Parliament of Victoria – Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee
Inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads.

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity for Murrindindi Shire Council to make this short submission to the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee Inquiry into VicRoads’ Management of Country Roads.

Murrindindi Shire is situated on Melbourne’s peri-urban fringe. The Shire spans 3879 square kilometres and includes the rural townships of Alexandra, Eildon, Kinglake, Marysville and Yea.

The Shire includes three major highways, Melba, Maroondah, and the Goulburn Valley Highway along with a number of arterial roads.

The highways and arterial roads carry significant heavy and over dimensional transports travelling across the shire including a large number of timber transport vehicles.

The Shire is also the tourist access point for Lake Eildon, Victorian Snowfields, The Great Victorian Rail Trail, National Parks and Fishing along its many rivers.

This submission identifies a number of key issues associated with VicRoads’ management of country roads, consistent with the terms of reference. For each issue an example has been selected to illustrate the issue.

Council has also identified a number of specific priority issues for action by VicRoads and will continue to work with VicRoads in relation to these. These include safety and traffic management within key townships and significant highway upgrades for both the Melba Highway and the Goulburn Valley Highway.

Council would welcome the opportunity to present to the Inquiry to elaborate on the information contained in this submission.

Effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads

Rural roads are critical to the economic prosperity of our region and the safety of our communities, business and visitors. Tourism is a key economic driver and good road infrastructure is essential to support this.

The level of service provided by VicRoads does not always reflect the impact of the issue on the local community. An example is Station Street, Yea where the table drains are not maintained to a standard the community is demanding, despite VicRoads allowing a number of additional access points for residential access under planning permit applications.

Businesses located on this street are continually expressing their concern over this issue and believe trade is severely impacted during wet weather with poorly functioning table drains causing pooling and flooding of water in front of premises.

Recommendation: That VicRoads improve the transparency of decision making and engagement with local communities in relation to the level of service to be provided
and that VicRoads improve accountability in delivery against the identified levels of service.

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

Council would like to see more transparency and engagement with community and local government about funding allocation decisions. This particularly relates to road safety issues where large sums are allocated to high profile safety improvements such as the Yea to Molesworth flexible barrier project while for other clearly identified safety issues Council is advised that VicRoads have no funds available. Further, a decision was made to extend this project in response to the project being completed under budget, rather than engaging with communities to determine the next road safety priority. In this case, Council understands the project was funded by the Transport Accident Commission. Effective engagement with communities remains critical where VicRoads projects are externally funded, to ensure public funds are spent in a way that meets community needs and expectations.

An example of an unfunded road safety issue is the section of the Goulburn Valley Highway from Cathkin to Koriella. This short section of road has been identified by Council as a safety risk requiring widening of the traffic lane, shoulder sealing and sections of guard rail on high risk bends. This road now carries significant over dimensional logging traffic following the diversion of this traffic from the Maroondah Highway due to safety concerns with such traffic using the Black Spur. Despite recent resealing works the trafficable lane remains less than the minimum 3.0m required lane width for class C roads. (Refer VicRoads Supplement to Austroads Guide to Road Design Table V4.2) and shoulders remain unsealed (See Pic 1.). Concerned local SES and CFA brigades have also submitted requests to VicRoads for these safety upgrades on this road.

Road maintenance and renewal work is also of concern with the need for additional resources to adequately maintain the VicRoads network. Increased resources for road maintenance together with increased responsiveness to identified safety issues would make a significant difference to regional communities. For example the Melba Highway from Yarra Glen to Yea has been in poor condition (see Pic 2.) over a significant period of time. Deterioration of road seals with issues such as flushing and polishing are often ignored without consideration to possible effects on road safety. Damaged guard rail and wire rope barriers have remained unrepaired for many weeks and potholes present significant risks in respect of vehicle damage as well as road safety. Council will continue to work with VicRoads Hume Region in relation to these issues.

Councils, particularly small rural councils, face similar challenges with funding the ongoing maintenance and renewal of road networks, particularly in the context of rate capping.

Roadside weed control is an important safety issue in the Murrindindi Shire with its high bushfire risk. Understandably this risk is at the front of mind for all our community. The lack of consistency to this control work with extent and timing of works reliant on funding allocations is unacceptable.

The communities of the Murrindindi Shire place a high priority on effective roadside weed control and roadside slashing for fuel reduction. Fire prevention roadside slashing was not undertaken in a timely manner in the 2017/18 year and important areas of weed infestation remain untreated. This undermines efforts to work with communities to reduce fuel and manage weeds and pests on private land.
Recommendation: That VicRoads be provided with increased and dedicated ongoing investment in rural roads and bridges.

Recommendation: That VicRoads improve transparency and engagement with community and local government in prioritising investment in maintenance, renewal and upgrade works, including all sources of funding (including any Transport Accident Commission funding).

Recommendation: That State Government provide secure and consistent allocations to local government to assist with maintenance and renewal of rural roads and bridges.

Recommendation: That VicRoads undertake effective and timely roadside weed management and fuel reduction consistent with expectations on private land holders and that VicRoads improve communication and engagement with communities in relation to this work.

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

While Council recognises that VicRoads has sought to increase communication and improve engagement with local communities, the experience of Council (and communities of the Murrindindi Shire) is that this does not yet consistently meet good practice and/or community expectations. This was particularly evident in the Yea to Molesworth flexible barrier project. Community consultation was limited and while information was provided to the community, members of the community did not have confidence that their views and concerns received adequate consideration.

Recommendation: that VicRoads review their approach to community engagement and implement a best practice approach including transparency in decision making about how feedback from the community has been considered.

Recommendation: that VicRoads give greater priority to community input (including Local Government) into location and extent of upgrade and repair works.

VicRoads’ performance in relation to community engagement and communication often also depends on the performance of its contractors. For example, VicRoads’ NEMA contractors have been reported to Council as falling short of expected standards in engaging with the public and providing inaccurate information to residents and road users.

Clearly identified areas of concern, as previously identified, on the Goulburn Valley Highway Cathkin and the Melba Highway at Castella indicate the need for greater weight to be placed on community input to prioritising roads repair or upgrade works by VicRoads.

Recommendation: The review of VicRoads approach to community engagement include engagement and information provided by VicRoads contractors.

There is a need and opportunity for improved communication to Council from VicRoads. Local government can play an important role as a partner in road management with VicRoads and as a conduit to local communities. On occasion required advice to Council is received late or not at all. A recent example being the change to speed limits in Molesworth
advised via a phone message to a Council officer at 1.00pm on the day the changed signs were installed. Council is continuing to work with VicRoads to improve communication.

Recommendation: That VicRoads strengthen its approach to working in partnership with local government and ensure early and timely advice.

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

Council does not have a specific view on whether a separate Country Roads organisation should be formed. Key considerations though include:

- recognition of the specific and separate needs of regional and rural Victoria
- effective input from local communities in relation to road upgrade, renewal and maintenance priorities
- keeping the bureaucracy (and associated costs) to the minimum required for effective management
- quarantining resources for works in regional and rural Victoria
Pic 1 Goulburn Valley Highway, Cathkin 14.1.17
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Pic 2 Melba Highway Castella 14.1.17