15 January 2018

Dear Sir/Madam

Inquiry into VicRoads Management of Country Roads

I am writing on behalf of Yarra Ranges Council in response to the call for public submissions relating to the Parliamentary Inquiry into VicRoads Management of Country Roads.

Located on metropolitan Melbourne’s eastern fringe, Yarra Ranges is home to a population of 145,000. Our municipality covers approximately 2,500 square kilometres and stretches from the densely populated outer suburbs of Melbourne up into the surrounding foothills, agricultural valleys and forested areas of the Great Dividing Range. Yarra Ranges is one of Victoria’s largest, most varied and scenic municipalities. It is also the largest area of any metropolitan council. There are more than 55 suburbs, townships, small communities and rural areas in the Yarra Ranges.

Yarra Ranges is home to a significant concentration of tourism product and experiences. Quality food and wine, nature based experiences, major attractions (Puffing Billy, Healesville Sanctuary), activities, and weddings and events provide the pillars of the local tourism appeal. These attract nearly 6 million visitors per annum, with over 450,000 domestic overnight visitors and over 26,000 international overnight visitors. 84% of these visitor trips are to the ‘non metropolitan’ region of the municipality, using VicRoads arterial roads that are in need of improvement.

Yarra Ranges has a road network of 2,300 kilometres, for which VicRoads has a responsibility for the management of 515 kilometres of state highways and arterial roads.
With the nature of our municipality transitioning from urban to rural, the roads for which VicRoads have responsibility vary from high standard six lane divided carriageways in the urban setting through to two lane undivided roads with roadside shoulders and open drains in rural areas. These VicRoads roads are mostly constructed with a sealed road pavement, however there still remains a length of approximately 65 kilometres of unmade arterial road. Snow clearing is required on the Warburton Woods Point Road to St Clair/Matlock and Donna Buang Road which provides access to Mount Donna Buang, during the winter period.

Yarra Ranges has experienced a long-term quality professional relationship with staff from VicRoads. Varying forms of engagement have occurred with staff at all levels over time to exchange information in relation to maintenance and improvement of the arterial road network for which VicRoads is responsible.

Over recent years there has been a noticeable reduction in interaction between senior staff of our organisations. Meetings have previously occurred at CEO/director level annually, either directly with Yarra Ranges or with the cluster of Eastern Metropolitan councils, however this engagement has fallen away.

*It is recommended that VicRoads re-establish senior engagement with councils to ensure that they understand the local community needs and strategic challenges faced by local government and how the arterial road network should support this.*

Prior to the introduction of the Road Management Act 2004, councils had a greater influence in achieving maintenance and improvement of the arterial road network. Annual submissions were made to VicRoads for maintenance and improvement funding for the arterial road network, resulting in successful applications being funded and delivered by local government.

As a result of the introduction of the Act, responsibility for arterial roads was transferred to VicRoads.

Yarra Ranges experience has seen a reduction in focus by VicRoads in understanding road improvement and safety improvement needs for the arterial network. Engagement with staff at Yarra Ranges is inconsistent and infrequent in seeking input towards improvement needs. From a process of seeking annual submissions from councils for arterial road improvement projects, it is now left to councils to individually advocate for attention generally via state and federal members rather than through a formal process led by VicRoads. Submissions are called for in relation to road safety projects, however this is generally linked to funding flowing from the Federal Accident Blackspot program.

*It is recommended that VicRoads re-establish a program of regularly or annually seeking submissions from local government for improvements to the arterial road network.*

Over recent years, Yarra Ranges have identified a progressive reduction in the standard of maintenance of the arterial network. Increased complaints from the community have been received in relation to failed areas and deterioration of arterial roads.
Standards of roadside maintenance have also significantly reduced to road shoulders, open roadside drains and roadside infrastructure and signs.

The recently released Exposure Draft of the Local Government Bill (clause 87) contains a proposed requirement for local government to have in place a 10 year Asset Plan that includes information about maintenance, renewal, acquisition, expansion, upgrade, disposal and decommissioning of infrastructure assets. It is considered that this requirement should also apply to VicRoads and that appropriate funding levels are in place to support this.

In response to low standards of maintenance to mowing of grass verges and medians, Yarra Ranges had to negotiate with VicRoads to take over this responsibility. Whilst funding was transferred to the Council for the level of service that VicRoads was providing, this was not meeting community expectations and has required Yarra Ranges to subsidise this program of activity.

*It is recommended that VicRoads be provided with increased funding levels to ensure appropriate levels of service are achieved in the maintenance of road pavements and roadside areas and that they operate to a 10 year Asset Plan.*

With VicRoads having a statewide responsibility for road policy and safety, understandably there is a need for a consistency in approach to ensure that drivers generally experience an intuitive road network. Setting of speed limits has been an issue of conjecture over recent years, however in urban areas VicRoads are becoming more supportive of lower speed limits in areas of activity. It is considered that there is inconsistency in approach where roads have a higher standard have lower speed limits applied, compared to some of the roads in Yarra Ranges where conditions would not allow drivers to travel safely at some of the speed limits that have been set. Whilst the Road Rules require a driver to travel in accordance with local conditions, it is considered that many drivers do not recognise this and see speed limits as a “target speed”. Members of the community are often seeking a lower speed limit to try and influence inappropriate driving behaviour of others using their road. Whilst VicRoads has recently begun asking for community views it is considered that the current approach of setting speed limits by VicRoads does not sufficiently give consideration to local community needs and views and that these are not having the degree of influence that should otherwise occur.

*It is recommended that VicRoads provide increased recognition of local Council and community views in the setting of speed limits for local roads.*

Similar to any other organisation, changes frequently occur with staffing. It has been a recent experience with Yarra Ranges that responsiveness from VicRoads in relation to community-based requests has reduced. It is uncertain if this is related to downsizing or change over in staff, however councillors and community members have recently been frustrated with a slow response to requests and a lack of empathy towards the nature of requests from a community perspective. Council staff are relied upon for developing information and submitting it to VicRoads for assessment, rather than VicRoads recognising the local knowledge and expertise of council staff and looking to work in partnership to achieve outcomes.
It is recommended that VicRoads establish improved mechanisms for working with local government to respond to local community issues and requests.

It is considered that the proposal for dividing VicRoads into two organisations that focus on rural/regional Victoria and metropolitan Victoria could only function effectively with adequate funding being in place and appropriate legislation, policies and strategies that ensure consistency of approach.

As an interface municipality, Yarra Ranges has experience with issues from both a metropolitan and rural perspective. Yarra Ranges however is classified as a metropolitan municipality, which is a disadvantage to our rural community when issues and needs arise that do not allow Council to attract funding to adequately support and respond. Whilst the government has introduced the Growing Suburbs Fund, Yarra Ranges has received the least amount of funding of all of the interface councils to date despite having significant needs. Yarra Ranges does not qualify for the government’s Regional Infrastructure Fund despite having a significant proportion of the municipality being rural in nature that experiences similar issues to other rural areas of Victoria.

It would be of significant concern to Yarra Ranges if a similar experience occurred with the proposed division of VicRoads. It is anticipated that Yarra Ranges would be aligned with the Metropolitan Melbourne, where competing for funding for improvement needs would continue to be a challenge and could potentially become greater if available funding was to decrease due to the division. The current experience is that growth areas are attracting significant funding to meet needs, which are quite evident. The disappointing aspect for Yarra Ranges is that at the time when development was occurring in our municipality, similar levels of funding were not being provided for road improvements. Yarra Ranges now faces a backlog of road improvement needs.

Metropolitan Melbourne has expanded to the boundaries of Yarra Ranges and our communities have an expectation for comparable levels of service to what they experience when travelling through neighbouring urban municipalities. The arterial road network has not been improved in parallel with development throughout Yarra Ranges, with many of our arterial roads now being at a “country” standard yet carrying “city” traffic volumes.

This was recognised by the RACV’s 2012 “Growing Pains - Keeping pace with transport needs in outer Melbourne and Geelong” report (https://www.racv.com.au/content/dam/racv/images/public-policy/reports/2012-outer-melbourne+Growing+Pains+Report.pdf) where it is stated:-

“Despite long-term planning, short-term decision making and a lack of adequate funding continue to result in communities where rural standard roads are carrying urban traffic volumes. Missing links in the arterial road network bring through traffic onto local roads, compromising amenity and safety for residents. Roads are built that are too narrow for regular bus services to comfortably pass each other. Where bus services are provided, routes tend to be long and winding rather than providing more direct links to train stations and other activity centres.”

4
In times of shrinking budgets and increasing community demands and expectations, there is a need for efficiencies to be sought that reduce bureaucracies and increase funding towards needed improvements.

It is anticipated that dividing VicRoads would only lead to a need to increase total overheads in the delivery of road maintenance and improvements across Victoria, leading to a reduction in on-ground activity. Whilst there may be a desire for an increased and specific focus for rural and regional Victoria, there may be other ways to achieve this without introducing increased overheads.

Yarra Ranges would therefore not support dividing VicRoads to establish separate organisations that focus on Country Roads and Metropolitan Roads for Victoria.

Should you have any further queries you are welcome to contact Mark Varmalis, Director Environment & Engineering on [redacted] or via email at [redacted]

Yours sincerely

Troy Edwards
Acting Chief Executive Officer