ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Stawell — 17 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
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Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officers: Mr G. Both and Mr P. Nelson

Witness

Mr. J. Nolan, Director of Physical Services, Shire of Southern Grampians.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — We will open up our hearing this morning and welcome everybody to sunny Stawell. Welcome also to Jim Nolan from Southern Grampians shire. The committee appreciates your time and input into our inquiry which is looking into the country road toll and, concurrently, crashes involving roadside objects. Our parliamentary committee consists of seven members of Parliament, five of whom we have here today. Our staff will provide a copy of the Hansard transcript to you and the Southern Grampians shire. You are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot legally be held against you in the future. Perhaps you could begin by explaining the geographical location or outlay of Southern Grampians shire.

Mr Nolan — Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for being invited to make a submission today. As you mentioned, my name is Jim Nolan. I am the director of physical services at Southern Grampians shire, and I was given the guernsey to provide the report today. I have brought a couple of maps of the shire. I am not sure that they show its proximity in relation to other surrounding municipalities but I will leave this map with you. It is not particularly good for demonstration purposes but for the sake of this exercise, Hamilton is the principal population base which is geographically somewhere just south of the centre of the shire. We are surrounded by approximately seven smaller towns — Coleraine, Branxholme, Penshurst, Dunkeld, Glenthompson, Cavendish and Balmoral to the north. They are primarily the shire.

The main routes through the shire are Glenelg Highway, which runs east-west primarily from Ballarat across to the southern border; the Hamilton Highway, which runs from Hamilton to Geelong; and the Henty Highway, which is a north-south route — primarily a grain freight route through Hamilton and out to the port of Portland.

One significant thing to comment on initially is that currently council is facilitating a rather significant development of Iluka Resources, which has purchased a mine and acquired a licence to mine mineral sands from the northern part of the shire and to transport those sands through to a separation plant just south of Hamilton and then on to the port of Portland, so that is a significant outcome.

Another significant industry in the region is the blue gum timber industry which is primarily west and south of the shire. There has been growing enthusiasm for that. There is a major north-south freight route for grain and the timber industry is becoming more prevalent.

The CHAIR — When I think of the Grampians I think of tourism. Is tourism a major industry in your shire also?

Mr Nolan — Tourism is becoming more so, particularly given that Southern Grampians shire is located on the southern and western edge of the Grampians and that is primarily the major tourist attraction to the shire. It is part of the Great Southern Touring Route. Council is also involved with the other adjoining shires to the Grampians to promote a ring road around the Grampians, which is another tourist promotion that is in the early stages at the moment. Primarily the agricultural industry is the backbone of the shire. Tourism is a smaller component but it is growing.

I will provide you with some other statistics with regard to the shire. The council is located in the western district of Victoria. It has an area of 6800 square kilometres and has a population of around 17 000. Hamilton, the main urban centre, is located 290 kilometres west of Melbourne and I mentioned the smaller townships it services. The shire adjoins the shires of Ararat, Moyne, Glenelg, West Wimmera, Horsham and Northern Grampians; and the Southern Grampians shire is located in the centre of the nation’s major wool production area. About 95 million kilograms of wool is produced within a 200-kilometre radius of Hamilton, representing 14 per cent of Australia’s wool clip and 10 per cent of the world’s apparel wool.

The red gum plains and tablelands combined with secure rainfall are a major natural resource which supports nearly $150 million worth of agricultural production annually. The traditional production of wool, beef and sheep meat is complemented by the rapid expansion of forestry, grains and viticulture, together with established processing, cutting tool and engineering service industries. The shire is located between two of Victoria’s outstanding natural attractions — the Grampians National Park and the Great Ocean Road. The southern end of the Grampians lies within the Southern Grampian shire and has over 700 000 visitors per year. The Great Ocean Road has over 2 million overnight visitors annually, so to that extent it has significance.

Mr Harkness — All that industry would create a lot of truck traffic, I would imagine. Does that primarily head down to the port of Portland — all of those industries?
Mr Nolan — The grain traffic primarily from the Wimmera and Mallee heads south to the port of Portland, and fertiliser north from the port of Portland into the grain belt. The majority of the grain, however, is carted by rail. Fertiliser is predominantly by truck. The timber industry is the other, which basically heads in all different directions. The woodchip heads south to Portland; there is some timber that heads west to Mt Gambier and south-east South Australia, and I am not sure that some of it does not head towards Geelong as well.

Mr Harkness — What is the quality of those transport routes in terms of the road surface, the width of the highway, the shoulders — all those sorts of things — for trucks?

Mr Nolan — I think the impact of the timber industry in our shire is probably yet to be experienced because blue gum plantations have only really come on in the last 10 years and we are only seeing the first thinning of the very early plantations now. As that becomes more prevalent obviously the biggest impact that our shire will have will be getting that resource from where it is planted primarily on to the main road or highway network, so it would be the local roads network they would travel to get there.

Mr Harkness — In terms of road safety, what lights are starting to flash if that is going to become a bigger issue than it is currently?

Mr Nolan — I guess the issue of higher mass limits for trucks and B-doubles may produce some increased traffic issues, primarily from the point of view of overtaking. Needless to say, I am perhaps not in a position to comment on how significant that might be. Needless to say, there will be a growth in that type of traffic on the roads.

Mr Harkness — So what is the council doing to address those types of issues, because obviously there is a lot of wear and tear, too, on the roads themselves.

Mr Nolan — Yes, that is right. Council can see some benefits from the timber industry. Obviously there is a greater economic need from a state and national viewpoint for the industry. There is currently no value adding in the timber industry within the shire, so much of the benefits of the production of the raw product is of no benefit to our council. Perhaps as I give the report the issues I will be raising will evidence the fact that primarily council is in some respects hamstrung in being able to address a lot of the issues that perhaps need to be addressed with regard to funding on its local road network.

Mr Stonely — Just on that point, is there any requirement from the council for the timber companies to contribute to the local road network in the areas where they will obviously be pulling out onto the roads over the years? Has any thought ever been given to a contribution at the planning stage and so forth?

Mr Nolan — In recent times planning restrictions have been relaxed for the timber industry. There is a forestry code of practice that timber companies are required to abide by. There is fairly little capacity for council to recover funds, and there is little evidence that council has done that. The timber industry would claim that it pays fuel taxes and the like and that that money ought to go towards maintaining the road network.

In a previous council I worked with there was a cooperative approach taken with a softwood plantation company with regard to the improvements of local roads for access, and that was negotiated with the company. There was obviously a need for that company to have the roads upgraded to get their product out, and council made it clear that it was not going to fund that just to meet one company’s expectations. That funding was negotiated. I suspect that council does have the capacity to negotiate with individuals, but it does not address the overall problem.

Perhaps if I could just mention a couple of things with regard to council’s road network. Currently council’s road infrastructure, as is described in the plans, comprises 312 kilometres of arterial main road, which is managed by the council and funded by the state through Vicroads. There are 1647 kilometres of local sealed road which are being ressealed on an average of a 17-year cycle as opposed to the optimum 12-year cycle. The local roads are being constructed on an average life cycle of 100 years as opposed to the optimum 70-year life cycle, and 71 per cent of these roads have a seal width of less than 6 metres. There are 932 kilometres of local unsealed gravel roads which are being resheeted on an average of approximately every 30 years, as compared with the target cycle of every 10 years.

As detailed in the report which I will provide to the committee, there are approximately 123 bridge structures and 297 major culverts, with 16 being assessed as requiring urgent replacement and 52 requiring replacement as soon
as possible. Before I get further into this report I will mention that I am actually reading from a report that was provided to the Road Safety Committee in July 2000. Circumstances have not changed significantly in the last three years, so to that extent the report is still current. I am probably reiterating some information that was previously provided, but because your members may be new to the committee since that time, I will reiterate some of those comments.

I have mentioned some of the major changes to traffic conditions being forestry and tourism. I have mentioned that we have 1600 kilometres of local sealed road and about 900-odd kilometres of local unsealed road, and to that extent there is a higher proportion of sealed roads within the shire. Many of those have narrow seals approximately 4 metres wide, which may in some respects contribute to some of the problems we encounter with fatalities on roads. I will reiterate the problem that council has with funding, because primarily the position that council holds and the position that is reported in this paper is that with an inadequate level of funding to maintain the roads, council’s expectation is that the roads will deteriorate, and that will then create a significant hazard for motorists with regard to poorly maintained roads.

The other point I will make, which is evidenced in some of the statistics, is that one of the maintenance shortfalls over recent years — perhaps over the last 10 years — has been the lack of funds spent on roadside treatments, in particular roadside vegetation. Perhaps I will come back to that point after I make a couple of comments with regard to the funding.

As at July 2000 council had a depreciation of $4.2 million on an asset base of $110 million, of which $57.5 million is road infrastructure. A detailed assessment of the funding needs of council to maintain this road infrastructure shows an annual shortfall of funding of $1.8 million — that is an annual shortfall! The study commissioned by the Department of Infrastructure entitled Facing the Renewal Challenge, which was produced in about 1999 following an independent review, identified a 22 per cent deficit for the Shire of Southern Grampians to allow maintenance of council road infrastructure. So it is not just the council that is coming up with these figures, there was an independent report done back then that identified a 22 per cent shortfall in funding to maintain the roads, and that is exacerbated every year that we do not maintain that level.

With regard to some of the specific areas of concern, and as a result of the below-desirable levels of funding rural roadside maintenance, council is unable to adequately fund clearance of vegetation from roadsides to maintain safe clearance. Twenty per cent of all accidents on council rural roads involve vehicles colliding with trees. There is a drastic shortfall in funding for pavement rehabilitation. Council is currently funding pavement rehabilitation at a frequency of 1 in 104 years — a deficit of $800 000 per annum. Reseals are currently funded at a frequency of 1 in 17 years — a deficit of $315 000 per annum. Gravel road resheets are funded at a frequency of 1 in 30 years — a deficit of $600 000. I know it is probably not information that you are looking for or need to know, but principally council’s position is that with the lack of funding, many of the road safety treatments and proper road maintenance practices cannot be met, and that contributes significantly to road safety.

I will just provide a few more comments with regard to roadside vegetation. Council amalgamations occurred in 1994, and it was probably around that time that councils were required to provide a 20 per cent rate reduction. In addition to that, there were a number of amalgamation issues which, to some extent, took council a fair while to come to terms with and to get systems in place to address its asset management practices. I guess, as a perception since 1994 with the reduction in road maintenance funding, the councils that I have been involved with have generally spent the money they have on sealed surfaces and on through lanes, and what has been left has been through the roadsides; so in the last 10 years there has been a gradual increase in tree suckers growing in table drains and some 10 years on now those trees basically present a major problem.

**Mr STONEY** — Do they present a problem because you are not allowed to take them out or because they are just physically in the way?

**The CHAIR** — I think primarily because councils did not do enough work in taking them out when they were younger because Councils did not have the resources to do it. They concentrated mostly on the through lanes and the table drains have been left, and consequently it is now a much more costly exercise to remove them. It was probably in the early 1990s — I think it might have even been 1989, I am not sure of that — that the native vegetation planning controls were introduced. In enforcing those planning controls there have been additional requirements and expectations, not only through planning controls but from the community, that council will
responsibly manage the remnant vegetation on the roadsides. Councils are also aware that there is a growing community expectation to do that, so there has been a bit of a balance there.

I suppose, in answer to your question, it is a combination of councils not having the funds to do the work and the problem getting larger by the year; and on the other hand, needing to find that balance about preserving remnant vegetation. In fact many of the community’s individual landowners actually prefer to see their roads tree lined than for the trees to be removed, so there is a balance there.

Mr MULDER — Given the scenario you have outlined for committee, how will your council meet the requirements of the new Road Management Bill codes of practice and requirements?

Mr NOLAN — Council is in the process of preparing a road management plan. Since 2000 when this report was produced council has engaged a consultant, Moloney Management, to do an up-to-date road survey of our network. That report has only just been received within the last month and we are still doing some analysis of that report, which is confirming some of the initial outcomes from the 2000 report, and that is the initial information upon which we are going to prepare our plan. We are in the process of developing our own road register based on that more recent survey and setting levels of service in conjunction with the community. We are participating in the STEP program, which is MAV-sponsored, to assist councils to develop their road management plans, and we are networking with municipalities in south-western Victoria to ensure some consistency with regard to that.

At the end of the day council needs to take a reasonable position with regard to its levels of service. The levels of service will be determined primarily by council’s capacity to deliver them, and that is of some concern. One of our concerns is with the levels of service on roadsides, particularly with trees, because it is very difficult to cost the maintenance of roadside vegetation. It is one of the more difficult things to cost. The unit rates for the cost of rehabilitating a pavement are easy enough to determine and calculate, but there are many variations in roadside vegetation, and that is very difficult.

In answer to your question, our road management plan will be prepared along the guidelines of the Road Management Bill and in consideration of the codes of practice, and we expect that we will be taking a reasonable approach to that. Needless to say, some of the levels of service that we will be providing may be much lower than what both the council and the community may like to see delivered.

Mr MULDER — Will the codes of practice be constrained by a financial position, and do you develop your own codes after you organise them; or are you doing those in conjunction with your own municipalities? Do you see that as a template situation across rural shires or will you develop your own?

Mr NOLAN — Some of those codes of practice are still in development, so we will need to participate in the development of those. My understanding is there are approximately five codes of practice. Those with regard to setting the boundaries between road authorities are primarily driven by a Vicroads code of practice, and that is reasonably clear and able to be adopted. It shows where the lines of responsibility start and end, and we do not have a problem with that code of practice. Council is very interested in seeing the outcome of the code of practice which has been prepared with regard to utilities.

I think there will be a significant impact on our road maintenance practices, depending on the outcome of that code of practice, but my understanding is that one of the key elements of that code of practice is the requirement by utilities to obtain consent from road authorities before they undertake works on their own road network. That is a key element. Council supports the retention of that requirement, and to that extent we will be following that code of practice.

A number of the other codes of practice are still in development so we will participate in their development, and obviously where it is appropriate and where we can afford to we will be adopting those codes of practice. It is not expected at this stage that we will be developing codes of practice of our own to duplicate them. In the report that I will provide you — I apologise that this is the only copy the council has of the 2000 report so I will need to photocopy it for you — there is a summary of the accident statistics over the nine-year period from 1991 to 1998 inclusive. That summary identifies a number of key issues.

In comparing rural and urban accident statistics including fatalities, serious injuries and other injuries, approximately 219 are rural and 253 are urban. In terms of location, only 9 per cent in the rural area are at intersections, so 91 per cent are not at intersections. Of all accidents on rural roads, 46 per cent involve collision
with a fixed object; 83 per cent are on sealed roads compared to 17 per cent unsealed; 80 per cent of those accidents occur on wet conditions, 20 per cent on dry; 73 per cent occur during daylight hours, so 27 per cent during dark. Of the 46 per cent of accidents which involve hitting a fixed object, 43 per cent involve hitting a tree. They are some statistics which may assist you in developing the case that I am attempting to build, that roadside vegetation is one of the key issues;

The CHAIR — In relation to those figures, do you also have stats on whether that is local traffic or traffic passing through your shire, and whether they are trucks or cars?

Mr NOLAN — I do not have all of those details. We would need to do more research on that.

Perhaps I will just tell you about an accident that occurred recently on an arterial road in the north-east of our shire where two young men were killed. The two fellows were celebrating a bucks night, and they were travelling back into Harrow from where the function was held, and on their way they ran off the road and hit a tree. That is still being investigated, and we have not had a report back from the police or Vicroads with regard to the cause of that accident. One of the fellows was the groom-to-be and he was a member of the footy team and the cricket team, and in small towns like Balmoral and Harrow that sort of thing has a big impact on the community. That is an example of an accident that occurred within the locality where the people involved lived and did not involve people passing through. They were people who were familiar with the roads, but nevertheless they ran off the road. That was the tragedy.

The CHAIR — Does council run any promotions or programs in, say, football clubs or cricket clubs with regard to the safe use of alcohol and driving?

Mr NOLAN — I am not aware of that. We cooperate with the police with respect to alcohol provision. In the CBD area in Hamilton we have a no-alcohol zone in the streets, and we work with police on that issue. We are in the process of developing a road safety strategy, and there are a number of elements to that strategy which look at some of the programs that are done jointly with other municipalities, with Vicroads and with the police, but I am not aware of any specific program with regard to promotion of no-alcohol driving.

Mr EREN — Some councils have indicated they would like to see speed restrictions on gravel roads. What is your view?

Mr NOLAN — I suspect that you could probably not travel at 100 km/h on many of the gravel roads we have, even if you wanted to, and that reducing the speed limit to 80 km/h would probably have little effect, because if you travelled at 80 km/h on some of the roads it might be unsafe. We would be promoting that drivers drive according to the conditions of the road. I have not actually been to the council to invite a formal position on that matter. Perhaps I should have said at the outset that I have been in this position for only eight months now, and I think that issue was initially introduced before my time, so I am not sure exactly where council sits with that. Council has not made any resolution to implement any speed restrictions. Because I am not sure what council’s view is on that, I will take the liberty of giving my own view, and that is that I would not expect it to have a significant impact.

Mr MULDER — Have there been problems in the past with utility providers and your roadsides in terms of maintenance issues — the way they have carried out their works and access to sites — and do you think having greater control over them under the new legislation will assist the council?

Mr NOLAN — I am not aware of any significant problems with utilities, though there are ongoing issues at times with regard to reinstatement, particularly in urban sealed areas where reinstatement may not have met the standard expected. I will make one or two minor points. I am reading from some notes from our operations manager, whom I asked for some comments. Many of the sealed pavements we have are not wide enough to carry B-doubles.

Lack of funding for shoulder maintenance is another issue. Lack of shoulder maintenance leads to excessive edge drop from the seal to the shoulder and promotes grass growth, et cetera. That shoulder drop-off is a potential cause of run-off accidents. We have a high proportion of narrow roads with edge drops and vegetation on the side, which we consider to be a lethal combination.
The other comment I would make is that mature trees overhanging roads have in recent times created problems for transports. Transports are becoming higher — we now have four-decker sheep trucks — and overhanging vegetation is an issue for those trucks.

We also have a perception that crossroad intersections are an issue. I will refer to an accident that occurred at a crossroad within the last two years in the Shire of Glenelg where a mother and three children collided with another car driven by an elderly lady. It was at a crossroad where one driver did not give way, resulting in the elderly lady and two children being killed and a baby and the mother being seriously injured. That was a standard crossroad accident. The consequences of an accident involving crossroads on rural intersections is extremely high, and that is one issue of concern, so I make mention of that.

My perception is that in the last 10 years speeding has to some extent been reduced. That is a general perception. I do not have any particular evidence of that, but I would say that reducing speed is having an important influence on safety. From a community point of view, council has had some positive feedback with regard to the recent introduction of school speed zones. They were installed in the Southern Grampians shire in January–February, I think, and they seem to have had some effect in slowing motorists driving through school zones. I might conclude there. I will provide the committee with a copy of that report I have been referring to, and I am happy to answer any questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Jim. As there are no further questions, I thank you for your input and time. We would like a copy of the report. Thank you very much.

Mr NOLAN — No problem.

Witness withdrew.
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Mr D. Phillips, Manager Technical Services, Rural City of Ararat.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Welcome, Don Phillips, from the Ararat Rural City Council. As you know this is a parliamentary Road Safety Committee. We have two inquiries happening at the present time; one is the country road toll and the other is crashes involving roadside objects. Our committee is made up of seven members of Parliament, five of whom we have with us today. Our Hansard staff are taking a record of the proceedings, and we will provide you 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 future. Once again, thank you for your input and time today. We look forward to your submission. Perhaps you could start by explaining quickly the geographic layout of Ararat.

Mr PHILLIPS — Ararat is the next municipality back towards Melbourne. It is probably in quite two distinct halves. In the northern area you are into the dividing range — Ararat sits on top of that, so we have hills, undulating areas, winding roads. Once you get a few kilometres south of Ararat you are into the plains, the flatter areas, which certainly present different problems. In the areas down south the quality of the roads is more difficult to maintain with the nature of the subgrades and materials, whereas to the north it is easier to build the roads — they are better quality and they last, but unfortunately you have to go through the hills, so there are two different sets of problems. Ararat is the main centre, covering a reasonably large rural area, with 660 kilometres of sealed road, about 1400 kilometres of gravel road and an odd few hundred of others, so it is a considerable length to look after; it is also very extensive compared to quite a few municipalities.

The CHAIR — Do you have a submission you would like to make?

Mr PHILLIPS — I made a submission originally. Perhaps the easiest way is to quickly work through that.

The CHAIR — Yes, and we will ask questions as we go along. That is probably the best way to conduct that.

Mr PHILLIPS — I will start with the roadside objects. As you mentioned, they are closely linked and it is really hard to differentiate one from the other. We will start with the incident causes.

We are no different to any other rural municipality. I spent a reasonable amount of time a while ago analysing crashes within our municipality, building up for things like the Road Management Bill, and for our own interest really as to where we concentrate our efforts. This sheet shows the results of it. We went through the Crashstats information, split it up, looked at rural and urban, looked at midblock and intersections within each of those, the surface on which the crashes occurred, then we split it up into the hilly areas — everything north of Ararat and the flat areas, and looked at the crash rates per kilometre travelled. On our asset database — obviously for the grants commission — we have traffic counts or estimates thereof, so you can relate the number of crashes to kilometres travelled. We then looked at day and night, dry and wet, and then specifically the off-road. The results are probably exactly as any experienced engineer would tell you. Per kilometre travelled the gravel road is about three times the rate of the sealed road, which does not surprise anyone.

Mr EREN — How many fatalities would have occurred on gravel roads? Do you have the stats for that?

Mr PHILLIPS — The break-up? I think I used the last five years, 1998 to 2003. All up there are 2 fatalities, 39 serious and 60 other. When you look at the fatal and serious together, probably even the others, it is just potluck really — but most of this is probably concentrated on the fatalities and serious.

To continue through this one, there are two rural intersection crashes of which only one was a serious one, so comments previously do not hold up in our rural area. There it just leaves the straight. The obvious ones are the hilly areas. The hilly gravel roads are the high likelihood, for obvious reasons, of course: the alignment is poorer uphill and downhill, and also that is where the trees are, so you are more likely to leave the road because of the alignment and then once you do the gum trees do not tend to move and clearly the highest rate was ‘off-road, hit tree’. That, as you are quite aware, is what this committee is inquiring into. You can read a lot into it, but it is very consistent with what you would think.

Probably the only funny result was that our rate of crashes on the narrow sealed roads per kilometre travelled was less than the wider seals, the two-lane seals. Whether that is just a statistical anomaly — but given that everything else was holding up even for a small sample of Ararat I do not know what conclusions you can make. Maybe when people are more aware that it is not a good environment they slow down, but the fact is that if you are going too
fast, if you are drunk or asleep it does not matter what the road is, you are going to leave it. That is probably the biggest conclusion for us. The other obvious conclusion is that there is no consistency. There is no such thing as a black spot for us, it is a dart board. Sure, we can focus on hilly gravel areas and through the Road Management Bill and the requirement now to nominate — well, we have been doing inspections, but we revisited all of that.

Our response will be that we will inspect these higher-risk environments more often, we will probably apply a slightly higher minimum standard to those roads. After that it is very difficult to say, ‘Here is a spot, let’s go treat it’; and, of course, the treatments are very expensive.

Mr MULDER — Can I just ask you a question on the issue of the Road Management Bill and your road management plan which you will be operating under. Are you in the position financially to determine your management plan based on financial resources or is it going to be based on what you consider to be absolute best practice?

Mr PHILLIPS — It is, and it is a question that has preoccupied us considerably. It would be fair to say that the road management plan our council has seems to be the leading one in the state at this stage. We seem to have progressed as well as anyone, which is a scary thought for a small council. Our depot has developed an excellent in-house maintenance system, so we consider ourselves very well advanced in regard to those processes.

The bill talks about intervention levels. Up to now we have operated on a priority basis. If the money is available we have a formula which says, ‘Let’s go out and do this job first to fix a defect’. The bill really leads you into an intervention level, and what we have been trying to do is establish a minimum level — a level where basically the risk is unacceptable. There are two issues. The first is: is fixing a pothole an unacceptable risk? Is that likely to cause an accident? We do not really know. There are the ARRB guidelines for such things, but as to deciding whether that level is the appropriate level, that is an area where a considerable amount of work could be done to help all councils. The second question is: if we adopt that level, is it sustainable? Our notion is to pitch the level as low as possible and to still do those works above it. Hopefully we will never get there. Hopefully our system of inspections will address the issues before we get there, but we have tremendous concerns that once you nominate an intervention level, the bill will bind you to it, and I dare say that trying to match that to resources will be virtually impossible. We cannot convince ourselves that it is the right number and the right standard.

Mr MULDER — The situation is you will develop a management plan that puts you at the lowest possible level of intervention, but you will intervene prior to that if you can?

Mr PHILLIPS — Yes. Up to a certain level — we are calling it a condition intervention level — we will record the defect and do the works on a priority basis. There is another level here, which we are calling the safety hazard intervention level — we have good titles for everything — and that is the level at which we think, ‘If the defect gets worse than that, we believe it is an unacceptable risk to the motorist’, and that will be addressed as a priority. There is a lot of — dare I say — guesswork or experience in trying to determine those levels, let alone in matching them to the resources. So that is very difficult. Of course that only addresses defects, and that is not necessarily addressing safety as a whole. Obviously if a pothole gets to a certain depth it could potentially throw someone off the road.

I will touch on this point later, but in all my travels through local government — I should not say for how many years, but too many years, and well over 20 — I have never been to a place that actually looks at safety as an issue. We are trying to introduce another review, which we are calling a safety review, in which we will pick these high-risk environments and drive along the roads looking purely at potential safety issues, because that can be distinct from defects. You might look at whether the standard of delineation is up to scratch. Obviously clear-zone issues blow up all the time. Then we can use things like the road risk management guidelines of the ARRB, which we have a copy of, to prioritise the works and allocate a small amount of money to address these works on a priority basis. Hopefully that will improve the overall standard well beyond issues of whether the road is rough and whether the shoulder is in good condition.

Whilst maintenance is the biggest one thing we can keep up to stop crashes, there are obviously other fundamental physical features of the road that we may be able to address as well. That tends to come more under improvements and upgrades rather than just purely maintenance. That touches on the fact that we cannot really identify a black spot or a blank length. Where the crashes occur is a dartboard effect. We have that dilemma at the moment. I was advised yesterday we have received federal black spot funding for a tree-lined road with thumping big trees 8 feet
from the edge of the seal, where four crashes have occurred over a relatively short stretch. Fortunately two of the
motorbikes missed the trees and got to the fence, but that was probably just luck as well. What do you do? If you
take out one tree that stands out 8 feet from the edge and you think, ‘Okay, the rest are behind it and would
probably meet a clear-zone width’, you would have to take out whole rows for 5 kilometres on both sides. The cost
would be enormous, and we would never be allowed to do it, which touches on another discussion point.

Guardrails cost $100 to $150 a metre, and yet you would probably miss that guardrail and hit the tree 5 kilometres
before it. So we will be looking at delineation and whether we should try the audio edge-markers that they put on
the highways now. But essentially that is not going to stop the person who is going too fast, the person who is
asleep and the person who is drunk — not the description I normally use — because if they are going to leave the
road for those reasons, they will. Unless you remove the obstacle or provide protection, it is still only treating a
certain percentage.

Mr MULDER — Do utility providers and roadside objects create a problem within your shire in terms of
safety issues?

Mr PHILLIPS — Not really. I know you touched on that before, as I overheard. We probably have more
issues with the quality of their reinstatement — not that I think that quality tends to present a potential risk or a
particular cause of a crash. Obviously there are more roadside objects in the urban area — the poles and all those
types of things — but there are not so many in the rural areas as we drive around.

The CHAIR — Just while we are on roadside objects, when the council identifies a tree as a road safety
hazard, how effective is the process of having that tree removed?

Mr PHILLIPS — Useless. Overbearing. Costly. Frustrating. What else can I add?

In our report there is the example of the Warrak road, which would be our busiest local road in the rural area with
150 cars a day — for us that is busy. We were looking to widen the narrow seal. As you can see in the photograph,
that is probably 2 or 3 metres from the edge of seal at best — well within any clear-zone design. The drain winds
behind it. We will keep those trees. Clearly from an engineering point of view they should not be there. I know
there is a balance with the environment, but it is out of our control. We have a lot of pressure on us to keep trees,
and what is the net gain? You would have to plant trees galore. For a tree this big you would be talking 100 to
200 replacement trees. A tree could be 3 feet from the edge of seal, and yet the process we have to go through with
planning permits is completely out of our control. I am arguing purely from an engineering road safety perspective.
The burden and the cost that puts on us is just absurd.

The CHAIR — Having gone through that process, would you say that there are trees within your shire
that you have identified as being a road safety hazard but, due to the process, remain there?

Mr PHILLIPS — Yes.

Mr STONEY — In your report you identify that conundrum of the DSE saying, ‘You cannot remove the
tree’, then someone hitting the tree and the shire being liable. Have there been any cases where councils have been
part of an action because of that, despite it being outside their control?

Mr PHILLIPS — Not that I am aware of.

Mr STONEY — Do you have any suggestions about what we might look at in the future in relation to
liability and perhaps involving DSE in liability if it refuses to have a tree removed, for example?

Mr PHILLIPS — While it has not happened — and I acknowledge that — it seems a logical argument
that if someone struck that tree and I stood up and said, ‘Following every engineering guideline’ — the Vicroads
design guidelines stop at 1000 cars a day for clear zones, and that is a bit of an issue, because in our area we get
down to 100 or 200 cars a day, and that is an issue that could be addressed — ‘that tree should be gone, but it is
there’, a lawyer would love that situation and would say, ‘You haven’t abided by standard practice’. The Road
Management Bill is now telling us to nominate the standards and guidelines we use, and I will list the Vicroads
design manual, and yet here is an example where I have not. So not through my doing, they are staying.

Mr STONEY — There is no legal ability for the shire to then link DSE with that issue, is there?
Mr PHILLIPS — I could not comment on the legal process, but logic would say if it came to that I think our council would be referring you to the planning process involving those trees. I would be referring you to DSE as a referral authority, and it is saying ‘they stay’. I suppose you can argue how far do we take it to say, ‘No, they must go’, but as a referral authority they place conditions on the permit, end of story. To be honest, we get to the stage now where we minimise the amount of tree removal as much as we possibly can beyond what we would normally do it to negate some of the cost.

Mr EREN — Having read the Ararat Advertiser last night I understand there is some problem with fencing and farmers not being able to fence their property to contain the livestock. Is that a big problem? Do livestock go on to roads?

Mr PHILLIPS — Yes.

Mr EREN — Have there been accidents as a result of that?

Mr PHILLIPS — There certainly have. I do not think Crashstats really distinguishes between a kangaroo and a cow or a sheep. I do not think it does. I think the DCA code is just ‘struck an animal’ so there is probably no way for us to tell whether it was a kangaroo or stock. Driving around, you will occasionally see the odd wandering sheep, and I have known of circumstances in other places where a shire engineer has come over the crest of a hill and bounced a sheep off the front of a car, but I would not by any stretch have called this analysis a high risk for us.

Mr MULDER — Do you fear the potential for Vicroads to declare some of its arterial roads municipal roads under the Road Management Bill and hand them over to you?

Mr PHILLIPS — I do not think it will happen. I desperately do not want it to happen. Hopefully it will go the other way round and we will pick up these parking lanes and issues through there. I am not aware of any discussion that that will happen. Certainly with the main roads when the last review was done in 1989 when we lost a few we managed to keep one that was borderline, so whether that ever comes up again I do not know, but we would not want to. We have too much already. The less the better really.

On maintenance works, again the problem is that council does not have the capital to do widespread capital works to address safety issues of a random nature — for example, bridges. We do one bridge approach rail a year. I am not aware of any accidents we have had on a bridge. In fact you might be better off going off near the edge of the bridge where it is probably clear of trees and hitting the soft embankment rather than hitting the 4-foot gum tree 50 metres past it, so the $15 000 or $20 000 we spend is probably hard to justify if you looked at pure risk and assessed it, but to some extent it is historical. To some extent you think, ‘Yes, I should try to improve this: it is a 3-metre or a 4-metre drop’; but when there are gum trees either side of the bridge, nowhere is a good place to drive off the edge of the road. We just do not have the money to do long lengths of road. I heard people talking about putting up guardrails — $150 a metre for 2000 kilometres of road. There are a couple of dollars there we would be struggling to find.

We have touched on tree removal, and again the comment there is that the balance between the environment and road safety is probably at this stage heavily skewed to the environment. Look, I am a greenie at heart, but I am here
wearing my road safety hat. I must also admit that I am a member of the Central Highlands road safety committee, so I get to see that side of it a little bit.

The CHAIR — What involvement does the council have in regard to promotional programs for safe driving behaviours such as fatigue, drink-driving, speed?

Mr PHILLIPS — Little, and probably deliberately so. I generally have a view that the road safety council addresses many of those. It runs programs for drink-driving. We pick out four or five key projects. They are the ones that tend to build on the advertising-promotional side of things. This year there has been myself sitting there and not many others because of staff changes, so from a resource point of view it is very difficult to address the issues raised in our road safety plan. We probably quite consciously said, ‘Let them handle that. Let’s concentrate on the physical side of it and make the necessary improvements where we can. Let’s not double up’.

The CHAIR — I think we are talking to the road safety council anyway.

Mr PHILLIPS — Yes, I think they will probably be in Wimmera whereas we go the other way for some things and another way for other things; we go north for some things because we are on the border.

The notion of speed was coming up. I got our council’s support on Warrnambool’s promotion of 80 kilometres an hour on a gravel road. That study proves that with a gravel road the likelihood of accident is much greater, so on most gravel roads you should not be driving at 80 km/h. Even when you can, your margin for error is small. Generally our gravel roads are excellent: I am kidding yourself. If you are doing 80 km/h you might have a chance; doing 100 km/h, no.

Mr EREN — Did those accidents that occurred on the gravel roads include locals or tourists?

Mr PHILLIPS — I cannot tell. You would suspect locals. Gravel roads would not be in locations that out-of-towners would get to, you would think, so you would have to suspect locals. The percentage then of inexperienced people would be difficult to tell.

It leads into another problem we have, again through the Road Management Bill. In adopting a level of service, purely from a financial point of view, the effective design speed you are adopting will decrease as you get down to a back track that has maybe five cars a day, which we have; so in essence we are adopting a design speed of 40 km/h, and a couple of problems occur from that. How does the motorist know that it is 40 km/h? It is probably the safe speed, and generally that will be with sight-distance issues. If the road is rough, yes, you should, under the bill, drive to conditions. Turn off the highway and it is a nice straight bit of gravel road, and you think ‘Oh, I can do my 60 km/h here, or 70 km/h or 80 km/h’, and at some stage we might be saying that that whole road is only 40 km/h. So the sight distance to some corner — while we have guidelines there to maybe improve the site distance or generally remove trees or weeds which affect sight distance, getting the government to address that is another issue. We have had troubles with that, but in that respect as a state authority it does not fulfil that obligation adequately so it is a real dilemma. We say that this is designed for 40 km/h, but how does the motorist know? Now we get situations where we say, ‘Let’s put a sign up and put a bend in the road’.

When we talk to ARRB officers they tell us, ‘But don’t put a yellow speed limit sign on it, because you would be indicating that is the safe speed, and the lawyers would love that one’. The notion is that you should drive to conditions, but conditions can vary greatly on a gravel road, as you are probably aware. A corner will be more corrugated at an intersection purely because of the wheel action, so a road could be smooth and, suddenly, at a corner the corrugations will start and there will be more loose material.

Just putting up a bend sign probably does not tell drivers much, but surely there has to be some scope to at least give them an indication of the severity of a bend through a speed sign. But we are being told, ‘No, that will be opening yourselves to liability’, so the fundamental driver obligations in the bill have to apply. All right, it might be a 60-km/h curve, but you still have to be driving for the conditions and assessing the conditions. That is a concern. It is great to say that the road is in poor condition, but how do we advise motorists that that is the case and not get ourselves into a legal mess that the lawyers may take great delight in?
So yes, I have our council’s support for the 80-km/h limit. It also has some maintenance cost benefits, through less wear on the gravel roads. But for most gravel roads, if you are driving over 80 km/h you are kidding yourself because your margin for error is so small and, as I said, the crash rates prove that it is a far, far riskier environment.

I suppose you are aware of the Swedish studies that are going the other way now and saying, ‘Hang on, which is more important — mobility or safety?’ In this country, of course, we look at it the other way round — that it is more important to get there quickly than to get there safely. That is changing. The introduction of speed limits around schools and the 50-km/h zones are starting to address that. People are going to have to start to pay a little bit of price in time and mobility at the expense of hopefully improving safety.

Mr MULDER — Do you have a road safety officer, and do you have access to those speed detection devices?

Mr PHILLIPS — We do not. I actually fill that role, or I endeavour to, amongst all the other duties — everything you could name. Through the Central Highlands Road Safety Council we have actually purchased a speed trailer to share around the municipalities, and I got a note yesterday saying that ours is coming for a month in June. I did hire one sometime ago and put it up at various locations just as a reminder. So yes, we will have access to one for a month each year just to move around and use as a reminder. The bill now addresses driver conditions and advisory speeds, which is good to see.

I have already touched on the safety review and the notion of looking purely at safety. Whilst I and other staff have done that review, we are not calling it a road safety audit because that is clearly not what it is. We have done trials on the scenic route to the wind farm where we know there is a series of right-angle bends and where we know unfamiliar people are heading down there. So we took a car out there and really trialled it and tried to pick up issues. Obviously the first project will be delineation and signage, which we see as the best value-for-money project to do, and that seems to work quite well. You certainly have a different outlook as you drive down the road and make a conscious effort to look at potential safety improvements. Perhaps the road safety audit process could move in that direction, if merit is seen in that approach. As I say, I have never known a council to take that single-minded approach and have that sole focus when doing some kind of inspection. I have touched on the clear-zone width. There are a considerable number of occasions when it does not apply and we are forced not to apply it.

Mr STONEY — While we are on that point, earlier you mentioned your frustration about that and the difficulty you have in having trees removed. Would it assist if there was a standard clear zone where, as of right, councils could just remove the trees?

Mr PHILLIPS — I agree entirely.

Mr STONEY — What would that measurement be? What would be a fair distance that councils should have as of right to shift trees if they think they are dangerous?

Mr PHILLIPS — If I could take the engineering approach and what I was told in the early days, that 90 per cent of cars recover within 9 metres of the edge of seal, I would say 9 metres. But, of course, on a single chain road reserve that would mean there would not be a tree left, and that might be a bit difficult to sell.

Mr STONEY — So should there be different clear zones for different standards of roads, for example?

Mr PHILLIPS — Off the top of my head, let’s say it is 8 metres to the edge of the shoulder for a typical sealed road, and then you have your drains through that, which give us some access too, and you would have to be a couple of metres outside the width of the drain. So for a clear zone from the edge of the shoulder of the traffic lane — the edge of the shoulder might be a better one, because then you have the narrow seals — you are talking about 3 to 4 metres.

Mr STONEY — Is that achievable in your area of responsibility?

Mr PHILLIPS — Probably not. The number of trees that would involve would be enormous.

Mr STONEY — Getting back to what an as-of-right zone should be, could it be half that and the rest negotiable with DSE?
Mr PHILLIPS — I will come back to the comment I made before about the Vicroads design manual that stops at 1000 cars a day. That will generally place you at something like 5 or 6 metres, and quite clearly if you had 100 cars a day on a road you would not expect the same standards or rigour to apply. So off the top of my head, I come back to that 3 or 4 metres, but there is very little to base that on. Again it would be good to have a bit more science behind it, but, as I say, this is the best guide we have at the moment. I think one of the other charts from America comes in at 750 cars a day, which clearly exceeds our numbers. It is a bit of a gut feel, but I do not know if a zone of 3 or 4 metres is right. If you are driving off the road at 100 km/h, 3 or 4 metres or even 5 or 6 metres might be no good. It comes back to that. You could spend a lot of time and money, but who are you really going to be saving? If it is the driver who is conscious and awake and has just glanced over and lost it, true, they might be able to recover within that distance, but I suggest if it is the driver who is drunk or asleep, 3 or 4 metres will probably be no use at all. That is the dilemma we face.

The other problem, too, which will I touch on later, is that you do not know how many crashes are purely due to behaviour, which is outside our control, and how many are due to the environment. We were fortunate last year. I saw in the paper that we were one of only four or five municipalities that did not have a fatal accident. That is just potluck, of course, but it reads very nicely, and you feel some sense of gratification in it.

We have had one fatality this year, so out we went to have a bit of a look. It was in an environment that we would rate as one of the safest, on a flat sealed road — a narrow seal, but a flat road — with only a thin band of trees on one side. One of the chaps from the office went out and came back and said, ‘I can’t find it. The police say it is 500 metres from a certain spot’. He could not find it, so he had another talk to the police. The driver had just gone straight off. He had missed the trees and gone into the paddock, and I assume he rolled in there. He actually missed it. It throws out a lot of the theories and demonstrates that potluck can apply. The cause of that accident may have been purely behavioural. There was not even a skid mark — nothing — on the road to indicate why he ran off. He certainly did not make any attempt to recover within the road, so a clear zone of 3 or 4 metres would not have stopped that, and even 5 or 6 metres might not have stopped that. It is a difficult question.

From a cost point of view, what is the right number? In principle, yes, we must have the ability to go out and do a review and identify hazards. For example, if a single tree is clearly sticking out from a number of others within what you have established is an acceptable design clear zone, yes, quite clearly we should have the ability to take that out. It is recognised to be a hazard and it is beyond a design standard — but even then, the chance of someone actually hitting that tree is very, very remote.

When you work out the number of kilometres travelled for crashes you are talking about one crash per 39 million vehicle kilometres. It just reinforces the random nature of those crashes; but it is a process you have to nibble away at. You do these reviews, you try and make these improvements, and if one tree is clearly outside and it is not cost prohibitive, yes, we should have that right.

In summary, what we are touching on here is how difficult it is. We have mulled considerably over standards, That was one of the fundamental principles of our road safety strategy. We did not want a heap of motherhood statements — very nice and warm and fuzzy. We wanted something that we could look at in three or five years time and say, ‘This made a difference’—whether that happens — and when it was proven how difficult it was, to say, ‘Here is an action we can do’ — a physical action on the road because that is probably our primary responsibility that will save a crash, maybe save a life. Without knowing and having black spots, as I say it is very much a shotgun approach of just steadily trying to do your maintenance. steadily trying to make improvements. In other words, I am struggling for an answer.

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

Witness withdrew
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Stawell – 17 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

Witnesses

Mr R. Cooper, Director Infrastructure Services;
Mr A. Dreyer, Asset Engineer;
Cr K Douglas; and
Cr I. Nicholson, Shire of Northern Grampians.

Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — I welcome members of the Northern Grampians Shire Council. The parliamentary Road Safety Committee is inquiring into the country road toll and also related to that, crashes involving roadside objects. Our committee is made up of seven members of Parliament, of whom five are with us today. We will be taking a transcript and providing a copy to council in due course. The inquiry operates under parliamentary privilege so what you say today cannot legally be held against you in the future. Having said all that, again welcome. We appreciate your input and time and will hand it across to you for your submissions.

Cr DOUGLAS — Anton will be leading us through our submission.

Mr DREYER — We have structured our response to the inquiry as an answer to the particular questions that were posed, and that is the format that we will follow. We have prepared a written response.

The CHAIR — If you want to work your way through that, we will ask questions as you go along.

Mr DREYER — Fine. The first item was the country road toll and the first question there related to speed, drugs, alcohol and fatigue. The council is not really in a position to comment objectively on the majority of those items as we are not the controlling authority; but we have delivered an opinion that they obviously have a definite role as regards road safety, and more investigation into that field is definitely supported by us.

The CHAIR — Does council plan any type of role in promotional programs with regard to the use of drugs and alcohol as they relate to road safety or promotional programs with regard to fatigue or speed?

Mr COOPER — The short answer is no, but fatigue is a big issue on the Western Highway, which is of great alarm to us. There are quite a few deaths with truckies et cetera on the Western Highway and through this strip on the map. We have concerns, but we do not promote in our own right.

The CHAIR — What about if we are talking about fatigue and truck drivers’ rest areas? How do you view your rest areas?

Mr COOPER — We have been part of Vicroads inquiry into rest areas and feel that toilets and everything else are a part of rest areas, so rest areas in their own right. I think that sleeping vehicle or whatever it is called has worked very well but I think rest areas that have toilets send a bit of a mixed message. It is relatively important that we do have this stretch where driver fatigue seems to set in, but after that they seem to be able to drive all night. We do not have the answers, but it is a concern, especially with the CFA attending quite a few of these accidents.

The CHAIR — What about the frequency of rest areas — distances between?

Mr COOPER — We would like to think that proper truck rest areas would occur with toilets. What with local government supplying most of the toilets and the rest areas not aligning with them, Vicroads need to be liaising with local government. At Great Western, for example, there could be a good truck stop and toilets. Whether that mixes well with residential is another issue but other than adding toilets to the thing I really have nothing to add to the discussion.

Mr DREYER — Looking at the next item which relates to the condition of the road itself, obviously it does play a significant role which probably leads to problems being caused directly, but the various items such as the rough surfaces, water accumulating in ruts, potholes et cetera obviously all contribute to a greater or lesser extent.

One point that we would like to highlight here is that we have 3500 kilometres of road to look after and we are obliged to maintain them in a safe condition which is not always easy to do, given the limited resources that we have available. There is one issue — that is, maintaining them to a road-users’ safety standard which also needs to be maintained. A lot of these roads obviously have low traffic on them but that does not relieve us of the obligation to provide a safe road to travel on, irrespective of what the user comforts might be for that particular section of road.

Mr MULDER — In relation to the Road Management Bill and this issue of lack of resources and your road management plan, will this mean that you will be put in a position in relation to your road management plan to design a plan around lowest possible standard?
Mr DREYER — That is exactly the problem that we are tackling at this point. That is an issue which definitely needs to be addressed. It is not easy to maintain a higher hierarchy or a lot more roads and a higher category of road hierarchy if we cannot maintain and do what we say we are going to do. So yes, some of those roads might end up in a lower category and be maintained at a lower standard; but the point I am trying to make is that we are obliged to maintain the roads to the standards that we say we are going to but that is more from a point of view of road-user comfort.

A corrugated surface, if you are travelling at an appropriate speed, is not necessarily unsafe, and obviously we do not have control over the road user to a large degree. So the Roads Bill is addressing some of those issues, and if they use the roads according to the prevailing conditions, they might be safe. However, I believe we should not only look at those people who are obeying the law and driving in a safe manner. We are looking at some of the people who for whatever reason might lose control, go off the road and become a casualty. The safety aspects do not vary whether the road is used once a day by one vehicle or 500 or 5000 vehicles, we are still obliged to maintain the same minimum safety levels on all our roads.

Obviously there is less risk to the council from a single user point of view but it does not relieve us of the obligation to maintain those minimum safety standards and to get around 3500 kilometres of shire roads. When you look at some of the urban fringe councils who might only have some 400 kilometres, is not an easy job. It is really an issue which needs to be looked at in a much broader context.

Mr EREN — You have a large area of gravel road — 2200 kilometres of it — and on the map I notice you have three types of gravel road. Can you expand on that?

Mr DREYER — It is really just the roads hierarchy, and the roads hierarchies are, as per the Road Management Bill requirements, grouped into functions and not necessarily types of road. So the function of a link road is to link major centres; and then the collector roads would be in a lower category — I am hesitant to say lower standard — where they collect traffic that normally feeds into the link roads; and then the access roads are purely to provide access, mainly for local people. They are seldom through routes, and they are probably more lightly trafficked than the other two categories. But the major overriding criteria for those roads is function and not the standard of road.

Mr EREN — Would you have stats to highlight the number of accidents that occur on the gravel roads?

Mr DREYER — We have not actually gone into that detail. Council does not have a dedicated road safety officer, but we probably need to. That is every council’s problem. We should have one, but again, everything comes back to resources. At the moment, no, but it is an area that could be looked at. It is not in my position description to do some of those analyses, but I have done one largely for this inquiry. To analyse those statistics in detail requires a full-time person. Obviously a lot of useful information could come out of that, as evidenced by the question you have just posed, but it needs a dedicated resource to do that and achieve outcomes from it. So, yes, there is a lot of useful information sitting in Crashstats that needs to be looked at in some detail, but unfortunately a lot of that is not happening at the moment.

Mr COOPER — We have had a road service agreement for about five years, and so the transition to the Road Management Bill is not all that hard for us. We have very good records relating to maintenance standards, but we have not done that exercise of relating them to accidents.

Cr DOUGLAS — I do not think we would ever be able to get a true and accurate picture, because a lot of these accidents, unless they are fatalities or serious enough to be recorded by the police, will involve people hitting roos or people swerving and losing control. Our best source will probably be from the crash repairers — who do very good business, I might add — but a lot of these accidents are never reported. It would not matter how many staff we had, we would still not be able to obtain a lot of those crash statistics.

Mr STONEY — How does council get to hear there has been a serious accident or a fatal accident in your shire?

Mr COOPER — We have a bit of concern that we are not advised early enough about accidents on the local roads you are talking about, and so we now have a protocol in place with the police whereby we are to be advised earlier. We want to go out and look at the road when the road marks and everything else are there to try to do our own investigation. So, yes, often we have found out via the ABC or something and have not been told by the
police, ‘An accident has occurred on your road. You might want to go and have a look’. We have asked for a
protocol to be developed by the emergency management committee for that arrangement to be put in place.

Mr STONEY — That is a local arrangement that is working, obviously, but there is no official statewide
protocol in place that we could find under which a shire gets to hear about what has happened on its roads?

Mr COOPER — Correct.

Cr DOUGLAS — No, not until they need our staff to clear the road.

Mr HARKNESS — Is that protocol working effectively?

Mr COOPER — It started only last month. We had concerns that it might be a week before we knew
about an accident.

Mr STONEY — Would you say there is a vacuum there that should be looked at on a statewide basis?

Cr DOUGLAS — Yes.

Mr COOPER — Without a doubt.

Cr NICHOLSON — We do get some information through CFA turnouts to road accidents as well,
whether they go for the fire or just to hose down or whatever else goes on at accident sites. But a lot of times it is
only hearsay, more or less, as Mr Cooper said.

Mr DREYER — Is there any more on road conditions as such that you would like us to address?

Mr EREN — Just one final question on gravel. Some shires and councils have indicated they would like
to see a default speed reduction on gravel roads. What would your view be on that?

Cr DOUGLAS — We discussed this at council some weeks or months ago. It was not supported. We
have a lot of gravel road, and we were not too sure who would actually be enforcing that. We were much more of
the view that we expect people to drive to the capacity of any given condition. If you reduced the limit to, say,
80 km/h, we are not prepared to stand by the assumption that 80 km/h is safe in every set of circumstances on our
gravel roads.

Mr EREN — At the moment it is 100 km/h by default, is it not?

Cr DOUGLAS — It is.

Mr EREN — So if it were 80 km/h by default, you would not necessarily have to put up signs.

Cr DOUGLAS — No. We would not support it. That was the position of our council. Hopefully our roads
are able to be accessed for whatever use and function they are designed for, and we are expecting our drivers to
make those decisions about the road conditions. Gravel roads are the most dangerous roads to drive on in the world,
in my opinion, and you are going to know very quickly if you are going too fast on most gravel roads.

The CHAIR — Just before we get off road conditions, does council conduct proactive safety audits of
road conditions?

Mr DREYER — I cannot speak for our works engineer, who is not here, but we do them, although
probably not as many as we could. Normally they are done by an independent body whom we have to pay, so we
are looking at the possibility of sharing with neighbouring shires so that we audit their roads and they audit ours.
That is something that is being looked at at the moment. Some of them do get done, but probably not as many as
could be done.

Mr COOPER — We seem to be missing the point we made about the window of opportunity to grade the
roads around here being very minimal. You can have five months where you cannot grade them, and when it does
rain you can only do the school bus routes. You can only do what can be done within the window of opportunity,
and all the auditing in the world does not solve that problem.
So safety-wise, yes, we put things in priority order. We have a pretty reasonable inspection regime, and we are going to make it more formal with the Road Management Bill, but this auditing becomes a maintenance issue. We will be inspecting and prioritising, but we have a small window of opportunity to grade. We budget a small amount each year to do surface grading of corrugations on rural residential roads. With the rest of it, the weather dictates our ability.

Cr DOUGLAS — We do strategic watering where we perceive there could be a danger on gravel roads where it is very corrugated from deceleration and acceleration.

Mr COOPER — The council allocates a modest amount for safety issues — for example, to improve the corrugations past a railway crossing where you accelerate. The council has been spending a modest amount on safety issues in its own little budget to do works at an intersection, a bend or somewhere where we have observed that a bit of seal could solve a problem.

Mr DREYER — Paragraph (c) in your terms of reference relates to the use of cruise control. Again, as with paragraph (a), we are not really in a position to make any objective comments on that, but our opinion is obviously that it does play some role. How that could be established would be difficult, but I am certain just from listening to my own children that younger drivers have no idea of the consequences of the use of cruise control in some situations. There is definitely a tendency to not want to lift it off around a corner, because you are going to lose your speed and it is a hassle to reset it et cetera. So I am certain there are definitely issues. That is really a driver education matter that needs to be looked at.

One other item we put in there under that same one was to mention modified performance vehicles and their use by younger drivers. Some countries limit the drivers who have held a licence for less than five years to driving smaller, less powerful vehicles, which might be something that could be looked at.

The stats describe vehicles as either a car, a 4x4 or whatever. I did not see anything in the stats to indicate that the vehicle had been modified, but if you look at some of the vehicles that are around, especially those of younger people, the drivers sit so low down in the car the level of vision must be very restricted. Somebody might need to put an item into the stats to say whether it was a modified vehicle that was involved in whatever accident, just to give an idea of whether it is an issue. From personal observation there probably is a significant percentage somewhere in there which might indicate that somebody needs to look at it further.

Cr NICHOLSON — I think what Anton means there is the modification of the driver’s seat, where you see them sitting right back and looking through the steering wheel. There is a problem in that accidents happen there.

Mr MULDER — How do you separate between a very short, small person who sits well down in the car and someone like me who is tall and whose head almost hits the roof of the car? It may be an issue of modification, but I would also imagine the stature of the person has a lot to do with visibility over the dashboard.

Mr DREYER — Undoubtedly. It is probably one of those matters that is an issue but is not easy to address.

Cr NICHOLSON — It is the angle the of the seat.

Mr DREYER — A lot of young people physically lower the seat in the car. They take out the rails or replace the seats with non-standard type seats, and that puts them very low down. They tend to look between the struts in the steering wheel to see the windscreen and that sort of thing.

The next item deals with enforcement effectiveness. Again, everything we say here is really just opinion, but it appears to us that in this area the police sometimes do not have sufficient resources to cover all the aspects of enforcement. As our mayor mentioned just now about the 80-kilometre-an-hour speed limit, it is one thing to have all these regulations, but if they are not enforceable then they are really meaningless at the end of the day. So yes, it might be nice to have more regulations, but the police are battling to enforce what they have so unless you are replacing one regulation with a more effective one there is probably not much point in generating more regulations. Certainly the police appear to have a problem with some aspects of enforcement. We have another issue with higher-mass vehicles which use roads they should not be using. Again, it is very difficult to enforce those, so that is an issue that needs to be looked at.
The next item is measures to reduce the incidence and severity of crashes. Again, there is no simple answer and every avenue needs to be considered and aspects improved on where possible. I have mentioned the road safety officer, who might assist in that regard by providing useful stats for local councils so they could specifically target the areas of concern — you know, things vary from place to place — as well as implementing the more general driver attitude programs that are put out by Worksafe and Roadsafe and those types of institutions.

Mr MULDER — Do you have issues with your utility providers in terms of them creating unsafe conditions with roadside objects or the way that they conduct their work?

Mr DREYER — I think that is a widespread problem.

Mr MULDER — It is? Not just reinstatement, but other issues?

Mr DREYER — Yes, there are all sorts of issues but hopefully the Roads Bill will address some of those. The utility providers might not be as aware of all the aspects of road safety as one of our own staff who works on the roads area might be because that is not their line of business, so to them road safety is a side issue. Sometimes the signage might not be up to scratch if they work on a single road or whatever. Councils cannot police them, so they need some education in that regard as well. It is an issue. The other issue with utilities is obviously the placement of the poles et cetera, which may or may not be in an appropriate position?

Mr EREN — Has your shire identified any of those power poles that may be in a hazardous position?

Mr DREYER — Not directly, but probably at any time there would be 30 per cent that might be. Short of conducting a safety audit on each pole it is very difficult to say that they are in an appropriate location or whether there could be a better position for them. Again, with the resources available, it is not easy to provide that answer.

Mr STONEY — I might have missed an answer to this but do power companies have to liaise with the shire before they change a pole or put another pole in, or do they just go ahead and do it?

Mr DREYER — At the moment that generally does not occur. Sometimes it does but not always. If it is maintenance-type work generally it does not occur. If it is new works, they send in a plan with their proposals which we look at, but they are not obliged at present to wait for our approval or anything like that. With the new Roads Bill those issues will be addressed and there will be some minor issues, from which they will be exempt from getting our authority to work on some of the roads, but on the more bigger issues there is a recommendation in the Roads Bill where they will have to obtain authority from the local council prior to them doing any work.

Mr MULDER — And council will lay out certain stipulations and conditions for the work to be carried out?

Mr DREYER — Yes, council will lay out those conditions and that sort of thing.

Mr STONEY — Does that relate to existing poles that are just replaced or to new works only?

Mr DREYER — I am not certain. I presume it would be all works but some of those items are still under negotiation so we are not quite certain of the exact position, but it will be an improvement on what is in place at the moment.

Mr COOPER — I think the Road Management Bill aspect is very positive. Your question about the maintenance is a good one. We cannot answer but you may be able to ask the question about maintenance in other forums. Certainly the utility authorities see this change as quite a big pressure, but we see it as good because the utilities groups have not looked at safety historically. It is to do with cost: if we want to move a pole because we are trying to improve an intersection for reasons of safety, they want an arm and leg to relocate the pole which should not have been put there in the first place; so it is a culture, which this bill is helping to address. In a couple of years time I would say the culture would have changed.

Mr STONEY — So you are suggesting that the committee should look at the effects of this Road Management Bill and perhaps even identity areas it does not cover?

Mr COOPER — That is a good point. It is refreshing that authorities have to stand up for what safety issues they do address. I think your question on maintenance is something we cannot answer because we have not
come up against it in the bill discussions; we have dealt with only new works, so existing assets and maintenance of those assets has not been discussed so far as we are aware.

Mr STONEY — There is an opportunity long term as poles are replaced to put them in a safer spot, obviously without any extra cost to the power company and with an increase in safety.

Mr COOPER — Very valid.

Mr MULDER — But it would be fair to say that utility providers probably fear retrospectivity in terms of past infrastructure, where council as a road authority may turn around and say, ‘Right, we want all of those safety barried’. That is an a issue that has not been discussed as yet.

Mr COOPER — Yes, but sometimes safety barriers can just provide work for suppliers of guardrails. Having the poles in the right place is what we should be aiming for. We are a bit concerned about the amount of money spent by Vicroads on some of the guardrail work. If we had been asked for priorities on safety, we may have come up with the point, as I said, that some of the intersections are much more dangerous than the guardrails, the protective structures, the bridge structures and, in particular, the drop-offs that Vicroads is spending money on. We think the intersections are more dangerous, so we disagree with their priorities with the main roads at the moment.

Mr DREYER — You also asked for any comments on how road authorities in other countries approach some of these problems. I have worked in that area, so we have put in a couple of comments along those lines. One of them, which relates to the Road Management Bill as well, is that at the moment there is no clear ownership of the road reserve, including everything that goes into that reserve. The ownership of utilities is pretty clear — the owner of the asset is responsible for it — but the roads bill defines only the road pavement, formation pavement and table drains and does not go beyond that. The rest of the road reserve does not have clear ownership indicated at this point. It tends to be very obscure, and it is very difficult to find out who is responsible for some of these areas, be they Crown land or whatever.

Some overseas authorities have full responsibility fence to fence, so everything that happens within that area has to go through the managing road authority. With that responsibility in place, it is really easy to get around some of these issues, because there is one body that controls everything that happens in a road reserve. Allowance is obviously made for utilities to put their services in, but the clear regulations are issued by one body which governs all types of issue, and it is an easy way to control what happens within that road reserve. At the moment in the Road Management Bill ‘road’ refers only to what you travel on and associated drainage; it does not address any of the other issues. Further along we will see that this has a major effect on some of these issues we are looking at.

Paragraph (f) in your terms of reference relates to changes to legislation, and again I refer to the issues of ownership which make it very difficult to determine who is responsible for some of these items. Without ownership, the liability and accountability aspects become vague, so it is very important to clearly establish, through whatever legislation, ownership of all assets within a road reserve.

Mr COOPER — We have commented on trees in our submission. We put in a submission to the inquiry on vegetation about the net gain of trees versus safety. That submission is an attachment. We have had that discussion elsewhere. There is a conflict in the net gain, and there should be a safety clause in the legislation, so we put in a submission and we have included it in our comments. We are prepared to answer any questions on that.

I see that as a fundamental problem. Two state government authorities have different standards, and in one particular case the council was asked to arbitrate between DSE, which was DNRE at the time, and Vicroads. We refused to. We said, ‘Go and sort it out yourselves’. The net gain on roadsides is a big issue, and we put in a submission from Northern Grampians shire which seems to have fallen on deaf ears to date, but we are still trying to say that there should not be a conflict between two authorities — we will call it safety versus net gain.

The CHAIR — Yes; a good point.

Mr DREYER — In summary, that is one of the major items that needs to be looked into and sorted out before some of these other issues can be addressed, because a lot depends on whichever legislation you are working to and from whichever angle. It is really a very important issue. Are there any further questions about part 1 of our submission?
The CHAIR — No. Push on.

Mr DREYER — Part 2 of our submission relates to crashes involving roadside objects. We did a very brief analysis from some of the statistics out of Crashstats for our area. They are all attached on the back of our submission, but a brief summary is that fatal accidents in Northern Grampians make up 9 per cent of the total; high-severity accidents are 48 per cent; loss-of-control accidents are 61 per cent; and accidents involving fixed-object hits other than a moving vehicle are 42 per cent. The loss-of-control category is one of the biggest items in that, so we focused on that for further analysis.

When compared with the whole of the state, drivers in the Northern Grampians had 8 per cent more fixed-object collisions, 21 per cent more high-severity accidents, 167 per cent more fatal accidents, and they were 91 per cent more likely to hit a tree. Some of these items are really significant percentages, which surprised a lot of people, and they are really cause for alarm.

When we looked at Northern Grampians against other regions excluding metropolitan Melbourne, there were 30 per cent more fixed-object collisions, 25 per cent more high-severity accidents and 139 per cent more fatal accidents, and drivers were 43 per cent more likely to hit a tree and 221 per cent more likely to hit a kangaroo — that is compared with country Victoria as a whole. Again some of those statistics are very alarming.

The CHAIR — In fairness to your shire, is that a reflection of the nature of the terrain? I picture Northern Grampians shire as having a lot of trees, a lot of kangaroos et cetera.

Mr DREYER — Definitely. We are obviously in that category of country shire, but it poses the question, ‘Are those acceptable statistics?’, because some of them could be reduced by taking certain measures, which we can look at a bit later on.

Mr STONEY — Do those statistics take into account the highways?

Mr DREYER — That is all the stats in the shire, yes.

Mr STONEY — And parts of the highways are in fatigue zones and long-distance zones, are they not?

Mr DREYER — Yes. But in comparison to the other country shires elsewhere in Victoria, it is still a lot.

Cr DOUGLAS — The Western Highway through Stawell is a designated fatigue zone. That part of the Western Highway is acknowledged as a fatigue zone, but in the rest of the shire nothing is acknowledged as a fatigue zone. It is 3 hours from Melbourne, but it is not known as a fatigue zone.

Cr NICHOLSON — It would be fair to say that the shire is not all leafy green. North of Stawell towards St Arnaud there is a lot of broadacre country as well.

Cr DOUGLAS — There are box ironbarks over there. But a lot of our trees are very old trees and they are very close to roadways, and if you lose control, even if you are the best driver in the world, you still may not miss them.

Mr COOPER — In some ways the point is that we train our children to hit the kangaroo and not miss it. That is a fairly fundamental reaction, but unless you were born in the country, you try to avoid them.

The CHAIR — That is your natural reaction; that is right.

Mr COOPER — It is a rule I try to observe myself. I try to hit the kangaroo — well, not intentionally — and it is a very important point. We think the kangaroos are mixed in with these fixed objects, and accidents are not always caused by fatigue or anything else. The training should be to try to hit the kangaroo.

Mr EREN — That is one way of culling them.

Mr COOPER — Yes, but insurance-wise drivers try to avoid them, they lose it and they hit the fixed object.

The CHAIR — For an inexperienced country road driver I imagine it is a reflex issue.
Mr COOPER — There is also the reaction of city drivers on gravel roads. You do not put your foot on the brake; you put your foot on the accelerator if you are local because you know that you can slide around the corner or something. The reaction is to put your foot on the brake. That is a fundamental problem which is a training issue.

Mr DREYER — I will read the rest of these stats because they bring out a picture. When compared with all our neighbouring shires — that is, seven direct neighbours — we have only 1 per cent more fixed-object collisions, so the chances of having that over in neighbouring shires is very similar. We have only 1 per cent more of high severity accidents so that fits, but we have 70 per cent more fatal accidents. We are only 17 per cent more likely to hit a tree but we are 384 per cent more likely to hit a kangaroo, so that is definitely an issue.

When compared with Ararat, which is probably a similar-type shire on the highway, we have 11 per cent more fixed-object casualty collisions, so that is within reason; we have 14 per cent less higher severity accidents but 74 per cent more fatal accidents again; and we are only 14 per cent more likely to hit a tree, and the same with Yarriambiack. So the only major variation there is our fatalities.

I am summarising very briefly, but we seem to have an issue with very large old trees. As our own Mayor said, they are very close to the road; and the stats do not show, when the vehicle hits the tree, how far that tree was off the road. In Ararat it could be 10 metres off the side of the road, it could be a much smaller tree; whereas in our shire there are much bigger trees closer to the road generally, which means you will get killed and you will not be seriously injured, so that is probably the conclusion that we would draw out of these figures at this point. We have not investigated in-depth, which we will do in the future; but at this point that would probably fit what our observations are in that regard, and they are really alarming figures.

Mr COOPER — I know we are running out of time, but we then touch on ambulance coverage, which we think is a fairly major concern. Often it governed by politics, not based on need, so our mortality accidents are higher. Often there are two people in an accident and in our case the police have had to drive the ambulance with a patient to the hospital and the ambulance driver has had to stay on the site to deal with the other patient. This whole accident thing — coverage and the chance of being picked up in a certain time — could be across the state. There is politics within the ambulance service. At the end of the day we just want a needs basis. We want it to be based on traffic volumes or on some other statistics so it is picked up.

Mr STONEY — What would be the answer to that dilemma of big areas and no resources and so forth?

Mr COOPER — Anton has made a point about the fatalities, so perhaps mortality areas should have a bit higher coverage; the fatalities go down to the next level, which is high severity. As we know, that first hour in an accident is very important. We have an ambulance here trying to cover from 90 to 100 call-outs a month. He has one ambulance to cover the Western Highway. There is politics around the ambulance service and I am not trying to get into that; I am just saying to have everyone look at a statistical analysis of the need, independent of the politics of the service, would be quite refreshing. There are no vested interests that way.

Cr NICHOLSON — To add to that, if the Stawell ambulance is out on a call an ambulance has to be redirected from Ararat or Horsham, so your time factor in the first hour is your main problem, and that is just the service.

Mr DREYER — We have probably covered most of the topics on liability and accountability. I would just like to re-emphasise that ownership needs to be established before those issues can be dealt with.

Dealing with risk management and roadside hazard management, again risk management is more in that regard a calculated risk, so how much risk are we prepared to accept before it becomes an issue? There is obviously a risk in everything. Having looked at these statistics now, we might say that that sort of risk is not acceptable now that the figures are or have been opened up. It is definitely something that needs to be looked at very urgently from all aspects. On changes to legislation, again I think we have probably covered most of what is in there.

In conclusion, we are disappointed that there was a short time frame allowed for this. We have not dealt in depth with all issues that we could, but we will certainly follow up on some of these items which have been highlighted. We welcome the review of the problem and we hope a speedy solution can be found. A lot of the issues are not
easy to resolve, we appreciate that, it involves politics and emotional issues which need to be got around; but at the end of the day if everybody is serious about road safety then certainly they will be looked at. We will welcome the outcome of this inquiry, and we will certainly look forward to a positive result.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that. I apologise for rushing through the submission. As I say, we are running behind time. If there are no further questions, we would like to thank everybody from the Northern Grampians Shire Council for their input and their time. We are taking a transcript and will provide a copy. This committee will be reporting to Parliament in March of next year, and it will provide your office with a copy of that report when it is complete. Thank you for your time and input.

Witnesses withdrew
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Stawell – 17 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
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Executive Officer: Ms A. Douglas
Research Officers: Mr G. Both and Mr P. Nelson

Witness

Mr C. Mibus, Director, Municipal Services, Shire of West Wimmera.

 Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — We welcome Colin Mibus from the West Wimmera Shire Council. We appreciate your time and input. As you know, this is a parliamentary road safety inquiry into the country road toll and into crashes involving roadside objects. Our committee is made up of seven members of Parliament, five of whom are with us today. We will provide a transcript of these proceedings to the West Wimmera Shire Council in due course. We are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say today cannot be used against you legally into the future. Having said all that, I will hand it across to you, Colin, for your submission.

Mr MIBUS — Thank you very much. I appreciate having been given the opportunity to come along today. I am the director of municipal services with the West Wimmera shire. I have served in that position since only September last year, so I cannot give you too much historical background.

Your terms of reference call for comment on a whole lot of issues, but the main one I have tended to focus on — that might help you catch up on a bit of time too — is the issue about how close roadside vegetation is to the edge of roads. If I can get one point across about that and make a fairly strong push for it, then I will have achieved something, rather than trying to push a whole lot of things and getting nowhere. I have included a lot of photos in my submission as well, and hopefully they will back up the arguments about what we face in West Wimmera.

I have noted that whilst effective road design is a tool to make our roads safer, the ongoing removal and trimming of that vegetation is just as important if council is to fully meet its duty of care in providing a safe road environment. Essentially what we are on about is that we have developed a clearance envelope, and whilst there has been no formal documentation on that, it is something we have developed over a period of time. In that process we have probably stood on a few toes in some departments, but we have not been taken to task too much over it.

In the past West Wimmera has not enjoyed the reputation of being a green area, because of issues relating not just to removal of vegetation on roadsides but also to removal of trees by land-holders. But at the end of the day, in the last three years we have proved that we have a net plant-back program far in excess of the trees that have been removed. What I have put up as a suggestion in this submission does not mean a wholesale clearing; it is only a small thing, but we think it can be very effective.

Mr EREN — If that were to happen, how many trees do you estimate would need to be cleared, and who would cover the cost of clearing them?

Mr MIBUS — That is what it gets back to. In a lot of cases cost is the issue. Later I will highlight some of the trees I have photos of, and they are examples of isolated and fairly huge mature trees. You are not talking about something that is 20 or 30 years old; you might be talking about something that is up to 80 or 100 years old, and when you get a tree of that size it involves a substantial cost to go about removing it. If the tree is on a road that has less than 100 cars a day and does not carry through traffic with strangers to the area, then it would not be worth the effort of taking it out. You would probably look at other measures such as diverting the road around it or putting up extra guideposts, chevrons and that sort of thing.

This envelope that we are pushing for is the current practice we have undertaken, and we do this without permit. We just do it as of right. I would rather come up before the coroner and say, ‘This accident did not result because we removed a tree; at least we have stuck to our guns and removed trees’, than be worried about appearing before DSE and being taken to task about removing trees unnecessarily. If it is a danger to road traffic, we take it out. The approach we propose is one of maintaining an area clear of all trees and slashing vegetation, because some cases do not require removal but just a slashing of vegetation from back-of-drain to back-of-drain on both sides. That is shown on the following page of our submission. We clear it up to a height of 5.2 metres above the roadway, and that is shown diagrammatically on page 2.

There are different categories of road and different speed values as well. On any sealed road we basically have the open speed limit that legally applies, and above. There are some people who push the limit because we are an isolated rural municipality, and if there is not too much traffic around people tend to go from A to B quite quickly, because we have a fair distance between a lot of our townships. As the roads come down in width we have gravel roads, and in some cases it might be only a track that winds its way through a road reserve that does not even have a formed road. You might get down to where you have trees right up to within a couple of feet of both sides of the vehicle. So as the speed limit drops down the vegetation you allow comes in on the side as well.

On pages 3 and 4 you will see photos of existing conditions of roadways that show what they look like when we have that cleared area. You can see that on the Wimmera Highway, where we get a lot of B-doubles, there is good...
overhanging vegetation that completely envelopes the whole road. Once again we have taken a commonsense approach. The section shown in figure 2 was ripped up and resheeted only a couple of months ago, and we did not damage the environment too much there.

At the end of the day, even though you might have a good road surface, guideposts and white line-edging up the road, it still gets down to the driver who has to drive according to the conditions. We get a bit of fog sometimes, and on a very windy day if you have a B-double coming towards you, you just have to take a bit more care to hang onto the road. If a driver goes to sleep, you cannot plan for that; all you can do is make the road as safe as you can. I believe what we are doing here is a basic tool in achieving that.

Mr STONEY — Is the Wimmera Highway a Vicroads route?

Mr MIBUS — It is a Vicroads road, yes. It passes from Horsham to Naracoorte on the other side of the border.

Mr STONEY — Did it do the work, or did you?

Mr MIBUS — We won a five-year contract to carry out the maintenance on that road for Vicroads.

Mr STONEY — In that last process were a few trees taken out?

Mr MIBUS — In this particular instance the actual rehabilitation of paving was done by another contractor. No trees were removed; there was no need. A couple of limbs were pruned back to get the height over the road, because they were getting a bit close to some of the B-doubles. Those limbs you can see are right across the road. As long as they maintain the height clearance of about the 5.2-metre mark within the guideposts, that is all we ask for.

Mr STONEY — In that process do you have to get permission to even take limbs off inside that area?

Mr MIBUS — We do not ourselves, no. I have given an example in the very last photo which I will come to a bit later. Vicroads is probably a bit more concerned about the environmental aspects and the thrusts that come from other departments than we are. Where we do not think twice about removing a tree, it does. The example I have given at the back — I do not mention it by name — I note it is reluctant to remove vegetation.

There was a near-miss accident last year with a vehicle travelling at speed along the highway. The driver said he was doing close to 110 kilometres an hour. At the last second he just caught a glimpse of a car coming in on his right. The driver of the vehicle crossing over the highway never even thought that he was about to cross over a highway. What he was thinking of I do not know, because he just drove straight through at speed and clipped the back of the bumper bar of the other car. Both, needless to say, were very much in shock, but at least they pulled up and talked about it.

We have looked at it since. The only way I can see — I have a couple of photos there — is we should be taking the vegetation back to at least the designed stopping speed from the intersection point, because if you can get back and line up to make sure that you have that envelope clear of it, to me you are making the best decision. Where this crossover is, unless you are within about 10 metres of the highway you do not see up the road sufficiently to allow anyone else to stop in time for you. If both vehicles are travelling at the legal limit then when you do realise there is a vehicle there it is too late; you are going to end up colliding.

Mr STONEY — Council has a fairly strong policy of removing trees within this envelope?

Mr MIBUS — Yes.

Mr STONEY — Have you had trouble with DSE, or do you perhaps just go and do it?

Mr MIBUS — Yes, we are working to rebuild relationships. It is probably being removed by DSE rather than ourselves, but at the end of the day, like I said, we are not out there for wholesale clearing. The road reserve is for a road carriageway and that is what we do it for. We only clear it out to the bare minimum. This is still not going to stop people running off the roads and running into trees and it will not stop deaths from that, but at least we can minimise and reduce the risk of that happening because you invariably find if someone is moving from the bitumen they hit a bit of a gravel road and that wakes them up — ‘Oops, yeah’ — and they have a chance to at least
take control. If they go further and hit a guide post, it at least gives them a chance to come back on to the road. If they go further and run into the drain, if they can stay in the drain they can be lucky. I have photos here of numerous examples that show that if they run off the edge of the seal there is only a small margin of error, and they can still hit trees at the present time.

Mr STONEY — You have had quite a severe disagreement with DSE over your policy. Is that how your relationship has deteriorated?

Mr MIBUS — No. On page 10 you will see there where the Edenhope-Kaniva road — a 5.5-metre sealed, category 3 link road that links Edenhope with Kaniva — passes through the Little Desert National Park. We got into a little bit of trouble with DSE when we went out and slashed 3 metres behind the guide posts. We have continued to do it, but at the end of the day it has not proceeded any further with it. Each year it is slashed. You can quite clearly pick up the line along there. It is not done more or less for the trees because if you keep slashing, the trees do not grow back that close.

The secondary thing there is kangaroos. Obviously it is a national park area and as such it is a habitat for these. Because it is a main road as well we have a maintenance contract on that which requires us as part of its thing to slash out to at least 3 metres behind back to the kerb, so that is another justification. There is some there, but I suppose it is a bit like two opposing views: in some you give ground and in others you give back, so it is not clear all the way along. But in each case we try and maintain it, as I said, at least to back-of-drain and back-of-drain; and if we have specific issues such as kangaroos and bushland on either side we try and get a bit more to try and increase sight distance to improve the safety of motorists.

Mr STONEY — Do you know of any occasion when DSE has prosecuted shires for removing vegetation without getting permission?

Mr MIBUS — Not with West Wimmera. Some of my colleagues — we have a local-interest engineers group in this region and they have talked about when they have been taken to task by DSE — —

Mr STONEY — Taken to task or taken to court?

Mr MIBUS — I am not sure of any actual prosecutions.

Mr STONEY — I am trying to draw this out a bit because it is a very important part of our inquiry. How far DSE is prepared to go with a shire if a shire is adamant that this tree has to come out and if it takes it out what will DSE do? Is it bluffing a bit or will it take action?

Mr MIBUS — I think it is a bit of bluff. It depends who you are dealing with too. Once again a bit of commonsense has to come into justifying the removal of trees. In our case we put up quite distinctly an area that we can maintain: our assets — the road pavement, the shoulders and the drains. If there is an issue beyond the drains, as in figure 16 which shows an issue of kangaroos, then we try and take that little bit more out beyond the drain. But there is a reasonable case for it, and you can go up along this road probably every week and our guys pull kangaroos off the road so obviously people have had close encounters there of the moving kind. If you were not getting them you would not do it. It costs us money to slash it each year, so we do not spend money for the sake of spending it; we do not clear trees for the sake of clearing them. We do it from a road safety point of view. I do not have statistics of actual road crashes like the previous presentation had. We do have road accidents — not that many serious ones, thank goodness — but the accidents occur more so on the highway.

The CHAIR — Does the shire carry out proactive road safety inspections?

Mr MIBUS — Yes, definitely. In fact the way the Road Management Bill will be coming in there is no surprise or shock to us. Because we have been contracting to VicRoads and part of that is you have to go through an audit to show what you have carried out — all your documentation of every inspection, the rectification of any non-conformance that we are now adopting for all our roads — we carry out that sort of procedure,. As I have shown in these photos there are lots of examples of trees close to sealed edges as such, but at the end of the day it gets back to costs. When the road is upgraded we will then come back and look at it; but in the meantime we have highlighted it by putting up a chevron sign or additional guide posts and those sorts of things:
Mr MULDER — With your road management plan that you will adopt for your own municipal roads, is the issue of resourcing going to put you in a position of having to produce a road management plan that has the lowest possible cost so that funding restrictions do not back you into a corner?

Mr MIBUS — We are not overly worried at the present time. I suppose the acid test will come when it is all in place and running. As I said, while we do it with the highways and with our main roads and our arterial roads, lesser inspections are done of all the other minor roads. The levels we set basically reflect that anyhow, so if anything it is probably whether we think there should even be additional documentation over and above what we are currently doing. We do not think there should have to be in what we are doing. Come the audit in July or so when they come around and start auditing our plans, we will find out how good our plan is, but we reckon it should be up to scratch, given what we currently do with Vicroads anyhow. I think we are very fortunate.

Our municipality is a very long municipality. It is probably in the order of from 30 to 50 kilometres wide at its widest point, but it is very long; we go right up and touch on to the Big Desert about 30 or 40 kilometres north of Kaniva right into the Big Desert, and we come down right to the Glenelg River at Harrow. We have very dry and arid country to the north of us and good red gums and wetlands to the south, so we have the full gamut of roads. As I said, our roads are in fairly good nick, and that is shown up in our customer satisfaction surveys that are carried out as part of the corporate plan each year. We rate pretty high in that, and we pride ourselves on that. We are not perfect by any means, but we strive to be. Something will always come along, depending on what happens. If you get very dry years you will do better with your roads and probably catch up on what does not get done in wet years.

Mr MULDER — Do utility providers create a problem for you at this point in time, road-safety-wise, access-wise and works-wise?

Mr MIBUS — No, they have been pretty good. Not too much goes on in the way of works in our township areas, because of their low populations. We do not have a lot of regional facilities, and we probably depend more on Horsham for a lot of the bigger things in our lifestyles. But recently, for instance, we had a wastewater line put in from our sewerage farm to the golf course, and that had to cross the highway. No issues arose during the installation of that pipeline through the town, across the highway and out to the golf course. We were given advance warning and the plans were sent out showing the route. The only thing was that we had a change of staff at that time and I came in, and I suggested an alternate line as they were starting to construct it. I reckon they could have saved themselves a substantial amount of money by rerouting one section. They said, ‘Well, it has been approved by your predecessor. Too late. Bad luck. We’re not going to do any more about it’. There is a lack of flexibility at times, even though something may have been referred to an authority.

We have had some issues with Telstra which have been fixed up slowly, such as cables that have just been laid on the ground as they have not had the time to put them in the ground, and if you get a brigade burning off you can get a bit of embarrassment. Some of our plant operators sometimes unknowingly take out a Telstra cable when they are cleaning out a drain, because it is not that far below the ground. But, once again, the guys who come out to do that live locally. We still do things locally, rather than ringing up some number in Singapore or wherever it might be to get a technician out.

I will just go back through some of the photos. Pages 3 and 4 basically depict ideal types of roads, and they vary. Those pictures are really to give you an indication of what the actual conditions are like and what the standard of roads can be like. Figure 5 shows that you can get a road serving properties in our municipality that is really only a track on the ground. It has probably been flat-loaded once, and it just weaves its way between the trees. Then you get up to the highways at the other end of the scale.

In figure 6 you can see a tree on the inside of a curve, and someone who is coming along that road towards that curve is half-blinded as they really do not have sufficient sight distance to see it. But once again, because it is a low-volume road, the cost of removing that one tree is probably not worth it. Some of the locals have painted a white line at the base of the tree and put a reflector on it to make it look like a guidepost right where the tree is. They have done that on a couple of occasions.

Figure 7 depicts the worst example we have of a tree near a road. Where that vehicle is parked is about where you would get if you went to normally pass another vehicle, and it shows how far you would have to move off if another vehicle were coming towards you. When you are in the car, the rear-vision mirror is nearly touching the
tree. Even though that photo shows a bit of distance between the vehicle and the tree, there is really not that much at all. You would have a job to walk between that.

The first time I came across this road and this particular example, we were driving along at midday and the shade of the tree was basically hiding the trunk. We had a vehicle coming towards us and our driver was pulling up and I said, ‘Why are you pulling up?’. He said, ‘There’s a tree there’, and I said, ‘Oh, yes, there is too’. Locals know about it, so that is all right, but if you get some unsuspecting people travelling through wanting to visit the wetlands in the shire — we are trying to push the wetlands from a tourism point of view, and people come from outside the area and travel on these roads wanting to see some of these wetlands — they are the ones who will be caught out by this situation.

This tree has hollows in it, and under our planning schemes any large eucalypts with hollows in them are protected because they are a nesting habitat for the red-tailed black cockatoo, so there is no way known you can remove it. If you do, you will have Environment Australia on your back. There is another example in figure 8. This is a small tree, but once again that has a guidepost painted on it with a reflector attached to it. The paint has worn off a bit, but we have just put extra guide posting around it.

Figure 9 depicts a similar sort of thing. It is just an isolated tree, but further up the road there might be a fair few trees that have come in close to the road. If drivers are driving in an environment where there are a lot of trees, they constantly reinforce the point that there are trees in the area and that they should slow down a bit and be aware of them when they pull off the road, but if you are driving around on an open road and you have one tree out on its own, you might just happen to be dreaming or looking at the scenery around you, and the next minute when you go to pull off the road and you are watching another vehicle, this tree could all of a sudden be fairly close to you.

We have some very mature trees on Cemetery Road, and an example of one is shown on page 8. It has a signpost attached to it showing that it has heritage protection because it is noted that it has had some significant cultural background to it, and, as such, the road has been diverted around that tree. Given that it is a low-volume road, once again, we do not have an issue with that, but we have to be aware of it just the same.

Figure 14 on page 9 shows Powers Creek Road and the vegetation that overhangs the road there. In the photo just below that you can see the abutting section of road which was constructed last year. That section of the road you can see at the top in figure 14 will be constructed in the next month. You can see down below what it is going to look like. There will be a substantial amount of tree clearing going on along that particular section of road. You can see in the figure below what we will be doing with it. There are still trees along there, and, given time, you will find that because there will be some additional light in there you will get regeneration coming back readily.

Mr STONEY — Do you just do that, or do you ask DSE?

Mr MIBUS — No, we just do it. On page 10 I have mentioned the road going through the national park where we clear back vegetation. It is more a matter of trimming, and the vegetation still grows there each year. Also in figure 17 you will see the inside of a curve. That road has only a 5½ metre seal. It is a fairly tight curve, and someone who has not gone around there before could probably take the curve comfortably at 80 km/h, but you could handle it at the legal speed limit. We have recently put double lines through that curve to help people keep on the right side of the road, because some people tend to cut the corners a bit when they are travelling. You will notice that in the inside of the curve the vegetation has been cleared back even more than the 3 metres. That is really just to give a bit of foresight and warning to traffic going around the curve.

Figure 18 depicts a situation where, once again, a tree is fairly close to the road, but there is a corner post of a fence as well. It has probably been like that since the road was first put in, but if that road were ever upgraded we would take out a truncation across the inside of that curve and take out those trees on the far side as well. At the present time we have put up an advance warning sign on that curve. It is a sealed road, but we just want to get people to slow down a bit, and then it is not an issue.

Figures 19 and 20 relate back to the incident I mentioned that occurred last month where we had a near-miss when two cars crossed through an intersection. Setbacks at intersections should go back a lot further, and what I am saying there is that the setbacks should go back to the stopping sight distance that is needed for the design speed of the road. In other words, if you are travelling at 100 kilometres an hour how long it takes you to stop; and you measure the distance back from the intersection. They should have that back from the actual intersection of the road, and everything that is within that envelope should be allowed to be cleared back, because if you are entering
that intersection and you just immediately look up and you see someone has come along and they do not look to be slowing down, at least you have a chance to pull up. So once again it just proves that what we have been pushing for and we have been doing — and working with DSE as well — is basically to have as of right a clearing of vegetation. There are trees that are within that envelope at the present time but we are going with it until such time as the road is further upgraded and we will review it then.

Mr EREN — I have one question. I refer to figure 4, where you say that the speed value of these gravel roads varies from 60 to 80 km/h. Is there a 100-km/h default speed limit there or have you got signs?

Mr MIBUS — No, we do not put speed advisory signs on gravel roads. I have been told, even by insurers, that you do not do that because conditions of gravel roads can vary from month to month, so it is only on sealed roads that you are safe and that you can put up a speed advisory limit. It is just that on those roads the locals will drive according to the condition of them, and that is what you should be doing, too.

Mr EREN — Would you like to see a reduction in the default of 100 km/h?

Mr MIBUS — It would certainly be an advantage to do it, but sometimes you can have roads where you can go faster than that too and still be very safe. I think it still comes down to driver education, that they should be driving to the weather and road conditions. Part of our maintenance inspection program is to try to ensure that we do set a minimum level to which we maintain a road, and that includes gravel roads. That will also relate to what the actual traffic count on the road is like. The higher the traffic count — and if it is a gravel road — the more attention it will get. Some roads get graded only once a year and that is invariably after winter so it is right then for summer.

A lot have not even got gravel sheeting at all, they are only just an earth formation; and invariably that is done just before summer as well, ready for the harvest traffic, because you usually get some people who enjoy seeing how far they can get with a four-wheel drive on dirt roads and invariably they wreck it for everyone. When it rains the farmers do not drive down those roads. They know to keep off until they dry, and they stay in better condition at other times. On the surface, you would say yes to it, but there are other times when you would not. Then you get enforcement of it as well. I do not have an issue with putting an 80-km/h limit on a gravel road, but there would be some times when even 80 km/h is going to be too fast.

Mr EREN — You would not have any signs; it is just a default like it is now? Instead of 100 km/h, through education people know to drive at a maximum speed of 80 km/h? Would you agree with that?

Mr MIBUS — I always reckon it is a good idea when driving along a road to hit the brakes and see how long it takes to pull up. I think people would be scared at how far they can roll along a gravel road compared to a bitumen road if they are doing the same speed. Then they can say, ‘All right, this road has a fairly loose surface, I have to drive a lot slower’.

If I may make an interesting note, a media release came in yesterday’s mail and the heading was, ‘The value of limb over life’, and I think that is what it is getting down to. Sure, we might have environmental issues but at the end of the day we have to value life over the trees and I do not see that what we are asking is too big an effort. There are still lots of trees left on the roadsides that accommodate that, and there are still sites for remnant vegetation and have been ever since road reserves were put in and there will continue to be in the future. Councils are not about wholesale clearing of roads. We are only asking about what we need to maintain — our asset — and to minimise it. We will not eliminate it because at the end of the day it still gets down to the driver, and under the Road Management Bill they are trying to reinforce that aspect, too, as the responsibility of drivers.

Mr STONEY — Who put out the press release?

Mr MIBUS — John Vogels, the Liberal member.

The CHAIR — If there are no other questions, I will thank you, Colin. We appreciate the time you have given us.

Witness withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Stawell – 17 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 K. Dowsley, Executive Officer; and
Mr J. McTaggart, Chair, Roadsafe Wimmera Council.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Welcome to Roadsafe Wimmera Council.

Mr DOWSLEY — Thank you, Chair. If I could introduce John McTaggart, who is chairman of our group in Horsham. We deal with the five Wimmera shires — West Wimmera, Hindmarsh, Yarriambiack, Horsham and Northern Grampians — and I am the executive officer of that group. We have some pretty strong interests in the particular issues you are involved in and a number of suggestions we would like to make to you, and we have a little bit of background we would like to talk to you about as well. You have asked about issues. The sort of issues we think are key in the Wimmera are things like this.

Overheads shown

Mr DOWSLEY — You might not have heard about invisibility. Here we are talking about invisibility of vehicles and other things like wildlife and stock. John and I counted up about seven or eight kangaroo-related incidents and crashes that we have had between us in our lives up here. If you live here you end up running into a fair bit of wildlife in one way or another, not to mention the odd vehicle.

Fatigue is also an issue, and we are including inattention, distraction and drowsiness in that as well, not just going off to sleep. The wide open spaces encourage speeding. Young drivers are generally overconfident and we have a lot of variations in road surfaces, so speed is an issue in varying respects.

Drugs are obviously another issue, and we are including alcohol in that. We suspect it is a fairly widespread problem, but with non-alcohol drugs in particular the evidence is not quite as obvious as we would like it to be. The collection of evidence is only just beginning at this stage.

We also think that non-separation of vehicles is quite an issue. Obviously the majority of country roads have one lane each way with nothing more than a white line — many do not even have a centre line — between passing traffic.

Ignoring double lines is another issue. It is extremely rare for me to travel anywhere for more than an hour in the country these days and not come across another vehicle crossing the double lines. It seems to me there are some things we could perhaps do about that.

Before I move on to a number of other issues I would say that many crashes involve more than one of these issues. We think the effects are cumulative and perhaps even interactive in their contribution to crashes. For example, if a fatigued driver is taking drugs it will obviously exacerbate reduced attention. Why are those things issues in our area? There are at least two key contributing factors I would like to speak about: one is the ageing population in this part of the world, and in particular the impact of that ageing on vision; and the other one is fatigue, which I will say a few words about.

Starting with the ageing population, the 60-plus section is the one we are particularly interested in here. I will be 58 in a little while, so I am feeling pretty much attached to that section myself. You will notice that there are three shires — Hindmarsh, West Wimmera and Yarriambiack — that have well over a quarter of their population aged 60-plus, and the total across the Wimmera is about 23.6.

You might be aware — in fact you would all know Road Safety for Older Road Users word perfectly, I suspect — that 17 per cent is the Victorian average for the number of 60-plus-year-olds in the population, so we are a fair bit above that for a start. The other significant statistic is that the Victorian average for fatalities contributed to by 60-plus-year-olds is 20 per cent, but in the Wimmera it is 28 per cent. They are a couple of bits of background that demonstrate that our ageing population is an issue.

The CHAIR — Perhaps I am on the wrong track here, but is the issue an ageing population or is it the fact that a lot of younger people leave the rural area and head into the city looking for work?

Mr McTAGGART — For instance, my children are all moving out of Horsham. I have a young family, with children ranging from 23 to 18, and they have all moved out of Horsham to study tertiary education. One has come back to Horsham as she has been lucky enough to get employment, but the other two have moved away. I think Ken’s family is the same.

Mr DOWSLEY — Yes, much the same. You are right; because those younger ones are leaving, the population ends up being much more at the older end of the stream.
Mr McTAGGART — When you move into the outer municipalities it is even worse because of the lack of employment opportunities in those towns, and you have that high-age population, as you can see.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr DOWSLEY — I mentioned before that I wanted to spend a little bit of time talking about the vision part of the deal. I have not been able to find a direct reference to this, but the RACV quoted recently that 95 per cent of the driving input is from the visual system. That is a quote that Anne Harris made recently. You would not have to stop to think for too long to realise that if you cannot see well, you will have some real issues with driving, and that is part of the reason I wanted to speak about this issue.

When you age these things listed are some of the things that go amiss. You cannot focus so easily, and it is hard to change the focal length, which is almost the same thing. It is also harder to distinguish colours. That is not absolutely critical in driving, but it might be if there is a strange-coloured vehicle you cannot see. Your peripheral vision decreases, and tunnel vision becomes more common. Glare becomes a problem with older eyes, and you also need more light to see well. I do not think there would be too many of us here who would not have experienced the need to have a bright light to read the telephone book from time to time. That is one of the classic examples of needing more light.

Your recent report talks about twice the brightness being needed for every decade after 25 years of age, and states that by age 75 some drivers might need 32 times as much brightness. That fact is well recognised, and it is just another factor for the ageing population. There are some fairly simple things you might do to compensate. You might wear glasses, like I do, or sunglasses. You might avoid night-driving, because obviously vision is a much more major issue at night than in the daytime. You might drive a bit slower and give yourself a bit more time to react if you have to. To combat fatigue, we are talking about taking regular rests and changing drivers. I strongly advocate driving with your headlights on as frequently as you possibly can, if not all the time. Why? It takes advantage of how our eyes work, in that the human eye is light-seeking, and it is most advantageous when the natural light is low and you can see highly contrasting objects more easily.

The CHAIR — Does your Roadsafe council advocate driving with lights on?

Mr DOWSLEY — Absolutely.

The CHAIR — Do you do that?

Mr DOWSLEY — Yes. At the moment quite a few of the newer vehicles coming onto the market have automatic daylight running lights, but not all. I have seen that there is a fairly strong recommendation in your road safety report, and I would support that extremely strongly.

Mr McTAGGART — The other things is that VicRoads has daylight running lights on all of its fleet of vehicles. So it has seen the benefits of having the lights on during the day.

Mr DOWSLEY — I have been busy chipping Harry Hayes, one of your assistant police commissioners, to get that brought into the police force, because I think they ought to be setting an example. We probably write a dozen or 15 letters to ministers and various others during the year about this, that and the other thing, and that is one of the things we have been pursuing.

The benefit about this lights-on issue is that you are less likely to miss colours that blend in. If there is a dark car on the horizon and it has its lights on, you will see the lights. It does not really matter what colour it is. It is just a way of getting around the desire that some people have to have a nice black car, a dark-green car or a purple car — colours that are not easy to see. Relating the issue to this business about improved vision at the periphery, if you are looking one way and there is something bright out in another direction, it is much more likely that you will see that than a vehicle without a bright light. It is also easier to estimate the rate of approach if you have a good fix on that particular vehicle. These are a couple of the little slogans we use — ‘Be seen sooner and see others sooner’.

I am sure some of you are well aware that this guy, Koonstra, from a major road safety research facility in the Netherlands has done quite an extensive amount of research and has translated that to our light level — our latitude. That is his estimate of the impact on Victorian road fatalities from his research. I was quite pleased to see that that. I think it makes a lot of sense.

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Moving on to the involvement of fatigue in crashes, when you look at the five highways that traverse our section of the Wimmera, the Western Highway is obviously the major interstate route and you will see there that something like 30 per cent of the cost that is attributable to these crashes occurs on the Western Highway. Those costs are the ones that I have gained using the Bureau of Transport Economics figures. It boils down to the fact there is a significant — approaching $100 million — cost involved. I guess lost opportunity is a very large part of that. A very significant amount of those happens on our highways.

Mr HARKNESS — What do you estimate the cost of a fatality to be?

Mr DOWSLEY — I guess 1.7. It goes up and down a bit. I have seen figures recently that say 1.6 and things like that. In the five years between January 1997 to December 2001 that is where the run-off-the-road crashes have happened. That is not all the crashes in the Wimmera, that is just the run-off-the-road ones.

The CHAIR — That is the main Adelaide road we can see there, is it?

Mr DOWSLEY — Absolutely correct. Looking at the map, this is Ararat which you probably would have come through, and Stawell, and then you come through the Grampians up into Horsham, up to Dimboola, Nhill and over into South Australia. The other is the Henty Highway, which runs through Warracknabeal up to Mildura; and then you have the Wimmera Highway, which runs through Edenhope, through Horsham and up to St Arnaud. The Borung Highway goes across to Warracknabeal and then down to Dimboola; and the Sunraysia Highway, I think, runs basically through this section through St Arnaud to the south.

Mr EREN — So it would appear they would be fatigue-related incidents?

Mr DOWSLEY — Yes, and I have a bit more evidence to support that.

Mr EREN — Are there sufficient rest areas, and do people feel safe in those rest areas?

Mr McTAGGART — That is one of the main problems. The only rest area we do have is at a place called Lochiel, which is on the western side of Dimboola. There are toilet facilities there. Unfortunately due to its location along the Wimmera River it is difficult for Adelaide-bound traffic to access it, although another road has been put in to assist people going in there. There is one rest area on the South Australian-Victorian border which has toilets, and they are basic, and eating facilities and things like that; but there is nothing else between here and the border apart from just pull-in places. There is nothing to assist truck drivers, apart from the roadhouses and the trailer exchange at Nhill, so the rest is pretty basic — just pull-ins and nothing else. As far as women are concerned, there is no security for women in any of those areas.

Mr DOWSLEY — That is one of the things we think needs to fall into the countermeasure area for fatigue, for sure. That is where they are. These figures are from Crashstats for about the last five years, and you will notice these DCs which are the standard classifications for the various sorts of crashes that are used in the Crashstats. The DC120 is head-on, not overtaking; so just think about that. Why does that happen? It is probably because someone has had a bit of a snooze. The DC170s and 180s are off-road in various sorts of ways either on the curve or on the straight, so it can be either to the left or to the right or whatever — there is a range of classifications there. In fact the majority of road organisations these days take these DCs as generally indicating that fatigue was a major factor in the crash. Basically these DC120, DC170s and DC180s figures are telling us that a significant number, more than half of the Wimmera crashes, have been to do with lost control.

The other ones include 70 per cent not at an intersection. They could have run into something else, it could have been a kangaroo or something, but it is difficult to put your finger on it. These are just vaguely supportive of the view that fatigue is probably involved. Then 87 per cent are on sealed roads, so you could say, generally speaking, that the road surface will not be an issue. A fairly large proportion in rural areas, a similar proportion in the 100-km/h zones — I guess 52 per cent run-off-the-road versus 56 per cent loss-of-control crashes means only 4 per cent of crashes were head-ons but not overtaking, so that is a way you can separate that out. That is pretty strong supporting evidence to say that fatigue is a major issue in many of the crashes that happen in the Wimmera. One particular run-off-the-road countermeasure is the wire rope barriers. I refer to the photo taken on the Hume Highway, looking in the direction of travel, so they are on the left of the shoulder seal. You will also see the audio-tactile strip on the left, the solid dotted line — the rumble strip, if you like. Behind the wire rope barrier there are 2 or 3 metres, because when a vehicle collects that it has to distort and you need a bit of space a couple of metres or so behind. That is an example of one of the sorts of things that are beginning to be used in places now.
There is a range of other things that we think ought to be seriously considered and one is to tighten vision requirements. I am well aware, having recently renewed my licence, that even though I wear glasses it does not appear on my licence. I think it ought to and that it ought to be pushed very strongly. I am also aware that you do not have to do a vision test when you turn up for your licence again and that a number of things like the useful field-of-vision test that is being used elsewhere could perhaps be adopted in our part of the world, so it seems to me that there is a range of things that could be sensibly done there. With my issues about vision I would be supporting those sorts of approaches very strongly.

As for the mandatory daylight running lights, I guess that is an aid provision, if you like. It is just one of the things to do with being seen better. On roadside tests, I am aware that a number of saliva tests are being trialled for drugs and so on at the moment. If you weigh out things to do with trying to assess fatigue, how you deal with fatigue is an interesting question. It seems to me that the fatigue penalty may be for an individual to be made to stay put, effectively to take a compulsory power nap for a bit. I do not know how far advanced these little tests are. Do you know, John?

Mr McTAGGART — No, not at the moment. They are under trial.

Mr DOWSLEY — That might be some time away; but seriously, fatigue is a real issue. How you identify it is what we have to come to grips with now. Drugs are perhaps a little bit easier in some respects.

We have mentioned the rest areas because obviously they facilitate power naps. We strongly advocate a break every 2 hours of a journey, one way or another. The rumble strips, audio-tactile strips can be in the centre of the road. The picture we saw a moment or two back shows what you would call an edge line audio-tactile strip, and it provides an auditory and a vibrational signal to somebody that they are going off the track they should be on. That sort of thing can also be put in the middle of the road. I understand that Vicroads has let a tender to put a couple of trial strips on the Western Highway, one near Mount Langi Ghiran, just east of Ararat, and the other one from Wail to Dimboola. Basically it is just to give additional alerts, if you like, to people running off the road.

Mr MULDER — Is it envisaged that they will be using them just on the broken strips or on the double lines?

Mr DOWSLEY — In those areas I think it will be solid right through. I understand they are going to do 5-kilometre strips, and I think it will be all the way along. But that is an interesting point you raise because we could seriously envisage these centre-line audio-tactile strips being used wherever there are double lines.

Mr MULDER — I have another question on double lines. Are reviews conducted in terms of the placement of double lines, and were double lines reviewed when B-doubles were introduced? I live down in the Western District and travel on the Princes Highway between Geelong and Colac, and in relation to the issue you raised before about people passing on double lines — I call it clipping double lines — quite obviously there are sections of road there where you cannot see a double line coming in your direction. You think it is safe to pull out and pass a B-double truck, but you are two-thirds of the way past and you are on double lines.

Mr DOWSLEY — I had exactly the same experience on the east side of Ararat on Sunday morning this week. I seriously think a new set of criteria need to be designed with B-doubles in mind and with regard to placement of double lines. So I would agree with that.

Mr McTAGGART — We get a number of complaints from local residents in regard to the placement of double lines, and we basically take those complaints to Vicroads on behalf of the residents. The Vicroads people do give us a good ear, and they are very flexible as far as reassessing the placement of double lines in our area. We have great cooperation from Vicroads as far as the double-line placement is concerned.

Mr DOWSLEY — I think rumble strips have a very valuable part to play and a bigger part than they currently do play.

We have talked about roadside wire rope barriers, and one of the things I have not put in our submission is centre-of-the-road wire rope barriers. We are probably all well aware of the Vision Zero deal in Sweden, and we were just talking about that coming down here this morning. We have quite a lot of three-lane highway between here and Horsham, and you can imagine there would be areas where these wire-rope barriers could be placed down
the middle. I believe it would dramatically change your view of how you drive, given that there would be a fence there. I reckon it would change the way I drive, for a start.

Wire rope barriers have some fairly interesting opportunities. I understand there is even likely to be a fair section of wire rope barrier put down along the Western Highway in the next few months — extensive trials, I think you would call it.

I was interested in your discussion with the previous gentleman from West Wimmera about the 80-kilometre-an-hour issue. I have put narrow seal in there. That might be difficult to do, but certainly default arrangements for gravel and dirt roads are way overdue. It seems to me that is something that should be brought in post haste.

I originally put it up the suggestion about limiting P-platers to one passenger as having no passengers, but on Monday night my committee said, ‘No, that is perhaps a bit tough’. It is clear that when novice drivers have their mates in the vehicle they are more likely to have a crash, so that is a way of trying to get around that. There might be other ways of doing it.

The old business about sealing shoulders is a bit of a double-edged sword, because if you seal a shoulder it means drivers can get closer to the trees before they wake up than they would if they got into gravel. If you seal shoulders you almost automatically have to put in a rumble strip to wake drivers up, and perhaps the wire rope barriers fall into the same category. But sealing shoulders has been shown to be a pretty useful addition.

There are a range of possible countermeasures. Very briefly, the sorts of things we have spent some time on in the last year or two include this business about having car lights on, and we very strongly support the Keys Please program, particularly in the new format, which is no longer the scare-the-young-ones idea it appeared to be in the past. It is now much more about trying to develop a situation where they will get 120-plus hours of supervised experience before they get their P-plates, and that is pretty important part of the deal.

We also spend quite a bit of effort with the local football and netball clubs across the Wimmera on this Looking After Our Mates program, which basically involves controlling drinking in a sensible way. Drinking is obviously a key issue, and it is a key social lubricant in all sorts of respects in the country — and perhaps not just in the country. Drinking is a pretty serious issue in some areas.

We also spend quite a bit of time trying to get people to understand what fatigue is and the ways they might go about avoiding it. When these audio-tactile centre lines are being put down in May this year, we will mount a bit of a PR campaign to get people to understand what they are, for a start, and what the likely benefits of these things will be.

The other thing we spend a bit of effort on is fleet purchase and driving policies, because a large proportion of the vehicles that come into the community originate from fleets, and if you can influence the safety quality that the fleet purchasers buy, that will quickly flow down into the Commodores or whatever it happens to be that the 18-year-olds will be buying in about five to six years time. We see that as a pretty valuable thing to push into the policies of the fleet purchasers. They are the sorts of things we are doing. There might be other things that John wants to add.

Mr McTAGGART — We are educating older people as far as their driving is concerned and the things to look out for when they are ageing. We address the older groups — the elderly citizens and any organisation that deals with the elderly people — on their driving, updating their knowledge of the road laws and things like that. That is an area we are looking at. We acknowledge the fact that our proportion of ageing population is higher than in other areas of Victoria, and we are looking at that.

Mr STONEY — I would like to explore the issue of having car lights on all the time. Some years ago there was a campaign for all cars to have their lights on, and a lot of people did it. There were strong reports of fatigue and irritation, especially with long-distance driving. It was reported that all the lights were different — some were on high beam, some just had little running lights on — and I remember that there was quite a debate about it at the time. A consensus emerged that when all cars have all their lights on all the time, especially out in the country, it caused great irritation and fatigue and might even have been counterproductive.
Mr DOWSLEY — Yes. I can understand why you say that, because the daylight running lights we are talking about from the European scene are certainly not on high beam, they are on low beam, at about 70 per cent of the normal candle power. So I acknowledge there is a problem of dazzling. Nevertheless I think that once you get away from that, there are a lot of pluses to be had in the deal.

Mr McTAGGART — It has been accepted quite well in the motorcycle fraternity. Most motorcyclists use their daylight running lights for visibility purposes.

Mr STONEY — I go along with that, but that is for one every now and again. If you have a whole stream of vehicles on a skinny road with lights coming past for hours on end, it is a different matter.

Mr McTAGGART — Perhaps if it is for hours on end, it might be time to stop.

The CHAIR — Perhaps we can discuss some of those issues over a bite to eat, but I think we will break there so that people do not get too fatigued. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Stawell — 17 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

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

Witness
Mr J. Keller, Infrastructure Manager, Shire of Glenelg.

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Welcome, John Keller, from the Glenelg Shire Council. As you are aware, this is the parliamentary Road Safety Committee inquiry into crashes involving roadside objects and the country road toll. We have seven members on our committee, five of whom are here. You are operating under parliamentary privilege, so what you say cannot be held against you legally in the future. Again, welcome. We appreciate your input. I now hand over to you for your submission.

Mr KELLER — Thank you. I extend my thanks and council’s thanks for the opportunity to appear before the committee and to speak to you. I am the infrastructure services manager at the Glenelg Shire Council. Perhaps in a previous life I might have once been a shire engineer, but these days I am the infrastructure services manager and look after a large part of the shire’s expenditure, including that relating to roads and road construction and the like. A map of our municipality is included in the folder. I apologise that in the photocopying it was shrunk down to an A3 size and some of the printing is not as large as it could be. Nevertheless it gives an idea of where the municipality lies. Glenelg is a large urban and rural municipality extending from Portland to north of Casterton. It has a whole range of rural and urban issues including those relating to roads and road traffic in rural and urban areas.

The port of Portland is a fairly key facility in the municipality, and in the context of this hearing it generates large volumes of heavy vehicles. Those volumes are increasing rapidly and will only increase in the future with ongoing developments in the timber, mineral sands and related industries. A number of local industries generate both heavy vehicles and smaller vehicles. They include timber and superphosphate production, and tourism. The mix of tourist-type vehicles and timber trucks on some of our roads can produce reasonably exciting times from time to time because of the inexperience of one driver compared with another. A lot of traffic is generated outside the municipality because of the port, and that relates to grain, mineral sands which are coming more on line now, and livestock exports of both sheep and cattle.

I will outline briefly the sorts of places we gather our data from when we need information on road accidents and in particular for design of roads. We use both Vicroads Crashstats and the police reported accident statistics, and there are examples of that sort of information in the little folder I gave you. It is reasonably old, but it is certainly representative of the statistics we have. While we do not have high numbers of casualty accidents — in fact in 2001 I think it was about four and two of those were motorbikes — there are still sufficient accidents, both casualty and non-casualty, to be concerned about. We have a lot of the more minor accidents, and you will see that in the police statistics.

Moving on to the terms of reference and relating particularly to the incidence and causative roles of various factors, including speed and drugs, alcohol and fatigue, neither of those sets of statistics tell us a great deal about what causes the accidents. Perhaps as a first suggestion we believe that is something that could be followed up, because sometimes it is important to know the cause rather than just that there was an accident in that place, particularly when you are going out to fix the problem.

Having said that, I would not suggest for a moment that we have the knowledge of what causes the accidents — in fact we are more likely to be trying to fix the problem — but we certainly have a range of observations. Our observations would be that it is not simply speed that causes many accidents, but rather inappropriate speed. If I could dwell on that for a moment, higher speeds can certainly be accommodated in many areas where they are quite safe. The example I would use is in the western part of our shire where the land is very flat. There are good, solid gravel roads that have solid surfaces on them. They have excellent sight distances — there are wide open paddocks — and speeds are not such a problem. A speed that might be appropriate there would certainly not be appropriate on some of the roads around the coast or in the more densely settled areas along the coast where there are lots of trees along the edges of the road, lots of houses, lots more people and the country is fairly undulated. It has to be horses for courses.

Similarly a speed of 100 kilometres an hour on a sealed road at a given time might be fine, but lots of our older sealed roads have heavy wheel ruts on them, particularly from timber traffic, and after a good rain they fill up with water and the 100 km/h is simply no longer appropriate. It is not so much an issue of speed, but rather what is an appropriate speed for the time. We need to somehow work harder to get drivers to drive to the conditions, and in that respect the proposed provisions in the new Road Management Bill under which there is an onus on the driver to drive to conditions are pleasing to us. I might talk about that a little bit later on as well.
We believe it is also important to note that speed zones are, in a sense, default zones. It does not necessarily follow that it is always safe to drive at 100 kilometres an hour in a 100-km/h zone, which many of our rural areas are, as we mentioned before. Given the size our municipal area, we would find it impossible and certainly impractical to sign every zone or every area at what would be a safe speed. I suspect we would have people driving at very low speeds because we simply could not erect sufficient signs to make it work.

One of the biggest issues in country areas is fatigue. I was at our council’s statutory dinner last night, and it was a nice sunny day today, and as I drove up through the Grampians I would have been foolish to think that fatigue did not have some effect. Most drivers in rural areas would certainly be aware of that risk and be alert to it, but being alert does not always help if you need to keep driving to get somewhere. So fatigue is certainly an issue.

Our observations are that fatigue is a risk factor, along with a whole lot of other factors such as mobile phones and animals in vehicles. One of my pet gripes is seeing the family dog on the lap of a driver looking out the window between you and the driver, and that is amazingly common. I fail to see how someone can really be concentrating on the job when they are in that sort of a situation. Our belief is that in many instances the issue is not necessarily speed, drugs, alcohol or fatigue, but the loss of driver concentration. That is not to say that those other issues are not contributing factors, and I certainly believe that in many instances they are, but in many cases it is a lack of concentration that causes accidents.

The CHAIR — Would you like to comment further on the issue of the use of mobile phones in cars, which you mentioned before?

Mr KELLER — Yes. Holding a mobile phone while driving a car has to be almost taboo, there can be no argument about that, but I extend that to include using mobile phones with a car kit. I am under parliamentary privilege so I can dob myself in, and that is fine. I once worked in the West Wimmera municipality and travelled a lot between Kaniva and Edenhope. If anyone knows the area, it is a nice back-country road, and it was always good for making up a bit of time. Invariably, if I did not have the cruise control set and I was talking on the mobile phone, when I finished I would find myself going faster than I was before. It has to be a lack of concentration — I was not thinking about the speed. That is merely an example. If you are concentrating on something else, you are not concentrating on your driving. It is a distraction from thinking about what you are doing. I am a fairly busy person, and I shudder to think that someone might take my mobile phone away from me in my car, because I do a lot of work on it, but mobile phones undoubtedly take away your concentration.

An area we have some experience in is the item in your second terms of reference that deals with the role of the road and roadside environment in the cause and severity of accidents. The design and construction of a road, as well as the roadside environment, certainly has a large part to play in the cause and severity of accidents. As we construct new roads or reconstruct old roads, we certainly construct them to current standards, and generally the reconstructions are much safer than the existing or older roads.

Given the long length of roads we have in our shire — in excess of 3000 kilometres of both main and local roads, leaving out the highways, and of those in excess of 1500 kilometres or well over half are unsealed, so it is a fair range of rural roads — it would be absolutely impossible for us, under our financing arrangements or the government’s, to construct all those roads to the standards we would like. If we cannot construct all the roads to the standards we want simply because the community cannot afford that, then there needs to be a better way to handle that, and the members of the community need to accept that there is some responsibility on them as well.

Mr MULDER — Does that mean that the road management plan you will have to put forward under the Road Management Bill will be based on the lowest possible standard to protect yourself in that regard? How will you handle that, given the lack of resources you mentioned?

Mr KELLER — We certainly would not be aiming for the lowest possible standard. We would be aiming for a standard that is as high as we can meet.

Mr MULDER — Given your financial constraints?

Mr KELLER — Given all the constraints we have, yes. They will always govern it. Generally speaking, at the end of the day we can only put into roads as much money as we can — being a rural municipality, a large part of our budget goes into roads, and there would be no surprises in that — and as much as we can get out of both
federal and state government. Our objective is to construct and maintain our roads to the safest possible standard, given all those factors, and funds will always be the governing factor.

**Mr MULDER** — Is there any downside to the Road Management Bill? There does not appear to be.

**Mr KELLER** — There is very little downside, from our point of view. We have been heavily involved, like most shires, in developing it. There have been some issues here and there that we have wanted changed and that have been changed, and there are some small ones here and there that might need refinement as we go on, but in general I would suggest we are very supportive of it.

As an example, I have made a note about the availability of funds. Like many rural municipalities, we have a number of intersections that are plain cross-intersections, and coming out of the Mallee originally, I know there are as many of those intersections as you might wish to count. Last year we had a serious accident that resulted in a couple of fatalities on a cross-intersection that involved the main road and a local road. There are a number of those intersections along that road, without looking anywhere else, and that became our focus. The good news out of that is that the feds announced yesterday that they will fund a black-spot program to fix that intersection, and we certainly appreciate that. But it is costing us about a quarter of a million dollars to fix that one, and when we look down the road we see all the rest of them, and, as an engineer, that is not a very comfortable feeling. I know that one will be fixed, but then I look at the rest.

The roadside environment is something I will talk about a little bit later on when we talk about roadside objects. We certainly have a lot of problems with the roadside environment, and native vegetation is one aspect we will talk about.

I do not believe we are experienced enough to talk about the role and potential contribution of vehicle features, but we can certainly cast some observations. My observations would be that cruise control is a valuable asset in a car, and given the way that modern vehicles are set up with cruise control, it is something I rely on heavily to reduce my expenditure towards the government. While car navigation systems are not so common, I see them as being another possible distraction in a vehicle. They would certainly have some value, and there is no doubt about that, but they are another distraction, and any distraction is likely to cause some problems.

I have had some experience on country roads with a feature some vehicles now have called traction control. It is a little switch that allows the motor to cut out when it starts spinning. It is a great thing when you are getting bogged, absolutely terrific; it helps you get out of a whole lot. It is probably the worst thing ever invented if you are on a loose gravel road and the car suddenly takes off sideways or something and you need a little bit of power to get out of it, because the moment you go for it is all gone and you will be down in the ditch somewhere fairly quickly. Again, sure, perhaps we need to know that we should have it switched on in the right spot, but I suspect we will see incidences where it causes accidents on loose gravel roads. Yes, it is a good feature, but there is another side to it as well.

On enforcement activities, in my view enforcement activities in the Glenelg municipality are certainly regularly undertaken. We spend a lot of coordinating time with the police on all sorts of things. I believe they are doing a very good job in our municipality and they are certainly very effective. From council’s perspective assistance from Victoria Police is always forthcoming and readily available if we have particular issues in particular areas. We use them pretty commonly to address problems that might arise one way or another, and they are very cooperative.

More importantly, the measures that could be introduced to reduce the severity of crashes — we can always design roads higher, construct them to better standards and maintain them to higher standards — will always be funding reliant. That is not just our problem or your problem. Sure, we would like lots more grants from you, lots more money, but we recognise the limitations on that because we face the same sorts of limitations in local government. There needs to be a balance between the standard of the works and the extent of the works. I could spend all our money on perfect sections and we would have perfect bits of roads and miles and miles of roads that are not addressed. It is always a difficulty as to how you balance that. You do not want to fall below standards, but you want to address it as best you can, and that is always a difficulty.

Black spot funding was a very effective mechanism — not just a funding arrangement but a mechanism — to address specific issues and sites, particularly the poorly designed sections of roads and intersections; and potential sites, not just the ones where accidents occurred. It was great to be able to address some where you could see it coming or where the police statistics identified more minor accidents.
Mr HARKNESS — Just on that point about quality and extent, what processes do you pursue to determine that?

Mr KELLER — It really comes down to working with the guidelines that we might have. I will touch on those in the second part of the inquiry out of the sorts of things in the Vicroads guidelines, particularly on new works. I guess the starting point is new works if you want to fit the guidelines. That has to be the start. It is when you get down into the maintenance that you rely heavily on all the people involved, from me down to the guy out on the machinery, to pay more attention to the more major roads and the more major issues. That has to be everyone, because I am not quite sure that you can write too many guidelines or processes to it other than plain commonsense ones, otherwise you get to the point where — I do not believe it would be a wasted exercise, but we do road audits on all the roads. We could do that, and I reckon I would end up with a fairly long list of work that would keep us busy for a long time. Again we should use road audits. We should use them on particular sections that are more important or more likely and so on, so it has to be in the order of things, if you like.

Mr MULDER — You spoke before about the Road Management Bill and utility providers. Has council worked out yet as to how it will put in place a process for control, approval, inspection of utility providers works, whether a fee will be applied, how that fee will be worked out?

Mr KELLER — Yes, that is a very interesting one. Thanks for that! We did have some processes there prior to the Road Management Bill, and we have not looked at them as a result of the bill. We will need to do that, because I suggest there will be a range of new processes that we will need to implement. We certainly have them in mind. We do at the moment charge for road openings, but a number of our more major utilities have in the past escaped that, and that is where we will need to be looking in the future. They have not been such a problem to us, and I think that is a reflection that while our urban area is reasonably large in Portland we do not have so many new or developing areas. Most of our road openings are on footpaths, nature strips and things like that. It is very limited on the road itself.

Mr MULDER — But even for them to do new works like connecting houses to power or anything at all that involves them conducting works on the road and the requirement of a permit I would imagine there would be a fee of some sort. You are not going to let them get away scot-free, surely!

Mr KELLER — No way! We will be pleased to recoup some costs, yes; and while we have an inspection regime we will need to refine that because of the onus that is now in the bill, so we will need to do better at that. It has been focused on ensuring that people have not opened the road without a permit, for example, and that it is repaired; not so much on the standards and the issues that come with the Road Management Bill such as compliance and those sorts of things. I spoke about the black spot program and not just as a funding source. We would certainly strongly advocate for its re-introduction or retention. We saw it as an excellent program to address problems.

One of the most important activities that could be undertaken is one of education. It is a very difficult thing, but it touches on what I was talking about before with appropriate speeds as an example, and there are many others. We perhaps need to get a higher focus on teaching people who are obtaining their licence about driving to conditions, about driving at suitable speeds and not zone speeds. If you think about the licence, there are lots of questions about the rules, about the law and how fast you can go in particular zones, how far you can park from places and all those sorts of things. It does not talk much about what would be a commonsense speed or what would be a sensible thing to do in these sorts of circumstances. I liken that to the statement that is often put to me, and I reckon in my career I have heard it so many times — if I had two bob for it I would be a rich man — ‘If you do not do something, someone will be killed’. I do not accept that because I cannot do something in every case, it would not be possible. The response should be that if you do not drive to the conditions or drive sensibly, you certainly will be killed. It is an onus on all of us, and perhaps it is that onus we need to get into the education system somehow, somehow.

On licences, it is a long time since I got mine. I recently took my son to get his. While they have improved dramatically in my time it is still a case of knowing the law. It is important, but there are other things that are also important. The benefit of learning what I call road craft might be important. That might require a lot more education, but perhaps it could be worth putting new drivers on a skid pan to learn what to do when the car is going to go out of control on a road. Perhaps that might be worth it, because it will invariably happen to someone one day. My son, who has just turned 18 — I have tremendous faith in him — spent too long in an old bomb out in the
paddock, seeing what he could do with it. My daughter, who would rather sit inside instead of driving the paddock bomb, I worry about. She does not have the same road craft.

In summary, I guess we all have the same responsibilities, both the state government and ourselves. We see our responsibilities relating to road construction and maintenance, the sorts of things that are set out in the road bill. They are all the obvious things like education, road safety officers. All those important activities that relate to reducing road crashes we would see as belonging to the state, and we think we have some very clear roles there and that it is fairly important that they are all delivered.

The issue of crashes involving roadside objects is one that applies to us, and we see specific instances of it because we have a lot of rural roads and run-offs caused by fatigue, and we have the very common situation of drivers drifting over to the right-hand side, doing a massive correction over to the left and then an over-correction, and tipping over on the right-hand side. That is a very common one on straight roads.

Again we use the Vicroads crash statistics, and they show that the number of collisions with fixed objects in our municipality is relatively high. The number is hard to read — it is actually 97 — and it is the second-highest cause over that particular five-year period. Similar statistics appear in the police statistics, although they are not summarised, and some of them are minor accidents. Those statistics do not give details of what the fixed objects were, so in many instances we do not necessarily know what has caused the accident, and we certainly do not get to hear about or see all the accidents.

You have probably met this situation in many places, but a lot of the accidents involve objects that are not so fixed — both livestock and native wildlife such as kangaroos. There is a very high incidence of accidents involving kangaroos.

Mr EREN — In these accident stats there is a high incidence of animals being struck, and in particular there are three in almost the one spot on the Princes Highway at Narrawong. Were they livestock or kangaroos?

Mr KELLER — No. I know that one. It was livestock. It was a gate that was left open. The gate should never have been left open. There was a mob of cattle on the road, and it was a very busy highway — or for our area it was a very busy highway. Two cars ended up running into them, and from memory people were injured in both vehicles. It was some time ago now. The gate was left open not by the property owner but by a different party. It should never have been left open, but that was the case.

Mr EREN — There was a fatality that occurred when an animal was struck. Was that as a direct result of hitting the animal?

Mr KELLER — In that incidence, yes.

Mr EREN — It did not hit the animal and then run off and hit something else?

Mr KELLER — No, it was as a result of hitting the animal.

There is certainly a whole range of physical measures that can be taken to address road crashes involving vehicles leaving the road, such as the provision of guardrailing. We have an extensive program — we have a long way to go with it — of providing approach guardrailing to bridges and bridge abutments, and also to the ends of some bigger culverts and that sort of roadside object. The clearance of native vegetation is another major measure, but there will always be a balance between the extent and quantity of works undertaken on a particular site and the funds you have available.

Mr KELLER — Yes. I was going to cover that in the second part of my submission, but the answer is yes.

Addressing driver behaviour and driver concentration is another way of making sure they stay on the road. Driving to conditions and at slower speeds is probably appropriate where fixed objects are closer to the side of the road, but too often people see a 100-km/h sign so they think they should be able to do 100 km/h. By way of indication, we spend in excess of $200 000 a year just on removing native vegetation from the edges of roads, and at that sort of figure each year we are by no means catching up, in fact we are falling well behind.
In relation to liability and accountability, trees along the road are certainly a significant safety issue, and they are an environmental issue. We see the importance of using the roadside for the retention of remnant vegetation, and we also understand and see the necessity of having native vegetation retention controls, but you immediately have a conflict, of course. In our area, where we have some magnificent stands of red gums and lots of other good native vegetation, it is always a problem for us, and it will be an ongoing problem. With regard to liability, I would just about bet — I would certainly strongly suggest — that it is pretty unlikely that any government department like DSE will put its hand up to accept liability should someone run into a tree on the side of the road. I would bet it is more likely to be us, because we did not have it in a safe condition.

We have an excellent example of a roadside tree. It is an extreme example, and I would not for one moment like the committee to think that all our relationships with the DSE are modelled on this one, but I guess extreme examples tell the story best. I have put in the folder a photo of a great big red gum alongside the edge of the road. That road was a reconstructed road — in fact, at the time of the photo it had just been built. It is a road that has a lot of heavy timber traffic on it. It was actually financed under Better Roads funding, so it had a fair bit of your money in it as well as our own. The road runs through an area that has a magnificent stand of red gums — you can see them further up the road. They really are magnificent trees.

We had a range of discussions with DSE about the trees and the need to remove them to reconstruct the road. It involved some widening of the road as well. At that particular site — unfortunately it does not show it — there is another tree on the other side of the road that is equally important, although it is a little bit further off the road, and in fact it falls outside the clear-width zone. The argument was put to us by DSE that we should have put a bend in the road. The difficulty about that was, of course, that I had two trees to get between. If I had put a bend in the road, I would have got one of them. The road was constructed, and the design of the road showed that it should have had a guardrail around it, but if you had put the guardrail around it the guardrail would have snuck out onto the edge of the sealed road. The guys brought the photo back in to me — I did not even see the tree — and I said, ‘You guys go and cut it down tomorrow, and I will take up the fight’. Needless to say, the tree was removed. I simply could not wear being responsible for that tree being there.

Mr MULDER — So council took the step of removing that tree?

Mr KELLER — I would suggest I took the step to remove it. Yes, council took the step and took it down. That led us into quite some discussions, the replacement of that tree with a whole range of other trees, and so on. That is fine. We overcame it. The point is that that tree was one that was particularly valuable, and there was seen to be a need to keep it. It simply could not be kept. While that is a very extreme case, it really does exemplify that there will always be a conflict between retaining vegetation and building a road. When there were horses and carts we could go close to roadside vegetation. That is not the case now. Sure, we can use guardrailing in some instances, but in many instances even that is not really appropriate for safety.

The CHAIR — Given that exercise, would council or yourself have no hesitation in taking that step if that instance arose again rather than going through the process?

Mr KELLER — Not at that point. We would certainly always go through the process first, and we did in that case, but the people who went through the process did not realise how close the tree was going to be to the road. The design actually showed a guardrail around it, but it was much too close to even put up a guardrail. In fact it came up when the guys went to put the guardrail up and they said, ‘It’s too close. You have to have the guardrail back a bit’. That is when I became involved in it. I would not like to suggest that all our cases are anything like that. It is a particularly bad example, if you like, and there was certainly value in retaining that tree, because it was a fairly magnificent tree.

In relation to appropriate guidelines and practices, the Vicroads guidelines set clear-zone widths. There are certainly exemptions, and I have put a table in there to show that, but generally they are 6 metres on rural roads. The design guidelines also provide options which begin with the removal of the hazard and end with provision and protection devices such as guardrails and the like, but again you have that conflict. The first step is to remove the hazard, as I suggest it should always be in any risk management process. With trees it is not seen to be the first step. The first step with trees is seen to be to put a guard fence around it or something like that, so it is the other end of the scale. We would have extensive lengths of road, and this touches on what I said before, where we have trees much closer to the edge of the roads than 6 metres. The road in front of my place has trees within about 3.5 metres of the road, and that is in a 100-km/h zone, and there are plenty of trees that would be big enough to cause an
accident. Perhaps it is not such a worry because it is fairly consistent; it is not one stand-out tree. Nevertheless, should someone run off I am sure they would have a fairly nasty accident with the tree.

The next example is a little less common — and that comes back to the processes where we might decide we do work. On that road it would be less likely because in many instances you are less likely to hit one tree in a whole bunch than one by itself. I guess while they are guidelines and we strive to meet them, we are not. It is clearly not possible for us to meet them in every case. We certainly take every attempt to meet them, and I believe we do meet them on new works. I suggest that a review of the design guidelines would be well worthwhile particularly as they relate to roads that might have sealed shoulders, for example, and in some other cases, rural roads.

Some of the other things that can be used and that we strongly advocate for ourselves — although again it is limited sometimes to what we can do — are things like shoulder sealing. Shoulder sealing of main roads is a particularly effective mechanism to prevent run-offs. Edge lines, in other cases and certainly the tactile edge lines which can be reasonably expensive to put down but are a very effective means are all cost reliant. It is a case of doing as much as we can with what we have.

With those few comments, I will finish, and I certainly thank you for the opportunity to meet before you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, John. I appreciate your input and your time in coming up from Portland; we know it is a fair hike, so take your time getting back there. We will send you a copy of the transport transcript in due course.

Witness withdrew.
ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country road toll

Inquiry into Crashes Involving Roadside Objects

Stawell — 17 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

Witness

Mr D. Eltringham, General Manager, Technical Services, Rural City of Horsham

Necessary corrections to be notified to executive officer of committee
The CHAIR — Welcome, David. I will hand over to you.

Mr ELTRINGHAM — My apologies for being late. I was held up by some road works to improve road safety!

The submission has been put together rather hastily, and on behalf of council we appreciate the opportunity to be here. I read the terms of reference late yesterday, and I understand that you are looking at instances of vehicles leaving the road and crashing into objects et cetera. The first part of our submission addresses that issue as it applies to Horsham Rural City Council. We consider the Road Management Bill to be a positive move. That bill will put emphasis on local government making sure that its management arrangements are in place to address in particular the issue of the clearance envelope. As such we think that is positive. There will obviously be issues relating to funding the many assets that will have to be provided to make sure that that envelope is clear or to install barriers et cetera.

We in Horsham Rural City Council have been particularly pleased that we have been able to work with Vicroads to implement a lower speed limit in areas where there have been environmentally sensitive issues, and that has been very successful, particularly as the issues relate to trees and the environment. One of the issues that should be looked at is whether the speed is appropriate for that environment. In Horsham we have been able to lower the speed limit, and people acknowledge it and probably enjoy the environment better. We note, however, that the Road Management Bill does not specifically address the speed issue in relation to road safety. It makes reference to it and we realise that that is part of the Road Safety Act, but we had hoped that the Road Management Bill may have put a default speed limit on local unsealed rural roads, which is our main concern. If it had, we would have thought that an 80-km/h zone as part of the Road Safety Act might have been a positive move. If that happened, it would not only have a safety implication but it would also have a positive implication for local government in trying to address increasing maintenance costs for unsealed roads.

Mr MULDER — I have a question on the issue of the default speed limit on unsealed roads. What would happen if you posted a default speed limit but then, because of weather conditions and a whole host of other issues, council could not maintain the road and its management plan did not pick up the issues in relation to maintaining the road in a suitable condition for people to drive safely at 80 kilometres an hour? If you have an 80-km/h posting on unsealed roads across the state, does that mean that international drivers in particular or people who are not familiar with those driving conditions will look at those signs and think it is safe to travel on that road at 80 km/h? Is that an issue? I know there are arguments for and against.

Mr ELTRINGHAM — I take your point. I notice the bill says that, notwithstanding any speed limits, it is the responsibility of drivers to drive with an awareness of the conditions — weather, traffic and those sorts of things. The bill addresses that. From the point of view of an 80-km/h speed limit on an unsealed rural road, it would be similar to a speed limit of 100 km/h on a highway, where you are not expected to drive at that if it is not safe. I accept the fact that a driver education program is needed to advise motorists that speed limits are not what they should drive at but what they should not go beyond, taking into account the other conditions. I understand that.

With regard to our municipality, I am pleased to be able to sit here and say that we are aware of only four accidents in our municipality over the past three years where vehicles have left the road and hit fixed objects, mainly trees. We also know that in three of those accidents, the drivers were local. They traversed the road every day.

The CHAIR — Do you have a formal reporting mechanism between yourself and the police that would mean those stats are correct? Are there instances where, in the absence of a formal mechanism, police could be aware of accidents involving vehicles leaving the road, for example, but they do not make council aware of them? It is not that I doubt your stats, it is more a matter of being able to recognise safety issues with regard to the road, because that statistic surprises me, having looked at the stats of other councils.

Mr ELTRINGHAM — Yes. Our relationship with the Horsham police is physically very close — we are almost in the same building — and there is constant involvement between council management and employees and the police. We are aware of accidents that happen that may not form part of the statistics but that do form part of our everyday management and association with the police. In fact I spoke to Vicroads only last week, and it said a particular area was not an accident-prone area, and yet we were aware of the fact that there are many accidents there but they are not necessarily reported. I would like to be able to say we have a particularly formal procedure with the police. We do not, but we do have constant contact.
The only other comment I wish to make, and this is a direct comment about the Road Management Bill, is that we are aware it is going to be good and we think it is a great thing, but we are concerned that more and more councils are going to get involved in data collection and administrative tasks. In my case and, I assume, in the case of other rural councils there is only one place where that funding is going to come from, and that is out of the hands-on money that is made available for fixing roads. That is what is going to happen. Instead of being able to send a truck out to patch a road we will send some people out to get some data on it, and I question whether that is going to be helpful.

Those comments, Chair, were basically all that I had to offer directly, but we did have some other points we would just like to mention to the committee if we could.

The CHAIR — Yes, that is fine. I think Terry has a question.

Mr MULDER — As you say, the money spent on sending people out to collect data, carry out inspections and all the rest of it will be coming out of your road funding, but under this bill council will have the opportunity to gain revenue from utility providers in the form of access charges. Has council worked out what those charges will be and how they will be applied?

Mr ELTRINGHAM — No. In fact this morning we had a meeting with service authorities, and we drew to their attention the clause that talks about the dollar per metre of their assets on our road reserve. I must admit that was not welcomed in that meeting by the other services. We have not addressed that, no, and that is a positive that we should be able to factor in. We understand that the whole point of the Road Management Bill is having a different attitude to road management, and in general we applaud it. We are just concerned that initially there will be some sort of transfer from hands-on work to data collection.

I will make the other points I referred to. Firstly, we just want to acknowledge that our association with VicRoads — this is not a paid advertisement — is very good. Over the past two years we have drawn the attention of VicRoads to several road safety issues, particularly regarding the Western Highway, and between the two parties we have been able to address those problems on a we-help-you and you-help-us basis, and we really appreciate that. For instance, we have been able to do works on the highway for a lot less cost than others, and we have been able to do design work, which has reduced costs. We have also been able to focus on the outcomes, being the safety improvements, and that has been positive.

Our council feels that Roadsafe Wimmera is doing a good job. That is probably indicated in what we think is an acceptable level of accidents. It may still be too high, but accidents do happen, and Roadsafe Wimmera is doing a good job. We feel its programs are acceptable and good for our community.

We would like to point out to you, however, that municipal resources are finite. I was talking to Alex Douglas yesterday about my attendance here, and we just do not have resources — I am talking about people resources. I do not want to go into what is on our agenda this week, but initially it was felt that we may not even be able to be here. What concerns me is that a document like the Horsham Rural City Council — Road Safety Strategy — 2002–2003 costs $20 000 to produce, which I should probably not be telling the committee, but is fantastic. The trouble is it is handed to local government and we are told to implement it, but the reality is that there is nobody to implement it. That is the reality. It may not be what we all want to hear, but that is what happens. So many other issues have been put onto local government that we just do not have the physical resources to do it.

Apart from this particular document, three other documents relating to road safety arrived on my desk yesterday asking us to get involved in other programs. The reality is we cannot. We just cannot physically do it. We are still trying to implement option 2 in this program, and that is the 2002 road safety strategy.

I am suggesting that it would be good if we could really address what we are doing with this road safety funding and instead of funding programs, perhaps there could be a partnership between local government and government agencies to fund road safety officers in councils, with an 80-20 split or whatever. But if I put up my hand and said to local government and council, ‘Give us a road safety officer to implement that’, it is not going to happen. Perhaps councils could be given an incentive. For example, today I am supposed to be putting in resources to a younger drivers strategy. I have not had the resources to prepare the strategy, let alone implement it.

The CHAIR — You are advocating for a road safety officer to be employed by councils?
Mr ELTRINGHAM — I am advocating that local government should have a road safety officer and that somewhere between government and local government there should be some partnership in funding that position so that strategies like this can be pursued and put in. It is great to hear what we should be doing, but no-one is doing it. That is reality from our point of view.

The CHAIR — Has Horsham Rural City Council sat down with the neighbouring city councils and discussed the employment of a road safety officer as a partnership, as they have done in other areas of Victoria including my area of Geelong?

Mr ELTRINGHAM — We have not specifically looked at that, but we have looked at other officer sharing. I would feel that there would be a very good option for us to share with anybody if they wanted to come on board. At the moment we are sharing stormwater officers and litter officers and other people.

The CHAIR — Road safety officers are employed throughout New South Wales by councils and they are employed in other areas of Victoria. I agree with you: they do very proactive road safety work within and throughout the communities.

Mr ELTRINGHAM — Yes. It breaks me up that we went to all that trouble to state what had to happen, such as to clearly delineate pedestrian crossings at roundabouts and identify locations of issues, appointing the HRCC technical services department as being responsible for doing it, providing a timetable I am supposed to do it by, but it does not happen, and it should.

We are concerned about the ongoing heavy traffic on the Western Highway. We realise it is a national highway, but we would like to say that we are very pleased that the Victorian government and the Western Highway Action Committee, known as WHAC, seem to be getting a bit of progress there and our council fully supports that.

We are also happy with the new initiatives for school crossing speed zones. Next week we are going to meet with Vicroads to discuss the implementation of those speed zones with our schools. However, we would like to draw to your attention again the inequity of school crossing supervisors. Our council spends $81 000 supervising school crossings; we get $15 000 subsidy. That means we are putting in 80 per cent of the cost. If school crossing supervisors are considered to be a major safety initiative, then somewhere along the line — our $15 000 has not altered in something like nine years, it is an absolute cost shift to local government. We would just like to indicate to you that we feel that imbalance should be looked at. We think our school crossing supervisors are a real necessity, but at the moment council is very reluctant to put in any other crossings. However, we do other things. For example, as a council initiative each of our crossing supervisors has a mobile phone so that if something happens or they see a vehicle that breaks the law at a crossing, they can do something about it.

The CHAIR — Can I ask you to cross to item 10, speed zones, which is an important issue for us, and make some comments about that?

Mr ELTRINGHAM — The 50-kilometres-an-hour limit is working well in our municipality. We have recently put together a submission to Vicroads to look at reducing the speed a little bit further in the CBD itself, and Vicroads has given that approval but the 50 km/h is effective. We have done checks with our speed reader, and we have shown that the 50-km/h limit has generally been complied with. It is working. In fact we have two roads where we still have the 60-km/h zone because we felt that they were collector roads, but we will probably bring those back to 50 km/h also.

The CHAIR — Is there concern within the council — perhaps I am talking for Terry here, we have taken up the issue within the last couple of months — a number of councils have raised with us their concern about the fluctuation of speed limits as you come in and out of a country town or city? Is that an issue for Horsham Rural City Council?

Mr ELTRINGHAM — It is not an issue at the moment, but it will be and it will be more obvious when the school speed zones are introduced. We are probably lucky. It follows a fairly logical pattern of 100, 80, 70. There is one area in town which is near the Horsham College and on which there is a bit of comment, but we do not have the same problem that I read about in other places.
Mr MULDER — In relation to your speed detection devices where you have noted that people generally are abiding by the speed limit of 50 km/h, are those streets heavily policed to bring that down or do you think it is just that attitudes and public behaviour have changed?

Mr ELTRINGHAM — I think public attitude has changed. Our devices are not cameras as such but tapes on the road.

Mr MULDER — They smile and frown — are they the ones?

Mr ELTRINGHAM — No, but our observation is that it is driver behaviour that has improved. Wherever we find that there is an issue, the police readily cooperate and police that particular area.

The CHAIR — Your last point there about roadside memorials is interesting as well. Do you want to talk about that? I must say you are the first council to raise that issue.

Mr ELTRINGHAM — I do not know which way you are going to Mildura but probably through Warracknabeal, but you have come up the highway and we all know what we are talking about with roadside memorials. At the moment we have one right in town and it is right opposite residences. People are saying, ‘Hang on a minute, are you going to allow that to be there?’ . It is on the Wimmera Highway–Natimuk Road. The memorial acknowledges the unfortunate crash that occurred at that location some 19 months ago when a drunk 19-year-old — he was 1.4 or something — did a wheelie out of a street and slammed into a tree, and the tree was well removed from the road. We have a florist who comes and changes the flowers on the tree on a weekly basis. It is what you would expect to see in a cemetery, and people say, ‘Well, get rid of it’. The council’s attitude is, ‘Okay we should get rid of it, but who is going to knock on the door and say get rid of it?’. Council has asked Vicroads, Vicroads say its policy is it will ask for trees to be removed if they are a danger.

They are all up and down the highway. There are two at Dadswells Bridge that have been there for five years. We are saying that somewhere there should be a community protocol, that cemeteries are for flowers and graves, that roads are not; that if there is a tragedy we accept that there is a grieving process but that the community must set down a protocol. For example, we are saying the protocol might be that the memorial can be there for 12 months after the event but we would then expect for it to be removed and replaced with a marker. There are markers, and you would have seen them as you came up the highway. We think that would be acceptable. But we have a whole proliferation of flowers and they are a distraction. Some of the memorials up the road have, quite frankly, not horrific but emotional photos of people and all sorts of things.

For a local government to act would be pretty bold, and our council has been hoping for a code of practice, and we thought the Road Management Bill may have been the vehicle. We had hoped there would be a mention of it in the Road Management Bill. That would then set a community standard, and then local government could say, ‘That is the standard and that is the law. That is what the government has introduced, and we are implementing it’. I guess that would shift the implementation from local government to government, but it would then be reflected throughout the state. There are various examples, and you will see them everywhere.

The CHAIR — Yes, that is right. I am going to tie it up there, unless people have any questions, because we are heading off to Mildura, and I do not want the consequences of fatigue striking the committee or the staff. Thank you for your time. We appreciate your input. We will provide a copy of the transcript and then the report to the Horsham Rural City Council in the coming months. The actual report will be tabled in Parliament in March next year.

Mr ELTRINGHAM — Thank you for the opportunity.

Committee adjourned.