Introduction

In November 2016, the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee was asked to inquire into:

- the effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads;
- the existing funding model and its lack of effectiveness for country Victoria;
- the lack of consultation with regional communities and their subsequent lack of input into prioritising which roads are in dire need of repair; and
- the option of dismantling VicRoads and creating a specific Country Roads organisation and separate Metropolitan Roads body.

VicRoads acknowledge the need to communicate why, how and what was being done on Victorians’ behalf to improve the roads that people and industries rely on. Two years ago, VicRoads began a major transformation of its management and maintenance of arterial roads and made a public promise to put customers and communities at the heart of everything it does.

The first public demonstration of this new approach was a year-long community engagement throughout regional Victoria by the VicRoads senior leadership team in 2017. The leadership team connected with more than 11,000 country Victorians and listened to communities in local halls, dockyards and stockyards from Portland to Omeo about how VicRoads can better plan, build, manage and maintain the 19,000 kilometres of country arterial roads.

An independent report into this community engagement is attached to help inform the Committee’s inquiry, along with the VicRoads’ response, ‘Country Roads: your insights, our actions’.

The first State of the Network report will be produced in 2018, and a website with a ‘digital dashboard’ is already sharing operational knowledge at a local level on pot-hole repairs, freight use and road safety data.

VicRoads is committed to rural Victoria through its regional offices in Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Benalla and Traralgon together with 41 Registration and Licensing Customer Service Centres right across the state.

VicRoads is continuing to build its regional capacity to engage with communities on problems as well as solutions, and is at the mid-way point of a four-year reform program to transform the way it plans and delivers maintenance of arterial roads.

The most significant period of planning, construction, maintenance and uplift of the regional road network is now underway.

Regional Victoria is changing

Victoria is leading the nation in population and jobs growth – with the population outside Melbourne set to double to 2 million people in the next 20 years.

The 2016 census showed a record 76,210 Melburnians moved to regional Victoria in the last five years, making it one of the nation’s fastest growing regions. Ballarat, Bendigo, Latrobe Valley and Wodonga are all planning for future populations of 200,000 or more and Geelong is already there.

Over the last two decades the number of people and freight travelling on Victoria’s major country roads has increased by 20% and this trend is expected to continue into the future. For people living in regional Victoria, arterial roads are critical, with nine out of ten journeys on state-managed roads.

The growing freight task in Victoria is significant, with freight volumes growing at 1.5% a year. Before 1980, the largest vehicles on Victoria’s roads were single semi-trailers carrying 40 tonnes. Today, a common vehicle is a B-Double of up to 68.5 tonnes which creates the same impact on a pavement as 10,000 cars. Farming equipment like headers now span five metres, taking up the width of some narrow country roads.

There are not only more people and more goods being carried to international and domestic markets, but community members are travelling longer distances in an economy where regional tourism now employs one in six people, equalling agriculture.

All this activity is taking place on an aging road base. Much of the existing highway network in regional Victoria was built in the two decades after World War 2 to relieve local municipalities of providing for long distance ‘through traffic’. The natural life of a road with regular maintenance is around 60 years. A decade-long drought in Victoria stretched the longevity of many roads, but when Victoria experienced once-in-100 year rainfall in the 2016 winter and spring, some roads failed significantly, including sections of the Great Ocean Road. Areas of high rainfall and high freight volumes were hardest hit.

The increased use of the road network, larger heavy vehicles together with the roads reaching the end of their designed life, has resulted in an increasing challenge for the maintenance of the regional road network.
Why integration matters

With Victoria growing at an unprecedented rate, the challenge for governments is to effectively plan and respond. The road network needs to cope with freight volumes growing at 1.5% a year, and growing demand for more inter-regional links. Understanding changing freight and population patterns and supporting efficient and safe routes requires an integrated response to ensure the network is fit for today’s purposes and meets future needs of regional economies and communities.

Victorians also expect to have access to a variety of travel options and connected journeys. A journey should not be more complicated because it crosses a regional boundary, or uses multiple modes. Meeting these challenges and expectations is possible if the transport system is planned, developed and operated on an integrated basis across all transport modes. An integrated approach to Victoria’s transport system makes the best use of the state’s existing asset plans for the future, and establishes a blueprint to take advantage of the opportunities ahead.

Transport for Victoria has been established to bring together the planning, coordination and operation of Victoria’s transport system and its agencies, including VicRoads and Public Transport Victoria. Its task is to integrate the transport network for simpler, quicker and safer journeys that connect places and support Victoria’s prosperity and liveability. Transport for Victoria will bolster the state’s capacity to plan and coordinate the diverse needs of metropolitan and regional transport while increasing interconnectedness.

The importance of transport integration was highlighted by many stakeholders during VicRoads’ public engagement in 2017. Many residents and businesses travel regularly to Melbourne and other regional centres by public transport and private vehicles. Upgrades to the network, including cycling and freight improvements, were of great interest. A number of local governments also raised the importance of better coordination across transport agencies and all levels of government.

The opportunities for greater integration with freight hubs, investment in the Inland Rail project, and the need for longer term planning to work across sectors, governments and borders, was also raised, particularly in regions close to interstate borders.

An integrated approach to Victoria’s transport system makes the best use of what we have now, while planning for the future and taking advantage of opportunities, such as the Murray Basin Rail Project. It provides a stronger focus of the role roads and public transport can play together in supporting regional growth.

Instead of planning around a simple hierarchy of roads based on traffic volumes, integration brings together insights and context into the economic, environmental and social benefits of building a productive and resilient transport network for all Victorians.

Road safety requires a joined up effort

Victoria’s changing economy and travel demand means road usage is more diverse. There are now more freight trucks, oversized farming machinery, tourists and cyclists all sharing the same roads.

One of the unacceptable outcomes for country Victorians is the high levels of road trauma. People are four times more likely to die or be seriously injured on Victoria’s country roads than on metropolitan roads.

To achieve the Victorian Government’s Towards Zero road safety target of reducing the road toll and serious injuries by 20 percent by 2020, a state-wide partnership is needed.

Towards Zero intends to make country roads safer and close the gap between the number of people being killed on country roads. More than $800 million is being invested in improving regional roads, including extensive safety barriers and rumble strips that have been shown to save lives. Evaluations of the flexible wire rope safety barriers being installed across Victoria’s top 20 most dangerous regional roads indicate a 30 percent reduction in deaths and serious injuries.

The $340 million Safer Road Infrastructure Program involves installing more wire safety barriers to save lives on country roads. Wire safety barriers can prevent the worst from happening in the event of a blown tire or a loss of control. Built to withstand the weight of a truck travelling at full speed, they have been shown to reduce run-off road and head-on crashes by up to 85 percent. On every major regional road into Melbourne, VicRoads is installing 1700 kilometres of wire safety. With 17 people killed or seriously injured each year for every 100km of our busy, high-speed roads, these barriers are an essential investment to save lives in regional Victoria.
Maintaining Victoria’s state-controlled roadways

Country Victorians now have better access to information about the condition of country roads, road works and upgrades as part of a major overhaul of the way VicRoads manages the road network.

People can log in to the first instalment of a digital dashboard on the VicRoads’ website that includes information on pot-hole repairs, the busiest truck routes and truck volumes, and road safety data in every local government area. This will continue to be improved and refreshed to be transparent about the state of arterial roads.

Significant work now underway

Approximately $420 million was invested in regional Victoria for pavement management in the 2017-18 Victorian Budget, including commitments made in previous budgets. This amount includes additional funding of approximately $220 million for surface replacement and approximately $200 million for recurrent and capital activities.

This year, more than 850 kilometres of deteriorating roads in regional Victoria are being repaired, resurfaced and rebuilt from the maintenance boost. About 85 km of road on high priority routes will be rebuilt from a $45 million investment, including parts of the Calder Highway, Hume Highway, Princes Highway East, Western Highway and Barwon Heads Road. $215 million is being invested to resurface about 765 km of roads and undertake work on drainage and shoulders that will preserve the life of pavements.

This investment will keep the highest priority roads open for business and in safe condition and enable the removal of temporary speed limit reductions on many impaired sections of road. Continued investment will enable arterial roads to support economic and social activities in Regional Victoria and will reduce vehicle operating costs that occur as a result of roads becoming rough and in poor condition.

Other key initiatives to modernise the network include a new approach to prioritising road upgrades that considers economic benefits and regional priorities, as well as a review of road signage across the state to support tourism growth.

The Victorian Auditor General’s 2017 report into Maintaining State Controlled Roadways aligned with VicRoads asset management transformation program which began in 2016. VicRoads has adopted all of the recommendations of the Victorian Auditor General’s report including adopting whole-of-life costs when making investment decisions.

Significant progress has been made on all of VAGO’s recommendations, including:

- The Asset Transformation Project – a three-year plan to ensure VicRoads has the right capability, systems, business and financial models to support more efficient asset management. The project includes Statewide Asset Management Plans for all road based assets to define levels of service,
quality standards and life-cycle management along with the data requirements to be able to monitor network performance.

- VicRoads Transport Analytic Platform (TAP) which is improving VicRoads analytics capability focusing on asset related data. The first instalment of a ‘digital dashboard’ on the state of country roads has been released preceding the first comprehensive State of the Network report. This will enhance VicRoads’ evidence-based decision making on asset management and give the public meaningful reports on road condition and performance against established levels of service.
- The Pavement Management Strategic Plan is a road maintenance strategy with clear objectives, outcomes and measures that define both technical and road-user levels of service for each road maintenance category. It is available on the VicRoads’ website and will be reported against annually.
- The Pavement Management Strategic Plan has expanded the focus from planning and measuring the work VicRoads does to focus more on community outcomes that contribute to the Victorian economy, safety, wellbeing and journey experience.
- The condition of roads and bridges, roadside vegetation, drainage, bike paths, electrical and other important roadside infrastructure will be reported on annually in future as part of a whole-of-life-cycle approach to the network.
- Maintenance and renewal investment is being prioritised based on the road classification and the type of work that is required (see diagram below which outlines funding prioritisation).

![Source: Pavement Management Strategic Plan. Figure 6: Investment Decision Criteria for Maintenance and Renewal Works](image)

**Transforming service delivery**

VicRoads has released a Pavement Management strategy to better define and articulate how investment decisions are made.

The 2017-2018 Pavement Management Business Case considered a range of factors including whole-of-life optimisation and service levels. It articulated a range of benefits of different funding scenarios including reduced road user costs and improved road safety.

Instead of a “worst first” or “squeaky wheel” approach to maintaining roads based on historical funding expectations, VicRoads is transforming service delivery by defining quality standards and monitoring performance of the entire network.

Data is being used to support better decision-making and value for money. A range of different maintenance delivery models, including an alliance model, lump sum, and schedule of rates, are being adopted to deliver the best outcomes to the community and delivery on clear performance criteria.
Many of these new approaches include data collection, building relationships and working in partnership to develop and deliver future asset management programs more transparently.

An area of future work is developing partnerships with local governments on innovative approaches to improve maintenance of less strategic arterial roads given finite road maintenance budgets. In the current budget, investment in road maintenance has been separated from capital investment improvements, to be transparent about the needs for maintenance and improvement.

New approaches and community engagement will be required to ensure lower category roads are provided with adequate levels of service in future that meet community needs.

VicRoads is also establishing a foundation asset management system and methodology to manage all its physical and intangible assets such as pavements, roads, structures and bridges, alongside IT systems, licences and data. This is a requirement of all Victorian Government departments and agencies and will support long term asset management.

**Greater transparency and State of Network reporting**

Every day, VicRoads has inspectors and assessors out on the roads measuring the performance and safety of roads, from the depth of pot-holes to the impacts of heavy vehicles to determine the best interventions to keep the network running well. This operational intelligence has never been shared in an easy-to-read way.

That is changing with the development of an online dashboard to show network conditions like pot-holes and general maintenance, along with traffic volume trends, road trauma statistics and weather impacts.

Communities told VicRoads they want to know more about the road trauma that is happening in their region. Road safety information, down to the local government area, is now provided on the digital dashboard.

More data will be made available to the public and other government agencies with the progressive development of a centralised data warehouse.

VicRoads will be producing the first detailed State of the Road Network in the first quarter of 2018. This will make it much easier for the public to see road condition trends in their region and improve the transparency and accountability around the available public resources for road maintenance and improvements.

Operational intelligence will be shared with other government agencies to inform future investment plans that align with regional priorities.

A Star Rating System will also be developed to demonstrate the safety benefits of different road safety treatments and interventions. Star Ratings are a simple tool to show the level of safety that’s built in to a road. This can help people make the safest choices on roads. It can also help governments and road agencies to make the best decisions on how to invest public money on the safety measures that will reduce the most road trauma.

VicRoads will explore using international star rating tools to assess ‘before and after’ investment scenarios on its current Top 20 road safety investment projects.

Five-star roads are the safest while one-star roads are the least safe. In the United Kingdom and other countries that have started using the iRap star rating tool, every extra star rating achieved through safety improvements have resulted in a halving of fatal and serious road crashes.

**Community and Stakeholder engagement across Victoria**

People know their roads best, so the more community input VicRoads has, the better aligned operational work will be with community priorities.

VicRoads has acknowledged that not enough has been done in the past to share operational knowledge with communities, explain the trade-offs that need to be made or how people can influence decisions.

Over the past two years VicRoads has been focussed on improving the way it engages with Victorian communities and stakeholders. In November 2016, VicRoads released a five year Engagement Strategy which outlines VicRoads goal to genuinely engage Victorians earlier in planning and decision making.

VicRoads has been improving the engagement capability of staff across the organisation with new resources in regional offices dedicated to community and stakeholder engagement.

**Country Roads Engagement**

VicRoads conducted the biggest public engagement in its history in 2017. The VicRoads Executive Leadership Team met with more than 700 stakeholders across every region of the state. Great insights were made from talking and driving with freight and bus operators, farmers, business groups, tourism operators, emergency workers, environmental and wildlife groups, cycling enthusiasts, motorcycle groups, and holding stakeholder
meetings with the RACV, Regional Assemblies, the Victorian Farmer’s Federation, Regional Cities Victoria and 30 regional councils.

The Country Roads initiative was supported by an online engagement portal which reached more than 10,000 country Victorians between February and August 2017. People mapped their local issues and joined regional discussion forums. A detailed community feedback report was released in December 2017 along with an independent stakeholder analysis.

VicRoads is building its internal regional capability to meaningfully engage with communities in an ongoing way to ensure the Country Roads engagement will not be a one-off.

**VicRoads 2018 engagement program**

This year VicRoads will continue its statewide engagement program with local consultation sessions, a presence at community events and regional roundtable discussions.

It will continue the conversation about people’s experiences, ideas and priorities, and to explain VicRoads’ timelines for upcoming projects, available funding, trade-offs and what communities can influence on plans and projects. Members of VicRoads Executive Leadership team will lead these discussions.

This program will compliment VicRoads’ consultation on individual projects which are being planned and delivered across Victoria’s regions this year. Consultation aims to ensure we talk to the right people at the right time and coordinate activities with other transport agencies to draw together an integrated view of the needs of each community.

The information and feedback provided to the parliamentary inquiry will also shape VicRoads engagement strategy in the coming years and support Transport for Victoria’s development of a regional roads strategy and action plan.

**VicRoads Engagement Strategy**

**Geelong pilot**

A recent pilot with customers in Geelong highlighted the need to involve communities in the road maintenance space to align VicRoads’ efforts more closely to the values of our customers. While legislative requirements mandate some roadwork above others, the pilot showed the importance of involving communities in decisions that affect lives and livelihoods. The “pop-up” style event involved VicRoads representatives interviewing 90 people and surveying 400 customers visiting the Geelong Customer Service Centre to understand their expectations and experiences. VicRoads will continue to engage with customers, industries and councils about road maintenance priorities to better align future efforts.

VicRoads is now designing a state-wide survey on community road maintenance priorities and a platform to ensure greater community and stakeholder involvement in maintenance programs. This will ensure an increased focus on customer experiences and priorities of industries and to better align future efforts.

**Regional Engagement**

Hundreds of regional engagement sessions were held across regional Victorian in 2017 giving people more opportunities than ever before to influence outcomes of projects and plan for the future. Some examples include:

**Consulting with Ballarat community on cycling and pedestrian safety**

Throughout November and December 2017 VicRoads partnered with Ballarat City Council to engage the community on a major cycling, pedestrian and road safety project. The project will connect missing links in the cycling network across Ballarat, improve safety by providing off-road cycling paths for all ages and abilities, reduce the risk of crashes as six high-risk intersections and improve safety for pedestrians in the CBD.

Consultation sought community feedback on the project including the location and design of cycling and pedestrian paths, road safety treatments, major intersection changes that are being proposed and overall support for the project. It was also a valuable opportunity to talk to the community about cycling and pedestrian road safety and why some treatments work better than others.

The month-long consultation used different ways to connect with the community including many meetings with key stakeholder representatives such as the local commerce, hospitals, emergency services, schools, cycling, RSL and heritage groups. Weeks of doorknocking connected with local residents and businesses impacted by the project. A public information sessions and a week-long pop-up-shop in Ballarat’s CBD meant we were available to reach people at different days and times and in placed that suit them. Our interactive online consultation hub was an effective way to engage with people who could not attend sessions or wanted to review plans again and provide feedback later.

VicRoads is analysing the range of feedback now and incorporating it into project designs. It is expected that they will go back to the community with final designs shortly.
Napier Street upgrade, Bendigo

VicRoads is delivering a $30.4 million upgrade of Napier Street to improve traffic flow and transport options between Weeroona Avenue and Hall Street, Bendigo.

Community and stakeholder engagement began in 2015 which involved listening to the community and stakeholders and involving them in project design. The program began with no preconceived plans with the engagement objective of hearing from various road users and collecting their feedback to inform the present and future needs of this high growth area.

Concept plans were developed based on the initial community engagement and released for public comment in June 2016. Topics of greatest interest to the community included parking options, types and locations of intersection upgrades, pedestrian and cycling integration and public transport facilities.

There were nine engagement sessions during the planning phase of the project and many individual conversations with business owners across the corridor. A Community Consultation Group (CCG) was established early on to help refine project design. Membership of the CCG included an independent chair, local business owners, emergency services, City of Greater Bendigo officers and interest groups such as Bike Bendigo.

The upgrade is being conducted under traffic and prior to Stage One commencing in June 2017 a door knock was conducted in the vicinity of the immediately impacted zone. Representative of VicRoads have been informing residents and business owners of the upcoming works and the possible effects on their access to Napier Street and the local side streets.

Now in Stage Two, door knocking of immediately impacted residents and business owners has been an ongoing priority for the project team, with a focus on informing residents about electricity relocation works, water main realignment and the possible effects on their access to the area. VicRoads is working in partnership with Powercor, Coliban Water and the City of Greater Bendigo to ensure all residents, business operators and visitors are well informed.

The Napier Street Upgrade project has also formed a key part of the local community road safety program involving the Huntly, Epsom and White Hills primary schools. Students have highlighted the project’s safety design, improved access and bicycle paths as future benefits to them as they travel to and from school.

Informing and involving the community in a timely and convenient way has been critical to the success of the engagement strategy. The project has a dedicated web page where information is updated at each stage of the project. Social and traditional media channels, direct mail and email are being used to keep the community informed of progress and how the works may affect them in the future.

Working with the Wye River community on the Great Ocean Road

During VicRoads’ landslide recovery project the local community, particularly traders, were very clear that we had to keep the Great Ocean Road open - particularly during holiday periods.

This led to VicRoads changing its construction plans and ensuring regular communication on about the works being undertaking.

Through feedback from the community, VicRoads identified the need to rebuild Paddy's Path, a much-loved path from Separation Creek to Wye River that fell away during the landslide. The path now features a wooden structure over the landslide area.

The community helped choose the gabion rock used in building retention walls and helped select the 2,000 plants that have revegetated the hillside.

Working with traders on Fyans Street, Geelong

Fyans Street is a busy street in Geelong with many small business traders. Originally VicRoads’ work to rebuild 700 metres of Fyans Street was planned to run for 12 weeks.

VicRoads took a coffee cart out to share a coffee and talk to traders about their views on the work program. As part of this conversation it was clear that traders would value a different approach that was less disruptive to their trade. VicRoads explored alternative, less disruptive methods and investigated the possibility of nightworks. These are now part of the delivery plan. The works will be delivered at night, with traffic flowing during the day.

While night roadworks are common in Melbourne, this is a new approach in regional areas.

The traders are happy and relieved and know the VicRoads team, and can call if they have questions.

VicRoads also used this initiative to build detailed contact lists and call or email traders if any issues arise. An example of this has been when we needed to keep one lane closed during the day. All the traders were contacted and were all very happy to get an update.
Conclusion

VicRoads has a wealth of local information as a result of its intensive community engagement efforts in the last year about the state of regional roads and regional priorities.

VicRoads acknowledges it can and will do better by involving communities and stakeholders earlier and more often in the decisions that affect them.

With the establishment of Transport for Victoria, the development of regional transport priorities through Regional Assemblies, and strengthened community engagement efforts by VicRoads, there is now more community intelligence to help make the best investment decisions for regional roads.

The history of VicRoads is grounded in regional Victoria and today it remains a regionally-based agency with two metropolitan and five regional centres.

In April 2016, VicRoads restructured to form a more cohesive Regional Services Division, to better plan, prioritise and deliver the maintenance program across Victoria. These reforms mean work is well underway to help address concerns raised about the state of country roads.

We welcome further insights that will be gained through the parliamentary inquiry and thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. If you require any further information, please contact Mr Daniel Heley of the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources on telephone ************.