

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll

Melbourne—Tuesday, 21 July 2020

(via videoconference/teleconference)

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WITNESS

Mr Richard Smithers, Team Leader, Transport Planning, Urban Strategy Branch, City of Melbourne.

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 welcome members of the public who are watching our broadcast via the internet.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore any information provided during the hearing is protected by law. However, anything you repeat outside this hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be 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 put onto our committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments, but we ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. Could you please state your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then begin your presentation. Thank you.

Mr SMITHERS: Thank you very much, Chair. My name is Richard Smithers. Chair and committee members, thanks for the opportunity to present to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into the Increase in Victoria's Road Toll. As already explained, I am the Team Leader of transport strategy at the City of Melbourne.

I would first like to emphasise that the City of Melbourne's submission to the inquiry is a management view. The submission itself is not endorsed by the council. However, the material in the submission and the comments I make today are based on adopted council policy, and that is largely the City of Melbourne's *Transport Strategy 2030*. The strategy was adopted in October 2019, and as I said when I spoke at the tram zone inquiry hearings, it was the largest community consultation process ever run by the City of Melbourne and there was very strong community support for the initiatives in that strategy.

The vision for Melbourne that it outlines includes making Melbourne Australia's premier bicycling city; the creation of a safe, accessible and fast public transport system; and enhancing the walking economy by improving the walking network and giving more space to people. The strategy has a very strong and clear commitment to road safety. A quick check before showed that the word 'safe' or 'safety' appears 199 times in the document. The strategy's targets include reducing by half the number of people killed or seriously injured on the streets of our municipality by 2030 and eliminating death and serious injury by 2040. Currently about 230 people are seriously injured, or some killed, on our roads each year, and about 20 per cent of those are people walking in the municipality.

Our submission highlights the role that lower vehicle speeds have played and that we hope will continue to play in keeping people safe and reducing road trauma. In 2006 the city proposed reducing the speed limit in the central, busiest part of the city—we often call that the Hoddle grid—from 50 kilometres per hour to 40. In 2012 that new limit was approved and signs were installed, and in the five years afterwards crashes between motor vehicles and pedestrians dropped by 37 per cent. The predicted benefit-cost ratio of that change was \$60 of community benefit for every dollar invested by the community, so a fantastic rate of return and a whole lot of people who are walking around happily today and did not suffer road trauma.

The *Transport Strategy 2030* includes plans to replace the current 50-kilometre speed limit on local roads in areas which immediately surround the central city, so surrounding the Hoddle grid. We are seeking a consistent inner-city 40-kilometre-an-hour speed limit. This aligns well with the existing 40-kilometre-an-hour areas where the City of Melbourne borders municipalities such as Yarra, Port Phillip and Moreland, where they have already introduced 40 kilometres per hour, and that is expected to make a significant contribution to reducing road trauma as well. The strategy plans to deliver also lower speed limit shared zones in our celebrated 'little' streets. The current 40-kilometre limit there is clearly too fast given narrow footpaths, significant numbers of people walking, bike riders, deliveries occurring and of course now the added challenge of the need for people walking to maintain social distance while we are suffering from the COVID epidemic.

There are some other ways in which the strategy plans to reduce road trauma, and they include building 90 kilometres of physically separated bike lanes. Evidence shows that these will make our streets safer for people riding bikes and for everybody else using those streets. They will also encourage more people to ride bikes. Riding bikes is an extremely safe way to travel around. It imposes very few externality safety costs on society.

We also intend to reduce the amount of traffic using the city as a through route. This will help to reduce the exposure to crashes in the city, where we have so many people walking around. We also seek to reduce delays at traffic signals for people walking and to provide more space, which will reduce both illegal crossing, as people wait a very long time to cross the road and then suddenly run across, and also footpath overcrowding, which often leads to people spilling onto the road while they are waiting for the signals to change. That was something that we mentioned in our submission in relation to the free tram zone as well.

I hope those comments are helpful, and I am happy to answer any other questions that the committee may have.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Richard, for your presentation. I might kick things off with an interesting question because you did raise the point about the reduction in speeds and the benefits that you feel—the \$60 community benefit. I did also want to ask: did you do any study or is there any information on the impact on travel times and other effects on people trying to travel around or get through the city? Has there been any study done on that?

Mr SMITHERS: Yes. The original benefit-cost analysis in relation to that included the costs of potentially people being slower through the city. However, what tends to happen—and in that case we are talking about the very central part of the city—is that most of the time that it takes you to move through the central part of the city in a motor vehicle you are actually not moving; you are stopped at the traffic signals. So changing the speed limit in some cases can have no impact at all on travel times through the city or that impact is extremely small. That was costed as part of that benefit-cost analysis. Of course these things often are done as estimates, but there were fairly insignificant travel time losses, and that was counterbalanced by very significant gains in safety and reductions in crashes.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I have just got one other question. I did notice in your submission—I made a note, actually, when I was reading it—that the consequences of autonomous technology include drivers becoming more complacent and distracted, and you requested that the government prepare for this. How do you suggest we do that? How should the government prepare, because you are suggesting that technologies are making people more complacent?

Mr SMITHERS: Well, I guess that is one possible outcome of introducing new technology. I suppose there are lots of precedents in history: new technology comes in and people change their behaviour, and sometimes some of those benefits are lost because people compensate. They change their behaviour perhaps in a way that makes them behave slightly more dangerously because they know that they have got something that is going to look after them in some sense. I think that what we are trying to say in our submission is that the responsibility really should lie with the vehicle design and manufacture and approval process, especially if they are to come into the central city, which is an extremely complex environment where the vehicles are going to have to sense all manner of activity that is occurring—you have got kids crossing the road, you have got tram stops et cetera, you have got bicycle riders, people pulling up to load. I think really the point of what we are saying is that the responsibility should lie with the approval of appropriate technologies before those are introduced into a complex environment like the central city.

Mr FINN: Can I just say when I think of high-speed crashes the City of Melbourne does not immediately spring to mind, because I have to say that in my experience of the city, if you can get beyond about 10 kilometres an hour you should go and buy yourself a Tattsлото ticket because it really is your lucky day. All levels of government of course have various responsibilities that are well known. What I am really keen to know—and I am sure a lot of ratepayers in the City of Melbourne are keen to know—is: how does the proposal that you are advancing fit in with the proper role of local government as we know it?

Mr SMITHERS: The city streets are under the care and management of the City of Melbourne. So we have arterial roads and we have local roads, and so the responsibility for management of local roads is a local government function. There are some aspects of changes to those roads which require approval from the

Department of Transport, and we work very closely with the Department of Transport on many, many, many matters in relation to the design and operation of roads, assets, road safety, mode choice signals et cetera et cetera. So I guess under Victoria's road safety strategy local government has a clear role to play, and I think we and other local governments have done, you know, a wide range of activities to reduce road trauma.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Mr Smithers. Now, I am just a little perplexed here. We have got the City of Melbourne that are here crying out for government assistance because the businesses are in trouble and there is nobody of course in the city spending money, moving around or doing things because of this crisis. So we need a big taxpayer injection to help out. I would have thought that you would want everybody possible to get into your city as soon as we are able to move about freely, and I am not sure whether you are contradicting yourselves, the City of Melbourne, by trying to make it more difficult—stop motorists coming into the city, stop people getting in there to spend money in all of your businesses—or what. I mean, we cannot be subsidising extended free tram zones, and now you do not want people coming into the city, so aren't you sort of contradicting yourselves here?

Mr SMITHERS: I think that the story of city development over the past eight to 10 years is that we have had a double-digit decline in motor vehicle access to the city and yet we have had very strong growth in jobs and visitation to the city. So the city is still available for people who need to drive into it or want to drive into it, and that is going to stay the case for a very long time.

There are some people for whom access to the city by car is really the only logical way they can get there—for a variety of reasons, including disability, or perhaps they live a good deal distant and there is no reasonable public transport. But the economic case for improving access to the city is clearly laid out in the transport strategy, and it is very strongly an economic strategy and it is about increasing access to the city and making it easier to get around.

Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on which way you look at it—the opportunity to increase access for motor vehicles really is very hard to find. We have the amount of space that we have. There is really very little that we can do to increase that capacity. So for those who do need to come in by vehicle, we hope that everybody else will choose a mode that reduces congestion so that those people can get to where they need to go as well. So every person who chooses to ride a bike or catch a tram releases up space and reduces congestion so that people who do need to get there by motor vehicle can do so. So I think that that is what the whole transport strategy is aimed at.

Mrs McARTHUR: Right. Well, thank you for that. That may well be the case. But is it the case that it is all the motorist's fault that these accidents have occurred? Have we got some sort of pedestrian technology that ensures that individuals are responsible for the way they move around your city and across the streets and the roads and so on. You know, it seems that your suggestion is that it is all the fault of motorists; it has got nothing to do with poor pedestrian decision-making or even poor bike riding decision-making. So what are you proposing to ensure that pedestrians and cyclists play their part in ensuring that you have a reduced number of accidents? And can you tell us exactly how many people have lost their lives in the City of Melbourne in the past year to a motorist accident?

Mr SMITHERS: As to the second part of your question, I would have to go and get the data directly from our submission. But, I mean, in the City of Melbourne we have in the order of between two and six deaths a year. That is the sort of range. But I cannot off the top of my head tell you the exact figure for last year. What we are trying to do in the city is set up a system where it is safe for everybody even if they make a mistake. We have road rules which apply to everybody—they apply to people walking and they apply to people riding bikes and people driving. But I guess the overriding approach is the safe system approach, where we are seeking, if someone does make a mistake, does the wrong thing, that they are not punished by a severe injury or loss of life. We provide access for motor vehicles. We think that if we, for example, reduce the speed limit in some cases we will still be providing access for people that need to use motor vehicles. Quite possibly that access will be not reduced in any way, shape or form. They will still be able to move through the city at the same journey speed that they were able to move through before, but if someone makes a mistake and steps out in front of a moving vehicle, that person will not pay by getting a serious injury or losing their life. We work within the framework of road rules in Victoria. We have in the past run education campaigns directed at all road users. We had a campaign called 'share the road'. We are considering something along those lines at the moment, and that

is directed at all road users because, I guess, our view is that everybody has a responsibility to keep everybody safe.

Mr BARTON: G'day, Richard. Has the Melbourne City Council got a strategy in the long term to make Melbourne a city without vehicles?

Mr SMITHERS: No. The transport strategy is called the *Transport Strategy 2030*, so it runs until 2030. That does not mean it will run until 2030. Sometimes if circumstances change a reset is needed sooner. There is nothing in there that talks about a car-free city. In fact, I would be repeating what I said before, but essentially it really does emphasise that there are people who need to use motor vehicles. Delivery clearly is an area. There is going to be motorised delivery for a very long time, and that is essential to the city's operation.

Mr BARTON: Some people from the commercial vehicle sector have suggested that a lot of these changes are being done by stealth to drive them out, and so it is just all too difficult to come into the Melbourne CBD.

Mr SMITHERS: I guess we engaged with all sorts of groups of people as we generated the transport strategy. We spoke to more people than we have ever spoken to before. We have engaged with different parts of the commercial vehicle sector. What we really would like to achieve is much more efficient delivery systems, particularly for commercial vehicles which are carrying freight so that they can get to their destination at lower cost, because we do not want to load costs onto business—costs of, you know, slow transport, unpredictable delivery times et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And part of doing that, I think, is to try and not encourage vehicles that do not need to be in the central city. Really the central city is the most active and valuable land in the state, and its highest use is for the thing that cities are for, which is for the exchange of ideas, for work, for pleasure, for meeting people, for shopping—all those things that humans have been attracted to cities for for thousands and thousands of years. The commercial delivery sector is an absolutely key part of that, and we are very aware and we are working with the state, for example, at the present on whether we can do delivery consolidation centres. The aim of that would be to reduce the cost of delivery to central city areas which can be hard to get to and which are in pedestrianised zones, which I must say generally are economically extremely successful, such as Bourke Street Mall, but we still have to get the deliveries in there.

Mrs McARTHUR: I am just wondering, Richard, your 2030 plan was obviously devised pre-COVID. Many people that work in the city—and I know of a lot, even in my own family—have worked out that actually it is terribly efficient to work out of the city. Do you think your plan might need revision, given the potential changes to use of office space within the city? I also am aware of the number of vacant apartments you have in the CBD and surrounding areas at the moment. So do you think COVID has changed the way we look at using the CBD and the city, and will fewer and fewer people be working and living in the city even into the future post COVID?

Mr SMITHERS: That is a really challenging question for everybody, I think, who has any relationship to the city. Certainly the changes in travel patterns have been something that I have never experienced, and what will happen in the future I would not be able to predict. I think that some change in city strategy will certainly be needed. The ongoing economic impact of COVID will be significant. I listen to economic commentators talking about this, and I prefer their views over what I might think. But some of the parts of the strategy may be less relevant; some of the parts of the strategy, I think, are very relevant to now. We have seen a significant upswing, for example, in the use of bikes, so we are trying to plan to cater for bike access to the central city, which was a part of the strategy when it was adopted in October, and we are now trying to move that. Those plans were all laid out; what we are doing now is trying to accelerate those plans. But certainly how people travel on public transport, how we maintain social distancing and what the impact is of people having worked at home and perhaps enjoyed that and wanting to continue that and perhaps businesses will reduce costs by not needing as much office space as they had before—I think that those are important questions. But the research shows that whichever way it goes we are going to need a mix of transport modes to supply for people to come into the central city. So I think a lot of what is in the strategy still holds, but no doubt about it, we will have to review lots of things about the way the city operates if this continues for a good deal longer.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Richard. Just one point that has come out of the move towards bicycles I do want to just reiterate. I think there is sometimes a perception that bicycles by their very nature are safer; it is not necessarily true. The City of Melbourne is looking to roll out further bicycle paths, and they need to make sure that the interface with pedestrians is safe.

I had a family friend only a few short years ago that passed away in the City of Melbourne when she was knocked over by a cyclist and she hit her head on the floor. And as a result, obviously, she left some loved ones and some dependents. And unlike with car accidents, her loved ones and young children did not have access to any sort of TAC compensation or any safety net. So it was a very, very distressing time, and that was a result of the actions of a cyclist in the City of Melbourne. I am a resident of the City of Melbourne, so I just want to make sure, if people have a misconception that cycling necessarily means safer: it does not. If you have that many cyclists on the road interacting with pedestrians, it is a very dangerous hazard. I am someone who has lived through it. Like I said, it is a family friend of ours that passed away in the City of Melbourne only a few short years ago. It can be very devastating, the harm caused by a collision with a cyclist. It can be just as devastating as an accident with a vehicle, a car. People—because there are not as many bicycles on the road—do not appreciate that, but when you get a large amount of cyclists you see the potential hazard to the safety of pedestrians.

My wife and I go for regular walks. I am a resident of the City of Melbourne myself and I see now some cyclists are riding really fast. My wife is pregnant, so I am very careful. I am really concerned that there is nowhere to report it to. You can report people who are doing the wrong thing in a vehicle, because you have got their registration number. With a cyclist we do not have that opportunity. I do not even know where I could report it to and actually get it enforced. So I am always concerned, as a ratepayer and a resident—and obviously as Chair of this committee—that we are looking for alternatives but sometimes maybe the alternatives might not necessarily be safer. Because it is easy to hope, you know, that you have got your solution, but the solution might not be as good as it looks once it is implemented. So I just want to keep that front of mind. Sorry about that. That is more of a statement, just because I have obviously been deeply affected, as you can imagine.

Mr FINN: Very well said, Chair. Well said.

The CHAIR: I do not have any more questions. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank you, Richard, and the City of Melbourne, for your submission and presentation. It is always great. We love the interaction with the City of Melbourne. We always find it engaging. We obviously have a balance on the committee, and different views, but I think it is important. And I did enjoy reading it—I have read the strategy, and I do like seeing it is different, it is innovative, trying to adopt some of the world's best practices. But obviously Australia's settings are probably a bit different. Every place is different. I can see the challenges and just the balancing act, that is all. Thank you for your presentation today, Richard. It has been a pleasure.

Mr SMITHERS: Thank you very much—my pleasure.

Committee adjourned.