

# **LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 6 October 2020

*(via videoconference)*

### **MEMBERS**

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Mr Mark Gepp

### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Dr Matthew Bach

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Andy Meddick

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr David Davis

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

## WITNESS

Mr Peter Keays.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll. I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present. My name is Enver Erdogan, and I am Chair of the committee. I would like to also introduce my fellow committee members: the Deputy Chair, Mr Bernie Finn; Mr Lee Tarlamis; Mrs Beverley McArthur; Mr Rod Barton; Mr Andy Meddick; and Mr Mark Gepp.

To witnesses, all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome any opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow for plenty of time for questions and discussion. Can I please remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise any interference. If you have any technical difficulties, please disconnect and contact the committee staff on the contacts provided. Could you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you, Mr Keays.

**Mr KEAYS:** Good morning, panel members. I am Peter Keays, a retired professional engineer who retired early to go farming with my son. We farm several properties on the Fyansford-Gheringhap Road, Gheringhap, and the Hamilton Highway in Stonehaven. Both these areas are a short distance west of Geelong. I am here to talk about the major safety problems created by central wire rope barriers on narrow country roads like the Fyansford-Gheringhap Road in Gheringhap and Stonehaven. We have lived on the Fyansford-Gheringhap Road for 40 years at the property where all our farm machinery is stored and then the machinery was moved along the Fyansford-Gheringhap Road and other roads to the other properties where we farm various grain crops. Farm machinery includes seed drills, 5 metres wide; tractors; grain field bins, 5 metres wide; and grain-harvesting headers, 4.8 metres wide. All this machinery was previously moved safely along country roads using safety signs and escort vehicles to warn other vehicles. The tractor and seed drill and rollers combination is 16 metres long and 5 metres wide, and most of the machinery has a top speed of 18 kilometres an hour. The semitrailer grain truck is 14 metres long. The central wire rope barrier and white posts on the edge of the road are on average only 5.1 metres apart along this road, making it very difficult to negotiate the road with wide machinery and not hit the white posts. Other roads in the area with central wire rope barriers are 7 metres wide.

The other major problem is that the central wire rope barrier has been constructed across most of the farm paddock gateways along this section of the road. This means we only have access to our property and other properties from one direction and have no ability to swing wide to use the entrances. This means we have to do a 7-kilometre trip in one direction and a 12-kilometre trip in the other direction just to change directions when we exit or enter our paddocks—all this at 18 kilometres an hour towing 5-metre-wide machinery. This creates a much greater danger for a longer period of time for all concerned. We cannot do a U-turn in the nearest gap, as suggested by Regional Roads Victoria.

A further major problem is that there are no turning lanes or passing lanes on this narrow road, therefore there is nowhere to go if someone breaks down. Access is now limited for emergency vehicles like fire trucks. U-turns are difficult for four-wheel drive fire trucks in car entrances. There are car entrance gaps of 40 metres, 75 metres and 90 metres in various places along the wire rope barrier. Recently three vehicles tried to pass my tractor travelling at 18 kilometres an hour in a 90-metre-long car entrance gap in the wire rope barrier. This was a very dangerous situation, with the last vehicle hitting a red cone at the start of the wire rope barrier and just missing the front wheels of the tractor—a very dangerous situation.

Another dangerous problem is that when we exit our property from our car exit in the car to turn south we are now unable to see oncoming traffic from the north due to the wire rope barrier, the support structures and the lay of the land, so we just have to pull out and hope for the best that if someone is coming at 100 kilometres an

hour they will be able to slow in time—a very dangerous situation. Also, when I entered our property with our caravan in tow—combined length 13 metres—I used to swing wide to use the car entrance, but now this is not possible due to the wire rope barrier. So this manoeuvre will be very difficult and far more dangerous. The central wire rope barrier has only been there a few weeks and it is not properly finished yet, but it has been hit at least four times, taking out sections of up to 60 metres at times. I believe this was caused by the narrowness of the road compared to other wider roads with central wire rope barriers.

Another problem is a quite substantial gum tree 3.7 metres from the fog line with no protection, but yet not far away from a power pole which is 5.7 metres from the line there is a large crash barrier fitted.

Back to the farm paddock entrances, most of these were formed during the original subdivision of the land 100 years ago to allow access to the many small landholdings in the area. One near us is protected by law as an emergency entrance for access to power pylons, but they all have wire rope barriers across them, only allowing difficult one-way access. Data used to claim this was a dangerous road to justify the installation of the central wire rope barriers is very doubtful and questionable. As a member of the local fire brigade—and my son was captain at the time—I do not recall many accidents along this section of the road in the period 2014 to 2018 as claimed by Regional Roads Victoria. The fire brigade are called to all major car accidents in this area. Therefore I do not believe this northern section of the road is any more dangerous than the other southern section of the Fyansford-Gheringhap Road, which does not have central wire rope barriers.

The consultation process: early in the process we had what Regional Roads Victoria would call ‘a consultation process’—because my son was captain of the local fire brigade and we were farmers using the Fyansford-Gheringhap Road—but in reality this session just turned out to be to tell us what we were getting. Any of our requests and information we gave were not listened to. I gave Regional Roads Victoria plans of where our farm paddock access points were located and the sizes of machinery that we and other farmers are using on the road. This information was obviously ignored as there were no changes. I do not believe they really had any idea of what farmers require for their farming operations, nor did they seem very interested. All in all, it is very poor quality construction, creating the possibility of some very dangerous situations on what was previously a reasonably safe country road, apart from the poor surface and broken edges.

I believe that a wire rope barrier will add to the casualties on this road rather than prevent them. The money would have been better spent on repairing the road surface, and this would have made it far safer. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Keays, for your insight and your contribution. I might pass over to Mrs Beverley McArthur to ask a couple of questions, and then I will go to Mr Tarlamis.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Mr Keays. One hardly knows where to start with this sort of nonsense that Regional Roads Victoria are inflicting on people in rural and regional Victoria. When you suggested to them that you needed access to your farm entry posts, what did they say?

**Mr KEAYS:** They listened, but they obviously did not take it in, because they just ignored that.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Did they come out to your property? Were you on site when you sort of said, ‘Well, I’ve got to go in that gateway there. How do I get through the wire rope barrier?’

**Mr KEAYS:** They were in our house. We had a meeting in our house, but we did not have any meeting on site of where the entrances are. They were not interested. They presented a set of drawings that were virtually the final drawings, and they said that they were the drawings that they were going out to quote on or they had gone out to quote—I cannot remember exactly. So they just were not interested in what we had to say.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Mr Keays, have they inflicted this sort of injury upon other farmers along this road in terms of blocking their entry points?

**Mr KEAYS:** Yes. There are other gates that we use and they use to enter their paddocks, so now all they have got is one-way access and you have to drive all the way to Gheringhap or all the way to Fyansford to get to the other side, if you understand what I mean.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** I certainly do. You are quite right, the *raison d’être* of putting up these wire rope barriers is to save lives, when most of the road surfaces are the reason why there are problems—and also the

vegetation on the sides of the roads, as you point out, which often grows right to the edge of the asphalt almost, and certainly does along sections of the Princes Highway further down my electorate. What do they say about removing the dangerous vegetation and fixing the road surfaces, as opposed to installing wire rope barriers? Or are they again not interested?

**Mr KEAYS:** No. They were not interested. There is a section of roadway that is quite washboardy, if you understand—you bounce along it—and that is still there. All they have done is tacked a bit on the side. Because they have taken a section of the centre of the road away, they have tacked a bit on each side, but it is just a patch-up tactic to patch a bit on the side. The whole road itself is still the old road.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Just with an expensive wire rope barrier installed.

**Mr KEAYS:** That is right. Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mrs McArthur.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** I might pass over to Mr Tarlamis to ask a question, and then I will pass over to Mr Barton.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Thank you, Peter, for your submission and for talking to us today. You spoke in your submission and then in your presentation about the consultation. How do you think the consultation could have been done better?

**Mr KEAYS:** Well, two things: they could have listened to us and they could have gone out along the road with us and we could have shown them. They could have gone out in the paddock and had a look at the machinery—at the big, wide machinery we are using. That is a couple of things that they could have done, which they were not interested in doing because, as I said, they just presented us with virtually the final drawings and said, 'That's it'.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** I am not familiar with the road. How long have the wire rope barriers been installed for?

**Mr KEAYS:** Well, they are still finishing them off, but it is probably four or five weeks that they have been there.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Yes. Have there been any incidents or accidents since the wire rope barriers have been installed? I know it has only been four or five weeks.

**Mr KEAYS:** Well, within the first week the start point of them at that time was hit and 60 metres of the barrier—the wire stayed there but the support structure was all torn out. That was the first one. Then there have been three other times it has been hit. Because the whole set-up is so narrow, there is no way you can pass anybody. Now, whether those accidents were caused by somebody going slowly on the side and then somebody trying to pass is speculation, but something is causing big problems with it.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Barton, then Mr Meddick, and then if the Deputy Chair has a question we will go to him and I will finish up there.

**Mr BARTON:** Good morning, Mr Keays. Thank you for coming in. I just want to know: with the design there is a heap of recommendations from the manufacturer on the design; did you have access to any of that?

**Mr KEAYS:** No, they did not. We have done a bit of poking around on the internet, and you can find a bit of information. They do not seem to stick to their own information at times.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes, and who has responsibility for that? Does that come down to the local council? Is it country roads? Who actually ensures that they are meeting their own guidelines? That is what I was looking for before.

**Mr KEAYS:** I do not know. Regional Roads Victoria is the organisation. I have made enquiries to the council. The council just say it is nothing to do with them; it is Regional Roads Victoria.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes. Well, that is one of the criticisms that we do hear—that they do not follow their own guidelines—and that is concerning, and it is clearly very difficult for yourself. But that is all I wanted to know—whether you had access to see what their guidelines are, and have they met their own guidelines for your section of road. It sounds like ‘no’.

**Mr KEAYS:** Yes, I would agree with you there. From what we could find on the internet, they have fallen short on quite a few things.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes. All right. Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Keays.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Barton. Mr Meddick.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Keays, for taking time out of your day to make this presentation. It is very informative. Look, I have only got a couple of very simple questions. Since the installation, have you approached Regional Roads Victoria—and by that I mean Regional Roads Victoria management—to actually come out and meet you on site and conduct an inspection so they can see with their own eyes the impediments to you being able to get your machinery in and out et cetera, the concerns that you have for emergency services and all those sorts of things? Have you done that? And if you have, have they responded at all?

**Mr KEAYS:** No. I had a telephone conversation with the lady in charge there, and she was fairly disinterested. The only other thing we had was in the *Geelong Advertiser*. We had some photographs of us trying to take some large machinery down the road—a large grain field bin—and you could see in the photo that was printed in the *Geelong Advertiser* that the bin actually hit the white posts because the whole thing is so narrow. So that is the only thing we have had with them at the moment.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Did you attempt to forward that article to Regional Roads Victoria as an example of the situation that you find yourself in?

**Mr KEAYS:** Well, no, not at this point. But they would have seen it, because they made comments in the *Geelong Advertiser* as well—in the article. They were asked for an opinion.

**Mr MEDDICK:** So in your opinion they are well aware of the problems that you are facing?

**Mr KEAYS:** Yes, they should be. It has been spoken about with them enough times.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Okay. Great. Thank you very much, Mr Keays, and again thank you for your time out of your day today.

**Mr KEAYS:** Thank you for your time.

**The CHAIR:** Deputy Chair, Mr Finn, do you have a question?

**Mr FINN:** Thank you, Mr Chairman, and thank you, Mr Keays, for giving up the time today to be with us. It is very much appreciated. I just have one question, and that is: have these people apologised to you in any way for the complete and total disregard that they have shown for you and for your neighbours?

**Mr KEAYS:** No. We have had no apology. Any contact that has been made with them has been initiated by us, and they are fairly indifferent to our situation.

**Mr FINN:** Well, I think what you have been subject to is a disgrace, and it is possibly one of the main reasons that I am actually in Parliament—to stop this sort of thing happening. So I am glad you have come forward. I am very, very pleased that you have made us aware of this, and I sincerely hope that this committee will make a very, very strong stand about this sort of thing when the report comes out. Thank you very much for your time. It is very much appreciated and hopefully very effective.

**Mr KEAYS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** On that note, Mr Keays, on behalf of the committee I wish to thank you as well for sharing your experiences with the rollout of the program. We will take that on board. We have got our next witness

here as well, so on behalf of the committee I wish to say thank you for your contribution and your time and for sharing your experiences with the committee. It has been a pleasure to hear from you.

**Mr KEAYS:** Thank you for having me, and thank you for giving me time to speak to you.

**The CHAIR:** Not a problem. Thank you. The committee will now take a short break before the next witness.

**Witness withdrew.**