

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Tuesday, 27 July 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

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Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Ms Harriet Shing

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Mr James Guy, Executive Manager, Economic Growth, Ballarat City Council.

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 any background noise is minimised.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and 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.

I wish to acknowledge my fellow committee members. My name is Enver Erdogan, Chair; and my fellow committee members are Mrs Beverley McArthur, Mr Rod Barton, Mr Mark Gepp, Mr Tim Quilty and Mr Lee Tarlamis.

To witnesses giving evidence, all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law, but any comment repeated outside of 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. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and put on the committee 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. Could you please begin by stating your name for Hansard and then start your presentation. Over to you, James.

Mr GUY: Thank you. My name is James Guy. I am the Executive Manager of Economic Growth at the City of Ballarat. Thanks very much to the committee for discussing this issue with me this afternoon. It is a really important issue for our community and for rural and regional Victoria more widely, really around that access to essential public transport. The focus of my submission today is really on what we have heard back from our community through various consultations that we have had over recent time and some of the messaging that has come back to us around the opportunity for there to be a far more nuanced approach to public transport, including things like the school bus program.

The City of Ballarat is an urban municipality—110 000 people—but more than 740 square kilometres of total area, which includes a large proportion of that as rural areas, including some township areas. What we hear is not specifically feedback around the school bus issue. What we have generally been hearing over the last few years is a strong desire for there to be viable, convenient transport options for those rural townships and wider communities, but it is a very all-or-nothing approach at the moment. So there either is a public bus service that comes there at a set frequency or there really is not any other option available for people in those communities.

What we hear back is that it is quite static, and the contracts and the way in which the provision of services is set up are not very flexible and not very adaptable to local conditions. We get lots of submissions from people who have really valid ideas to drastically improve provision of services, but there is no way to do that beyond a full review or inquiry—things like this—so it is terrific that this inquiry is underway at the moment.

So the experience that we hear—really Ballarat is in two pieces. There is the urban area, which is covered by the PTV bus network. There are lots of similarities though between some of those issues that relate to that network and some of the wider ones in that even in the areas that are covered by the public bus service—that includes townships like Learmonth that are outside of Ballarat—the routes are excessively long, meandering. You get lots of feedback that there are some really easy wins to make around timetabling. The issue is that even when they have been provided with a public bus service you will have five buses all leave the Ballarat station at the same time, so they all arrive at the stop at the same time. Then you have got a period of an hour or more without another service. So they are not very nuanced toward the needs of the user groups, and there is some low-hanging fruit there around the way in which the bus services could be timetabled, things like that, to make a much more nuanced service. That is sort of fixed by the bus servicing contracts. And I guess some of the

feedback that we get from users of that bus network is to say, 'Look, there's some really obvious ways here that for the same amount of money you would get a much, much better service'.

Similar types of comments come back from the more township and rural areas around the provision of public transport and the idea that all public transport has to be a public bus service is quite outdated, if you like, and is not very nuanced. We see some other great examples in other communities around on-demand bus services, prebooked community-based services that can provide people with a much higher level of access to services. I guess the link back to the discussion here around the school buses is that obviously—and I heard a submission earlier today that the buses are largely idle between the school pick-up hours—they are only contracted for a certain period.

If you took the more holistic view around the provision of accessible transport to these communities and looked at an overall cost, if you like, there could well be a way to have a more targeted package of transport options that means that people do not have to be leaving in the morning for a specific appointment and waiting all day in town for a school bus service to return, for example, in the afternoon. If you took a more holistic view, you could probably have a package of services that could provide people with much more on-demand, on-time services that could really benefit them.

We do not have any specific data or metrics on the actual feedback around the specific school bus services other than to say that is not the issue that is usually raised with us—I hope the committee would be provided with, you know, some really good data insights from the department and operators—but what we do hear is that the users are expecting a much better provision of transport into town. Even communities that are just on the fringe—it might take them an hour, an hour and a half to get into the university, for example, from an area that is not very far outside of Ballarat because those services meander so much. So we get very strong feedback that a more holistic view of much more convenient services is really important to these communities. And whether that includes a school bus service or not—as I say, we do not have any particular insights around it, but it is a terrific example of where a more nuanced approach for a service that is already provided could be another way to get people to access those communities which they desperately want. So look, those are really my sort of opening insights. I am happy to take any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for that, James. That is an interesting outlook. I might start off by going to Mr Barton first.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, James. When we were doing some research—I will apologise as I quickly have a look at this—we had some notes about a tech bus extension in Ballarat. Effectively it was kids using the school bus—people were prebooking, jumping on the school bus—but it was students. Are you familiar with this trial?

Mr GUY: Not in detail, no.

Mr BARTON: Okay then.

Mr GUY: I know it is happening, but I am not across the detail of it.

Mr BARTON: So it is still happening, do you know?

Mr GUY: I said I am not across the detail of it.

Mr BARTON: Okay then. Maybe we might ask you if we can have a look to see what is happening there and how successful or not successful it may be. Certainly we know social isolation is a huge factor for people in rural and regional Victoria, and we think one of the opportunities if we could expand the bus program and do exactly what I think you have suggested is that we utilise the buses outside of the normal period as well. How do you see that working in Ballarat?

Mr GUY: In terms of the number of people that would use those services every day, it would probably be a reasonably targeted number in that most people would drive if they could. Obviously this is probably provision for those that for whatever reason are unable to. I think that what we would say is that for those people that are missing out it could be an organised service, if you like, so the numbers are not so great as for it to be overwhelmed. But you would just think that if those school buses or it may be another type of vehicle are

sitting idle during the day, it is just a great opportunity for those people that are missing out at the moment to be able to have a specific service or have a provision of a service that is absent to them at the moment. So it would seem like a really good benefit for those people, because you are right, social isolation is a big issue. If you for whatever reason are not able to jump in the car, you really are limited in the services that you can get, and that is a big problem for people.

Mr BARTON: Yes. Thank you, Chair. Thanks, James.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, then we will go to Mr Quilty.

Mrs McARTHUR: I will pass at the moment, Chair. Go to Mr Quilty.

The CHAIR: We will go to Mr Tarlamis after Mr Quilty.

Mr QUILTY: You talked about cutting meandering routes. Isn't that going to be effectively cutting services, making buses go to fewer places? Are you also saying therefore we need more buses to service shorter routes, or how do you see that working?

Mr GUY: No. There is obviously really good data around where people want to go, so the issue really is that all services in Ballarat head to the station, which is great to integrate with the train. But if you look at who is using the bus, almost everyone who is on the bus is going to another destination in Ballarat. So when I say 'meandering routes', I am saying that by again having a more targeted view around where people actually are getting on and off and want to go, you could have much more direct services that take them from places within and across the city itself rather than having to go via the station, for example, when you simply want to go to the supermarket or to the doctor. Looking at the user and the specific user needs—where people want to go—could have some big improvements.

Mr QUILTY: Won't that require more buses though?

Mr GUY: No, not necessarily, because certainly at the moment the way that the timetabling is all done is that everything starts and finishes at the station itself. Often they go out in a big loop and back to the station. But you could set up—and we have proposed this in our integrated transport plan, which aligns very closely with the Public Transport Users Association, who have put forward a similar model—much more cross-city based routes so they really link the people from where they live to where they want to go without having more of a looping system that we have at the moment.

Mr QUILTY: All right. So what is the barrier to actually implementing that? Is it that the Department of Transport is just very, very slow?

Mr GUY: I think that the Department of Transport would need to do a review of the bus network and change that, so that would be a question for them. But it is certainly something that we have been talking to them about for a number of years, and we are as keen as ever for that to happen, because we just think that for no real greater cost, no real greater increase in the number of buses, you could have a much more convenient service for the users.

Mr QUILTY: All right. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. Mr Tarlamis.

Mr TARLAMIS: I just wanted to pick up on the point that you made that there is good data available as to where people want to go. Has there been work done to look at using that data where there are those gaps and whether—I think you touched on it a little bit then—you would need additional buses or whether it is just a matter of rerouting? Because we are looking at the issue of utilising the school bus routes to basically address the issues of getting people where they need to go. I am just wondering whether the issue that you are looking at is about using the existing bus routes or rerouting the existing bus routes and reorientating those to pick up the needs and not as an alternative to using the school bus system. Or are you talking about potentially doing both?

Mr GUY: Look, I think it is combination. I think what we are really saying is that if you look at the provision of services for people—like the coverage—then that is different to the convenient access. So if you

have all the buses arriving at the same time once every hour, if you space them, if you like, then you get a much more frequent service. So for those that might want to come—tertiary students, for example, coming from the fringe areas, who might be on a bus service but from the fringe, a sort of outer area, of Ballarat—if you took a more holistic view around provision of convenient services, you could actually consider the school bus tabling within a frequent pattern of public services. So in terms of the user, they probably do not really care if it is a full public bus or if it is a school bus or if it is a community bus. For them, convenience in terms of time, frequency and certainty of that service are things that we hear as being the most important. So I think from that perspective, certainly considering that the school buses are a government-funded option—there are obviously other issues that I do not really have an insight or view into around the safety and all that sort of stuff, which I am sure you are hearing a lot about—in terms of the raw provision for the user, considering the school bus option as part of a wider suite of transport options would seem like a convenient option for those that might want to use it.

Mr TARLAMIS: I think that might be more of an option in the sort of urbanised areas around Ballarat. I think my colleagues in the regional areas would know the area a lot better than me, but as you get further out into those areas, most of them are further and further apart—smaller towns and such, where they may have even fewer services if any services at all. Where all they have is a school bus service, those options would not be available, so they would only have the school bus option to draw on for those services. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. Mrs McArthur, do you have a question there?

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. Thank you, Chair. Look, I just want to go back to something you have just said, James. You said you have been in discussions with the Department of Transport for several years over streamlining and better options for the current bus network. Can you just enlarge on that? What is the hold-up in getting a better outcome with the Department of Transport? Surely it cannot take years to do a review.

Mr GUY: Yes. Look, our integrated transport plan was adopted last year. We started preparing that, obviously, the year before to lead up to that. So as part of that, again with the Public Transport Users Association, we put forward a model for direct cross-city bus routes. So that has been something that is still publicly available; that is our adopted sort of position on that. We just see that as a much, much better system. I understand that that would require a review by the department of the bus network in Ballarat, and that has not been forthcoming to date.

Mrs McARTHUR: And what is the reason for them not providing that review or not acting on your recommendation?

Mr GUY: I do not know. I could not give you a direct insight into that, but certainly it is something that we think would have huge benefit. We are very committed to continuing to see if we can have that occur.

Mrs McARTHUR: I do not know whether it would be appropriate, Chair, but would it be a good idea for Mr Guy to be able to furnish that report that they have done to us, just so we know what they are looking at?

The CHAIR: Yes, please. Would it be possible, Mr Guy, for you to forward that plan—the integrated transport plan that the City of Ballarat has worked on? At some stage during our hearings we are hopeful of having the Department of Transport.

Mr GUY: Yes, certainly.

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. It would be a very logical question to ask the Department of Transport, if they happen to turn up, do you think, Mr Chair?

Thank you, James. Also, we have heard from the witness from Federation University that there are potentially students that are not attending Federation University or not continuing with their studies because of a lack of available transport for them. Is the city familiar with any of this evidence, or do you have constituents that have presented that argument to you?

Mr GUY: Look, I do not have any data on it, I am afraid, so I do not have anything specific. It certainly would not surprise me, but yes, I am afraid we actually do not have any data that I can point to on that.

Mrs McARTHUR: Do you have any information, perhaps, on apprentices that are finding it difficult to get from A to B to pursue a trade future?

Mr GUY: Look, again, that is exactly the sort of insight that we would love to have. Often you do not hear from the people who miss out, you know. Often you have much, much better data on people who are using the service than those who are not. Hopefully you are getting some good insight from bus operators and other communities that are very, very close to those people and who potentially would be able to pick up that data.

Mrs McARTHUR: I am just thinking aloud, Mr Chair. It might be a good idea if we asked Commerce Ballarat or the Committee for Ballarat if they have any insights into the forgoing of opportunities for apprentices or students in this area due to a lack of transport.

The CHAIR: No, that is a good idea. I know, James, initially our inquiry was meant to be in the City of Ballarat and we were hoping to also have a number of witnesses from areas surrounding Ballarat, such as Golden Plains and Moorabool shires, which probably are more greatly affected, I suspect, by this school bus program that we are looking into. But yes, if you could forward that information, that would be helpful, as Mrs McArthur has suggested, and then we will look at it as well.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, James.

The CHAIR: Committee members, does anybody else have a question? Otherwise I might actually conclude today's hearing on that note. On behalf of the committee, James and the City of Ballarat, I wish to say thank you for your presentation and your appearance today. You have been very helpful—a different perspective from the City of Ballarat.

Mr GUY: A pleasure.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, James.

Committee adjourned.