15 January 2018

The Executive Officer
Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

To whom it may concern

Re: VicRoads Management of Country Roads - Submission by Campaspe Shire Council

I write on behalf of the Campaspe Shire Council to provide comments to the VicRoads Management of Country Roads inquiry. Council appreciates the opportunity to have input into this important process.

The Shire of Campaspe is located in northern Victoria, encompassing 4,500 square kilometres. It includes the communities of Echuca, Kyabram, Rochester, Lockington, Gunbower, Rushworth, Stanhope, Tongala and Girgarre.

The Shire of Campaspe benefits from its location at the heart of northern Victoria, with strong connections to Bendigo and Melbourne to the south, Shepparton and the Goulburn Valley to the east, and the expansive Riverina and Mallee agricultural regions to the north and west.

Alongside agriculture and manufacturing, the tourism and service sectors help drive a strong and diverse economy. The Shire has a growing population of approximately 38,000 people.

Council and the wider community have a range of key infrastructure challenges which centre largely on being able to fund its ongoing capital program and being able to leverage external funding opportunities.

The discussion below addresses the inquiry Terms of Reference.

The effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads

Campaspe Shire Council has over time developed and proactively maintains a strong relationship with the leadership team at VicRoads Northern Region.

Our view is that Region officers have an excellent knowledge of the road network, but have been hampered in their ability to provide an appropriate and consistent level of service due to inconsistent funding, particularly over the past 4 years.
Campaspe ratepayers, consistently report concerns with the level of maintenance and operation of VicRoads routes. This was strongly reflected in the 2017 Local Government Satisfaction Survey where Campaspe’s satisfaction score for sealed road network dropped from 53% to 40%. The reduction in satisfaction is inconsistent with the number of complaints received by council regarding council roads, but does reflect the known increase in the number of customer complaints that council has referred to VicRoads on customers behalf. Verbatim comments from the survey also support this theory.

In recent years, a common treatment for a VicRoads route with hazardous defects is to subject the section of road to speed restrictions (reduction from 100km/h to 60km/h). These restrictions and hazards are seen to last very long times, many between 6 and 12 months, which impacts on the efficient and safe use of roads.

Anecdotal evidence from the manufacturing sector is that poor road conditions on freight routes is resulting in increased costs due to damaged goods on arrival, longer routes to avoid poorer sections of road and increased damage, wear and tear on vehicles.

In summary, VicRoads is not delivering a consistent level of service. Unless resources are increased, this will remain where it is.

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

The funding model is partially to blame for a lack of effectiveness for rural Victorians. However a model cannot make up for inadequate level of funding overall.

Council’s experience is that it is increasingly difficult to access funding for safety, maintenance or road improvement projects that the community or council has identified as important. This is reflective of the VicRoads model of best use of funds as a state-wide body, where larger population and traffic risks in metropolitan areas outweigh rural priorities. As such, safety and upgrade projects that may be entirely reasonable from a technical, practical and return on investment standpoint, and would meet the requirements for funding, are left unfunded and not done.

It is council’s opinion that a separate fund for rural Victoria which measured projects with a rural lens it would be more likely that legitimate rural projects would more commonly gain support. This opinion is premised on the basis that the total budget required needs to match the required level of service. If not, funding will simply move around to suit the policy of the day rather than supplying the resources to maintain the assets and the level of service required.

The lack of consultation with regional communities and their subsequent lack of input in to prioritising which roads are in dire need of repair

The level of consultation between council and VicRoads Northern Region is very good and we enjoy a strong and collaborative partnership. Both council and VicRoads have an excellent understanding of sections of network that are in need of repair or upgrade through local knowledge, community feedback and regular inter-organisational meetings. However, the level of funding available, hence the number of projects initiated is inadequate.
As stated in the introduction of this submission, the Shire of Campaspe is located at the heart of northern Victoria, and is largely reliant on agriculture, manufacturing and tourism. All of these sectors require a reliable, safe, well maintained road network to thrive.

It would be beneficial to community, council and VicRoads if there were greater resources available and increased emphasis on rural road network needs.

The option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific country roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body.

If the outcome is to improve the ability of rural areas to access state support for projects, improve the delivery of maintenance and the overall level of service of state roads in rural areas, then council supports the proposal. However without appropriate funding any model will fail.

VicRoads Northern Region have an excellent knowledge of the road network and condition and operate a professional organisation that council believes delivers a net benefit to the community. The submission we have written is aimed at improving the value proposition to rural areas and the state as a whole.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this feedback. Could you please direct any further enquiries in the first instance to Richard Conway, Asset Manager at the Campaspe Shire Council on .

Yours faithfully

JASON RUSSELL
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER