

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

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Organisation Name:Wattle bank Community Group Inc

Your position or role: President

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

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Moragh A Tyler

Submission to the Economy and Infrastructure Standing Committee – Legislative Council

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

Introduction

The following submission has been compiled by the committee members of the Wattle Bank Community Group Inc. with input from residents in Wattle Bank. Wattle Bank is a rural hamlet comprising of 111 small acreage properties and farms. There are no amenities or facilities in the immediate area necessitating residents to travel to nearby towns for shopping, education, recreational and health services and facilities. There is no public transport and the community relies on 3 school buses to transport children to the local primary and secondary schools. Isolation for the young, elderly and single car families is problematic. Living in Wattle Bank is not sustainable if you do not have access to a vehicle and cannot drive. Taxis are not readily available and are too expensive for residents to use regularly. The pandemic has highlighted the isolation problem as lack of socialization and inability to access nearby towns has been a significant issue and has increased the mental health problems associated with online learning, lock downs and anxiety associated with COVID 19.

The community is situated 11km from Wonthaggi, 9 km from Inverloch, 32 km from Leongatha, 22km from Korumburra, 32km from San Remo and 43km from Rhyll. The community is divided by Lynnes Road and bordered by the Inverloch Kongwak Road; both of which have 100km/hr speed limits, are narrow, single carriageways, have bends and concealed driveways, have no footpaths and deep drains on the verges. The demographic of the community has changed since the last census from retirees and families with older children to mainly young families. Development due to subdivision has and continues to increase the population. In 18 months, it is anticipated that there will be over 200 properties in Wattle Bank. Growth is placing greater demands on local schools and the school buses network. Lack of public transport increases isolation for “stay at home parents”, young people and the elderly.

Current School Buses Servicing Wattle Bank

1. Wonthaggi - carries children attending Wonthaggi Secondary College years 7-12 and primary school students P-6 from:-

Wonthaggi Primary School,
Wonthaggi North Primary School
and St Joseph’s School.

The bus stops at multiple locations along the 100km road that passes through the community. There is a school bus stop but it is too dangerous for students to walk or cycle to due to the busy road. Some parents drive to the bus stop but there is little parking. Most students have to change buses at the Wonthaggi Secondary, School Senior Campus.

2. Leongatha – Mary Mackillop Catholic Regional College years 7-12

The bus has one designated stop that is not near any properties and parents have to drive to it.

3. Rhyll – Newhaven College years P-12

The bus has one designated stop that most parents drive to.

Students who attend Inverloch/Kongwak Primary School have no school bus. It should be noted that Kongwak is the closest Primary School to Wattle Bank.

Use of School Buses System in Wattle Bank

We believe that we can only make recommendations to the enquiry based on our community. Currently, there are safety and logistical concerns about the school bus system in our area and we believe that it could not cope with the additional demands of allowing public access to the mainstream school bus network. However, we acknowledge that the school bus network has the potential to service the public but only with constraints that would not undermine the role that school buses fulfil to transport Kindergarten to year 12 students. Parents entrust the safety and wellbeing of their children to the bus driver and the school bus service allows them to work on properties and in other town using their time and petrol money more effectively. School buses are a vital and integral part of our community and the bus driver and students on the bus supply an important socialization and wellbeing role to our children's lives. Children often share happy and sad events with friends on the bus or the driver. Children travel on the school bus for years; often with the same driver. The school bus community becomes like a family. We would not like this to be compromised by having members of the public travelling on the school bus.

Current Concerns Raised By Parents

- Safety of frequently stopping bus along single lane, 100km/hr zoned road with limited shoulder. The community believes that there is constant, high risk of an accident. Some children cross the road to use the bus and there are no pedestrian crossings. There is limited parking for parents and lack of paths to allow for safe access to the stationary bus.
- Inadequate monitoring system of who should be on the bus such that if a child misses the bus no one knows where they are. This is particularly worrying for younger primary students unfamiliar with the bus route, the demands of changing bus and anxiety associated with busy environment and older students.
- Inadequate communication with parents when there is a change in the schedule due to traffic conditions, early finishing due to power outages or other emergencies. There seems to be devolution of responsibility from the Primary Schools to the Wonthaggi Secondary School Bus Coordinator and therefore parents lack confidence in the system and do not know who to speak to when things go wrong due to lack of process across the network. Protocol for communication between bus drivers and the Wonthaggi Secondary School Bus Coordinator seems to reduce the speed and effectiveness of parents being informed about problems on the bus.
- The school bus network seems to be reactive and based on demand at the beginning of the year. There seems to be no forward planning based on future enrolments, location of the students' homes or projective data of the region.

Additional Concerns as a Result of Allowing Public Access to the School Bus Network

- There would be safety concerns around allowing public access to the school bus network. Working with Children Checks are required for all volunteers, employees and parents interacting with children in schools and on excursions. It is difficult to reconcile this requirement with a school bus system that would allow unvetted members of the public to travel with children. It would be difficult to implement and enforce Working with Children Checks for members of the public using the school bus. In addition, when children travel on school buses parents have different expectations regarding safety to when children travel on public transport. Parents allow younger children to travel on school buses than they would on public buses. There is the concern that allowing the public to use school buses would stop young children using the school bus network.

- Our current school buses travel to schools which are not near the town centres. Other stops would be required for the public which would increase travel time.
- Members of the public travelling on school buses would place greater demands on bus drivers who would have to monitor seating arrangements, interactions and getting on and off the bus more closely.
- School bus times would not suit some of the public as they would have to stay at their destination until the end of the school day for the return journey.
- Isolation due to lack of public transport in rural areas is a real problem for young people in Wattle Bank but more so during the school holidays and weekends than during school term. School buses used in their current form would not assist with this issue.
- Many school bus stops are in isolated locations and waiting with members of the public would be a safety concern for school children.
- Evaluating spare seating capacity on school bus routes would be impossible with the current system. Daily attendance data is not always available to bus drivers meaning that they do not always know how many students will be on the bus and who will get on and off at each stop.
- School buses are not as quiet or orderly as public transport and as such may not be suitable for elderly people.

Suggestions

- Different computer systems and apps could improve the current school bus networks.
- Newhaven College uses software that requires students to scan individual cards as they enter and leave their bus. The parent app allows parents to know if their child is on a bus, which bus and the time of their arrival at school or at their home destination. Similarly, the school administrators know if children are on the correct bus, are at school and do not have to telephone individual parents if a bus is delayed. The system increases the safety for children greatly and makes administration of bus routes easier for the school and bus company.
- Online booking systems for the public could be developed that integrated with an effective and efficient school bus network system.
- The school bus network is an under used resource. Buses are parked during the school day and drivers are either not working or engaged in other tasks. During school holiday many buses and drivers are not working. Innovative use of the network could help to provide transport for isolated communities during these idle times.
- Any school bus that carries members of the public would have to indicate the presence of the general public so that parents know and as such give consent for their children to travel on a shared school /public bus network.
- Wattle Bank residents who have children on the school bus network suggested that an ideal system would have a dedicated school bus carry prep to year 7 students and an additional shared school/public bus carrying year 8 to 12 students and members of the public.

In summary

The current school bus network in our area is not inclusive to all schools and is not effective or efficient. We believe that it is important to improve the current system before additional demands and pressures are placed upon it. Acknowledgement must be made to the fact that the school bus network has the potential to alleviate the significant problems associated with a lack of public transport in rural and regional areas. However, we would not like the benefits to families and the positive aspects of travelling on the school bus be lost to solve a parallel problem.

Written by Moragh Tyler, President Wattle Bank Community Group Inc in consultation with Wattle Bank residents.



