

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Coburg—Wednesday 9 August 2023

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESSES

Lanie Stockman, Member and

Jose Villadangos, Member, Safe Access over Bell Street Bridge for Everyone.

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 phones 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 the hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website.

We will do a quick introduction, and then I will hand over to you. I am Alison, the Member for Bellarine.

Anthony CIANFLONE: I am Anthony Cianflone, Labor Member for Pascoe Vale.

Wayne FARNHAM: I am Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

The CHAIR: And we do have Dylan, who is the Member for Tarneit, who will be back in a moment.

We might give you a few moments if you would like to do any opening statement or talk to your submission, and then we will open up to questions. Thank you.

Lanie STOCKMAN: Sure. Hi. Thank you so much to the Committee for this opportunity to speak with you. We are from Safe Access over Bell Street Bridge for Everyone, and we are one of the three campaigns that Cate Hall alluded to in the previous session. As you would know from our submission, we are advocating on behalf of residents. We have around 2,000 community members who have signed a petition and close to 200 people in our closed Facebook group advocating for infrastructure improvements in that Bell Street risk zone between Elizabeth and Nicholson streets in Coburg.

Jose VILLADANGOS: We have been working for a number of years. Actually, Lanie and I, unbeknownst to each other, had made requests to VicRoads asking about safety improvements in the area. They were all essentially put down or ignored. It was only later we started to organise with other neighbours to do things a bit more formally. Several of you have already been in contact with us and are not well aware of the problems that exist with the bridge itself and the adjoining areas.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. We will do some questions just to unpick that a little bit more if that is okay. Wayne, I might go to you first.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for coming along, and thank you for your submission. We just heard from the Coburg school the incredible work they have done in uplifting their active transport, which pretty well comes back to your issue here. With about 1,000 kids at Coburg, what calming measures or alternatives would you like to see installed in the Bell Street risk zone to improve safety for vulnerable users and 1,000 students just around the corner?

Jose VILLADANGOS: Everyone who visits the area has a good idea about what to do. I think, however, and what we advocate is that there should be a study by experts that looks comprehensively at all the problems that exist and for them to draw a plan that addresses all the issues. We do not have the expertise to provide the specific solutions to the many problems that the area has. That goes from access to the tram stop, which is inaccessible to mobility-impaired people, to the inability to use a bicycle safely across the bridge—that is, commuting to work by bicycle—and ignore the main road if you can, because it is just too dangerous. And the same applies to people going in a wheelchair over the bridge—it is manifestly dangerous to do so—or people pushing a pram. There are just too many things to mention to put it down to a single solution. Of course I could tell you, 'Well, let's remove one lane in each direction,' as they did on Heidelberg Road, and 'Let's use the extra space to implement several things,' but probably even that would not complete all the issues that exist with the bridge.

Wayne FARNHAM: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your submission. We have had this spoken about a lot through these hearings, but I think it is good to continue to reinforce it and get specific examples of just how much people's road usage and aggression have changed through and since the pandemic.

Lanie STOCKMAN: We do not feel that we can really comment as a before and an after, but what we do know from qualitative comments that have come through our petition is that the infrastructure problems in the risk zone that we have described have actually influenced people's behaviours and usage of that area. By that I mean—and you talked about it in the previous session—there is a high active travel rate of Coburg High students, but some parents are so concerned about their young people using that risk zone on Bell Street, between Elizabeth and Nicholson streets, that they are actually jumping in the car and driving their kids to school rather than having their kids cycle or walk. It is contributing to more traffic going really short distances. Similarly, because there has been a quite notorious and horrific sexual assault underneath the Bell Street bridge, women and girls in particular are frightened of using an alternative path, which again is contributing to more car usage than there otherwise should be. I have not really answered your question, but I have said how the infrastructure problems are affecting the road use.

Dylan WIGHT: Yes. Thank you.

John MULLAHY: The infrastructure is obviously what you see as the problem there. How could pedestrian infrastructure be improved in the area around the Bell Street bridge?

Lanie STOCKMAN: Again, as Jose mentioned, we are calling for a holistic, comprehensive and expert review of the area. We know what the problems are. These comprise things such as footpaths that are well below Austroads Guides standards. In the narrowest parts we have got footpaths that are less than a metre that people are meant to cycle and walk across. We have got no setbacks between roads and footpaths. We have got sloped guttering, and we have got concealed slip lanes with zebra crossings. All of this is happening on a road with 47,000 cars daily. We know what the problems are, but we need a comprehensive review to address such complexities.

Jose VILLADANGOS: The road along the bridge does not have a shoulder, so you are walking on the sidewalk with heavy vehicles streaming at 60 k's an hour right next to you. It feels very unsafe.

John MULLAHY: Thank you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks for coming in and thank you for your submission and your ongoing advocacy. We have met on many occasions, and I have raised your matter in Parliament a couple of times at least now, so I am happy to support and work with you how best we can.

Jose VILLADANGOS: Go to our Facebook page. We just posted you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you. That will be great. You mentioned that 47,000 vehicles a day go through Bell Street, one of the busiest arterials in Melbourne east–west, you know.

Lanie STOCKMAN: Correct.

Anthony CIANFLONE: It is a major east–west link. You heard earlier that a thousand Coburg high students commute by active transport, but 30% of those, just going to your submission, actually commute over the Bell Street Merri Creek bridge on a daily basis, which is a significant proportion. As you know, 12 months ago the Victorian Government did introduce some measures along the bridge to help make things safer. We have currently undertaken and completed a review which the minister will be releasing soon, I understand, so we look forward to that. But I guess I am really keen to get your opinion around, just generally speaking, in your experience what can be done by the State Government to make arterial roads like Bell Street safer for vulnerable road users, particularly students, other young people and others. How can arterial roads be better considered or reconsidered in that context in your opinion, just generally speaking?

Jose VILLADANGOS: Well, I believe speed limits are an issue. We also understand that there is also a need to accommodate the needs of drivers who also have a right to the roads, so not everything can be put as a problem for the drivers. Other things may require reconsideration of the way that the pathways are built and the

width of the lanes and whether the traffic lights are organised and timed. I think that there are just too many things that we can provide a specific measure—they are definitely above our pay grade of what we can recommend. If I could have my way, I would probably do it for pedestrians.

We are also car drivers and we understand the need for different people to share the road, but there are very specific points where clearly they were not designed for the type of pedestrian, bicycle and car use that they have many decades later. The Bell Street red zone is a blatant example of an area that has been superseded by the current needs. There is a logical explanation for this, because the bridge is over a river so there are serious limitations to what you can do, so that also implies that the solutions have to be more comprehensive than you would do for a place that has just a pedestrian crossing in a heavily built-up area. I am not sure if I am answering your question.

Anthony CIANFLONE: No, you are doing fine.

Jose VILLADANGOS: But I think that we would have expert people in our departments to look at it and say, ‘Well, is there something we can do on this?’ And I think that they can.

Lanie STOCKMAN: I do not know if we will get to the issue of the tram stop.

The CHAIR: You can go to that.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Go to it, yes.

Lanie STOCKMAN: I guess when you are considering complex arterial roads that include tram terminuses like in this Bell Street risk zone, we really advocate for all of these spots to be included in the tram stop rollout strategy. I do not know whether that has come out yet or if it has been released, but all these sorts of hotspots need to be included in that tram stop rollout strategy that is part of the accessible public transport strategy. From our inquiries, that particular tram stop, there is no plan. It is not even on a 10-year plan, five-year plan, 20-year plan by Yarra Trams to upgrade that terminus. For now pedestrians need to deal with that tram stop and access it via those concealed slip lanes, and we really do take our lives into our hands every time we cross to get to that tram stop.

Jose VILLADANGOS: There is in particular a traffic line that is systematically jammed by cars turning into Nicholson Street. I know that because I see it every day. In fact I am going to take my camera one day and post a demonstration of the fact. This is a fact. It was reported to VicRoads. We suggested that maybe they could put a red camera. We know how favourably red cameras have been received by the community and how cameras are received generally by the community. We do not care what they do. It may be a matter of changing the times, but anybody who stops there at 5 pm or at 9 am can see that there is a serious problem with it. The cars are just jammed systematically while the pedestrian crossing is in green. And the cars are in the middle of the pedestrian crossing entering Nicholson Street.

With the tram stop, I think that that illustrates one of the problems or the issues why we think that there has to be a comprehensive review, because let us suppose that they upgrade the tram stop to provide access to people with mobility problems, right? What happens then? That incentivises the use of the tram stop by people who have to get to that. And then many of those people will have to go through a bridge that has a sidewalk with 90 centimetres width between a wall and a truck driving at 60 k’s per hour. That is why all these things need to be considered as a package, not as a little problem.

Anthony CIANFLONE: That is why you are calling for a plan for the whole intersection and the precinct.

Jose VILLADANGOS: Exactly. It has to be comprehensive. What are all the needs of this place, which are not only those that affect people using things but people that you do not see because they avoid them? And that is how you can put a solution to the whole area.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you so much for your submission, and thank you for answering our questions today. It is taken very seriously, and we appreciate getting a really good snapshot of this particular issue.

Witnesses withdrew.