ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Mildura – 18 March 2004

Members

Mr B. W. Bishop  Mr T. W. Mulder
Mr J. H. Eren  Mr E. G. Stoney
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Chair: Mr I. D. Trezise
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Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officers: Mr G. Both and Mr P. Nelson

Witnesses

Mr P. Pearce, Chief Executive Officer;
Mr G. Healy, General Manager, Assets and Environment;
Mr N. Ganeshanathan, Project Engineer, Asset Development;
Mr P. Dixon, Manager, Asset Development, Mildura Rural City Council.

Necessary corrections to be notified to
effective officer of committee
The CHAIR — Welcome to the Mildura Rural City Council. We thank you for your time and input. We also thank you for your hospitality. We appreciate being able to use what is your old chamber.

As you are aware, the parliamentary Road Safety Committee is inquiring into the country road toll and also crashes involving roadside objects. The committee is made up of seven members of Parliament, five of whom are here today.

We will provide a copy of the transcript to the Mildura Rural City Council in due course. We are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot be held against you legally in the future. Thank you for your input and time. We will hand across to you for your submission.

Mr PEARCE — I will be very brief because I have a 9:50 a.m. plane to catch, so very shortly I will hand on to Garry and he will introduce the team and give a presentation. On behalf of council I would like to welcome you up here. It is terrific that you visit these areas when you are looking at these sorts of activities.

We are a fairly unique municipality. As you would be aware, we are the largest municipality in Victoria and cover about 10 per cent of the geographic mass of Victoria. We are also very prone to the sorts of things that you are looking at, given the nature of our roads and the geographic distance between our centres. It is very timely that you are here, and if you have had the opportunity to drive up and around this area, in particular the road between here and our borders to the south and also the two roads to the west which are the main traffic areas within the municipality, you will understand why.

We welcome you, and I will now hand over to Garry and the team. We will also have further input this afternoon when you hear from the Roadsafe committee as well. Thank you for coming, enjoy your stay.

Mr HEALY — As Phil has mentioned, we will be relying to a large extent on the presentation this afternoon from the Roadsafe committee. That will be a joint presentation — we have been working with them on that, I suppose as a result of the strong partnership between council and the committee, and we think that is probably one of our strengths.

The document which are we have tabled today and will refer to as the council’s Road Safety Strategic Plan was certainly the first for Vicroads western region and I think one of the first in Victoria to be jointly funded by Vicroads and council. Interestingly, the plan has identified as I think its second priority the issue of collision with fixed objects, so it is familiar to us in this region. I apologise for not firstly introducing the members of the team.

Mr DIXON — I am Paul Dixon, manager, asset development.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — I am Nathan Ganeshanathan, project engineer.

Mr HEALY — Both Paul and Nathan have been involved with council’s road safety initiatives and will speak further on them. We have also documented and will leave with you a number of statistics, maps for your convenience and a few locality plans. If you get the opportunity to look around the district, I hope they will be of assistance to you. With that I will hand over to Paul.

Mr DIXON — The two documents we have handed out to you are, as Garry has mentioned, the Road Safety Strategic Plan, and the other one is the crash statistics which I think addresses one of the questions you have in the inquiry — the actual statistics on the problems we have had of run-off on roads.

The CHAIR — You produced this in July 2001?

Mr DIXON — Correct. In the document we have included the issue of the actions, the progress and the status, where you can see the current status of a lot of these initiatives. A lot of them we have already completed or we are well into completing. Because the plan will be finished in June 2004 we will need to find out from our council whether they are going to fund renewing this plan or accept what we have done and live with it. So it is pretty much a live document today. We keep modifying it as and when we make progress. But it gives you details applicable to this inquiry regarding on and off-roads.

Nathan has prepared a summary sheet which if you can read it through brings the whole thing into context as regards the municipality, the budget, the strategy and the crash stats that we have.
To put it into context, I will start off at part A of the document and let Nathan lead you through the crash statistics. The municipality has over 5000 kilometres of roads: 4163 unsealed and 919 sealed, 271 urban roads and 4811 rural, so we have a lot of roads to maintain and therefore a lot of roads where incidents and accidents can occur. So we have a lot to manage. It is not an easy task. That is the damage we are dealing with in our municipality.

Mr STONEY — Do the sealed roads include the highways?

Mr DIXON — No. These are just the local roads that we manage. On the back of this sheet Nathan has filled in some more details of the local roads and the highways. The statistics and the details are there for you as well.

The budget is there just to give you some indication of how much we spend each year on maintaining the roads, including the Roads to Recovery funding which we greatly appreciate. That brings into context the roads we have and the dollars we are managing them with.

The next thing is the road safety strategic plan, which we mentioned before, which deals in particular with the run-off-road accidents. The issues were identified in the plan which was carried out by an independent consultant in consultation with the community, so the report is not something we dreamt up, it was a consultative document. There are five items listed: provision of adequate rest stops; road-safety auditing; shoulder sealing and audio-tactile edge lining; avoid driving under the influence of alcohol; and remove or treat roadside hazards. They are the major things that were identified in this strategy, so for the last four years we have been addressing these issues in our yearly budget process, in our engineering assessments et cetera.

The CHAIR — This may be in your strategic plan, but obviously we have not had time to read it. Where are you up to with regard to the provision of adequate rest stops, for example?

Mr GANESHANATHAN — For the highways?

The CHAIR — Yes, the highways.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — We are coordinating that with Vicroads, because they are the ones who come and do the work. So it is still happening. There is something in the pipeline, but no projects have been undertaken, especially with the rest stops on the highways.

Mr DIXON — Roadsafe is advocating on behalf of the community to lobby for rest stops on the highways.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — For that item, in the column saying who should be doing the work, it says ‘Vicroads’, but still nothing has happened.

Mr HEALY — It is something of importance in this area that we think should be treated with some priority. In particular, the climatic conditions up here do not lend themselves to the type of rest stops we have, and if the committee gets the opportunity to have a look at some, it would probably be a worthwhile exercise. There is one close by out at Mildura airport which is typical. They are nothing more than a bit of bare earth, sometimes a table and a rubbish bin. They are really not conducive to having people use them. They are the ones we have now.

The CHAIR — Is the issue the lack of rest stops or is it that the rest stops are inadequate in the way you just described?

Mr HEALY — They are certainly inadequate in terms of attracting people to stop. There are no real facilities there, and there is no attraction. Secondly, they have tended to develop on an ad hoc basis, so no real strategy that we are aware of has been applied to their appropriate location on the highways.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — Yes. There are rest stops, but they are not sealed. There is a gravel area and maybe toilet facilities. There is really no attraction for people to stop.

Mr BISHOP — Has there been any indication that Vicroads is looking at putting in rest stops like the one on the Euston road, which is quite good? We have had reports made to this committee that a number of motorists, particularly women drivers, are not that keen to use roadside stops because of the safety angle.
Mr HEALY — Yes. I am not aware of the position of Vicroads on that or on what it is actually looking at.

Mr DIXON — Roadsafe is lobbying Vicroads to get something of a high quality that people will use because if people are tired and if the roadside stops are high quality, they are more likely to stop. If they look grotty, they will not stop. They will keep going, and that is when they will fall sleep and have an accident. We have to make them attractive to encourage people to have a short nap.

Mr BISHOP — You are not aware that Vicroads has any model in mind?

Mr HEALY — I am not aware of that at this stage.

Mr BISHOP — Do you have a model in mind?

Mr DIXON — No. The highways are not our roads. It is something that Vicroads manages.

Mr HEALY — If I might just conclude, you mentioned a New South Wales example, and there is also another good one close by, just immediately west of Buronga. It is a sealed area and it has solar lighting. I am not sure if it has a toilet facility, but it is certainly of a considerably better standard than the ones we have.

Mr DIXON — That was the context of the road safety strategy, which you might get a chance to look at later on. Some of these initiatives have already been completed, so we are working our way through the list. You can look at that later.

I will move on to the document dealing with crash statistics. I propose to just summarise what we have in this document. The number of off-road crashes in the last five years was 268, and the number that have involved running into fixed objects was 172, which is quite a large proportion — 64 per cent. The proportion of run-off-road crashes with trees was 45 per cent and 11 per cent with utility poles.

Mr STONEY — The fixed objects that are not trees, what sort of things are we looking at? If they are not trees or poles, what are we looking at?

Mr GANESHANATHAN — These are mainly on the highways, specifically the Calder Highway, which has been sealed. Normally vehicles have run off the road and ended up hitting a fixed object.

Mr STONEY — My question is: what sort of fixed objects are they? Is it irrigation channels, barriers, or what do they hit?

Mr GANESHANATHAN — Mainly trees. There is a break-up in this document.

Mr DIXON — Some of them just fall sleep, run off the road and do not hit anything.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — The figures for the five years are poles, 19; trees, 78; and fences and walls, 16. That is on the third page of the document.

Mr DIXON — Fences and walls, embankments, guideposts, traffic signs, guardrails, fire hydrants, buildings, traffic island and others. Some of them just fall asleep and run off the road into nothing.

Mr MULDER — The figures for 2001–02 are very high. Is there any reason for that? In 2001 the figures for hitting a pole, a shrub, a tree or what have you are 38 and 22.

Mr DIXON — There has been no analysis to indicate why that would occur.

Mr MULDER — There was no special event — a bus accident or something like that? It seems very high.

Mr DIXON — No, these are individual accidents.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — There were three fatalities over the five years.

Mr DIXON — Each individual accident has a bit more detail on the following sheets, if you want to analyse it in more detail.
They are the crashes statistics over that time frame. There is a bit of a lag in the monitoring and registering by Vicroads, so these statistics are from 1998 to 2003. It is not real-time data that we get, which is a bit unfortunate. It would be more useful if we could get the information as soon as these incidents occur and are registered.

The CHAIR — If an accident has occurred out on the road and the police or perhaps Vicroads has attended, is there a formal mechanism in place whereby the police or Vicroads will contact council to notify it of the accident?

Mr GANESHANATHAN — For accidents in the urban area, police normally call us and we go to see what we can improve, but for accidents in the rural areas, no, normally we do not.

Mr DIXON — Unless they ask us to. We have had instances where the police have called us and said, ‘We think the road dynamics might not be quite right where this accident has occurred. Can you look at it?’ Nathan has been through the audit course and is a trained auditor, so he will go and have a look at the problem and see if the road has been made properly and has the right dimensions and signage.

The CHAIR — That occurs in the urban area, but what happens in the rural areas?

Mr GANESHANATHAN — If it is a significant accident they send an accident report for us with their comments about what needs to be done. For instance, a couple of accidents happened in one area and they informed us we had to do some shoulder sealing, which we did last year. It was on a sharp curve where a couple of accidents occurred within two months, and one was a fatality. We had a program to reseal the road, so we did the shoulder sealing as well.

Mr BISHOP — Given the fact that you will have to identify and audit roads which are yours, are you well prepared for that in relation to the Road Management Bill which we will start debating possibly in two or three weeks time in Parliament? Will that alter this process you are talking about?

Mr DIXON — We develop our own road management plans, as you are probably aware. Will it change it? I think not, because probably if there is an accident the police determine whether or not they want to call council in to look at the issue. Sometimes I think they might speak to the driver and he will say, ‘Yeah, I was falling asleep, I ran off the road’; and it is nothing do with the road dimensions, it is the drivers themselves. I do not think it will change dramatically from the current situation: the police generally call us when there is an issue that they feel is a problem with the road, so I do not think so but I am not sure. The police may have a different view of that.

Mr BISHOP — How regularly do you inspect those roads which are your responsibility?

Mr DIXON — It varies. Obviously it varies with the budget, and the type of road will vary the inspection regime. That will be spelt out in our road management plans. Some roads might be more inspected than others because you might get a road — let’s say down here — which has 8000 vehicles a day compared to a road out in the middle with 20 vehicles per day. Obviously you do not inspect them with the same frequency, so it is based upon resources and availability.

We will be using modern satellite technology for the road inspections to actually document and track where we have been, and that will then be downloaded so we have evidence to anyone who wants to see it as to where we have been, where we have inspected and what we have found. We should have that in place within about 12 months time.

Mr MULDER — In relation to the resources part of the new road management plans that you are going to put forward, is it fair to say that available resources will determine the plan you put forward and perhaps not best practice?

Mr DIXON — It probably would be fair to say that, yes. I think like any council you have only a certain amount of resource to do a certain job. Obviously we are looking at using technology to increase productivity and we have new equipment to again increase productivity and overheads, so we are trying all the time to be more productive; but there comes a point where you cannot squeeze any more blood out of a stone.

Mr MULDER — Just on another issue, are the utility providers’ road reserves that you picked up under this legislation a cause of problems for council at this time? Will being the controlling body over the utility providers assist you?
Mr DIXON — I think it will, because we do not have any control and some of these things are in a location that we would probably like to change or that should never have been put there in the first place, so I think yes, it is about time that this was fixed.

Mr MULDER — Have the council looked at how they are going to implement that in terms of an application fee from the utility providers inspection regimes? Is there a model in place to work from?

Mr DIXON — Not yet. Until we get this thing finalised — we spoke about it yesterday — it is something we need to look into. The other utility provider charges for assessing their requirements, so we will probably have a reverse arrangement.

Mr MULDER — It would be nice to get some back.

Mr DIXON — We would be pleased to have it in place! The next item concerns action taken by council on Vicroads. Again there is a long list of some of the activities that we are going through.

Turning to the requirement for ongoing road safety audits by independent road safety auditors, again we bring in people from Melbourne to do some audits on high-risk locations for us. Nathan works with them of course to do some of our own internal audits as well. We carry out independent and internal audits.

On the requirement to implement road safety audit recommendations, once the audit is finished we look the recommendations and we take action accordingly.

The CHAIR — How often do you conduct the audits? Perhaps you have already said this and I missed the point.

Mr DIXON — It varies. We have so many dollars per year for doing audits so it is probably four times a year.

Mr GANESHA

Mr DIXON — We have also insisted with the new developments around the town that the designs have a road safety audit carried out before we approve the development. The development industry have not been very happy with that because it costs them money but we have basically said, ‘Tough, this is what we want; we want the community to have a safe road’. I think it is working well.

Dealing with shoulder sealing and black lengths on a priority basis — again, that has been happening with Vicroads on the Calder Highway. I will turn to tree removal where potential crashes could occur in and around rural towns.

The CHAIR — Just on the process of having a tree removed, if council identifies a dangerous tree from a road safety point of view, describe to me the process of removing the tree. Is it a difficult process to get through?

Mr DIXON — Depends where it is, I think.

Mr GANESHA

Mr GANESHA

Mr DIXON — I do not think it is quite as easy as that. We have problems with DSE, to be quite honest with you, because they want to protect the environment and we want to fix our road reserves. We identify a road
reserve with trees in there and they say, ‘You cannot remove the trees’. We say that on safety grounds we want to remove the trees but they say we cannot do it, so we have to go through quite a long rigmarole of justifying why these trees should be removed. It is very lengthy. I think from a road safety perspective, as managers of the road reserve we should have some degree of flexibility to go in there and remove the trees, but we cannot do that without a permit.

As Nathan has explained, there is an arbitrary requirement. For every single tree we pull out we have to plant 100 elsewhere. If you can show me where that sits in any procedure I would be glad to see it. I think it is just totally arbitrary. So we have a conflict with DSE. I appreciate what they are trying to do, but with road safety the two do not mix.

The CHAIR — Are there examples within the shire where trees that you have identified as unsafe have remained through this process?

Mr DIXON — Yes, I think there are examples of where we have had to detour roads and things

Mr GANESHANATHAN — No — for example, we widened the Kooloonong road last year and they said, ‘Why should you be removing them? You can put guard rails up’, so we did not end up removing those trees and we put on the program to put up guard rails for about 80 metres. It will cost some money, but there is no way.

Mr BISHOP — On that point, if the tree remains there because of the insistence of DSE and the new Road Management Bill comes into place, has your council a view on who is responsible?

Mr DIXON — Not yet. We have not been through that argument. I think we have tried to work around it. We have tried to work with them, but it may be a sore point. When push comes to shove we may say, ‘Well, you accept responsibility’, perhaps. We have not come up against that. We have tried to work with them and we have worked around it.

Mr HEALY — It would be a matter of having good documentation in relation to our assessment and correspondence with DSE on the matter. Ultimately, I guess the liability would be determined by others.

Mr DIXON — There have been developments in the area as well. I cannot remember where it was but there was one development where I think they wanted the road widened but DSE would not let them do it, they had to build a private road on private land; so really the road reserve is becoming a bit of a nonsense because it is not a road reserve any more, it is a native vegetation reserve.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — And it is a ‘cattle crossing’ road.

Mr DIXON — It is a ‘cattle crossing’ road, yes.

Mr HEALY — One of the issues we do have is individual trees can be dealt with on an individual basis, but the VicRoads guidelines for clear zones are an issue for us because that does require substantial clearing and we do not comply with that clear-zone requirement at all.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — Normally DSE gives the approval to remove the trees when there is a problem with the sight distance, not with the clear zones.

Mr DIXON — So we are really not complying with the safety requirements that we should be complying with.

The CHAIR — Do you have the same difficulties with other utilities such as power utilities and their poles?

Mr GANESHANATHAN — They are prepared to relocate if we pay. Sometimes they go and install new poles without referring to us, and they might be put in a silly place, or instead of putting in frangible poles they might put solid poles just behind the kerb. It happens sometimes.

Mr MULDER — What is your understanding of the situation with existing infrastructure under the Road Management Bill? Will you have the right to direct that it be removed or moved at the cost of the infrastructure provider?
Mr DIXON — That is not my understanding, no. At the moment if we ask for something to be removed, they send us a bill and say, ‘This is what it is going to cost you’.

Mr MULDER — It is only access for new work; is that your understanding?

Mr DIXON — New work will be different. I think we should have a say on where it goes. We have a reasonably good working relationship with them — we have a coordination group — but there are instances where, because they contract out this work, they just go and put the pole up in the wrong spot. We have to work towards not having that happen.

The installation by Vicroads of audio-tactile edge lining on the main highways has been very successful. There are 67 channel crossings in the municipality, and we have spent $275 000 so far putting guardrails around those channel crossings on our local roads.

The CHAIR — What percentage of channel crossings would now be guarded?

Mr GANESHANATHAN — We have done 30 per cent of the channel crossings.

Mr DIXON — We looked at them from a risk base, and we have done the higher-risk ones first. Again, it has been done on the dollars we have available. We had a debate with the people who own the channels as to whether it should be council’s responsibility or whether it should be theirs. Legal opinion said it is the council’s responsibility, so we have gone ahead and done the guardrails.

Mr BISHOP — We have asked questions about driver fatigue, which our area lends itself to. Do you have any data on audio-tactile edge lining, which is a wonderful name for it, in relation to that? You said it was very successful.

Mr DIXON — The anecdotal feedback is that the rumble noise wakes people up. We do not have the hard facts yet, but I think when we get the statistics in future years and we look at the run-off-road accidents, we will find they will be much reduced.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — The Calder Highway was done only last year, so in another couple of years we will see what has happened.

Mr DIXON — The anecdotal feedback is that it is successful.

Mr STONEY — Is it expensive to do it or reasonably cheap?

Mr DIXON — I think it is expensive.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — It costs about $3 or $4 per linear metre.

Mr STONEY — Is it a machine that does it?

Mr GANESHANATHAN — There is a special machine, yes. But you have to do the shoulder sealing if you are going to put down the audio-tactile line marking, because if you put it on later it is going to break away. There should be a connection with the shoulder sealing and the audio-tactile line marking.

Mr DIXON — The sealing of unsealed roads is being done on a priority basis, looking at risk and high-volume traffic. We are converting Y-junctions into T-junctions. We have identified some unsafe junctions and fixed them up. When replacing light poles we are using frangible light poles. We are maintaining tree zones and planting new trees. Again, looking to the future, in 20 years time when these trees have grown there should be less of a risk. We have mentioned that we are negotiating with DSE on tree removal following receipt of crash statistics. We are working on improving shoulders on rural roads. We have a gravel resheeting program in place. We are reducing speed limits where there are trees on clear zones and where the shoulders are not sealed. Again, we are reducing the road speed to fit the road dimensions and the way the road has been built.

With black spot treatment, shoulder sealing et cetera we have been successful in applying for grants for black spot treatment works. We are resheeting 50 kilometres every year. We still do not have enough money to fix all our roads. We would like to see more money from the Roads to Recovery program, and not less, which is what we are
getting in the proposal by the government. Given our remoteness, we are advocating that we should be looked at differently. Our adjacent municipalities in Victoria are 300 kilometres away. There are no projects between us and the next municipality that we can reasonably work together on, so we are advocating that we should get a 100 per cent Road to Recovery allocation and not be docked a third, as has been proposed. We are rescaling 70 kilometres every year.

That just gives you a snapshot of what we are doing to try to fit into the big picture here, and hopefully the outcome will be fewer crashes and fewer incidents on the road.

The next section deals with some of the works carried out by Vicroads and council. There are some more specific details given there and their locations.

**Mr MULDER** — Do you have any further applications for black spot funding before government at the moment?

**Mr GANESHANATHAN** — Yes, especially the Red Cliffs-Colignan Road. That is a potential one where there have been 16 accidents. We have applied for shoulder sealing, but we have not got the funding yet.

**Mr HEALY** — We are waiting for it.

**Mr GANESHANATHAN** — There is a separate issue. We can put in wire ropes because of the trees within the clear zone, and we are going to make another application for that as well.

**Mr MULDER** — Is that state or federal funding you are applying for?

**Mr GANESHANATHAN** — That is federal funding. On the highways, our specific concern is the Mallee Highway. There have been several accidents on that road, and it has not been fully shoulder sealed, only some sections have been done.

**The CHAIR** — Which is the Mallee Highway?

**Mr GANESHANATHAN** — From Ouyen to South Australia.

**Mr BISHOP** — Nathan, the road you talked about with the black spots, which one was that again?

**Mr GANESHANATHAN** — The Red Cliffs-Colignan Road. Kulkynne Way is the local name.

**Mr DIXON** — We were very successful in the early days of black spot funding. Vicroads senior management came here and said we were the most successful council in submitting bids because we had very high-quality applications and photographs. We submitted dozens of these things, but what we found in time was that we kept submitting all these bids — dozens of them — but they were not being processed by Vicroads. They were just sitting there on the shelf, and eventually the money ran out, so we really wasted a lot of effort. The process of asking for bids and then turning them around should have been looked at, because we were wasting a hell of a lot of effort, hoping that we were going to get something back, but it did not occur.

We are now working with Vicroads according to what money is available. We will submit bids when the funding is available and not waste our time as we did before. That is a summary of what we have done and where we are.

**Mr HARKNESS** — I have a question about road trauma. Which group or groups are primarily responsible for attending scenes of accidents? Is it the rural ambulance service, the CFA or the SES?

**Mr DIXON** — It varies, depending upon the incident. The police are obviously there first of all. The ambulance service goes as well if there is an accident.

**Mr HARKNESS** — And because you have such a large municipality, are there problems in getting rescue teams out to remote sites in a reasonable space of time?

**Mr DIXON** — I am not aware that that has been a problem. We have good SES groups around the region, so they normally respond and help out as well.
Mr HEALY — We have an SES unit at Mildura, which is the primary unit; there is an SES unit on the Mallee Highway at Murrayville on the South Australian border; and there is also one at Ouyen. They are spaced at about 100-kilometre distances, roughly speaking, so their response times are reasonable for this district.

Mr DIXON — Council supports them financially each year. We give them money so they can buy new equipment and keep up to speed.

Mr HARKNESS — In relation to behaviour modification, what is council engaged in at the moment to try to modify people’s behaviour with, say, drink-driving, drugs, fatigue and all of those type of activities?

Mr GANESHANATHAN — We run a program through the Mildura Roadsafe Council. We are a member of Roadsafe, so Roadsafe normally runs those programs, because it has members who specialise in road trauma, alcohol and things. We run the program through them. We contribute funds to the Roadsafe group, and those things are normally run by Roadsafe. The Mildura Roadsafe representatives will present the full details to you this afternoon.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your time; we appreciate it. We will provide you with a copy of the transcript shortly.

Witnesses withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Mildura — 18 March 2004

Members

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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

Witness

Mr B. Andrews, Service Director, Shire of Yarriambiack.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Welcome, Bruce Andrews from Yarriambiack, to the parliamentary Road Safety Committee. We have two inquiries — crashes involving roadside objects and the country road toll. We have six members of the committee here today.

We are taking a transcript and will provide Yarriambiack with a copy in due course. We are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot be held against you legally in the future. Having said that, I thank you again for your time.

Mr ANDREWS — I welcome the opportunity to make a presentation to the Road Safety Committee. Obviously in general terms the wealth of our ratepayers in particular is contingent on a good road system and a safe one and all the factors that go with that.

I have a written presentation. On the back of the folder itself there is a map which gives you some idea of our locality. The best one I could find was in our tourism folder, so that is the one I have given you. There is also a bit of tourism information in the coloured brochures.

As a municipality we stretch between Horsham and Ouyen and that is a large rural area — 7500 square kilometres and just over 8000 people — so we are very sparsely populated. We have long roads and communities that are responsive and vibrant but we have do have an overall level of population that is falling and ageing as a demographic, so they are the things we as a council are grappling with.

In the first part of the paper I have given an outline of some of the production from within the shire and the value of the production. I will not run right through that, but as you would pick up from that, we are predominantly rural, growing grain into the legumes and other crops that we have diversified into lately, and page 2 gives a breakdown of some of those crops that are grown in our area.

One of the vital things I would commend to you and I will touch on it later is the piping of the Wimmera-Mallee stock and domestic system, which is a current proposal. The business case has gone into the state and federal governments, and as a council we see that as a vital issue for the future of our shire, but it is not a matter before you so I will not dwell on it.

On road safety issues, turning to page 3 of my presentation, we have detected over the years a change in road users and particularly bigger trucks, and that is an issue we see facing our communities. The little 6-ton Bedfords, the single-axle trucks, are no longer around; they are now triaxial trailers at least, or B-doubles in a lot of cases. We have seen a change in the type of traffic, particularly heavy traffic, and that is obviously mixed in with our townships and our other road users.

We have detected damage due to those larger trucks. Often the axle load is not as high, but the manoeuvrability of these bigger vehicles is not as good and we see tearing of tops of road pavements and things like that, as instanced there in the main street of Minyip, which is one of our towns.

Moving to page 5, the increased bigger vehicles are moving faster, leading to increased dust. In the middle of that photo — spot the truck! You see a lot of issues with dust and road safety, and obviously the answer is to seal but the cost of that is an issue we face. We have looked at a lot of dust suppression-type treatments where the gravel pavements are treated with chemical-based products or by-products of the timber industry with quite some reasonable success, particularly in access to gypsum pits and things like that.

The CHAIR — Do you have less trucks now that they are bigger?

Mr ANDREWS — Yes, but as I will touch on a little later, those trucks are going further. Because of the rationalisation of receival points for grain, the distance travelled has increased so we are seeing bigger vehicles going longer distances. There would be less vehicles but they are going quicker and they are going further.

Mr MULDER — Is dust suppression work expensive?

Mr ANDREWS — Yes, almost as expensive as a seal. We looked very hard at doing dust suppression-type work as opposed to putting a bit of extra money in and a seal that will last. Dust suppression has a 12-month life, and there is an issue with some of the products with traffic ability in wet seasons where you get that glazed top on them which provides dust suppression; but in the wet they tend to become a bit glassy and slippery. They have a function, they do well in the right place, but obviously there are some restrictions with the use of it.
The other trend on the question of trucks is to move to contract harvesting or to use contract harvesters. Rather than each individual farmer having his own equipment, there tends to be a lot more contract harvesting, so bigger trucks are servicing that harvesting equipment.

On page 6, the change on traffic pattern which I touched on earlier is the change to where the grain is going to. Previously the little silo 5 or 10 kilometres down the road was where the grain went to. Now they are looking at more central receival points. The last page in your folder is a map of the shire, and the stars indicate our previous silo receival points and the rockets indicate where the only receival points are now, because basically they cart to the smaller ones and close them once they are full. So the majority of the grain is carted to the Woomelang, Hopetoun, Beulah, Warracknabeal and Murtoa centres.

Mr HARKNESS — So the stars are no longer used?

Mr ANDREWS — They are used but really they are cart and fill, so there is very limited capacity. Some have now had their rail lines closed. There is no longer a rail line servicing the Patchewollock silo, so it is a cart and fill, and once they are full they are closed so then you get traffic diversion.

The other issue around that is the advent of the private buyer as opposed to your central grain elevator board-type receival body. We are seeing a number of these developed with the deregulation of the grain industry, and they are major receival points now. There is one just out of Warracknabeal and that is the photo there, Wilkin storage on the Birchip road. They would receive far more than a lot of the little old silos that were around previously. In fact they are rivalling the major receival points now.

Mr HARKNESS — How many truck movements would you have to this Wilkin storage facility daily?

Mr ANDREWS — Hundreds. He started off receiving about 30 000 tonnes a year; now he is over 300 000 tonnes a year receival totals. They are a bit better at receiving grades of grain. He segregates more, so the central receival systems take it in bulk and there is very little segregation whereas Wilkin will store in smaller bunkers with different grades, smaller protein levels in barley and wheat, and he caters for a different market to the bulk market. I could probably get some more information about truck movements and provide that to the committee in total. I can talk to Mr Wilkin and get that information and pass it through.

The CHAIR — I am grappling with the relationship. What is the point you are making? Is it because you have larger concentrated storage areas? What is the relationship of that to road safety?

Mr ANDREWS — The traffic pattern has changed. They are no longer using the radial routes into the townships where the central receival points once were. They are now looking at points that are not necessarily along those main road links, and they are cutting through back roads and whatever to get to these other receival points. And it is not carted out by rail; it goes in and out by road.

Mr STONEY — The question is: have you noticed a rise in accidents due to this change in patterns of truck movements?

Mr ANDREWS — I do not think we would see it in our actual accident stats. We are running through our road safety plan analysis of our stats at the moment, and we are not seeing it in actual truck accidents, but the heavy vehicle movements are certainly increasing. We can see that in our road traffic counts and our vehicle analysis. If we are not seeing as many truck accidents, that is an improvement, but our concern is that if and when one does happen it will be more severe.

Mr STONEY — Are you monitoring this change of pattern to see if there is going to be an increase in the future?
Mr ANDREWS — We are seeing it in the road network. We are seeing the effect of these little gravel roads, which were really only for farm access, now becoming bypasses where the trucks are cutting through to some of these other private buyers.

Mr STONEY — What you are saying to us is that the trucks are really starting to damage the roads, which could cause an accident for other vehicles at another time. Is that what you are saying?

Mr ANDREWS — Yes. And often that little back road carries a school bus and things like that.

Mr BISHOP — Is it fair to say that this process is basically concentrated in six weeks, hopefully in the driest time of the year, and that in fact the problem has been increased by storage organisations subsidising contractual carriers to take the product from a fair way away into their storages? It is a change of pattern, but is it generally only at the harvest period when the roads are at their driest?

Mr ANDREWS — Yes, but I beg to differ, particularly in relation to these private facilities. The grain is carted out at any time — when the market is ready, when the buyer is there, when the ship is in port or whenever — and that could be through the winter. We have seen that particularly in Patchewollock, where the rail line is closed. They fill that silo, and they have actually established a bunker there as well, and they cart that into Hopetoun in the off-season, through the winter. We have seen that Patchewollock road suffer badly because of heavy movements off-season. A majority of the harvest happens in a confined period, but with this change in pattern and in receivals we are seeing some heavy movements at other times as well.

Mr MULDER — In relation to these changes in movement, are there mass limits on those roads, are they ignoring the mass limits, and how do you deal with that situation?

Mr ANDREWS — Yes, they are under mass-management permit systems. That is the beauty of having the contractor-based industry where there is a standard, and they are pretty good at sticking to that. We have B-double access routes that we allow trucks on and other routes that we do not allow trucks on. There is a permit system through council for that, and we have a couple of bridges where we are not allowing heavy trucks through because of mass limits. But it is a more regulated system, and in our case it is generally being stuck to, because we do see Vicroads around with its surveillance gear and its mobile logging equipment, and the truckies are pretty aware of that.

Mr MULDER — In relation to this issue you are talking about of finding back roads and shorter routes to the grain storage facilities, are they breaching mass limits and going on roads they should not be going on?

Mr ANDREWS — No, not as far as I am aware. But there would be instances, I am sure. We certainly hear pretty regularly when Vicroads is around, and there is usually a bit of a scatter when that happens.

Just moving on to page 9, the next issue I would like to cover is the increased size and movement of farm machinery. Obviously with increased acreages we see bigger farming equipment, and one of the issues we face is that we believe every large tractor that gets brought into the area means one less family in the area, because it really means one less driver. We are grappling with some of those issues. In particular we are concerned about the movement of that big gear around our road network.

The second-last page is a map of the property that the Penny family owns around Warracknabeal. The shaded blocks, which are within a 25-kilometre radius of the main homestead, is the area where they farm their property. They do not necessarily buy the land that is contiguous to their existing site. They may be looking for a different soil type, a better rain belt or whatever, or a property that becomes available at the time they want to expand. So we are seeing increased movements of farm machinery, and we are having trouble getting road-width clearance, tree clearance and that sort of thing for the movement of that machinery.

Moving back to page 9, we have captioned that photo ‘Chainsaw anyone?’. That is a road we are going to have to widen. It is the Patchewollock road out from Patchewollock to Hopetoun, and it is not wide enough for two of these machines to pass. We are going to have to get out there and trim that back. A couple of things arise out of that: obviously one is the cost, and the other thing I would like to mention is our right or ability to be able to do it. Roadside conservation is an issue. We are developing our own Roadsafe conservation plan, but we need that provision for road safety in particular to be enshrined in the planning legislation as it is at the moment, so that we
can take action where there is a road safety issue. We want that right to be preserved. There is no talk of it being removed, I am just making the point that we want that to be preserved.

Mr MULDER — Do you still have to go through the permit process with DSE? Does that cause you problems in being able to take out vegetation?

Mr ANDREWS — There is an exemption in our planning scheme — and it is across Victoria — that provides that we do not have to go through the permit system for road safety issues. There is a specific exemption, and it is interpreted differently by various DSE offices around the regions. If there is a road safety issue — in particular, visibility at intersections and that sort of thing — there is an exemption for native vegetation clearance by the council. We have had various arguments with various DNRE and DSE officers about what is road safety and what is exempt, but we have worked out a relationship and worked out a criteria with which we are both happy. We certainly would not want to see any tightening of those restrictions.

The CHAIR — I must say that we have traversed Victoria and spoken to numerous councils, and this is the first I have heard of the exemption to remove trees if there is a road safety issue. We have not heard that before.

Mr ANDREWS — I cannot quote you the section, but it comes under section 52 of the planning scheme.

The CHAIR — So where a council identifies that a tree is unsafe, you do not need go to DSE?

Mr ANDREWS — No.

The CHAIR — You can just remove the tree?

Mr ANDREWS — Yes. In most cases we would liaise with them or talk to them at least, but we would not run through the planning permit process to remove that tree.

Mr STONEY — Are there guidelines under which you can say, ‘We think this tree is unsafe’? Are you using some sort of guidelines, or is it just your own assessment?

Mr ANDREWS — It is our judgment, and, as I have said, it has been controversial within the community and within DSE, so we have really established a bit of criteria around that. Generally we do not take that lightly. We do not march in and denude the landscape unnecessarily. If there is a safety issue, we will take the tree out, but it needs to be a fairly evident safety issue. If we want to widen the road as part of a general upgrade, we would run through the permit system. We would talk to DSE, do a planning permit application and talk about revegetation, replacement of trees or whatever.

That is not a safety issue, whereas with a road network development type of thing we would involve them and work through the process. If we have a dangerous tree hanging over a road, we will take it out.

Mr STONEY — And are you still required to plant replacement trees?

Mr ANDREWS — No, there are no conditions.

Mr STONEY — So you can go along and take off overhanging limbs?

Mr ANDREWS — Yes.

The CHAIR — Or take the tree out?

Mr ANDREWS — And we do not do it lightly. We recognise that there is a conservation value in the timber and in the vegetation. We use that occasionally — not often, but occasionally.

Page 10 gives a little indication of some of the roads that are around our shire. That is a nice little track to take the ute down, but if you want to take down a 40-foot header it is a bit hard. I guess we are saying to our ratepayers — I will talk about it a little later — that we are not going to clear all of these roads and we are not going to widen all of these roads. We want to see some sort of a network where the wider vehicles can go. Rather than having to widen and open all of these roads, with the cost and the impact on native vegetation as well, we see a need to have some sort of a hierarchy where we can say, ‘There is our strategic route’, and work off that. That is what we have done not just with clearance but also with road pavement issues about trafficaibility of roads.
Page 11 deals with school buses: One of the issues we see is large machinery and grain trucks competing with school buses. We have a system where we approve school bus routes through the council in association with the schools and the bus contractors. We judge those roads as either suitable or unsuitable. In some cases we have refused permission for school buses because either the road pavement or the width is not sufficient, and that has an impact, particularly where our communities are competing for students. It is about the viability of even the footy club. The instance I am thinking of is between Yaapeet and Hopetoun. The Yaapeet kids go to the high school at Rainbow, and there is a high school at Hopetoun. The Yaapeet footy club closed down so the issue became one of where the school bus went meant where the kids trained for footy — either Hopetoun or Rainbow. We had a debate at council about where the bus route was to run, and really it came down to which footy club those kids were going to play with.

They are the sorts of things that are in the mix, and we were involved in that. In a lot of these cases it is about survival of communities. If you lose your footy club, it is about survival of that community. They are some of the issues that council is grappling with; and bus routes, bus travel and bus safety impact on that.

Touching on council policies that we have used to try and address some of these issues, I mentioned the hierarchy. We have a road hierarchy. We have decided which roads we will maintain to an all-weather standard and to a good width and which ones we will not. We have given priority to residential farm access. If it is just a business centre from which that farm operates — silos, bunkers, storage sheds — we will not give that as high a priority in all-weather road pavement as we would to a residential farm. That is the sort of criteria we are using to establish our road network.

The second point is access to rural properties. That is the policy we are using. We are even looking at the evaluation of sealed roads — do they need to be a sealed road — and the cost of maintenance and serviceability. We looked at a policy around unsealing — ripping up a gravel road.

The CHAIR — Has council gone down that trail?.

Mr ANDREWS — No, we have not implemented it. We came close a couple of times, but we have not in fact done it, not in my term in the last five years anyway. There is an argument about serviceability and obviously we would be trying to preserve that if we could. If it gets beyond it and the question becomes one of reconstruction, we then would ask the hard questions: is it needed? Is it really a part of our network that we need?

Earlier I mentioned the road management plan. The Road Management Bill is before Parliament, as you would know, and I think it has been through the second reading. Council will be using that as a tool for road management. It is something that we will have to use, and I see it as a positive step in that we are looking very hard at our policies and standards and we are analysing our road network to ensure that it serves our community. While it is a forced change as far as the legislation goes, I have been involved with council in that with all those other policies we have been steadily working towards over the last five years.

I would like to run through some black spot specific funding programs that we have listed under the black spot funding program. The first one is an intersection treatment at the Blue Ribbon–Dimboola–Minyip road, where there has been a fatality recently. As you can see there, there are no visibility obstructions; it is open, it is flat. We did some traffic counts with a classification counter on both legs and we detected speeds in excess of 140 km/h, on both legs.

Mr STONEY — Through the intersection?

Mr ANDREWS — Through the intersection. It is a straight-through intersection at the moment. You do not have to deviate at all. We are obviously looking at deviating one of the legs and trying to put in a physical S-bend, a staggered T situation. We see that one as a priority, and it is right on the boundary with Horsham shire and it leads into Hindmarsh as well, so the three councils support that application.

The CHAIR — I presume there are numerous examples of intersections like that?.

Mr ANDREWS — Certainly. It is just one we have had fatalities on, and it is a bypass route for Horsham basically. East-west traffic travelling to Adelaide mainly from central Victoria tends to cut through the Dimboola–Minyip area. They can use the Wimmera Highway through Horsham, but they tend to cut east-west on a small road, and that was one instance.
The second one is the Yaarpeet–Rainbow Road widening, a gypsum truck and bus route. I am sorry about the clarity of that photo, but that is the way it turned out. It is a narrow 3.7-metre seal. If you are in a truck you have to put your wheels off into the gravel. There are bends and all sorts of issues — school buses we have indicated. The third item is the Rainbow Road bridge at Warracknabeal. The caption is ‘Taking Turns’. It is a single-lane bridge. We have in fact a bunker facility in the background of this photo. Behind where I have taken that photo is the grain receival point. Those trucks go over that bridge four times to drop off one load of grain because they come in and weigh off, they go out and unload, they come back and weigh out and then they go home again so there are four trucks movements across a bridge to unload one load of grain. It is a situation we have taken up with Vicgrain, and it is trying to consolidate its operations on to the side behind this photo and that should eliminate it; but at the moment that is a single-lane bridge across the Yarriambiack Creek and we see it as an issue.

Mr HARKNESS — How many single-lane bridges would you have throughout the municipality?

Mr ANDREWS — That would be the only one with heavy truck movements. We have a number of others on small back roads, and that is a main road.

The next picture shows Hopetoun township and the Henty Highway roundabout that is not a roundabout. It is a trap for a lot of players. A lot of arm-waving goes on at this intersection when people think they have the right of way. There is no history of accidents as such. It is in a 60-km/h zone, but it really just needs clarification of the priority at that intersection. We are working with Vicroads as to the design. It obviously has implications for the side streets.

Mr BISHOP — Does Yarriambiack Shire Council have an audit in relation to where accidents have occurred? You brought up the point about the roundabout at Hopetoun which has been there for a long time, but, as you have said, no accidents have occurred there. Does your council have a script that says how many accidents have occurred and how they have occurred — for example, has the driver run off the road and run into a tree? Do you have that data?

Mr ANDREWS — Yes, we have. We are currently working through our road safety plan, and we are just looking at the analysis of the Crashstats from Vicroads. Our history is run-off-the-road accidents.

Mr BISHOP — Would they be available to us?

Mr ANDREWS — Certainly, yes. I can get that through to you.

Mr STONEY — Forgive my ignorance, but what is a statcon-controlled intersection?

Mr ANDREWS — A stop sign or a give-way statcon sign.

Mr STONEY — So you just rely on the signage?

Mr ANDREWS — Yes, as opposed to a roundabout.

Mr STONEY — So if people think it is a roundabout, then they have to follow the signs?

Mr ANDREWS — That is right. Another straight-through intersection is item 5, the Rupanyup North corner intersection of Stawell-Warracknabeal Road and Banyena-Pimpinio Road. Barry probably knows this one, too. It is a straight-through intersection. There was a near miss there the other day involving someone just breezing through, it would seem. It is just a straight crossroad with no staggering, and people tend not to see it.

The CHAIR — That road, from what I can see, has no real shoulder on it. You are basically onto the grass.

Mr ANDREWS — That is right, yes. There is a rail crossing north of Minyip, still on the Warracknabeal road. It is unsignalled, and we see a need to have that signalled. Visibility is poor at the crossing, and while there have not been any accidents, there have been some reports of near misses.

There is an issue regarding the Burong Highway, which, as I think you realise, stretches east to west across our shire and is very undulating in its road pavement surface. In fact, that is the issue we have, because heavy vehicles are avoiding the Borung Highway and using local roads — the Dimboola-Minyip Road — just to get off this
undulating surface. We have had axles broken and springs broken on this road. The vehicles have not necessarily been going fast, it has just been due to the bad road pavement, which is deformed due to the reactive clays in the Mallee and Wimmera. We see that as an issue, and there are some horizontal alignment problems with that in the eastern boundary, which we also see as an issue.

In conclusion, we are a remote rural shire that is sparsely populated, and obviously our road network is vital to us. We have used both the federal funding programs and the state funding programs to try to generate road funds to improve our network. People are obviously travelling long distances, and there are no alternate forms of transport for our residents.

We welcome the initiative of the federal and state governments, including the federal government’s Roads to Recovery program, and we see funding as a critical issue in promoting and improving road safety in our municipality.

Council submits that a contravening factor to the rural road toll is the increased weight, size and configuration of vehicles using our road system and the inadequacies of the road system to cater for that heavy traffic.

Council submits that the increasing size of farm machinery implements moving along road systems is also a contributing factor, particularly in relation to school buses. We want to retain the ability for local councils to have the right to remove native vegetation if it is considered a safety hazard as a roadside obstruction. That right needs to be maintained and reinforced.

Yarriambiack shire commends the Road Safety Committee for including these items in the black spot funding program, and requests your support if you can generate that for us. Finally, we wish the committee well in its considerations.

I have included a couple of photos there of what we term ‘Roads to ruin’, where heavy gypsum trucks are contributing to edge breaks. The last photo there is of a road access to a gypsum pit which at times has over 400 truck movements a day.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Bruce.

Mr ANDREWS — I am happy to take any questions.

The CHAIR — There are no further questions. Thank you, Bruce, we appreciate your time and input into our inquiry. As I said, we will provide a copy of the transcript in due course. We hope you have a safe trip back to Yarriambiack.

Witness withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Mildura – 18 March 2004

**Members**

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

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

Chair: Mr I. D. Trezise  
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**Staff**

Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas  
Research Officers: Mr G. Both and Mr P. Nelson

**Witness**

Mr M. Duke, Manager, Technical Services, Shire of Buloke.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee**
The CHAIR — Welcome to Martin Duke from Buloke shire. As you are aware, this is a parliamentary Road Safety Committee inquiring into the country road toll and crashes involving roadside objects.

We are taking a transcript, and we will provide you with a copy of the transcript in due course. Today we are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot be used against you legally in the future. We appreciate your input, and I will hand it across to you for your submission.

Mr DUKE — Buloke Shire Council’s submission is not strictly written out. It will be off the cuff because I have just a few scribbled notes. I have given you a little background as to the Shire of Buloke — the geography, the area and the population, the rolling sand dune country going down to the Wimmera country and some of the red gums in the Charlton area. We have five larger towns ranging from 800 to 2000 and a number of smaller towns and districts. The road network itself ranges from the sand dunes in the Mallee country such as around here in Mildura and a little further south. I have given you a couple of maps so you can locate in your minds exactly where the shire is.

The roadside vegetation, which I interpret that you probably want to know about, ranges from Mallee scrub at the top end and Bulokes and black gums ranging right down to river red gums alongside the roads down towards Charlton. I understand you are going to Charlton tomorrow so you will see the pretty countryside around there.

I will give a few road statistics. Buloke shire makes the boast that we have the longest network of roads in Victoria, if not in Australia. The grants commission informed us of that. While it is a boast, at the same time we take a deep breath because that means that is the length of roads we have to maintain, so at times it is a bit of a challenge for council. That is a rough idea of the length of roads. What I have not given you is the length of goat tracks on road reserves which we have not measured. All up, we are maintaining 5000 kilometres of road.

Addressing your points of inquiry, the first one asks about the incidence and causative role of speed, drugs, alcohol, fatigue and rural road crashes. Unfortunately we do not have access to that information, which is usually anecdotal, and we have to run with that; so we cannot comment on that apart from the anecdotal things such as drinking and speeding does not make sense, so I cannot say much on that one.

Mr BISHOP — You have no formal reporting process from Vicroads and the police?

Mr DUKE — That was one of the comments I was going to make later on and an improvement that I will be recommending to committee. In some municipalities where I have worked we have had casual arrangements with the police who notify us when there is either a fatality or a serious accident. We have had systems where they notify us and we have previously gone out and checked those things. But we are not operating on any sort of formal instruction to the police. There would be an opportunity for local government to improve its road network if we knew within 28 or 48 hours of a fatality — we mostly always hear about fatalities because we get it on the grapevine — but if we could know officially within a day or two we could get out there, take photos, make an assessment, do a road audit and therefore make some improvements on the roads. That is a recommendation I would be making to this committee, that it would help if local government had a little more information coming to us from the police records. So thank you, Barry. It is the conclusion we have got to, too.

Dealing with the role of road and roadside environment and causation and severity of crashes, within Buloke shire we believe we have good lines of sight anyway on a lot of our roads. I have given you one very brief figure on the accident statistics, and it is showing that we are having around 20 to 30 accidents a year which, given the extent of our network of roads, we are fairly comfortable that it is not excessive. We have had a number of fatalities, unfortunately, and if you go through the statistics you will see a lot of them are on the Calder Highway and the highway network from the Calder Highway, Borung Highway and the Sunraysia Highway, which goes through Buloke shire. Buloke Shire Council as such does not focus that much on those accidents, we leave that to Vicroads. We might have some comments to make to Vicroads at the time but we do not focus on those a lot; so from the look we have had of the statistics we are having from 5 to 10 accidents a year on the local road network we are responsible for.

The CHAIR — Looking at that extensive road network, does the shire have concerns about or problems with intersection accidents?
Mr DUKE — The two fatal accidents we had in the last five years — in one there was three deaths and in the other there was one death — were both at intersections. One accident was two cars colliding and the other was two trucks colliding.

The CHAIR — On the local road network?

Mr DUKE — On the local road network, yes. Each of the deaths was of locals, so unlike the sort of myth that says it is not the locals getting killed, in our instances the four deaths were locals. That matches with VicRoads statistics, which are saying that country people are being killed on country roads.

Mr EREN — Were they sealed or unsealed roads?

Mr DUKE — In the two-truck accident it was sealed roads both directions. In the two-car accident the road was sealed, changing to gravel road, and unfortunately we believe that the two cars that hit — it was a cross intersection — both thought that they were on the main road, so obviously the signage was not indicating enough to them for one car to give way.

The CHAIR — So where you have had that fatality, council becomes aware of that fatality just on the grapevine or through the papers, but there is no formal process?

Mr DUKE — There has not been a formal process where we get notified, unless we get drawn into the police and coroner’s investigations, but my experience is that usually you set up a good relationship with the police and the police keep you informed about accidents, but it is not a requirement that we have to know.

The role and potential contribution of crash causation of vehicle features such as cruise control — again, we do not know. We are not being kept informed of those sorts of things. Can we say however from personal experience that they have been a tremendous advantage to distance drivers in country areas. I do not know whether that causes accidents but to a certain extent it allows us country people to travel longer distances more safely. I do not know whether we are always pushing the edge — you go that extra distance because you have got cruise control and you can sit there for 2 hours without getting up.

On enforcement, we have observed over the last five years that the patrols by police have increased and that the threat of suffering a speeding fine has limited the driving of a lot of people within our shire because as you go down the road and you speed, the possibility, that the police could catch you is prominent in your mind most of the time. We believe it has an effect in making people drive more carefully, so it is a credit to the police in that instance.

In talking about measures which could be introduced to reduce the instance and severity of crashes, I will get on my little hobbyhorse, which is based on an observation we have been making about the speed expectations of drivers. I have worked in local government for over 20 years. Over the last five years I have observed a cultural change whereby a lot of drivers are now expecting to be told what speed they are supposed to be driving at.

It came home to me when the speed limit changed down to 50 km/h in urban areas. In a few of the towns — it was not in Buloke in this instance — we had put up 100 km/h signs at the end of the town in windy country, and I got a few phone calls from people saying, ‘But we can’t do 100 kilometres an hour on that road’, and my response was, ‘Yes, but that is the state limit. You are supposed to drive to the condition of the road’. So there seems to have been that cultural change where people are now wanting to be told what speed they are supposed to be driving at, whereas when I did my driver licence testing we were trained to drive to the condition of the road. We seem to have lost that expectation over the last five years. I have spoken to VicRoads traffic engineers, and at that level there is agreement that there has been that cultural change whereby people are expecting to be told what speed they are supposed to drive at.

Mr STONEY — Are you saying that is good or bad?

Mr DUKE — I am saying it is bad. I was dealing with South Gippsland towns at that time, and as you drove out of those towns the roads were windy and you could not do 100 km/h, but people were expecting to be able to. If it is raining you cannot expect to do 100 kilometres an hour. So there has been a mind-set change somewhere there. I do not know if other people have observed that too.

Mr HARKNESS — Do people have that same mind-set with unsealed roads?
Mr DUKE — I have more confidence in country people being able to drive to the condition of the gravel roads. I do worry about the people who are not experienced on gravel roads and how they treat gravel roads.

Mr HARKNESS — You have given the example of people exiting those towns and thinking they can go at 100 km/h. Are you finding that people are getting onto gravel roads and thinking that, because it is an open road, they can drive at that speed?

Mr DUKE — No, I do not have enough experience of those types of accidents. I will just make an observation: there have not been a lot of accidents on our gravel roads due to that expectation, and I do not think we have a lot of outsiders on our local roads in Buloke shire.

Mr HARKNESS — Just on the subject of gravel roads, some councils are advocating a drop in the default speed limit to 80 km/h; what is your council’s view on that?

Mr DUKE — I do not know whether council has come to an opinion, but I can give you my opinion. At Warrnambool shire, for example, they were advocating that change, and the response I have observed in the forums where I have been has been that it might be appropriate to have an 80 km/h limit or something like that on gravel roads closer to Melbourne for people who do not have experience on those sorts of roads, but in rural country areas like Buloke shire, if we were limited to 80 kilometres an hour, it would dramatically restrict our ability to get to a lot of places within a reasonable time. A majority of our roads are gravel roads, and people need to be able and expect to be able to drive at 100 kilometres an hour.

Mr HARKNESS — So you could drive at 100 kilometres an hour on most of the gravel roads throughout the Buloke municipality?

Mr DUKE — I would not say all of them, but on a lot of them you can do the 100 kilometres an hour fairly readily.

Mr HARKNESS — Because they are long and flat?

Mr DUKE — They are long, flat and straight roads.

Mr HARKNESS — Sheeted?

Mr DUKE — They are gravel-sheeted, yes. But you can see 1 or 2 kilometres ahead of you, you can see a car coming and things like that. That is the case for Buloke, and I am suggesting that in the more remote areas of Victoria, yes, you can see long distances. You are not going to see a truck or a car for some time, anyway.

Mr MULDER — In relation to the Road Management Bill, how is your shire coping with that, and what challenges do you think it creates for you?

Mr DUKE — I am seeing the Road Management Bill as a positive in that I believe road management and asset management in local government is something that has to be improved dramatically. The speed at which we are having to act and get a road management plan and road asset management plans together is causing us some costs and some pain. It is going to be better for us in the long term, but at the moment it is taking our minds off a lot of our normal work and we are having to focus on the bigger things when we can spare the time. We are also pulling in consultants to help us get through those sorts of things. So it is an increased cost at this stage, but in the longer term we should have an improvement on our road management.

The time lines are going to be a challenge for us, and the neighbouring municipalities that I am talking to are also facing a fair challenge. We are fearful that in the rush to get some of our road management plans together, we might not produce as good a document as we could if we were not trying to meet the deadlines.

Mr MULDER — On the issue of your relations with the utility providers who are putting in power lines, power poles, gas pipes and other things, and who may use the road reserves, have you had any problems with them in the past, and can you comment on the new process in the Road Management Bill under which you will have stronger controls over them?

Mr DUKE — Can I speak for not only Buloke shire but also a previous municipality where I worked?
Mr MULDER — Yes.

Mr DUKE — In Buloke shire it is not a real problem. We are not having ongoing development. The new utilities going on our roads are not going to cause us great problems. We have good relationships with all the boards, so it is probably not going to cause Buloke shire a lot of problems.

I previously worked with the Bass Coast shire down in Wonthaggi. We had established very detailed utility systems to try to record all our road openings. It caused a lot of difficulty with Telstra, the power companies and the water boards with respect to their cooperating with us to record when they had put installations in the road reserves. We established a system whereby we had a road opening officer doing inspections and making sure the roads were being put back properly, and that was due to some history of the council losing some court cases due to subsidence and those sorts of things in trenches of other utilities. We established a staff officer and we were out of pocket $10 000 or $20 000 a year for that officer, because we were not recouping fees for road openings.

Mr MULDER — Under this new system you will be able to charge fees for applications and inspections.

Mr DUKE — I doubt whether that would be accepted within the industry, but what will happen is there will be more cooperation for us to be able to record when and where trenches have been installed so we can have better seven-year records. I have suffered a couple of instances where we believed we got caught in a compensation case when it was not our trench. I am sorry, I have gone a long way off the track.

The CHAIR — Responding to questions is fine.

Mr DUKE — Turning back to the need for change in legislation and statutory requirements, that was a suggestion along the lines of what Barry had suggested, that we recommend that there be an improved reporting system between the police and the road authority. I do not know whether that would be a change to legislation, protocols or procedures.

The CHAIR — Some of the local councils we have spoken to have introduced their own local protocol with district police, so that is obviously a capability you have at the present time.

Mr DUKE — Yes, we can do that.

Can I move on to your other inquiry — that is, crashes involving roadside objects. Again, we are not getting feedback that there are increases within Buloke shire, but from the statistics we do not believe we are getting increases in the numbers of accidents. In relation to roadside utility poles, we believe we are one of three partners in road management: we are the road managers on our local roads; there are the road users, with education issues; and there is the law enforcement. We are seeing a need for continuous improvement, particularly with roadside objects and, as you were saying, utility poles, trees and others fixed objects.

Buloke shire in the last 12 months has developed a roadside management plan. Initially it was developed in response to the fact that a lot of our remnant vegetation is remaining on the roadsides so there has been a push for council to recognise that and to put protocols in place on how we should trench on roadsides. The bonus coming out of it is that council has said, ‘Okay, here is the envelope of what is needed for the road, and the roadside management plan accepts that clearing of saplings and those sorts of things out of table drains is an acceptable procedure’. We unwittingly found that the preservation of the environmental issues on the roadsides has given us a bonus because it has clarified that we are allowed to clean out table drains and those sorts of things.

While we have a lot of trees on the sides of the roads down in the Charlton area, we are also observing that we are not having a lot of accidents in those areas. Perhaps it is because of the condition of the road in that people know they are driving in red gum country and they drive to the condition of the road, so in effect the trees may be slowing the traffic down anyway. For example, when you are dealing in 20 to 40-km/h speed zones the normal practice is to put barriers right beside the road so you naturally feel you will go slower, just like you put trees and vegetation in to naturally slow the traffic down — traffic calming. Perhaps the same is occurring in our Charlton area. Even through there are 100-km/h speed zones, people are seeing the big red gums and slowing down and driving to those speed limitations.

The CHAIR — How effective is the process of removing trees that you recognise as unsafe?

Mr DUKE — I heard you on the radio this morning.
The CHAIR — Was it good?

Mr DUKE — Yes, it came across well. I did hear you saying that a lot of municipalities have been complaining to you about that. We have not had a lot of difficulty. Admittedly, we are not going through a lot of road growth development, but when we have had any problems we have made an application for a permit to remove the trees, the DSE has come in and done the inspections, and subsequently we have been issued planning permits to remove those trees, so we have not had any problems. If there were improved systems, if there were better ways of communicating and getting those planning permits, yes, we would — —

The CHAIR — In general where roadside objects and trees have been recognised as unsafe have you been able to have them removed through the process?

Mr DUKE — Through the process or by pruning them. I think there is a certain dispensation within the vegetation controls — vegetation under 10 years of age, that sort of thing — and then subsequently putting into practice a roadside management plan and saying, ‘Here is the envelope which we need to be able to clear’. It is clearly stated within that roadside management plan.

I go back to the three groups — road management, the road users education and law enforcement. We believe we have a responsibility altogether to improve those three areas.

I have addressed all your areas. We have been checking fatalities but we have not been checking the serious accidents as closely. We have not been informed on the minor accidents.

On road construction, we make the observation that there has been a little improvement on vehicles coming through our road construction sites which have had speed limits imposed and where there is police enforcement because of a feeling there might be a police officer there.

I also make the observation that the low volumes of traffic within Buloke may induce complacencies which have led to those fatalities.

The last point that I have been asked to make to you is the positive effects of the black spot funding. We believe that black spot funding has been a tremendous boost for local government in that when we have been successful in getting funds we have been able to improve incidence locations. We encourage the committee to ensure that financing for black spot funding continues.

Mr BISHOP — A fair length of the Calder runs through Buloke. We are interested in driver fatigue and the causes of it and perhaps the fix to it as well. Have you anything to do with Vicroads in relation to roadside stops? Have you heard any comments about that area, and has Buloke any views on it?

Mr DUKE — I have not had discussions with Vicroads on roadside stops. We are happy to cooperate with Vicroads whenever they are wanting maintenance or collecting rubbish from those stops. We are working with them pretty well on that.

Council has an opinion about the speed limit from Wycheproof North. Council has made a resolution that the speed limit from Wycheproof down to Marong should be 110 km/h. The observation that council makes is that north of Wycheproof on the Calder Highway the traffic is spread out. The 110-km/h speed allows the traffic to spread so there is no congestion and the possibility of incidents and accidents is reduced. Council believes that a 110-km/h speed further south would be advantageous to spreading that traffic out a bit more.

Mr BISHOP — Down to Marong?

Mr DUKE — The council resolution said from Wycheproof to Marong. I know Vicroads has said that is not possible.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Martin. We appreciate your time and input. As I said, we are taking a transcript and will provide the council with a copy of that transcript in due course.

Mr DUKE — Thank you very much. The best of wishes to the committee, and I hope you come up with some good conclusions. I am looking forward to it. Witness withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Mildura – 18 March 2004

Members

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

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

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

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officers: Mr G. Both and Mr P. Nelson

Witness

Mr. R. Lambert, Assets Engineer, Swan Hill Rural City Council.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — We welcome Roger Lambert from Swan Hill Rural City Council. We appreciate your time. As you are aware, the parliamentary Road Safety Committee is inquiring into the country road toll and also into crashes involving roadside objects. We are taking transcript, and we will provide council with a copy of the transcript in due course.

We are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot be held against you legally in the future. Having said all that, we look forward to your input, and I will hand it over to you for your submission.

Mr LAMBERT — Thank you. First of all, I would like to put in an apology for Joss Duirenvorden, who was supposed to be here today. He got called away to a Worksafe meeting, so he was unable to attend.

I have done some work on the accident statistics for the Swan Hill area, and you should have a copy of this handout in front of you. As you can see, in the first chart the most common accident in our area is intersection cross-traffic accidents, and that is followed closely by off-the-road on-the-straight accidents and off-the-road on-the-curve accidents.

You will also notice from the numbers of fatalities and hospitalisations that the off-the-road on-the-straight accidents actually cause more serious injuries than the intersection cross-traffic, even though there is a smaller number of total accidents.

I have looked in a bit more detail at those off-the-road accidents in the next graph, and there you can see that the off-the-road accidents on the straight occur more often than off-the-road accidents on a bend, which is interesting. Obviously the ones where the vehicle has then run into a roadside object have caused more injuries than the ones where the vehicle has not.

On the next page we can see the trend over the years. I have records going back to 1987. There is a fairly rapid decrease in the number of accidents from 1987 to 1992, but then it levels off up until the present day. So there has not really been any reduction in the road toll since 1992.

The CHAIR — Are the people injured or involved in accidents predominantly local people or are they people passing through the shire — visitors?

Mr LAMBERT — It is about half and half. There are some locals but also some from outside the area.

Mr BISHOP — Before you go too far, the off-the-road accidents running off to the right and into an object are about as prevalent as those running off to the left in your first lot of statistics. That is interesting. Is there any anecdotal evidence to indicate why they went off the right-hand side of the road instead of the left?

Mr LAMBERT — No, I do not have details of those accidents to know what has happened. The primary cause of running off the road is probably either fatigue — someone falling asleep at the wheel — or drunkenness. If you fall asleep, you have a fifty-fifty chance of going either way off the road.

Mr EREN — I notice there are more fatalities off to the right, because obviously the driver is on the right-hand side, so, if anything, they are going to go that way. In relation to the map you have provided, you have 1656 kilometres of unsurfaced roads?

Mr LAMBERT — That is correct.

Mr EREN — So that is just dirt?

Mr LAMBERT — That is right, just graded dirt, yes. These are obviously the low-traffic-volume roads. Normally they are used to bring the grain harvest in, so their use is mainly seasonal, with the grain harvest.

Mr EREN — How do you go in the winter with rain? Do they get squishy and muddy?

Mr LAMBERT — It depends where they are. Most of those roads are out in the Mallee area where it is sandy country, and the rain does not affect the roads, it just soaks into the sand. You can still use the roads, even when they are wet. A few of them are on the river flats, and they become impassable when they are wet.
Mr EREN — Some councils have indicated that they would like to see a reduction in the speed limit on gravel roads. What is your view about that?

Mr LAMBERT — I think that would be appropriate. I think 80 km/h would be a suitable speed for driving on gravel roads. The problem I see in our area, though, is that many motorists have to drive for long distances on gravel roads, and I think they would be reluctant to travel at the lower speed because they have such a long way to go. If it was for only a short trip on a gravel road, they would not mind a lower speed limit, but some of the people who have to drive for half an hour or an hour or so on a gravel road would be reluctant to make their journey longer by going slower. The other difficulty would be with enforcement. My impression is that the police generally stick to the highways. You rarely see a speed camera or anything like that on a gravel road.

Just going on to the time of day, as you can see from the total accident numbers, most of the accidents happen during the daytime rather than at night. That is just a reflection of the volume of traffic on the road at that time, but it is interesting to note that the percentage of off-the-road accidents peaks at about 2 or 3 o’clock in the morning, when 100 per cent of the accidents are people running off the road. That ties into the idea that fatigue is the main cause of those accidents.

On the next page I have the accidents as they relate to age groups. As is well known, the younger people are more often involved in accidents. This is driver age, so you can ignore the passengers in this case.

Mr HARKNESS — How many 10 to 14-year-old drivers do you have in the municipality?

Mr LAMBERT — Not too many, but apparently they do have accidents.

The CHAIR — What is that green line showing me?

Mr LAMBERT — The green line is the percentage of off-the-road accidents. You can see that 40 per cent of the accidents involving young drivers are off-the-road accidents, whereas when you get up into the older age groups, the percentage is down to 10 per cent. Only 10 per cent of the accidents involving older drivers are off-the-road accidents.

The CHAIR — It climbs pretty steeply from 1990 to 1994.

Mr LAMBERT — Yes.

Mr HARKNESS — I think that is a graphing problem.

Mr LAMBERT — Yes. I would say there are probably only one or two accidents in that area. Not too many people aged 95 to 99 drive cars. I followed that up with looking more into these off-the-road accidents — what type of object people generally hit when they go off the road, and it is predominantly trees. You can see also that the fatalities are predominantly trees. There are not many fatalities with any other roadside objects; they are nearly always trees.

The CHAIR — We ask this question of all councils: with regard to council identifying some unsafe trees on the side of the road, how effective is the process for having those trees removed?

Mr LAMBERT — We find it extremely difficult to have trees removed, especially if they are native vegetation. It is very hard to get a planning permit to remove native vegetation from the roadsides. If you look at the second map, which is a survey of roadside vegetation that council has undertaken, all the roads that are marked in green have high conservation-value native vegetation on the side of the road, and you can see that that is the majority of our roads. We find it extremely difficult to get permits to remove that vegetation.

The CHAIR — So there are examples of trees that council has identified as unsafe but which, through the process, still remain there today?

Mr LAMBERT — It is not so much individual trees because our roadsides have a lot of trees and they are usually fairly small, being Mallee-type trees; so there are usually individual trees that we are identifying as whole areas of trees, which again makes it more difficult to get them removed.
Mr MULDER — Looking at the number of fatalities and crashes involving trees, are there specific areas where they have occurred or is it spasmodic, are they all over the place?

Mr LAMBERT — They are all over the place. The previous map I have given you shows the Vicroads Crashstats sites. I have marked on that map all the incidents involving a car running into a tree, and you can see that they are scattered all over the municipality. There are a few sites where there have been two or maybe three accidents but the majority of them are only one accident per site. It would require wholesale clearing of trees to make any difference.

Mr STONEY — I am interested in the fact that you have been able to break down the difference between kangaroos, horses, sheep and cattle, and tame animals. Some other shires have told us that they have been unable to get that breakdown. How did you get such a comprehensive breakdown in what animal was hit?

Mr LAMBERT — This information is available on the Vicroads Crashstats site. It is a matter of knowing how to query the data.

Mr STONEY — So it is possible on the Vicroads site to get right into that detail?

Mr LAMBERT — It certainly is.

Mr STONEY — Because it is interesting. What is the difference between a tame animal and a horse, for example?

Mr LAMBERT — Tame animals are more like domestic pets — cats and dogs and those sorts of things.

Mr STONEY — Most horses are not that tame anyway!

Mr EREN — Do the stats in relation to collisions with poles relate mainly to power poles?

Mr LAMBERT — That information is not available on the web site; it is just a pole. Because fences are listed separately it would not be a fence post, so most of them would be power poles.

Mr EREN — Has your council identified any power poles that may be hazardous; and if so, how has the reaction of the utility companies been in relation to possibly moving those poles?

Mr LAMBERT — We have had a few power poles moved. Generally the power companies are quite cooperative; it is only a matter of dollars. They expect council to pay for it, and as long as we do that they are quite happy to do whatever we ask.

The final map that I have is just a reduction of the bigger one that you already have there which shows the type of roads. As somebody noticed before, we have 1600 kilometres of dirt roads. There is a lot of things that councils could be doing in regard to road safety, but in the end it really comes down to dollars. While we have such a large number of gravel roads and unsurfaced roads, there is probably more demand on our dollars for improving the actual road surface rather than looking at road safety aspects; although if you seal a gravel road that is obviously going to have an effect on road safety as well.

Mr MULDER — Do you have a road safety officer?

Mr LAMBERT — No, we do not. Joss Duirenvorden, who was meant to be here today, is our engineering services manager and he would fulfil that role.

Mr MULDER — Do you have the use of speed detection devices as a road safety initiative?

Mr LAMBERT — We do not have any of our own but Roadsafe Central Murray hires a speed trailer from time to time which is put around the district, and we share that with Gannawarra and Buloke and a couple of other shires.

The CHAIR — Does the council carry out road safety audits on a regular basis or a priority type basis?

Mr LAMBERT — Not generally, although we have done so on some black spots to try and identify the best kind of treatment. Council has been quite successful in getting black spot funding for intersection works. It is
easier to get it for intersection works than for roadside objects, because it is easier to identify particular sites. Quite a few roundabouts have been built with black spot money.

Mr HARKNESS — The committee has dealt with other councils where the boundary goes along the Murray River and the highway that goes along there. Your shire does, too. Is there an increase in the number of accidents with people touring along the road that bounds the Murray River?

Mr LAMBERT — The Murray Valley Highway?

Mr HARKNESS — Yes, that is the one.

Mr LAMBERT — No, I do not believe that that would have much of an effect, really. I do not think the stats for the Murray Valley Highway would be any greater than an equivalent road elsewhere.

Perhaps I should address the particular queries that you had in your brief. The first one in regard to speed, drugs, alcohol and fatigue — certainly they are causative in road crashes. I guess Vicroads have done quite a bit of work in that regard with their TV advertising campaign and that sort of thing and it is probably better done on a state level than on a council level.

On the role of the roadside environment — as I said, our roads are chock-a-block full of trees and they figure fairly prominently in crashes but there really is not much that we can do about removing the trees. I think that problem has to be tackled from the driver education point of view as well, to prevent the drivers from leaving the road in the first place, rather than trying to remove all the trees:

Mr BISHOP — An issue was raised which is probably not totally directed to road safety, but one of the previous municipalities spoke about the capacity to get farm machinery along roads as well, which as you know is quite a difficult issue we are all now facing. Have you a policy that some of those roads are tidied up? To some degree this leads to safety.

Mr LAMBERT — That is another issue that council has a lot of difficulty with. The farm machinery seems to be getting bigger and bigger every year. Farmers are now wanting roads 8 metres in width and 4 to 6 metres in height for clearance, and a lot of our roads just do not have that clearance. Again we run into the problem of not being able to get permits to clear the native vegetation, so in a lot of cases our farmers just have to take the long way around to get where they want to go, or alternatively they take the law into their own hands and cut the trees themselves. But it is a big issue for the Swan Hill council to try to get the farm machinery through.

Cruise control is an interesting issue, and I am not sure what the effect of that would be. I tend to think it would increase the incidence of crashes caused by fatigue. A lot of drivers who fall asleep at the wheel are probably bored rather than tired, and the fact that they do not have to worry about their speed is probably contributing to their boredom. If you were driving down a windy road where you had to be steering all the time and constantly changing speed, it would be very unlikely that you would fall asleep at the wheel, but on a straight road with the cruise control on I think the chances are increased.

In relation to enforcement activity, I mentioned before that you rarely see the police off the highways and main roads. Some people I know personally take the back roads in order to speed, because they know that they will not get caught. You also hear of people coming home from the pub and taking the back roads rather than the main roads to avoid the police. The other issue we have in that regard is B-double routes. We have some gazetted B-double routes throughout the municipality, but we find that B-doubles go anywhere they want to, because there is just no enforcement on the back roads regarding B-doubles.

The CHAIR — What effect has that had on your rural road system?

Mr LAMBERT — B-doubles really do not damage the road, except at sharp corners where the turning action pushes the seal sideways and tends to crack the seal. On the straight roads they really do not have that much of an effect. I am sure they have an effect on road safety, though, because some of our roads are fairly narrow, and it is difficult for two trucks to pass each other or even for a car and a truck to pass each other.

The CHAIR — What you are saying is that through lack of policing B-doubles are using smaller roads that they are not supposed to be using?
Mr LAMBERT — Yes, exactly. Obviously Vicroads has gazetted the highways in the area, but there are also a number of roads around the industrial areas within the towns and roads that lead to the quarries and those sorts of things that are gazetted, but they are all 6-metre-wide sealed roads. But there is a lot of B-double traffic on non-gazetted roads which tend to be a lot narrower, including gravel or even dirt roads.

The CHAIR — I would have thought that even on the smaller sealed roads a larger truck like a B-double would damage the shoulder of the road.

Mr LAMBERT — They certainly do on our narrow seals. We have a lot of roads that are only 4-metre single-lane seal, and you have to go onto the shoulder to pass any anyone. They would certainly damage the shoulders on those, yes.

Mr MULDER — I have a question in relation to the machinery that is now appearing. There was a comment made before about some of the really big harvesters that are coming out now. Is there a permit process that operates within the shire for those to go on the roads? The manufacturer develops and makes these machines and they arrive at the distributor, obviously, but is there a permit process? We have heard talk before about having to clear trees on both sides of the road for these to pass each other. How does that operate?

Mr LAMBERT — A permit system for over-dimensional vehicles operates though Vicroads. They have to apply to Vicroads for the permit. But generally for the movement of farm equipment they usually do not bother taking out a permit, because they are on the back roads and, again, there is no enforcement in those areas. We are finding increasingly that farms are getting bigger, but instead of a farm just growing in the one area, the person who owns the farm might buy another farm somewhere else, and so he is moving machinery between his different farms, and, as I said, it is usually on the back roads where there is no enforcement.

Mr MULDER — You are not a referral authority, and Vicroads issues the permit for over-dimensional vehicles, but if they then turn up on local roads and someone raises with you the issue of clearing vegetation and says, ‘We can’t pass on this road’, you are not aware of the problem until it turns up. Is that how it works?

Mr LAMBERT — Generally the farmers call us and ask us to make the road wider, and it is not just for two pieces of machinery to pass each other, it is for one machine to be able to get down the road by itself. If farmers need to go from A to B, they ring us up and say, ‘The road is too narrow and we can’t get through. Can you clear it for us?’ , and we have to say, ‘No, sorry, we can’t’.

In relation to the need for legislation changes, that would be of assistance to us in regard to the removal of native vegetation. Obviously we are not looking to be able to remove native vegetation wholesale off all the roads, but in certain critical spots where there is perhaps a road intersection and inadequate sight distance and where a minimal amount of vegetation clearance would have quite an effect on road safety, we are finding we are still unable to get a permit to do that work. I am not sure exactly what legislation would need to change for that to be able to happen because there are a number of different acts that protect native vegetation, but I think there needs to be a little bit of commonsense there to allow us to do some clearance of native vegetation in critical locations in the interests of road safety.

The CHAIR — I did not realise that you have a road safety strategy document. Do you want to briefly describe what is in the document and the effect of the document?

Mr LAMBERT — Yes. The document was developed in consultation with the local road safety committee. Many of the outcomes in the document are actions for the road safety committee rather than for council, so it is a community project and not just a council one.

Most of the recommendations in it are for education-type activities rather than for infrastructure. The one infrastructure activity that has been pointed out in there is in regard to what we call gophers — the mobile motorised wheelchair vehicles used by older people. We are getting a lot of those in Swan Hill now, and they tend to use the road rather than the footpath because our footpaths do not have the proper pram crossings at the intersections. They drive on the wrong side of the road and they do not look for traffic. They are extremely dangerous drivers, and that is increasingly becoming a problem for us.

The CHAIR — What do you see as a solution there?
Mr LAMBERT — The solution is to fix up the kerb crossings on our footpaths, but that will take a long time, given our budget.

Mr MULDER — Is there a process in place to introduce that over a period of time or is that not seen as a priority at this time?

Mr LAMBERT — It is not being taken as a high priority. The engineering department put it up as a project at every budget and we do get some money towards it, but with the amount of money we are getting it will take 10 or 20 years to fix the problem. We are making some progress.

Mr STONEY — Have there been any accidents with gophers?

Mr LAMBERT — No, not that I am aware of. There have not been any recorded accidents, but there is a lot of potential for it.

Mr BISHOP — The other issue with the gophers has been the railway line crossings as well in relation to safety. You might wish to make a comment on that?

Mr LAMBERT — There are a couple of railway crossings in Swan Hill that are regularly used by gophers and there is no footpath across the railway line. The footpath comes up to the railway reserve on either side and stops. There is one of those in our budget at the moment — not for this year but it comes up in about two years time in our works program. That one will be fixed, but again it is a matter of dollars, how much money we can spend on that sort of the thing.

Mr STONEY — Whose responsibility is it? Is it the people who maintain the tracks or the council?

Mr LAMBERT — If we want a footpath across a railway line council has to build it, but it has to be done in accordance with V/Line’s specifications and with its permission, of course.

Mr STONEY — What about a local road that crosses a railway line, who is responsible for the area surrounding the line?

Mr LAMBERT — Council is up to, I think, 10 metres from the railway line, so the railways will not allow council to work within 10 metres of their line. I am glad you mentioned that, that is an issue for councils where we find that on a length of local road the worst bit of the road will be bit next to the railway line. Council is not allowed to fix it and the railways do not fix it.

Mr STONEY — Is there a process to virtually make them fix it or is that a bit of a vacuum?

Mr LAMBERT — It is a bit of a vacuum at the moment, but I notice it has been included in the new Road Management Bill. There is an item in schedule 7, I believe, that specifically puts the onus back on the railways to fix that section of the road.

Mr HARKNESS — I have an example in my own area where councils resurface the roads up to their allowed space so there is a big dip down where the line is now.

Mr LAMBERT — Very common, yes. Although we are constantly writing letters to Victrack to have those areas fixed, they are not very responsive.

Mr BISHOP — Is there another issue in relation to road safety and vision on approaches to railway lines where a municipalities have a difficulty if ratepayers object and say, ‘It is not safe. I cannot see the train if it is coming’. Is that another issue in road safety?

Mr LAMBERT — Yes, there can be in certain locations. It usually comes back to the native vegetation issue again. There will be native vegetation near the railway crossing and we are not allowed to clear it to provide sight distance.

The other aspect with that is that the guidelines that V/Line have for sight clearance at level crossings are fairly extreme and it is virtually impossible to achieve that sight distance. I think it is looking at something like 200 metres — a site triangle of 200 metres by 200 metres — and that is just about impossible to achieve.
Mr BISHOP — Can you explain that.

Mr LAMBERT — A car 200 metres back from a crossing should be able to see a train that is 200 metres away, so that is a huge area of clearance that has to be done so it is pretty well impossible to meet those guidelines.

The CHAIR — I am interested in your road strategy. One of the key issues you have here is increased driving experience on gravel roads, and promotion of Ls and Ps programs seeking community and driver education to support promotion of Ls using gravel roads.

Mr LAMBERT — Our impression is that most learner drivers learn on sealed roads and they rarely go on a gravel roads during the times they are on L or P plates or even when they are on P plates. So they just do not get the experience on gravel roads while they are on sealed roads.

There is a system, I believe, in some of the other states where learner drivers have to keep a log book of their activities while they are learning. That is probably a good idea. In South Australia they have to log what activities they are doing, and there is a certain list of things that they have to do while they are learning. That is probably a good system that could well be introduced in Victoria. It would make sure that learners do get experience in every kind of road condition and every type of road, every kind of weather condition, that sort of thing.

Mr STONEY — Does the Charlton student driving centre do anything on gravel roads?

Mr LAMBERT — I do not know. I am not familiar with what they do there.

Mr STONEY — We will find out tomorrow. You just prompted the question.

The CHAIR — The other key issue you have here is truck traffic adjacent to schools — investigate alternate routes for trucks using roads abutting schools. Is that an issue for council?

Mr LAMBERT — It is not a huge issue. That is one point that was raised by someone from the community. It is a bit of an issue in Grey Street which is where the Swan Hill central primary school is. Grey street is a residential street and we would prefer that trucks do not use it, but it is also the shortest distance from the Murray Valley Highway to the industrial estate so it does get fairly heavily used by trucks, and council is looking for an alternative route. But again it comes back to money to provide those alternative routes.

The CHAIR — Is there anything else you would like to add, Roger?

Mr LAMBERT — There was one. I mentioned liability for utility poles and that sort of thing. It is difficult to say what the situation will be now because of the new Road Management Bill which will change the liability set-up. I guess I am a bit concerned with the way the Road Management Bill is structured in that it gives council the power to instruct a utility service to shift the pole; and because we are the coordinating road authority under the act I am wondering whether the courts would see it, if someone did hit a pole, that the council would be liable it because it did not tell the authority to shift the pole. I am not sure how that will pan out; we will probably have to wait until the first court case to know exactly what is going to happen there.

Mr BISHOP — Would you suggest the same thing would occur if you as a council applied to remove a tree because of safety and DSE said, ‘No, you cannot’?

Mr LAMBERT — I think that would probably get us off the hook as far as those trees go, but the situation with utility poles is not the same because the utility has to remove the pole if we ask them to but we have to pay for it.

Mr MULDER — On that basis, an application needs to be made by them to council, does there not, to carry out the works and then an inspection needs to be done in terms of codes of practice to check how they have conducted the work and left the road reserve. Is a fee then also charged by council to the utility provider?

Mr LAMBERT — Yes, the utilities have to get the coordinating road authority’s consent for any works they want to do.

Mr MULDER — Do you envisage there will be a cost associated with that on behalf of council in terms of processing those documents, inspecting work and so on?
Mr LAMBERT — We already charge a $30 inspection fee on all road-opening permits, but I believe there will be some regulations with the new act that will set the fee. From what I hear around other councils, our fee is lower than most people’s.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Roger, for your time and input. We do appreciate it, and we will provide you with a copy of the transcript in due course. Thank you very much.

Mr LAMBERT — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Mildura – 18 March 2003

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

Senior Constable A. Mangles, Chair, Roadsafe Central Murray Council; and
Sergeant R. Barbary, Traffic Management Unit, Victoria Police.

Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Welcome to the Roadsafe Central Murray Council. Thank you for your time and input. As you are aware, this is a parliamentary Road Safety Committee inquiring into the country road toll and crashes involving roadside objects. We are operating under parliamentary privilege today, so anything you say cannot be used against you into the future legally. We appreciate your input, and we will hand it across to you for your submission.

Sr Const. MANGLES — I would like to start with the issue of reducing the road toll in country Victoria. In my personal experience as a police officer we find that a lot of our accidents on the open road up in our area, which is in the Swan Hill and Gannawarra shires, are single-vehicle run-off-the-road rollovers, which is due basically to people running onto the gravel shoulder, overcorrecting and rolling off onto the other side of the road.

There are a few things we could look at putting in place to reduce these kinds of accidents. The shoulders on the sides of the roads could be sealed, and possibly ripple strips put down as well to wake the drivers up and let them know they are on the shoulders. We also have a problem with dust storms and a fair bit of fog over winter, so we are looking at having reflectors on the white lines on the edge of the road and also on the centre line, just to assist drivers in dust storms and fog.

Another issue is railway level crossings. Most of our railway level crossings on the major highways are lights and bells. However, a lot of our minor level crossings have only give-way or stop signs. People in the country get complacent. They think, ‘The train won’t come through here because it never comes through here’, but unfortunately there are a few carting grain over grain season, and we do have a lot of accidents.

The CHAIR — You have a lot of accidents?

Sr Const. MANGLES — We have a few, yes; not a lot. Fortunately most of them actually hit the side of the train, so we have less trauma there. Occasionally we get one where the train actually hits the motor vehicle, and we receive fatalities. We would like to see an improvement in the railway level crossings, perhaps looking at having more lights and bells and having wake-up lines on the approach to level crossings to alert drivers that there is something up ahead.

Sgt BARBARY — I might mention that if you head back along the Murray Valley Highway through Swan Hill on your way home, you will see the Castle Donnington level crossing, where recently we have had three semitrailers nearly plough into the side of our trains.

You will see that the actual road markings are still there at the moment where the black tracks are. One of those particular semitrailers was able, under full brakes, to turn off a side road to avoid hitting the side of the train. We are currently trying to get Vicroads to help us with that one because we are going to have a major problem there.

The CHAIR — So there are cars actually hitting the side of the train?

Sgt BARBARY — These are semitrailers — actually transports that are locking their brakes up to avoid trains. We have now documented complaints from our train drivers, and there is one particular crossing that we really need to address as a priority and that is especially what Alby is suggesting — our wake-up line is there.

Mr STONEY — Is it that the truck drivers cannot see the trains coming, that they just do not notice them, that they get complacent, or what is it?

Sgt BARBARY — With our transport companies we are pretty close to the end of the line. A lot of them slip over the border at Swan Hill. We do not have an awful lot who travel from Swan Hill up to Robinvale, so we have a fairly big transport depot in Swan Hill. I think it is the end of the trip and they could be a little bit fatigued, and it is only about 10 kilometres out of Swan Hill, so it is that issue of, ‘I am going to push on a little bit’. It is vividly there in black and white, so to speak, with the black marks there.

The CHAIR — Is it also a problem at night with regard to reduced vision?

Sgt BARBARY — The funny thing is we have about three or four trains a day, one in the morning and one at night, and I think you will find it is probably the ones at night that are the major problem, so it is night time.

Mr STONEY — So once the engine goes past — it is trucks and not a lot of lighting?
Sgt BARBARY — If you are looking at grain trucks, there is no lighting on the sides of those at all. You will have a headlight and maybe a tail-light, so to speak — a headlight on the engine and tail-light really for other trains. That is about all. Otherwise they are pretty dark at night.

Sr Const. MANGLES — Yes, they do have reflectors on the side, but that is about as far as they go.

Mr MULDER — Has any note been taken of whether these accidents are laden grain trains or just flat trays without any cargo on board at all?

Sr Const. MANGLES — The last one was a passenger train, and the truck that had to brake heavily and veer off into a drive way was actually a gas tanker.

Sgt BARBARY — We would have been woken up for that one without even receiving a phone call!

The CHAIR — We might have in Geelong!

Mr BISHOP — The audio strips have been tested? That gives a good result, does it?

Sgt BARBARY — From my own personal experience I think they are good. They are a bit annoying if you are wide awake, just quietly.

Mr BISHOP — On a side issue we have discussed with other organisations about having them on the sides of the roads to wake you up if you veer off the road. I wondered what the statistical data was in relation to the ones on the railway line crossings.

Sgt BARBARY — I do not think we will have firm data on that, and it is probably a bit unfortunate because I think we have taken care of it in a lot of other areas. The Calder Highway is a great example of shoulders and the ripple strips on the side and that type of thing.

Mr BISHOP — It is quite good.

Sgt BARBARY — It is, but in relation to those wake-up lines that we were talking about, they actually need ongoing servicing and that is where VicRoads needs to continue to either update with VicRoads or with the railways — Freight Australia or whoever is controlling the railways these days. From memory there is one over near Charlton — Teddywaddy. There is a crossing there on the Calder and basically over the years the lines have started to merge in with the rest of the bitumen and you are losing that effect.

Mr BISHOP — Teddywaddy is where, you said?

Sgt BARBARY — Teddywaddy. I think that is the one, yes. It is just a railway siding, so to speak, but it crosses the road. If you are going to implement these ideas that we are suggesting here today, you have to have ongoing maintenance after that.

Sr Const. MANGLES — Moving on to minor intersections in the country, where they are a T-intersection, we think that they should probably be set off-line so you have to stop, you have to give way and then you have to turn on continue on rather than having this complacency again, that, ‘No-one uses it this road, she’ll be right, I will go straight across’. It makes the drivers pull up and look before they proceed. Most intersections in the bush have plenty of room from boundary line to boundary line to do it.

Another one that could probably control fatigue a little bit would be roadside stops. We have very few roadside stops in our area anyway. We would probably need to look at more user-friendly — i.e. safety, for road users, especially at night when people get tired. People are a bit reluctant to stop on the side of the road at night.

The CHAIR — Because there is a lack of lighting, toilets, facilities?

Sr Const. MANGLES — Yes, I think a lack of lighting, toilets, and maybe we could even look at telephones. They have them on freeways; why not have them in the country as well for safety reasons and break downs, that sort of thing? Again, we would have to keep the maintenance up on these places so people feel comfortable to stop.
Just as an educational thing, probably going back to the first issue I brought up about people getting into the gravel and overcorrecting too sharply, maybe it could be brought into the driver education part of the driver licensing process as in more driving on a dirt road at some stage to see how the car handles on dirt roads, that sort of thing, especially up in the country. Maybe there could be questions along the lines of, ‘What do you do if you get one side of your car on to the gravel? You do not pull the wheel too tightly, you ease back on to the carriageway’, or something similar to that.

**The CHAIR** — Do you experience many accidents where there have been overcorrections, for example, on gravel roads?

**Sr Const. MANGLES** — On the major highways we do. The Murray Valley Highway is a prime example of that and the Loddon Valley Highway. For whatever reason their left-hand wheels get on to the gravel and, ‘Oops, I am on the gravel!’, and they sharply turn back on to the road and the back slides out, they slide around and roll across the road and end up on the other side of the road. We find a lot of them.

**Sgt BARBARY** — Where it is an unsealed section you will find that perhaps motorists do not travel that fast on unsealed sections so if they spin out there they tend to spin out in whichever direction they were heading in the first place. If it is a straight line they will tend to spin out on the stones in a straight line. It is when you hit the bitumen and all of a sudden you gain that traction, and if the wheels are facing the way that you corrected it, that is the way you will go, and that is the one that really hurts the road toll.

**Mr BISHOP** — One of the previous presenters talked about learner drivers having a log book filled in to give more focus and to ensure that they get a bit of driving on gravel roads as well. Have you ever heard of that?

**Sr Const. MANGLES** — No, I have not heard of it.

**Sgt BARBARY** — It is a good idea but you need to be able to verify that they have actually done that. It is like the old log books for our truck drivers, you know what I mean? It has to be enforable in some manner.

**Sr Const. MANGLES** — Just quickly on roadside objects, we find it strange that where new roads are built or where Landcare or the likes plant new trees on the sides of roads, that they seem to be large-trunk trees. I believe there is a standard of 9 metres or something from a roadway to the first object or the first line of trees. Perhaps we could look at crash-friendly flora such as shrubbery, so that if you hit them you are not going to bend your car up too much and they are going to slow you down before you do come to the thicker-trunk trees, so you have two purposes there.

We also have a lot of intersections coming onto our major highways, such as driveways and that sort of thing, and we find that they are concealed by a lot of trees and shrubbery. Maybe we could look at having a clear zone on either side of that so that persons travelling along the highway can see a car coming out and the people coming out can have a clear view of what is coming along the road.

**Mr MULDER** — Do you have any view about the issue of the number of entertainment systems, phones and televisions that are coming out with the new cars, and drivers being distracted by them and running off the road? Do you think they are starting to play a role in drivers running off the road? I am talking about things like CD players, telephones, DVDs, televisions, global positioning systems — cars have everything in them these days — and I would like your thoughts on that.

**Sr Const. MANGLES** — I certainly think mobile phones contribute to bad driver behaviour and to some motor vehicle accidents, but it is very hard to gauge what percentage or how many. As far as the DVD players and the like are concerned, we do not have a large number of those up in this area as yet, but they are definitely starting to come in now.

**Sgt BARBARY** — Are you referring to the DVD players the kids have in the back seat behind the drivers?

**Mr MULDER** — Yes. CD players, DVDs and all the mod cons in cars now other than mobile phones — push-button things and the like — that are distractions, and I am asking whether or not they are contributing to the run-off-road accidents.
Sgt BARBARY — I think if we all had six-stacker CDs we would be all right, because you do not have to worry about changing them. We have had a couple of accidents due to drivers changing CDs, so they are documented, but that was over the last two years. It is not a lot, but it is certainly an indication that they are a distraction.

Overheads shown.

Sgt BARBARY — My presentation is from a policing perspective. I have had 25 years service with Victoria Police, and I am of the firm opinion that through education and enforcement we will go a long way in reducing our road toll.

To a certain extent, modifying the environment will assist with our road crashes when we are not out on the road, which leads me into funding. Victoria Police does not provide any funding for any of the operations or initiatives that we kick off from a local point of view. We continually seek funding from Roadsafe councils, shires, Vicroads if we are lucky, and the Transport Accident Commission, which does not entertain our requests for cash.

Talking about funding, I will show you some initiatives we have up and running at my office. These have basically got off the ground only because we have got funding from other people. Some of them are good ideas and you might have a bit of a giggle at some others, but we are trying everything we possibly can.

We are obviously from the traffic management unit, and some time ago when local priority policing (LPP) was brought in — does the committee understand what local priority policing is? Under LPP, Victoria Police was split up into regions where local commanders take control of their own units. No longer do we have what I call a traffic tree. A traffic tree is where we have an assistant commissioner at the top and all the various ranks breaking off right down to sergeants, senior constables and constables, and the traffic assistant commissioner would run the traffic programs and that type of thing.

Right now I answer to about four bosses. I am in charge of my own unit. They got rid of the position of the senior sergeant who used to liaise between Mildura traffic management unit and Swan Hill TMU. For whatever reason, they got rid of that position, and now I answer directly to my inspector, who is a very intelligent fellow, and I am certainly not here to criticise him or the way the system is currently structured, but I do have some suggestions that might alleviate some of our issues.

Apart from having no increase in staff in the last 25 years, Victoria Police is slow to obtain equipment for us. As to the structure of the traffic program itself, if we were to go back to that traffic tree, I would have some idea as to who my boss is and some idea in which direction the state government wants us to run. Yes, we can still focus on those local issues, but I would prefer to have one boss so I know in exactly which direction I am firmly heading.

We have requested legislation for a number of things. One example is that we were chasing burnout legislation similar to the New South Wales legislation. We have a lot of what we call young bucks, who are simply young people in B & S utes. B & S utes are our bachelors-and-spinsters ball utes, which are simply utilities decked out in weird and wonderful bullbars and all the rest of it, and they do wheelies at a fair old rate in and around our towns and on the highways as well, particularly at intersections that are not well policed, where you will see a sea of black wheelies and whatnot.

They are fatalities just waiting to happen, and we would like legislation whereby we could seize vehicles or issue heavy fines to these people on the spot instead of having to wait six months for a summons to hit their doorstep before we can get them to court, because by then they have lost the idea of why they are going to court in the first place. That is the beauty of penalty notices with an on-the-spot fine — the person knows exactly what he has done wrong, and he has been fined for it. It is all over, he gets on with his life and the policeman does as well, unless there is some sort of problem, but the lesson has been learnt.

That suggestion apparently reached the people who request legislation from Parliament, but my understanding is that Parliament has knocked it back. That may be something you people can address from your level — that is, if we request legislation and if it is suitable and we have proved our case, perhaps along bipartisan lines you could let the thing run through and give us some tools to do our job.

Mr STONEY — You say ‘we’; can you explain who ‘we’ is?
Sgt BARBARY — There was a fairly hefty file which I contributed to, and my understanding is that it was simply knocked back by whoever it was.

Mr STONEY — So it went through your system right through to head office?

Sgt BARBARY — It went right through our system, it left us, it left Victoria Police, and somewhere along the line it was knocked back. I do not understand where it goes after it leaves Victoria Police. I am not even sure if it made it before your eyes or if it was debated. My understanding is it was simply rejected. I do not know why. That hurt us a little bit, because we could have used that tool, and it would have been good for us.

We have also put in reports to VicRoads for testing purposes, and one of them was simply about that business of run-off-road accidents. Each time we have a fatality, I investigate it myself and I put in various reports wherever they need to go. I never hear anything back from these people. It just goes into a black hole. I do not know why. I do not even receive an acknowledgment that my report has made it to them. That is frustrating in itself, but I keep doing it anyway. I digress.

The TAC has rejected a few of our ideas. One of our ideas involved having Operation RAID — Remove Alcohol Impaired Drivers — at Christmas time. Up here at Swan Hill we have a trailer through Roadsafe Central Murray. The trailer is a massive billboard with blank sides each side, and with Operation RAID we get our schoolchildren to design posters that are transposed up onto the trailer, and then that is towed around by VicRoads or whoever to the various areas and everybody has a look at it. Right away we are getting our children involved in road safety; we are using resources from Road Safety Central Murray; and we are getting the message out there in front of people’s eyes. Personally I thought it was a great idea, given that it was mine, and it went nowhere. In fact it has been given to them twice now and we have simply received nothing back from them. So we go to all these various places, we ask for things, we present things and we seem to get nowhere with it. I think probably the easiest thing to do now is to show you what some cash can do.

Overheads shown

Sgt BARBARY — I will run through this as quickly as possible because it takes about 15 minutes and I think we will go over time. I apologise for that.

The initiatives I will show you came from my office from either myself or Alby or some of the other fellows who are there. In summary, we put sunshades on taxis and on a police car. They were paid for by Roadsafe. We did not have any pushbikes and I wanted to police the area in a different way so we had Roadsafe again supply us with money for that. We put a school package together for our kids. We came up with a crash trailer for in-your-face advertising. We had a problem in Mildura with street racing, and we have done something with that. Our Asian driver strategy was as a result of six fatalities involving the Asian community at Robinvale. Through 13 partnerships we eventually came up with a strategy to fix that. The most hated road-user group we have in our community at the moment is our scooter users, and that is tongue-in-cheek, I am sorry, but some old folks who use their scooters to get about with.

The vehicle in this picture has a sign on the back of it, saying ‘Speed Kills’. If you drive down the road and see that sign on the back of a vehicle, it has to take your attention. It has to be a good idea, and it has to be in your face so people understand what it is all about.

Again, these are taxis with that sign. We have done them from Robinvale down to Cohuna. We have done 15 taxis at $160 each a sign with a total of $2400 to get the program off the ground. That was paid for by Roadsafe.

I presented this picture of a taxi at one of our conferences in the city and unfortunately the taxi drivers thought it was a great idea; they thought it was a get-out-of-jail-free card. I am sorry to say that the taxi in this picture is speeding. We had a meeting to tell them, ‘This is not the idea of the program, guys. Get rid of it’.

The slogan, ‘Drink drive, bloody idiot’ is on a police car, actually one of our cars, again paid for by Roadsafe. We were not going to put ‘Speed Kills’ on there for the obvious reason that we are continually breaking road rule 20 in order to enforce road rule 20. It is a catch-22, but if you were to have ‘Speed Kills’ on that, they would think we were a joke.

Mr EREN — Does that sign on your back window restrict your rear vision?
Sr Const. MANGLES — No, not at all.

Sgt BARBARY — Alby here is the occupational health and safety representative for our office. Believe it or not, I also have an occupational health and safety rep. from the association in my office, so from that perspective we are well and truly safe. It has been tested and we are quite satisfied with it. We would not have given it to our taxi drivers if it was going to be a problem.

Mr HARKNESS — What do you see in your mirror, Alby? Is it really light?

Sr Const. MANGLES — It is a mesh, yes. It is a really light mesh and then they just screen print over the top of it. You would not even know it was there most of the time.

Sgt BARBARY — This shows policing in a different way — riding pushbikes. Again, we had to get some cash from other people because Victoria Police were not going to pay for our pushbikes. You can see Alby riding his bike on the left, Darren Brown on the right, and basically those fellows are out in the community. Again, it is not a new idea but it is a new idea for traffic people to use these bikes. Normally they are in cars doing speeds down the roads and they are missing out on small things like checking roundabouts, that type of thing where we do have collisions in Swan Hill.

From a policing point of view it has been a great idea. It has shocked a few people in the traffic sides of things. They could not believe that we had volunteers who were prepared to get out of their seats and pedal a pushbike.

The next slide shows a program for our secondary schools, year 10 and upwards. As it says, Stewart Tomsett put it together. You can see our partnerships here — VicRoads, Roadsafe and Swan Hill Driver Education. They all assisted to put the program together. It very quickly and simply gets the kids up and into the swing of what the legislation is. Probably the most important stuff down the bottom is how to keep your licence when your first get it and some of the offences that you can commit. It is really just giving them an overview of how to keep themselves safe on the road.

This next picture shows a crash trailer, which was basically put together again with funds and voluntary donations from our community. The signage is all done by Roadsafe, and we paid for that. The local tow company lent us the trailer, the insurance companies have lent us cars to put on the trailer, councils give us permission to stick it on their nature strips, VicRoads give us permission to plonk it on the sides of the roads, and simply it is advertising. ‘This is what happens when you roll your car’ is the message.

Mr EREN — How long have you been doing this campaign?

Sgt BARBARY — Coming up for 12 months, I suppose.

Mr EREN — Have you seen an impact?

Sgt BARBARY — Once you start talking about education it is very hard to gauge or get a result as to whether it has worked for you. I suppose you could put a survey out to your local community and say to tick the box if you have seen anything, but seriously there is a bit of apathy in the community and you do not get a good response. In fact, the only time you get a response from surveys is when people are keen and eager to follow your line anyway.

The CHAIR — Ron, do you do this through the Roadsafe council or do you do this as local police?

Sgt BARBARY — All the initiatives are Victoria Police but funded by Roadsafe. This is what I am saying. Victoria Police do not have the pot of cash to hand to us, and this is only Swan Hill. I am not too sure what other communities or what other policing regions are doing but this is what we doing up here because we have taken ownership of our job and we clearly like the job — that is why we are here today — and we have a feeling for our own community, so this is what we are trying to do for our own people. That does not stop other policemen or other agencies or whatever doing the same thing elsewhere. You have to have a commitment.

Street racing in Mildura — we simply tried to reduce our street races in Deakin Avenue here. They were using the traffic lights as staging for their drags and they were doing burnouts in the intersections and all that type of stuff, so again through partnerships we got together with the Sunset drag strip and the Sunraysia Drag Racing Association
and basically advertised through the local media and got the kids off the street. We gave them an opportunity to go their hardest on these drag strips, and it has reduced most of our draggers here in town.

The funny thing, though, through the media and what not is it has shifted them out of that area into another one. So some of these programs are great, but sometimes you just shift your problem. That is just an unfortunate way it has come off.

Tips on safe driving is a particular strategy for our multicultural drivers. This came about as a result of our Asian drivers dying in 2002. We had six die or cause fatalities up here at Robinvale, and we are certainly not racist by any means but these people figured in our stats.

**The CHAIR** — Are we talking about a local Asian community or people who are tourists?

**Sgt BARBARY** — We are talking about our fruit pickers who travel from Melbourne up to Robinvale to pick fruit, and in fact that is their job, they were all doing that job. Basically they had no understanding whatsoever of our road rules. You could speak to them and they could not speak English. That is an issue for Vicroads, a big issue, but my personal belief is that unless you can comprehend English and exchange backwards and forwards in that English language you should not have a drivers licence, because they are missing those roads signs and all those important messages that we try to get out to them, whether it be locally or through TAC or whatever.

**Mr STONEY** — So they have a genuine licence?

**Sgt BARBARY** — Yes.

**Mr STONEY** — But they are unable to communicate in English?

**Sgt BARBARY** — Correct. There are issues with how they get their licences. Our understanding through communication with our major collision investigation unit is that somebody else will do the test for them, but when the photo is taken the real man then steps in and has his photo taken, and he then has his licence. That needs to be tightened up. There are plenty of issues there.

As a result, again, of teaming up with Roadsafe and Swan Hill Rural City Council we got some funding together. This program cost $5000 to get up and running. We brought in our Asian squad, and its members identified those who fitted within our crash data, and they turned out to be Vietnamese, Thai and Cambodian-speaking people. Nobody else has done this. We formed a committee; we said, ‘We have to get this information out to them quickly’; and that is what we have done. We have put this brochure together.

Basically this program has come about as a result of all our fatalities. Thirteen partnerships were formed along the way. Our Asian squad was brought in and identified who we were dealing with. A couple of people from our multicultural awareness unit connected us up with the communities themselves to find out who the people were, what they were doing in Robinvale and that type of thing, and we identified labour camps out of it. Some of these people were being bussed up from Melbourne to work in the fruit industry.

The Ace Radio Network radio school cut a CD for me with some of these messages. The local radio station would not play it because it did not want to do anything with that, so I have had to chase up who will play these CDs now that I have them cut. HOT FM in Mildura is a multicultural radio station, and it has played them for us, along with 3EA, which is SBS radio in Melbourne, and it has played them for us. My understanding is that the Asian newspapers took some information from our Asian squad and produced that in their local newspapers. When the local media people started seeing these signs up, they started asking questions about what was going on, so we fed them the information as well.

The words at the top simply say, ‘Stick to the speed limit’. If you are going to talk to these people, unfortunately the message has to be loud and very direct, so we said, ‘Stick to the speed limit’. If you start asking them to do other things, they simply get confused, because they do not have the breakdown or the understanding of our language.

**Mr STONEY** — Would there be a possibility that they might think they have to drive at 100 km/h even though the road conditions might dictate that it should be 80 km/h at the time? Is there a possibility they might get mixed up in that process, by being so direct?
Sgt BARBARY — The only thing I can say to that is we have had no Asian fatalities until Friday night just gone, when a pedestrian was killed. So from April 2002 up to Friday we had no Asians involved in collisions. Whether it has got through to them, I do not know. I think it possibly has, because there was such a definite stop when we kicked in with our program.

Mr STONEY — Were the accidents before mostly related to speed?

Sgt BARBARY — Speed, fatigue and alcohol, and being on the wrong side of the road. They simply do not comprehend what they need to do. I think we have educated them, and this program actually won a Frank Green award with the Roadsafe state conference at Bendigo recently. It is recognised right across the state as something that is working. We are having other people coming to us and asking what we are actually doing. As a result of this we are now dealing with our Somali people who are struggling with the English language and what the laws are. We doing a couple of little things there that I do not want to tell you about just now because we are still working on them, but they are along the same lines.

As you see from these initiatives, we have basically dealt right through the community: we have dealt with our kids, we have dealt with our multicultural people and we have dealt with our elderly. The people shown on the screen use their little scooters on the road — actually on the bitumen — for whatever reason. They are using these now to get about. Instead of using their legs, they actually prefer these. They do not have to drive. But what they do not understand is that they are exposing themselves to road safety risks by being on the road. Through this education program we have actually got them back onto the footpaths. When they were on the footpaths we had to educate our pedestrians, because nobody was giving way to each other, and we were having complaints from down on our main street in Swan Hill about bullying with scooters. It was very much a localised issue, but from speaking to other road safety groups and traffic people, it is an issue that is emerging across the state.

The CHAIR — Obviously another issue for motor scooter users is the ramps from the road up onto the footpath.

Sgt BARBARY — Part of this program involves the Swan Hill Rural City Council handing them slips of paper to identify problem footpaths, because legislation allows them to actually move onto the roadway if they cannot use the footpath properly or if there is no footpath there at all. So we think we have pretty well covered a lot of the issues, and we have also given information back to our council to again try to relieve the pressure on us. The last thing we want to do is start booking people who do not have money in the first place. Generally the people using these scooters are people who are on a pension and are struggling for a dollar anyway.

Again the idea is education. The brochure — which I have copies of and which you are welcome to look at when we go — is simply to give these people an idea of what they should be doing and what they should not be doing. The bottom line is that all this is being paid for by other people, and, like I said, we have to beg and borrow money from other people to get these programs up and running.

The CHAIR — Worksafe has completed an inquiry into issues as they affect older road users, and we have actually addressed the issue of motor scooters, so we can provide you with a copy of our report, which talks about those exact issues you are talking about now.

Sgt BARBARY — Thank you. That is about it, folks. Thank you very much for your attention. I am sorry for going way, way over time.

The CHAIR — That is fine. Thanks, Alby and Ron, for your time. We appreciate it. As I said, we are taking a transcript, and we will provide you with a copy in due course.

Witnesses withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll
Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Mildura – 18 March 2004

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

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

Staff
Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officers: Mr G. Both and Mr P. Nelson

Witnesses
Mr C. Davis, Chair, Roadsafe Mildura; and
Mr N. Ganeshanathan, Project Engineer, Asset Development, Mildura Rural City Council.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Welcome to this hearing of the Road Safety Committee at Mildura, which is inquiring into crashes involving roadside objects and the country road toll.

We are taking a transcript and will provide you with a copy of it. Today we are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot be used against you legally in the future. Again, we appreciate your input and time and we will hand across to you.

Mr DAVIS — Most of you probably know what Roadsafe is. Roadsafe Mildura has been around since 1990. I have been chair of Roadsafe here for seven years and prior to that I was chair of Roadsafe in the Goulburn Valley. There is a whole range of different issues in those two places. During that time I was also manager of the RACV here in Mildura and also in Shepparton prior to that, and for the last three years I have also been associated with council’s Road Safety Strategic Plan. I am on the Mildura local safety committee and assist council with their planning, so I have had a reasonable background in road safety over past years.

I would like to talk more about this area. Roads that are over 80 kilometres an hour in this area account for 71 per cent of all fatalities, which is not necessarily the same as in Melbourne. When you look at the difference between the Melbourne metropolitan area and the country, Melbourne can have a lot more targeted campaigns by police and so on whereas in the country with the open roads where most of our crashes occur those type of focuses do not take place. Also, black spot treatments are more focused in metropolitan areas. Because of the long stretches of road it is more expensive here in the country. I would therefore like to concentrate my presentation today on road improvement measures which include rest stops, sealed shoulders, audio tactile edging and overtaking lanes. The final one is the roadside hazards that are in this area.

I would like to now talk to my report, if that is okay. We acknowledge that there are a number of fatalities in the country area, decreasing slightly but not to the same degree as they are in the metropolitan area, which I guess is the main focus of your report. The metropolitan areas have benefited with lower speeds and increased enforcement from mass media whereas in the country we have not enjoyed the same level of speed reductions in zones and police enforcement.

Ongoing maintenance and improvement in highway networks is paramount in providing a safe and efficient movement in road and freight and also in private vehicle movements. Improvements to driver behaviour and attitudes can also be achieved by accommodation of ongoing mass media and educational programs and also police enforcement.

I will start by looking at highway improvements. Australian standards state that rural highway overtaking opportunities should be available roughly every 10 minutes of travel time at the prevailing speed. If there is not an overtaking opportunity then overtaking lanes must be provided. The Calder Highway between Mildura and Ouyen carries large volumes of freight and private vehicles, and Roadsafe contends that the highway’s horizontal and vertical alignments due to the sand dune formations severely limit overtaking opportunities. This can often result in oncoming vehicles not being visible for some time and overtaking opportunities are not adequate, particularly when larger vehicles are involved.

A passing lane was constructed on the Calder Highway north of Hattah several years ago, but we again contend that the Calder Highway traffic flows and driver expectations could be improved with the construction of additional overtaking lanes between Mildura and Hattah and the overtaking lane between Hattah and Ouyen, so probably another two are needed in that section.

Roadsafe is also aware that Vicroads has designed an overtaking lane between Hattah and Ouyen but has been unable to secure funding from the state government at this stage. Although the Sturt Highway is not as undulating at the Calder Highway, it is the consideration of Roadsafe Mildura that sections of the Sturt Highway between Mildura and the South Australian border and the Mallee Highway between Ouyen and the South Australian border would also meet guidelines for the installation of overtaking lanes.

Roadsafe Mildura acknowledges the installation of audio tactile lines on the shoulder sealing program on the Calder Highway between Mildura and south of Ouyen, and urges the same level of safety be now considered for the full length of the Sturt and Mallee highways. There was a little bit of work done on the Mallee, but because that is the worst road in this district for crashes which are run-off-the-road we believe it needs a lot more consideration, and in fact it was even worse on the Calder Highway before that work was done.
The CHAIR — Which was the road?

Mr DAVIS — The Mallee Highway from South Australia to Ouyen.

The CHAIR — Why is that?

Mr DAVIS — There are quite a lot the of corners on the road. There are not that many towns and the towns you go through are small, so there is not a lot happening between the areas. There are not many overtaking lanes, there is no tactile edging; and if you are an errant driver or lose concentration or are fatigued and hit the gravel, what usually happens is that cars can overcorrect and end up going across to the other side and an injury or a fatality can occur. That is very frequent on that road.

Mr EREN — Do those accidents occur mainly during the day or at night?

Mr DAVIS — I have not researched that. It was some time ago that I looked at it.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — Mostly day time.

The CHAIR — They are run-off-road crashes, did you say?

Mr DAVIS — Yes. We made application for black spot funding on the Vicroads web site a few years back, and they did some treatments following their work on the Calder Highway on some of the worst sections, but it really needs to be the full length to have an effect.

I do not have the figures with me, but I recall after coming to the region — I moved here seven years ago — having a look at the Sturt Highway, and its figures showed that once there was shoulder sealing, even without audio tactile edging, the number of run-off-road accidents decreased significantly. I can certainly obtain those figures for you and forward them on if you wish. Following that work there was significant decrease so there is clear evidence that roadside edging of about 1 metre makes a clear difference.

Moving on to audio tactile lines as an effective device to avoid errant drivers, which we were just talking about, we would like to see consideration given to the installation of those audio tactile edges on centre line marks approaching corners and around corners as well, so again an errant or fatigued driver would be alerted on crossing over the centre line. Roadsafe Mildura is an active supporter of the introduction of sealed shoulder and audio tactile edging treatments on the Mallee Highway, which is the one we spoke about, and the centre lines.

Driver fatigue is a major contributing factor to road trauma in Victoria. Roadsafe Mildura is greatly concerned at the poor standard and construction of facilities and perhaps to a lesser extent the location of roadside areas on the Sturt, Calder and Mallee highways. Most of the roadside stops here are a green bit of dirt and a green bin. That is never going to encourage people with a family to stop. Toilets, lighting, seating, shade are all critical factors, particularly for trucks, which definitely need shade when they pull off the road.

Mr BISHOP — We have had raised with us the issue of safety at the roadside stops as well, particularly at night. Have you done any work on that or have you a view on that? We even had suggested today that perhaps phones could be put in there in relation to safety.

Mr DAVIS — I do not have a view on that. I am not sure how much of an issue that would be. There are some roadside stops — for example, at Ouyen at the Queen Bee, where a lot of trucks stop and rest. There are some opportunities, but if you stop for 15 minutes or however long you need for a nap, the likelihood of your having a crash if you did not stop would be a lot greater than the likelihood of someone interfering with you while you are stopped. I guess it is a matter of weighing up the balance. If you had a phone in this area you would still have to get to the phone, so I am not sure what the benefit would be there.

Roadsafe Mildura member Dennis Tuit also did a lot of work. He is a qualified driving instructor in heavy transport, and he has reviewed the standard of the Calder Highway rest areas between Mildura and Wycheproof, way down below our area. The findings of his survey were forwarded to Vicroads, but we have not received a response yet. I have provided you with a copy of our annual report because Dennis’s report is contained in there, and it really does show the poor standard of our trucking and passenger vehicle stops.
The Mallee Highway between the South Australian border and Ouyen is classified as a B-class highway, and, as we were saying before about the widening of shoulder seals and audio-tactile edging, we believe because of the number of accidents that highway really should be brought up to an A-grade standard road.

The final thing I would like to talk about is the identification, protection and removal of roadside hazards. The Roadsafe Mildura committee supports a program that would identify, protect or remove roadside hazards within acceptable clear zones. In talking to this point I will reflect a little bit on the Goulburn Valley Highway as well, because most vehicles that run off the road on the Goulburn Valley Highway hit a tree. We are probably a little bit luckier in that respect, because often there is Mallee scrub alongside the roads and there are not as many trees in this district, and I believe that is one of the contributing factors to us not having as many deaths on the road as an area like the Goulburn Valley has. We still have the run-off-the-road accidents, but there are not as many trees to hit as there are in that area, and I think that makes a big difference. That supports what I am saying here, because that is something that can be done statewide and something that will have an effect. There are different road treatments that can be done to protect drivers, as you are probably well aware. There is an attachment which shows the number of run-off-the-road accidents and the type of things that people are hitting in this district, and trees and shrubs are still the most significant thing.

The committee would support the formation of a road safety audit team within Vicroads and Mildura Rural City Council to undertake a risk management analysis on all roads with a speed limit greater than 80 kilometres an hour. This analysis would identify potentially hazardous roadside objects such as utility poles, posts and roadside vegetation to ensure that protection, relocation and removal is undertaken.

In our discussion we did not care whether this was a 20-year project, as long as we got it up and running. If it is not started at some stage it will never happen, so it does not matter how long the project runs out, as long as we get going on it.

The high-speed road risk management program should provide targeted funding for road reserve facility improvements and treatments while offering greater road safety benefits to the community. Some of those treatments might be the installation of wire mesh, which you probably know a little bit about. They have installed that on the Geelong–Melbourne road.

Roadsafe Mildura’s Sy Nunan has also identified as a motorcycle rider that trucks losing their tyre treads is also a problem. He has included that in a report within the annual report of Roadsafe Mildura. Motorcycle riders hitting anything on the road is a danger.

Mr STONEY — Is there a solution to that, because a truck might blow a tyre and not know about it for some miles. What is the solution?

Mr DAVIS — Surely if they blow a tyre they should be made responsible to clean up their litter?

Mr STONEY — But it might be some miles before they pull up, and if it is a B-double or something it is not really practical or safe to turn around and go back, and the driver would not know if the tyre had blown off into the bush.

Mr DAVIS — Maybe the driver could make a phone call to a council number so that it could be attended to as soon as possible.

Mr STONEY — It might be worth exploring that a bit further to see if there is a solution, and perhaps you could feed that in. We have discussed that issue, and I do not know what the solution is.

Mr GANESHANATHAN — You could call the road patrol people from Vicroads to clean the highways. That is what we do. But how often are they are on the highways; that is the only thing.

Mr DAVIS — Yes, it is difficult.

That is my report. I am happy to answer any questions.

Mr MULDER — I am interested in your thoughts on double lines. With B-double trucks, lower speed tolerances and a change in driver behaviour, has there been any work done on altering double lines in the region?
Mr Davis — We did discuss this while we were putting this report together, and the conversation we had when we were discussing double lines was more to do with approaching a hill and the distance you would need to observe an oncoming vehicle. Sy Nunan, who was in that meeting, said, ‘I am a motorcycle rider and I need 2 seconds to get around a car, but when I am driving my ute I just do not pass anything, because I can’t’. I personally believe we need to look at repositioning double lines. Maybe double lines are not the answer, and maybe there needs to be some other warning that you are approaching an area where sight might be a problem, and then you could have the double line when it is definitely not safe to pass.

I have been involved in one incident myself on the Calder Highway between here and Ouyen, when it appeared at night that the road was clear, so I pulled out past a truck and was halfway past it when a car popped up in front of me from a hill. There were no double lines approaching that area, so I did not know that was coming up, and I literally made it with a second to spare.

Mr Mulder — Were you on double lines once you started to get out past the truck?

Mr Davis — I do not recall. That was not what I was looking at! But as I approached, there were no lines. I certainly could not see any. It was probably the most scary incident I have had in my life. We were driving down to Melbourne, and I was a wreck. I had that heightened feeling of fear from that point on all the way down to Melbourne, and it has changed my overtaking behaviour. I believe there should have been some warning, and that is why we discussed pulling the lines out further to give an indication it is unsafe to pass or having some other indication.

Mr Mulder — There are positions on most of the highways now, particularly with B-double trucks, where you start to pass, you have a clear passageway and a broken line, but two-thirds of the way past you are onto double lines, but you cannot see them.

Mr Davis — I would have been fine overtaking a car, but the truck was the problem. Well, my overtaking was the problem, but the truck was the issue.

Chair — I see you have had the speed observation trailer for the last 12 months. Do you want to describe the success of that program?

Mr Davis — I do not think the speed observation trailer on its own is effective in long-term behavioural change. However, when it is coupled together with other things it does make a difference. We are doing a presentation next month at the local government Safer Roads conference, and in that will be making a presentation on a survey we have done which found that on two of the roads we surveyed the presence of a speed observation trailer followed up by police enforcement made a clear difference and reduced speeds.

We have also started a program of putting 50-kilometre-an-hour stickers on bins, and if you drive around Mildura and look for the bins you will see them on some of the streets. The traffic camera officer, rather than reading a book when he sits in his car, has actually been making notes of what types of vehicles are passing him, whether they are driven by P-platers and so on, and he has been keeping a record of what is happening. He has reported to us a 30-per cent drop in vehicle speeds on bin days at his locations where there are 50-kilometre-an-hour stickers on bins.

Chair — You mean you are talking about bins?

Mr Davis — The wheelie bins. We have 50 kilometre-per-hour advisory signs on wheelie bins, and observations are that there is a 30 per cent reduction on what he would normally pick up when he sits on those days on those streets.

We have a default speed limit, as we have always had in Victoria, but we used to have a 60-kilometre-an-hour default speed and now it is 50 km/h. We know that people are breaking that because the number of speeding fines has increased and so on, but clearly when we remind them of what the speed limit is they are slowing down. Where we go with that I am not sure. It was a very cheap thing to do. It cost us $6000 to do all of Mildura and we now have stickers left over to do all the outlying areas.

Mr Mulder — You can put the bins out twice a week and you will really make some money! Do the speed detection devices print out information on how many vehicles have exceeded the speed limit in those areas?
Mr DAVIS — Yes.

Mr MULDER — Do you use it as any form of education?

Mr DAVIS — We do not. I have found that that information is tainted because a car approaching the speed observation trailer will register two or three times and therefore it is difficult to ascertain how many vehicles actually focused. However — this will be in my presentation next month — long before we focused on speed, council purchased seven Metrocount pieces of equipment; these are the tapes that go across the road and give council information that they need for addressing rescaling of roads and so on. But these pieces of equipment also tell you the size of vehicles through the number of figures, those type of things, and the spaces between the wheel distances. They can tell the type of vehicles going over the Metrocount. They can also tell you the speed they are going. It is extremely accurate because it is measuring one vehicle at a time, and it tells you what direction the vehicles are travelling in and at what speeds.

We use that information and we have now got it down to a fine art where the reports are collated into a graph which is supplied to police for vehicles travelling more than 7 km/h over the speed limit. Those graphs are then put into the local police pursuit cars and the smart cars, and whenever they are looking for something to do they grab the graphs out and they look at the times of day when speeding is an issue on a particular road and go around there. So in answer to your question, no, we do not use that, but we have found another method that is more effective and has been fantastic for police because it has focused them on utilising their resources in a very targeted manner that they have not had before.

The CHAIR — I am mindful of the time. Have we further questions? If not, thank you, Chris. Once again thank you, Nathan. We will provide a copy of the transcript when it becomes available. We appreciate your time.

Witnesses withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Mildura – 18 March 2004

Members

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

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

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officers: Mr G. Both and Mr P. Nelson

Witnesses

Cr G. Mann; and
Mr S. Walsh, Director, Planning and Infrastructure, Shire of Gannawarra.

Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — I welcome you from the Gannawarra Shire Council, Steve Walsh and Cr Graeme Mann. We appreciate your time and input. I am not sure where Gannawarra is, but it is a fair way from here, so thank you for the travel as well.

The parliamentary Road Safety Committee is inquiring into the country road toll and also crashes involving roadside objects. We will provide a copy of the transcript to the council. You are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot be used against you legally in the future. Having said all that, welcome again, we appreciate your input. I now hand over to you.

Cr MANN — Thank you. I will spend a couple of seconds explaining where the Gannawarra shire is for your benefit and a bit of the profile of the shire, and Steve will take over and explain some of the issues.

Gannawarra is based on Kerang, the main town, which has a population of 4000. Cohuna is the other major town in the area. They are both in the irrigated area of the shire, which services about 18 000 people right up to the border of New South Wales. We have an agreement with Barham on the other side of the border to provide quite a few of the services for it, so we have a bit of an interstate attachment. There are quite a lot of towns within the shire, but they are all quite small — Quambatook, which is the town where I live, Lalbert in the dryland area to the west, Leitchville, Lake Charm, Koondook and Murrabit, based along the lakes area and the Murray River.

The climate as you can see there is generally very mild. We do not believe it plays a significant part in road accidents as such because it has a good climate with a rainfall of about 400 millimetres — which we would like to see at the moment — unlike the hilly areas. Gannawarra also boasts a wealth of natural resources, including the wetlands. It is the lakes area of Victoria. It contains most the lakes where people like to come hunting, shooting and fishing, and also there is ecotourism. We see a lot of tourists through that area. It is a water sports area with skiing and fishing and all that sort of thing. The western part of the shire, which by area is the largest part of the shire, is dryland, mostly broadacre cropping area, so we have the two major divided areas, the irrigated area with its own problems and which is quite different to the broadacre area to the west.

As you can see, the main industries are irrigation, which is dairying, and usually attached to that are the intensive livestock industries like pigs and some poultry, some lot feeding; then to the west the broadacre area which is all cropping, with its problems of large tonnages of grain moving around. Then there is quite a bit of horticulture, a developing viticulture industry and mining of both salt and gypsum. So with that I will ask Steve to introduce you to the issues as we see them.

Mr WALSH — The shire is in the process of developing safety plans. We have had meetings very recently, and some of the things that I am mentioning now came from those meetings. The shire intends to have a full safety plan implemented in the next three or four months. However, some of the issues that were identified, as you can see in that submission, were heavy vehicles.

If you have a look at the traffic counts at the rear of the document, you will see we have given a table of all the traffic counts we have available to us on some of the roads throughout the shire, and it is quite evident that a large percentage of the vehicles that are traversing our roads are heavy vehicles. In fact some of the roads with significant numbers of vehicles on them have up to 40 per cent heavy vehicles. Some of this is due to the fact that farming is changing. The dairy farms in the area are getting bigger. The farmers are buying grain directly in, they are buying hay directly in, and there is much more on-site silage and on-site siloing of the grain in the western part of the area, which means that the traffic is going across the shire instead of to the silos, where it used to go. So we are getting many more heavy vehicles on our local roads, and, of course, the advent of these large vehicles is causing many safety problems. The existing road infrastructure was designed for much smaller vehicles, and when it rains there is great difficulty in getting heavy vehicles across the shire.

The CHAIR — Are we talking about B-doubles?

Mr WALSH — To some extent, yes, there is B-double access to some of the roads. It is fairly well controlled, because we are frightened that with the narrow pavements we have, if we put B-doubles on those and we get two B-doubles head to head, one of them is going to end up in the ditch in the rain. So we are using a strict guideline for B-doubles to ensure they are able to use the roads that are being used.

The CHAIR — So they are on designated roads, are they?
Mr WALSH — Basically, yes.

The CHAIR — Do they stick to those designated roads?

Mr WALSH — No.

Cr MANN — And there is also pressure coming from the grains industry. I was at the VFF grains conference yesterday, and a motion was passed — in spite of the fact that I gave them a lot of information — to pressure for all local roads to be opened up for B-double grain transport. It was passed unanimously — apart from me.

Mr WALSH — Yes, there are a significant number of our roads that I fear it would not be safe to put B-doubles on. Until the upgrading of the roads is completed, I feel this shire will not be permitting B-doubles on many of these roads.

The other problem we have with the milk industry is the way they now schedule their pick-ups. If we have a relatively long road with a number of dairies down it, because of the way they schedule their loads so that they are full when they get to the processing plant — we have a processing plant at Leitchville, which is in the east of the shire — many of the tanks are coming through the one road. One will top up and fill up at one dairy and then go through to the plant, and then another one will come through and top up at the next dairy. So where we were getting maybe one vehicle going through and picking up from all of those dairies, their scheduling means that at times we get three, four or even more B-doubles and heavy vehicles going down the same road. In effect the amount of produce coming out of that area is not increasing, but the number of vehicles going through the area is increasing, and that is tending to be a problem.

Before I get off that issue, the shire has some fairly major strategic highways going through it — there is the Murray Valley Highway, which travels through the full width of the shire, as well as the Loddon Valley Highway, which comes up from Bendigo — and also one of the major crossings of the Murray River is at Barham–Koondrook, and a lot of the produce and freight from New South Wales and Sydney going to western and south-western Victoria crosses diagonally across the shire, and a lot of that traffic uses some local roads as well. All this increasing heavy-vehicle traffic is compounding the problems we have and increasing the risk to the safe passage of motorists.

The next problem that is obvious is the railway crossings. There are two railway lines through the shire — one goes from Swan Hill to Bendigo and the other one goes from Robinvale to Bendigo — and all our local roads are traversed by those on basically uncontrolled intersections. Whilst there are not a lot of trains at those locations, the mere fact that the trains are intermittent means that the people who are using those roads are not expecting a train to be there, so there is the potential for a problem.

The CHAIR — Have there been any accidents?

Mr WALSH — We have a couple of level crossings where there have been accidents.

The CHAIR — Trains hitting cars or cars hitting trains?

Mr WALSH — The last one was a car hitting a train, but we have had both.

Cr MANN — My property is actually along the railway line, and the railway crossing immediately behind my property has had one fatality and three minor accidents involving local people who managed to see the train at the last minute and swerved such that they did hit the train but managed to survive.

The CHAIR — Would those accidents have been during the day?

Cr MANN — Yes, during the day. They are uncontrolled railway crossings.

Mr WALSH — The other problem with the railway crossings is the surface that you go along. It does not really show it on that photograph too well, but you can actually see the railway line, which means the railway line is sitting proud of the road, and the maintenance of that section of the road is very difficult. If you hit some of these at any speed, it can cause damage to vehicles and make things unsafe.
The other problem we have with a lot of these crossings is that they are on embankments, and as you can see with the one in the photograph there is no way in the world you can see cars approaching from the other direction. You can see by the road leading up to it that motorists use one track going in either direction, and by the time they figure out someone is coming on the other side of the railway line there can be a problem.

I did not bring a map with me, but if you look at a map of the shire you will see a large number of irrigation channels running around in the eastern part of the shire, and you will realise that there are a large number of road crossings at these irrigation channels. The majority of them were built in the days when safety was less prominent than it is now. As you can see by the diagram, this particular one — which is actually a good one — at least has a kerb on the side of the road. Some of the crossings do not have a kerb on the side of the road. This one also has width markers, although the width marker has been pushed over by cows or something. We have many structures crossing the roads that are basically unsafe for any vehicle that happens to go off either side of them.

A lot of the channels are quite small, and two of the recent deaths we have had in the shire have involved motor vehicles leaving the road. One overturned into a channel and the driver could not get out, and the fellow drowned. He was not discovered until the next morning, because the location was quite a way off the road. Another one involved a vehicle that overturned in one of these channels on the side of the road. So within the last 12 months we have had two deaths involving channel structures, either alongside the road or going across the road. When you have the number of irrigation channels that we have in our shire, the consequences of accidents at some of these locations can be quite frightening.

The CHAIR — Does council have a program for protecting those crossings?

Mr WALSH — At this stage we do not. The majority of them are Goulburn-Murray Water crossings, and as they upgrade them they will bring them up to a standard, but if no work is being done on them they stay at the current standard. The reason for that is the pure enormity of the job. We are talking about hundreds of these things. There are 70 bridges that we are responsible for in the shire, and there are a huge number of these channels — it would be in the hundreds. I do not know the exact number of channel crossings, but there would certainly be three or four times the number of bridges.

Cr MANN — They are not confined to the irrigation area, either. I think they are probably even more dangerous in the dryland area where they only run twice a year when they supply stock and water to farms. The rest of the time they are not maintained or anything, often with poor markings on them and usually very narrow, certainly not wide enough to put the modern farm machinery over, so they are a problem. There is a map of the shire in the attachments. The eastern side of the shire has a lot of creeks, rivers and lakes on it; the western side is the dryland area.

Mr WALSH — While you are looking at the map, all of the yellow roads are unsealed, and generally the majority have no gravel either, so you are looking at dirt roads or formation roads. The green ones are sealed council roads. The red roads — the highways are the ones that VicRoads look after and at the moment the shire is the agent for VicRoads on the other red roads. As you can see, the unsealed roads amount to quite a lot: there are 3500 kilometres of roads in that area so put together they would go nearly to Perth and back.

The committee has spoken about loss-of-control crashes. I got some information on what happens within the shire with regard to those. During the five-year period up to 2003 there were 116 loss-of-control crashes resulting in seven fatalities and 109 injuries, both serious and minor, within the shire. Eighty-nine per cent of these crashes were within a 100-km/h zone, which would be fairly obvious because as you can see from the shire there are less roads within the 60-km/h zones, and the majority of people are travelling along those 100-km/h zones. A lot of the crashes were on the major highways as well. Most of those crashes, 48 per cent of them, involved collisions with fixed objects.

Mr EREN — On that picture you have a 60-km/h speed limit on this section of the gravel road. Is that consistent with most of the gravel roads in your shire or council?

Mr WALSH — This is a particularly bad section of road that we have sign-posted because of the slippery nature. The majority of our roads are gravel, and because of the sheer numbers of them we do not signpost them at all. They may have a ‘Dry weather only’ sign on them.

Mr EREN — That is a default of 100 kilometres?
Mr WALSH — Yes, that is right.

Mr EREN — What is your view about decreasing the default from 100 km/h to 80 km/h on gravel roads?

Mr WALSH — When I go and check out a road, 100 km/h is what I aim to be able to drive along those roads at, so I suggest that decreasing the gravel roads to that would probably be a fairly good move. Unfortunately a lot of the roads are basically tracks through trees and you certainly would not want to try and do 80 km/h on a lot of those roads, so there is a hierarchy of roads and we are working on that now with the Road Management Bill. We are going through the process of developing our hierarchies and levels of service on these roads now, and there are a lot of roads where 80 km/h is too fast.

Mr EREN — So obviously during the lead-up to this decision to make this stretch of gravel road 60 km/h there must have been a high number of incidents that occurred there?

Mr WALSH — I am not aware of many but I expect that would be the case, yes.

Mr EREN — After putting this sign up was there a reduction of incidents on that part of the road?

Mr WALSH — I have no knowledge of whether there was any less or more than there was before. Nothing has been reported to me in the three years that I have been on the shire on this particular location.

Mr EREN — In terms of enforcement, are people speeding on this part of the road?

Mr HARKNESS — It is advisory only, it is not actually enforcing it.

Mr WALSH — It is 100 km/h, that one. It is up to the motorist.

Cr MANN — There are a lot of advisory signs, which that one is. It is not a speed limit; it is an advisory sign that 60 is the maximum recommended speed to be using on that road, and there are lot of them around the shire on these types of roads.

Mr WALSH — This sign is at the end of a piece of sealed road, so it is warning the people who are going on to the gravel road.

The CHAIR — So, Cr Mann, what is your idea of reducing the gravel roads back to 80 km/h?

Cr MANN — We will give you an answer to that a little later, but just right now my idea of it is that it is not really feasible.

The CHAIR — I would imagine your property is on a gravel road.

Cr MANN — Well, I certainly have very few gravel roads, mostly dirt, but I lead right on to the Quambatook–Swan Hill road, which is bitumen, and the road leading to our farm is bitumen, which we paid for. As I see it, the problem with reducing speed limits is that there are just so many speed limits that it becomes almost fatiguing to try and keep up with which one you are in at the moment. Reducing a speed limit on a gravel road is really another ho-hum. I think we see a lot of people now within the shire who say, ‘Ho-hum, they have reduced the speed limit. I can go faster than this, it is ridiculous to come down to this sort of speed limit’. It is a Big Brother which people do not want too take much notice of.

I see it as more of a driver education matter. It is just too easy to get a licence, there is no skid control, there is no understanding of road conditions in the gaining of a licence. I am a pilot, and the first thing you do when you get a pilot’s licence is get trained for all eventualities. You spend more time learning how to fix a problem than to fly, and that is not happening on the roads. That is the same with the dry roads, the dirt roads, the gravel roads. We find that the majority of people who drive on them early in their career do have a problem.

Mr WALSH — The other problem with reducing the speed limit is the enforcement. Enforcement on the highways is fairly rigorous around our areas, but on our major local roads the enforcement is much less. If you had another 3500 kilometres of road to enforce in that area, how many police would you need to have some effect?

Mr EREN — This document states that 89 per cent of the crashes were in 100-km/h zones.
Cr MANN — That is correct.

Mr EREN — So it is a very high number, and obviously you would be looking at doing something about that.

Mr WALSH — The majority of them are on sealed roads, though, not on unsealed roads. There are some on unsealed roads but the majority of the crashes are on the sealed road network.

Mr MULDER — I want to ask a question of Cr Mann in relation to his comments about pilots and drivers licences. We have visited a number of professional driving organisations, who say that the only time they see a lot of drivers is a week before they are going to get their drivers licences. They come in and that want one lesson to make sure that they get their drivers licences. Would you advocate for more professional driving instruction for younger drivers?

Cr MANN — Yes, very much so. I have three children. The two boys were typical boys: as soon as they got a vehicle they had accidents straight away within a few months of gaining their licence. My daughter was so scared of a car she did not get a licence until she was 21. She headed straight into Melbourne with a car and straight away ran into problems through inexperience on slippery bitumen roads, tramlines and things like that. That I think is fairly typical.

Mr WALSH — To continue, on looking at the statistics we found that a lot of the crashes occurred in an 8-hour period between 4pm and midnight, then again between 3.00 a.m. and 6.00 a.m., which indicates to me anyway that there is possibly a fatigue problem in the area. As I said a lot of these are on the highways, which you would suspect is either people coming home from being in Bendigo or in Melbourne. We are 4 hours from Melbourne and there are relatively few rest stops on the highway between Melbourne and Kerang and lots of wide open spaces. There are rest stops there but the majority of them are quite rudimentary. You might get a table, if you are lucky, and a garbage bin. It is not really conducive for families to stop and have a rest. Before I started working here I was working for the RTA in New South Wales, and in the western area it put in some large rest stops which included playgrounds and toilets. It spent a lot of money on them, but every time you went past those rest stops you would see people there having breaks. That is the important part of having rest stops — you have to encourage people to use them.

Mr BISHOP — Good point.

Cr MANN — I wanted to comment on some of these accident statistics from my own experience. I have travelled a lot from home to Melbourne over the last 25 years, and one thing I have noticed is that with the duplication of the Calder Highway no thought was given to rest stops, and you now find that by the time you get to Bendigo after a day’s work in Melbourne you are quite fatigued. Carlsruhe used to be a stopping point, but it is now chopped off the highway. The only toilet along that stretch — and I had a fair bit to do with getting it put there, through the VFF and Jim Hinton — is not really well marked and you can drive past it without seeing it.

I came up to the grains conference via Robinvale and along the other side of the river, and in the last 12 months the New South Wales people have put in toilets at quite a number of rest stops — I think there are three or four between Robinvale and Mildura — and they are well designated. They are signposted and everything. They were not there a while ago. We are going to have to look at having places where people can take a rest to control fatigue. They are just not available at the moment.

We have looked at the loss-of-control crashes in my area, and there have been quite a number of young people killed. This year the major crashes have involved young people, mostly males, involved with sport. They stay with their mates and they have this hero attitude. In Melbourne it might be gang rape, but up here it is getting drunk, and then they try to drive home afterwards. I do not know what the statistics say, but there have been two such accidents that we know of in the eastern side, and just around me there have been several over the last few years.

The CHAIR — Do they have the attitude that they have a fair idea where the local copper will be and they can sneak around the back tracks?

Cr MANN — As we said, if you look at that map of unmade roads, you can see you do not have to go home the main way as there are five different back ways you can go. And there is usually only one policeman in the town, so he cannot cope. It is just impossible to police the whole of this area. It will have to come back to
education and training, so that people learn to be responsible. And that is happening. The responsible service of alcohol training is attempting to do it. It is just this macho idea that you have to get with your mates and have a big drink-up after the footy or after training. A lot of it has happened after training rather than after the footy itself, too.

**The CHAIR** — Has that always been the case, or is the problem growing?

**Cr MANN** — A lot of it has been over 25 years. I am thinking of the four local people who were killed in this way, and the problem has been over about a 25-year period. The incidence of people trying to get away with it is more prevalent now. As the booze buses appear in and around small country towns, people are starting to say, ‘We’ll escape it by going another way’. It is not really stopping the drinking. It is a societal attitude, too: the younger people seem to be of the attitude that they are prepared to take more risks than we did as younger people.

**Mr BISHOP** — Graham, has any thought been given by the council to some education through the football clubs, for example, about looking after your mates — in other words, one of them not drinking? I know it is tough, but in society today if someone is the designated driver, they do not get the pressure put on them to drink, whereas otherwise they would.

**Cr MANN** — I have to say we are not highly advanced down that road, but the council has certainly identified the need for it, and we are looking at just how we can relate with young people. We realise council has a role and a responsibility to do some of these things, and at the moment we are really at the stage of determining how to do it rather than having something in place.

**Mr WALSH** — That was certainly one of the things discussed at the meetings we have had for the safety plan — going to community groups and promoting the Keys Please program and all those other programs.

**Cr MANN** — The next thing we have identified as a problem in the accidents we have looked at — and I have my own anecdotal experience of this — is the lack of experience of drivers. We have already mentioned that you can get your licence in virtually a few minutes. The 100-hour log book arrangement does not seem to work in the country as well as it does in the city. It is pretty easy to get a licence, but there is no training in the problems of driving — in skidding, for example. There is not a country road that does not have a loose side surface somewhere, and there is not an area throughout our shire where you can drive without ending up on either a gravel or a dirt road, all of which are dangerous if you do not know how to control a vehicle, how to control speed and how to control a skid. We have seen quite a number of accidents where lack of experience has been a problem or has been the defining cause.

Another thing that we see as a problem is that there is at least one horrific accident area where dust is a factor. After following a truck for a long period of time, drivers have decided there is a straight stretch coming up and that they will pass, but unfortunately there has been a grain truck coming the other way at the same time. There is anecdotal evidence of many near misses with that sort of thing.

There is one issue I would like to mention which we have not been able to highlight but which seems to becoming more of a problem, and that is road rage. We are seeing it attached to the football clubs and to alcohol. I have heard of a couple of young people who have been quite annoyed with an older person who was driving along at 80 km/h when they have been on their way home and wanting to get past. I have experienced road rage myself on the Loddon Valley Highway coming out of Bendigo, where I passed a young chap who did not like me passing him, and he really stuck it up me by driving a foot behind me and then yahooing and tearing past. We are hearing more and more about road rage, and I think over the next few years it will start rearing its head as a cause of accidents. I am highlighting it without having any real figures on it.

**The CHAIR** — That is fair enough. One issue we are interested in hearing about is native vegetation, and I have noted you have also commented on that.

**Mr WALSH** — Yes. Attempts were made through the normal channels to remove that tree on the road you can see in the diagram, and increasingly road maintenance and road safety are being inhibited by the bureaucracy of going through the process of getting approval to remove native vegetation. It is becoming more and more apparent that through planning overlays and so forth it is going to become more difficult to ensure there are clearways on the sides of the roads. In some instances it is an issue that needs to be brought back into reality. We take a lot of notice of the advice of officers from the Department of Sustainability and Environment in these circumstances, because the last thing we want to do is destroy significant vegetation. The officers are, on occasion,
quite rigid and insistent that not only trees but also bushes and vegetation which is causing sight-distance problems should not be removed. It is becoming more and more difficult to make sure the roadsides are safe.

The other thing that causes problems in this area is the fact that you have roadside vegetation on an embankment and someone will run off the road and not realise how steep that embankment is. While it might seem a simple thing — you have just a bush or bushes on the side of the road — the vehicles will turn over. If in fact that was flattened off — I am not saying the vegetation would cause that problem, but if you knew there was a steep embankment there you would try and avoid it more than some people do. They say, ‘Well, I am going off the road, so I will just go down this embankment’, and it is more than they anticipate.

What I will mention lightly is that we are starting to have a problem with scooters — people getting out their scooters from their cars. While I cannot give you any figures on it there is a problem within our shopping area and residential streets where people obviously cannot drive cars any more and they are jumping onto these scooters and pretending they are cars. A program is certainly needed for those aged people to try and educate them that they are actually pedestrians and should stay on the footpath.

I put a picture of a school crossing in there. While school crossings in the towns are not a major problem, they can be in our rural areas where in some instances buses have to stop in the middle of the road because there is not enough room for them to go off to the side of the road. While we do as much as we can to ensure that there is space for buses to turn and discharge the children correctly, it is really beyond the council’s financial capacity to do that safely. Perhaps an area of funding in that vein might be thought of at some stage.

As far as speed limits are concerned, there are a number of inconsistencies throughout the shire. We have had inspections with various people from other organisations to try and rationalise these but we still have speed limits going through the town of Cohuna, for example, on the Murray Valley Highway where the speed limit goes from 100 km/h to 70, then within that 70 zone there is a school crossing which drops it down to 40 km/h in school hours; you it goes back to 70, then to 60 and then to 50 km/h through the shopping centre; then it goes back to 60 and then 80 and 100. This is in the space of a couple of kilometres. When you go into town you have no idea what speed you are supposed to be doing because it is changing all over the place.

It is not consistent for a couple of our towns. Because the street through the shopping centre might be a main road there seems to be a reluctance to drop the speed limit down to 50 km/h, which would be consistent with all the other roads in that area, and we have a number of locations where council has asked for that to be done to try and rationalise it so people know when they go into a 50-km/h area that they are all 50 km/h where it is reasonable to expect them to be 50 km/h. I believe that this variation brings about a disrespect for the speed limits, and it would cause more problems by having this sort of thing than it would be to be more consistent, even if it is at the lower level rather than the higher level.

Mr MULDER — Are you negotiating with Vicroads to try and implement a more consistent speed?

Mr WALSH — Yes. We have been speaking to them and I am about to write another letter to back to them. We have had an inspection with the safety officers during the last month or so.

Mr MULDER — Will the implementation of the 40-km/h speed zone around schools further complicate that issue?

Cr MANN — Yes, it will. You already have too many speed limits and when the 40-km/h limit is there for certain periods only it complicates it even further.

The CHAIR — I am conscious of the time, so we had better push on.

Mr WALSH — That is about all I wanted to say on the issues. I have given you a lot of issues, and I tried to put together some results in the closing section. I think, as Cr Mann has stated, that driver education has to be the main focus. The statistics that I have looked at show that in the order of 90 per cent of the reasons for accidents is the driver so surely we have to start looking at those things and make sure that the education is improved. Also, while incidences may not appear to affect local roads in a major way, the number of incidences is starting to creep up. If it is not recognised that we need education and we need attention to these roads then the road toll will increase in these areas. The shire will be taking up a review of the speed limit zones. I think that is about all I wish to say at this stage.
Cr MANN — I only have one other thing to add, and that is to support the initial driver training. I think it is so important that a person going for a licence goes through a longer period of training with a qualified person. It does two things: firstly, it gives them a skill for life, having been trained by a trainer. They respect the trainer, they respect the car after they understand what it can do and they understand what to do when something goes wrong.

Secondly, I know anecdotally that a number of people around home have had minor accidents and they seem to be the same people on a regular basis. It would seem to me that offenders and people who regularly have accidents should go through some sort of a scheme like the alcoholic on the road where they are retrained before they are allowed back on the road again. That will do two things: it will give access to somebody with skills to teach them a new skill and reassess them and it will also deter them from offending in the first place. I see that as so important.

The CHAIR — If there are no further questions, thank you, Steve and Graeme. We appreciate your time and input and will provide a copy of the transcript to the council.

Witnesses withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Mildura – 18 March 2004

Members

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

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

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officers: Mr G. Both and Mr P. Nelson

Witnesses

Mr S. Gough, Director, Operational Services; and
Mr G. Thomson, Area Manager, Rural Ambulance Victoria.

Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee
**The CHAIR** — Welcome to the Royal Ambulance Victoria. We appreciate your time and effort. I think you have come up from Bendigo; is that right?

**Mr GOUGH** — I have come from Ballarat, but Geoff is from Mildura.

**The CHAIR** — You have come from Ballarat, so thank you for that. We appreciate your time and your input.

As you are aware, this is a parliamentary Road Safety Committee inquiring into the country road toll and crashes involving roadside objects. We will provide a copy of the transcript to you gentlemen in due course. What you say today is under parliamentary privilege, therefore nothing can be held against you legally into the future. Having said all that, again, we appreciate your time and input, and we look forward to your submission.

**Mr GOUGH** — Thank you very much, Ian, and thank you for the opportunity to present before the committee. At the outset Alex was talking to our chief executive officer, Doug Kimberley, about the involvement of ambulances in road accidents in rural Victoria, and although RAV is principally focused on response to road accidents rather than mitigation, we thought there was some background material that might be of interest to this committee.

To that extent, what I have prepared for the information of this committee is the incidence of road traffic accident responses or Transport Accident Commission instances that RAV has attended in rural Victoria — that is, the area outside the metropolitan catchment — in the 2003 period.

You have two sets of data, but the A4 is probably a little harder to read than the A3, so we have given out a few sets to share. The first page, just by way of background information, shows the statewide number of cases — that is, the number of cases in rural Victoria — that ambulance paramedics have attended in the 2003 period, and that totalled 3573 responses. The subsets that we worked on were how many of those were actually in urban areas, and an urban area is, by definition, where there is a population of 2000 or more people, and those areas outside of that were categorised as non-urban.

In the statewide category, 2042 of those 3573 responses were in urban areas with populations of 2000 people or more, representing 57 per cent of the accident case load, and in non-urban areas 1531 cases were responded to, representing 43 per cent of the total workload.

The question was raised about response time for ambulance attendance at these events, and again, we have put together some data there. The statewide response time at the 50th percentile, or the average, was 11 minutes, and at the 90th percentile — that is, 90 per cent of the TAC cases that we responded to in rural Victoria — they were attended within 29 minutes. The subset data shows that in the urban area — that is, with populations of 2000 or more — the average response time was 8 minutes and at the 90th percentile it was 18 minutes, and in the non-urban area the figures were 18 minutes and 36 minutes.

In the graphical representation, the data set was plotted on a map of rural Victoria and put into those circles, if you like, the smallest one representing up to 10 incidents or 10 cases, and the larger ones representing 50 and 100 incidents or cases. So that visual representation gives you some idea of the traffic accidents that an ambulance was required to attend in rural Victoria, and although at all times an ambulance does not provide a high level of intervention in all of those cases, there were cases where it was thought necessary that paramedic attendance be summoned.

The next page looks at the Mildura area, seeing that you are sitting in Mildura, and Mildura is shown enlarged in the box above the lower graphic. There were a total of 143 incidents in the immediate Mildura area. The third page takes that small box and makes it a little bit larger for you to see. The distribution of incidents across Mildura: again, of the 143 cases requiring paramedic attendance, 117 — or 82 per cent — were within the Mildura catchment, and 26 — or 18 per cent — of those were in the non-urban catchment. Dealing with the average response times, 7 minutes is the average at Mildura, 25 minutes at the 90th percentile; within the Mildura urban area itself 6 minutes is the average, 15 minutes at the 90th percentile; and in the outlying areas 18 minutes is the average and 41 minutes at the 90th percentile. Indicatively the data set suggests that by far the majority of Transport Accident Commission traffic accident incidents that we are responding to occur in urban areas. The data it is pretty self-evident and the graphic representation gives some ease of use.
I would like to move on to the enhancements that the RAV believes made a difference in providing services in response to traffic accident events in rural Victoria. Besides a road-based ambulance service we have been supplemented in more recent times by an enhancement to the air ambulance system in Victoria. We have established a rotary-wing aircraft at Bendigo which now services up to 100 kilometres from the service point. We also operate a further rotary-wing aircraft out of the Latrobe Valley for most of the south-eastern part of Victoria. Again that is supplemented by four fixed-wing aircraft. In the Mildura context, Mildura is a heavy user of secondary fixed-wing transport to Melbourne so that the patients who are injured in these events arrive at a trauma centre within a reasonable time, and the road system is advantaged by that.

What might also be of interest to this committee is the management of those patients. Ambulance services have again been enhanced by the introduction of advanced life support system in rural areas — that is, an extended clinical skill is now available to people in rural Victoria and country areas which was once the purview of the metropolitan. Some of the things available are advanced airway techniques, the use of intravenous drugs and the use of plasma volume expander fluids in the case of severe blood loss.

Rural Ambulance Victoria has noticed emerging trends that have had an impact on reduction in road traffic accidents that we have attended or indeed have improved our ability to attend those accidents in a timely manner, one of the key benefits being the introduction of a rural addressing scheme. A number of local government departments and emergency services have been actively involved in that initiative. That has meant that when we get called to a traffic accident, because of the commonality that now exists in the approach to rural addressing, it is much easier to identify the location of the event. Historically there has been a degree of confusion by not having addresses marked clearly.

The CHAIR — What is the process for receiving calls?

Mr GOUGH — I have this on this little mind map, so I am sticking to my plan.

The CHAIR — Keep going, then.

Mr GOUGH — I forgot to explain this. It is just a basic mind map, and I am working around it in a circular fashion with those key points before answering any questions that you might have.

The other comments that have come back from our people is that where there has been verge sealing on country roads — Geoff will speak to that in a few moments — particularly on the road between Mildura and Ballarat and through, where the sides of the roads have been sealed there has been a noticeable decline in accidents. Our people also refer to the advantage of shoulder line marking — that is the white line marking that is on the highways — as being something that has improved the incidence of accidents in some areas of rural Victoria.

Other examples are the vehicle safety features such as air bags and certainly the policing activity that has occurred with enforcement of seatbelt wearing; driver education behaviour in terms of reduction in driver speed and also about trying to educate rather than being completely focused on compliance in people driving at the allowable prescribed concentration of alcohol.

One of the things from a rural perspective in particular is the campaigns that have been targeted at country driving fatigue. Given that the bulk of population is in the metropolitan area and Victoria, from our analysis, is a highly mobile population on weekends and during times of recreational racial activities, making the distinction in people’s minds between driving in a metropolitan area and driving in a rural area is particularly important. Driving in the metropolitan area, from my experience and speaking to people who have been in the ambulance sector for a long time, is different from driving on rural roads. I am sure that you have heard that put before.

The metropolitan area might be slow paced, it can be bumper to bumper, there is often lots of peripheral activity that occurs which provides some sort of stimulation. When people enter into the rural road networks and drive for long periods, for example between Ballarat and here, there is a degree of monotony and people do not take into account the under-stimulation that occurs and the fatigue that follows.

The other thing that has been noticeable are the enhancements to the mobile phone network. Again there were at times significant delays in achieving a response to events that occurred outside of urban areas. The enhancement to the communication infrastructure available in rural Victoria has meant that people can contact emergency services, an ambulance in particular, in a much more timely manner, and we are able to provide that assistance as necessary.
The CHAIR — In Mildura are there black spots for telecommunications such as mobile phones?

Mr THOMSON — Up until recent times there have been, but you would be aware that Telstra have installed CDMA towers at Wentworth, Centre Plaza and Nangiloc, so that has helped us no end. It has been mentioned that we do not have the infrastructure to provide radio coverage in New South Wales, and also out in the Big Desert et cetera we utilise satellite phones where coverage for both mobile phones and radio is not adequate.

Mr GOUGH — Probably just to take that in a logical sequence, the future improvements in Rural Ambulance Victoria as we see them are that RAV is currently in discussions about enhancing its dispatch processes, to come back to your earlier question, Ian. Currently dispatch processes in our five communication centres are a manual card-based process, whereas now technology available both nationally and internationally and used in most other states centres around computer-aided dispatch, which also is supplemented by high-level geographic information systems, geo-based data, auto-vehicle location.

The CHAIR — If I was in an area where there was that state-of-the-art type equipment, what would I see?

Mr GOUGH — The benefit to that is in the enhancement of the timeliness of the service, being able to use geo-based data and information and to identify locations of traffic accidents and enhance the response performance to those accidents. In crude terms, if you are using basic tools that are manually based and they are being enhanced by technology in an environment where seconds count, depending on the severity of injury of a patient, then how you are able to improve the effectiveness of the system by adding technology will do something to patient outcomes or at least improve the intervention that is available to the patient in a more timely manner.

Major communications network upgrades are occurring in rural Victoria. We have current funding for part of those phases, which includes our network upgrades and some enhancements in our five communication centres which look after all ambulance call-taking and dispatching in rural Victoria.

As I am sure the people in this room would appreciate from looking at the map, there are small rural communities that are relatively isolated but that are still exposed to not only traffic accidents but also to other events. As a fill-in between our services in some of the more isolated areas, we have been engaging the community and expanding what we call community emergency response teams in communities that want to provide a better level of service. The activity levels in those communities do not support an investment of permanent staffing, but nonetheless there are important things that community people can do if they want to take up the challenge of being in a first-responder program, which can save a person’s life in the event of a motor vehicle accident or other event. Those response teams have been very successful. We anticipate that they will become very popular, and they will fill in some of these gaps in isolated areas where costs may be prohibitive in taking on other initiatives. Having a better level of access to first response in those areas is a reasonably low-cost advantage.

The other comment from RAV is that a compulsory learner-driver first aid training program by people who have extensive industry experience will be shown to have benefits over time, and I am sure that is evidenced by much research that has been undertaken elsewhere in the world. At a national level, the Convention of Ambulance Authorities, which is the peak body for ambulance jurisdictions in Australia, has also been making submissions in an appropriate forum for having basic first aid CPR training a requirement for attainment of licence at entry level.

That is the formal part of the presentation and the information I had prepared. I will just ask Geoff whether he wanted to add anything to that.

Mr THOMSON — Given that we are in Mildura, I will give the local perspective on some of the initiatives that Stephen has touched on that have occurred here. One that has had marked effects has been the road shoulder sealing. While we have no measured evidence, there is certainly very good anecdotal evidence from our staff to support this initiative, and you can see it in the reduced numbers of motor traffic accidents that occur on the highways, in particular from Mildura to Ouyen and in my area from Ouyen to Charlton, where you will be tomorrow.

The line-marking initiative has certainly paid dividends in terms of the atypical road accident, and again the anecdotal evidence is that the majority of those accidents are caused by people wandering off the road due to lack of concentration because of fatigue, alcohol or whatever reason, over-correcting and going further into the bush or going onto the other side of the road. It is one of those types of accidents we just do not see on that particular road any more, and the same would apply to the Sturt Highway.
The majority of accidents that occur in the city are due — again, on the anecdotal evidence — to lack of concentration. Mildura has been renowned for the number of roundabouts it has, but certainly at those intersections we do not see road traffic accidents of any significant number, if any at all. The majority of accidents occur at open intersections that are controlled by give-way and stop signs, which relates back to concentration issues.

I have been listening to the previous speakers, and we have also seen a lot of changes since the introduction of the 50-km/h limit. We have not been able to measure the impact of that or provide any anecdotal evidence, but what seems to have happened is that the further out we move into the irrigated areas, where there were 100-km/h limits, obviously the higher speeds were causing higher-impact accidents, and the reduction in the speed limits out in those areas seems to be having an effect on a gradual basis. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that that is, if not reducing the number of accidents, certainly reducing the impact and severity of those accidents.

Mr HARKNESS — Have you gathered any data with the non-urban call-outs? Do you have the data on the reasons for accidents, whether it be drugs, alcohol, fatigue or speed? Do you have access to that sort of data yourself?

Mr THOMSON — Unfortunately the period the ambulance is actually with the patients is limited, and whilst for student training and MICA paramedic training et cetera we provide feedback via the hospital on occasions, to put it plainly we would be only guessing. Most of the time we know when alcohol is involved, but given that we cannot measure the level of alcohol, we cannot attribute accidents to that, and of course attributing them to drugs would be just out of the question. Whilst people exhibit signs and symptoms of some sort of substance abuse, we can only provide that sort of evidence.

Mr GOUGH — With a lot of that post-event assessment, obviously anyone who is involved in a traffic accident, as I am sure you appreciate, requires breath analysis if police are in attendance. However, there is currently very little in the way of other forms of widespread testing for drug assessment, or, indeed, a formal test that could be applied to assess the level of fatigue that a person may have been sustaining at the time of an event. There is a lot of anecdotal discussion among people within the emergency services community about what the causal factors may have been for a traffic accident, but without some greater level of sophistication in being able to make a post-event assessment of what the cause may be, it is hard to give an answer with any clarity.

The CHAIR — When we have travelled around Victoria a couple of people have raised with us the issue of ambulance response times and the notion of a golden hour. Is that an important issue?

Mr GOUGH — Internationally they now also refer to the platinum half-hour. Persons involved in traffic accidents who have sustained major trauma usually need some level of intervention within an hour. Most systems, depending on how badly the persons have been injured, can be sustained with a level of intervention if it is within that first golden hour. Mostly it is referred to in surgical terms, where a person may have some injury that requires a surgical intervention which is best delivered within 1 hour of the event.

That links nicely to the improvements that we believe — obviously from an ambulance perspective — make a difference, and that is in response-time performance and the systems that are available for us to be able to quickly identify a location and to quickly dispatch resources to the event, hence the reference there to computer-aided dispatch (CAD), geographic information systems (GIS) and auto-vehicle location (AVL). They are systems that are available elsewhere nationally, and they are certainly predominant systems in the international pre-hospital care arena, but we are not quite there in Victoria as yet — in the rural area; I must temper that statement. In the metropolitan area, as you are probably all aware, there are very sophisticated call-taking and dispatch systems available.

Mr THOMSON — Further to the golden hour — and the golden hour is a teaching methodology — it is about definitive treatment for those people. There are some things an ambulance can treat medically, and trauma is one of those things where we can prolong people’s lives until they get definitive treat.

One of the important aspects in communications is having the right people at the hospital when we get there, and that is sometimes our nemesis in country Victoria, where we cannot make the call. With satellite phones now we are a lot better in this area, but it is important to have the right surgeon at the hospital when we get there. We can have all these systems in place and then get to the hospital and have to wait 30 or 40 minutes for a surgeon. If that happens, the system will fail the people. We have to have that ability in our officers to make the call first, but also have the technology in place to make those arrangements.
Mr EREN — Are the centres staffed 24 hours?

Mr GOUGH — We have five centres, and as you would expect they are in Morwell, Wangaratta, Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong. They are staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week by a minimum of two people in each of those centres.

Mr MULDER — Typically what type of injuries occur when a vehicle hits a roadside object?

Mr THOMSON — Obviously it depends on speed. When you leave a road it is usually at speed because normally you are on a highway. The main juries are major trauma to the head or the thorax region, they are the life-threatening ones. You do not want to downplay limbs et cetera — a femur can be a major injury, you can have up to a litre of blood loss, for example — but it is the major injuries such as in the thorax region.

Mr GOUGH — I suppose that is where time is important because neurosurgical facilities are only available in the metropolitan area so in a rural context if you have that level of injury like a head injury, then neurosurgical intervention is what is needed, and it is often needed very quickly:

Mr MULDER — Have airbags played a major role in reduction of that, do you think?

Mr GOUGH — Not having done any research apart from other people’s research that suggests that point. Our people who attend these events believe they do make a difference even from the perspective of our response vehicles. Our on-road clinical support operations now have side intrusion airbags as a mandatory feature because we consider it important enough to improve the safety features for our people who are in at-risk driving events.

Mr THOMSON — Obviously because we do some work on the roads here my own experience has been that it makes a significant difference. Quite often you see two cars that collide, one that does not have the airbag and one that has, and time and again you see a noticeable difference in the extent of the injury.

Mr MULDER — One of the councils yesterday was talking about lack of resources, of police driving patients to hospital while the ambulance stayed with the second patient. Is that an issue?

Mr GOUGH — That is a very broad statement to make. From where I sit my responsibility is to manage the operations of rural ambulances across the entire rural area outside of the immediate metropolitan area. I think it is a matter of fact that people in this room would understand that resources have to be put in places where they can be used to the best advantage.

The rural ambulance service is not operating a single service model, as you would expect a metropolitan area is able to operate. We are in fact operating up to about six different service models to provide some level of care, and that starts with our CERT teams, as I mentioned — our first-responder program, our volunteer community ambulance officers where we have permanent ambulance officers who work with volunteers through to where we have exactly the same as the metropolitan area; we have two officers crewing and full intensive care services available in major provincial cities.

In those smaller locations where there is a choice between having no service or one of those service models, then based on the work load of those centres and the level of risk of those centres quite often you may well have one person operating. It might be a permanent staff or it might be a couple of volunteers in some locations to provide a level of service. In those situations I typically find that what has happened is that there is not a community base that is able to support providing a volunteer officer as a second officer, and because of the relationship within the emergency services community generally the police often work hand-in-glove with the ambulance paramedics who are in those locations, the same as the SES or fire services would, to provide a service collectively rather than trying to provide it individually.

Mr THOMSON — There may have been some isolated cases where that occurred. There are two things about this part of the world. One is geography and getting another resource to the area where basically it is 100 kilometres everywhere you turn to the next ambulance station. The second is one of the skill sets that Steven is alluding to — that is, ambulance community officers. In our part of the world our manned branches also have trained community officers who can take two roles, one is to support our pay person, to use our zone as an example, as one man on the road so we effectively have a two-man crew; but our trained community people are
also a second resource at the station, and that is not an unusual circumstance now. It is good for has to have that resource, particularly where geography is an issue.

Mr GOUGH — That is the collaborative nature of the way emergency services work in small rural areas as opposed to being specialisation where you have lots of work for each of the agencies in bigger centres. In smaller centres when there is a job to be done they actually pitch in together and they make it work. In situations where a police officer or a fire officer may be required to drive a vehicle, then at a systems level it is far better for the paramedic to be with the patient and an emergency services trained person to be given the responsibility to drive the vehicle. There are a number of options such as to increase the resources in those communities, but to put on permanent staff you need to have sufficient case load to warrant that investment and also the opportunity cost of doing that in locations against places where demand is difficult to meet.

Mr EREN — How are your services coordinated with other services like the SES or the fire brigade or the air ambulance services?

Mr GOUGH — That is probably a part of the call-taking algorithm for when a call is received. Typically, if we take a 000 call as it comes into the system, it is routed to the agency that the caller has asked for. If it comes to ambulance and it is a road traffic event, for example, then the ambulance service will take the details but it will also notify the appropriate other agencies at the same time, so while in our centres the dispatch of an ambulance would be occurring, someone else in the centre would also be notifying police and fire brigade, and the police have responsibility in the main for turning out SES.

Mr THOMSON — There are those formal things in place including the municipal emergency management planning committees that we all sit on. In the unformalised sense, I mean in particular locations, the ESOs are quite often aware of each other’s existences and there would be times quite often where our two-man crews — I have been part of this where we have had five patients with a high degree of injury requiring transport we have put two people in the back of the ambulance and had a policeman drive. Those informal relations sometimes help us out enormously in those situations.

Mr BISHOP — We have battled a bit getting a handle on driver fatigue. Given the position where you are stationed here, which is at the end of the line but certainly locals drive a long way and visitors drive even further, can you give the committee some of your views in relation to that?

Mr THOMSON — Fatigue, for whatever particular reason, is probably the no. 1 issue; if it is not, it is close enough to it. Again, the anecdotal evidence is that the majority of people you see come out of Melbourne or Adelaide, depending on which highway you are going to concentrate on, and fatigue is something that is not managed at all well by people. The evidence would be strong to say that the contributing factors to accidents are therefore fatigue. We have had some good education programs, and I know one of them is reversing the type of person — in fact it is looking at country people on country roads, and that would be in place as well. Country people use country roads a lot more than the city people, and it is a matter of people managing their fatigue. There is education out there — we have it on the highways now, with reminders about the fatigue zones et cetera, and indications to people that fatigue is an issue in whatever form. Fatigue is undoubtedly a major factor.

Mr GOUGH — Just to echo the comments about the difference between compliance enforcement and providing solutions to problems simply in response to known events, most paramedics on the road would agree that the target groups that really need to be engaged for the future are the school children. It is about educating them in responsible behaviour across a whole range of things that relate to driver behaviour and vehicle operation. Accepting the fact that there will always be some motor traffic accidents and traffic events and that there are competing arguments about huge investments in infrastructure and networks versus getting the thinking right in the people who are going to be the future drivers, most paramedics would argue that going to schools, talking to kids about the risks of driving and what is the right sort of sensible behaviour — and police do a fantastic job in this area as well — is very important in setting the scene for the way these children think about things in future year.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your input. As there are no further questions, we thank you very much for your time. We will provide a copy of the transcript to you in due course.

Mr GOUGH — Thank you for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Mildura – 18 March 2004

Members

Mr B. W. Bishop
Mr J. H. Eren
Mr A. R. Harkness
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Mr T. W. Mulder
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Witness

Mr G. Jennings, Director, Aust-link Pty Ltd.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Welcome, Gordon Jennings from Aust-link. As you are aware, this is a parliamentary Road Safety Committee inquiring into the country road toll and crashes involving roadside objects. We are taking a transcript, and we will provide you with a copy of the transcript. We are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot be used against you in the future.

Having said that, we thank you for your time and we welcome your input into this inquiry. I will hand it over to you for your submission.

Mr JENNINGS — I will start off with just a bit of background about Aust-link and its involvement in the transport industry in general. We are a private registered training organisation. Our core business is to deliver nationally accredited training programs to the transport and distribution industry. We are also accredited with Vicroads to deliver training and licensing to heavy vehicles, motorcycles, ATVs and the like, and with the Victorian Workcover Authority, where we are engaged in training and licensing for a lot of forklifts and earth-moving equipment. Over the last 18 months we have moved into having a lot to do with cars, particularly with novice drivers. That entry has been driven by a lot of requests from schools, parents and the like.

I will touch briefly on our involvement with heavy vehicles and what we do there, and make a few comments. The outsourcing of training and licensing by Vicroads has generally been accepted by the industry as a good move in terms of its flexibility and certainly in terms of the trainers we use, who are experienced people from industry and whom we train up to the relevant qualifications needed to back up their experience. That is well accepted by the industry.

Having said that, the comments I would make would be that in multi-combination training, where it is a fixed two-day course, there is a requirement to have vehicles loaded to 70 per cent of capacity. That is not the case for other categories of licensing. We see a bit of a gap there, and we think that licensing framework ought to be a bit tighter in how it operates. We are training people on heavy vehicles, and we think there should be a loading capacity on all vehicles. However, on anything from medium, light-rigid through to our semis, there is no requirement to have those vehicles loaded while people are undergoing training, and we find that a bit difficult to come to terms with. That is something that needs to be addressed.

Driving with a load does have some impact on how people handle vehicles, in terms of the appreciation of having a load or a force pushing behind them when they are on the road as distinct from having an empty vehicle out on the road. In New South Wales that is a requirement, and certainly elsewhere it is a requirement.

The CHAIR — To have a load on the back?

Mr JENNINGS — Yes. It also opens up the door for some providers getting away with using one vehicle for all categories of training — that is, by using a prime mover with a combination of trailers. You can unhook some and you can use a prime mover itself without any loads on it, which in our view does not give quality training. That is another area where training in the heavy vehicle area could be improved.

In terms of addressing some of the issues about obstacles on roads and why people run off roads, we are not authorities on that so I really cannot talk too much about that sort of thing, except to say that there is no question that operators in the transport industry are suffering a skills shortage in terms of drivers. Their long-haul drivers are 50-plus years of age, and some of those drivers in long hauls are pushed constantly, which must present some hazards and must be contributing to some of those accidents.

We have a very good relationship with the transport industry, and when we talk to those guys they say they need younger people on long-haul driving. They cannot attract them into the industry, so there is a need there to start trying to attract young people into the industry, by whatever means. We are working through a few strategies with the industry on that, some being through the traineeship system and so on. That issue of how to get people into the industry needs to be addressed, because it has an impact on some of the things you guys are looking at.

I suppose the other thing that makes our relationship with the industry successful is that we work closely with them. We are out there with them all the time, we get to know them very well, we get to know their problems. It seems to me that it adds a lot more impact and credibility to the way we train and the way they respond to it. Some seven years ago the industry itself did not have a culture of training. They are now coming to terms with that and they are trying to address it. They need to upskill their people and to attract young people. I guess by working closely with the industry we are able to do things better.
I will switch straight to the car situation. From our experience I believe that if you are working with people at a distance you really never get to know the people you are dealing with because of the way the whole thing is structured, and I will come back to that a little later. In terms of the transport industry, we deliver fatigue management courses. People from the industry attend those, and they have mixed feelings about how good those fatigue management courses are.

**The CHAIR** — What type of things are you talking about in a fatigue management course?

**Mr JENNINGS** — It is really all about the need for them to look after themselves in a physical sense: the way they eat, whether they drink before they drive, drug content, the hours on the road, the need to stop, to get out, to exercise — all of those sorts of approaches. Most of the guys we deal with would say, ‘Well that is very fine, but in the real world out on the road that does not happen. We do not get time to do it because we are pushed so hard to make deadlines; we have to be here, there and somewhere else’. I guess the most common comment that comes through is, ‘We really need our managers and our bosses to do something about this. We do not need the drivers doing all the courses, we need someone higher up to be in here doing some of these courses also’. It is one of the things in the industry that the people who are running the companies themselves are not always heavily involved in training programs. Certainly below that they are, but not always at the top level, and that is an issue that needs to be looked at.

We do a lot of dangerous goods programs, which they have to do. We also get a lot of general information from drivers about how they feel about the industry, so we have picked up a lot of information that is useful for us in how we deal with them. The point I am making is that because of those connections we are able to know them better, deliver programs better and get more credibility in what we do.

If I move to talking about cars and novice drivers it is because it is a logical step for us. Cars form a part of the transport chain. In reading through a lot of research that has been going on we would agree with most things that come out of those reports in terms of the involvement of parents and experience behind the wheel. Certainly we agree with the notion that there needs to be a higher level of development of the person — we have no problems with any of that stuff at all. What we do have a problem with is that we do not believe parents are necessarily the right people, because parents tell us that. We see them all the time. They do not feel that they are adequate enough to be training even their sons and daughters in cars in a satisfactory manner. Somewhere in the chain of events there needs to be a support mechanism for parents if they are going to be involved at the level that all of this research and all of the other information is suggesting.

It is also interesting to note that there seems to be a fair bit of resistance to do with off-road training — and that fits into the scheme of things — and whether it has any value. A lot of people say it does not. In fact a lot of research says it gets in the way, full stop. There are also some suggestions that it is too costly to build off-road centres for training of novice drivers. I would say that no-one in their right mind would develop a centre solely for the purpose of training novice drivers in off-road driving, but there are plenty of very good skill centres around. We are involved in developing a very good one here for the transport industry, but those ones are developed for the transport industry collectively. They are already out there, placed very strategically around, and to utilise those centres for a lot of the car driving is not an added expense but it is an added advantage. I would be saying that you really need to look at those areas and ask what is already out there that can be utilised to support the car instruction industry.

In considering training for novice drivers, we can talk about 120 hours which has been kicked around or 150 hours, but how do you schedule the hours? We believe there are critical stages where you account for those hours, and we remain completely convinced that a section right near the start of that 120 hours requires some off-road tuition with stages in it. That is when we would look at an evaluation of young people — where they are in the scheme of things, and certainly there needs to be an element of car control and manoeuvring. There certainly needs to be one-to-one discussion in that car about where they are and what they are doing and there certainly needs to be a component where we take parents along. From all of our information they need to be involved in that critical first step. More importantly, without that professional centre, without that professional group of experienced people, where do parents go to get some advice when they need it? As a parent, when they are really struggling, where do they go to talk about this stuff? Who do they go to? They used to go to the police station when they were involved, and they cannot do that any more; or they would go to the Vicroads office, but that is not available to us any more.
If you look at the overall scheme, and we are going to focus heavily on parents, what support do parents have in the proposed system? We would argue very strongly that by picking up on people heavily involved in the transport industry who have already put in place substantial infrastructure, not for cars but for the industry collectively, and who have surrounded themselves with some very good information and have mechanisms in place that involve ongoing research into what is happening out there, who have a program in place of professional development to bring their people up to date all the time, they are in a very good and unique position to be very valuable in the development of young novice drivers, particularly in the development and provision of support for parents.

I will argue that to the end of time. I do not know of anything — whether it be sport, business or anything else — where you do not first build a foundation to work from. Then, sure, you become an expert by ongoing training in real situations, but there has to be a foundation. We believe that foundation has to start off road, and then by sequencing all of those hours.

The other question I would raise is that in a licence system that says, ‘You will do 120 hours on-road training before you can sit for any licence test or for your P-plates’, how do you qualify the 120 hours under a sweeping statement like that? How do you know how the 120 hours have been spent and who has done the training?

Last year we piloted a driving program with Mildura Senior College in which we had 27 young people. We worked with them over a period of 15 weeks for an average of about 4 hours a week, and we got to know them very well. When we quizzed them about where they were getting their experience from, by far the most common response was, ‘Our parents don’t want to do it, but we spend time with our mates, and that is where we are getting it from’. That was from them alone.

I am not challenging any of the research, that is not where I am at, but reading that research and all the things that come out of it, all the stuff that is being said is right. But how do you actually sequence the training and get to know that there is quality coming out of whatever is being put in place? The framework certainly has to come under some licensing arrangement. I repeat that parents need enormous backup in there, and there needs to be a foundation built and a body has to be identified that can do some ongoing research and follow up on what is happening.

Mr BISHOP — Gordon, can you give us a bit of a clue about who you use for driver trainers, who your people are and what the program is from here on in? Just give us that snapshot.

Mr JENKINS — Okay. In looking at our entry into novice driving, there are seven schools in this area that will be undertaking some driver training this year with Aust-link. That has been brought about following requests from the schools and parents, and we have put that together. We have thought long and hard about who would be suitable instructors for those programs, and we have had very much in our mind an aspect that is coming out very clearly in a lot of research — that we need to develop the individual. We believe we should be collectively taking that development from expertise already out there in the community, so we have spoken to some ambulance drivers who will be a part of the program as instructors, and we have spoken to the police force, which will likewise come on board and be part of our instructing team. The whole operation will be headed up with one of our experienced instructors, who will coordinate the program and make available all the necessary resources, timetabling and what have you.

We also want to build into the program, picking up on the Keys Please program with VicRoads, the involvement of parents. If possible, we want to have the parents with the students for one day — perhaps at the weekend — doing exactly the same things the students are doing in the car and learning the things we are teaching, so that they have at least some knowledge of what we are trying to do. Then when they come into the equation, they will have a starting point and a springboard to start from. We are also trying to develop some material for parents as guidance, and that is already done very well in the Road Ready program, which is compulsory in schools in the ACT from year 10 onwards. They have developed some really excellent material for parents as guidance, and we have spoken with them and will pick up on some of that material.

The CHAIR — Tell us about the Keys Please program.

Mr JENKINS — The Keys Please program, as we see it, is the VicRoads program where a presenter goes into schools, usually of an evening, and simply talk to the parents of students. There is usually a member of the police force there, and they talk to those parents about road issues, about young people in cars and the sorts of things that parents should be looking towards when they are involved in giving their children instructions about
cars, driving and the like. That is a great program, but it does not give parents the opportunity to be in a car with their child under instruction and to take it a step further.

We have spoken to VicRoads — in fact I had a meeting early this week with two of the VicRoads people — and what we are doing with the schools program is that for those young people whom we deem are suitable to sit for a learners licence test as a result of our program, we are going to do that test within the school with the assistance of VicRoads.

We have also spoken to VicRoads about its Keys Please program, and it has agreed to incorporate that within what we are trying to do, using a VicRoads presenter in the expanded day-long program we are talking about. I believe that in some training organisations, particularly in the metropolitan area, there is already a program that involves parents over a couple of weekends, in which parents, sons and daughters go through the same program. So it is not new, it is out there, but we want to incorporate it as part of an overall program so that it gives a little bit more assurance to parents and certainly a little bit more confidence to sons and daughters, so that ultimately when they are out there in cars together they are starting to talk on the same wavelength.

Parents will tell you straight up — they don’t muck around — ‘We’re not even confident we know the road rules any more’. Some of them may not have been in direct contact with that for a long time, and a lot of them feel threatened. If the requirements say that learners must have on-road experience, which indeed they do, it is the quality of that on-road experience by itself that is critical. You might get mum and dad doing it for an hour and then saying, ‘I’m sorry, we can’t do it any more’, so the kid says, ‘I’ll go and get my uncle to take me out for a while, and he’ll tell me something different. And when he’s not available, I’ll go and get my mate, who’s a bit of a ratbag, and he’ll tell me what he does’. They get a whole mishmash of discontinued and different information, and if you tell me that is good for developing the skills you guys are talking about, then I am afraid I really do not know agree.

If 120 hours is going to be the figure, I still believe that maybe 20 or 25 hours of that 120-odd hours ought to be the foundation on which to build.

There has to be a foundation to work on, whichever way you look at it. It gives people the opportunity to do an assessment on them. You can go and get your L-plates and you do not even have to even open the door of a car! They got rid of the exam system from schools because if you are smart enough to do the time and learn all the bits and pieces, you can pass the exam. That is why competency training now is so good: you have to demonstrate you can do something, but we do not have to demonstrate anything in cars. In heavy vehicles you have to demonstrate you can do something and you have to do set courses. To ride motorbikes you have to do set-down courses. You have to ask the question, ‘What do you do with cars?’. The answer is, ‘Oh, the parents will look after it’.

The CHAIR — Gordon, I am mindful of the time, so if you do not mind we will finish up there. If you would like to, and I do not know if you have, you can also provide a written submission to the inquiry as well. That is obviously up to you, but we would welcome that written submission if you have the time.

Mr JENNINGS — Thank you.

Committee adjourned.