Submission to the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee

Inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads

January 2018
1. **The effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads**

There has been an improvement in the effectiveness of management of Towong Shire VicRoads Roads in the last 12 months. Changes have been made to improve maintenance practices including a more proactive approach to addressing the causes of drainage problems such as substantial shoulder maintenance and drain clearance programs.

We understand there may have been limited funding in the past for renewal and maintenance of roads assets.

Rural areas face unique issues when maintaining rural roads including increased catchment areas and limited stormwater infrastructure, eg. open drains and minimum pavement depths that contribute to asset deterioration.

Remote areas such as Towong Shire have limited access to contractors. Accreditation levels need a hierarchy that aligns with road locations and traffic volumes. This will enable smaller contractors in rural areas to be able to undertake work for VicRoads in a more responsive way instead of requiring the same level of accreditation needed to work on large metropolitan roads.

If this hierarchy system could be introduced it would enable smaller contractors and Councils to undertake minor maintenance works on VicRoads assets when they are in the area. This would improve response times and the customer experience whilst contributing to local economies.

Asset management on lower priority roads to a component level, eg. kerb, guardrail and large directional signage appears to be limited with assets deteriorating beyond their useful life expectancy in some areas. For example kerb at the Corryong town entry, frangible directional signs and guardrail on the Murray River Road prevents proactive maintenance and renewal of these assets when it is required.

2. **The existing funding model and its lack of effectiveness for country roads**

In the very short term, delaying infrastructure renewal is unlikely to have significant impacts on users. Over time without appropriate renewal, it is expected that rural infrastructure will deteriorate and reach unacceptable levels of service.

It is more cost effective to address asset renewal and maintenance in a proactive manner. These delays are not only adding time to the renewal process, but are also resulting in a higher cost of reactive maintenance and asset renewal due to the delay.

For example, if you cut the sealing budget for three years it is not just the three years of sealing that was not undertaken needing to be funded. There will also be additional pavement deterioration due to the seal not being replaced within its expected lifetime. Therefore, as you are also catching up on the subsequent
pavement deterioration that occurs due to seal deterioration, the cost of pavement renewal far outweighs the cost of a reseal.

It is imperative to consider all angles when setting the funding model for renewal of country road assets. Consideration should be given to the weighting of service level delivery between metropolitan and country areas to ensure that there is equality between the two. More transparency on the methods used to allocate funding to the two areas would be useful to demonstrate this.

Flexibility needs to be built into the funding models for regional areas for unexpected and unplanned for situations. For example, a high rainfall year can put a large strain on a maintenance program. Using standard budget models for materials and resources, that one wet year can multiple years to recover from. In a wetter than average year, additional funding needs to be allocated immediately outside of any flood recovery money to address the increased maintenance need to ensure that this work is completed.

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

There are a number of issues that contribute to the lack of connectivity between Melbourne and regional communities:

- Poor staff retention in regional areas, resulting in a loss of corporate knowledge
- The secondment of staff to Melbourne from regional areas, reducing the capacity of regional offices to deliver projects within appropriate timeframes
- Regular staff changes mean there is not a known and designated person to contact
- Melbourne-based staff not understanding the regional environment

Council believes that consultation with Towong Shire Council has been adequate to keep staff and councillors informed. Whenever we have asked for a meeting with VicRoads representatives they have attended or been responsive with phone calls and emails.

The recent consultation through regional community meetings were good including the mapping and planning for these meetings. More meetings to accommodate the remote demographics of Towong Shire could have been useful for VicRoads insight. The online mapping tool received limited response in comparison to other Shires. This is not a reflection of no issues existing within Towong Shire but more highlights the limited access or awareness of this tool existing.
4. **The option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body**

Appropriate funding to the regional areas is more important that the creation of two separate entities with additional ongoing costs, eg. dual finance systems, administration and management.

Appropriate resourcing and retention of staff in regional offices could be improved to maintain communication and connectivity with each regional area. This will assist with long term planning and the ability to be responsive to issues.