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

Submission on VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads

On behalf of the Peri Urban Group of Rural Councils, I would like to thank you for the opportunity into the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee’s inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads.

Background:

The PUGRC comprises the seven Shires of Bass Coast, Baw Baw, Golden Plains, Macedon Ranges, Moorabool, Murrindindi and Surf Coast and was established in 2007 to work collaboratively on shared issues and challenges for this fast growing region.

The Peri Urban Councils share common characteristics and impediments to managing the rapid population growth.

The peri urban region is growing rapidly, relative to their existing resident base and at higher rates of growth than the Regional Cities. To 2031, the population across the peri urban region will grow by an average of 32.44% in comparison to the Regional Cities which will grow by an average of just 19.95% and the Interface Councils at an average of 53% growth.

The population growth in the Peri Urban region is being driven by three major factors:

1. Proximity to Melbourne and the growth areas. The peri urban region is around an hour from Melbourne and adjacent to many of Melbourne’s fastest growing outer suburbs. The region’s proximity to Melbourne is fuelling population growth amongst people seeking homes within commuting distance.
2. Affordability. The average house price in Melbourne is $740,000 while across the Peri Urban region, homes average at $340,000.
3. Lifestyle and environment. The Peri Urban region contains 633,000ha of native vegetation, national and state parks, water ways, natural springs and some of the State’s most iconic coastal areas. The region also contains 10% of Victoria’s productive agricultural lands and produces 17% of the primary produce.

Due to the region’s proximity to Melbourne and the Regional Cities of Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo and Latrobe, the region is very popular for commuters. In 2011, almost half of the working population of the region or 38,000 people were commuting from the peri urban region each day.

The numbers of commuters is forecast to increase by 65% to 58,000 people by 2031 unless strategic interventions are delivered.
The high levels of car ownership across the region also highlight the region’s dependence on private vehicles for work and social opportunities and the lack of public transport.

Peri Urban households with more than two vehicles is higher than the average for Greater Melbourne and Regional Victoria.

The region is also the first area outside of metropolitan Melbourne where the increased fist homes owner grant is available. It is too early to understand the impact of this policy on the population growth of the region. However Moorabool Shire’s recent Urban Growth Strategy provided for 20 to 30 years of land release and developers have snapped up all the area within weeks.

**Response to Terms of Reference**

1. **Effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads**

The PUGRC would like to see greater transparency and a longer term view of the management of rural roads undertaken by VicRoads and consistent funding allocated to both VicRoads and Local Government. Rural roads are critical to the economic prosperity of our regions and their maintenance and upgrade should not be subject to the whims of party politics. A longer term view would provide greater certainty to Councils, communities and business owners.

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

The existing model of funding for rural roads is not effective and the lack of sufficient investment over many years is evident across the Peri Urban Region and regional Victoria.

The Peri Urban Group of Rural Councils manage a combined total of 22,000km of roads across the seven Shires. This is sufficient to circumnavigate mainland Australia.

Shire | Total Commuting | % of Workforce Commuting | Total forecast to be Commuting in 2031
---|---|---|---
Bass Coast | 1,930 | 15.9% | 3,105
Baw Baw | 5,419 | 27.4% | 9,334
Golden Plains | 5,720 | 63.7% | 8,627
Macedon Ranges | 9,617 | 46.6% | 12,555
Moorabool | 7,091 | 53.2% | 11,126
Murrindindi | 2,495 | 43% | 4,206
Surf Coast | 5,971 | 47.8% | 9,074
Total | 38,246 | (42.8% ave) | 58,027 - Up 65%

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Due to historically small populations and corresponding small Council budgets, investment into the rural road and bridge networks have not kept pace with increasing demands from commuters, high productivity vehicles (HPV) for greater freight efficiencies, community expectations and population growth. Natural disasters also throw the lack of investment and condition of these rural, often unsealed roads and wooden bridges into sharp focus.

The peri urban areas surrounding Australia’s capital cities are a battleground between the residents of the rapidly growing residential areas, the adjacent traditional industries and uses like agriculture, resource and timber production, and manufacturing. These industries and residents are competing for access to congested, poorly maintained rural roads and bridges and ultimately highway access to the capital city and transport hubs.

In Victoria’s peri urban region, it is a battle that is being played out on a road network that was built during the time of the gold rush and on bridges designed for a horse and cart. This network needs strategic investment to bring it up to par with the road networks of neighbouring growth areas and to accommodate growing populations and sustainable industries.

The requirement for new and significant investment (including maintenance) into the road and bridge network is being driven by the following:

- Rural roads – our Shires, unlike metropolitan Shires, contain significant tracts of rural and unsealed roads. These are an ongoing maintenance burden and a significant cause of resident dissatisfaction. In the 2016 Community Satisfaction Survey, rural unsealed roads remain one of the biggest points of dissatisfaction and priority for respondents of the survey. Unsealed roads were scored at 79 points for priority for residents across the Victoria and performance scored 43 points¹.

- Population growth – the population in the VIC peri urban region will grow by 32.44% through to 2031. One in every 3 residents will be new based on today’s population. The roads and bridges to support this growth need to be funded now and not solely by the current rate payers.

- Congestion – In some towns like Bacchus Marsh, the traditional road network means that up to 500 trucks per week are passing through the middle of the CBD rather than by-passing these pedestrian areas. Gisborne has similar pressure from truck routes.

- Last mile – Councils and businesses need access to funds to complete roads capable of carrying high productivity vehicles (HPV). HPVs are most efficient when they can operate point to point and yet often, loads in rural areas will be divided onto smaller vehicles for transportation to or from their destination.

- Commuters - the peri urban regions are highly desirable to commuters working in capital and major cities. Across the VIC Peri Urban region there are currently 38,000 people commuting for work. This is forecast to rise to 58,000 by 2031. Improved, new and alternative routes to major arterial roads are required across the region.

The region requires increased and consistent VicRoads investment for rural roads and bridges along with ongoing expenditure on roadside weeds and pests.

The proactive and ongoing management of weeds and pests on VicRoads roads is a significant issue for rural and regional Shires in three key areas:

1. **Economy**

It is estimated that the agricultural cost of weeds to Australia is in the vicinity of $4 billion per annum². Similarly, the Invasive Animals Co-operative Research Centre published a report in 2010 that estimated the direct national annual economic impact of invasive animals like wild dogs, foxes, mice, pigs, rabbits and starlings to be $743.5 million in agricultural losses and expenditure on management, administration and research³.

The costs of not effectively managing weeds and pests in agricultural areas like the Peri Urban region, which provides 17% of Victoria’s primary produce, can be devastating to local farmers and the communities who rely on the industry. Similarly, lack of investment into weed and pest management can have implications for local tourism.

The Peri Urban Councils are an average of 2,412 km² in size and cover 16,887km² of Victoria. Within these Shires there are 22,000 km of roads which is sufficient to circumnavigate mainland Australia. The average total revenue for the Peri Urban Councils is $64 million.

In contrast, the Growth Area Councils are an average size of just 1.024km² and their average total revenue is four time larger at $219.8 million.

As a result of the limited resources, including State Government funding, and the scale of the Shires, it is currently impossible for rural and regional Councils to make more than a small dent in the weeds and pest issue within each Municipality. The challenge is highlighted below:

- In Baw Baw Shire, approximately 300 kilometres of roads are treated for blackberries each year, depending on funding allocations from Council and the State Government. With 1,515 kilometres of local roads within Baw Baw Shire, it is not possible to treat all harmful weeds on all roadsides every year⁴.
- In Murrindindi Shire, 438.13km out of 1,218km of Council managed roads are treated each year at a cost of $28,862⁵.
- Macedon Ranges Council provides weed control works across approximately 200 sites per year out of a total of approximately 600 mapped locations. These mapped locations represent approximately 60% of Council managed roadsides and reserves⁶. The value of Macedon Ranges Council’s current weed control program is approximately $250,000 per year including:
  - Weed control on Council managed recreation reserves, such as Hanging Rock - $1,000 - $5,000 per recreation reserve
  - Pest animal program on Council managed roadsides and reserves - $20,000 annually based on 2014/15 budget allocation


• Surf Coast Shire Council receives $23,314 annually (2015-17) from the State Government to manage roadside weeds and pests. Through past State Government funding initiatives Surf Coast Shire Council has treated approximately 1000km per year of roadsides for Regionally Controlled weeds and pest animals. There are currently no Regionally Prohibited weeds in the Shire, a situation Council is keen to maintain, in particular by focusing Council resources on new and emerging pest plant and animals.

The DELWP Roadside Weeds and Pest Management funding is a $13 million program over five years. The 56 rural councils responsible for rural roadsides can currently apply for up $75,000 over 2 years to manage pest and weeds.

2. Amenity

The National Resources Management Ministerial Council in their 2007 Australian Weeds Report estimated that the cost to nature conservation and landscape amenity of weeds is thought to be in the vicinity of $4 billion per annum (NRMMC2007). The protection and retention of the Peri Urban region’s natural and man-made amenity is critical to the region’s economy and sustainability.

The Peri Urban region is Victoria’s fastest growing regional area. This is due in part to the region’s proximity to Melbourne and regional cities of Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo and the high level of amenity in the landscape and towns.

The Peri Urban region and surrounding Shires are key tourism and day trip destination which injects $1.5 billion into the Victorian economy. The region hosts more than 4.255 million visitors each year who stay 12.8 million nights in the region supporting 5,152 jobs.

The region plays a key role in balancing population growth away from Melbourne and providing tourism and recreation opportunities for domestic and international visitors. Unfortunately, there is little additional support from State and Federal Government to enhance the role of this region, manage the impacts of tourism visitation, control weeds to ensure amenity is retained and to ensure the sustainability of the region.

3. Safety

Lack of investment into weed management is also a safety risk for rural and regional communities. Weedy roadsides populated by a consistent vegetation type will tend to pose a higher fire risk than those dominated by natives. Some grasslands, like Phalaris, can grow to two metres high, with fuel levels of 29 tonnes per hectare. This contrasts with fuel levels of 6 tonnes per hectare measured for native grasslands dominated by Kangaroo Grass (Themeda triandra) during January in an average year (CFA 2011).

For Macedon Ranges Shire Council the treatment of sites with high densities of woody weeds in bushfire prone areas close to townships costs in the order of $60,000 annually (based on Council's 2013/14 budget allocation).

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

Roads are the highest priority area for rural residents. The 2017 Community Satisfaction Survey results highlight their importance to residents, revealing that sealed local roads have an importance index score of 78 and unsealed roads have an importance index score of 79\textsuperscript{11}.

Slashing is another area which impacts on the community’s perceptions of roads. Slashing and weed control showed the most significant decline in satisfaction in 2017 with a three point drop (index score of 53). Performance in this area is at the lowest level recorded.

While the community satisfaction surveys record resident’s views on the performance of Councils, they are demonstrative also of the views of State Government in these areas as most residents cannot differentiate between State Government and Local Government services and responsibilities.

Greater engagement with rural communities on areas for maintenance and renewal of roads and delivery of roadside weed management and slashing would improve community satisfaction for these services and would deliver efficiencies for both State and Local Government.

4. The option for dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body

The PUGRC does not currently have an adopted group view on this element in the terms of reference. However we would be pleased to be consulted further.

Conclusion

We congratulate the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee for your consideration of this issue.

Should you require further information, please contact me via [Contact information]
or [Contact information]

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Cr David Edwards (Mayor of Moorabool Shire)
Chair
Peri Urban Group of Rural Councils