

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Shepparton—Wednesday 13 September 2023

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESS

Bill Winters, Executive Officer and Secretary, RoadSafe Goulburn Valley.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users. All mobile 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 of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

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Thank you, Bill. We will do a quick introduction, and then we might come to you. If you would like to provide an opening statement, we would welcome that as well. I am Alison, the Member for Bellarine.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Hi, Bill. I am Kim. Lovely to have you here, thank you.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

Dylan WIGHT: Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

Jess WILSON: Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

Bill WINTERS: Welcome to the Goulburn Valley, and thank you for coming. We appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Bill. Do you have something you would like to talk to first, or are you happy for us to dive straight into some questions?

Bill WINTERS: I guess there will be a lot of questions, but I will just give you a bit of background. RoadSafe Goulburn Valley has been in existence for over 30 years now. A long time ago there were over 30 different groups through regional and metropolitan Victoria. Now we are down to about seven, so that gives you a bit of an indication of what is happening. This is paralleled in a lot of service clubs as well. There is a lack of involvement by the community in particularly these not-for-profits and community-based groups such as ours. We are pretty much a volunteer group. My history with road safety goes back a number of years. I had been the senior coordinator for the Berry Street L2P programs and recently finished that position and retired, and I had been a member of the RoadSafe group for some 13 years, sort of building up a bit of knowledge and experience along the way, which was important. The opportunity became available to become the executive officer for RoadSafe GV, and it has been a very interesting journey.

What are we about? We are just a community-based group. Collectively we have participants on our committee that come from the Wallan region right through to Yarrowonga. Our footprint covers that area as well but also right up into the hills, places like Alexandra and Mansfield, not quite into Benalla but into that typical Hume region, so that is what our focus is. Our funding comes through Regional Roads, and we have been very fortunate over quite a few years to have great support from what was called VicRoads. There is usually an officer that is attached to each of the RoadSafe groups. We have been, as I said, very fortunate to have a couple of really great people to support us.

Big picture: we know that the Victorian Government is there. We know that Regional Roads is there doing their bit, and VicRoads of course is doing their bit. But we are sort of a softer approach, if you like. We are community-based people. Most of us are in that demographic of being in our 60s, so we have got a lot of experience and age. Some of us are also survivors from car crashes, so we have that personal perspective as well.

That gives you a bit of an idea of what we are on about. Our funding comes from a grant system through Regional Roads, and we apply for those each year. We have a number of reporting periods through the year. There is focus in different categories. We focus on older road users, so we are talking about the vulnerable people; younger road users, those that are going into their learner and P1 stage; people with mobility devices and that type of thing; pedestrians; and cyclists. We pretty much cover the whole range. But also, if we have an opportunity, we try and provide forums to support the heavy truck driving and bus industries through forums.

We have had two in the last 12 months that we have sort of funded ourselves to try and get the right messages out there.

Following the council and VicPol, there are a lot of similarities and we sort of tag along with them. We hear words like ‘complacency’ and ‘lack of skill and knowledge’. You alluded to it before—that as people get older, they seem to have a lack of sense of the actual road rules that are current at the moment. It was good that that point was raised.

I am happy to take questions.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you so much, Bill.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Thank you, Bill. It is actually really good following Cool Heads. You are obviously dealing with students as well.

Bill WINTERS: I have been involved with that as well in the past, yes.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Yes, really good. I have actually sat in on the whole program; it is amazing. It is really interesting to hear the more mature drivers. I like to use that word ‘mature’ rather than ‘older’ because we do hear people are driving longer in years—like, they will drive for longer. They will have a licence over their 80s sometimes. Is the program specific in regard to that—if you have got elderly people or older residents? I know as a family member when you have a person that you feel should not be driving—and the assessment process is that it is really up to the family or the person to decide if they want to drive—do you have any guidance on pretty much when the time is up, or is there an opportunity of discussion when you feel that they are no longer safe? I am trying to work out the gap that I see for vulnerable drivers, and particularly post COVID. I know a lot of those elderly people did not drive for quite some time. One of my neighbours gave up driving straight after COVID because she lost her confidence. She was also quite elderly, so I think that was pleasing. But in saying that, I think there would have been a bit of a cohort like that that perhaps remained driving and perhaps did not still have the confidence. Then there are those, like the one that I know, that did stop driving. Is that part of your program—to assess and guide?

Bill WINTERS: Yes, it is. It comes under the ‘safer driver and passenger’ category, really. I noticed myself that for a number of weeks I did not drive during the pandemic, and I sensed a drop in my skill set. I am a very experienced driver. I had been out on the road quite often with learner drivers, so my mind is conditioned for looking and scanning and giving the right directions and having the right reactions in the car. Those are some of the conversations we do have with older road users. Other than perhaps having safer vehicles as a choice, maybe they need to look at their skill set as well—are they still capable of driving? It is not all about the young people as well, like the guys spoke about before. They are not sort of popping up in the categories as we might think and as they have in the past. I think that answers your question.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Yes. Just finally on that, you do feel that COVID did impact—you personally felt it yourself?

Bill WINTERS: I did, yes.

Kim O’KEEFFE: And there would be a cohort of drivers that are probably still feeling like that—they have lost a bit of confidence, and just to be able to get them to either not driving anymore, which is a shame, or feeling the confidence.

Bill WINTERS: As an absolute, yes.

Kim O’KEEFFE: Yes. Thank you for that.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you. John.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair. On that theme of—it is more ‘mature’, is it?

Kim O’KEEFFE: ‘Mature’ drivers.

John MULLAHY: Mature drivers. How can the Victorian Government improve safety for mature pedestrians in regional areas?

Bill WINTERS: I think it is all about education. That is what our focus is. It is the grey matter between the ears. I think if you do not use it, you lose it, and the pandemic showed that in a number of weeks you tend to lose it. I imagine over a long period of time that could happen. Pedestrians and cyclists are very vulnerable on our roads, and I think it is important that we continue messaging all the time—keep the message up. There does not appear to be enough of it at the moment.

The CHAIR: Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Bill, for being here and all the work that RoadSafe Goulburn Valley does. A large proportion of Shepparton's population was born overseas, very similar to the district that I represent. What are the key road safety messages that you find most important to these community members, and what is the best way of getting that message across? Is it material in other languages, or is it sort of engaging face to face and in forums et cetera?

Bill WINTERS: I think engaging face to face is the best way, and we have found through the L2P program that there were a lot of new arrivals at the parent level. They did not have a very good understanding of English and our road rules. Road rules are very complex in Victoria. We have a lot of rules and some of the countries that they come from do not have that many, so we found the best way to get the messages through was through the young people. They would then translate it or whatever and explain exactly what was happening. A good example that was brought up before was people crossing the road, not going across the crossing as such like a school crossing but actually going diagonally across. We know with the work that we did with the Shepparton English Language Centre that it was important to get the message across to the parents that, 'No, you don't walk across diagonally when you just jump out of the car. You go down to the crossing and wait until it's okay to get across.' They did not quite understand that. We find that that is the best way of getting the messages through. Local principals are telling us now that maybe the boat has already gone with the older people, but let us focus on the young people and see if we can influence them and they can take forward the messages. This is why we put so much work into Safer Cycling and such as well.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Jess.

Jess WILSON: Thanks, Chair. And thanks, Bill, very much for taking the time today. I think it has been really useful coming back off the Cool Heads program and then into your discussion. I would be keen to understand some of the synergies between the two programs. We have heard that you work with different organisations and schools, but how do you, I suppose, get in front of as many people as possible? How do you garner that audience, and what more could be done to support you doing that? I know you rely on grants, but is there a greater ability to share the fact that you exist with certain organisations to make sure that more people get access to your advice and services?

Bill WINTERS: Well, over the last year or so that I have been involved directly as an executive officer I have built up a database, a distribution list at different levels—so secondary and primary and service clubs et cetera. Periodically I would send out information about particular programs that we have developed, such as Looking After Our Mates, Safer Vehicles and How Safe is Your Car?—those types of things. It has been picked up fairly widely, and it is important to keep working on it and to keep sending those messages out. So I would do that probably every few weeks and try and garner a bit of interest. The schools love it, particularly at that year 10, 11, 12 time when they are going into their Ls and P1s et cetera. It is important to get that message out there, so we work very hard on that, albeit it is difficult because of the lack of funding. We do have a Facebook site as well and we find that has some responses, which is good. I know with the L2P program through the support from VicRoads last year, they did a massive campaign to get volunteers on board, and that had hundreds—so Facebook works. It does work. That is the new medium at the moment. Traditional newspaper outlets—maybe not so much. It is only those people that purchase the newspapers, I guess, and do they read the ads? I am not sure of that myself. I am guilty of missing ads as well. That is what we do, and it is important to get that message out to the young people because they are in a learning stage in their life. At, say, 16 through to 30 their capacity to take on information and knowledge is just tremendous, and it is so different to when I got my licence all those years ago. We spoke recently about how 50-odd years ago over 1,000 people

would have lost their lives on the Victorian roads. Now we will probably come in somewhere around the 200-plus mark this year, which is still exceptionally high considering what has happened in the last few years, and we have just got to keep working on it.

Jess WILSON: Can I just ask one follow-up question?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Jess WILSON: Just in terms of when you go to schools in particular, do you charge them to run the programs?

Bill WINTERS: No, absolutely not. It is a point I make, because all the schools have not got funding for it. When I first started doing it, I was pretty much just following the script, 'This is it, looking after our mates.' We would talk about making the right choices and being safe. We would talk about peer pressure being also a positive thing and how peer pressure works for you to make the right decisions: 'Hey, maybe you should not be driving. Is there a better way of getting home? Do we have a taxi service or whatever?' And then after awhile I sort of twigged about maybe throwing in a bit of personal content, my story about what happened to me when I was a young person making the wrong choice, and it was a bit confronting at first. I thought, 'Hello, I don't really talk about this,' and I had not spoken about it. But I find it is a great tool because all of a sudden you have the attention of the young people—this is real, this has happened to this guy and he has gone through all those struggles over all those years to be what he is today, being committed and putting a lot of passion into it. And the kids pick up on the vibes, you know? They understand it and they walk away. And you know you have got them when they come up to you afterwards and have a chat about road safety. Then that is an opportunity for me to talk also about their social commitment and putting back into the community.

I alluded to this right at the beginning: we are seeing in service clubs all over Australia, and I guess the world, a lack of involvement. How do we get people involved? How do we get that younger demographic involved in road safety? It is not a sexy subject, and that is a problem, you see. How do we get it? Do we need a lot of dollars put into it? Do we need a lot of personalities put into it to sort of drive home those key messages? We really need to get away from the city because everything seems to be Melbourne-centric. We see the big builds down here, but we are not seeing the big builds in the country areas, really. The roads are deplorable. We know that—that is a given—so what do we do next? We have to try to affect the way people think. Complacency popped up quite a lot, you know, and arrogance as well in attitude, but it is over the board. It is not just young people; there are older people. They have lost a sense of what the road rules really are because the world has gone past them.

Jess WILSON: Thank you, Bill.

Bill WINTERS: Your turn.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Bill. Look, there is so much to pick up on there, but I will just focus more on the road safety messaging side of things. I mean, you pointed out the fact that many years ago the road toll annually was around 1,000 a year, if not more, in certain years in the mid to late 1970s, but after decades of work and years of work over successive Victorian governments of all persuasions and the establishment of the TAC we have managed to bring that right down, even though it is still very high, as you acknowledge. But am I correct in saying over those earlier years in driving down the road toll the messaging from the TAC, from government, was a lot clearer because the issues might have been a lot clearer to address? For example, at the time it was about enforcing the seatbelt rule, it was about addressing drink driving and it was about addressing speeding, but as we fast forward to today, as you point out, there are so many other elements and so many things that are different to when you first got your licence, like around driver distractions and phones and EarPods and all the technology in cars. Drug driving is another one, and there are post-COVID behaviours and forgetfulness of road rules pre COVID. So I guess, going back to road safety messaging, how do we, going forward as a government or as a committee, nuance that messaging in ways that target those actual issues, those behaviours that are causing the road toll to still remain concerningly high?

Bill WINTERS: Perhaps we look at messaging using well-known characters—people, personalities—and maybe those who have survived a car crash. Maybe have it directed from young people to young people, older people to older people, if you understand what I am saying, to get those messages through. The beauty of time is that it passes by. We saw the introduction of seatbelts in 1970, and then over time technology changed: cars

got a lot better; the technology within the cars improved as well. But I think we have got to that tipping point now where maybe there is too much—there are too many distractions in the car. People need to focus on what their job is, and their job is to operate a motor vehicle—not just drive it, operate it. To follow on a little bit about the road conditions, so many people were complaining about hitting potholes in the road and destroying their wheels and tyres. I drive a lot, but I do not hit that many potholes because I see them. This is what happens: I think people are focusing a little bit too much on maybe what is happening within the car but maybe just not scanning the distance and not really watching the road and driving to their conditions.

Anthony CIANFLONE: So potentially going back to first principles about driving the vehicle, operating the vehicle, is a key message that we should focus on or look at.

Bill WINTERS: It is, yes, because the police will tell you also that there are so many people who jump in a car that do not put their seatbelts on. Hey, we have had seatbelts for over 50 years, and they had a dramatic effect on lowering the road toll, as it was called then, and that is important. Maybe the messaging could be a bit of a time line thing—‘Look what’s happened over the last 50-odd years, all these introductions to reduce the figures.’ My answer is to have targeted messaging to particular groups. There just does not appear to be enough of that.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Bill. I might just add a little bit onto that. Is it also about taking responsibility when getting in a car? I do not know whether your programs talk about it to young people, about the responsibility they have when they have a licence.

Bill WINTERS: It is, and the police alluded to it before as well, about the graduated licensing system—a fantastic system, 120 hours of driving experiences. Every time we get into a car it is a different driving experience as well, so that is important. But one of the things we talk about in Looking After Our Mates is that it is not all about the driver; it is the passengers as well. You have got a responsibility to look after the driver and the passengers. If you see something coming up, make them aware of it—‘Are you aware of the cow on the side of the road? Are you aware of the bus pulling out?’ There is too much carry-on in a car. I think all passengers, all people in the car, need to act responsibly. We have got a very important job: to get from A to B.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. Thank you, Bill, for your time. I am sorry; we probably could keep going with some further questions.

Bill WINTERS: We could, yes.

The CHAIR: We really do appreciate your time today in sharing the wealth of knowledge that you have had over these years, so thank you.

Bill WINTERS: Can I leave some information with you as well? It gives you a bit of an idea of what we do, because there is just so much we cover.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. And if anything has been sparked from our conversation today, you are more than welcome to write to us further as well—so thank you.

Witness withdrew.