SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY ENQUIRY ON THE
EFFECTIVENESS OF VICROADS IN MANAGING COUNTRY ROADS
BY CENTRAL GOLDFIELDS SHIRE
The terms of reference

The terms of reference of “The parliamentary inquiry into the effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads” was received from the Legislative Council on 23 November 2016.

That pursuant to section 33 of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 this house requires the Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee to inquire into, consider and report, no later than 30 November 2017 (now 30th June 2018)—

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.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Central Goldfields Shire is located at the geographical centre of Victoria. The shire covers 1,532 square kilometres and has an estimated residential population of just over 12,500 people.

Maryborough is the shire’s major business centre with a population of around 7,500.

Main settlements in the shire are Maryborough (population 7,500), Bealiba, Carisbrook, Dunolly, Majorca, Talbot and Bowenvale-Timor.

The land through the shire is rural farming with considerable tracts of native forests.

The shire has been experiencing residential growth being well positioned for lifestyle and located within one hour’s drive from main provincial centres of Ballarat and Bendigo and just an hour and half Melbourne.
2.0 RESPONSE 1

The effectiveness of VicRoads in managing country roads

Effective existing relationships

Council has enjoyed a professional, friendly and co-operative relationship with VicRoads staff. The municipality is within the Western Region of VicRoads.

Operating in a difficult financial framework

The council experience with VicRoads is they maintain their road network within the limits of their financial capacity. Over many years VicRoads has been subject to severe budget variation and in the last two decades budget cuts.

This has led to prioritising the limited funding available with the consequential failure to really address B and C road needs other than stich in time maintenance. What appears to be missing are programs to upgrade and improving (modernise) A but particularly B and C road classes to accommodate the ever growing needs of larger trucks, more trucks and more cars. While roads have a life and wear out, the change in use and vehicles necessitate the need to upgrade the infrastructure over time.

Examples of outdated structure are narrow bridges, narrow sealed roads, narrow shoulders, lack of turning lanes. There appears to be no programs to address these issues.

Specific example of issues needing to be addressed in Central Goldfields Shire

Need for turning lanes on VicRoads roads

- Ballarat-Maryborough Rd / Lexton Talbot Rd intersection – right turn lanes
- Ballarat-Maryborough Rd / Old Ballarat Rd intersection – right turn lane.
- Ballarat-Maryborough Rd / Landrigan Rd intersection – right turn lane.
- Bendigo-Maryborough Rd Simson Rd intersection – left and right turn lanes
- Pyrenees Hwy Maryborough/St Arnaud Rd intersection – right turn lane and intersection lighting Pyrenees Hwy / Chaplins Rd Intersection – intersection upgrade.

Narrow road – narrow road and shoulders overdue for modernisation

- Maryborough/St Arnaud Rd – Longs Rd to Porteous Rd - narrowness of road & shoulders

Narrow Bridges – need to be modernised suitable widths for modern traffic

- Ballarat-Maryborough Rd London Bridge - narrow bridge
- Dunach Eddington Rd Cottrells Bridge - narrow bridge and dangerous approaches
- Maryborough/St Arnaud Rd bridge west of Longs Rd – narrow bridge

Road maintenance

- Pyrenees Hwy Moolort Plains – continual road pavement failure
- Pyrenees Hwy Bung Bong – Road roughness
- Lexton-Talbot Rd – Road roughness and clear zone concerns Talbot to Caralulup
- Pyrenees Hwy / Gillies St intersection – pavement failure
- Gladstone St - repeated pavement failures
- Dunach Eddington Rd – continual surface and shoulders deterioration
- Pyrenees Hwy (Sutton Rd) , Bendigo Maryborough Rd (Park Rd) and Gladstone St – kerb & channel deterioration.
3.0 RESPONSE 2

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

Prioritisation of limited resources works against the lower use regional roads

VicRoads in dealing with serious underfunding has quite rightly prioritised their expenditure based on the number of fatalities and higher traffic volume roads. This has unfortunately been the norm for such a long period of time that the “B” and “C” roads have received very limited maintenance renewal essentially other than keeping them operational. As a result in Central Goldfields Shire there are many narrow roads and bridges (listed in Response 1) suited to the traffic of the 1950’s. Traffic volumes and truck transport has grown significantly over the last 50 years and so has the size of trucks. There does not appear to be sufficient funds to undertake network modernisation and development.

Response versus planning

Possibly as a result of the difficult funding paradigm for decades has been that planning appears largely to be maintenance response based. There seems to be little programming of asset modernisation to bring road and bridges to current expectations and demand or in anticipation of future growth. Maintenance intervention based on immediate problem solving rather than a program of cyclical planned maintenance inevitably delivers poorer quality outcomes with higher costs over the long run.

In this continuum, there is little prospect “B” and “C” class roads being brought to modern construction on operational expectations and standards. It is recognised there is a huge backlog of work required on freeways, metro roads. “A” class roads may see some basic improvements. Of course at some time in the future there will be the need to update these networks either as a result of age or simply being totally unsuitable. A program of asset improvement is required across all road classes aimed at assets not being too far behind their functional needs and avoiding a future knee jerk program of catch-ups.

Where there has been sufficient fatalities, road lengths or intersections receive funding. While it is appropriate to address black spots, there is something unsettling about waiting for the body count to reach 3 before the intersection or road length can meet requirements. Clearly this is prioritisation in response to available funding. It would be better for the fatalities not to have occurred.

It may also be perceived that, in some instances, VicRoads appears to have its funding shaped by political initiatives perhaps with insufficient consideration of getting the basic network planning and development as the key driver.

Prioritisation on traffic volume favours Melbourne Metropolitan area

Prioritisation based on traffic volume will inevitably see a large proportion of funding being expended in the Melbourne Metropolitan area. Country councils have difficulty receiving VicRoads funding for signalised pedestrian crossings because of the waiting list swamped by metropolitan needs.

The failure of long term growth areas and metro transport planning and historically inadequate application of developer contributions has seen the need to expend significant state funds in Metropolitan growth areas. The transport problems generated by the backlog but also forecast Melbourne metropolitan growth needs potentially overwhelms the rural needs for road assets.
4.0 RESPONSE 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 are no specific programs that this council has been consulted on for upgrade renewal and repair priorities by VicRoads. This would extend to the community in Central Goldfields Shire. Our presumption is that there is a well-established asset management system which determines priorities based on condition needs.

There are opportunities for a formal and structured approach to be introduced which would enable communities to receive timely relevant information, and, to provide local inputs into the decision process. Council would encourage the creation of such a process.

As a Road Authority ourselves, Council supports the need to have a strong assessment based process to determining priorities.
5.0 RESPONSE 4

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

There may be merit in the suggestion to separate Metropolitan form Country roads to provide more balance in prioritisation.

However this may result in regional centres like Ballarat, Bendigo, Traralgon etc. replacing the Melbourne metro in receiving the bulk of available funding.

Breaking VicRoads into two organisations will lead to increased overheads eating into available road funding. It would have been thought that a substantial adjustment to the operating guidelines could address the problems identified.

The underlying problems are:

- The inadequate amount of funding available and the security of road funding over the long term

- The growing unfunded needs of Metropolitan growth (possibly regional centre growth in the future)

- The redirection of essential road funding to special initiatives versus ensuring the fundamental asset maintenance and development needs are met first and special initiatives have separate funding programs.

- Clearly articulated (measurable) plans for network management and development.

- Need to transparently segregate VicRoads expenditure for Metropolitan and regional needs across Victoria.