5 January 2018
Submitted by:
Phillip Anstis

Dear Chair,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on this most important topic to all Victorians.

**Country road maintenance in Victoria?**

Hmmm, let’s see what the observational evidence tells us about just one drive on ONE road:

- Inconsistent application of road work speed zones for exactly the same work
- Road work speed zones without any actual road work taking place with no need for any reduced speed zone (resulting in majority of drivers totally ignoring the speed limit thus creating a danger for law-abiding drivers)
- Uneven patches on the road surface, with unexpected humps and unexpected dips
- Roadworks left incomplete with road edge line not painted
- Road signs indicating rough road conditions present for months (with no actual work being done on the rough road)
- The road surface extremely rough and riveted by the road edge
- Potholes

The road in reference is the *M8 Western Freeway*, between Melbourne and Ballarat, a stated principal road link between Victoria and South Australia.¹

Oh, and I forgot the following:

- Old road work markings blacked out but still apparent (e.g. old car spacing arrows near Gordon and criss-cross yellow line markings near Bacchus Marsh) which only serve to distract and confuse drivers

So what hope is there for road maintenance across Victoria if one of Victoria’s ‘principal’ roads displays this standard of not just ineffective but *dangerous* road maintenance?

None.

There is actually no possibility for VicRoads to be able to properly maintain Victoria’s vast network of principal roads and other secondary roads. So I will not begin to describe the woeful state of Victoria’s secondary roads. I’m sure the committee has been inundated with such examples.

But the reality of this situation was starkly brought to me when I was instructing my daughter to drive recently. This task is of course essentially all about hazard identification in real time e.g. oncoming traffic, weather conditions etc. However, it soon became apparent that what I was primarily instructing my daughter was about how to drive under appalling road conditions:

- broken road edges
- virtually invisible potholes
- inconsistent camber
- inappropriate line markings for the road conditions
- inappropriate speed limits for the road
- wavy pavement
- inconsistent road surface material resulting in different handling characteristics
- lack of run-off areas

A key contributing factor of road deaths is known to be driver fatigue. It is my view that drivers are becoming unnecessarily fatigued and distracted by Victoria’s appalling road conditions.

But this is not just my subjective view. This view is supported by Victoria’s independent Auditor-General who following an audit of VicRoads’ road maintenance capabilities in mid-2017 stated:

"Failing to address these issues will reduce transport efficiency and pose significant risks to the safety of road users".2

The report actually paints a more dismal picture of road maintenance in Victoria than what I thought possible.

I think the problem is deeper than just simple road maintenance and if the Committee just focusses on how to prioritise existing road maintenance funds then a major opportunity will have been missed.

A band aid will not help this patient, severe surgery is required.

Further in the Auditor-General’s report it is noted:

“...there is no current strategic plan that identifies outcomes, explains target levels of services or expected costs.”

This is a stunning finding. No plan...?? How could this be? So how is road maintenance actually prioritised and planned if there is no strategic plan...

2 Victorian Auditor-General (2017). Maintaining State-Controlled Roadways. 22 June 2017
But I refer the Committee to a direct quote from another Auditor-General’s report, but conducted ten years earlier in 2008:

“Recommendation 1.2
VicRoads should further develop the roadside asset strategy to define service levels that promote a consistent approach to manage risks and to set maintenance priorities across its regions.”

What the...???

This is either a case of Auditor-General copy-n-paste (very unlikely) or a REAL problem of neglect of the most basic requirement for success – planning before doing.

So by the evidence presented we must accept the premise that in ten years VicRoads has failed to implement any meaningful strategic approach to defining service levels and service delivery in terms of road maintenance.

So, to hark back to the observational deficiencies of the road condition of one of our major freeways, this is now not actually a surprise, but truly an expected outcome of the non-system of planned maintenance that has been in place for at least ten years. In fact, it would actually be more surprising to drive on a well-maintained road in Victoria, because as the Auditor-General has faithfully reported over ten years – no such planned road maintenance system exists.

This means it is pointless for the Committee to be debating about where scarce road maintenance funding should be allocated – because there is no system to assess where or how it should actually be wisely spent. One may as well employ the dartboard method and at least save some time while achieve the same outcome as current.

The ten years of abject failings to enact or enforce Auditor-General recommendations will be brought up again shortly.

So, can decent roads be built and maintained in Australia?

Fortunately, the answer is yes.

But not in Victoria, the answer is no, as has been amply demonstrated.

But, even more fortunately, the apparent answer is not far away.

Having driven to Adelaide and back several times on the Western Highway over many years provides plenty of time to sadly ponder Victoria’s woeful country roads.

Being able to compare directly the disgraceful state of Victorian roads compared to the high quality South Australian highways I am convinced our poor roads are not due to our haphazard, infrequent and totally random non-strategic maintenance but inferior road construction in the first place. Apart from the Western Highway direct comparison this phenomenon can be experienced on the Sturt Highway from Renmark to Mildura.

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In comparison to the smooth, flat, perfectly cambered roads in South Australia our roads are like a random expression of some bizarre roller coaster, full of dips and rises across the pavement surface and curled up bitumen edges. Our major highways are dotted with ill-fitting and sunken patches waiting to throw an unsuspecting car off its course and a driver into a waiting tree. No amount of maintenance will improve that self-inflected mess.

The South Australian section of the Western Highway is rated at 110 kmh and it is safe to travel at this speed and in fact rather pleasurable driving. Right across the border in Victoria the limit is instantly reduced to 100 kmh but then the driver needs to instantly tighten their grip on the wheel and concentrate harder, resulting in more driver fatigue. I have driven many rural highways in SA and they are all equally high quality - the RM Williams Way in the middle of nowhere is possibly the best road in Australia re quality. When I was there I saw the road crews rebuilding some of it. I couldn’t believe the depth they had excavated. Would this be to provide a satisfactory road base resistant to premature failure? I’m not a road engineer, but the long roads in SA provide plenty of opportunity for one to think and compare the observed differences between the two states.

A key conclusion is that the superior rural highways in SA are not just a ‘border’ phenomenon in order to ‘stick it up’ the hapless Victorians.

I imagine the excuses that responsible Victorian road managers would provide for this cross-border phenomenon would be something like:

- “there are more trucks in Victoria damaging the roads” (not unless they magically disappear at the border there’s not, as they travel constantly between Adelaide and Melbourne)

- “there is more rain in Victoria that deteriorates the road surface” (possibly, but the amount or rainfall directly either side of the Victoria / SA border is identical and so not a differentiating factor).

I am sure I speak for many Victorians when I say I am tired of seeing rotten roads here resurfaced only to see the work crews come back and patch the emerging potholes etc. after only 9 or 12 months and the whole predictable deterioration cycle start again. As a taxpayer funding this fiasco, this is a pointless waste of funds paying for what is obviously an inferior product.

My daughter is now on her P plates and all the government appeals for new drivers to be a responsible driver is (in my opinion) an exercise in cynicism as the road provider is knowingly providing a sub-standard driving surface.

So where to from here?

Given the evidence presented above, and despite the best intentions of the Committee and its members, the Committee is clearly not the right Parliamentary instrument to actually get to the core of this most crucial problem and solve it. I suspect a Parliamentary Committee simply does not have the coercive powers required to make permanent and positive change in this most important driver of Victoria’s community safety, social cohesion and economic prosperity.

I therefore propose the following recommendations for the Committee to consider in light of the above evidence and to include as part of their final report:
Recommendations

1. An independent judicial body be formed with coercive powers to investigate into the following:
2. Why the Auditor-General’s specific and clear recommendations from 2008 were not implemented by VicRoads
3. Why VicRoads failed to self-regulate its commitments to the Auditor-General
4. Why the Parliament failed to regulate the Auditor-General’s recommendations
5. Conduct an independent technical examination into the practices of South Australian road construction, involving technical specifications, tendering, construction and project management. (Yes, I understand this will be politically unpopular, but our taxpaying road users cannot afford to fund our ineffective approach any longer).
6. A review into VicRoads road construction methodology including technical standards, materials, methodologies, practices, including tendering, specifications, project management
7. Development of VicRoads best practice road construction methodology, properly resourced through long-term budget commitments and passed by the Parliament
8. Development of proper independent development of road maintenance standards, with meaningful levels of service, that will be able to support a high quality constructed road
9. Finally, Auditor-General and Parliamentary oversight of actual implementation of the above recommendations

I believe these changes will help change the culture of road standards in Victoria maintenance from ‘whoever yells the loudest will get their substandard road patched up with substandard materials’, to Victoria being clever enough to develop a truly world class system of road construction and maintenance.

Thank you again for the opportunity to voice just not my concerns, but more importantly suggest a pathway to true reform for the long-term benefit of all Victorians.

Yours sincerely,

Phillip Anstis

Via email.