

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Multi Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP)

Melbourne—Tuesday, 19 October 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

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Ms Wendy Lovell

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Ms Jacqui Shephard, Director, and

Mr André Baruch, National Executive Board Member, Transport Alliance Australia.

The CHAIR: The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearings for the Inquiry into the Multi Purpose Taxi Program continue. Please ensure that mobile phones are switched to silent and any background noise is minimised.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast.

My name is Enver Erdogan. I am Chair of the committee. My Deputy Chair is Mr Bernie Finn. Fellow committee members include Mr Rod Barton, Mr Lee Tarlamis and Mr Andy Meddick.

To witnesses appearing, all evidence given is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the constitution and also by the Legislative Council standing orders. Any information you provide at the hearing is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a transcript following today's hearing. Ultimately transcripts will be made public and put on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. On that note I will hand over to both André and Jacqui from Transport Alliance Australia. If you could begin by stating your full name for the record, and then start your presentation. Over to both of you. Thank you.

Ms SHEPHARD: Thank you, Chair. My name is Jacqui Shephard, and I am joined by my colleague André Baruch here today. Thank you for the opportunity to be here. We, the Transport Alliance Australia, represent owners, drivers and operators of taxis, hire cars and rideshare in the Australian commercial passenger transport sector. The roots of our association are in Victoria, as are the majority of our members.

The committee no doubt appreciates the magnitude of the impact the pandemic has had on the CPV industry in Victoria. The industry has been devastated, with up to 90 to 95 per cent reduction in trips and associated revenue for an extended period of time. The BSPs—booking service providers—that are still in business are operating with skeleton staff in an effort to reduce costs and just to remain in business, with a large proportion of vehicles being parked up or sold. The CPV industry operates an essential service for vulnerable members of our communities, transporting MPTP participants. They are given an added layer of service, and this standard needs to be maintained now that the MPTP is available to non-taxi service providers. You have heard a lot about the service provided by Colin just previously, so I think you are pretty all over that. Those in authority naively gave accreditation and support to an inexperienced entity to partake in the MPTP scheme. Further on, the study conducted to investigate this entity's suitability to transport these passengers had a minuscule sample size. You would be inane not to have serious concerns for the users of the MPTP scheme.

In our submission the TAA made five recommendations that we feel urgently need attention and action to ensure that the needs of the MPTP users are being met now and into the future and that their safety is given priority.

Our first recommendation was the introduction of mandatory training for all drivers operating within the MPTP scheme. We know that training and educating workers in any industry has a positive impact on performance. As you would have seen in our submission, Guide Dogs Australia managed to halve the amount of complaints by guide dog handlers in New South Wales by introducing monthly training of taxidivers. Other states have training requirements. Queensland has taken a positive step forward and implemented a mandatory requirement for all personalised passenger transport drivers to complete disability awareness, sexual harassment and anti-discrimination training. With the rideshare industry being plagued with sexual harassment complaints and reports of drivers discriminating against passengers with a disability, it is paramount that drivers are educated

for the safety of all passengers, especially the MPTP passengers. We recommend the CPVV takes a progressive leap and introduces mandatory training for all commercial passenger vehicle drivers.

The second recommendation was the introduction of a mandatory requirement for approved cameras in vehicles operating within the MPTP scheme. The safety of our society's vulnerable needs to be a priority. The cameras have been proven to act as a deterrent of unethical acts and crimes, and if unfortunately an unlawful event took place, accountability could be served. We believe all CPVs eligible to transport MPTP passengers must be required to have safety cameras installed.

We also recommend the introduction of a maximum fare rate for all MPTP trips. That was discussed already this morning. The surge pricing for MPTP passengers during peak periods would unfairly eat into their annual limits, and this needs to be prevented. Implementing a maximum fare rate for all MPTP trips would stop the surge pricing.

Our fourth recommendation is the introduction of a requirement for operators accredited to offer the MPTP rebate scheme to have a minimum percentage of their fleet as approved wheelchair-accessible vehicles. As you know, many MPTP users ride in sedans that are not wheelchair-accessible vehicles. Having a wheelchair-accessible vehicle on the road is a costly exercise. A typical taxi company operating a WAT uses income from other vehicles in their fleet to subsidise the cost of the wheelchair-accessible vehicle. Allowing the MPTP service providers to operate without WAT vehicles is taking sedan work from these participants who have the wheelchair-accessible vehicles in their fleet. Subsequently it will cripple the already-struggling BSPs with the wheelchair-accessible vehicles and reduce the number of vehicles available to the MPTP users. If a BSP would like to be an MPTP service provider within the disability sector, they should be required to be a full participant and not permitted to discriminate for their own financial gain.

Our last recommendation was the introduction of a mandatory requirement for the MPTP service providers to have comprehensive insurance and public liability insurance. It is important to have both, as the public liability insurance kicks in where the comprehensive insurance stops. It is relied on in scenarios where the driving journey has stopped—for example, if a passenger gets out and falls after disembarking a vehicle, or if a mobility aid, a wheelchair, accidentally gets damaged while being removed from the vehicle.

So that is a summary of our recommendations. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the concerns of our members, and we are very open to any questions you may have.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Jacqui. We appreciate your submission and presentation today, and also the recommendations because you have actually offered some solutions from your perspective. I might begin by maybe handing over to the Deputy Chair to ask the first question, then we will go to Mr Barton. Deputy Chair.

Mr FINN: Thank you, Mr Chairman. Thank you, Jacqui and André, for being with us today. Jacqui, I listened to those recommendations with a great deal of interest and I thought to myself there is nothing there that I thought was particularly controversial. Why haven't those recommendations already been adopted? Why aren't they already in place?

Mr BARUCH: Can I answer that please, Deputy Chair?

Mr FINN: André, if you would like answer that, I would be delighted.

Mr BARUCH: Thank you very much. Some of these recommendations were in place. Back in the day when I first started driving taxis and operating taxis in Victoria you had to have as a driver compulsory training. You had to do the Knowledge, and that not only included the training in how to look after passengers with disabilities—I will get the English right—it also included local knowledge, how to get around, how to treat people nicely, how to do your job properly. The current regulator, the CPVV, took away all of this when they re-regulated the industry and they got rid of all need to have any form of regulation, any form of knowledge, any form of education—

Mr FINN: Why?

Mr BARUCH: So the question is not ‘Why is it not there?’, The question is ‘Why did the regulator remove it?’. What were they afraid of?

Mr FINN: That is what I found. I am keen to know.

Mr BARUCH: That applies across the board. There used to be regulations on the standard of care of the people. There used to be regulations on the vehicles—how old the vehicle could be, how often it had to be serviced, how often it had to be looked after. There were all these sensible regulations and rules around safety—safety of the workspace, safety of the employee and safety of the travelling passengers—and the CPVV chose to remove all of that.

Mr FINN: Again, why did they do that? It does not seem to make any sense.

Mr BARUCH: I can only agree with you. It does not make sense.

Mr FINN: Did they give any reason at the time?

Mr BARUCH: The only reason that was mentioned was they wanted to make it easier for other people to come in and out of the industry—translation, Uber.

Mr FINN: Yes. Okay. You should have just said ‘Uber’ and we would have understood. Thank you.

Mr BARUCH: I am trying to be diplomatic, given the people I am speaking to and the importance of this committee.

Mr FINN: I am not really good at that, as Mr Barton, I am sure, will back me up—Mr Tarlamis probably as well and maybe Mr Erdogan as well. Thank you, Mr Chairman.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Deputy Chair. I will hand over to Mr Barton. Mr Barton, go ahead, please.

Mr BARTON: Thank you. I will help you, Comrade Finn. They refer to it as ‘removing barriers to entry’. What we say, and I believe Mr Tarlamis will agree with this and so will my colleagues, is what we want to do is set a standard. We have lowered the bar so low we have created an absolute monster.

This comes down really to the logic—sorry, André and Jacqui—this comes down to about what is the philosophy of the Department of Transport and the regulator about having an open market at any cost. No consideration is taken of the impact on the drivers who operate within the space—whether they can make a viable living—and there is no consideration of what impact these changes, like they did with the Multi Purpose Taxi Program, will have on people who are going to receive services from the commercial passenger vehicle sector. That is effectively what they have done.

Jacqui or André, can you tell us: has the regulator contacted you at all prior to the announcement in the middle of January, in the middle of the pandemic when we had thousands of cars not working, that it was a good idea to whack another 50 000 cars on the road so you could talk to your members? And prior to that did they speak to you about what would be the impact?

Mr BARUCH: No.

Ms SHEPHARD: No.

Mr BARTON: I say good on them. So you were not aware of any impact statement? Nothing was put to your members about the consequences when you allow a foreign multinational to cherrypick the cream of the work, which has been subsidising the very important part of our wheelchair work?

Ms SHEPHARD: We received no indication, nothing.

Mr BARTON: Nothing, yes. Well, that is very disappointing. It is extremely disappointing.

Look, I have to say thank you for your submission. It was very good, and I will just go about some of the recommendations. The introduction of a requirement for multipurpose participants to have a minimum

percentage of their fleet approved as wheelchair-accessible vehicles—you could not really say that to someone who has five cars, for instance, because there would not be enough margin in it to support it. So if you looked at bigger fleets, how would you see that working?

Mr BARUCH: I would see that working that if you have a fleet of—I am pulling numbers—let us say 200 vehicles, a sizeable percentage, 5 to 10 per cent of that, maybe more even, would have to be wheelchair-accessible vehicles to allow it to cover for the service. It is incumbent on us to remember that taxis, particularly in the MPTP scheme, are providing a community service, an essential service that has to be there because the people, particularly those in wheelchairs, do not generally have another way of getting around, so we are their point of contact to get them out of their homes and into the rest of the world. If we block access to that service, we are locking these people up. We have all been through the last two years, 270 or 280 days of lockdown. We know what it feels like, so we certainly do not want to do that to vulnerable members of our society by saying, ‘Well, sorry, there’s no transportation available for you’. That is what we are up against.

If you look at rural and regional Victoria, the problem is amplified because the number of providers is not great, and if we have major rideshare companies going in and taking on this work, they are not going to do it well, if at all, and they are certainly not going to invest the money to provide the vehicles, because that is not their business model. If you look at the typical taxi fleet business model, the operators—the owners—provide the vehicles and they have drivers. I am aware that is slowly changing at the moment. But the rideshare model is the rideshare operator—the company, the BSP—owns zero vehicles and it could be said has zero interest in the vehicles. They just want to have drivers and cars on the road without caring how they go. It is another discussion potentially. So we feel that it is of great importance to ensure that those people who are operating in this MPTP space are catering for those vulnerable people who need the service. That is what it is there for. That is the government’s role in looking after its members of society. That is why you guys are sitting in the positions you are sitting in in Parliament: to look after the people that put you there.

Mr BARTON: Will we do another question now, Chair?

The CHAIR: We might go to Mr Meddick, and then we will come back around. There will be opportunity. Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, Rod. I have really only got one question. Thank you, Jacqui. Thank you, André. At the risk of sounding like a broken record to my fellow committee members, I just want to talk about one of the things you were talking about there before, which was minimum standards. I believe in most instances minimum standards and accreditation in any industry are covered by codes of practice. Most of the time those codes of practice are voluntary. Would you be supportive of a code of practice developed from within the industry—so it is input from the ground up rather than lecturing from the top down—that includes all those things you are talking about but that is mandatory rather than being voluntary? For instance, I take your point about the regulators sort of not being held to account on some of the things they should be. Perhaps it might even be possible to include the regulator under this code of practice. Now, they normally sit outside these sorts of things because they have a charter of operational functions. They are normally instigated by government to be in authority and they operate separately from that, but if the penalties for them not adhering to those particular operational mandates—if they could be included in that code of practice, that might be something that could be somewhat of a game changer. Is this something that you would consider?

Ms SHEPHARD: I think it is something we would consider. For me, definitely holding the regulator to account is something that needs to happen. Obviously all these things have been missed and dropped along the way, and now we have got people that are not going to be getting the service that they are used to—so a code of practice. For me, the training requirements are something that is paramount. We need that code of practice. We need the training there for all of our drivers so that they can uphold the standards because, as has been presented already, this is not about making money, these MPTP services. You know, you have heard from 13CABS this morning. They are not making money out of this. This is about looking after people. And we have all got experiences of people in our families or people we know of, and this is their only access to the community. This is their only way to get out and about.

I recently was privy to a conversation when I was visiting a BSP in Melbourne, and there was a conversation that came up about one of their MPTP users, a regular user who had a driver they had all the time. That driver was not going to be available to them for the next week. It was not just like, ‘Oh, who do we give?’, it was like,

‘Okay, so we need to train up. We’ll select the person that is going to take their place. We’re going to give them all the education that they need about this individual’. The driver already knows how to deal with people with a disability or to help them, but it was that extra layer that says, ‘This person likes this, this and this. You need to remember to do this, and when you are speaking to their mother, you need to be able to do this as well’. So the minimum standards need to be up there for this for sure.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you so much.

Mr BARUCH: If I can add to that, please. I would agree with you, Mr Meddick, that these standards have to be of a high level and have to be mandatory, because if they are optional, as we have seen, it just does not happen. People tend to go to the lowest common denominator and, as Jacqui so eloquently put it, we are looking after people. We can never forget that—we are looking after people. We have to give everybody the respect they deserve as an individual, and we are talking about those who are suffering more than most people, so, so much more so, we have to look after them and do the right things to make them feel as regular and as human as you and I.

Mr MEDDICK: And I look at it this way, by way of statement, I suppose—I thank you for those comments, both of you—all of us have been in a restaurant at some stage where the waiting staff have absolutely gone out of their way to make us feel at home and make us feel like we are part of the family in that restaurant at that time. We have had extraordinary service, and we walk away from that experience going, ‘That was fantastic. I would love to go back there again’. That is the level of service, that is the level of care, that has been provided, and more so, to these vulnerable members of our society, so thank you very much.

Ms SHEPHARD: I will just add one thing there. I had a BSP mention to me recently that they consider that maybe they should have some of their drivers, or their MPTP drivers, actually be care workers to have that extra training and skills as well, to include them as the cream of the crop in drivers. They are the types of people that we want operating the businesses that are servicing the MPTP.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jacqui. Very aspirational.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, both. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: I might pass over to Mr Tarlamis then back to Mr Barton. Mr Tarlamis.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Jacqui and André, for your presentation and for coming along and talking to us today—hearing those personal stories. Also we have heard that from other presenters today as well, including our previous one, Colin Wells. I think it needs to be acknowledged that these services are essential services that are being provided to the most vulnerable in our community. I am sure I know the answer to this question. You can lower barriers to entry and all these sorts of things as much as you like, but the reality is if left unchecked and without some form of intervention, the market will not fix this. And that is something that people need to understand and get that insight into because if this service was to disappear, who is going to transport these people in our community who are some of the most vulnerable so that they can enjoy that quality of life that they have been able to? And again, I have personal experience of this. I have a very close family friend who drives a wheelchair-accessible taxi, and I know how passionate he is about this. I have seen him leave family events on Christmas Day to go and take people to see their families because he wants them to share in that, to have those same opportunities. It really is an invaluable service that is provided. It is a bit of a Dorothy Dixier, but do you agree that unless there is some form of intervention the market will not fix this problem?

Ms SHEPHARD: Definitely, 100 per cent.

Mr BARUCH: Absolutely. Can I add to that? I was in the fortunate position yesterday to have a conversation with the Essential Services Commission of Victoria about the pricing of taxi prices, and I bring it up because they are drawing their data from MPTP data because it seems to be the only real data that they have access to. I made the point to them that if you have got a service that is a key service and you are paying peanuts, you are going to get monkeys. What eventually happens is the monkeys stop performing for the peanuts and you have got peanuts and no monkeys and nothing left, at which point the government then has to ask themselves, ‘We have got a responsibility to provide the service. What are we going to do? How are we going to do it? Do we bring it back in house ourselves and the government takes over running it?’, which I do

not think anyone wants, 'Or do we subcontract it at a huge cost? Or do we fix it now to make it an industry that people are proud to be involved in, an industry where people want to go out to help those vulnerables, to support the MPT program and to get paid fairly for doing it?'. It is all part of what needs to be looked at and considered, because you cannot have a service at a high level that gets paid nothing because no-one will do it. That becomes part of the problem, part of the issues that have to be considered.

The CHAIR: Thank you, André. On that note I might pass back to Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Jacqui and André. As an association what role could you play in training for the Multi Purpose Taxi Program?

Ms SHEPHARD: Great question.

Mr BARTON: What can you do?

Ms SHEPHARD: We can do everything. We can definitely support the industry in that. The TAA has already started supporting the industry: in March 2020 we launched COVID-19 hygiene awareness training for free to the industry. So we are geared, we are ready to introduce this training. We have got things developed already, so it is definitely something that we are passionate about and we are ready to play a big part in. We are already providing training to the more proactive BSPs in Victoria.

Mr BARTON: Clearly there is an opportunity there. Training has to be done, it has to be coordinated and there has to be a standard. I do not think that is in dispute. What is your members' view on the handling of this rollout by the CPVV? I am not leading the witnesses there, Chair.

Ms SHEPHARD: I will say little bit and then André will go on. They are absolutely devastated by it. You have got already struggling operators and drivers and then it is just like a knife into them. They were given no warning of it. There has been no impact statement, no evidence to show why this is required or why the disability sector needed this or what the benefit was. And a bit of a viewpoint is that more cars out there offering the service does not mean better service; essentially it means the opposite. So, yes, they are quite disillusioned by it. André, over to you.

Mr BARUCH: I can only back that up. If you are looking at 'Do more cars mean more service?', as Jackie said, no. It is supply and demand. If you increase the supply so that it is many times more than the demand, the price is going to drop down, because that is basic economics. If the price drops down, the service level is going to drop down because no-one can afford to give the service at that price, so it is a counterintuitive move. Having said that, it is something the CPVV regularly does to the industry. The regulator seems to be doing everything it can to destroy the industry rather than building it up, which is a worry in general and so much more so for those that rely on the MPTP. We would have to question the need for the regulator even.

Mr BARTON: You are not Robinson Crusoe there.

The CHAIR: No. Thank you for that, Mr Barton. Do you have another question? I might go back to the deputy to ask an additional question. Deputy? Mr Finn?

Mr FINN: Thank you, Mr Chairman. Look, I am sort of going to carry on from what I think Mr Barton asked a little bit earlier, and that is: what do we need to do now? It seems to me the regulator appears to be in the gun here. Do we need to scrap the regulator, change the regulator? What do we need to do to the regulator?

Mr Barton interjected.

Mr FINN: I am not asking you. I am asking our guest, Mr Barton—our witness, Mr Barton. What do we need to do now to get this show back on an even keel? Because it seems to me that if we do not, we will not have a ship floating at all for very long.

Mr BARUCH: You have given me a lovely, open-ended question there; thank you, Deputy Chair. To answer a few points only: the first thing is to get the regulator to realise that their job is much greater than just focusing on safety concerns, focusing on bureaucracy, focusing on, 'Did somebody fill out the correct risk matrix and really consider the risks of somebody standing up through the sunroof of the taxi?', which is some of the nonsense they have come up with. You need to have people inside the regulator that actually come from

industry and understand industry and cannot just talk the talk but can walk the walk because they have been there, because they have done that, because they have experienced it, so that when they get up and say, 'I picked up Ms Smith from such and such a place at 10 o'clock on Christmas morning in the WAT vehicle', they are talking about practical experience rather than just the theory of, 'Oh, you just send a car and it's fine'. You need to have a regulator that is supported by the industry and that goes to the industry in a consultative manner, that says that 'We want to work with you to build up the industry, to make an industry that it once was and an industry that people are proud to be involved in'.

In days gone by, as Mr Barton would know and as the rest of you are all aware, to be a taxidriver was not a decision of last choice. It was an active choice of a fulfilling career to bring good service to people, to bring good income to your home, to make you feel proud of what you do. It used to be that people chose to be a taxidriver. Today it seems to be the default, 'I can't do anything else. I'll go and drive cabs'. If we have a regulator that imposes service levels, be it through an SLA, which is probably the wrong terminology—'Here's a list of expectations. Here's the training you have to go through. Here's what you can do, what you can grow to'; if you have got a regulator that brings the industry with them, you can achieve great things and you can do what the job is, which is to regulate the industry for the benefit of the travelling public. I repeat that: they should be regulating the industry for the benefit of the travelling public. And that does not just mean the dollar value that the public pays, because benefit is a lot more than just the financial side of it.

Mr FINN: André, some years ago we had a Premier here in Victoria who used to frequent Tullamarine airport and personally inspect the taxis and indeed the drivers, for that matter. Do we need that sort of attention paid once again to the standards of the industry?

Mr BARUCH: I do not know if it needs to be Premier-driven, but I think—

Mr FINN: I reckon the current one would scare the living suitcase out of it.

Mr BARUCH: I refuse to comment on that, Deputy Chair. That is far too political for me. I am going to pretend I am American and plead the first.

The CHAIR: That is out of order, deputy.

Ms SHEPHARD: Some transparency, though, would be good.

Mr BARUCH: Yes. We definitely need to have a positive focus on the industry. We forget sometimes that the point-to-point transport industry, particularly taxis, are the public face of Victoria. When you get out of the airport and jump off a plane you jump into a taxi. That is the first impression. First impressions are—

Mr FINN: I recall many years ago when I was chairman of the tourism committee we established that as a fact: that the first port of call for many, many visitors—most visitors—to Melbourne, Victoria, was a taxidriver at the airport, and if they did not have their act together, well, then, that is a very, very poor first impression to make.

Mr BARUCH: Yes. We have to bring the pride back into being a taxidriver, a taxi operator, and particularly the pride of looking after those in need. We have to remember it is people's livelihoods, both the drivers' and the passengers'. We have got to look after everybody, and it is a fine balancing act.

The CHAIR: Yes. Just building on Mr Finn's question, I guess, is it fair to say we have had a—

Mr FINN: It is about Jeff Kennett, is it?

The CHAIR: No, no. It is not about Mr Kennett. I understand that some of the taxidrivers did not appreciate his time. Nonetheless, just on these standards, one of the complaints made by some of our previous speakers has been they feel as though some of the new entrants are held to a different standard or different regulation to some of the existing players that were already in the transport industry and transport space and some of your members, I am guessing, of your alliance. Is that an area of concern for you, the standards that do exist currently under the Multi Purpose Taxi Program for registered taxidrivers and their vehicles, as we heard earlier? Do you believe that the standard needs to be equal for all operators? So if there is going to be a market situation, how would the market operate? Do you have any suggestions on, if you were going to deregulate this subsection, how it would be done—if?

Ms SHEPHARD: André, did you want to go?

Mr BARUCH: Yes, sure. Thank you, Chair. My first comment is: I would not deregulate the subsection. I would leave the MPTP absolutely regulated for the safety and the wellbeing and the health of those that need the services—I cannot stress that enough. We have seen in the industry what happens when you deregulate or you allow deregulation by stealth from other operators coming in: things go really bad, really south, really quickly. The industry is struggling anyway. People are struggling. To deregulate and open up the MPTP space in my opinion would be an absolute recipe for disaster. There might be a short-term gain, but it would be total long-term pain, and it is not worthwhile.

The CHAIR: I have just got one additional question, because from a lot of the people we are hearing and in a lot of the submissions we received there has been this concern that with the current proposal or what has occurred with some of the low end—Mr Barton has explained this as well—what might happen is that the new entrants may take the low servicing need customers, meaning that a lot of the multipurpose vehicles, which cost \$100 000 approximately, will be left without enough work and then people might leave. But conversely, could there be an argument made—I am just putting it out there; I just want to see what you believe—if the new entrants were allowed into the place, that might free up these wheelchair-access vehicles to focus on, instead of about 60 per cent on wheelchair access, 80, 90 per cent of their business on wheelchair-access vehicles. Is that a possibility, or does it just not work that way when you are paying such up-front costs? I am not sure; I am just putting a concept out there. Feel free to answer, or I could leave it. Or we could also discuss it—

Mr BARUCH: I am happy to answer that, Chair, thank you. I do not believe that will be the case. I think if people are investing from a financial point of view into the wheelchair-operating taxis, which generally are high-occupancy vehicles, they are going to chase the HOV work, because they can get extra tariffs and extra money—and why earn \$1 when you can earn \$1.50 for every kilometre, so to speak? I think that if you want there to be a better percentage of people doing the wheelchair work, they have to be incentivised in different ways. While financial is important, it is not the be-all and end-all, and I do not think just opening it up to bring more people in will help. As you suggested, the lower end will be taken away, and the hard work that costs too much the new entrants are not going to do, because it does not make financial sense for them to do it and in most cases they may not care.

Ms SHEPHARD: You have got to remember: it is a workplace that has got quite a high turnover as well. The average lifespan of a rideshare driver, an Uber driver—well, it has been reported in a few different places, but I have seen things like, you know, six weeks.

The CHAIR: I asked that question to the previous speaker, and Colin gave an answer, but I will ask it to you quickly as well. Is it fair to say that the drivers that usually operate within the MPTP are more experienced, are usually of a higher standard and are more invested? They are permanent people, so it is a career path for them. And that is besides also the personal, emotional connection we heard, which Colin explained. Is it fair to say that your membership, your cohort, are long-term, experienced drivers, permanent drivers?

Ms SHEPHARD: Definitely, yes.

Mr BARUCH: Yes.

The CHAIR: I do not have any additional questions. Mr Barton, Mr Meddick, do you have any additional questions?

Mr BARTON: Yes, I do, funnily enough.

The CHAIR: Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: If I may answer the question you asked our guest, Chair—I think you were heading in that direction—there was a requirement previously that you had to do X amount of lifts because it was a condition of your licence. If you had a wheelchair-accessible vehicle, you had to do X amount of lifts. I cannot recall what that number was now, but it was too low then. But in their infinite wisdom the Department of Transport and in their infinite wisdom Commercial Passenger Vehicles Victoria got rid of that. So what do the drivers want to do with their wheelchair vehicles? They want to go up to the airport and take eight people down to the

Yarra Valley and make \$700 or \$800 for the day. You know, those wheelchair vehicles were put on the road for a reason, and they should be required to do what they are designed to do. That is the first part.

If I can just go back to—no, I will not go there; I will save it for another time. Thank you, Chair. That will be all the questions I will have at this time.

The CHAIR: Okay. André or Jacqui, would you like to comment on that?

Ms SHEPHARD: I completely agree with that, Rod. I think that we use the term quite lightly in this, ‘MPTP user’, and we all just envisage a person with a disability using that vehicle and the need that they have, yes, to access the community—and this is huge. There is a flow-on effect here of having these services available. Hypothetically, if I am the carer of somebody with a disability, them being able to use that vehicle instead of me transporting them gives me some time to actually possibly be able to work, to earn some money for my family, to be able to do something for myself in the community, to be able to benefit other people. So it is not just the person who is the user that we are talking about here. This has a big flow-on effect to everybody that touches the disability sector, the carers included.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Jacqui, and I agree—it affects a greater range of people. Thank you for sharing that. On that note, on behalf of the committee I just wish to thank Transport Alliance Australia and particularly André and Jacqui for appearing before our hearing. Your submission was very helpful, and your presentation today was very thoughtful and informative. I wish to say a big thankyou for appearing. It will assist the committee in our deliberations going forward.

Witnesses withdrew.