15 January 2018

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

To whom it may concern,

I should like to make a submission to the Inquiry into the VicRoads management of country roads.

Though I have no academic qualifications in this matter, I have been a long term observer of our country roads and have lived in the country all my life. What follows is therefore my opinion based on observation and I have had a great interest in these matters over the years. I have a great interest in the environment and sustainability, am a member of Mitchell Shire Environmental Advisory Committee and have received an OAM for service to the community.

In this case, I am interested in nature conservation and the role of corridors for the movement of biota. Roadside vegetation provides significant habitat corridors throughout the state, and indeed in our more fragmented landscapes, for instance in the west, the roadsides provide the only native vegetation. While the Landcare movement has made significant gains, many other landowners have failed in their duty to restore habitat on their land, especially those on broad acres.

To date, VicRoads has carefully negotiated the need to provide safe carriageways and the need to retain native vegetation. VicRoads has managed to retain as much native vegetation as possible in my area, as well as providing offsets. I think it is important that the offsets be planted as near as possible to the areas they are replacing. Nesting hollows can be provided to offset the ones lost in old trees that need to be removed. However the beauty of an old tree cannot be replaced and VicRoads should take these old resilient trees into account when planning the course of new roads, so as to minimise their destruction as much as feasible. These old trees have a lasting place in the hearts and minds of country dwellers, who are loathe to see them fall.

Consultation with the community. Where VicRoads is planning new roads such as a freeway or a duplication, local residents are consulted, and their views taken into account. It is important to continue this practice, but to include local environmentalists who may have expertise in the roadsides in their area, as well as a strong commitment to achieving the best possible outcome for all. Their interest is not pecuniary but altruistic and expressed on behalf of the community at large, the wildlife, and future generations.
Road repair. In the past 40 years there has been a massive move to rural lifestyle living in this state. Where once just a few local farm vehicles travelled, now there is heavy traffic as people drive to work in nearby towns or Melbourne. The roads are much more heavily used. The shoulders are worn down with narrow asphalt road surfaces down the middle. Clearly this change in population dynamics has placed enormous pressure on road maintenance budgets. Many roads just aren’t safe to travel at 100km/hr, yet that is the accepted speed limit on our country roads.

Accidents. News reports of road are prone to say, the car was driving down the Hume Highway (for instance) and hit a tree, when what they should be saying is the driver veered off the road and hit a tree, or an oncoming vehicle. It is hard to legislate against stupidity or fatigue. One can only do so much. Poor roads combined with excessive speeds are causing a lot of accidents. This is especially true in younger drivers.

Wire rope barriers, or flexible barriers, are considered one of the most effective means of preventing collisions, based on international evaluations. An evaluation of the lengths of wire rope barrier installed on Victorian roads has been completed. The barriers were shown to significantly reduce the incidence of all crashes, and run-off-road and head-on crashes, with estimated reductions on individual routes ranging between 75% and 87%. These results are consistent with overseas findings.

I strongly support the installation of wire rope barriers. Where possible sufficient space should be allowed so that it is safe to pull off the road. Consideration of management of roadside grass is an issue, and heavy use of herbicides may have a very deleterious effect on waterways.

On secondary and Shire roads, it may be necessary to lower the speed limit. This is certainly true in our area. We have been trying to get VicRoads to lower the speed limit on Telegraph Road between the Goulburn Valley Highway and Kobyboyn Road for many years, to no avail. This high conservation value three chain road is safest travelled at no more than 70KPH, but is signed “End 80” as one comes off the GVH. Requests to lower the speed limit on this road have fallen on deaf ears.

Dismantling VicRoads? I would see this as a very dangerous move vis a vis funding. I can see that a National Party dominated government federally such as we have now will pour money into country roads at the expense of city roads. Then when the situation is reversed as it inevitably will be one day, the country roads will suffer at the hands of the city roads budget. Far better to keep VicRoads as one body so that experts in the management of all the roads of our state can prioritise where the money needs to be spent. One thing is sure. As the population continues to blow out, more money has to be allocated to road management. This is a matter for politicians, and the federal government which is encouraging the high migration to our country needs to make the funds available to provide for and manage our infrastructure, such as our roads, schools and hospitals.

I should like to conclude by saying VicRoads is doing a very good job managing the roads, given the paucity of funds. It balances the need to preserve last remnants of native vegetation with the need to provide safe carriageways.
However, transport should be considered as an integrated whole. For example, there is need for more train services, as well as clearly much safer road surfaces. Lack of funding and government planning, and short term point scoring by politicians are holding things up.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on these matters.

Yours sincerely

Lesley Dalziel OAM