Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into VicRoads Management of Country Roads

From the Healesville Action Group

Introduction

The Healesville Action Group (HAG) was born in 2011, after I wrote a letter to our local paper expressing concern about the lack of and poor maintenance of our roads and drains, which was aimed primarily at the Shire of Yarra Ranges. There was such considerable support for what I said that a public meeting was held that resulted in the formation of HAG.

I along with another local resident in the group, are former road construction workers and while I do not have a Civil Engineering qualification, I do have 30 years of experience with the former Shire of Healesville in construction and maintenance of our country roads. This I believe places me in a position to how a road should be constructed and maintained, including the ability to identify the quality of materials used in the process, this along with over 50 years of driving experience, not only large and heavy motor vehicles but motor cycles as well.

Submission

Background

In opening our submission I would like to express our appreciation for being allowed to lodge a late submission, having only just been made aware of the inquiry, when the Yarra Ranges Shire raised the matter in the council meeting of 13th February.

As HAG was formed largely in response to the poor condition of our roads, it has been an ongoing source of anger in this community for many years and relates to the appalling maintenance of both shire and VicRoads roads.

We have records of complaints to VicRoads by HAG and community members dating back to 2009, which indicate either a lack of interest in, or understanding of the fact that metropolitan and country roads have different maintenance requirements. As a former grader operator I am often appalled at the apparent lack of expertise of many current operators that I see from time to time working in our area.

As this group is not privy to enough information to accurately comment on some aspects of the terms of reference we would like to offer some information on the practical aspects of the problems that have arisen over the last 30 years, since the the old Country Roads Board (CRB) transitioned into VicRoads.

What happened in 1983

This era of government services came in for “reviews of performance” and to whether services should be contracted out to external companies who were deemed to be better at providing the particular service. What was missing in this analysis, was that large contracting companies are in business to make money and the consequences of this is a lowering of the standard of road maintenance that has led to this inquiry. While not suggesting that there has necessarily been any dishonesty in what has developed, however it is obvious that poorly produced specifications and contracts, lack of adequate supervision, or a combination thereof, either by ineptitude or inexperience of staff has led to the need for more frequent repairs over a shorter span of time, which is costing more money for the tax payer with potentially more injury and deaths and certainly more frustration.
By bringing the various road and traffic authorities under the one minister has seen a very large bureaucracy come into existence, along with the associated difficulties for the public having the ability to communicate directly with the correct person. The use of a common call taking centre, with operators who may not be familiar with the area or the detail of the individual problem, all add to frustration on behalf of the general public trying to get a road maintenance problem attended to.

The majority of maintenance problems appear to relate to roads which were constructed 20 to 30 years ago and in the main are not able to be corrected without rebuilding the road, which is not going to happen in the foreseeable future. The cause of these problems relate to the construction that was done at the time, along with increased volumes and speed of traffic and the use of larger and heavier vehicles that the road was never designed to handle.

The need for proactive maintenance.

There is therefore the need to embark on more frequent inspections of not only the road surface, but the shoulders and table drains, to enable the necessary repairs to be carried out before they get to be a major problem. Temporary repairs are taking too long to become permanent.

Potholes and failures of the surface along with subsidence depressions are the most common complaints we receive, these are usually due to failure of the road base. This in turn can often be traced back to water seepage into the base, due to poor or inadequate shoulder grading preventing water, displaced from the surface of the roadway being able to enter the table drain and be carried away. This is usually due to a build-up of grass at the edge of the asphalt surface or insufficient fall from the asphalt surface to the table drain. A further problem that appears to be occurring is allowing the wearing surface to be laid beyond the base of the road, onto the shoulder, which in a short time causes the edge to break away as there is no support for this thin layer and allowing water to penetrate into the road base.

All these issues are unique to country roads, most metropolitan roads are fully sealed with kerb and channel and are therefore not subject to these issues. This is why we believe that the integration of all road maintenance under one authority has not been satisfactory.

Conclusion

We support the separation of the management of country roads from metropolitan roads for the reasons outlined in the foregoing and although we have strayed beyond your terms of reference, we thought it may be beneficial for you to understand the reasoning, based on our experience.

We further believe it is in the interests of transparency to see that country road funding is disclosed as going to a single point rather than into a large department’s bureaucracy and then divided up.

John Rosser
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Please direct all correspondence to John Anwin: