

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users

Shepparton—Wednesday 13 September 2023

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESS

Robert Palma, President, Goulburn Valley Motorcycle Club.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road Users. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

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Thank you, Robert, for your time today. We really appreciate you coming along. We might do quick introductions, and then if you have got an opening statement or something you would like to say about your club, that would be great. Then we will ask you some questions.

I am Alison. I am the Chair, and I am the Member for Bellarine.

Kim O'KEEFFE: And I am your favourite Member here today. We know that.

Dylan WIGHT: Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

Jess WILSON: And Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

The CHAIR: So, Robert, do you want to speak first a bit about your club? And then we can ask some questions.

Robert PALMA: I am the current President of the Goulburn Valley Motorcycle Club. I joined the Goulburn Valley Motorcycle Club as a 12-year-old in 1977. The Goulburn Valley Motorcycle Club was formed in 1914. We have a current membership of 140 members. The age group of our members ranges from five years old up to around about 80 years old. We have a complex out at Undera called Undera Park Speedway. It is not only a speedway complex; it has a motocross track and a flat track. I will just point out, out of our 140 members and the duration of our club, that we have never had a fatality, a motorcycle death. What that tells us is quite clear: that when you learn to ride a motorcycle in our environment that we offer, it makes it safe.

We have got a system that we use out there at Undera. It is called Minikhana. It was funded, supposedly, by the Federal Government. We have never seen a cent of that money that came through. The pursuit for the money was taking its toll on the membership of the club and the committee of the club. We still run Minikhana. Minikhana is advertised through the education department, through their newsletters. We had children come up from as far as Maryborough, over at Albury–Wodonga and down around Leongatha, roughly a 600-kilometre area, for the children to come, for the parents to bring their children and for us to teach the safety of the clothing of the motorcycle, the safety of the motorcycle itself and the conduct of motorcycle riding. This is all in a non-competitive environment. We quickly discovered that the types of children that glue themselves to motorcycling are non team players. They do not play team sports. They are kids with ADHD. They have parents that are struggling to keep their kids in mainstream schooling, but through the motorcycle connection they can manage their children's behaviour. It was something that I had no idea about until two years ago, when I got involved in Minikhana. Once they put that motorcycle helmet on, that is when they become their own person. They do not have to be in a sporting environment where they are in a team, and they can behave themselves. That is where it is taught about the importance of the helmet and head protection and feet, hands, back—everything. The connection between these kids when they become road users I hope will be the same as our club—that they have been taught how to ride.

Our motorcycle club is based in Shepparton. We do not have one good road leading in or out of the town. All of our adult membership age group people ride motorcycles if not every day then at least once a week. But we know how to manage a pothole. We have people that come up to the area, and they have got no idea how to see a pothole coming and how to manage it if they are stuck in a last-minute decision. In our club we have learned how to manage a pothole. The advertisement method that is used for motorcycle safety, being on television, is not working. Clearly people do not watch mainstream television. I believe the focus should be more on

changing it to the myVicRoads website, when you go on to renew your registration, so that you can opt to watch the safety videos and get a reduction in your registration renewal fee on the one vehicle.

The importance of first aid—I will make reference to level 2 first aid—when you are in a remote area and you have a motorcycle accident is how to report that accident, the location of the accident and the means of being able to contact the outside authority to say that you have got an accident and this person is injured, if you are in a group of people. I myself have saved two lives at motorcycle accidents, and I have experienced numerous fractures where bones have come out through skin and things like that. If I had not been involved in the level 2 first aid instruction stuff, it would not have worked out so well.

The ads that we use that frighten people about motorcycling in a way do work. I remember the ones that were on television before pay TV came out, but I just do not watch it anymore. The older age group of people with motorcycles do not use internet and stuff like that. But they do go to pay their registration renewals in the office, so when there were large-screen televisions that used to be on with safety ads, they hit home in that age group. That is another way of getting the message across to people: if you go and pay your car rego and you watch an ad about bicycle safety or you watch an ad about motorcycle safety, that is another way of reaching out. We have had a massive change in the way people receive their messages, and mainstream television is not working.

The issue that we have got with motorcycle clubs is that Motorcycling Australia provide the insurance for motorcycle clubs. Motorcycling Australia have trouble transferring the funds that they get given to the motorcycle clubs. We were promised in writing that we would get money for running these Minikhana. I tried numerous tactics to receive that funding. It was not a lot of funding, but it was still on merit. We were told we would get \$400 for having two Minikhana. As a businessperson myself I tried all methods of getting that money out. When I confronted the membership of the club and suggested we go on the Minikhana path and suggested that we would get funding, that helped with the decision to get the membership to apply themselves to go in. At the end of the day, the money never came through. A few of the members have persisted in chasing me to say, 'What's happened?' That is very disappointing. We will continue with this Minikhana. We have spoken to the primary schools about us notifying them that the Minikhana is going to take place, and they will send that message out through their newsletters with their school.

As far as educating people about pothole safety goes, there are numerous ways of surviving a pothole. You get into a crouch position. Once you get into a crouch position on a motorcycle, your arms are pulling on the handlebars and your knees become the first point of impact of the suspension. So if you are sitting on the seat of a motorcycle and you hit a pothole, the chances are you will be winded and you have lost control of the bike. The bike will 'tank slap' they call it. The bike goes end over end, and that is the worst outcome of a pothole. You can see a pothole coming by watching the suspension on a car in front of you. That is one way. If motorcycles ride single file, the first guy will hit it and everyone else will go to the left. These are the sorts of things that can be put into the ads.

The availability of parts for motorcycles online and fitted by people in their own yard, in their own workshop—if a person buys a cheap tyre online and takes it into a motorbike shop, the motorbike shop will fit the tyre and take no notice of the fact that it is not ADR compliant. Motorcycle tyres have a logo. It is called E3, and it means it has been tested and approved in Europe to the standard of ADR compliance. I accept that rating. The problem with the cheap tyres is that the sidewall rating is too thin, and when the back wheel of the motorcycle hits the pothole or the branch or whatever else it becomes the first point of impact of the suspension and it rebounds incredibly fast. The back wheel of the bike will go into the air, and all the weight transfers to the front handlebars. When TAC investigate these accidents, that is one of the things they overlook. I have worked in a motorcycle wreckers for 30 years, and TAC would often come. But they are the sorts of things they would not look at. The guy has had a crash or the girl has had a crash, but what caused it? The guy hit a log, but the tyre is what actually broke his back from the seat. It was not when he hit the ground; it was before he hit the ground. These potholes—people are getting winded. They bite the inside of their cheek or they bite their tongue. On the ground people mistake it as being internal bleeding, but it is actually from the mouth.

I know we cannot fix every road in one hit, but motorcycle road riders like to have a favourite loop circuit or a route, whatever. So we are looking for a bit of focus on making one road safe and declaring that this is a motorcycle-safe route, then focus on all the other roads. But get that road. I do not know how many of you live locally, but for us to ride from here to Violet Town, from Violet Town to Strathbogie, over the top of the

Merton Gap towards Yea and then to come home through a little place called Ghin Ghin and Caveat and Ruffy and Longwood and back to Shepparton, that is an example of a route that people like to do. You get used to the corners, you get used to the straight section and you get used to the dip and stuff, but at the moment it is a deathtrap. There is no good route around Shepparton at the moment for road users. Either you are not riding, or you are riding at risk. There is a road that leads to Echuca. It is sort of that way. You can have a pothole in the morning the size of a 50-cent piece; by the afternoon it can be the size of a car bonnet. If you have got some farmer cutting hay and other produce on his property and he has got six trucks going past every hour, that road can deteriorate within hours.

The CHAIR: Robert, I am sorry to interrupt you, but do you mind if I just throw it open to some of the Committee members, in case they have—because I am just mindful of time—something that they really want to focus on. So I might just open it to the Committee, if there is something. Maybe, Kim, I will go to you.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you, Robert. Obviously your experience and knowledge are so valuable, and the work you are doing with the club is significant. Starting grassroots, young kids—I mean, that is where it often starts; it is so important and I am so grateful to hear that that is happening within the club itself. But more broadly, how can you better collaborate with road authorities to develop more road safety measures? How were you able to connect to those authorities with this amazing experience and knowledge that we need to know can make the change that needs to happen?

Robert PALMA: Just more frequent contact between the groups or clubs, or whatever you want to call them.

Kim O'KEEFFE: With the road authorities?

Robert PALMA: And more sessions like this to bring it forward. Like, it is amazing that we have even got to talk about this—and I can tell that I have enlightened you on a lot of things, but that is only the tip of the iceberg. What I have said so far is far from what needs to be taken into account. My ability to explain things is probably different than what you are used to hearing, but I will just go straight for it: it has got to be more contact with sporting groups to understand that we are a sporting group, but we are not solely a sporting group; we are a social motorcycle riding group, which means the road, but we are an educative, non-competitive group. We teach kids the safety aspects of motorcycle riding. Whether or not they go competition, that is their choice. But we want them safe and having fun, and to get them away from computers, and to get the mums and dads outside with us. If we get them young, we have got them for life—motorcycling is an addictive hobby.

Kim O'KEEFFE: It has to be safe, and that is probably what I am alluding to: how do we make it safer on the roads—through the authorities that you can actually share this valuable experience with?

Robert PALMA: I think really, just through—

Kim O'KEEFFE: Collaboration and working together?

Robert PALMA: Yes. Free advertisement means to change the way you put the message out is up there. Not everyone goes to the cinema, not everyone is watching television. But everybody has got to renew their rego, or renew their licence. And that is where I think—

Kim O'KEEFFE: A broader opportunity?

Robert PALMA: Well, if people had the option of watching these online videos for safety and getting a \$15 reduction on their registration renewal, I am sure they would choose it, and you would get a view.

The CHAIR: John, we might head to you.

John MULLAHY: We just had the bicycle groups in just before, giving evidence that they often feel like they are seen as objects on the road as opposed to people. Is that something that motorcyclists notice as well, that drivers are not considering you as road users?

Robert PALMA: Motorcyclists—the more experienced you get at it on the road, the more instinct plays out. You can have a near miss, and the next time it comes you will know how to react. That comes through your experience and the time that you spend on the road. One of the issues that we motorcyclists have got is we

have got to have vision—because we are travelling at a speed, so many metres per second, and it is our eyesight that does that. We have vehicles that have overtinted windows so you cannot see through the back window through to the front to see that, ‘Yeah, there is a pothole,’ or, ‘Yeah, there is a log or a brick on the road.’ The vehicles with overtinted glass are unroadworthy, but what can we do about it whilst we are riding around? Nothing. But police can pull those vehicles over and say, ‘Come on, come back to being roadworthy.’ When we pull up at intersections, we look through the passenger window and out through the driver’s window, and we can see if there is a problem. But we have lost all of those abilities with motorecycling—no vision.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dylan, if there are any other questions that you might have, we have got a little bit of time left.

Dylan WIGHT: Yes, sure. I just thought I would ask about the impact of the pandemic: have you noticed a change in the behaviour of road users since COVID?

Robert PALMA: My take on that is that people were locked up during the pandemic; the interest rates were low, and people got to buy motorbikes who normally would not buy motorbikes. And now they are getting onto the country roads, and that is where we are having some issues. They are city riders coming into the country and finding potholes, rips in the surface and things. I think that has contributed to it. We just recently ran a rally at Undera; we had 160 motorcycle people turn up there on road bikes. I got all of their postcodes; we had very few from this area—they came from great distances. And some of them had never camped in a tent and never been out of the city, but they ended up on a country road to get to Undera. Luckily they all got home.

The CHAIR: Jess?

Jess WILSON: Yes. Thank you so much. I think what has been really helpful today, Robert, is particularly your solutions-focused assistance to us: ‘This might be a problem but here are some ways you could improve it.’ When it comes to road infrastructure—we have spoken about potholes a lot today—do you think that should be a core focus of government when it comes to investing in the roads in regional Victoria, to improve those potholes as soon as possible because they do pose the greatest risk?

Robert PALMA: That is right up there, yes. We have a lot of blind intersections because the grass grows in springtime. You are travelling along a bitumen road and there will be a crossroad, and the people on that crossroad have lost vision of what is going on on the bitumen road. The complacent farmer that does not normally stop at that stop sign will tend to halfway get across at the stop sign and then it is too late. We had two fatalities last year out at Goorambat, from that same scenario—local driver, straight through the stop sign. We had a fatality earlier this year out near Nathalia from a lady that hit a pothole, so we have got death around this area from the roads. I do not know if the figures that you have on motorcycle deaths also include farm deaths. The education for people on farms seems to be lacking. Grandparents have got the motorbike—the grandkids come, and people take their eyes off them and there is an injury there. The answer to your question is: the potholes are bad, but to me, there is another thing called a truck swell. It is where the bitumen lumps up and down. It does not actually tear the bitumen, but it is there. The swells are always on the white line, so if you go to overtake a car and you strike into one of these, you have lost so much control over that motorbike. I know to avoid overtaking unless I can see clearly or I know the road. That is what I was getting on about, that we have our favourite route—you know the road, you know the perils and you know where you can be a little bit daydreamy and keep going.

The CHAIR: I am really sorry, Anthony—the one that asked the question. Robert, we have to wrap it up there. If there is anything that has been sparked today that you think to add further to our knowledge or discussion, please write to the Committee. We are happy to take that, and we really appreciate your time today. Thank you, Robert. We really appreciate it.

Witness withdrew.