have increased the hours from 4000 to 6000, there are covert operations — so all of those sorts of things — and we lowered the enforcement threshold. All of those things have brought about a compliance that is fairly healthy. You would have thought they would have started to trend up but they have held their ground.

It is a government decision; it is not my decision. There are issues — we have always spoken about the possibility of hypothecation of some of the revenue coming out of cameras. I am not sure, but we have often said if you could clearly say to the travelling community out there that a percentage of revenue coming out of the camera program was dedicated back to road infrastructure, hospitals — whatever it might be — then that might start to negate some of this revenue-raise stuff that is also out there and that we always have to contend with. It is not the only answer, but it is one of the ways of trying to tackle that problem.

The main issue for us at the moment with the fixed cameras is, having gone through that process over the last six months and having the camera program, is to maintain confidence in it, that people have confidence that it is doing a job, it is saving lives. Monash University Accident Research Centre does regular studies on the impact of the camera program, the impact of the booze bus program and all those sorts of things, and from my recollection it is fairly conclusive that they believe the cameras are having impact out there. But you cannot just treat those in isolation. You have to look at the changes to the responsible driving legislation, the 50 km/h zones — all those other things that have come on line — to support that overall package, if you like, and we are part of it. I hope that answers your question.

**Mr LANGDON** — However, the cynics out there would say the 40 km/h zones around schools and the 50 km/h zones in residential streets are only there to raise more revenue. To those who complain to me, I say, ‘If you take the revenue that raises and put it against the costs of all the accidents and what-have-you, the serious injuries, it comes up well short’. But the general public do not see that. Again, they see fatalities, they do not see serious injuries and the ongoing cost of that to the community. That is where governments of all persuasions have perhaps let the side down in that we do not say there is this ongoing cost. Fatalities are unfortunate, but it ends there; you lose the economic growth out of it, but the cost factor stops there. A serious injury can take 20 years to recover from, and it is very expensive for the taxpayers.

**Assistant Comm. HASTINGS** — That is right. I do not have the figures before me, but I think last year, or the year before, it might have been about $2.5 billion for those sorts of injuries to the community. Those are the
TAC figures, so they are incredible costs. I do not think people understand that, and trying to convey that message becomes murky. They can relate to a death. It never ceases to amaze me; you would have thought over the number of years that people have been travelling on the roads there would not have been too many families now that would not have been either directly or indirectly impacted on by road trauma and understand the consequences of that, either the death of a loved one or the ongoing incapacitation of a loved one over time and the extra pressure that that puts back on a family unit to cope with those sorts of things. Clearly the World Health Organisation believes that road trauma ought to be lifted out of the transport domain and put into the health domain, because it is a major health problem for the community. That is their summing up on it.

Mr BISHOP — On the cameras, which we drifted on to, I thought you said you lowered the enforcement tolerance. Can you explain that to us?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — We told people out there publicly. The TAC brought out the Wipe Off 5 campaign, which was for every 5 kilometres over 60 you double your chance of being involved in a serious crash. To complement that we went public and said to people, ‘We will allow you a 3 km/h tolerance on the device’, and that is allowed under the legislation to complement and support that enforcement program. That was our position, and in the public domain we were trying to promote it to slow people down. It was not about catching them, it was about wanting them to slow down. That is why we did those sorts of things, and it is interesting now that other jurisdictions are considering that it is time to make a similar move.

At the time we did that Jack McLean, who has been involved in a lot of road safety research, actually said it was probably one of the most significant moves in an enforcement environment at that time, so it received his blessing for what it was about but obviously it still created some angst out there in the community. We understand that: I do not think we can take our eye off the ball on that one or change our minds. If you start flip-flopping you cause confusion. That was our lowering of the tolerance.

Mr BISHOP — Following up from John Eren’s question of community support, I think that was one of the reductions of community support in that Australian design rules as I understand it say 10 per cent, but you made a judgment of 3 kilometres. That I think is where you lost a fair bit of community support.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — We may have, and I am not arguing against that either. I think that is probably right. But if you talk to some of the people from MUARC, the 10 per cent of the ADR came about 20 years ago when we had mechanical speedometers. Cars have moved on, but the design rule has not necessarily moved on. My recollection of the research that is coming out of MUARC from 1992 is that most of the cars are now pretty well spot on. The newer cars in fact under-read, they do not over-read. I am not sure if the design rules caught up with modern technology, and I know MUARC did some research on that too.

I take your point, that by doing what we did created some angst out in the community, but if you look at our mobile camera program, every month 3 million vehicles are assessed through that program and only a bit over 2 per cent are detected for speeding, so 98 per cent of people are complying and doing the right thing. I suppose the odds of it are that for all of us in a five or six-year period the likelihood of picking up a ticket is there, but most people comply. I think we sometimes miss that one, too.

The CHAIR — Is very interesting how you got that 8.7 per 100 000 which, back in 1999, was down to 6.7, which is the lowest in Victoria. In our recent trip to New South Wales the Australian Transport Safety Bureau put that dramatic drop in two years down to the reduction in speed limits to 50 km/h and the lower tolerances.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — Yes.

Mr BISHOP — As a follow-up question to that, I thought you said that at the moment we have 50 more deaths than the trend. Did you say that?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — No, we are projecting 50 more. If we keep going at the rate we are going, we are still sitting at about three or four under where we were this time last year, but on the trend that is coming through we are projecting about 380 this year if we do not put the brakes on again. We found last year in the first five or six months it was pretty ordinary out on the roads and then for some reason it tightened up considerably in the last six months, so death rates came down. This year if we keep on going the way we are we are probably going to end up with about 50 more than what we had in 2003. That is where we are at. But we are still about three or four under where we are at the moment.
What is worrying is that our front-line barometer is showing disturbing trends — that is, the vulnerable road user groups. Pedestrians are up in deaths, motorcyclists are up in deaths and cyclists are up in deaths; and the metropolitan area, which was our big winner last year, is up in deaths and the country this year is well down so it is really the country that is holding us about where we are, otherwise we would have blown further out.

There is the trend line for fatalities that we have been talking about. Country fatalities — as of midnight last year there were 117 of them; and you can see on that map that the red ones represent the singles, the blues are the doubles, the green are the triples and the Xs are the quadruples. It is not rocket science to link those up to our major highways going north, east or west. They are pretty well much the Princes Highway going east; if you were going south there is a bit down John’s way; and going north, the Goulburn Highway and Murray Valley Highway and those sorts of areas. Up until 19 May this year there have been 69 fatalities in the country.

**The CHAIR** — How does that 69 currently compare with this time last year?

**Supt KEOGH** — In the country we are down 15.

**Assistant Comm. HASTINGS** — That is what I said. The country is the one that is holding it together.

The next one talks about country serious injuries. In 2002 there were 2943, in 2003 it was 2552, and we have breakdowns of those if you want to go through them. Again it is a fairly good scattering. The trend is a bit all over the place going west but more of them are along the major routes.

On-the-spot fines by process — these are the ones that the police detect. They are slightly down but going up. It is interesting that that the numbers went up when the lasers and the radars were phased in in May and August 2002, but our people are telling us out there — and John can perhaps talk to this better than I from an operational point of view out in the regions — that they struggle to detect those high-end speed offences that used to be more common out there, and those sorts of issues.

**Chief Insp. ROBINSON** — That is certainly the case. I look after Corangamite and the Colac Otway region. My position is at Warrnambool but I interact with all the TMU traffic members in that area, and it is getting harder and harder for them to get bookings. Mobile-mode radar has been a bit of a winner for us in the bush, but it is obviously not the only driver.

**The CHAIR** — John, you are saying that it is getting harder and harder because of changing driver attitudes?

**Chief Insp. ROBINSON** — Less people speeding, and it would be in the order of 10 per cent.

**Mr EREN** — So what is that really huge drop in September and October 2001?

**Assistant Comm. HASTINGS** — We do not want to talk about that. That was the enterprise bargaining phase that went on in 2001. Something happened: it was not going up, it came down. It is like the baby boom; we will never get rid of that for at least the next six years, or whatever it is going to be. But that is where people were warning rather than booking and all those sorts of things that went on. Does that explain it?

**Mr EREN** — You made up for it later on!

**Assistant Comm. HASTINGS** — Speed infringements issued for 2002–03 — those are total figures that have been issued over that financial year for fixed and mobile cameras. As a comparison, you can see that speeding is up and down a bit. It was certainly down last year on 2002.

Seatbelts — surprisingly, this has gone up. We have had seatbelts since 1969 or 1970 but there seems to be a reluctance to wear them in country areas. A lot of people who have been killed have either been thrown out or thrown around and were not wearing seatbelts. A friend of mine said that even in the metropolitan area, a lot of the younger people coming up are now saying, ‘I do not want to wear a seatbelt’, so I hope it is not something that we are going to have to tackle. The figures reflect a constant across a number of years. Clearly back in 1970 when we started to wear seatbelts, we demonstrated the impact on saving lives and reducing injury.

Mobile phones are the sleeper. That figure just keeps growing because more and more people have them and there are the problems that go with that. We had the case down in Geelong when the young lass was convicted after
sending an SMS on her phone. I know up until that stage when we had been warning about those sorts of things, it was almost a bit like, ‘You do not know what you are talking about’. But I think that case cemented in the community’s mind that these things are bad. They are even bad with hands-free phones because the research coming through is that you are still trying to drive and talk, and you have all this stuff going on around you. Clearly those who have done the research say that if you want to use a mobile phone, pull over, stop and have a conversation because while hands free obviates you from an offence of using a mobile phone, it does not necessarily reduce your likelihood of being involved in a collision.

Mr LANGDON — On the issue of mobile phones, in one of the parliamentary cars you can change the radio station on your steering wheel. Then when you have to go back to look at the dashboard, it becomes as bad as using a mobile phone, I would think, especially if you are trying to find the right station or whatever. Have you picked up that in the modern cars with the steering wheel being used to change the station and volume? Is that helping?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I do not know. The modern car is becoming like a stereophonic theatre. They have more gadgets and dials — they are now putting in DVD players in the more modern cars. We are finding — and Peter will correct me if I am wrong — that cars pull up to one another and BMW and the like have screens that drop down out of the roof, that people are now gawking at what is being shown in the next car rather than worrying about where they are driving. So those are the sorts of distractions that are going to come along as technology develops. How do we deal with it? I do not think it is an offence to use one. It is an offence to look at one.

Supt KEOGH — If you are driving, it is an offence if the driver can see the screen. It is also an offence if someone in another car is distracted by the screen.

Mr EREN — So who is the offender, the person looking or the person who has it in the vehicle?

Supt KEOGH — The latter.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — We know with our own fleet of vehicles the cockpit has dials for sirens, speakers and God-knows what else, as well as mobile data terminals and things that are coming at you. Clearly the car manufacturers are trying to move towards a safety framework, if you like, with airbags and those sorts of things, but how much of this stuff can we take in while we are trying to drive a motor vehicle and do it safely? That is going to become an issue. I do not necessarily have the answer, but it is something that is going to have to be looked at.

The CHAIR — Can I just ask about seatbelts because that is a worrying trend. I think something like 20 per cent of people killed in car crashes were not wearing a seatbelt. What do you think can be further done to ensure that people are aware of the safety benefits of wearing their belts, especially young people, because what you said surprises me?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — It does. It is an automatic reaction now for me. When I get into the seat I reach for the seatbelt to put it on. If I have not got it on I feel insecure. There are trends that some country people do not like wearing them. We know that at one stage people in the bush were dying within 5 or 10 kilometres of where they lived. There is a perception that people from the city go out there and get killed, but it is actually the rural people who are the problem. I am not sure what it is. John might have a perception from where he sits as a regional member.

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — A lot of farming folk just drive around their farms and the last thing they are going to do when opening and closing gates and chasing sheep is wear a seat belt. But what concerns me is that my 18-year-old tells me that of all the mothers picking up their kids and leaving the school, a goodly percentage of the kids are unrestrained, and that is something that I have to deal with locally. But does that set in place a mindset on the part of teenage kids and younger ones that it is okay? I do not know if that is a pattern that is replicated in the metropolitan area.

Supt KEOGH — Can I just add something with respect to seatbelts. The seatbelt warning system is a device in new cars, and if you do not put your seatbelt on it continues to beep at you. There are moves afoot to try to introduce an ADR to have that put in all new cars. So that is one way of ensuring that seatbelts are worn.
Mr BISHOP — On that point, that was raised in another hearing we had with Monash University Accident Research Centre. We chirped up about that, saying that the light comes on and flashes. They said that it does not in all cars; there are different models within a range where some do, so perhaps that is an issue of a much more audible and visual signage across the whole sector of seating in the car. You would have to have a sensor in the seat across the lot but it would probably be worth while.

What about the safety of cars? Do you think there is enough influence put into the manufacturing area in relation to the safety of cars per se?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I think with some manufacturers there are. Clearly we see nightly on the television that the thrill of speed and getting out somewhere and hooning around sells a car. I know that both the TAC and VicRoads are trying to work with the manufacturers to say that that is not the image we want. I know it is not the image we want as a police force; we want to promote the safety aspects. But I suppose the safety aspects are not the things that appeal to those out there to go and buy a machine just because it has another airbag stuck in there. They would rather know that they can go another 20 km/h faster — or something seems to be the attraction. I believe vehicle safety is one area that needs to have a lot more work done on it and promoted. Whether that comes through government using its good offices to do those sorts of things and deal with the manufacturers — that would be well and good, with the advertising community supporting those sorts of things as well.

We were talking about this the other day. You jump into a modern car and it still has a speedometer showing up to 280 kph or whatever it might be. You have to ask why? You cannot legally do those speeds on our roads. If you changed the speedometer to go up to 120 kph or 130 kph and you had your 60 kph at 12 o’clock on the dial rather than at 8 o’clock on the dial so you get a perception that you are doing the right speed. Then once you get to 130 kph it should be red-lined out and should say that you are an idiot and you are going off the dial. Those are the sorts of things that manufacturers can do, but it probably does not sell cars for them. I do not know anywhere in Australia where you can get out and do 280 kph legally, and even if you did you would be totally irresponsible. In the Northern Territory there are unrestricted areas, but you never know when an animal is going to run out in front of you, or whatever is going to happen. How can you avoid a collision? I would suspect that safety in motor cars is something that we should continue to focus on.

Supt KEOGH — I think there are also opportunities to put more pressure on overseas markets to keep those safety features in cars that are imported into Australia. I know that previously manufacturers take devices out of cars that have them in Europe — —

The CHAIR — As standard!

Supt KEOGH — Yes. As a way of reducing costs. I think there are also opportunities for companies and governments in Australia to put pressure on manufacturers to say, ‘If we are going to buy 200 cars, we want these safety features in them’. Then as those cars get churned back into the community, they then pick up safer cars too, so that is another avenue.

Mr LANGDON — On the issue of speedometers, doing, say, 60 kph, you only move the speedo a little way on the dial. If there were greater variance you could see quite easily that you were going over. Those sorts of things would certainly assist.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — Yes. I think it is a perception thing. At the moment you have your speedo that is here and your 60 is down here and people are saying, ‘God’. Even 100 now is somewhere up about there and then you go into wherever. They are small things, but they would be interesting to test to see whether they do change people’s thinking about those sorts of things.

The next slide is a graph showing a breakdown again of the camera offences detected over a two or three-year period. You can see there where we went into extra camera hours, went into what we call covert — no-flash type of thing. We lowered the threshold. Things did peak but they have trended down. But towards the end of December again the total offences have started to trend up. I think the debate over the fixed camera program that started about the end of last year has not helped. The last thing we want people doing is thinking that now they get out onto the Western Ring Road and it becomes another speedway, which it was prior to the cameras being there. Everyone is aware that there were nine fatalities out there prior to the cameras coming on line; we did not have one in that period they were operating out there.
From where we sit as an enforcement agency, where you have high-volume, high-speed freeways and motorways technology is the best way to enforce because our people will go out there and they will do their best but when you are dealing with that sort of volume you often create a health risk to yourselves and others by trying to intercept cars because you never know how people are going to react. I mean, our guys say sometimes they are in the lane near the median strip and someone takes off into the median strip to stop, or you are pulling a person across two or three lanes of traffic to pull them over. It creates more health risks to everyone than the technology. So we believe that technology has got a part to play on those sorts of infrastructures.

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — I guess it is fair to say, too, Bob, that on some of our roads it is basically not possible to enforce using traditional methods. The Great Ocean Road, for one, causes us great concern because there is nowhere to stop and set up any form of speed detection device that is driven from a car or by a member. I think the road up to Buller is probably another one. They are both roads that attract reasonable collision statistics.

Mr EREN — Do you think that the design of roads is also important? I know that at one stage when the Western Ring Road was built — I used to use it frequently — the lanes were very narrow and you had a lot of trucks that used that route. I think eventually they did make it a bit wider somehow. Do you think that that also has an effect on certain accidents happening, because of how the roads are designed?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — Look, I would say yes. Clearly I know and probably all of us know roads that need some sort of help in terms of how they are treated, to stop these sorts of things happening, whether it is people spearing off into trees or poles or whether it is those sorts of high-volume roads that perhaps need some consistency in the way that they are constructed. I do not think that helps to go from three lanes to two lanes to three lanes because people just keep going in and out, in and out; they do not get a smooth flow as well. I am not an engineer, but I think anything you can do in an engineering way is healthy as well and can only benefit the outcome in terms of road safety.

We celebrate the great outcomes in terms of deaths and serious injury. I often think that the other thing is the golden hour of treatment. It is often the missed point in this, that we are a lot better now in getting either SES crews, CFA crews or ambulances on site quickly and extracting people from wreckage and saving lives when they get to the best treatment at a hospital than what we were, say, 10 or 20 years ago. That is my impression. I went out to an Australian demonstration at the Royal Melbourne Showgrounds two weeks ago, where the SES were showing us how they extract people from cars with fire services. I had four years in our major collision squad back in the late 1970s. I made the point to Rhys Maggs, who is the director of the SES, that at best you got to a scene and everyone did their best or incompetent best of trying to drag people out and do all sorts of things. I watched a young crew from Bacchus Marsh. They were 19 or 20, they were well led, well coordinated and were just thorough professionals. They absolutely amazed me. They got the person out of the scenario in about 20 minutes. Then if you can get them to a hospital in another 20 minutes I think there are huge savings to be made there as well. I think that is part of the equation that is not often picked up. I have not got any research that supports it, but I know that John, coming from the country, would probably say, ‘That’s exactly probably the case: the quicker we can get people treated either on site or at a hospital, the better’.

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — It is probably an area I have been reluctant, wearing a uniform, to step into. Just supporting what Bob says, in the west of the state the obvious issue is the helicopter that has been an issue that we have pushed for eight years now. We just do not get people to Alfred, the Royal Children’s and the Royal Melbourne in time. That is an issue that I am dealing with government on in another arena at the moment. It is fair to say that I am concerned that even with a sponsorship of $20 million from Woodside Energy, which we have attracted, it is possibly still not going to happen for us and that will be one of the tragedies for the west of the state.

Mr BISHOP — So that would go over any area in Victoria that would not have the opportunity for quick response times for medical treatment, would it not?

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — That is true, but the only significantly populated part of the state that does not have a service, other than up the top end of your area where it gets to the impractical stage with a helicopter, is the west of the state. We have the added benefit of a south-westerly airflow over the state as a typical airflow, which would actually get us to hospital even quicker from that side of the state. It is $2 million a life, roughly, for all-of-life costs and what we have put to government would see a helicopter of the same category as exists at Bendigo and the Latrobe Valley for significantly under half the cost, with Woodside’s generous offer of assistance. That is an issue that the trauma surgeons in the west of the state are now calling for. Government is devoting huge
amounts of money to the state trauma centres in Melbourne. It is just absolutely critical that we get people to them in time, otherwise we are wasting out time. The trip times at the moment ran out to about 7½ hours.

Mr BISHOP — That is the road ambulance side?

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — No, that is the fixed-wing air ambulance side, at times. And on many occasions there is just no aircraft available: 5½ hours is not unusual, even from Warrnambool.

Mr BISHOP — When you say that, is that ambulance to airport to Melbourne?

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — That is from trauma scene in the west to the Alfred, and the convoluted way that it happens at the moment with fixed wing, the King Air fleet, because obviously they cannot land on our roads. That and an issue I will talk about later — the run-off-road issue — are what I see as the two major issues in the west of the state. Pretty much the rest of the state, except your territory, is covered from the aeromedical point of view.

Mr BISHOP — How does the mix of road ambulance services and the proposed helicopter stuff fit together?

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — Identical as to how it happens in the state at the moment. Woodside are happy to stand down at any time for community emergencies. It would be a full-time base, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, set up at Warrnambool. There are two options for government as far as staffing it: train up the existing MICA paramedics — and I can say, talking to them one on one, they are pretty keen — or pay a bit over $1 million a year and fully staff it, as they do at Bendigo and the Valley. But that would reduce the time. It is an hour’s flight time by helicopter from Warrnambool to the Alfred.

Mr BISHOP — As up against 5 to 7 hours?

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — Yes. It certainly happens quicker than that, but they are the time frames that run out. We have had fatalities as a result of those time frames, not as a result of the original injuries. A typical example is that a triple fatality at Myamyn, which is just south of Hamilton, saw a young child in the Portland hospital for 5½ hours, waiting to leave that hospital to be transported to Melbourne. The consequences of some of those in terms of all-of-life costs are significant to us.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — The next goes to the hours of operation for the radar laser — these are the handheld measuring devices — over a period of time. They remain fairly constant. The government provided funding to purchase 110 of those devices back in late July 2002. Again, there has been a trough and it took off. They are out there every day of the week, being used.

The other one I want to move into is rural radar. The slide shows the required and achieved. It sort of ebbs and flows a bit, but we are actually coming back on line with the achieved, which is more to address our own targets in terms of how we are conducting the enforcement program in the rural area with those devices.

The next slide shows offences per hour. In March it is climbing above it again. It is almost one offence per hour. Again, as John said, I think in the rural area it is becoming more and more difficult to actually get those sorts of speeds that we used to have years ago.

The next one is speed enforcement for 2003. You can see the low end there, the 1 to 9 km/h, is speed cameras. Then our own people out on the road, along with them, start to pick up the high-end speed more than what the cameras do. The cameras, certainly in the metropolitan area, are focused in the 60 km/h and 50 km/h zones predominantly because the research coming out of Monash said that if we can focus on the 60 km/h zones in the metro area and the 100 km/h zones in the rural area, we would have significant benefits in road safety outcomes. We have tried to do that in the way we have placed the cameras and the general enforcement.

The next is booze bus operations. Just by way of information, we have replaced seven metro booze buses now at $500 000 each. They have just been put on the road, up and running. They primarily run in the rural area during high-alcohol times, which is that late evening into the early morning. In actual fact we used to finish the booze buses there at about 11 o’clock to midnight, but we are now finding that people used to hold back to dodgem them. So the hours we have extended more into when people are now travelling again. I mentioned on the Neil Mitchell show today that we still had 77 over the weekend and 14 of those are what we call recidivist or repeat offenders. So
whilst we have changed the general attitude about booze and drinking and driving, there is a constant percentage of people who keep reoffending — who I think have a drink problem — they just keep going out there putting themselves and others at risk.

Mr LANGDON — What would you do with them?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — This is the issue. I do not think sending them to jail is necessarily the way to go with it. Whether you start taking the vehicles from them or doing other sorts of things or whether you help them in a medical sense, it is getting them to that sort of treatment. I do not know what the benefits would be but they keep reoffending. I am probably not answering your question directly.

Mr LANGDON — It is an honest answer.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I have not really got the answer, to be quite honest. There is probably a number of options but I do not know which one would be more successful than the others. It is a bit of a revolving door — that is, we keep catching them but they are still taking the risk in doing it.

Supt KEOGH — I think New Zealand tried to deal with this issue, particularly when someone lost their licence for driving offences, including drink-driving. They started to impound cars and that seemed to have huge benefits, particularly initially, but then over a period of time — I notice that some other states are seeking to introduce similar legislation, one even to wheel clamping the vehicle.

The CHAIR — I would be interested in your comments on the dob in a drink-driver program that I think is operating in our area of Geelong.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — Yes, we got some attention on that. I think when I first mentioned it publicly people said, ‘What can you do about these sorts of people who dob in drivers?’. I said, ‘You have always been able to do it. If you’re prepared to ring the police, we act on it. But remember you’ve got to become a witness in court. You can’t get away from that because we’re acting on the evidence that you’re providing’. I think the Geelong experience is still in its infancy a bit, is it not?

Supt KEOGH — It seems to have been going for a number of months now. I guess the issue with the Geelong experience is that there is no person answering the phone after hours. So often someone will call and leave a message on an answering machine that someone has to react to the following day. Traditionally, if they rang a communications centre and reported that they were travelling on a certain road, then the communications centre can get a car there and react to the situation, hopefully, and arrest the person or detain him. So I think that is another option. We are also looking at perhaps linking in with a program down at St Kilda Road, called Crime Stoppers; that is resourced 24 hours a day. That is another option we are looking at.

The CHAIR — Another issue that has been raised with us is that drink-driving in the country is hard to detect because, no. 1, the bush telegraph is pretty good. — if you are at the footy club you soon learn that the coppers are just down the road — and the other is that you therefore drive the drivers off the main roads and down the back roads.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — The feedback we have coming back — because we have four of these mini booze buses in each of the country regions — is that we have had evidence coming back to us. What we are trying to say is, ‘Listen, guys, you’ve got to get out there during high-alcohol times. There’s not much point getting out doing volume checks at low-alcohol times because you’re wasting your time in some ways, if you’re going to protect people’. What they found was exactly that — that people knew very quickly were they were, they would take back roads and do all sorts of things. So what they are doing now more in the country area is that whilst they might set up their booze bus they are running cars on the back roads in support of the booze bus, so trying to pick up those who are trying to go around it and target it that way and, when they check them, running the test from the car, not necessarily from the booze bus.

The booze bus has a powerful impact in terms of road safety. I think the earlier research coming out of MUARC said that if you run a booze bus somewhere there is almost a carryover impact of about two weeks, that people think it could be there. It is also a general deterrent — in other words, it is one in, all in; you cannot miss it. If we are all driving home on the Western Freeway, we all go through, whereas if I am standing out there with my
handheld mobile, it is you and me and everyone else just keeps going because I am not targeting. So it has a powerful impact, the presence of the booze bus on the road.

I mentioned some time ago perhaps debating the zero tolerance issues particularly for the age groups 21 through to 25. For years now we have conditioned people from 18 to 21 that they cannot drink and drive, that there is a prohibition on it. Our issue with that age group is speed. Then they turn 21 and we say, ‘Okay, we’ll give you the next element. You can now have a drink, and as long as you don’t go over .05 you can now drink and carry on’. We just add to it and you can see then that the spike for 21 to 25-year-olds with road deaths just goes up — from here it just goes straight up.

Mr EREN — Just on that, Bob, then, on the slide that we have up now, the required hours of operation, achieved hours of operation are below the required, as is the required high alcohol and achieved high alcohol. Should that increase at some stage, or is there a problem with increasing the hours of operation of booze buses?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — No. I think it is gets back to the issue that we were talking about, that they are struggling in the bush to target high-alcohol time but actually detect people at the same time because of all those other tricks they get up to. We are certainly through the regions now refocusing that because we have to report back to both the road safety executive group and the ministerial council as a policing authority in terms of what we are doing on those country indicators. The question is asked and we have to realign those more to where it is required.

That is something that the operations part of the world has to address. They are well aware of it, and from where we sit we keep informing them of that. We have to do more in the country and do it smarter to get around some of those other issues that we are talking about. We often run one of our metropolitan booze buses into the Bendigo, Shepparton and other country centres and run a joint operation as well, which I think has an impact at the same time.

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — In the south-west we actually do more tests than any other division in the state, and we have a requirement that each member do 10 tests per shift, but our detection rate is the lowest in the state, I think, for what we are doing. Our problem is that because we have to provide a service 16 hours a day at our smaller stations the day shift is always going to do tests and get very few results and the afternoon shift typically, say, in Warmambool, at the very time you would like them to be out there doing tests they are probably wrestling with drunk at the Whalers Inn or the Gallery nightclub or something like that, and then they are tied up for the next hour when you would really love them on the road. It becomes a resourcing issue. We are trying to create the perception that you can be tested any time of the day or night and you might get a breath test at 7 o’clock in the morning.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — That really complements my definition of police presence. I think it is not only a matter of being out there being seen out there targeting those doing the wrong thing, it is also talking to those doing the right thing. If I asked any of us here how many have been intercepted by a police car in the last two or three years the answer would probably be not at all, unless you went through a booze bus site where you had a bit of a blow in the bag. But what it does, I think, even if you stop people and just do a licence check or whatever it might be and they are committing no offence, you could even congratulates them on what they were doing. You could say, ‘Look, you were doing nothing wrong. Everything’s okay, keep up the good work’. It just creates the impact that not only are you targeting the group doing the wrong thing, but you are also intercepting others as well. It just creates that whole visible police presence. So, while Chief Inspector Robinson’s people may not be working in high alcohol times at all times, they are interacting with the community in some way at the same time and just bringing home a road safety message.

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — Just for the south-west we would run to around 150 000 tests a year, not particularly using the booze bus but using the cars dotted around the countryside. A lot of people would say, ‘I was tested last week’, or, ‘I was tested earlier today’, but every man, woman and child gets a breath test one and a half times a year.

The CHAIR — You were just about to make an important point before and I think one of us cut you off with a question. You were talking about how the amount of deaths of 18 to 21-year-olds had dropped because of the zero tolerance level. You were then saying that going on to people between 21 and 25 how it then starts to climb and steepen.
Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — Yes, that is what the statistics show. The three of us before you here all know that the 18 to 21-year-olds are predominantly the speeding people, and then once they get to 21 we tell them, ‘Now you can have a drink’, and it spikes because you have two elements running there: speed and possibly grog. All I am saying is that for a number of years now we have conditioned 18 to 21-year-olds to not drink and drive. They have already been conditioned for three or four years, and then we let them off.

Perhaps in time it might happen that we have zero tolerance for everyone. We already have classes of people now who cannot drink and drive, such as bus drivers, people that drive trains, people that fly planes and taxidrivers. They cannot drink and drive, but we are still allowing people to drink to a certain level, so long as it is not over .05, and drive. I would say the greatest percentage of people who want to go out and want to have a drink probably do get a taxi home, or people think about it more and make some other arrangements. But it will probably get to the stage in our community where those sorts issues really have to be grappled with in a strong way. We need to consider whether we make that move, but it needs debate and research to actually arrive at that decision.

The CHAIR — I think that is a good point. Those between 18 and 21 years of age generally organise their night; they decide who will be the designated driver and they stick to that. From what I can see, though, after 21 a lot of people go out with the good intention of not drinking at all but with a couple of drinks under their belt their decision making becomes quite muddled and they decide to take the risk and try to get home.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I think another thing is creeping in. I do not have any figures on it, but a lot of the younger people, the 18 to 21-year-olds, know they cannot drink so they get more into the drugs.

Mr BISHOP — That was going to be my next question. We have all talked about booze buses, but what about the drug testing?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — The random drug testing is scheduled to start. We sometimes think the younger people are now taking more of the drugs now to get around not having the grog. I do not have any concrete figures on it, but we know that of the people killed last year — I think the figures we have here are for the year before — 29 per cent were loaded up with some stimulant or other drug. So drugs are a problem for us.

Mr LANGDON — The AFL is an example: drugs are more of a problem than alcohol.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — Then you get a combination of both, alcohol and the drugs, so it is out there.

Mr BISHOP — As you mentioned, a trial program is under way, and we are all familiar with that, and we will be interested to see how that goes. But what about the operational day-to-day side: where you have all your graphs and you can say how many people you got for the booze and so on; but what about the drugs? What is the operational side of that? Is it difficult now, is it impossible, or is there more of it? How do you address it?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — There are three layers to it. We have always had the legislation to prosecute for driving under the influence of alcohol or a drug. That was based on observations and you had to get people to walk the white line and all those sorts of things. Then about two years ago the impaired driver legislation came online, under which people do the same thing. They are intercepted, assessed at the scene and then they are taken back for further assessment and then charged. The random drug testing really is the third layer to all of that, where it takes us into random domain where we can intercept and test for the presence of drugs. There is really a three-pronged attack. People think that random drug testing is the only thing; it is not. But with the other two you have to have some physical observations of what you have seen and then you run them through a testing regime to determine whether they are affected or not. The random one will be a straight procedure. The first test will always be for alcohol and the second test will be for drugs. That is due to start later this year.

I think Victoria is certainly leading Australia and New Zealand and in some ways the world in terms of this concept. The rest of the country is watching what happens here in Victoria. We are testing a number of different devices to see which ones we will use. One of the devices we are using is being used predominantly in the United Kingdom to screen its prison population for drugs. It is easier and less intrusive to take a saliva swab than all the other things they have to do with the prison population, so that is the sort of machinery that will be used. We hope it will have an impact, particularly in the trucking industry where the presence of those sorts of stimulants is out there all the time; and also around the rave party scene. We are targeting those sorts of areas, and also we might work perhaps in conjunction with our booze bus, so we might have the drug bus running not far away from the...
booze bus targeting certain people. It is a 12-month pilot and then it will be evaluated to see whether it goes beyond there. I know other jurisdictions are certainly keen to see how we proceed with it.

The slide before you shows the drug impaired stuff that I was talking about that we have been running for the last 12 months in metropolitan and rural areas. The total assessment is 175, so they are running at about 200 a year that are conducted under that program. The next slide relates to drivers killed that tested positive to a drug other than alcohol. That was about 29 per cent for 2001 and about 22 per cent for 2002. We know that is a problem and we have to tackle it as an enforcement agency.

Some other areas are improved enforcement, an effective booze bus campaign, high visibility in country and metropolitan areas, targeting high-risk groups, recidivist drink-drivers, those driving while disqualified and unlicensed, and excessive speed. I think there is more and more evidence, particularly in the United Kingdom, that shows that those driving while disqualified or unlicensed are the same people that park in the disabled bays and are likely to have some sort of criminal history as well. They seem to be people who just do not treat the lot like anyone else: they break it. That is coming through from a lot of the stuff they are doing in the UK for these sorts of operations.

Another area is identifying the real causes of collisions. The committee may be aware that our major collision group did a fairly significant study on motorcycle deaths over a 12-month period.

We were always under pressure from a lot of motorcycle groups saying, ‘We think you are getting it wrong. You are picking on us’. Our people looked at about 47 crashes involving motorcycles and went into a whole host of assessment criteria, and I think it confirmed what we originally thought: that motorcyclists are a vulnerable group but they often contribute to their own deaths as well in certain circumstances.

Other issues to consider include using the full weight of enforcement in high-collision zones and the availability of intelligence at a local level. Clearly we are building intelligence and a lot of data so we can target our operations to these sorts of areas.

Mr STONEY — I am really interested in identifying the real causes of collisions. I am particularly interested in the frustration on country roads where there are long lines of traffic and someone up the front who should really pull over does not and eventually someone goes to pass them and gets into trouble. Say they had a head-on, would that accident be classed as passing while unsafe, or would they dig deeper and take into account that they were passing because they had been sitting behind someone for 25 minutes and that that was a contributing factor?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — So the frustration contributes to it?

Mr STONEY — Yes. In the mountains you see that a lot where you cannot pass for a long time and there is a slow caravan or a farmer with a dog just does not get over and they could.

Mr EREN — Or on the Great Ocean Road.

Mr STONEY — They do not pull over. In fact they speed up on the straight bit, and you see this frustration occur among the drivers behind him. But I can understand it because it is beyond the pale. Is that identified as part of the real cause of a collision or not?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I am only speculating, but probably not. I would have thought they would just look at what was the cause of the collision — that is, that someone was on the wrong side of the road at that particular time and collided with another other vehicle. The fact that you might have been sitting in a line of traffic for 10 or 15 minutes might come out but I do not think it would necessarily be a contributing factor because everybody else was lined up there too, except that you decided to take the risk to get out and do what you thought was — —

Mr STONEY — So therefore the issue of unnecessary frustration — I am not talking about where it is unrealistic, but where there is unnecessary frustration and yet that is never really taken into account. I believe it is a real issue in some areas.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — It is probably not reported under our process as it exists. We are really looking as to why these two vehicles collided or ran off the road rather than the bit that may have led to it — that is,
the frustration. It is a bit like fatigue. We know that fatigue is an issue out there, but how do you really quantify what was fatigue in some of those things and what was just alcohol or just speed? It is very hard to get your head around how much fatigue contributes to these sorts of things, and yet we know that in probably does, and more in the long haulage industry than elsewhere.

Mr STONEY — I wonder if you think there is an opportunity, with the psychology of driving, if you like, which I know is a bit airy-fairy, to look at fatigue and perhaps frustration. There is another issue too: road maintenance signs being up when there is no maintenance going on and the authorities have forgotten to take away. People get angry with that. There is a lot of stuff on the road that good drivers, provisional drivers, get really annoyed with.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I know what you are saying. I have actually taken it up. We all know that if we go down through the Domain or one of the other tunnels there and something is happening, Big Brother booms over your radio saying, ‘This is the control centre’, and whatever and tells you what is going on. I have spoken with VicRoads and others to ask if that sort of technology is around why couldn’t we put it on our major freeways and arterials so that people can get off well beforehand. The typical example is coming up from Geelong on the Geelong road when we had the young lass killed on her motorcycle. That sort of accident just locks it up and people have to either rely on commercial radio to tell them something or it is too late and they are in there and cannot escape. If we have that technology why can we not be telling people to get off earlier, either through signage or somehow communicating with people in another way, particularly in areas where once you get caught up in those high-volume roads you could be locked up in there for an hour or more, sitting there and going nowhere. We are conscious of that. We know that when we go to a collision site on major roads how important it is to try to do our business and get it cleared. We get some criticism as a consequence of that, too. I take your point, Mr Stoney, but I cannot answer it. It is something that could be picked up through studies through research institutes.

Supt KEOGH — There are two other issues. Sometimes when the occupants of the car are deceased the truth of the cause of the crash is not always identified. The second issue is that, working with our road safety partners and also Monash, there is an enhanced crash study under way through Arrive Alive, where they will investigate 80 crashes and really dig down into the root cause of the crash. A trial of the study was undertaken down at Geelong and that is going to progress over a series of months. That may identify better ways of investigating crashes, and it is a system that was brought back from Sweden.

Mr EREN — In a situation where there is a fatality, obviously an autopsy or blood test is done to see if they have had either alcohol or drugs. Are antidepressants detected, and is their presence noted as possibly part of the cause of the accident?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I think it is noted. Any type of drug you have in your system will be identified and then it is grouped according to whether it is cannabis, THC, stimulants or whatever it might be; they are broken down.

Supt KEOGH — It would be. It would come out through the coronial inquest.

Mr EREN — But if that was the only thing in the system — no alcohol or other drugs, only antidepressants — would that be indicated as drugs?

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I believe so. With the random drug testing stuff we are really only targeting methamphetamines and the active component of THC, so we are not covering the broader spectrum. What we did not want to do is go there and scare someone who is taking their cough mixture or something into thinking they will be knocked off for that sort of thing, and they will not be. But we are limiting it to those two areas first up.

As to the outcome, clearly we are on about prevention and detection and community acceptability in terms of what we are doing. Really that comes back to the camera stuff. We really have to start to build community confidence in the camera program. That is important to us. We are also focusing on a reduction in road deaths and road trauma and creating a safe driving environment, and that is coming out of Sweden too. You will often hear VicRoads talking about a safe system — in other words, what contributes to a safe system. One of the factors is that when you and I go out there every day we agree to abide by the laws for a start, and the rest of it follows on.
Another focus is improved community safety. That was the fatigue stuff. I think at about 16 or 17 hours of non-stop driving they are now saying your impairment level is equivalent to being at .05 alcohol.

I refer now to the road safety outcome. Combating fatigue, education enforcement, chain of responsibility legislation: we have had some cases go before the court. We are not having great success with that. I think the courts are probably coming to terms with what it means when we actually start to prosecute operators and others for their role in the chain of responsibility. And this moving away from not just targeting the driver, but all of those who are in that link. So that is still working its way through. Driving hours, detection of offences, engine management system readers — we are hooking onto to look at trucks and heavy vehicles. Improved collision investigations and statistical records.

Single vehicle collision. Strategic partnership approach. Reducing the average travel speeds by 4 kilometres per hour. Improving roadside safety by treating worst roads. Expand the black spot investment program by 50 per cent.

Enlist community support. Rural deaths regularly involve persons who are killed close to their place of residence, and we have talked about that. For us the strategic enforcement areas and enhanced enforcement.

We do a lot of interstate links. We ran Operation Clamdown twice in the north-west area, around about Bendigo and Shepparton. We targeted those areas to try and address some of the high levels of trauma coming out of there, and there were a number of offences detected.

Future directions. Maximising the visibility of our patrols, which we have talked about. The camera program we have also talked about, and there are other camera technologies that people are aware of — such as the Geelong Road, the point-to-point on the Hume Freeway and the new speed on red cameras that are all physically being installed but are not operating at this particular time.

Future strategies. Introduced saliva rates. A drug test, which we have talked about. Legislation for the immediate licence suspension for excessive speed is something that we think ought to be looked at. The impoundment of vehicles for driving during a period of licence suspension or cancellation — I know that has been talked about from time to time, but there are some social and mobility issues that need to be worked through there in terms of what it means to the family to lose the use of a vehicle and all those sorts of things that come through.

Increased penalties for seat-belt and mobile phone offences. I know mobile phone now attracts three demerit points, but the penalties are the same. Expansion of the road safety education programs. Enhanced collision data analysis.

Mr BISHOP — I cannot resist. Can you put that slide up?

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — Which one?

Mr BISHOP — I am not talking about advanced driver education; I am talking about young people, pre-licence, just teaching them the absolute basics.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — When I went to school, which was a long time ago, we actually had that at school. I grew up in the bush. I think one of the local car dealers donated a car to the school. By the time you got to about 17 you went through a bit of a driving thing. From memory I think it was fairly basic, but there are those sorts of things going around, and I think some of them are conducted privately too. I cannot think of a name.
There is one running in the peninsula area. I am not sure. We try and promote that, but what advantage it has, I am not sure, to be honest, Barry. It is not something we should ignore. If it is worthwhile exploring, we ought to do it and test it to see whether it does have an outcome.

Mr BISHOP — It is quite frustrating because no-one will move because they keep questioning that there is not enough depth of data, even at the ACT this was an issue. I do not know how far you have got to push it before someone bites the bullet and does this and adds that to the armoury.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I sort of put two points at this even with the licensing system. We should have a graduated licence system in, which happens. We ought to have a graduated licence system out. We all that we are in an ageing population. We all know that people retire and they get to the seaside or get somewhere else and mobility is an important thing to them, but I am not sure whether we need to give more work to it because, when you get to 70 — —

If people were conditioned that when you reached a certain milestone you had to comply with certain things and that there is a nice exit, whereas at the moment you could be put through a process and you have lost your licence to drive and you think, ‘Good God! I have lost my mobility. I have lost my independence’, and all those sorts of things. They are some of the other things that I think need to be looked at. I know VicRoads and others are, as part of the licensing regime.

The CHAIR — Bob, I know we keep asking the questions, so I am not pointing the finger at you, but we need to move on.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I think I have finished my bit, and I am flicking across to John just to wrap up a bit.

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — Just following on from what Bob said about a safer road system, the issue in the bush — or the stand-out issue — is run-off-road struck-fixed-object, which accounts for about 30 per cent of our road fatalities. In fact from 1995 to 2002 there were some 354 fatalities and 4375 injury accidents on rural roads.

The Geelong Freeway with those new big sign steel posts has cleaned up a couple of people because they are not guarded. If you drive from here down to Geelong you will see that the closer you get to Geelong the guards around barriers that are close to the roadway fall away. They are just not there in place. A lot of our roads have a very big tree within a metre and a half of the actual bitumen seal. You do not actually have to be a bad driver; you only have to make a mistake and you are dead. The trees are not going to move.

It is an issue that we have talked about in the south-west for about four years. It is our suggestion to you that we consider drawing together the available research on ran-off road struck-fixed-objects — from MUARC, Sweden has done an amount of work, VicRoads I believe now has a 9-metre standard clearance on newly constructed roads of fixed objects, and the municipalities have holdings of data and can identify historical problems.

The problem is not confined just to trees; we have got power poles in the south-west. We have got a lot of rocks that are never going to move, and they are right beside the road — they have been there for years — and also the man-made objects. One of the issues for us is that you can have a highway that is constructed and then trees self-propagate and are just allowed to grow. There seems to be no, in places, pattern of actually knocking them down.

It is our suggestion that a working party look at this. We already know in the south-west from raising the issue that an amount of work is already happening to actually move some of the tree line back and look at other issues. It is something that has taken 200 years to create. It is not going to go away overnight, but if we do nothing with it now, our children and grandchildren will be dealing with this problem.

A lot of folk think it is going to be expensive to roll this tree line back. I think the last thing we need to do is beat the municipalities and VicRoads over the head with this issue, but there does seem to me to be an opportunity to form groups in municipal areas, perhaps based around the existing local safety committees or the community road safety committees, and start the process of at least stopping the planting of trees in the wrong spot, and that happens now. There are trees of significance that may need to be protected. There are stands of trees that before we would move them we would want to create another stand inside a fence line. If I look at the highway between Hamilton...
and Horsham as an example, you can see where logging has been licensed in the forest creating a wide gap of no trees, and yet right beside the highway we have these monstrous great trees. It is my suggestion that if it is okay to create quite a gap through that national park area the gap ought to be beside the road.

There is also an opportunity to plant species that are going to not crush a car cell if you do run into them. Perhaps in Barry’s area with some of the Mallee scrub it is perhaps not worth worrying about. But 30 per cent of the rural road toll — I can supply you with some charts of what it means in the south-west since 1999 through to April this year — there have been 30 fatalities, 509 injury collisions and 465 non-injury collisions out of about 4500 ran-off-road struck-fixed-object. Interestingly more of them were on a straight section of the road as opposed to a kerb. In fact 10 fatalities were on a kerb; 20 were on a straight section of road.

Mr STONEY — A question about remote areas and accidents. I know the south-west is quite prone, as you have said, to all sorts of objects and serious accidents, and it is a well-known fact that the longer people have to wait for help the more likely they are to die or have serious injury. Can you tell me how the helicopter proposal is going down that way?

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — We have dealt with that. You are right. It bobs up everywhere. Hopefully we will have some sort of an answer this week, but I am not.

Mr STONEY — Sorry, I did not know that.

Chief Insp. ROBINSON — The shortened version, allowing for the time constraints, Chair — —

The CHAIR — We do appreciate the importance of the issue you raise, hence we have one inquiry that has evolved exactly around crashes involving roadside objects. Unfortunately I am aware of the time, so I would like to thank you, John, for coming all the way from Warrnambool. We do appreciate you time and input. Also obviously Bob and Peter for your input today. As I said, we have taken a transcript, and we will provide Victoria Police with a copy of that transcript in due course.

Assistant Comm. HASTINGS — I think you have got a copy of that, which was a document that we put together in consultation with the TAC, VicRoads, the RACV and everyone else who was interested; we developed that. If I could say at the end of it, I think that in Victoria we have a unique partnership and arrangement with government, the TAC, VicRoads, Victoria Police and the community. It seems to be that other jurisdictions would love to have it, and they have not got it. I really believe that we have achieved some marvellous outcomes in terms of road safety over the years and we really just need to build upon those experiences.

The CHAIR — Well spoken. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Melbourne – 24 May 2004 10.30am – 1.00pm

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 Officers: Mr G. Both and Mr P. Nelson

Witnesses
Mr D. Healy, general manager road safety;
Mr J. Bolitho, senior legal counsel;
Transport Accident Commission

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — I welcome representatives from the TAC, David Healy and John Bolitho. We do appreciate both your time and input to our inquiry. As you are aware, we are running two inquiries at the present time. The first is an inquiry into the Victorian country road toll, and obviously a second related inquiry — that is, crashes involving roadside objects. We are taking transcripts, so we will provide the TAC with a copy of the transcript in due course. We are also operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot be used against you legally into the future. Again, we do appreciate TAC’s time and input, and we will now hand across to you, David — or John — to make your submission.

Mr HEALY — Thanks very much, Chair. I will introduce John. John Bolitho is our manager of legal policy area, so for issues surrounding liability with respect to roadside objects and the like John will certainly be happy enough to field questions, and I will deal more generally with the road safety issues under discussion. Firstly, might I say that it is not our intention to provide detailed crash statistics. I think we know VicRoads was providing a very detailed analysis of the crash data, both in regional areas and certainly breakdowns for run-off-road crashes and the like. What we can bring to the table though is additional information with respect to our claims data.

Dealing specifically with the country road toll — and as you noted, Chair, there is a fair degree of overlap between regional trauma and run-off-road fixed-object trauma — we note from our statistics that in broad terms the regional area of Victoria collars about 45 per cent of fatalities and about 33 per cent of serious injuries.

The overrepresentation of fatalities is no accident, simply because of the fact that generally speaking we are dealing with higher speeds in that locality.

When we look at our claims data — I am referring to our serious claims data, where someone is at least hospitalised for more than one day — about 48 per cent of claims in regional Victoria arise from single-vehicle running-off-road crashes. So probably the single most important claims for us in regional areas are single-vehicle running-off-road crashes, many involving striking fixed objects.

The CHAIR — Do you have a breakdown of those figures?

Mr HEALY — We can provide that. It is not in the material we have provided, but we can certainly provide those claims figures.

There are a number of causes of crashes, and I am sure other agencies have gone through them with you. There are multiple causes; no crash is the result of a single cause, it is normally the result of a chain of circumstances. In the case of serious trauma in rural or regional Victoria behavioural factors play a significant role — we do not deny that — including alcohol. We note that about 25 per cent of drivers killed in regional Victoria are over the legal limit of .05, and much more than 50 per cent are more than three times the legal limit. That remains a significant problem for us in regional centres.

Speed is always going to be a factor, particularly when you have a majority of serious crashes happening in high-speed zones. The reality is that if things go wrong and you are travelling at 100 km/h or even more, then the results are clearly going to be more severe than they would be in the metropolitan area.

In relation to fatigue, within rural areas we are clearly expecting longer trips on average, particularly for those who are commuting through the areas. Longer trips inevitably mean a greater propensity to experience fatigue, and while it is very difficult to assess the exact extent of fatigue in rural crashes, we estimate that approximately 20 per cent of serious single-vehicle crashes in rural Victoria are related to fatigue. It represents a significant problem area for us, because we simply do not have the legislative or enforcement regime to support programs to help change that behaviour. We have to rely very much on the educational approach.

The CHAIR — When you talk about fatigue, you are not only talking about fatigue as in a long trip, you would also be talking about fatigue resulting from people having a long night out or people working overtime — so fatigue from working longer hours, working outside normal hours and those types of things as well?

Mr BOLITHO — Absolutely.

Mr HEALY — Correct. We are talking about fatigue in its broadest sense. It is most easily recognisable if you have been driving for long periods of time. We say to take a break every 2 hours and preferably take a small nap to help restore your level of alertness. But you are right: if you are fatigued for other reasons — having late
nights or working hard — that can also have an impact in terms of your tiredness on the road. It is a difficult issue to counter those sorts of problems with impairment. I note, too, that generally speaking about two-thirds of the TAC’s claimants for crashes occurring in regional areas are male, so it is much more of a male issue. Our ratio of males and females who appear in hospital following crashes in regional areas is approximately 2 to 1.

I mentioned some of the behavioural aspects contributing to the causes of rural crashes and injuries. Clearly we have roads of varying standards, and quite rightly VicRoads and local councils make sure that the roads of the higher standards are those which carry the greatest volumes and hence provide the greatest public utility. But for all that, there is a large network of roads of lesser standard carrying lower volumes but which nevertheless do accumulate over time a significant proportion of trauma events. So there are varying roads and varying conditions. In some instances you may have gravel shoulders or even gravel roads, according to their level of use, their amenity and their purpose, and these represent increased risk factors for those who choose to use those roads. Speed limits are important in terms of helping to define what speeds are appropriate in each of these areas.

Looking at vehicle factors, while I do not have specific statistics to hand, I would imagine that the average age of vehicles in regional Victoria is older than it is in metropolitan Victoria. That in itself has an impact in terms of the likely severity of outcome of a crash. It is hard to credit how important vehicle crashworthiness is in terms of the severity of the outcome of a crash.

In fact I will quote the European Transport Safety Council, which said that if everyone across Europe changed from their current vehicle to the very safest vehicle in their class overnight, then road deaths in Europe would halve the following day. That gives you some sense of the great potential for vehicle safety to ensure that even when a crash happens, the outcome is going to be a lot less severe than it might have been. We believe that there must be ways to make sure we accelerate the uptake of safer vehicles in our fleets over time, and that would apply as much to regional areas as it does to metropolitan areas.

Another factor in terms of the severity of outcome, which was noted by the police officer in the previous session, is the remoteness of some areas, particularly if it is a single-vehicle crash. The fact remains that under those circumstances it might be some time before there is notification of the crash taking place and of the nature of the injuries, and because of the post-crash ‘golden hour’ in which to get injured persons to intensive medical care, the likelihood is they will get a more severe outcome than they might have got in the city, given the proximity of medical services and the like. That is an issue which can exacerbate the outcomes of crashes in regional Victoria.

I note also there is a reference to cruise control and in-car systems and the role they may or may not play in terms of trauma. We know very little about cruise control, and there are no definitive studies to suggest that it is either a detriment or an advantage in road-safety terms. You may well surmise that cruise control might make a driver less attentive to the road environment and might be more likely to induce fatigue or a lack of awareness, but we simply have no evidence to that effect. There is a newer technology called adaptive cruise control which will adapt to the speed limit in the zone, but should you get too close to a vehicle in front it will naturally pull back to give you a safe distance between yourself and the vehicle in front. To my way of thinking, that has some potential in terms of reducing the risk of rear-end collisions. Technology does have a role to play, but we do not have a definitive outcome in terms of its value going forward.

Navigational aid systems are a tremendous aid for many drivers in getting from A to B, particularly when driving in foreign areas. To the extent of actually using the system in the car, you are inclined to be pushing buttons to reset the Melway reference code, so clearly that constitutes a risk. To the extent that you can happily set the system in advance of the drive and take verbal advice as you move through your trip, I surmise — there is no definitive evidence — that that could be an advantage in terms of helping you concentrate more on the task of driving as opposed to learning where you should turn next. Once again, there is no definitive evidence.
With respect to longer-term solutions for regional trauma, clearly there are issues surrounding driver behaviour, and there is little doubt that enforcement continues to play a significant role. The enforcement challenge in rural areas is significant, because you have a lower population and you have a much more extended road network; hence, to deploy a limited resource in an effective way over a very poor road network and to give a real sense to motorists that their chances of getting detected are real and palpable, is a genuine challenge for police. Going forward we believe technologies will potentially play an increasing proper road safety role in terms of surveillance and speed control, because we know that small changes in speed and can result in very significant changes in trauma. It seems almost counter-intuitive, but the fact remains that small changes in speed at the outset after braking, which normally takes place before most crashes in some form — except for crashes involving fatigue, when oftentimes a person does not brake and will hit the tree at full speed — is where the speed differentials kick in and you derive some benefit from travelling at slightly slower speeds. We believe that applies equally in regional areas, even at higher speeds, as it does in the metropolitan area. So technology based enforcement will continue to be an issue.

We have noted that drink-driving is an important area of trauma in regional areas, and it is a difficult one to tackle, but it needs to be tackled on a number of fronts. I note that the Australian Drug Foundation has a Good Sports Accreditation Program, and we think that is an excellent program for rolling out for sporting clubs and licensed premises throughout regional Victoria. That rollout has been moderately successful so far, and essentially what it does is help set up a policy in these clubs to make sure that they responsibly serve alcohol, that they look after the individual in the club, that they generate a family atmosphere such that people return to those clubs and that they can be successful for reasons other than serving huge amounts of alcohol.

The CHAIR — Does the TAC contribute financially to those types of programs?

Mr HEALY — Yes, the TAC currently partially funds the Good Sports program rollout in Victoria, because we believe it is a worthwhile program. What is attractive about it is the fact that it actually sets a policy in place so you have sustained change. Oftentimes in public education you roll out a program and you would like to think you could achieve sustained change, but often it is relatively limited in its duration; but a policy change really means that you have implemented change for the future and that hopefully you will derive benefits from those changed policies from that point on. We think they are important because they help to change, if you like, the social milieu in which drinking takes place, and that is always going to be a challenge, particularly in regional areas where you have to travel very significant distances to get to your local watering hole, hence the likelihood of driving after having had some alcohol is a lot higher, particularly where you might not have the same alternative transport services as you do in metropolitan areas.

The CHAIR — We have travelled the width and breadth of Victoria in the last couple of months and spoken to something like 60 or 70 organisations, and I must say that those programs have very much won the support of the local communities.

Mr HEALY — And that is a great thing, because I think that if they get local community support, then you will see a change in the environment locally as to what is expected of individuals and what is expected of clubs. It is not wrong for a bartender to say, ‘You have had enough’, and if that sort of philosophy and approach can then be translated into hotels and larger clubs, then people begin to expect it and to think, ‘Well, that’s okay for them to say no. They are actually looking after our needs and our safety interests’, and that is to the good longer term. So we see the Goods Sports program as being very much the foot in the door in terms of changing generally the attitude to dispensing alcohol in licensed premises, and we think it is particularly pertinent in regional Victoria.

In relation to the issue of drugs in driving, it is very difficult to get a handle on the incidence on-road of illicit drug-taking and drug-driving. We know from toxicology reports from the coroner’s office that the incidence seems to be growing in terms of the number of drivers killed who have the presence of illicit drugs in their system, particularly drugs such as cannabis and amphetamines. We note that there is a likelihood of rolling out a new drug-driving testing regime in the near future, which we think can be particularly positive in hopefully denting the degree to which drug-driving takes place both in regional and metropolitan communities.

Moving from the behavioural side of the story, which is always an ongoing challenge in terms of achieving successful change, the other side of the story is the road infrastructure.

The CHAIR — Before you move off driver behaviour and illicit drugs, are there statistics around to show what proportion of drugs contributing to road accidents are legal drugs?
Mr HEALY — Not very good statistics at all. What you would find is there is a small percentage — which I cannot quote you — in the toxicology reports, which suggests that a certain proportion of those drugs are legal. Sometimes, depending on the actual prescription, they could be legally taken or illegally taken. I believe it is a relatively small proportion of drugs which forms the legal group, and by far the bulk is made up of illicit drugs such as methamphetamines and cannabis.

Mr STONEY — You would be familiar with the report this committee put out on drugs and driving and so forth some years ago. Would the TAC have preferred some of those recommendations to have been taken up a lot quicker? Personally I have been amazed that implementation has been so slow, and I was wondering how the TAC felt about it, because it is obviously a growing problem.

Mr HEALY — Clearly the earlier you can introduce effective countermeasures, the better. One of the difficulties has been to carefully assess the technologies. The technologies for testing have been growing rapidly in number, in sophistication and in accuracy, and I think it has been a question of deciding at what point in time you can bite the bullet and pick a technology which you believe will very reliably and capably undertake what would you like it to achieve. I think they have reached that time in terms of technology selection. Up until this point there has been rapid development, but there has been some reticence in terms of picking it up.

Mr STONEY — Would you agree there is an opportunity there that we should explore?

Mr HEALY — In terms of drugs-and-driving testing?

Mr STONEY — Yes.

Mr HEALY — Absolutely. It is an area in which ideally we want to build the impression — and rightly so — that for anyone who chooses to take an illicit drug and then drive, their chances of getting detected for that offence are high. I believe the new drugs and driving legislation, coupled with appropriate technology, can help to secure that perception, which will be important in reducing the frequency of drug-driving on the roads.

I will quickly turn to the area of road infrastructure, which I am sure is an area that has been covered by groups such as police — as I heard — VicRoads and RACV. It is a very important area for the future, and it is an area where we recognise that if you do make the appropriate change, it can build in systemic safety going forward. It is off the back of the work done in the Netherlands with the sustainable safety programs and off the back of the Vision Zero concept in Sweden. In its simplest form it is saying, ‘We as humans make mistakes. If we make a mistake at the wrong time in the wrong location, unfortunately the consequences could be lethal — disastrous — to ourselves or to others. That seems unfair. We as human beings have certain tolerances to injury. If the level of energy dissipated exceeds that tolerance, we or someone else will be severely injured. Are there ways in which we can build a safer system such that when we commit an error, we do not commit ourselves to being injured catastrophically or even killed’. That is the basic underpinning philosophy, and it provides a driving force to understand what we can do with the road infrastructure system such that when people make mistakes, the area will be more accommodating.

So in the road infrastructure area there are two challenges: preferably to keep the people on the road in the first instance, and that involves such things as appropriate shoulder sealing, proper delineation, appropriate curvatures of the road system and the like, and rumble strips, which we deem to be very appropriate; but, should they leave the carriageway, is there going to be in some way, shape or form, a forgiving environment? In some instances this may involve the installation of flexible barrier systems; in other instances it may require having a significantly lengthy clearway to ensure that they can pull up. These are the challenges, because they are not insignificant costs and they require a considerable priority from the point of view of agencies and government to take this forward against all other areas competing for scarce resources.

But in terms of actually making those changes and then locking in the benefits for the next 15 or 20 years, that is a very attractive proposition. Also, ensuring that we have a safer system generally for our road users and our community is a very attractive notion. On that basis the TAC is in accord with most of the other agencies in recognising that this is an appropriate way to go; but of course you must seek resources against other competing needs, and we understand that.

Mr BISHOP — I have a question which is probably not about resources. We are talking about infrastructure and making roads safer, and roadside objects is one of the issues we are looking at. We have talked to
a number of municipalities which have told us in their evidence that they have struggled to ensure they can remove trees that might be unsafe in their view because of the difficulty with the Department of Sustainability and Environment and the conditions that were put on tree removals.

In the event of the new Road Management Bill coming into being, where nonfeasance disappears — I will put it to you fairly bluntly — would TAC take action against the Department of Sustainability and Environment if it believed that its refusal to allow a tree to be cleared caused an accident?

Mr HEALY — I might let John answer this question first up.

Mr BOLITHO — That is a very difficult question because all of this approach appears to have been taken from a whole-of-government perspective, and I think the TAC would be reluctant to get involved in government-department-versus-government-department litigation in circumstances where there might be a better way to resolve the problem. With VicRoads, one of our road safety partners, we are setting up protocols to look at these sorts of problems in an alternative dispute resolution environment rather than necessarily going out to institute action wherever that was possible.

Having said that, in the past the TAC has instituted action against both VicRoads and local authorities where there has been clear negligence, and the TAC is empowered under the provisions of the Transport Accident Act to do that, and in appropriate circumstances where negotiation and all other reasonable attempts to resolve those issues have failed litigation has been instituted. So I suppose if the evidence was absolutely clear in the way you have suggested, the TAC would certainly give consideration to issuing such an action. We would prefer to approach it on a resolve-the-problem approach first, if that could be done.

Mr BISHOP — Can you explain to the committee what process you would put in place? We heard that the Department of Sustainability and Environment, under a bit of pressure, suddenly came up with a code of practice that no-one had heard of before. I am particularly interested in how in fact they, and you and VicRoads, may respond to this new challenge.

Mr BOLITHO — The TAC in its approach to local authorities, in its approach to VicRoads, and no doubt in the future in relation to DSE, will be involved in developing those protocols and responding to them with respect to the ways in which they affect the issues that affect us, and that includes our recovery provisions.

Mr BISHOP — Municipalities now will be classed as road managers.

Mr BOLITHO — Correct.

Mr BISHOP — Will TAC consult widely with the municipalities in relation to the future basis you would put into place?

Mr BOLITHO — I am sorry, I missed the last part.

Mr BISHOP — I will shorten it. In the process of getting to some resolution, will TAC go out and consult with Victorian municipalities which will therefore be the road managers?

Mr BOLITHO — Yes, and it would be part of an ongoing interrelationship process that we have. There has been that inter-reaction with them in the past and with the Municipal Association of Victoria.

Mr STONEY — To carry on from that, are you aware there is this issue Mr Bishop spoke about where councils and indeed VicRoads have been actively prevented from widening roads and getting rid of dangerous trees? Have you been aware of that issue?

Mr BOLITHO — I was not aware of it, no.

Mr STONEY — We have had a great deal of evidence from around Victoria, as the chairman said, about the DSE physically preventing local engineers from shifting dangerous trees to the point where some engineers are very frustrated. I would have thought that perhaps it would be in TAC’s interests to look at that issue. I am surprised you do not know it has been bubbling along because it has being going quite strongly for some time.
Mr HEALY — We have had feedback that from time to time there has been push back from DSE with respect to moving forward on some of these areas. I can only emphasise what John said: in the end we would prefer a whole-of-government approach. If that involves sitting down with DSE, VicRoads, and representatives of local government about the way forward, that makes the most sense. Litigation hopefully would be very much the last resort in government to government. I would have hoped there would be an opportunity to secure both maintaining environmental amenity, while at the same time improving safety outcomes.

The flexible barrier system is one option which in many circumstances enables you to maintain the great bulk of the trees and foliage on the roadside, so long as you have a reasonable amount of initial clearance between the barriers and those trees. It is not the same wholesale clearing you would need for a clearway on the side of the road. So they represent significant advantages in that respect.

Mr STONEY — Who would be the lead organiser on a whole-of-government approach to an issue that is identified by this committee?

Mr HEALY — My view would be that because VicRoads maintains the responsibility for the declared road system in Victoria, I imagine it would be the lead agency, but we would be willing partners in terms of such meeting.

My final point generally in relation to safety and rural roads, and it applies also to fixed objects, is really the vehicle safety issue that I referenced before. It has got a huge potential. Victoria has an average age of about 10.8 or 10.9 years, which means it is a decade away before we change half our fleet, if that is the rate at which we continue to renew new cars for old. Nevertheless, for the new cars coming on to the market it is important that purchasers help drive safety on the agenda. That really means that we wish local government, organisations and the consumer pick cars which will perform better in the event of a crash rather than more poorly. If we do that we believe that can make a contribution both in regional Victoria and also on the outcomes of any type of crash, including struck fixed object.

We also note there are a number of technologies which the TAC is trialling now in its TAC SafeCar project, such as intelligent speed systems. That is very much about providing advice back to the driver through a GPS tracking process if they are in fact exceeding the speed limit. The particular vehicles we have out being tested in fleets right now push back on the accelerator to suggest you are exceeding the current speed limit in that zone. We believe these, longer term, definitely have a role to play in light of making sure speeds are controlled both in regional and metropolitan environments. We also believe there is a new system called electronic stability systems which has been evaluated in Sweden, although I have not been privy to the actual results, and which suggests better control in the event of an emergency situation and hence avoiding the problem of striking the fixed objects in the first place.

We think newer, safer cars, and an incentive for manufacturers to take on some of the new safety technologies can only be of great advantage in both regional and metropolitan areas with respect to producing a safer outcome. It will be road-user behaviour, infrastructure, and improved vehicles which, in combination, will produce a more satisfactory result for us.

The CHAIR — With regard to standard vehicle safety standards, to some degree most purchasers of new vehicles or second-hand vehicles do not take into consideration a great deal of safety features, such as airbags, especially parents who are buying for their 18-year-old son or daughter — they always seem to buy the second or third-hand older car. Has the TAC given any consideration to an advertising campaign to educate consumers with regard to the importance of safety systems within cars?

Mr HEALY — Yes, we have. We have a web site called howsafeisyourcar.com.au which basically updates information with respect to new car safety, which the RACV does also, as does VicRoads, and also used car safety ratings which is a Monash evaluation of real world crash performance of existing cars. Currently we are in the process of developing a new communication which will go to mass media with a view to promoting safety as an important feature when you next buy your car.

We have undertaken some tracking surveys over time with the community, particularly those who intend to buy a new car in the future. We have found some encouraging results to the extent that when people were asked what they will look for when next buying a car, safety has risen from fifth to second most frequently mentioned. That safety might be as simple as a driver airbag. Public perception of safety might be something quite different from what you see as being best in show, if you like, with respect to new vehicles.
However, we believe that the community attitude is changing. We still think there is a long way to go. We believe that vehicle manufacturers, importantly, will respond to increased demand. That is probably the most important message for us. We would like to tackle vehicle safety on two fronts: influence the Australian design rules in terms of the minimum safety standards, such as we believe seatbelt reminder systems are very appropriate for new vehicles going forward, but also to look at ways we can generate market demand. In that way manufacturers will come to the party and come to the party earlier than they may have done otherwise.

Mr LANGDON — Picking up the Chair’s point, I have been involved with the Road Safety Committee since 1996. My first thought when I first started to drive a car was you got an older car so if you had one or two accidents in it you were damaging an older car. The education for me from this point of view is that when my children become old enough to drive I will try to get them a very safe car. It did not take me eight years to realise that, but it is certainly something I have picked up. I do not know that the general community has picked it up yet.

Mr HEALY — That is probably right; we are still on the way to educating the community with respect to vehicle safety and what it means. The new ad and obviously assigning a significant media budget to that to bring it to the public’s attention is going some way towards that. I notice that NCAP, the new car assessment program committee, makes sure when it releases the results of the latest crash tests it tries to generate some editorial, and it has been successful in doing so in recent times.

It is a gradual drip process, but we would very much like to up the ante in terms of the community coming to understand vehicle safety and its role. Also we would like to tailor some of the information on our web site to assist young people. The likelihood is that a young person getting their first car is not about to get into a new Holden at whatever price it may be; it will be a second-hand car and a cheaper car most likely. On that basis we would like to tailor information to assist them to make sensible choices, even for their first car and even though it might be cheaper than many others. We have a way to go.

What is important with the mass media is it is sending a secondary message to manufacturers. When they see that advertising they realise that government is getting serious with respect to vehicle safety as an issue, and hopefully they, as manufacturers, will come to the party.

Mr BOLITHO — One additional item which did not arise out of our paper but which TAC sees from its claims experience, and which relates particularly to rural areas: stock on the highways and fences that have not been properly kept that result in cattle and horses being on highways and freeways is quite a significant cause of serious injury and death. If this forum is a way of feeding that back into the community I think that too would be a good thing. The TAC certainly has had successful recovery actions against farmers who have not had proper fencing in place and so on, but sometimes those major collisions with animals are overlooked when we are looking at trees and frangible poles and so on.

Mr BISHOP — I suspect when you do that you will widen that to animals that may come out of parks and injure cars as well, rather than just looking at the rural side of it.

Mr BOLITHO — Yes.

Mr STONEY — Wildlife is a very big issue.

Mr BOLITHO — Yes, it is.

Mr BISHOP — I am interested in driver training and education. I suggest to you that TAC has avoided its responsibilities in that area quite substantially. You have taken a high profile in advertising, which has got the results, I suspect, but in this particular area I think you have dropped the ball. While it is difficult to find enough depth of data to look at particularly pre-licence driver training and education, and most organisations are dependent on on-road hours, I would put to you that a package of those two events would certainly reduce the traffic incidents on our roads and would be financially beneficial as well as health beneficial to Victoria, and therefore TAC.

Mr HEALY — There is no doubt that we have a great interest, as do our partners, in driver training and its role going forward in terms of reducing injury. We are on sure ground when we say if you build up varied experience as a learner driver — and we recommend 120 hours — you will be a safer driver by virtue of the skills you have acquired as a learner under supervised conditions. We know that. I think research out of Sweden is quite definitive. Certainly we are comfortable in promoting that 120-hour message to the community and young drivers.
Driver training in itself is a vexed area. I say that because I have met many people, well intentioned and they are great community contributors in many areas in terms of driver training and their approach and contributions locally. From our perspective we have tried as best we can to look at the evidence in terms of level of effectiveness or ineffectiveness to date. We also recognise that many groups are very interested in taking forward and doing the right thing by the communities. The challenge for us, I believe, is to help build a resource which they will find of use and which we believe is best practice collectively and which they can help to integrate into their programs to make a difference.

The other area of interest is to undertake some definitive evaluation work in terms of some of the programs. It is a vexed area and an area which we continue to have an interest in. I take your point with respect to abrogating our responsibility. I believe we have a genuine interest in that area and we are trying to take it forward, but we believe we should expend vehicle owners premium money in a responsible way to best effect.

Mr BISHOP — The research that is often quoted to the committee is quite often international research. I would like to ask — and you talked about evaluating different areas — whether you would be prepared to do some research in the particular area of pre-licence training in Australia rather than relying on overseas research, where in fact it would be directly related to our particular conditions?

Mr HEALY — I think it is important that we evaluate as best we can those programs which we believe have a very good chance of being successful in Australian conditions. The TAC currently is considering a number of options which may be of value in terms of evaluating programs. They have not come to fruition but certainly we are interested in the notion of evaluating what is deemed to be best practice by way of driver training and in the Australian context. We would be rather hopeful that we would have some cooperative arrangement with other agencies in undertaking such an evaluation.

Mr BISHOP — Other agencies — is that VicRoads?

Mr HEALY — Potentially.

Mr BISHOP — Is it Monash?

Mr HEALY — Certainly VicRoads and our government agencies, but our discussions have not gone beyond that yet. It is relatively early.

Mr BISHOP — I am never particularly patient but this has gone on for some time. TAC has been skirting the issue. I think it is about time you bit the bullet and had a decent look at these programs which, if you put into a package, may well achieve the results we are all looking for. Where do we go from here?

Mr HEALY — I do not believe from our perspective we have been skirting the issue. We have had a long and hard look at the issue in terms of what we know and what we do not know. As I said, what we can do right now, and planning is under way, is to develop some resource materials to help all groups that are interested in driver training to incorporate elements of this into their program. We think that is useful for them. We are trying to pull together best practice, integrate it into a user-friendly package so that training programs can adopt the materials as they see fit and incorporate them into their package. That is trying to meet some of these groups halfway in the short term.

In the longer term our interest is to definitively evaluate in the Australian conditions and we need support from other agencies. We need a program which we believe combines the best elements of practice from around the world, but it is evaluated in an Australian context, in a methodologically sound way to ensure we are on the right tram.

Mr BISHOP — In the Australian Capital Territory we saw the program Road Ready Plus, which again did not have the depth of data that keeps getting thrown back to anyone who suggests this. Are you prepared to also look at that particular area as well in relation to your future policies?

Mr HEALY — I think we would be looking at what we believe will work and is worth evaluating. We are not discounting any approach if we believe there is sufficient merit based on the program and what we know from prior work in the area of driver training. It is an area of great interest to us. The notion of short-term training of drivers to reduce their risks is very attractive. In notion it is incredibly attractive.. The issue for us is to make sure
when we expend on a program and expand and promote it that it is well founded, and on that basis we will continue to make those decisions.

The CHAIR — The government has recently announced a two-year, $130 million-dollar black spot program, a new program, over the next two years, using TAC funds, as I understand it. Are there any conditions for the allocation of those funds, particularly bearing in mind that in country Victoria we are seeing great support for the previous program?

Mr HEALY — There has been no fixed quantum of expenditure, regional versus metro. Clearly one of the key conditions is to derive the best value we can for the community in terms of safety for the investment. The other is I believe to achieve a reasonable balance in terms of the investment; and while I cannot give you an exact percentage, a significant proportion of those funds will be expended in regional Victoria and a considerable proportion will be devoted to the vexed question of the run-off road crashes, particularly striking fixed objects.

Mr STONEY — You mentioned in your submission that TAC administers a comprehensive, hybrid no-fault and common-law damages compensation scheme for Victorians who are injured or die as a result of a transport accident. Does that scheme cover Victorians driving interstate?

Mr HEALY — Yes, it does, driving Victorian registered vehicles.

Mr STONEY — Interstate?

Mr BOLITHO — Yes.

Mr STONEY — Okay. If they are driving a car registered in another state?

Mr BOLITHO — No.

Mr STONEY — They are not?

Mr BOLITHO — No.

Mr LANGDON — A rented vehicle, for example?

Mr STONEY — That is my next question. What about if someone bowls up to the airport, gets a New South Wales registered car and heads off?

Mr BOLITHO — Then if they get involved in an accident that is caused by their own fault, that is too bad; if somebody else is responsible then the CTP insurer of the New South Wales registered hire car would respond.

What is an issue from another perspective is that often you will get off a plane in a remote part of Australia and find that the hire car that is offered to you is actually a Victorian one, so the people who hire those cars are entitled to Victorian no-fault benefits.

Mr STONEY — So single car, no fault at all if it is Victorian registered, anywhere in Australia?

Mr BOLITHO — Yes.

Mr STONEY — Single-car accident driven by a Victorian with a New South Wales car in Victoria is not covered?

Mr BOLITHO — No, in Victoria it would be covered because the no-fault — — .

Mr STONEY — Okay. In New South Wales — not?

Mr BOLITHO — No, because Tasmania and Victoria basically have the two pure no-fault schemes. In the Northern Territory there is a no-fault scheme with a common-law overlay, so if you or I were injured in an accident in Darwin we would have an entitlement to sue at common law if the Northern Territory insured vehicle was negligent.
Mr STONEY — Do you think the general driving public know about those differences? Do you think they might have a false comfort?

Mr BOLITHO — I take issue with the false comfort because I think that the coverage that a Victorian resident driving a Victorian registered vehicle or hiring a Victorian resident vehicle has probably one of the most generous covers. The no-fault and common-law system that the TAC provides is certainly, I would say on a number of measures, ahead of any other system in Australia. Your question becomes difficult in circumstances where I am not sure that a Victorian resident would necessarily be entitled to expect the New South Wales authority to provide the same cover as a Victorian resident would have for the premium they charge. Their scheme is different.

Mr STONEY — My observation is that Victorians are used to a very good system, I think we all agree. They would have false comfort thinking it was the same everywhere, and they would not necessarily know.

Mr BOLITHO — I take your point about that.

The CHAIR — Thank you, David and thank you, John, for your input in time. We are taking a transcript, as I said, and we will provide a copy of the transcript in due course.

Witnesses withdrew.