

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Tuesday 22 August 2023

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESSES

Nellie Montague, Manager, Partnerships and Transport, Port Phillip City Council;

Bhushan Jani, Coordinator, Transport Management, and

Khanh Nguyen, Sustainable Transport Officer, Boroondara City Council; and

Alex Reid, Principal Traffic and Transport Engineer, Kingston City Council.

The CHAIR: I would like to acknowledge country first. I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the various lands on which we are gathered today, and I acknowledge that in this virtual environmental we are gathered on many different lands. I pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

I also need to advise that the session today is being broadcast live on the Parliament website and that rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with the Legislative Assembly's standing order 234.

This morning we have a round table, so I will just explain how this will work for the Committee and for the witnesses.

Welcome to the round table 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 and broadcast live on the Parliament's website.

While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this 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. Just to help us, I remind Members to mute themselves while they are not speaking to minimise those interferences.

Because this is a round table, we thought we would jump straight into some questions and answers to get the most out of our time. We will do this by handing over to a Committee member, and they will ask a question. If you think you can answer that question or would like to answer that question, please just raise your hand on the Zoom function. We may not have an opportunity for everyone to answer that question. We will allow for a couple of speakers and then we will move on to the next question. But please note that if there is anything important that you believe has not been discussed or you want an opportunity to make more contributions, you are more than welcome to provide some additional written information to the Committee.

In the interests of time, I will quickly go through the Committee members. We have Deputy Chair Kim O'Keeffe, Member for Shepparton. We have Member for Kew, Jess Wilson; Member for Pascoe Vale, Anthony Cianflone; Member for Narracan, Wayne Farnham; Member for Glen Waverley, John Mullahy; and Member for Tarneit, Dylan Wight. And I am the Chair, Alison Marchant, Member for Bellarine.

Deputy Chair, we might go to you first, and maybe we could kick it off with the first question. Thank you.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Good morning, everyone. Thank you so much for providing this wonderful opportunity for all of us to meet. It is a really great chance for us to get your feedback and hopefully really contribute to the outcomes. The first question I have is: what challenges do councils face in providing safe environments for vulnerable road users?

The CHAIR: Thank you. City of Boroondara.

Bhushan JANI: Thank you. Hello. One of the biggest challenges we face is the physical constraints. The availability of the space within the constrained environment is one of the biggest challenges that we actually have. I guess the other issues are around the funding. We have got lots of good proposals and lots of good ideas, but a lot of proposals are actually waiting on funding.

It is also important to have the interactions between councils, the Department of Transport and Planning and various service authorities—VicTrack, Metro Trains and Yarra Trams. It would be good to streamline some of the processes, because a single project may actually involve three to four different authorities, and it can become really challenging to get feedback from various authorities. That is one of the issues we also face and challenges we have as well.

The other thing is that we can actually advocate for initiatives that are managed by the authorities or advocate for improvements on the roads managed by the Department of Transport and Planning. Because we are not the decision-makers, we actually have to rely on approvals and support from the relevant authorities, whether it is

the Department of Transport and Planning or there might be some initiatives and improvements on VicTrack or Metro Trains managed areas.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Nellie from the City of Port Phillip.

Nellie MONTAGUE: Thank you for this opportunity. We are seeing obviously higher population growth and high car traffic volumes and an increase in the use of local roads for through traffic. This provides challenges in encouraging local residents to consider other options apart from the car—bike riding, walking and other low-impact opportunities—so we are hoping to work with the State Government to increase options for all road users, making sure there are safe spaces for all different types of modes, not just vehicle traffic. We are seeing a greater increase in people using other modes of transport, such as e-scooters, electric bicycles, Vespas, motorbikes, to counter the issues of congestion and that high traffic I have already mentioned, so we need to make sure there are safe spaces for those road users that allows that safe movement of those different speeds. We know that separation is the best way to increase safety, especially for vulnerable road users who are at risk of any crashes and fatalities. Unfortunately, we are seeing fatal and serious transport-related accidents across our network, across local and the major roads so we really want to be able to understand what is happening with those crashes—so as much detail and data that we can have for our engineers, for our planners, for our other teams to understand what is happening on our roads. We hear a lot from our community, but we need that technical detail and as much information as possible to be able to produce engineering solutions to repetitive crash histories, especially with our vulnerable road users and how we can get that information best from those who are on site, whether it is police or other services that are providing assistance in those crash and injury locations. So the detail and the information about those crashes to hopefully stop them in the future would be very useful as well.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you very much. City of Kingston—Alex.

Alex REID: Hello. I will sort of reiterate some of the things that I think Nellie mentioned. I think severance is probably one of the biggest issues—when I say severance, like barriers to crossing major roads along the arterial road network in particular. There are often large gaps between crossings. There are high speeds and high-volume safety issues and these all sort of create issues for people wanting to cross the road and sort of discourages more walking and cycling. I think it was mentioned before: separation between cyclists and pedestrians compared with motor vehicles and the need for segregation between the two. Vulnerable road users, particularly in shopping centres: so perhaps more focus on the shopping centres to encourage that 20-minute neighbourhood approach. The use of universal design: so that is like accessible for all and a diverse range of users so people of different ages and abilities and incomes and gender and things like that are very important. And then there is the recognition of some of those micromobility changes that have come around in the last few years and perhaps mobility scooters and wheelchairs. Particularly also perhaps monitoring walking and cycling more.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Also, Khanh, have you got something to add?

Khanh NGUYEN: Hi. Thanks. I just want to add to what Alex is saying and that is about pedestrian crossings, especially on busy arterial roads where there are schools. People are going to cross regardless of whether or not you provide a crossing, and they will cross where they need to, so it is really important that we do provide pedestrian crossings and especially around schools on busy, high-volume roads such as arterial roads.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much for that. We might head to the next question, and I will pass that on to Jess Wilson.

Jess WILSON: Thanks very much, Chair, and thank you all for your submissions and for appearing today. To my local council, the City of Boroondara, thank you for being here as well. Khanh, I would agree. I have raised the issue of pedestrian crossings near some of these major schools on arterial roads in the Parliament and with the Department, and hopefully we can see some traction there. But I guess that leads into my question: how helpful would it be if councils had a greater say or a greater ability to influence speed zones through local areas—speed zones particularly around high-volume pedestrian and road traffic and potentially public transport through shopping strips—and to influence the road treatment, whether it is pedestrian crossings or other road treatment around school areas? Do you think at the moment council has enough ability to influence that, or is it

something that is quite rigid when it comes to VicRoads and the Department of Transport? Where do you think there could be reform in that space?

The CHAIR: Nellie, we will head to you. Thank you.

Nellie MONTAGUE: Thank you, Jess. Our two biggest priorities are lowering speeds and pedestrian- or bike-operated signals. We know that they provide a great increase of safety for our vulnerable road users. I think there could be improvements in the process, the timelines and the length of time that approvals take. As Bhushan mentioned earlier, we have a lot of great plans that we are working on in the background. If we had clear pathways, funding opportunities and agreed-on timelines, we could continue the advocacy that is required. One of the biggest challenges is that once projects are ready to hit the ground, the community can have concerns. So the community engagement is really important to do early to ensure that when it is ready to go and everything is lined up, that does not push time lines back in the time you need to discuss with the community, get feedback and incorporate their feedback into the designs. That is one of the key moments we see in these projects being held up. Because of the timelines coming down from other stakeholders, we may not always know when that is coming—so clearer processes on that. I think in terms of the approvals required for these kinds of works, obviously they can have impacts on traffic flow, public transport movement and other traffic-related pieces, so there are important stakeholders who need to be involved. But I think the timelines and the process could be a lot clearer and therefore able to be worked on in a better way across all stakeholders to get those outcomes as quickly as possible for our community.

Jess WILSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Bhushan.

Bhushan JANI: Thank you very much. I was sort of thinking just along the same lines as what Nellie just mentioned—trying to have a more streamlined and efficient process in obtaining approvals—because it can actually take ages once we have put in a submission to support lower speed limits, whether it is actually along strip shopping centre or around schools. Councils are fully supportive of lower speed limits around schools especially, to protect the children, but also along busy strip shopping centres. We have actually done a lot of groundwork in the past where we prepared the detailed applications, prepared the scope reports and developed them fully to give as much detail as possible to the decision-makers, the Department of Transport and Planning, to help them assess the request and make a decision as soon as they could. We can do our part, where we develop applications in line with the council's position to support lower speed limits around schools and strip shopping centres, but then the process is done at the higher end, at the State Government level. Hopefully those processes can be actually streamlined to fast-track some of the lower speed limit applications. Thank you.

The CHAIR: And Alex.

Alex REID: Yes, I think the common theme here is that councils would like to reduce speeds, particularly on their own roads. But the process of change is very onerous and takes a very long time—up to a year—to do, and it does not seem to relate to the amount of effort that might need to be involved in changing the speed limit. That year wait is quite a substantial delay and disincentive to want to make some of those changes quicker, really.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We might go to the next question. Anthony, I might hand to you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you all for your submissions and for appearing. My question is around the Transport Accident Commission's—TAC's—Local Government Grant Program. We know that program has been around for a little while, assisting councils to deliver some of those local road safety measures in local streets and neighbourhoods. I would like to ask, I guess: in your view, how effective is that program in supporting councils to roll out better road safety and community safety measures, and how could it potentially be made even better?

The CHAIR: Nellie, you are quick off the mark. I will go to you.

Nellie MONTAGUE: Thanks, Alison. Yes, we really appreciate the TAC's Local Government Grant Program. It is something that I have seen across a number of councils. It has allowed the opportunity to design, trial and test a range of solutions to road safety problems, whether it is education in schools through to analysis

and design to come up with innovative treatments, especially around vulnerable road users. We know that the safe system approach gives us a lot more options to produce outcomes that are not reliant on current crash stats. We have always got the catch 22 that we need to be able to prove that a location requires treatments. But we do not want people to get injured in the first place, so how do we pre-empt and ensure that, especially around our high pedestrian activity locations, we can be pre-emptively putting in treatments to support our community? One of the big ones is the requirement in the applications around crash stats and data to support it that there is a road safety issue. We need better access to crash stats and the details of any issues at these locations. We rely on what is released and what we are allowed to access, which is often somewhat minimal. If there could be any improvements in the level of detail and the speed in which councils get access to that, it would really help to be on the front foot with things like these grant applications. Obviously the pedestrian-operated signals and the lower speeds are the big ones that somewhat fall into this grant program, but not in a clear, direct way. If there could be some assistance with some of these bigger projects that obviously cost more and have more resources required—I think a grant program like this could be improved by having those bigger pieces available, or at least steps towards those, whether it is concept designs, detail designs or assistance with consultation with community to get those steps moving for these bigger pieces that we know make a big impact on road safety. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Alex.

Alex REID: I will just add that the application process can be quite onerous to go through. I think it is a bit limited in the number of applications you can make in any one year. If we are going to make a big change in encouraging walking and cycling and making things safer, the funding stream could be increased basically—there could be some more funding in that field, particularly as the TAC Black Spot funding type thing becomes less. Because we are covering more and more of those projects and there are fewer and fewer issues, this sort of safe system approach helps to cover some of those gaps in the funding stream. But, yes, the main thing for me is the amount of funding and the number of options that we have got to put in in a year.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Bhushan, did you want to add anything to that?

Bhushan JANI: Yes, just quickly, a couple of pointers to add to that: it is exactly our thinking as well. The program is actually quite effective. It gives us an opportunity to prepare the applications, and also the infrastructure grants are actually available—but not enough funding to attract the infrastructure grants. That is the biggest drawback. The other thing that could be improved would be to relax the one-to-one contribution. Councils would not always have up to \$100,000 to match the funding that has been provided for infrastructure grants. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. We might head to another question. Wayne, I might head to you.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thanks, Alison. My question is around e-scooters today. On Sunday I actually took my life in my own hands and went on an e-scooter, so that was an experience. My question is: what is the infrastructure you think we need around e-scooters, especially to protect pedestrians, and how can we improve the compliance and enforcement of e-scooters regarding safe e-scooter use?

The CHAIR: Bhushan, we will head to you first.

Bhushan JANI: Thank you. I actually had my hand up—I did not lower it—but I am happy to contribute first, thank you.

The CHAIR: Oh, sorry.

Bhushan JANI: The biggest change that could actually help alleviate some of the issues that we have around e-scooters and the use of e-scooters and the mixing of various users is to provide a bit of separation if you can. Physical protection would actually go a long way in separating pedestrians from e-scooter riders and bicycle riders. Separate facilities for cyclists and pedestrians, possibly, if you can, in an on-road environment, preferably in an off-road environment on busy paths, is something that could actually go a long way to improving the level of safety amongst all users. Consideration can also be given to lowering speed limits at suitable locations, because the speed differential between an e-scooter rider and a motorist would be quite high, so you need to have that separation and at the same time consider possibly lower speed limits where it is a really busy environment in terms of e-scooter riders as well as motorists.

The other thing that we could possibly do is education, because the road rules around e-scooters actually have changed fairly recently, so there needs to be a greater level of education and awareness that we can bring to the attention of the wider community to ensure that they are all across the new changes with respect to e-scooters and road safety rules. Enforcement can be very challenging, but if we do the part around education—the State Government possibly would need to take a bit of a lead role in informing the wider community around education and awareness of e-scooters and their rules and responsibilities as well as an individual. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Nellie.

Nellie MONTAGUE: We know one of the main reasons e-scooters are being used on footpaths is because they do not have safe on-road options, so we need that space to easily and clearly connect to on-road facilities to keep those movements separated. We need statewide regulations, including clear injury coverage and insurance settings for e-scooters. The shared e-scooters and the private e-scooters are obviously very different situations. We need to update speed and power regulations, especially for privately owned scooters that can be purchased at numerous stores.

At the moment Port Phillip is part of the trial of shared e-scooters, and we have seen some great success in the technology available through these devices to understand where they are, how fast they are going, how they are being parked, are they upright. There is a whole lot of technology available to us that is still developing. It is very early technology that we are still learning about. But private e-scooters are much harder—obviously we do not have any role as council in privately owned e-scooter use and purchase. We need clear speed guidelines for these transport options that can be purchased easily. If people can buy them off the shelf and they can go 60 kilometres an hour, that is a serious concern for us, for them—the riders of those devices—as well for people around who may be nearby when they are riding them. We would want very clear speed and power regulations on anything that can be sold or purchased in Australia. And make sure that the compliance is tied with enforcement, but acknowledging that we need to provide safe locations to ride to discourage that misuse that we do not want to see. We want to protect all users and need those safe options that are very clear to see and very clear to access and continue to be built to connect all road users.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Nellie. Apologies, Alex, I know you have got your hand up, but I might go to another question just to get a variety of questions today. I will hand to John to ask the next one.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair, and thank you, all councils, for attending this round table. All your submissions have touched on traffic and parking demands around schools since COVID-19. We had some evidence in earlier hearings with regard to that. I just want to know what councils would consider to ease traffic congestion and improve safety for vulnerable road users around schools during pick-up and drop-off times?

The CHAIR: Khanh, thank you.

Khanh NGUYEN: Okay. We know that school pick-ups and drop-offs are a really busy time, and to ease congestion we have to encourage families to switch to an active mode of transport—that is, walking, cycling, scooting. The only way they are going to do that is if they feel it is safe for their children to walk, scoot or ride to school. We need funding to build the infrastructure to make it safe for the children to be able to do that. Parents, when you do the surveys, want to walk and ride to school but the biggest barrier for them is safety or the perception of safety. There are so many cars on the roads. People are distracted, they are speeding, they are not stopping at the zebra crossings. Vehicles are actually parked on the school crossings, so parents see that and they do not feel it is safe for their children to walk or cycle so then they drive their children to the school gate and that is where you get your traffic congestion problems. The idea is to encourage families to switch to active mode. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Alex, I might go to you so that you can contribute to this question.

Alex REID: Thank you. I think there are two things that I would like to raise. One was to do with the idea of having a park-and-stride approach where people park their cars not directly outside the front gate of the school and actually walk—I do not know—a hundred metres or whatever it is so that the area around the school is better protected. Also, coming back to that idea of funding, in the past there used to be something called SSRIP funding, which does not seem to be around anymore. It is called the Safe System Road Infrastructure Planning budget. That was less based on a crash record and was more to do with traffic-calming measures, and this was

really useful for providing traffic measures around schools. But that does not seem to be available anymore, and that means that few of those sorts of projects are happening.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Nellie, we have a few more minutes. I might finish on this one, thank you.

Nellie MONTAGUE: There has been some great success in Merri-bek with temporary road closures around schools, so again tying into if you can make that close walking and cycling environment to a school gate at those peak times as safe as possible. Temporary road closures have been found to really increase active travel use and working with the local community to understand access needs and other challenges with temporary road closures, but again making that space very clearly safer for these road users. The other one is around bus zones. Obviously schools often need access for buses and we want to ensure that pedestrians are safe as they are accessing bus zones. Obviously there can be challenges with where to locate them, especially in residential areas, so increased support for safe bus zones at multiple times of day, especially for schools where people may be travelling further or have other access needs. We need that road space as well to access the bus kind of transport.

The funding for programs—a lot of councils do things like a Healthy Streets Approach of working intensely with a school to understand where they are coming from, are there treatments along the routes to school that could help—pram crossings, pedestrian access, kerb outstands—to reduce the distance pedestrians have to cross roads, those kinds of smaller treatments to ensure that it is very clearly a safe environment to walk and cycle to therefore get the behaviour change that we need to decrease congestion and car traffic.

The CHAIR: Wonderful, thank you. I am sorry we will have to wrap it up at this stage purely due to time, but I really appreciate your submissions and appearing today to speak to us and answer our questions. I will just repeat that if there is anything further you think you need to add to the Committee to consider, please do not hesitate to put that in writing to us. Again, thank you for your time. We are really appreciative.

Witnesses withdrew.