

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

Nancy Atkin, Member and

Nic Maclellan, Member, Brunswick Residents Network.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing of the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee 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 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.

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

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

Wayne FARNHAM: Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

The CHAIR: And Dylan is the Member for Tarneit. He will be joining us in a moment. I know we are all tight for time, so maybe a 2- to 3-minute opening statement and then we will go to questions.

Nancy ATKIN: Yes. I have just got a very brief introduction. I am Nancy Atkin. I should point out I have been walking for, I reckon, 74 years. I cannot be accurate about that, but I have been riding a bike regularly for 70 years. I would like to just point out in relation to some of the past witnesses that there is a difference between being elderly, which I think I am officially, and disabled. There are a lot of people like me who get around by active transport.

The Brunswick Residents Network is a neighbourhood network in Brunswick. We have been going for around about 15 years. We put out a monthly newsletter, and over 1,300 people subscribe either to the email or to our blog. We hold meetings to inform discussion and campaign around current issues, we support other groups and we do research. Transport and traffic, particularly active transport and public transport, are the main area of interest of our group, along with environment, open space, community and other issues. As we mentioned in the submission, we have carried out over the years some major community surveys on traffic issues, including two surveys which are available on our website, which investigated perceptions of, concerns about and solutions to local traffic issues, and more recently our report *Walking in Brunswick*, which was attached to our submission, had almost 1,000 respondents to our survey.

Some of our recent activities have included joining a major residents' campaign where we highlighted traffic safety and amenity issues that became the basis for VCAT's rejection of a large hardware store on Glenlyon Road in Brunswick. In the reasons for the judgement from VCAT they concurred with our concerns about rat running in particular and noted our comments on the role of Google and satellite navigation in inducing it. Recently we posted early community discussions—we got that discussion going—on Brunswick's coming level crossing removal, and we have been supporting the campaign for overdue accessible tram stops on Sydney Road, as well as holding a community Zoom discussion on the reasons for introducing 30 k speed limits on local roads.

Nic MACLELLAN: My name is Nic Maclellan. I am a member of BRN as well, Brunswick Residents Network, and have been involved in a number of the research initiatives that we have been doing. Given time is short, we might just go to your questions. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Perfect. Thank you very much for that. Thank you for being here today. Would you like to kick us off?

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes, thank you. I am very pleased that you have come here today, and let the record show that the submission was absolutely phenomenal. It was very well detailed, very well researched, and the consultation was amazing, so honestly I want to just acknowledge that. I am proud to be a that represents parts of Brunswick West too, so in that respect I am a local member in this regard.

Just two things I wanted to ask quickly. One is: in your submission, page 4, you talk about footpath quality being compared as worse by residents who were surveyed—35% of respondents say footpaths should be given the top priority as an item which would make the most difference to encourage more walking and pedestrian activity across Brunswick. I would like your thoughts on that. The second part of that is around rat running and the role rat running plays in impacting road safety and walking safety through Brunswick, so any thoughts you have on better quality footpaths and rat running.

Nancy ATKIN: Yes, I will just start. Much of Brunswick is an old industrial area, a traditionally poor area, with often narrow footpaths, and many of the footpaths are not up to scratch. For example, outside the major new East Brunswick Village development the footpath between the EBV gateway and Glenlyon Road is extremely poor quality. It is a weird mixture of concrete and cobblestones, and it is really pretty unwalkable. There are many streets where footpaths need upgrading and also where they need widening, because there are actually more people living there nowadays.

Nic MACLELLAN: Can I add one thing on that too. Brunswick, Brunswick East is an area of massive redevelopment. Old industrial sites are being converted into apartments, and so there are a lot of footpaths being ripped up—gas lines going in, a whole lot of construction work. Obviously during the construction phase it can inconvenience people. I am conscious of this because I have got a bad knee at the moment; it is really interesting how often you have to get off the footpath to move around the suburb. But often developers are people who do not fix up footpaths after they have done the work, despite permit conditions that they should. So there is a whole issue about enforcement in planning law. There was a case, for example, where a major developer also went to VCAT to oppose requirements for traffic calming in streets around this—we are talking about a 1,000-apartment complex—and they got away with two thresholds and a speed hump. The reason was because there is so much construction going on around the area VCAT could not apportion the costs to that one developer. So there is a bit of buck-passing going on around whose responsibility it is to fix footpaths given their age and given the constant damage to them, in parts of Brunswick East especially.

Nancy ATKIN: Regarding rat running, in our short introductory submission we referred to amenity. One of the things our survey showed was that having—I guess ‘pleasantness’ is the word for it—pleasant walking and pleasant places to ride to are very important in encouraging people to walk and ride. Councils need to facilitate this. Rat running is obviously an issue there if your streets are full of traffic. That is one of the aspects of poor amenity. But also from a state government point of view—just a small point—currently there is a lot of red tape, which has been referred to already, and a lot of bureaucracy involved in reducing speed limits. There have also been some recent changes in regulation or law—I am not quite sure which one—which require street closures to go through a whole process of renaming the street; it is not allowed to be called a street anymore. This has been a big roadblock, so to speak. It is kind of a mixed metaphor, having roadblocks—that kind of unintended consequence. Because closing roads is one of the tools in traffic management that needs to be available to councils, and that needs to be fixed.

Nic MACLELLAN: I think one big problem for rat running is delay in implementation. I personally got involved in local government stuff because Lygon Street and Sydney Road were 40 k and our residential street, which is a very narrow residential street, was 50. It is bizarre. So people went rat running through the streets because it was easier to go 50 down our residential street than get stuck in the main arterial roads. That is a constant problem.

I was just looking at this: we were asking for 40 k to be rolled out in residential streets. This is a 2014 survey, and it still has not been finished. We work with local council to try and make suggestions about hotspots, danger spots and areas that could be improved. That engagement is constant, and yet we constantly find that there are delays with the Department of Transport or other state government agencies in following through with what are often pretty small changes around signage, around turn signs and around approvals. We have done a lot of work around rat running to think of innovative solutions about road closures or traffic treatments or delays—a whole range of mechanisms that can slow traffic in quiet residential streets. It takes a long time for state government departments to sign off on it. Frankly, there is a real problem.

One example: we proposed more than a decade ago to have a shared zone around Fleming Park, which is a major football oval and park in Brunswick East. It is an area where there are literally hundreds of apartments being built around it, and we feel it is not rocket science—if kids want to get safely to kick a footy in the park, elderly people want to get across the road to the one big piece of green things, the traffic should be slowed in

those streets. We have had a trial of a thing that still has not been finalised to have that shared zone signed off, because of delays. The question is: where are the delays? We get different answers: is it at council level, at state government level or is it at Department of Transport level? Community has incredible insights about how traffic moves. We know, we live in this area, but there are roadblocks to achieving those, and I think that frustration is a problem that needs to be addressed by the State Government.

Nancy ATKIN: Just going back to the big picture of rat running, in theory we have hierarchies of roads with main roads and little roads and local roads, whatever term they go by. The government, both at state and at council level, needs to have control of those hierarchies, and that is where satellite navigation is throwing that out. They are just saying, 'We'll put the cars wherever we want them to go where we think it is quickest.' I have read that recently there is some discussion in other countries of them stopping doing that and of obeying road hierarchies, but if that does not happen and if that cannot be negotiated with Google or whoever, then it needs to be regulated. There needs to be regulation to say that satellite navigation systems cannot send cars into local roads. Similarly, I think that councils need to have targets for a low amount of through traffic in local roads and not just kind of say, 'Oh, dear. There are 3,000 cars a day that go through this road.' It needs to be actively pursued as a target to get that figure of the through traffic down.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Wayne, I might go to you.

Wayne FARNHAM: Sure. There has been a lot of conversation about bigger vehicles, oversize vehicles in communities. How can you see the government maybe stepping in to discourage the sales of those types of vehicles like Toyota LandCruisers and the big, big vehicles in the inner city at the same time remembering—I am going to put my regional hat on—that they are required in regional Victoria? How do you think government can work with that?

Nancy ATKIN: This was dealt with on the *Gruen* program very humorously a few weeks ago, and I recommend you watch the advertising solution to having people buying monster trucks. There are obviously taxation incentives that can be looked at, both positive and negative. My understanding is that in Japan there are taxation incentives that really encourage people—and this could be maybe particularly in the inner city—to purchase small, compact vehicles that do not take up much road or parking space and at the same time removing any taxation incentives that exist. It is maybe important to look at the advertising, as was mentioned earlier, that makes these vehicles appear to be attractive and which addresses the fact that, although you may believe that your child is safer inside your very large car, it is enormously much more dangerous for other people's children outside your car.

Nic MACLELLAN: I think with the perception that a big car is safer there needs to be education advanced around safer for whom, because it is clear that high-rise cars kill more people. There is evidence for that; it is just not widely known. I actually think it is also about all the discussion that has been held from previous speakers about giving alternatives. People feel safer in a big car. Okay, what are the alternatives to make them feel safe using other modes of transport? All the questions we have had about separated bike lanes making pedestrians feel safe on the footpath without e-scooters running them over and things like that. There is a role for state government in that in not just Department of Transport regulation but things like the planning law. One example: There are many large apartment complexes being built in this municipality. We are talking hundreds of apartments in one complex. Why can't the planning law mandate that there be spaces allocated for, say, car share companies to have spaces to park in the basement of those buildings, mandated space for bikes and things like that? That would give people a quick and easy alternative to use other modes of transport without having to feel that they have got to buy a monster car. So I think there are a whole range of education and taxation and advertising issues. But I also think it is about using different elements of state government control, like around planning, to create alternatives, because people will move to safer alternatives if they are real, cost effective, timely and easy to access. I do not think it is just Department of Transport regulation. I actually think it is things like the planning laws, which at the moment really do not enforce really simple solutions, like car shares, which are relevant for our area—maybe not for all of Victoria. But certainly in the inner city and the inner north it is a quick and easy solution.

The CHAIR: Now, I am really mindful of time, because it is 25 past. I just wanted to ask one more question.

Nancy ATKIN: Yes, absolutely. I am allowed a bit of –

The CHAIR: A bit of movement. Okay. I just wanted to check because I know it was something. Dylan, I will go to you.

Dylan WIGHT: Sure. Thanks, Chair, and thank you so much for your submission. I will be quick because I am conscious of time. Nic, you just touched on planning very briefly there, and one of the recommendations in your submission talks about how safe and pleasant walking needs to be planned and incorporated as part of new housing developments. Obviously the State Government is doing a review on the State's planning at the moment. I was just after your opinion, and maybe perhaps elaborate on how developers and councils et cetera might be able to do that best in the future.

Nic MACLELLAN: There are issues, to use the planning jargon, of permeability—allowing pedestrians to walk through these large areas, and there are a couple of really great examples where communities worked with council and the developer to allow access for cyclists and pedestrians to get through a really large area rather than having to walk all the way around. So it involves a planning scheme that actually accepts that local residents have a say. One of our great concerns is that there are moves that local councils and residents be taken out of the planning scheme in terms of efficiency, when we would argue as a local residents' network the opposite: that there is a lot of local knowledge about how people move around the suburb and to work with developers to create spaces that people can move through. We are talking big projects, not just a suburban thing.

Secondly, there is a whole lot of potential for the planning scheme to talk about surrounds. There are a couple of big projects here that create real opportunities for shared zones. Once again, that involves state government regulation of the road, and council has got to negotiate those. So we see a real potential for that to change as well to make it easier in the planning scheme for local knowledge to be incorporated in these projects. One of the problems is that many developers do not have incentives around this. We did a survey along Lygon Street, Brunswick, where there a lot of apartment towers going up. Half the shops on the bottom were empty. Most of them have got gyms and fast-food stalls. So there is no incentive in state government policy to encourage active street fronts. Developers have got to put a shop down there, but literally half of the major towers along Lygon Street in this area we surveyed, right along the area, were empty because of the cost of fitting out things. There are areas around planning law that could help with active transport, making it feel comfortable and safe to move around without having to rule through transport law.

Nancy ATKIN: There are a couple of specific things. One is shading and being safe from rain. So obliging awnings over the footpath in any major building would be great. The other thing, though, that I particularly notice on these north wind days, now that we have a lot more north winds, is that the buildings that have a large facade facing north often have really, really bad wind tunnels, and that is actually really quite dangerous for bike riders and unpleasant for pedestrians. If you walk along that big building just near Brunswick station—on Albert Street, that 14-storey building—that is a really good example of somewhere that is very unpleasant on a strong north wind day. So the planning laws need to address wind.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am so sorry; we are probably going to have to leave it there because of the time. But we really appreciate all your time and your submission and for answering our questions. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.