

TRANSCRIPT

ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into motorcycle safety

Geelong — 15 November 2011

Members

Mr A. Elsbury

Mr T. Languiller

Mr J. Perera

Mr M. Thompson

Mr B. Tilley

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Witness

Mr R. Bennett, chairperson, RoadSafe Barwon..

The CHAIR — I welcome Mr Rod Bennett, the chair of RoadSafe Barwon. By way of general background, Mr Bennett, I advise that the evidence you give will have the benefit of parliamentary privilege. You will receive a transcript of your comments, which we invite you to correct for typos and then return in due course, following which it will be placed upon the Web. We thank you for your time, for your expertise and for the submission you contributed earlier. I suggest that a good way forward would be for you to speak to your submission briefly, the key points you would like to see implemented by way of change, and then we will have a number of questions to ask you. Could you introduce yourself and your role for the benefit of Hansard?

Mr BENNETT — My name is Rod Bennett, I am the chairperson of RoadSafe Barwon, which is the local community-based road safety group. Our membership comprises interested community members, and we are actively supported by a number of government agencies and organisations, including municipalities. We made a submission to the inquiry. Our interest is in general road safety, and we try to target road safety behaviour. Road behaviour is where our key programs lie.

We run a number of programs targeting a whole lot of different areas involving motorbikes, including programs on pedestrians, speed and alcohol. Motorbikes feature fairly highly in our local statistics, which I am sure others will have quoted today. We have had 10 fatalities in this area over the last five years and in that time we have been doing a lot of work running targeted programs for motorcyclists. There are a couple of issues that we have identified as a community group that we believe need to be addressed. One is the age profile of people who are riding motorbikes. We are actually finding that there are more and more older riders coming back. They are getting their licences, buying themselves a motorbike and getting back on their bikes. We would like to see the issue of old drivers returning addressed as part of this inquiry.

We see issues with riders' attitudes. There is always a bad egg amongst the bunch and it is those odd few who seem to give everyone a bad reputation. We need to see much-improved standards and a bit more enforcement around appropriate safety and the protective equipment that they are using. Our ability to liaise with the different riders through our group is mixed. We have a lot of success liaising with the HOGs, the Harley owners groups and the Ulysses motorbike groups. They are well regulated and well formulated within themselves and they are very proactive in terms of safety and responsibility. It is the ones that we do not catch, as part of that net if you like, that we seem to be having the bigger issues with.

One of the issues that we believe might need to be reviewed is the process of licence endorsement for a motorbike in terms of it being an automatic renewal. There might be some form of competency test perhaps that should be sat every 10 years, especially targeting the older, returning drivers. The other part of that deals with the ability of police to capture motorcyclists when they are breaking the law and there has been an ongoing push for registration plates on the front of motorbikes so they can be identified from in front. Usually riders are disappearing into the distance when the police are trying to catch them from behind. Those are probably the key points in our submission that we would like the inquiry to consider.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. The committee understands that you provide subsidised training. Can you provide more details of this to the committee?

Mr BENNETT — Up until this year we were running two sessions of the Honda Australia Rider Training sessions down at Anglesea. They were very expensive to run and we were subsidising those sessions. With the new VicRoads alliance, funding for that has been withdrawn. The programs are very effective. They are a day-long training course which puts the motorbike riders through a series of challenges and basically teaches them to ride safely. It is an expensive one-day course and the ability to reach large numbers of people is not really there. The course numbers are limited to about 22 or 23. We were not getting a return on our investment, if you like, for the cost of putting that day on and the courses were generally taken up mainly by members of either the Harley Owners Group or Ulysses, those formalised motorcycle groups. It was very rare to see an individual or an external person participating in one of these courses. So we are not running them anymore, unfortunately, because our funding has been withdrawn.

The CHAIR — To clarify that, what was the source of your funding?

Mr BENNETT — It had previously been through VicRoads. We were funded through VicRoads up until 1 July this year. There is a road safety alliance which is charged with funding all of the community road safety groups across Victoria. We put in a submission for about \$20 000 and that was knocked back. They said no, as

there were current investigations into the successful rates, if you like, of the training and the benefits that it provides. They withdrew the funding. We have funding to run some other initiatives which we are running this year, but they will not include the rider training.

Mr LANGUILLER — Which ones?

Mr BENNETT — We will be running a number of sessions for local municipalities targeting road maintenance activities to try and make the road maintenance activities user-friendly. We will be running some roadside trauma awareness training so that motorcyclists have the ability to provide appropriate first aid and to deal with those kinds of issues, whether they are involved in an accident or come across an accident or are in a group of which one member has an accident. That program is being developed at the moment. We will be promoting more use of protective equipment and better quality protective equipment because it is very expensive. That is probably about it for this year.

Mr TILLEY — You just mentioned the HART course. What is the cost per trainee?

Mr BENNETT — It is around about \$800, or somewhere around that, per person per day. It was generally subsidised by one of the local municipalities. We would make a co-contribution and the riders would pay a particular contribution themselves to make up the difference for the day.

Mr TILLEY — Was there any money coming from TAC or from the safety levy?

Mr BENNETT — Our money indirectly comes from TAC. The VMAC money has stepped in a little bit and a lot of the TAC money as such is being redirected. We do not see any of the \$50 premium that is paid to TAC.

Mr LANGUILLER — Thank you for your submission. In terms of your committee and other committees, I understand that you have road users represented, but do you specifically have a motorcyclist represented?

Mr BENNETT — We have representatives from the Harley Owners Group and the Ulysses group. They are local members. They are not formal. I do not know whether they are endorsed representatives, but they are definitely local members.

Mr LANGUILLER — Your submission states that the motorcycle safety levy is ineffective in improving safety for motorcyclists. Can you elaborate further on that?

Mr BENNETT — These were some of the comments that we have received back from motorcyclists and that is how it is perceived. They posed the question: we are paying this money and we do not mind paying the money, but what benefit are we getting from it? There does not seem to be any great promotion of any activities that are being done. Our understanding is that a lot of that money has been pooled and has not been spent yet. All of that money is coordinated through VMAC. They are the comments that are coming back to us. The promotion that we have seen locally is generally on project signs where it might be a typical state government project sign and will have at the bottom, 'Funded by your motorcycle levy', but we do not see many of those.

Mr TILLEY — Firstly, can we talk about motorcycles? Do you hold a current motorcycle licence?

Mr BENNETT — No, I have never ridden a motorcycle in my life.

Mr TILLEY — The question I want to discuss with you is specifically about protective clothing and it is a two-part question. Is there anything in particular that RoadSafe Barwon specifically recommends — and I wanted to hear your own view as well — to encourage people to wear protective clothing? The other part is: would you support mandating protective clothing?

Mr BENNETT — I understand from talking with our motorbike subcommittee that they believe road safety equipment should be mandated and that there should be a minimum of gloves, footwear and leather trousers as well as a jacket. They recognise that they are very expensive items to buy, but there are new products coming out on the market all the time which are becoming tougher and tougher. Certainly part of our program this year is to try and fund awareness campaigns for improved protective equipment. In our situation they will be run locally. We are not a statewide organisation.

Mr TILLEY — So that is RoadSafe Barwon's view

Mr BENNETT — Correct; yes.

Mr TILLEY — Have you got a personal view? As a community member you see a lot of motorcycles on the road.

Mr BENNETT — My personal view is that, through years in the fire brigade, I have seen lots of skin and bare bones. There are a whole lot of issues that go with that. It is easy to say, 'Yes, it is a good idea; you have to wear safety equipment', but it has to be rider friendly and it has to be comfortable to wear. You could have an hour or many hours in the seat. My personal view is yes, it should be worn and it should be mandated, but I am not a rider who is going to have to put up with whatever products are available on the market.

Mr PERERA — Can you outline to the committee any specific motorcycle safety initiatives currently being undertaken in your area?

Mr BENNETT — We have these ones that we have planned, which are things that are happening at the moment. Part of what we are trying to do is establish a database of motorcycle riders who are not attached to clubs. As I indicated earlier, it is very easy for us to contact riders who are members of formal clubs. The difficulty is in contacting or getting in touch with people who are not. We have run a number of seminars down here and we are slowly gathering names on a database. There are privacy issues obviously through VicRoads. For people who are licensed or registered owners of motorbikes, we will not have access to that data. We are trying to develop a database of localised contacts.

Unfortunately I missed part of the police presentation, but they also run what they call blitzes down the Great Ocean Road, where they stop every motorcyclist and hand out leaflets and flyers on safety on the Great Ocean Road. We publish them and the police hand them out on the day, along with general safety-type information. They are some of the initiatives. We have an ongoing commitment through our group to continue to run those programs, which is what I spoke about.

Mr ELSBURY — Does your organisation have much exposure to off-road riders?

Mr BENNETT — We do not have a lot mainly through our municipal representatives. One of our members, who unfortunately became ill and had to leave the group, was involved with VMAC, and I understand that a lot of work has been done by Parks Victoria with the local Otway Trail Riders group to develop formalised trails through the Otways. There is a lot of work being done in the background. Locally we have lost our motorcycle tracks which were at Breakwater. There was another one, but I am not sure where. They were off-road tracks. The issue was with McAdam Park out at Barrabool. There are a whole lot of issues going on in the background there and a whole lot of dealings which we are not privy to. We hear whispers, but I do not know the details.

Mr ELSBURY — From my knowledge of that particular issue I would keep right out of it if I were you. I am glad I am a member of a metropolitan seat.

Mr BENNETT — It is very contentious down there. We are a little bit restricted in our ability to access all riders because of our affiliations.

Mr ELSBURY — Out of the overall funding that you have for road safety, how much proportionately do you spend on motorcyclists?

Mr BENNETT — This year, for this 12-month period, we have spent \$14 000 out of \$45 000, so whatever percentage that is — approximately 30 per cent.

The CHAIR — This may traverse some of your earlier comments, but what would you like to see as being the specific outcomes of our inquiry?

Mr BENNETT — Pretty much what I put in my written submission. We believe the automatic renewal of a motorcycle endorsement should not be given. I have a heavy bus and heavy truck licence, which I got 30 years ago, and I have not driven one since. It is no different for a motorcyclist who is returning to the road to me getting out there and driving a bus full of people or a fully loaded semitrailer. It is a completely different kettle

of fish. We really believe that should be something that the inquiry at least considers and that that flows on to other areas of general road licensing.

The current state government policy is to make the road network road safe or road friendly, whatever you want to call it. I know that over \$15 million has been spent on the Great Ocean Road specifically targeting motorcycle safety. That is one road. There is no way you can afford to make every road in Victoria totally motorbike friendly or safe, so you have to start targeting things like riders attitudes, but certainly I think the protective clothing issue is important because riders are so vulnerable. They are basically riding a missile and have no protection around them at all.

Mr LANGUILLER — In your submission you indicated that the current level of penalties does not change behaviour.

Mr BENNETT — Yes.

Mr LANGUILLER — Can you elaborate further? What sorts of penalties are you thinking about?

Mr BENNETT — I have heard some stories about people changing their registration numbers with little stickers and then roaring up the Melbourne Road at 180 clicks and laughing at the cameras. The attitude is wrong — —

Mr LANGUILLER — Is that a majority or a minority?

Mr BENNETT — No, it is a minority. That is certainly not the majority. But you hear — —

The CHAIR — Are you happy to name names?

Mr BENNETT — No, thank you.

Mr LANGUILLER — Give us one!

Mr BENNETT — That is all right. It is like a whole lot of issues we see through RoadSafe with penalties. It does not really matter whether they are motorcyclists, pedestrians or car drivers. They are just not severe enough for people to start getting the message. Everyone complains about speed cameras. If they did not speed, they would not get caught. It not an issue. It is just the media hyping things up and feeding this community perception that it is not right. The penalties are there for a reason. They need to get the message over. They are not feeling the impact of that message. People just pay the fine and go, 'Well, we will get another one next time'.

Mr LANGUILLER — You are not talking about taking licences away?

Mr BENNETT — No, I do not think so.

Mr LANGUILLER — Are you talking about fines?

Mr BENNETT — I think more financial penalties, yes. I am not yet talking about taking licences away at this stage. Certainly there is always going to be that bad element with motorcycle riders, as there will be with pushbike riders and pedestrians. It is trying to capture that bad element. There are certain instances where the hoon legislation needs to be expanded to possibly have vehicles confiscated. It just does not go quite far enough at the moment.

Mr LANGUILLER — I think we do, don't we? About 48 hours.

Mr ELSBURY — Yes.

Mr BENNETT — They can at the moment and I know the police have been slowly increasing it, but certainly I believe the effectiveness of that penalty needs to be reviewed.

Mr ELSBURY — Just on the comment you made about the spend on the Great Ocean Road in relation to motorcycle safety, considering it is a tourist route and it is being utilised quite a lot by motorcyclists, would you not think that would be an adequate spend for that particular road?

Mr BENNETT — When you look at the statistics, we have had about a 45 per cent drop in serious accident numbers since that area was funded; so if you look at return on investment, that is not bad. It does not mean that all the areas have been adequately addressed as part of that. Probably one of the greatest impacts was lowering the speed limit to 80 kilometres an hour on the Great Ocean Road. We talked to a lot of the motorbike clubs and they told us, ‘We will not ride down the Great Ocean Road because it is not an enjoyable ride any more’.

The CHAIR — Mr Bennett, thank you very much for your time. We commend you for your work as a volunteer and your willingness to input back into the committee from an area of activity for which you have had a professional working role as well. Thank you very much.

Mr BENNETT — Thank you for the opportunity.

Witness withdrew.