Submission to:

Inquiry into VicRoads’s Management of Country Roads Submission

The Law reform, Road and Community Safety Committee

Parliament of Victoria

From: Maurice D. Squirrell, Associate Professor (Retd)

Phone: [redacted]

Email: [redacted]

Address: [redacted]

I do not seek confidentiality.

Note: I endeavoured to send these documents electronically, but I do not have an electronic signature, I may not be able to correctly read all pieces of road signs or of cars, and apparently I have an URL unable to whirl properly or similar.
Terms of References to be addressed by this submission:

1. Not addressed
2. Addressed
3. Addressed
4. Not Addressed

Comment: the prior production of a ‘Green paper’ dealing with the issues would have been helpful to increase the level of informed responses.

This Submission

This submission sets out a most unsatisfactory situation and may have arisen due to road ‘ownership or responsibility by a Victorian government body but not a government body normally expected to have to exercise the responsibility of road ownership.

This is the story of a country road and its management – the section of Ridge Road, Humevale, which runs through the Yan Yean Water Reserve from Coombs Road at its eastern end to the Whittlesea town eastern boundary on its western end. See Location Map 1.

Location Map 1 (based on ‘Google Earth’) shows: Yan Yean Water Reserve (YYWR)
Two sections of Ridge road: Melbourne Water (MW) section of Ridge Road (MWRR)
Eastern section, from Coombs road to Arthurs Creek Road.
Deep Creek Road
Arthurs Creek Road.
Coombs Road
Plenty road.
Whittlesea Town. (W)
Writer’s House (McSweeny’s Corner)
Writer’s son’s house.

Location Map 2 shows: Melbourne Water section of Coombs Road (MWRR)
Writer’s House (McSweeny’s Corner)
Scrubby Creek Road
Whittlesea Town.

Background

The Squirrel property was purchased in 1969. Previously used as a dairying farm, we now use the portion we purchased for beef cattle and fat lamb raising. In 1969 the YYWR was then the responsibility of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW).

Ridge Road commences from its southern end as an extension of Yan Yean Road, running northerly from Arthurs Creek Road along the eastern boundary of the YYWR, passed an intersection with Deep Creek Road, and then, later, turns in to the YYWR at Coombs Road, running then in a westerly direction to Whittlesea Town at the Yea road. The Melbourne Water section of Ridge Road is from this last section from Coombs Road but only until it exits at the MYYWR western boundary next to Whittlesea Town.

When Ridge Road enters the YYWR it leaves the ridge line it was following and descends to, and ascends from, a creek line. It then follows a contour along the side of a substantial hill which rises along its northern side.

We understand that:

a. The Section of Ridge Road from Arthurs Creek Road to Deep Creek Road is jointly ‘owned’ by the City of Whittlesea and the Shire of Nillumbik. That from Deep Creek Road to Coombs Road, and from the YYWR to Yea Road the responsibility is solely that of the City of Whittlesea, and

b. The section of Ridge Road from Coombs Road running west, passing Scrubby Creek Road, to the western boundary of YYWR is the sole responsibility of MW.

‘Ownership’– MMBW

We understand that sometime before our arrival in 1969, road access to Whittlesea was available via a road that is shown on the original Parish of Linton plan as being a (virtual) extension of Deep Creek Road, which now terminates at its western end at Ridge Road nearly 1 km south of the corner of Coombs and Ridge Roads. Further, earlier in the last century, that the road section here described as MWRR was then provided as an alternative to this earlier route (which was then closed to public use) by the MMBW (the then ‘owner’ of the YYWR) and who accepted responsibility to maintain the road as if it were a ‘public’ road.

This, they were doing when we arrived and did so competently until their replacement by MW in the 1990’s. The road was well maintained, and the attitude to us by the local manager was that traditionally expected between adjoining rural land owners where issues, if any, arose between them. We never had any grounds for complaint and found the MMBW a responsible, friendly and accessible neighbour.

MW

Since the mid-1990’s, when MW apparently accepted ‘ownership’ of the YYWR, issues of mutual concern between our new neighbour and us have arisen and some have been difficult resolve. One of these is the condition of the MW section of Ridge Road. While the City of Whittlesea maintains its section of Ridge Road in generally good condition, MW does not. The MW section seems to be less
frequently maintained, there seems to be an indifference to its condition, and the quality of what work that is carried out is such that it soon leaves an inferior surface for travel.

Some 18 months ago, in mid-2016, MW spent a considerable amount of money of regrading, resurfacing and constructing new culverts and relatively large lengths of metal barriers. Some areas of habitual pot-hole development have not returned to that state, but not all. Over the next six months or so the road developed significant areas of corrugations of the surface and in some spots large and deep pot-holes developed. Over the next 12 months from the construction there was no noticeable maintenance carried out. In contrast the City of Whittlesea graded its section at least twice, and maintained good surface, free of corrugations and with few pot-holes being allowed to develop.

Six months ago, MW regraded and within two weeks most of the corrugations returned, some new areas started to develop this condition and some areas, not all, of areas where serious pot-holes had been were starting to develop again. By the end of last winter, not a wet one, it became necessary to virtually stop and to negotiate in and out of two areas of serious and deep holes. In this same period the other section of the road had pot-holes filled and compacted.

The Problem

Whittlesea Town takes about 8 - 10 minutes to drive to from our house when the road is in good condition. The alternative route would be to travel around the reservoir via Ridge Road south, Arthurs Creek Road and Plenty Road - a 20-25 minute drive. We use Whittlesea for doctors, chemist, newspapers (we have no delivery service), farm and private vehicle mechanical, fuel, grocery, butcher, library, banking, mail (we have no delivery service), ambulance, and so on. Important services that come or may come to our house and perhaps urgently from Whittlesea are mechanic, fire brigade and ambulance.

The nearest other town is 15-20 minutes away and the nearest town with the same set of central services is probably a 30+ minute drive-time.

To illustrate the importance of maintaining appropriate access and convenience to Whittlesea, I use a simple personal illustration. In 1972, when our son was born, he stopped breathing one evening when about 6 weeks old. We raced him to the Whittlesea Doctors in about 10 minutes, all-up. Last month, now a very fit 45 year-old, he had a serious accident on his property, fracturing four vertebrae and three ribs, etc. We understand that the ambulance officers who attended told our daughter-in-law that the poor condition of Ridge Road from Whittlesea slowed them considerably.

I find it intolerable that in the 21st century, 40 km from one of the best cities’ in the developed world that for at least nine of the last eighteen months we have been forced to put up with this road that is so degraded in parts even after significant expenditure. This, after nearly 20 years of poor maintenance and neglect.

Although not suggesting I am an expert in the building and maintenance of roads I have been exposed to this area in 25 years of Army Reserve service in Royal Australian Engineers. I am aware that all roads must incorporate features to drain water off the road surface and allow it to cross from one side to the other to allow drainage. Road drainage is the key to a road’s integrity.

This critical principle has not been fully met with this road, even though it is clear from the significant expenditure of 18 months ago that where new culverts and side drains to feed drainage water to them and appropriate cambering or crowning provided these spots were significantly
improved. In my view all of these three are still deficient definitely in two places, particularly in the construction and maintenance of side drains. There are considerable lengths where there appears to be no side drains.

I don’t particularly blame MW. I do hold them responsible. I am annoyed they did not consult ‘interested’ parties before the expenditure in 2016, like say VicRoads is currently doing with other road upgrades in the district. I am not surprised, given their apparent indifference to other issues and attitudes with their neighbours and when these attributes are compared with MMBW. Nor do I have any compliant on these issues with any particular MW officer.

Rather I think they should not be given responsibility to maintain this road and perhaps we, as a community should not expect them to. Their job is water, not roads.

However, as this is clearly a ‘local’ road it should not be the responsibility of VicRoads. Nor do I think the road should be sealed because of these particular issues.

A Possible solution.

I suspect the smart way to an effective and efficient solution to this problem is for MW to negotiate with the City of Whittlesea to take over the physical care of their section of Ridge Road.

We have noticed that the City combines their own water and trucking resources with the same private grader operator who seems very experienced with the road and the area and competent in his output. On the other hand it is difficult to consider a similar statement for the apparent contractors used by MW.

Further, it might be possible for MW to negotiate a price with the City that reflects the marginal service being sought.

The opportunity then for enhanced effectiveness and efficiencies should be available.

If the same quality of product was available along the whole length of Ridge Road as that normally available along the City of Whittlesea section I would be very pleased. This solution provides the best option for that to be achieved.

This submission is written not only out of personal frustration with the situation outlined here but also as an illustration of what has happened, probably unintentionally, but with a doable solution proposed or similar and that similar roads should be identified and audited for similar problems and solution.

I would be happy to appear before the Committee

Sincerely

Maurice D. Squirrell