Jan 2018

Comments in response to Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee; Management of Victorian Regional Roads

Introduction

Mibus Bros is a Portland based civil contractor operating from Portland predominantly across eastern SA and western Victoria. It is pre-qualified for the construction and maintenance of roads under the National Accreditation Scheme R1 F2. Our expertise is in heavy civil works, quarrying and crushing and road construction. We have not to date done significant works for VicRoads but have major shire road building and repair contracts. (approx. $15,81112018-19)

While engineers seem to have differing opinion on some technical aspects, there seems to be general acceptance that the majority of road failures that we are currently seeing in roads within the South West are roads that are failing from the bottom up. Many of these roads have seen the level of traffic on them over say the last two years equivalent to what they carried for the previous twenty! Water ingresses under the roads, softening the foundations allowing the road to spread wider at its base due to the heavy truck loading (creating rutting longitudinal trenches where the tires put load on the surface) has accelerated due to the loads being carried, exacerbated by poor drainage, and original road design over clay and silty sands. This rutting in turn cracks the wearing course and allows further water into the pavement. Temporary fixes are being applied being cement stabilization of the course immediately under the asphalt (wearing course). While cement stabilization is a cheaper fix requiring less time and disruption to traffic than a complete rebuild, this creates a ridged base pavement that does not flex.

There seems to be divided opinion amongst the engineers in the area on the use of cement stabilization. Southern Grampians Shire used it extensively as did and still does West Wimmera Shire, while Southern Grampians has substituted major re-sheet programs as an alternative. Many engineers are unconvinced that a ridged cement stabilized layer on flexible base is anything more than a short term fix. Patching of the wearing course on these surfaces is akin to re-painting a rusty car, painting over old paint without proper preparation. The rust is back in no time!

In essence there needs to be recognition that the whole road network needs to be rebuilt. You cannot expect to use body filler and paint to keep a car roadworthy when its body and chassis is rusting out! As a general rule rebuilding of a road appears to be mainly done on country roads where it is part of the construction of new dual lane highways and there is no commitment to fully fund maintenance let alone programmed rebuilding or improvements.

When comparing city and country roads, I have never seen in the city roads sign posted for months on end with speed restrictions to reduce traffic speed because of a surface hazard due to roads breaking up! Money is found and spent. Why is it seen as acceptable for country main and arterial roads?

The effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads

It would appear to the external observer residing in the South West of the State, that VicRoads is not very effective in managing our country roads. To the extent that when I used to visit Victoria over many years prior to moving to Mildura, Geelong and then Portland, driving from South Australia the Victorian roads were at a significantly higher standard (appearance, ride, shoulder maintenance, surface continuity and condition) than those of South Australia. Now the case is the reverse, with those in the South West of the State (not South Western Region) appearing to be worst and in diabolical and dangerous state of repair. Had there not been several prolonged dryer years previously, those in the South West would have been in an even worse state of disrepair. Return to winters and rainfall of past will see much more rapid acceleration of these failures.

To what extent one can blame VicRoads, rather than successive Victorian Governments and their priority setting is a challenge. Even to the extent that strategic thinking encapsulate the State, those of us residing outside Melbourne or adjacent regional centers could be excused for thinking Infrastructure Victoria should be called Infrastructure Melbourne, as a classic example! For country residents the optics of seeing the billions spent on not building a road (disregarding the rhetorical contract argument, dismissing the spending of many millions on geotechnical investigation, land purchasing and design and repeat this on another project at breakneck speed incurring exorbitant design and geotechnical costs) and on building roads, tunnels and
railway crossings, with budget overruns where money appears to be unlimited, country residents could rightly feel cheated. Then don’t get me started on the $140m spend on cables called spend on country roads! Those of us further down the food chain struggle to get efficient services from civil engineering firms, and geotechnical design and testing services due to the attraction of the operate at whatever cost Melbourne city Government project money.

Vicroads management of oversize - Overmass Permits - heavy and wide Load Permits, now through the “National Office” is also of major concern. It is not uncommon to be waiting weeks for permission to shift equipment, significantly impacting on cost and efficiency.

- Tristate agreement has reduced (finally back to what we had previously) the number of permits we require but still issue of:
  o first and last mile
  o immediacy (eg we had opportunity to backload from Kangaroo Island but couldn’t get a permit with reasonable expedience)
- We would like to see a “approved self-accredited carrier” system or similar that allows operator with clean record and appropriate process to “self-approve” under a framework
  o Onus of obligation currently is still on carrier for overhead clearance so no reason other factors couldn’t be
  o Local road agreement with Local Council
  o Could be restricted to low frequency of use
- Bridges “black spots in SW region”
  o No direct access from Portland to Casterton, Coleraine, Edenhope, Arrarat, Ballarat or Bendigo
  o These bridges are approved for B Double 68t and Quad Quad 77ton, meaning that if there was one crossing from each way, potential loading of 136 ton to 154ton
  o Seems illogical, even taking into account load spread/axle loadings, that a single wide load (which would require/restrict crossing to one lane only) cannot be approved for over 46ton (46 to 100 ton permit)

There are clearly some issues with respect to internal communication and information recording, policies and procedures within Vicroads

- For example for an addition to a pre-approved route for A Double 3-2-3
  o We had permit for majority of route
  o Glenelg Shire approved use of the additional 5.5km their road within 5 days
  o Vicroad approval for the additional 3.3km of additional road took 5 months, even though their own web site showed the additional route was approved for HPFV, Quad Quad, Quad Tri, B Double, PBS Level 1, PBS Level 2A, 40t SPV, 4&5 Axle Crane, OSOM

In applying for a permit, applicants are charged for the bridge assessment. I was advised during the conversations I had with Vicroads officers that there were no records or system that showed what assessments were undertaken of a particular route or structure such that each application required bridge assessment from ground up!

The existing funding model and its lack of effectiveness for country Victoria

Vicroads staff indicate that they do not have the budget to do the work required, even to stop our roads deteriorating further, let alone repair them or upgrade or make improvements such as adding passing lanes or upgrading roads. Where South West Budget is reported, the major proportion of the spend on anything other than Geelong and adjacent vicinity. Notations (in red) on the following categories of resource investment are opinions based on my understanding of the spend within the South West of the State (Warrnambool and west) regional observations.

1. Maintain existing roads Must be done but has not been done properly for years and lack of is responsible for major damage
   - Drainage, kept clear I have not observed this being done in the last 6 yrs. When the Myamyn MacArthur roads was repaired, the drainage was neglected resulting in major failures of the new works
   - Restrict tree roots and other vegetation and removal of excess material or reconsolidation of verge as required
   - Re-seal wearing surface See comment below – represents the major regional spend
   - Keep overhead branches clear Has been done – some evidence only in response to complaints of trucks hitting overhead vegetation – eg Portland Nelson Rd
2. Repair existing roads Poorly done and seen by the public as such
   - Pothole patch Work practice seems to be throw loose asphalt aggregate in and let traffic roll. Local councils use more technically advanced approaches (eg Ausroad jet pack truck rather than hand shoveling from flatbed truck) Neither dig out, flame dry when wet and tamper in as is the practice in Europe!!!
   - Dig out and patch- may include cement stabilization Questionable long term in fix? Portland ring road - solution dig out and replace with 300+ mm asphalt.
   - Resurface Majority of Vicroads spend – promoted as rebuild but in reality little more than equivalent to a coat of paint. Reduces water ingress from top but does nothing to stop water ingress from below.
   - Rebuild road Less than 50 km done in 2017-18 season of 600 + km of network.

3. Improve roads
   - Construct passing lane Nil $
   - Construct turn out lane Nil $
   - Construct parking / rest bay Nil $
   - Upgrade road category / sealed width Nil $

4. Maintain bridges Nil ?
   - Assess capacity, classify and record (no central data kept of bridge capacity even though operators pay Vicroads for a bridge assessment every time they apply for a permit. The work is redone each time!!!)

5. Improve bridges strengthen to improve capacity and freight efficiency Nil
   - Travel to port
   - Non Melbourne radial for inter region travel No heavy or wide load travel access direct to Casterton, Colac, Edenhope, Ararat, Ballarat or Bendigo from Portland due to bridges
   - Travel for PBS freight efficiency As above

The lack of consultation with regional communities and their subsequent lack of input into prioritizing which roads are in dire need of repair
Communities should not need to be involved in a conversation around which roads are in dire need of repair. Communities through their Local Councils (their role by legislation) should be putting forward the perceived priorities for road improvements within their jurisdiction. Would we expect the power lines, water lines and other services to be repaired on the basis of “community consultation and the “voices”? Data from condition reports should provide the signals that a road needs repair or rebuild.

South West Roads and their condition
- Planning Data Vicroads
  - Analysis by the RACV (David Jones) of Vicroads data identifies that
    - Roads in the South West are the worst in the State
    - The most common type of road failure is rutting (longitudinal trenches in the roads)
    - $120m per year would be required to repair the 600km of distressed roads
  - Also quoted is the Methodology for obtaining this data
    - Data for half the roads in the network is collected each year
    - The data is only collected for one direction of travel on each road therefore one could assume from this that data on each side of the road is only collected every 8 yrs
  - Vicroads own analysis, from anecdotal evidence indicates that they believe the SWV roads are the worst

Qs Is this data collection seriously sufficient for planning purposes?
Is the story of South West, excluding Victoria Central West (Geelong) truly told?
Are Vicroads resources allocated appropriately by this data or other influence?

- Planned Forward Works
  Breif analysis of Vicroads Tender Website 23/2/2017
  - Tenders Advertised Between Dec 2016 and Feb 2017 11 projects advertised – closing in March. Potentially June commencement build time (winter)
    - Only one of these were West of Warrnambool (2 in SWV – Great Ocean Road, Fynansford)
  - Listed as in Planned, 30 projects listed
14 are in SWV
• Of these 10 were listed to be advertised by now
• There is only one listed West of Warrnambool (Karoit road safety improvement)

Q From this is it to be assumed that the works being proposed are emergency repairs, not new projects and given the lead times, there are no improvement projects planned west of Warrnambool pre winter?

The option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body.
The Government has entered into a partnership with Barwon South West Region (Barwon South West Region) and others for other regions for the maintenance of roads.

South West Alliance Sep 2015 – “delivering improved strategic maintenance of roads”

Quotes attributable to Minister for Roads and Road Safety, Luke Donnellan

"The Andrews Labor Government’s will improve regional roads for local communities by delivering more responsive services, better quality road repairs and improved planning for network improvements.”

"Locals can expect to see more works in their local areas as VicRoads and alliances work together to improve roads and networks across the state.”

Are the repairs being done in the most efficient manner, involving local communities and contractors?
• There doesn’t appear to be any public tendering processes
• Even contractors who have gone through the considerable process to become accredited under the National Road and Bridge Construction Scheme don’t appear to be invited to tender
• There is no apparent train of works, allowing local contractors to judge potential volumes of works and business positioning, creating return for the region and allowing for other than a “boom and bust” cycle
• The basics of cutting back grass, keeping drains open to allow water to run off the road surface are not done
• Compound this with rutting – introducing alignment cracks, filled with water, no wonder roads are failing

The rational that was presented for this strategy was that the private sector would bring forward technology, thinking and expertise lost from the Public sector. As a civil contractor, it would be my observation that this is not evident in the manner that much of the works is undertaken.

The creation of a separate Country Roads organization would only be effective if it is given a budget and management structure based on equitable outcomes. Policy makers would need to ensure that budgets and data are not distorted by including building and maintenance of existing and planned dual lane freeways and calling them country roads rather than main arterials roads. Reporting by spend within each Shire would add greater transparency and accountability.

I trust that this may be of some assistance and would be available for discussion should it be deemed appropriate.

Respectfully,

John Weichert
General Manager