15 January 2018

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

Dear Sir/Madam

INQUIRY INTO VICROADS’ MANAGEMENT OF COUNTRY ROADS

VicRoads and Victorian councils, both road authorities, play important roles in the management of the road network in across the state. Mitchell Shire enjoys a collaborative relationship with its VicRoads Northern Region partners.

Mitchell Shire Council welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee's Inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads (the Inquiry).

The Inquiry is required to report on the four points below by 30 June 2018:

1. The effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads
2. The existing funding model and its lack of effectiveness for country Victoria
3. The lack of consultation with regional communities and their subsequent lack of input into prioritising which roads are in dire need of repair
4. The option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body

This submission is structured around these four questions. It has been prepared by and is the opinion of Council officers and has been informed by recent Council resolutions and ongoing community feedback collected through community surveys and social media platforms.

Due to timing constraints, this submission is expected to be formally endorsed at a meeting of Council in February 2018 and at that stage, there may be some amendments made by Council.

I would also like to register Council's interest to be heard at a future inquiry hearing to speak on behalf of this submission.

The effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads

The Victorian Auditor General (VAGO) published its report into Maintaining State Controlled Roadways in June 2017. This report highlighted the increasing proportion of the state road network in very poor condition, which creates a growing risk to public safety and increases road user costs.

The report’s key recommendations predominately focussed on asset management practices and the importance of having a road maintenance strategy. Mitchell Shire
recognises that VicRoads is currently undertaking work on a number of measures to implement the VAGO report’s recommendations which includes a range of asset maintenance reform measures.

It is critical that VicRoads has the funding needed to continue this reform work and implement changes to the delivery of its road maintenance program, as well as building the evidence base for investment decisions.

In 2015, VicRoads released the Managing Pavements in Poor Condition Policy which guides actions to be undertaken by VicRoads when the road is unable to be maintained. When pavements are in poor condition, the treatments include road closure or diversion, speed reduction, and warnings for drivers.

Council recognises the requirement for the policy in lieu of adequate funding, however we express concerns for the efficient movement of people and goods and for the sustainable and effective management of the state’s road assets.

Further to the management of physical infrastructure assets, Mitchell Shire Council would also welcome a thorough and mature review of the Victorian default speed limit on non-arterial rural roads throughout the state. It is considered that this is in the best interests for road safety for motorists travelling on rural roads that are of much lower standards than the declared arterial road network.

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

Aside from a need to boost overall funding levels for road maintenance (at State and local levels) VicRoads currently operates by allocating funding to its regional offices, which have the autonomy to allocate funding based on the priorities within the region.

While we don’t have any qualitative evidence to suggest the current system of prioritisation is inadequate, Mitchell Shire supports the creation of a State-wide uniform road condition assessment process and prioritisation framework for funding road maintenance on the States arterial road network.

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

Mitchell Shire is not consulted with regard to the prioritising of road maintenance, road upgrade projects or rural roadside vegetation management on the arterial road network within our region. Council sees this both as a current weakness and as a significant area for improvement that would not only improve road maintenance and road upgrade investment decisions in our region but significantly strengthen the relationship between VicRoads, Council and the local community. Council can provide case studies where planned road maintenance/upgrade by VicRoads would have benefitted with the input from local government.

The local knowledge of arterial roads in our region that exists not just within our community, but within our organisation is a significant resource that continues to remain untapped. Council officers could effectively become a second set of eyes and ears across the region to help inform road maintenance and upgrade investment decisions, rural roadside vegetation management and to help manage community expectations.

Any steps taken to improve consultation between VicRoads and Mitchell Shire Council will be welcomed by Council and our community.
The option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body

The option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation will not address the lack of funding currently being invested in arterial roads in Victoria by the State Government. At its meeting of 18 December, 2017, Council resolved, in part, ‘that there needs to be a significant increase in VicRoads spending on road maintenance, including but not limited to, potholes, road envelopes and drainage.’

VicRoads operates in a financially constrained environment which is largely outside of their control. A 2008 VAGO report, Maintaining Regional Arterial Roads noted that funding for road maintenance needed to be significantly increased. Total real funding to VicRoads has decreased since 2010-11, including a reduction of maintenance funding of approximately 60 per cent.

The 2017 VAGO report Maintaining State Controlled Roadways states that the proportion of roads in very poor condition is increasing in all regions. The report also states that the road pavements in two metropolitan regions has significantly declined over the past two years. This analysis suggests there is no discrepancy between metropolitan and regional road funding, and that more funding is needed across the entire arterial state road network.

Mitchell Shire Council would also welcome further investigation of initiatives to improve joint procurement for road maintenance activities between Local Councils and VicRoads.

The capacity and buying power of VicRoads for road maintenance services is far superior to that of Local Councils and this has a significant bearing on the availability and affordability of local contractors to perform road maintenance on the local road network.

This situation further exacerbates the growing gap between state and local road maintenance activities resulting in the ongoing deterioration of the local (non-arterial) road network.

Improved procurement collaboration between VicRoads and Local Councils for road maintenance activities would result in a significant uplift in the standard of all roads across the State.

Conclusion

Our community and Council is continually frustrated by the lack of proactive maintenance on the States arterial road network which sees minor defects propagate into much larger defects that require more disruptive and costly repairs to address. Our Council regularly writes to State Government MP’s and elected representatives asking for increased funding for the States whole road network.

While Mitchell Shire Council is generally supportive of recommendations from various VAGO reports into VicRoads relating to asset improvement and maintenance, we also recognise that VicRoads needs adequate funding to implement these recommendations in addition to a significant increase in funding for road maintenance to improve road maintenance practices.
We appreciate the opportunity to register Mitchell Shire Council's response to Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee's *Inquiry into VicRoads' Management of Country Roads*.

For any enquiries, please contact Mr Tim Partridge, Manager Engineering and Major Projects on

Yours sincerely

DAVID TURNBULL  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

cc  Hon. Mark Gepp, MP  
     Danielle Green, MP  
     Hon. Wendy Lovell, MP  
     Hon. Luke O'Sullivan, MP  
     Stephanie Ryan, MP  
     Jaclyn Symes, MP  
     Daniel Young, MP