

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 11 August 2021

MEMBERS

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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 Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Dr Chris Lowe, Executive Director, Bus Association Victoria.

The CHAIR: The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Use of School Buses in Rural and Regional Victoria continues. Please ensure that mobile phones are switched to silent and that 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, and I am Chair. I would like to introduce my fellow committee members that are present with us here today: Mr Rod Barton, Mr Tim Quilty, Mr Lee Tarlamis and Mrs Beverley McArthur.

For witnesses appearing: all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this 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. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome any opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions. Could you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of the Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you, Dr Lowe.

Dr LOWE: Good morning, everybody. I am Chris Lowe. I am the Executive Director of the Bus Association Victoria. And thank you very much for asking me to present to you on the submission we made to the inquiry. This is an issue that is extremely close to the bus association and all of its members' hearts.

In summary, I do not need to outline to you the extent of economic and social issues that we have prevailing in rural parts of not just Victoria but Australia. So many of those economic and social issues, such as mental health, youth unemployment, social exclusion, even general unemployment, are linked to transport, and it is a fact that transport is an enabler. It enables economic activity. It enables social prosperity. Yet we know that in rural parts and to a lesser extent in regional and certainly metropolitan Melbourne, public transport is poor at best. We in Melbourne are very fortunate enough to have sophisticated train, tram, bus networks and services virtually on tap. If you are in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, you have less of a choice and you have got less frequent services, but there are services and you can generally catch a bus every 40 minutes to 60 minutes. In regional Victoria, such as Bendigo, Ballarat, the Latrobe Valley, Geelong, Shepparton, Horsham and major and secondary regional centres, there are public transport networks. There are bus networks that have been operating for many years so if you do not have a car or you cannot drive or will not drive there is a safety net public transport network in place for you to be able to socialise and contribute to the economy.

But in rural Victoria you are far more disadvantaged, and that is why so many people in rural Victoria have a car. In fact so many principals have told me over the years that if one of their students in year 12 does not get their licence, they take a very active interest in the welfare of that student, because without your licence you are set to have not as prosperous a life as you deserve to have. So the schools make sure their students in rural parts of the state get their licences when they are able to, because they can do things—they can travel, they can go to jobs, they can take people places, they can honour appointments. In rural Victoria the public transport network is hit and miss. If you take a town like Wycheproof, Sea Lake or Manangatang, for example, you will be lucky if the V/Line coach comes through two or three times a week. If you miss that and you do not have a car, you are very limited—and I am not having a go at public transport.

What we need to do is also remember that we have this exclusionary, almost invisible, free school bus network—and it has been in place since the end of the Second World War—where students are able to get on a local school bus, if they suit the eligibility criteria, and get to their school. It is a wonderful initiative that was started, and all the operators of those services have been delivering those services since basically 1944. It was a

very informal system for many years until the state formalised it in 1944. In fact of all the operators of those services, a lot of them still remain in business today; it is just the second, third or fourth generation of the family that has taken the business on and they are still delivering the services.

But the school bus network has capacity. About 40 per cent of the school bus fleet are small buses and about 60 per cent are big, traditional buses. On many of the routes, say, from Chinkapook to Manangatang or Sea Lake to Swan Hill or other parts of the state, some of the services are full but it changes every year as new students come into the school roll and other students leave school, but generally there is capacity.

For a member of the public to get on that school bus at present, it is a very draconian process. In fact it is too hard for, say, an elderly person who lives out the back of Wycheproof who just happens to have a school bus go by every day to get on that bus, because the amount of rules that they have to adhere to and the amount of hoops that they have to jump through to get the authority to be picked up by the school bus and go into town and back is just too hard. So as a result, no-one does it. None of the general public use the school bus. We might have one or two or three over here or one or two or three over there, but typically the rules that we have in place prevent or dissuade the general public from utilising the school bus. And we also need to keep in mind that the school bus network is only used 2 to 3 hours in the morning and 2 to 3 hours in the afternoon 198 days of 365 days in a year, and these are buses that are funded to the operator by the state. Now, that is not a good use of scarce resources.

These buses are often sitting idle, and we need to be able to sweat the asset and see more economic and social utility out of these school buses. Many of the school bus operators who are contracted to the state to deliver school bus services are already using their school buses for community work, and most of them do not even charge for it. So if there is a retirement home or school that wants to do a trip to the movies or some sort of special trip through the day or even on a weekend, outside of school hours, they do it—all the school bus operators do that. Some of them charge something for it, but it is certainly not a profit-making exercise. It is more what they do because they are the only person in the town with a bus that is able to move these people. And as I said, most of them do it for free because they have got a suitable contract with the state that allows them to do that, and I think it is in the state's interest that they do that. The state wants them to do that, and the contract allows them to do that.

So we have made a submission to your inquiry that suggests that the state needs to revise the rules around the wider use of school buses. The crux of our submission says: let us make it simpler for the general public to get on the school bus, let us not make it so arduous, let us just have a simple system in place that says, 'If it's okay with the driver or the operator and it's okay with the school'—either the principal or the principal's delegate—'that person should be able to get on the bus'. You should not have to go off and get a working with children check and a police check and all the rest of the palaver that the general public are currently required to do.

We also think that if that sort of regime is introduced it would raise some concerns in the general public about Joe Public getting on a school bus. So in light of that, we think that the school bus should match some of the criteria more closely to your public route bus, whereby a GPS system is installed on the school bus so parents can track where their child is on their phone. That technology is here and with us now. And we also think that a camera or cameras should be installed on the school bus as well if the general public is going to get on the school bus. At present school buses do not have those. Keep in mind that we think that way because all the route buses in the state, whether they be in metropolitan Melbourne or regional centres, have cameras, and it just provides a bigger degree of comfort and safety for those parents and families who have got people on the bus. That is the thrust of our submission to the inquiry.

We do not presume that something should be done overnight. We think that there need to be further discussions and negotiation on the topic, but we think if we can pull this off, if we can allow school buses to serve a wider purpose and enable the general public to get on school buses, pursuant to any revised rules, we would be enabling greater social interaction and greater economic prosperity because people who are stuck, who do not have access to a car, would have access to the bus. They would be able to access their medical appointment or go down to the shops or into town and do their shopping. They would be able to connect into the regional centre to get on the V/Line train or to go down to Melbourne. I have endeavoured to articulate those economic and social benefits in our submission. That is my introduction.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Lowe. I have really enjoyed your submission and your presentation so far. I will now pass over to Mr Barton and Mr Quilty to ask the first few questions from the committee. So, Mr Barton, over to you.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Dr Lowe, for your presentation. There was a very good graphic put up by Associate Professor Stanley previously showing how much further the routes are compared to what the current public transport is. So the advantage is really quite clear to see—how far we can reach on this—but there is this ongoing concern about safety, and people are concerned they are going to lose access to their bus, it is going to get taken over and all that sort of stuff. So I do not think anyone is advocating to change routes or anything like that. What does your organisation say about changing the routes and all those sorts of things. Are people still going to be able to get their buses and we are not going to be overflowed, like, have a pre-book system, and can you do a pre-book system?

Dr LOWE: Yes. The technology exists to have a pre-book system. Even without the technology, you just need a very simple manual process in place and seamless communication between the school and the operator. That is the only thing that is going to make this work. If the quality or quantity of communication between the operator and the school is compromised, it is not that good. Fortunately all of us operators in the state strive to ensure that the relationship with the school is top drawer. It needs to be because they are carrying delicate citizens. In fact, it is a fact that many of the principals and school bus coordinators throughout the state depend on their school bus operators to make sure they have got everything documented. So that deals with that. Whether it be manually or technologically driven, it can be done.

On the other issue about changing routes, I honestly cannot see that as being a knock-on effect or a spillover or an effect or result of making school buses available to a wider public. In order for Joe Public to get on this bus there needs to be interaction between the operator and the school. I think you will find that if the person lives on the route—

And keep in mind that school bus routes change all the time, almost every term, because children come and go; children start at schools, children leave school. Particularly every January, the group looks phenomenally different to what it did last January, really because of where the children live. So routes change already. I think if the child or the person lives on the existing route, there is no loss or cost or disbenefit to just stopping and picking up that member of the public. If somebody lives close to the route, I still cannot see it being an issue. I honestly do not think an operator could say, 'Hang on, they live 3 kilometres off the route, that is going to mean another 5 minutes in time and therefore that is going to cost the state another \$20 that we are going to need to bill them for'. When it comes down to that sort of marginality, I honestly do not think it will happen because it is marginal; it is just a couple of minutes here, maybe another 1 or 2 or 3 k's there. And because the route has changed they might be able to save a couple of minutes or kilometres off the route once a child moves or a child goes from the bus. So it is swings and roundabouts.

I think if there was a request from a member of the public who was materially away from the existing school bus route, then there would need to be some serious consideration because the principal may not know this individual and the operator just might say, 'Well, hang on, if I am going to go that far, I am going to be putting another half an hour onto the school bus run. That is unfair to the kids, and I am going to need more money from the state to cover my costs for that extra time, and distance costs'. But I honestly do not think that you are going to get a swathe of those material, almost off the chart requests. I think it is just going to be swings and roundabouts of marginality.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton. I might pass over to Mr Quilty to ask a few questions. Mr Quilty.

Mr QUILTY: Okay. We have spare capacity on the buses, so initially there is a capacity to fill those seats up at little cost, to an extent, without any changes, but that will quickly hit a barrier and costs are going to rise, aren't they, if we have to start adding larger buses or more routes. So is there only a small, marginal benefit available without investing considerable resources?

Dr LOWE: Yes. What we have maintained is that if there is capacity, the general public should be able to use the bus. If there is no capacity, there is no capacity. As you all well know, we have got some regional areas whose populations are booming, and I have got plenty of members who are telling me all the time that their

buses are full, but the state is not in a position to put on another one or contract the operator to put on a larger bus. They might have a small or a mid-size and they might have to go up to a large, and we understand that there are always funding constraints, but it is a fact that there are parts of the state, regional parts of the state, and in a way that is a good thing. If we are sending more children to regional and rural schools, that is a good thing. It is decentralising, and we need to find ways for government services to accompany that growth. But my point to you, Mr Quilty, is that if there is no capacity, there is no capacity; you cannot get on the bus.

What I do not have is a listing—of the 1400 current school bus services in the state, which have capacity and which do not. But what I also know is that it is very elastic every single day. I have got some operators down in Wonthaggi who go over to the island every day, and their buses are chockers; they have got people almost hanging out the windows. But there are some freak days where they have got capacity—kids are sick or they are going off to an appointment or whatever. It is elastic, it goes up and down. But there are definitely some services which are fuller than others, so it is a matter of understanding where there is capacity, and if there is none, well, I am sorry, there is none.

Mr QUILTY: Okay. We heard from other witnesses last hearing that they thought people would be far more enthusiastic with a gradual rollout—so, rather than letting the general public on the bus, if they let recent school graduates who had been on the bus continue to use the bus to go to TAFE and so on—

Dr LOWE: Yes.

Mr QUILTY: and gradually rolled it out that way, it would be more popular. Do you have an opinion on that?

Dr LOWE: I think that would be very good, a staged rollout. I think that is a great idea. Let us widen the net gradually, suck it and see. I think that would be a very reasonable approach, so long as the rules for that apprentice or that recent graduate to get on the bus are not as draconian as what they are at the moment. You know, the year 12 graduate who has just started an apprenticeship who might live, say, at Strathfieldsaye and wants to go into Bendigo every day should not have to go and get all the current requirements to get on that school bus. They should be able to just have a conversation with the school firstly or with the operator, and then they should be given permission to ride on a bus. The operator is informed, the driver is informed and they amend the route accordingly—which leads me to another point, if you just allow me 30 seconds. Most of these school buses, the 1400 school buses in the state, operate in rural parts—not so much regional parts, but they are rural services. They are very small communities, communities where everybody knows everybody. So if the bus operator, the bus driver or a principal of the school—or a designate of the principal—does not know that person who wants to get on the school bus, I would be very surprised. And if none of them do know the person—they might be a recluse or whatever—it will only be one or two degrees of separation to find someone who does know them who might be able to vouch for their candidature to get on the school bus.

If you are talking about regional Victoria, it is a different kettle of fish, because Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong have got huge populations—you are not going to know them—but in rural parts of the state, even if you wanted to start with just rural school buses and limit it there, I think you will find that either the operator or a designate of the school will be known to that person who wants to get on.

Mr QUILTY: Okay, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that, Dr Lowe. I have a couple of questions of my own. The first one is: you raised the point about capacity. Do you know if the departments capture the level of capacity on the different regional or rural school buses? Would they have that data? And I have got an additional question. In your submission you talked about the Castlemaine trial that is going on where there are GPS systems and other child safety measures. Can you tell us more about that pilot program and how it has progressed so far? So two parts, but yes.

Dr LOWE: Thank you, Chair. Yes, sure. So yes, the department has all the data about the capacity of each of the services. They are in fact contracted by the department of education to manage the entire school bus network. So the DoT know who and who is not on school buses and what the numbers are, what the capacities are. They have got systems in place to stay on top of it. They are called school bus service reviews, where they go to a school centre and they do a review of the school bus services. They look at whether the existing services are fit for purpose or whether they are surplus to requirements. And every now and again they take one out,

which sees my member go out of business, which is not a good thing. Now, since COVID, it all seems to have stopped because these communities are growing again, which is wonderful. So yes, the DoT have got all the facts and figures about capacity.

The second part of your question was about Castlemaine. I have paid for that. We are going to do this trial, but I cannot do it without the department of education's authority. I am confident that they will say yes because they can see our intent. We are trying to prove that this technology works and that the system can be more efficient than what it is. That is why we are doing it—to help government, show them how the system can be more effective and more efficient. We are delayed with that trial not because of the Department of Education but because of COVID. When things get back to a more normal situation, the principal and the DET will be engaging more with us, and the operator will be able to designate more time to be able to start the trial. But right now with COVID we just cannot do it.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that update. That puts it into context, because I saw it mentioned in the submission. Mrs Beverley McArthur? I think she might actually have just stepped out. Mr Barton or Mr Quilty, do you have any additional questions? Mr Barton, over to you.

Mr BARTON: Just on the ongoing concern, it seems to be that one of the biggest concerns is about the safety of young people on the school bus. There is no evidence that has been put to us that has been able to show that there is a concern that school buses would be any different to the level of safety on a public bus, for instance. But just to reassure the public, you mentioned that school buses should have cameras. I am a little surprised they do not have cameras, because all taxis have cameras and the big route buses have cameras. I am surprised they do not have them. Things like today it was suggested that any adults coming onto the bus would have to sit in the front, with all the kids behind. It was another possibility. At the last hearing I put to someone that perhaps there could be a volunteer from the local school on the school run in the morning and in the afternoon—one of the parents travelling with the kids as well. What other ways can we reassure the public and make them comfortable that it is no more dangerous than any other form of public transport?

Dr LOWE: Thank you for your question. I think the concept of the general public sitting in a designated seat is good. It just provides an extra level of safety, and the driver can keep an eye on them if they are not known to them. I think that is a good idea. Of course, you would be able to do that on some services. You would not be able to do it on all, because some of the children might just sit in their seat, and they get very upset if they do not. I think the idea of volunteers is a terrific idea. If there are mums and dads out there who would be prepared to sit on a school bus in the morning and the afternoon and the driver and the operator and the school were okay with that, to take on more of an informal babysitting role, no problem. Keep it in mind that we have got children as young as five all the way up to 17.

Another point I want to make is that none of this has really happened over the years, because the Department of Transport's legal department has been arguing with the department of education's legal department for about 50 years. That is the reason why we do not have this. People talk about 'Oh, what if a paedophile gets on the bus' and all this sort of nonsense. That is all just rubbish, absolute rubbish. The biggest social issue that we have on school buses is bullying. Now, if you have got an adult on the bus, that is going to reduce, and a nine-year-old is going to be far less inclined to bully another nine-year-old if there is an adult right by, because the adult, if they are a responsible citizen, is going to intervene and say, 'Oi, none of that'. The driver is going to appreciate that, because the driver cannot attend to the needs of all the children on the bus, because he is driving the bus. So adults on a school bus is a good thing. We want it to reduce bullying. That is the number one issue that touches our association all the time.

Having said that, the operator has got a lot of its own little tactics and strategies in place to deal with bullying already. Children—you know what they are like: they grow and we have all these issues. I do not need to tell you what they are. But what we have found is that some in their early teens are just really crying out for some responsibility. I have learned of several cases where they have had problematic children on their school buses but their behaviour has not really been, 'Oh, I'm going to be problematic'; their sub-text is, 'I'm capable of doing more. I want to do more'. And so the school bus operator has said, 'Look, I know we've had some problems, but what if I make you a bus captain and you have to be responsible and count all the kids that get on the bus every day and you have to make sure they get off safely and that they go to Mum's car and all that sort of stuff', and they have taken to it like a duck to water. They have changed their behaviour because they have

been given a little bit of responsibility. But the concept of a bus captain is another good thing that we could formalise. See, it is not a formal thing. It is just a relationship thing between the operator and the child.

Mr BARTON: Yes.

Dr LOWE: I think, where we can, we should try and formalise that, because that in itself will ensure greater compliant behaviour and increased public safety. Another point that is worth making is that we do not have school buses in metropolitan Melbourne. There are none. But trains, trams and buses—kids as little as five all way up to 17 get on buses in metropolitan Melbourne. What is the problem? We should be able to do it in the bush as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that, Dr Lowe. Mr Barton, do you have any more questions? We have got time for one more question, if you wish to do so. Or Mr Quilty?

Mr BARTON: No. Mr Quilty, if you have got one.

The CHAIR: No, he does not have any more questions, so Mr Barton, we have got time for one more question. On that point, Dr Lowe, I have really enjoyed reading your submission and you have been able to expand on that. On behalf of the whole committee, I wish to say thank you for your presentation before the committee in the hearing today. It has been very helpful. If any other questions appear later on, are you happy for us to reach out to you, if we have any more additional questions?

Dr LOWE: Yes, perfectly happy. Thank you for having me.

The CHAIR: It has been a pleasure. I appreciate that.

Witness withdrew.