Submission to inquiry into VicRoads

I reside in country Victoria approximately 40km from the SA border to the west and 85km from Hamilton to the east. I drive 1000km to work each week into SA. I travel to Hamilton, Horsham and Portland quite regularly, and Melbourne at least 4 times a year. The difference in the state of the roads and the road infrastructure from country roads to city roads is profound.

Country Victoria has a road system which has deteriorated to the point where it is no longer a viable network, it is antiquated and is failing country people as we can see by the disproportionate number of deaths and trauma on country roads. Whilst driving the poor condition of the roads makes it extremely difficult to travel safely, it is a battle to stay on the roads with crumbling road edges, large and dangerous pot holes, I have reported the poor state of the roads and the dangerous pot holes to VicRoads, they are always going to come and do something about it but usually that doesn’t happen, a slow down to 40km/hr sign appears but roads workers are very slow to do anything.

An example: There was a particularly large pot-hole which took up ¾ of the Casterton-Dergholm roadway, I reported that particular hole every week for several weeks and then I started to report it every day, that is when something was finally done about it. I replayed to the phone operator a near miss I witnessed with a semitrailer hitting the large deep hole at the recommended speed according to the roadwork sign of 40km per hour, the truck almost tipped over due to the very large hole. He obviously wasn’t a local and although the hole had been there for months he must not have been familiar with it. A family put a sign up on a tree next to the road at Christmas time 2016 saying ‘all we want for xmas is someone to fix the road – the kids on the school bus’ still the road wasn’t fixed. After many months, and many poorly undertaken patch-up’s the hole was finally completely dug out, correct drainage was put in and the road in that spot was fixed. About 25 metres of road.

We have trees very close to the road, on one area of the road there is a huge tree on a bend that is only about 2 feet off the road, this tree has been the site of several accidents over the years. I complained to VicRoads about it as I experienced a near miss with a log truck at that tree. The tree leaves you very little room when a log truck is travelling towards you and you pass at that tree there is nowhere to go and there is no margin for error. VicRoads said that they inspected the tree and decided that the tree wasn’t too close to the road.

Log trucks have wrecked the roads, but that is not their fault, they are as entitled to use the roads as much as any person, when all the huge number of bluegum plantation were planted the councils and vicroads had 15-20 years to plan better, wider roads to help with this extra heavy vehicle traffic, now we have a totally destroyed infrastructure and a pathetic lot of patch up jobs that just break down again within days of being fixed. We have an area of the road that has been fixed about 25 times, it is still pot holed and now has semi-permanent 40km per hour signs on it.

VicRoads has failed country people miserably in the way it has handled the mismanagement of our country road system.

Country people need to be involved in the planning of the repairs and expansion of the road network, there is no point giving this job to council as they no longer have the infrastructure, the expertise or workers to undertake these tasks, they can barely grade a gravel road on a semi-regular basis, they are all about monument building and beautification of the largest town in the shire areas.

What we need:

Remove all trees next to the roadway, we need clearance of at least 4 metres either side of the road, this will help reduce road deaths from car versus tree, it will also help ensure safe passage during fires if required and extra area to get off the road in case of emergency. You don’t see large trees within 2 feet of city highways and that is because it is dangerous and they have been removed.
Widen all the country roads on which trucks are allowed to travel, this includes smaller country roads. Image the jobs this could create for people in the country if it was undertaken with careful planning and consultation. Train country people for the work force to undertake this work, don’t just use city contractors, we need to have people available in the wider community to undertake regular maintenance of these roadways.

Ensure there is adequate funding for country road infrastructure now and into the future, we need ongoing funding to IMPROVE and BUILT a proper road network in the country. We are moving cattle, sheep, hay, produce, vegetables, fruit etc to feed the city so give us enough money to do it safely.

Plan, plan plan!!!! Ask country people what they need, ask them for ideas about where things need to change, for example grass right to the edge of roadways allows water to pool on the road and immediately under the bitumen surface allowing the surface to break and the sides of the road to collapse.

We need much wider roads with a full 60 cm gap between two white lines down the centre with rumble strips so that the traffic is further apart and drivers are alerted if they stray across the first line. We need better road side drainage, and better roadside maintenance, we need passing lanes on hills, why is this only for the privileged few on highways near cities? Country people are sick of being treated like second class citizens,

We need more safety rails on dangerous bends and drop offs, we need wider bridges and better designed intersections with large roundabouts to stop intersection death traps.

We need better designed roads with sharp bends removed where possible.

Give us the funding we need, let us be involved in the planning of what needs to be done now and what we want for the future. It is extremely frustrating to see machinery and workers come out and do a small patch of a road, then have them travelling back to the city where they live as they are contractors brought in for the job. They repair a small area, drive over other areas which are in need of repair, pack up and leave. This is such an inefficient use of these resources, travelling from Melbourne or Warrnambool or Geelong to undertake works in the furthest part of the western district is not economically viable, why is this happening? Because local councils no longer have the infrastructure to undertake the necessary works.

Yes I think we need a Country Roads Board back, and this board should comprise Country people including farmers, nurses, truck drivers, teachers, shop keepers, road workers, people who are out there in the country using the roads. We need more say, and we need to have a future plan for country roads or soon we will all be driving at 40km per hour everywhere we go because the roads are completely ruined, and that is not too far into the future and it is not a fairytale.

Country people pay a large amount of fuel tax because we drive large distances, trucks pay a huge road users levy, all the money from city traffic and parking fines should be used to fund country roads. Vicroads have failed in their duty of care to country road users and there have been deaths that would have been prevented had the road system been adequately maintained, and improved as is the right of country people.

We don’t just want our country roads repaired, we want new better, wider roads unencumbered by overhanging trees and trees dangerously close to roadsides.

Let’s get this show on the road.

Mrs Barbie Sawyer

Country Road user, farmers wife, nurse practitioner, mother and grandmother.