TRANSCRIPT

ROAD SAFETY COMMITTEE

Inquiry into serious injury

Melbourne — 22 July 2013

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Mr J. Cleaver, policy adviser, transport and infrastructure committee, and

Mr B. Morris, manager, environment, Municipal Association of Victoria.

The CHAIR — Mr Cleaver and Mr Morris, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the Victorian parliamentary Road Safety Committee to contribute to its investigations in relation to serious injuries and related matters. I remind you that the evidence you give here today is protected by parliamentary privilege but comments made outside this room are not so protected. The transcript will become a matter of public record. If there are any matters which you would like to make in camera to us, we can also facilitate that process. You will receive a copy of the Hansard transcript in a couple of weeks, and your task will then be to amend it and make any necessary corrections and return it. The amendments should be just typographical and factual corrections. I would like you to speak to us, following which we will be pleased to ask you a number of questions. I invite you to make your submission.

Mr CLEAVER — Thank you for inviting us to present to the Road Safety Committee inquiry into serious injury. Councils are an infrastructure owner and maintainer. Council's role is to work with other agencies to implement road safety countermeasures. This is based on the advice of organisations such as Austroads, VicRoads and the TAC on what works, what does not and what is best practice. To that end the MAV submission focused on two elements of the inquiry's terms of reference to determine the correlation between reductions in fatalities and serious injuries resulting from different road safety countermeasures and identify cost-effective countermeasures to reduce serious injury occurrence and severity. We feel the other questions in this inquiry are best directed to the appropriate experts.

Councils and the MAV have very good relationships with road safety agencies, particularly VicRoads and TAC. This facilitates advice and information exchange on the most effective road safety countermeasures to reduce both fatalities and serious injury crashes. In May the MAV transport infrastructure committee met — and it includes a number of councillors and senior officers — with a special focus on road safety, including a presentation from road safety expert David Healy. In June the MAV hosted the local government road safety officer network, which facilitates information exchange among councils at the officer level. This meeting also included a guest presentation from the TAC.

Both of these forums reinforced the links between road safety experts and the infrastructure managers, which are critical to achieving on-ground improvements in safety. Councils and the MAV also work closely with VicRoads and the TAC to deliver very successful road safety grant programs such as the VicRoads community road safety partnership program and the TAC road safety grant program. These programs fund small-scale community-based activities and infrastructure such as pedestrian refuges in high-risk locations, mobile speed signs, driver training initiatives, such as the L2P program, and point-operated breathalysers in venues such as RSL clubs.

These programs are based on a simple formula whereby the TAC and VicRoads provide information on what works and what is best practice research. The state government contributes financially. That is usually matched by councils' own funds, and the community and councils contribute by identifying the issues and locations that need to be addressed and providing community engagement and buy-in, which is essential to a program's ongoing success.

To return to the inquiry's terms of reference, point (d) focuses on road safety countermeasures which we take to mean hard infrastructure. I would also like to note that councils and community groups are heavily involved in education, training and awareness raising, including those programs funded by the government grant programs. The soft infrastructure is equally as important as the hard infrastructure in reducing fatalities and serious injuries.

In relation to hard infrastructure, councils implement a number of countermeasures including local area traffic management programs, intersection treatment, wire rope barriers and speed limit reductions. The MAV's written submission provided further details on how these types of countermeasures are implemented. However, I would like to emphasise that the costs associated with comprehensive hard infrastructure programs is very high and beyond the resources of many councils, particularly in rural areas. Although countermeasures like wire rope barriers are known to be effective at reducing facilities and serious injuries in run-off-the-road-type crashes, for rural councils with massive road length, distributed crash history, low crash rates but high-risk infrastructure — for instance, trees very close to the roadside — such countermeasures can rarely be afforded.

These challenges are exacerbated by lack of accurate data about total road use, crash rates, types of crashes and their cause. Critically, rural councils face ongoing difficulty in adequately funding basic road maintenance and

rely on federal and state government assistance. These are the reasons why the ARRB Group research indicated that recent advances in road safety outcomes on arterial roads have not been matched on local roads, and according to ARRB there is a one and a half to two times greater risk when driving on local roads compared with arterial roads.

Although this inquiry is seeking to identify the most cost-effective road safety countermeasures, a determination of cost-effectiveness necessarily involves an assessment — a road safety treatment's cost relative to the crash frequency risk, and the savings associated from crash prevention. For many councils with massive road length, such countermeasures can rarely be justified on roads with low and distributed crash history, even if the roads are known to be high risk, hence the aggregate poor performance of these roads continues. That is the end of my presentation. I am happy to take questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Cleaver.

Mr PERERA — Thank you very much for the presentation. To what extent do councils or the MAV access crash data from police, VicRoads and the TAC?

Mr CLEAVER — There is a very high level of engagement between councils and VicRoads in relation to crash data and using crash data to inform their activities, and councils have strong networks with their local officers that might exist in a formal setting. They might have formal meetings on a regular basis, or they might have an informal relationship whereby the council road safety officers pick up the phone and talk to the local customer, and vice versa.

Mr PERERA — All the three agencies? Police, VicRoads — —

Mr CLEAVER — Yes, and in terms of VicRoads and the TAC, VicRoads regional officers and councils have very good relationships as well. Looking at asset management and infrastructure issues, they work very closely. In terms of the TAC, that relationship is more focused on delivering some of the TAC programs like the driver training programs that councils are involved in, in delivering to their communities, like the L2P program. So those links are very strong throughout the state and are very important.

Mr PERERA — Are there other working groups that you currently operate on?

Mr CLEAVER — Yes. There are informal sorts of networks that we participate in, like the road safety officer network that meets on a quarterly basis. That has 30 to 40 councils involved in it, and at those meetings there is discussion among the councils and there are also TAC and VicRoads representatives involved. There is information sharing, discussion about programs that are under way and discussion of how best to deliver those and improve them.

Mr PERERA — What data, if any, do councils and the MAV collect on crashes that occur on local roads?

Mr CLEAVER — That is a significant challenge, not because the data on crashes that occur is not available, but the difficulty is linking that data to an appropriate response. For example, for a rural council with massive road links where we are aware that the roads have high-risk features— for instance, alignment issues, trees close to the roadside — and where there would be a crash history because the roads have quite low use, the crash history is quite dispersed. So even though there are areas of high risk in the networks, the dispersed crash history makes it very difficult to target a particular area with a particular intervention.

So where there is room to improve, that data is looking overall at the total use and how that use and the evidence of crashes interact, and trying to develop some causal relationship there, but also to identify that the crash history is not necessarily going to tell you where the highest risk areas are. For instance, on the Mornington Peninsula recently a road safety officer of Mornington Peninsula showed me a picture of the Peninsula Link — the new road down there — with lots of lanes in each direction and all the latest safety features, and it has a 100-kilometre-an-hour speed limit. But then another road with massive pine trees that have trunks that are a metre or two metres in diameter, which are a metre or two off the side of the road, with the road only being one and a half lanes wide, is also a 100-kilometre-an-hour speed limit. So focusing on those high-risk roads may or may not be supported by the crash history because with roads like that you really know it is only a matter of time.

Mr PERERA — With local roads, normally VicRoads would not have a role. Is it just the police data when it comes to local roads?

Mr CLEAVER — Yes, it is primarily the police data.

Mr PERERA — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Just one small further point: is this data shared across councils?

Mr CLEAVER — The data on the crash history? Yes. Victoria Police holds the data, and then councils will work with the police to interpret it and try to identify how that would impact on their planning and maintenance issues, and then in terms of the links between the councils the neighbouring municipalities will have very strong relationships and discuss those issues together as well, and then obviously with the other forums that we host those discussions take place as well. But with all issues where the data is complex and could be prone to misinterpretation, it is very important that Victoria Police has the responsibility to manage that dataset and then councils work with the police on how best to interpret it and what it actually means and what their focus should be in terms of responding to some of the challenges that are raised.

Mr ELSBURY — You have been rather glowing about the relationship between VicRoads and councils in sharing the data, but no system is perfect. Is there any room for improvement, and are there any impediments to the sharing of data between the agency and your councils?

Mr CLEAVER — That was a question that I specifically put to the councils in terms of providing input to this process, and I think that whilst I agree that no system is perfect the council engagement with VicRoads, notwithstanding that there might be a few issues here and there, on the whole is a very strong one. VicRoads has recently gone through a significant restructure, and the information that I have received is that that has not hampered that relationship at all, and the relationship continues to be a good one. Another thing to add is the presence of the VicRoads regional officers in different parts of the state. Whereas the MAV has a strong relationship with head office, individual councils have very strong relationships with their regional office and we try to bring those together.

Mr ELSBURY — Also, in relation to when a countermeasure is installed on a local road, are you aware of councils having any methodology in place to check on the effectiveness of the countermeasure, or does the MAV have a policy that it brings forward? I know that usually ratepayers are the ones that make you aware if something has not gone right, but is there a formal process in place?

Mr CLEAVER — Different councils will use different processes to determine how effective the countermeasures are, but at the front end of that process is using the VicRoads and the TAC information to determine what is an appropriate response to a particular scenario. VicRoads produced guidelines on different sorts of infrastructure — for instance, pedestrian infrastructure, cycle infrastructure, road alignment — and councils will use that guideline material in the first instance to determine which path they are going to take. Then after the project is completed, councils will vary in terms of the extent or formality with which they analyse how effective it has been.

So some interventions will be accompanied by a fairly comprehensive analysis done by a contracted professional, and that will be done in instances where maybe a newer treatment is being used and they want to have a bit more robust analysis conducted before that treatment is repeated, but in the cases where a treatment is known to be an effective one, the councils have more of a 'Get on with it' approach. Then obviously there will always be feedback in terms of the residents, or if there are some accidents the council will respond to that, but for known treatments that are known to be effective there is definitely a 'Get on with it' mentality — where the money is available, obviously.

Mr LANGUILLER — Thank you for your submission. It highlights unique issues with local roads which limit the use of engineering countermeasures for reasons including the size of the road network, the cost of evaluating countermeasures in rural areas and on local roads, and the reduced ability to rely on clusters of crashes to identify problem areas on the network. Given these issues, particularly the size of the local road network, how in your view should cost-effective countermeasures be assessed on local roads and in rural areas?

Mr CLEAVER — I suppose to return to the rural area issue — and there is no doubt that this is a very challenging part of the issue for the committee to address — the feedback that I have had from councils is that more of a thematic approach could be taken to identifying highest risk types of infrastructure that would be targeted rather than relying on the crash history. For instance, in areas where there are large trees in proximity to the road, those areas should be targeted either by the wire rope barriers or reduced speed limits or an intervention like that, across the network where appropriate, rather than waiting for the crash history to accumulate.

As far as the metro councils are concerned, the real challenge with the implementation of road safety countermeasures that can reduce travel time is like water flowing through the path of least resistance. Drivers of cars will rat-run to avoid a set of speed humps or other countermeasures that have been installed, so a road safety problem can be moved from one area to another. So a significant part of that analysis is identifying the alternative routes that motorists might take to get around a new piece of infrastructure and ensuring that a holistic view is taken, looking at a whole local area and at where the risks and less safe areas are and addressing the area in a comprehensive fashion, rather than looking at the issue on a street-by-street basis and then potentially causing a problem to be moved elsewhere just by targeting a particular street or set of streets.

Mr LANGUILLER — Are you aware whether there has been any analysis of give-way signs versus stop signs, for example?

Mr CLEAVER — That is not something that we have discussed. In the various road safety networks meetings that we are involved in, the focus is more on the vulnerable road users and what you can do to protect pedestrians and cyclists in the metro areas and in the rural areas — some of those thematic issues. I think that give-way signs and stop signs would be fairly comprehensively addressed by the VicRoads guidelines for determining where it is appropriate to use those sorts of pieces of infrastructure, and the councils respond to the VicRoads guidelines. It is not a matter of debate in our networks.

Mr LANGUILLER — Thank you. In your view, what steps need to be taken to deal with the currently reduced capacity of councils to assess road safety risks and implement countermeasures that deal with them?

Mr CLEAVER — That is a very challenging area. In addition to the earlier comment that I made about taking a more thematic approach, it is probably important to acknowledge that councils would take different views on that question. Some councils might suggest that we need to encourage people to drive less, that we need to provide more transport options for non-drivers and foster less car dependency and that that would be an important way to reduce the impact of serious injury crashes and fatalities. Other councils would suggest that the speed limit is the most important issue. Whereas the rural default speed limit is 100 kilometres per hour and it can be very difficult to have a lower speed limit imposed in even some high-risk locations, some councils would say that the rural speed limit should be 80 kilometres per hour or maybe even different from that and that, going through the process to set the speed limit, the road manager would need to demonstrate a higher level of safety in order for the speed limit on a road to be set at 100 kilometres per hour, rather than 80 or whatever it could be. These are very challenging matters because there is no unanimity among councils about the best approach. That is just a range of suggestions I have heard.

Mr LANGUILLER — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Mr Cleaver, what are some of the best road safety measures developed and implemented by local councils?

Mr CLEAVER — I think that again we need to look at metro and rural councils slightly differently. For metro councils it is definitely the measures that are reducing speed limits and protecting the vulnerable users. The recent efforts through the VicRoads and government's speed limit review have been very worthwhile in terms of identifying improvements to the way speed limits are set to improve safety and then combining those with separate lanes for cyclists and pedestrian refuges for high-risk crossings. They have been very successful.

Where councils are most successful in that space is generally by having good information about the natural path that pedestrians take through the landscape. It might be that the outcome of that analysis is that the pedestrian crossing is 50 or 60 metres up the road and so no-one uses it. 'This is the place that people cross, so that is where an intervention needs to be made'. That works very well. With a higher level of use you have a lot of data that you can make a decision on.

But in a rural setting, where there is not necessarily a lot of data that you can rely on, councils are relying more on the knowledge of VicRoads and the TAC on what works. To that end things like wire rope barriers have proven to be very effective in preventing serious injury, accidents and fatalities in a lot of areas where there are lots of trees around and off the roadside. That can be a real hazard. Then obviously there are road maintenance issues, alignment issues, the creation of special dedicated turning lanes for right turns so that the car is not necessarily in the flow of the traffic while it is waiting for an opportunity to turn right.

There are a number of new interventions that have been developed in Gippsland, rumble strips and things like that, that have been quite effective coming into T-intersections at main roads and things like that to prevent people accidentally driving straight through the intersection. The measures are developed by VicRoads and the TAC based on what is going on around the world, and then the councils are very much responding to those guidelines and that material rather than developing their own.

Mr LANGUILLER — Through the Chair, if I may interrupt you, firstly, regarding roundabouts and stop signs, I am very cognisant of your submission that you listen to VicRoads and you are pretty much guided by them. I am also cognisant of the limited resources that councils have. But do you not think that there is a role for you, given that of all the jurisdictions you are on the ground much more than other authorities, to also put points of view and countermeasures based on your potential observations and anecdotal research, if any, or in other areas?

In my work in my area I usually have many more conversations with council officers than I do with VicRoads, because they happen to walk the streets, they happen to be driving around, they happen to be there. A number of times council officers have come to me and said, 'Look, we need a pedestrian crossing' or 'We need a roundabout along a certain road in Sunshine', and they are pretty much onto it more proactively, if I might suggest, than VicRoads, which is a big instrumentality. I hear you say you work for VicRoads and you pretty much roll out what they suggest should be corrected based on international evidence and so on, but sometimes a good policy is very much a local policy, is it not?

Mr CLEAVER — Yes. I think there are two parts to that issue. One is the council identifying the problem and then getting on with finding a solution. I absolutely agree that councils need to be empowered to do that. The other part is the identification of the appropriate solution for a particular scenario. When you are looking at the council's ability to get on and do things, then that is absolutely critical. When you are talking about the more technical aspects of the alignment of a roundabout or a similar piece of infrastructure, that is where it is important that all councils use similar guidelines for the actual construction of that asset. From the driver's point of view it is important that approaches to roundabouts, speed limits and things like that have a consistent flavour and that the councils are responding to that.

That is notwithstanding the fact that there is often a negotiation around what is the appropriate response for each scenario. I think it is very good to have those negotiations rather than have a potential for councils necessarily to develop their own responses to some of those larger scale infrastructure questions, which could then result in inconsistency around the network on some of those alignment questions that could also have a safety impact.

Mr ELSBURY — Under the heading 'Rural local roads issues' in your submission you state:

> Data — councils' ability to develop strategies to reduce crash risks on local roads is hindered by a lack of accurate information about total local road use, crash rates, the types of crashes that occur and causes of these crashes.

What do you see as the solution to that particular issue? You have noted that there is limited funding for that sort of thing. I am seeking your input as to how you would see that being resolved.

Mr CLEAVER — There is no doubt that that is a significant challenge. I would be more inclined to direct that question to some of the other expert witnesses in terms of developing the best solution to that question. From the MAV's perspective it is a real challenge because for councils so many of these things come down to dollars. It is very difficult to have an objective discussion when on the one hand there are serious injuries and fatalities and on the other hand there is a question as to what is the best thing to spend money on and where those two meet.

Mr ELSBURY — Would a study assist — something that builds some sort of formula that your members could use, or something along those lines? We are not talking about putting counters on every single road in

every single municipality — that would be just ridiculous — but certainly if there was some method of working out population density versus the number of people on roads equals road use so that you have some sort of base to work from so you could say, 'Yes, 15 crashes on our roads is unacceptable because the average is only 3'?

Mr CLEAVER — Yes, absolutely. Ultimately that needs to be based on some sort of analysis of the total road use, which can be very difficult to get at. But to return to one of the comments that I made earlier, this is the wicked part of the problem. Trying to improve the data to create that data-driven basis for subsequent development of countermeasures and infrastructure changes is always going to be very difficult to do.

The feedback that we have had through this process is that rather than necessarily relying on the data to drive those decisions perhaps an alternative could be to develop more of a thematic approach to look at the infrastructure aspects that are more likely to be high risk — for instance, the proximity of trees to the road — and then target those particular areas, even if there is an absence of good data to justify that.

Just returning to that speed limit question, some councillors and some council officers would just say, 'Where there are large trees within 2 metres of the roadside and then basically zero shoulder, that should not be a 100-kilometre speed zone' and that coming from the other side of the issue should be the approach rather than waiting for the crash stats and methodology to be developed and then that data to be used to inform subsequent decisions. Just look at where anyone driving down the road — local police or local council officers — could fairly confidently say, 'Well, this shouldn't be 100 kilometres here'.

Mr LANGUILLER — I am cognisant of your submission. I think it would be remiss of me not to ask you a question and give you an opportunity to answer it. Given the increasing phenomenon of cycling and the growth in numbers of cyclists, and in light of the overrepresentation among vulnerable road users in terms of casualties and serious injuries and so on, do you wish to make any broad comments in relation to cycling and cyclists in the context of our inquiry?

Mr CLEAVER — In terms of the development of countermeasures there has been a significant amount of progress made over the last 10 years, particularly in terms of the development of cycling infrastructure, and that is something that is definitely improving over time. The creation of separated paths is definitely a positive development. The research demonstrates that in particular young men are happy to ride out in the traffic; women and older and younger people are far more inclined to ride on more separated facilities. Another part of that issue is that active transport, walking and cycling, have significant benefits for your health and significantly less impact on other infrastructure than car driving. Economic analysis of those benefits and savings to the health system and the like should be a feature of the decision-making for how our cities are designed as well as having a more comprehensive approach to road safety rather than looking at the impacts of crashes.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time, Mr Cleaver, and for attending today. You will get a copy of the transcript. Please correct any typographical and factual errors and return it to us. On completion we will be putting it on our website. Thank you for attending today.

Mr CLEAVER — Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.