Buloke Shire Council

Submission into the Inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads

11 January 2018

The Executive Officer
Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002
1. The effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads;

Communication
Council is often approached by residents with complaints about VicRoads roads particularly in relation to condition or safety concerns. The complaints typically come to us for one of three reasons:

- A misunderstanding from the resident that Council manages the road
- That despite the condition or safety concern being reported, no response is received.
- That despite the condition or safety concern being reported, the VicRoads response is generic and the resident doesn’t feel like it has been appropriately investigated.

When Council officers take these requests direct to VicRoads staff and the response we mainly receive is that works will not be done due to the unavailability or inflexibility of budget allocations.

Roads in poor condition
What is apparent throughout the Buloke Shire and the rest of regional Victoria is the significant amount of speed restricted zones due to the ‘roads in poor condition’ policy. The anecdotal evidence is that these speed limited sections of road are increasing and are not limited to lower usage roads, but appearing on A, B and C class roads.

For some roads, the condition is so bad that a previous 100km/h section of road has been reduced to 40km/h for over two years. What is increasingly frustrating for the community is that VicRoads are typically unable to provide a timeline for repair work.

As an example, there is a large dip in the Borung Highway, Wooroonook, which has been speed limited to 60km/h for over 18 months. The estimated cost to fix this work is $50,000 and would take 2-3 days. There is no budget allocation this year and discussions with the region staff suggest that it is unlikely to be funded next year either. Lack of funding for ‘patch’ fixes means VicRoads are unable to meet the community’s reasonable expected levels of service.

Inadequate asset funding
The amount of roads in poor condition isn’t surprising, given the low funding levels for renewal works on roads. Whilst the 2017/18 financial year has seen a budget increase, the previous years were significantly underfunded. Council’s own asset management systems indicate that sealed roads last 45-50 years which is typically due to soil type, before a full rehabilitation is required. VicRoads have in previous years been rehabilitating roads at a rate 0.5% of the network, which equates to a road needing to last 200 years – 4 times longer than the expected life.
Flexibility in approach

We understand the need to ensure works are fit for the purpose, however it is our experience that designs are often over engineered. We see the need to be more flexible and solutions focused in looking at outcomes within often low budget parameters.

2. The existing funding model and its lack of effectiveness for country Victoria;

As has been mentioned above, the existing funding model stifles the effectiveness of VicRoads and has wide-reaching impacts. Over the past five years, VicRoads renewal works has been drastically underfunded, which has impacted on their ability to manage the road network in a good condition. In the Buloke Shire region, we have seen how this lack of funding impacts on the tourism and visitation to townships, the Sunraysia Highway is a perfect example which motorists actively avoid travelling on. For the businesses in Donald and Birchip positioned on the highway, they miss important through-traffic and day visitors with grey-nomads and truck drivers recommending use of the Henty or Calder Highways as an alternative.

This year VicRoads' budget allocation doubled, and we were pleased to see this increase in allocation to the road network. The inconsistency of allocation from year to year is difficult for VicRoads and other agencies to manage. The boost in funding in one year has resulted in an increase in demand for engineering and road construction contractors, increasing the price of tenders for both VicRoads and Local Government. In reviewing the tenders received on the VicRoads website, most projects are receiving only 1 or 2 tenders, whereas this time last year, the competition was much greater.

In addition, we understand that there set criteria for funding allocations that many of our projects do not meet. A more flexible funding mix that considers local needs would allow VicRoads to better meet community levels of service.

The recent Building our Regions Program has been a welcome addition, and Council applauds its implementation. We believe this project that has allowed VicRoads to work with Council and the community to implement key local priorities is a great initiative and should be continued.

Council advocates for establishing a consistent level of funding over a four year period to give VicRoads more certainty to plan works and therefore confidently communicate a forward works plan with the community.
3. **The lack of consultation with regional communities and their subsequent lack of input into prioritising which roads are in dire need of repair; and**

   The most recent Country Roads consultation program was an excellent approach to getting out into the community and hearing the thoughts of the users of the road. This was well appreciated in the Buloke Shire and should become a regular practice.

   Whilst discussing priorities with the VicRoads Executive Team was important, many community members simply want a chance to discuss their ‘pot-hole issues’ with the maintenance and asset managers and ultimately see a result from their discussions. More engagement work completed by regional staff would allow greater community input and ensure there is a greater understanding within VicRoads of the community level of service.

4. **The option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body.**

   Council doesn’t wish to recommend or advocate for either operational model. The decision is one that needs detailed analysis, and each structure would have benefits and limitations.

   When considering the best option, it could be assumed that the structure with one overarching body (VicRoads) should be able to be provided with lower overhead costs, leaving more funds for project delivery. This current model can and should work as long as the appropriate amount of authority and budget is given to each Region to plan and deliver projects.