Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee  
Parliament House  
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RE: Inquiry into VicRoads management of country roads  

This submission is in support of my motion to split VicRoads into two groups responsible for metropolitan and country roads respectively.  

My motivation for bringing this to Parliament is my belief that VicRoads has simply failed to maintain and develop the roads in country Victoria. Country roads are unsafe, poorly managed, and in desperate need of urgent repair.  

As MP for Western Victoria I have campaigned on behalf of my region, continuously asking for funding for repairs to our failing country roads. We have rolled out a number of tactical campaigns in an effort to bring attention to the issues, and I will provide detail on these later in this submission. Country roads are an ongoing issue.  

Research by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that people living outside the major cities are nearly twice as likely to be involved in road accidents causing injury or death as those living in the metropolitan area. If their statistics are based on the assumption of reasonable road conditions, it does not bode well for people who choose to live in south-west Victoria and western Victoria, given the horrendous condition of our roads.  

The condition of our roads are deteriorating year on year. VicRoads itself has identified that country roads in western Victoria are worse than in any other part of the state, let alone the rest of Australia. Yet, even identifying the problem hasn’t prompted them to take action. It’s estimated it will take something in the order of $220 million to bring these roads up to a condition equivalent to the worst roads in the rest of the state — not to bring them up to the
condition of the best roads but to bring them up to the next worst road conditions. This isn’t good enough!

I have asked the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee to investigated the effectiveness of VicRoads in its management of country roads and to review the funding model and its lack of effectiveness in allocating the funds required to maintain and developing roads in country Victoria.

Another issue raised in the motion is the lack of local consultation. We hear daily of reports and suggestions for improvements that have been directed to VicRoads and been ignored. Decisions on road upgrades seem to be taken in isolation of the groups that use the roads.

There is also confusion over who is responsible for some roads in our regions, with some roads the responsibility of local government, and others falling under VicRoads care. The public certainly don’t understand how responsibility is allocated and which roads belong to which group. More often than not they are referred from one to the other with: ‘it’s not our responsibility’.

Each Government over the years has discussed their funding commitments to the road network and promised millions of dollars. When you look at those figures you would think that the problems will be fixed. But, they have been band aid fixes, which are not working

Piles of scoria are placed into potholes as a means of fixing them. When the next truck drives through the pothole is emptied of scoria and the road and potholes are back to where we started.

A perfect example of this is the Garvoc rail overpass, just west of Terang. Millions of dollars have been spent on this overpass, including as recently as 2008, when another $2 million was provided for this overpass to make what was meant to be a permanent fix, but the overpass continues to fail.

The latest solution, which is appearing more commonly across our country roads, is to simply put up speed restriction signs. I fail to see any attempt to do anything about the long-term problem and fix it up permanently.

We hear many excuses for our roads are so bad; high rainfall and heavy truck usage on our road network. It seems bizarre that the same rain and trucks can pass through metropolitan areas without causing the same pothole damage. You only need to cross the border into South Australia to magically find that the roads there are in a much better condition. Potholes do not exist on South Australia roads, or at least note for long. Their
roads are wider and well maintained. Anyone who suggests that a magical climate change occurs as soon as you hit the border is delusional. The condition of roads and the road-making techniques that have been used traditionally throughout western Victoria in particular show that we seriously need a better way of doing it.

In a recent discussion with an employee of VicRoads about the difference between the Victorian and South Australian road conditions it was admitted that our roads have been built with scoria, a traditional base for our roads. The durability of the material used in South Australia was much better.

Scoria, which is used in Victoria, is a very unstable product to use, it’s very porous and not a very good base at all for road making. What was most concerning about my discussion with that VicRoads employee was the admission that VicRoads doesn’t know what the South Australian road-making authority uses for its base. Would a simple phone call help significantly improve the road base material that is used from one state to another?

I believe that effective consultation with regional communities would also help. The people who are on the ground are the ones who know the condition of our road network, and they also are the ones who so desperately need solutions. They are the ones who contact me on a very, very regular basis with suggestions and input. I’m their last resort.

I’ve spoken extensively with local government in Western Victoria. One of the major problem road areas is through the Glenelg shire, which covers the Casterton-Heywood-Portland area. Their chief executive, Greg Burgoyne, says that the safety of motorists and the protection of export industries are dependent on urgent road repairs. He also added that roads in his shire have been neglected for decades. He says it is not good enough.

Moyne shire councillor Colin Ryan, while he was mayor, said that the key freight routes were literally crumbling under the weight of timber trucks, placing lives and livestock and livelihoods at risk. He says we need a large input of money and also a large input into a different way of constructing these roads.

Corangamite mayor, Cr Jo Beard, described the whole network as struggling. I think that is as well as you could put it. Country Victoria is struggling because of our roads.

I don’t underestimate the magnitude of the task. It’s a massive job, which VicRoads seem to be trying to ignore. Recently we went to the public to get their list of worst roads in south-west Victoria. The intent was to identify the 10 worst roads, but as soon as we made our position clear the phones started to ring. Even the local radio station weighed in, playing the AC/DC classic *Highway to Hell* to highlight the issues we have.
The despair from these people and the cynicism that VicRoads would ever successfully fix our road network were absolutely palpable. They have had enough, and rightfully so, because they just want roads fixed.

My team assessed all the nominations that came to our office and submitted a list of 10 to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety and VicRoads in the hope that this list would stimulate some action. We are that desperate that we actually took on the job of community consultation to create this priority list to stimulate some action from VicRoads itself, because it showed little motivation to consult with our regional communities.

The list could have been much, much longer, but our top 10 were:

1. The Southern Cross intersection - intersection warning lights;
2. Port Fairy - Warrnambool Road - potholed and reconstruction needed;
3. A1 - Heywood to South Australian border Road;
4. Woolsthorpe-Heywood Road - dangerous verges;
5. Hopkins Hwy - Ellerslie-Purnim;
6. Hopkins Hwy - Ellerslie-Mortlake Road;
7. Myamyn - Macarthur Road;
8. Foxhow Road;
9. Portland Ring Road;
10. Cobden-Warrnambool Road.

To date we’ve only seen action on the Southern Cross intersection with the installation of warning lights. A simple, cheap and effective solution. Unfortunately, the others require a more expensive, long term solution.

This is just one of many tactics I’ve used over my current term to try and push some resolution on our roads.

Last year we petitioned to change the status of the Princes Highway to a Road of National Significance. The major benefit of this is that the road would then attract Federal
Government funding, allowing us to split the huge costs of bringing this main arterial road up to scratch.

Princes Highway west services 34 towns and 350,000 people. The *Princes Highway West A1 Corridor Strategy* reveals it has the highest accident rate in the state, particularly from Colac to Portland.

I ran an informal petition and promotion to garner support for 50 passing lanes on the stretch between Colac and the South Australian border.

In October 2017 it was announced a business case would be undertaken, which is a real win for the south-west. So again, we have taken on the role of community consultation, asking our constituents to nominate an area of the Princes Highway that urgently needs a passing lane through our website at [www.50passinglanes.com.au](http://www.50passinglanes.com.au)

We to this to ensure there is some community input into this business case.

We need to have a better system of tapping into the intelligence of the people who use these roads to help prioritise repairs. They deserve a lot more than the recent decision to reduce speed limits on particularly bad stretches of road. The number of speed limit signs on country roads is increasing at a phenomenal rate. In many cases it would be cheaper to fix the roads than to continually put up reduced speed limit signs.

Our roads are starting to affect our industry in western Victoria. In October 2017, I raised the issue of freight coming into the port at Portland. Freight into the Port is being effected by the poor state of roads. Port Haul Trucking plans to bring an additional 50 trucks, which means new jobs for drivers to haul wood ships to the Port to meet increasing overseas demand. But they are worried about the state of the roads, the safety of their drivers and the effects additional heavy transport will have on heavily potholed and dangerous roads.

School buses are routinely cancelled in the region because in heavy rain and wind, which we get more than our share of, the roads are unsafe to transport children to school. This is not a false claim; this happens on a fairly regular basis. These roads are affecting jobs and job creation and the growth of industry in our region.

Once upon a time we had a Country Roads Board, chaired by Tom Russell, which managed our regional roads. It wasn’t caught up in city politics about commuter routes and overcrowding in the CBD, or the why and who of a Westgate Tunnel. It was solely responsible for the management and maintenance of our regional roads, and they did a
great job. Then in 1983 it was merged with its metropolitan equivalent to form the Road Construction Authority, which has evolved into the city-centric VicRoads we have today.

VicRoads has responsibility for overseeing, repairing and keeping our roads safe, but it needs to have a better rural focus. The roads in Melbourne and in the suburbs of Melbourne are in comparatively good condition, and this is vastly different to what we see in the prime agricultural region where I live.

Perhaps in the 1980s amalgamation of these groups made sense. Our roads were good, management was easy and there may have been duplication of resources. But times have changed, and now there is a need for a single focus again to work to bring our country road network up to speed.

When we did have the Country Roads Board our roads were in better condition because the board’s role was to concentrate solely on our regional roads. The stress on our roads has increased. Rural roads are not receiving the attention or funding they deserve. Metropolitan areas, in my opinion, are being favoured over their country cousins, whose roads are falling apart around them.

Another issue, which I want to address is this submission and which have raised in Parliament repeatedly, is the problem of international drivers on our main tourist roads.

The situation on the Great Ocean Road at the 12 Apostilles has become desperate. The roads in this area aren’t equipped to handle the volume of traffic, there’s no parking and over summer there is a chaotic mix of pedestrians and cars clogging a single narrow stretch of road. It’s a ticking time bomb.

Across Victoria, VicRoads reports that 3.46% of reported crashes in 2017 involved overseas licence holders. Tragically, 1.52% of fatal crashes on our roads involved overseas drivers. On Boxing Day last year a Chinese tourist was charged following a crash with a local near Birregurra. The local man was killed.

A scheme based on a New Zealand initiative to educate international drivers has been announced this year. Unfortunately, it is non-compulsory and, from what little information there is available, seems to be inadequately funded and slow to roll out. We need a roads authority that is invested in the quality and safety of our regional roads, and that can force attention and funding on these issues.

We need to make a change, and we need to make it now. By continuing to do the same thing over and over again we will not get a different result. The existing Melbourne-centric
funding model is not providing even the basic maintenance level needed to keep country roads safe.

So, I unequivocally support the motion that VicRoads be split into two bodies: a metropolitan body and a country roads body. Each organisation should be funded separately and be responsible for geographic areas, with local councils included in the process of consulting and prioritising repairs and ongoing maintenance.

Maybe this will help, as nothing else has.

Yours sincerely

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