Submission to Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee

The Executive Officer
Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee
Parliament House
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Terms of Reference

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; and
4. the option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body.

Preamble

The Strategic Directions Group (SDG) was formed as a community-driven response to, and in recognition of, the necessity to act in the best interest of the municipality, given the contemporary vacuum in leadership in the Horsham Rural City Council (HRCC) in respect to planning a Western highway (A8) bypass of Horsham.

The SDG includes past mayors, councillors, a broad cross section of business and community leaders with a suite of expertise. It is apolitical and does not represent any sectional interest. It seeks only to achieve objective, transparent, evidence based planning and management that deliver optimal outcomes and the highest net community benefit in projects that affect the Wimmera community and the wider region.

Introduction

The objective of this submission is to provide only a brief overview of the direct experience gained from VicRoads highway (road) planning and management in the context of the Terms of Reference, in particular in relation to VicRoads planning for a Western highway bypass of Horsham over the previous decade and the general management of existing road infrastructure.

Comments made for VicRoads could equally apply to other Government agencies that overlap in functions, e.g. DEDJTR, TAC, who (also) have a direct influence on decisions and outcomes on road infrastructure.

1. The effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads.
In a word, unacceptable. Road pavement is falling apart while "safety" is pushed as the mantra. Small fractures in the pavement of all highways categories, but in particular those with increasing
volumes of heavy transport use, soon develop into holes and thence quickly into the necessity for either a major repair or re-build over hundred of meters and kilometres. What is initially a small issue and relative cost to repair, soon escalates in dimension to a major cost.

This has a direct impact on funds allocated to new infrastructure being diverted through necessity to repair of the existing. There is need to re-establish regional capabilities for maintenance and repair of roads. While this has been devolved at one level to municipal councils, they do not have the skill base and some small contractors lack the capability to achieve effective outcomes.

Bandaid "repairs" of roads is not always an efficient allocation of limited resources. This equally applies to main highways where a new highway suffers pavement failure within only months to a year or two after construction. This indicates a lack of technical competence in VicRoads, consultants and contractors, who seemingly fail to institute either tight contracts or significant penalties for a failure of contractors to achieve the highest net benefit in construction of new roads/highways.

An example is the Western highway duplication west of Burrenumbeet to Buangor, sections of which have to be re-built within a short period after construction. On other, older sections, cables are installed when the pavement is deteriorating and requiring a re-build. This may not be a decision of VicRoads in the first instance. However, it illustrates one aspect of the lack of effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads.

2. The existing funding model and its lack of effectiveness for country Victoria.
A significant slice of vehicle registration fees is allocated to the TAC which in turn funds installation of wire ropes (cables) on the sides of roads, without any consistency or apparent logic in placement. This, while the pavements where safety of vehicle stability should be the priority, is falling apart.

Greater efficiency of resources could be achieved with funds channelled through one agency, e.g. a "Country Roads Authority", with responsibility for construction/maintenance. A separate agency might have a number of advantages over one, whereby the planning for and the determination of, new roads, e.g. a highway bypass of a regional town or city, was not the same agency as one for determining the allocation of resources for construction and maintenance.

There is need to provide transparency and consistency in application of engineering standards, which are not inherent characteristics of VicRoads (and other agencies) when it comes to "safety" measures. Those who live in regional communities rely on the road network for their personal livelihood and functioning of the regional economies.

Regional roads are of greater importance than getting to and from work (employment), for many they are an integral part of daily work on which their business is 100% dependent. This applies not only to interstate transport operations, it equally applies to regional businesses, including and not limited to, agricultural businesses who are dependent on efficient transport of input supplies and for commodities from the farm gate.
These all have to use everything from un-made "dirt" roads impassable when wet to duplicated highways. This encompasses road managed both by local councils and VicRoads. So when the committee thinks of roads, it's not only the sealed ones that are important to country Victoria.

The funding model tends to favour VicRoads, whereby municipal councils, with many a shrinking ratepayer base, are becoming increasing constrained in available funds to provide and maintain road access to, from everyone's gate to town. This is often least understood by those privileged with all-weather road access, public transport and rail within easy, consistent reach.

A funding model whereby Infrastructure Victoria (IV), or its equivalent for regional Victoria be established either as a division within IV or separate to IV, might have advantages over current structure. This might also be integrated with a different organisation if consideration is given to dismantling VicRoads, creating a specific Country (regional) Roads organisation.

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

There significant room for improvement in the level of professional capability and technical expertise either employed or contracted by, VicRoads. It is readily apparent an over-emphasis on bureaucrats possessing either limited or no technical with appropriate professional expertise, are used to either over-ride, discount, denigrate and/or ignore regional communities, if the experience of the Wimmera community is any guide.

This is often combined with an attitude of belligerence and arrogance, whereby local input required in consultation processes is simply "ticked" as having been done. Significant local time, cost and expertise is all too often simply brushed aside as an impediment and alleged independent consultant reports are simply "facilitation reports" to achieve pre-determined outcomes.

If the committee wish to review an example as it affects the Wimmera community and planning for a Western highway bypass of Horsham, a recent submission by the SDG to the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and the Minster for Planning, might be of assistance, if it is appropriate and in accordance with required protocols.

In brief, the Wimmera community have clearly illustrated the lack of professionalism, or worse, of VicRoads, its consultants and others in planning major road infrastructure. A cost estimate for a new highway has several orders of magnitude cost blowout, using official figures, yet VicRoads have persisted with a proposal that will cost, for 16 km, in the same order of cost as duplication of the Western highway from Burrumbeet to Stawell.

If this is repeated elsewhere, there is potential to save billions of dollars allocated for road infrastructure in Victoria. Making staff accountable for poor outcomes would change the culture.

If VicRoads and other government authorities were actually genuine and professional in community consultation, other than merely "ticking boxes" of statutory requirements, and adopted a partnership with regional communities to achieve the best possible outcomes, significant cost savings with less impact could be readily achieved. This will require a major cultural shift in VicRoads and other
agencies affiliated with the planning and repair of roads in country Victoria. And in turn, to achieve this, it gives significant weight to consideration of the dismantling of VicRoads providing a different ethos and culture is established from the outset in a new agency.

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

There are many arguments that could be used to create separate agencies for Country and Metropolitan roads. However, the disparities might be more effectively addressed with a dismantling of VicRoads into different agencies with responsibilities for planning of new infrastructure on the one hand, and the construction and maintenance of roads on another.

This could also secure on a more equitable framework the provision of expertise, skills and funding that most councils do not employ or are able to retain as consultants and potentially contractors. This would provide more integration on a whole of government approach, and achieve more effective outcomes at greater efficiencies in allocation of scarce resources.

The old model of a Country Roads Board (CRB) had many distinct advantages over its replacement; VicRoads. The CRB had a suite of skills ranging from planning to on-the-ground expertise combined with local knowledge, strong community ownership and trust: elements missing from VicRoads. Regions are too large and centralised. This also waste time in travelling to a job.

Instead we have a VicRoads bureaucracy located remote from where the need is for outcomes, in Ballarat. In turn, VicRoads retains multi-national consultancies, often based in Melbourne, who have no local knowledge and largely do desk-top studies, to carry out a consultancy.

Like VicRoads' sister agencies in other states, all the best expertise has moved to the consulting firms on higher incomes, leaving VicRoads with an abundance of third rate skills and a less than professional attitude. While there are some nice people in VicRoads, too many regard local communities with an almost equal disdain, as some from other agencies do, e.g. DEDJTR, and cost tens of millions to achieve mediocre, poor or outright disastrous outcomes with no net benefits.

Too many in VicRoads and other agencies merely drive a desk, a vehicle to and fro meetings where they pontificate with a degree of, "we know what's best" pushing their personal, yet technically and professionally un-qualified, points of view, as a "stakeholders” of equal or greater standing than the local community expertise. And their reports merely state what the "official" pre-determined line is.

Worse, they impose a flawed process and poor outcomes on people's lives and properties with an air of indifference. And then drive home with no responsibility and accountability for what they inflict on local communities. If required, they will retain a consultant to further "push the process" and secure what they intended to, politically, regardless of the outcome, the results of which will not surface for years later, after the bureaucrats and consultants have long gone.

Surely we can be and do much better than this? What's really important here? Protecting poor processes, positions, high cost and high impact outcomes? Or achieving optimal $/km outcome and efficiencies with a solid framework of trust, community ownership and long-term benefits?
At a lesser level, though no less important, is VicRoads retaining consultants for "minor design works", e.g. for intersections with issues that need resolution. Wasting resources on consultants for works that, on the one hand is redundant without consideration of the larger picture of road infrastructure and efficiency of transport being considered, and on the other whereby a local solution with local knowledge and the potential secure a better outcome, is not even sought as an input for evaluation. Local endure poor outcomes, while to VicRoads, it's just another job finished.

A new Country Roads organisation could minimise of not avoid unnecessary waste and imposition of poor outcomes developed by from remote consultants without local knowledge, by having a number of smaller regional offices with high standard of expertise employed locally. This would secure greater knowledge, efficiencies in service delivery and improvement in local accountability.

Governments of all persuasions tend to gravitate between a "lumping together" and a "splitting apart" process of agencies, sometimes simply to be seen to "doing something" new. Occasionally this is advantageous in outcomes, sometimes it's not. Getting the right balance is the issue and sometimes a good idea at the time requires minor or serious re-adjustment a few years down the track when problems become evident. If not broken, don't fix it; if broken, don't leave it unfixed.

A serious problem in VicRoads, as experienced from the outside, is the lack of professional and technical expertise combined with high quality on-the ground experience accumulated over many years. This equally applies to other agencies "fiddling" in road infrastructure planning and repair.

It's almost axiomatic that if the weight of "desk experts" outweighs those with an accumulation of years of "dirt under the finger nails" gained from relevant expertise, that a level of bureaucratic arrogance emerges to cover for the level of ignorance. A culture forms whereby the agency "knows best" and it develops unseen walls to protect the level of incompetence that tends to build within.

It is literally on the road where mistakes after serious errors and attempted denial or worse, cover-up, eventually emerge. The "mistaken" felling of several hundred old redgums on the Western highway duplication west of Beaufort was not an oversight, but more about being found out.

A major under-statement, from their own published figures, for the cost of crossing the Wimmera floodplain in VicRoads preferred option D alignment was, "an error yet to be admitted to". These are merely symptomatic of a deeper malaise within VicRoads that requires attention.

Splitting country from metropolitan tasks would be a good start in a review process. However, it needs to be carried through to a establishing number of smaller regional office to facilitate local knowledge and be an integral part of each regional community. Thank you for your consideration.

Your sincerely

Kevin Dellar
Chair, Strategic Directions Group
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