T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Tuesday 22 August 2023

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair
Kim O'Keeffe—Deputy Chair
Anthony Cianflone
Wayne Farnham
John Mullahy
Dylan Wight
Jess Wilson

WITNESSES

Dr Jeremy Lawrence, President, Streets Alive Yarra; and

Ruth Jelley, member and

Dr Molly Hoak, member, Streets Alive Darebin.

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 being given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. 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.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website. I will just remind Members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking, just to minimise that interference.

Thank you for your time and your submissions and for joining us here today. I will quickly introduce the Committee Members, and then you have got everyone on screen there too. Then we might hand over to each of you to give a maybe 2- to 3-minute opening statement, and then will head into some questions. I am Alison, the Chair, the Member for Bellarine; we have Deputy Chair Kim O'Keeffe, the Member for Shepparton; we have Anthony Cianflone, the Member for Pascoe Vale; Dylan Wight is the Member for Tarneit; Jess Wilson, the Member for Kew; John Mullahy, the Member for Glen Waverley; and Wayne Farnham, the Member for Narracan.

I am just going to go with whoever is on my screen first—Dr Jeremy Lawrence, you are first on my screen. Maybe if I head to you for just a couple of minutes, you can talk to your submission or anything actually you would like to add.

Dr Jeremy LAWRENCE: Thanks for the opportunity. My name is Dr Jeremy Lawrence. My PhD is in engineering in the transport energy group from the University of Melbourne, and I am representing the Streets Alive Yarra community group here in the City of Yarra in Melbourne, Victoria. We advocate for safe access to all properties, irrespective of whether people choose to walk, cycle, roll on a wheelchair, use public transport or drive and park.

This Inquiry is about road safety behaviours during and since COVID. We are all road users, irrespective of whether we walk or bike or use public transport or whether we are workers or engineers or even Members of Parliament. The change in road safety behaviour that we were looking for—had hoped for—during and since COVID that we have not seen and would like to see is from that subset of road users who are the Members of Parliament. What we are looking for is multiparty or bipartisan support for effective changes, which actually means infrastructure. We know that irrespective of what country you go to, whether it is the Netherlands or Belgium or Australia, there is going to be a cohort of people who are disinclined to follow road rules or disinclined to share the road, so we are not living in a perfect world and we should design our streets for the real people that we have. Similarly, you can have as many behaviour change programs or cultural change programs and advice and training as you can have, but try that over and over again—it does not work. What we really need is changes to infrastructure. We hold up the Netherlands as an example because it works. You can also go to Oslo or to Ghent in Belgium. These are all places where the physical environment has been changed and people have responded to that physical environment by changing their behaviour. If lanes are narrower, if corners are tighter, then it is much more difficult to speed. What we are looking for, as we laid out in our submission, is for all the parties to come together and say, 'This is about everyone.' It is about safety for kids who want to ride or bike to school, it is about older people who can no longer drive but they still want to get out in society, so they need level-access tram stops.

If we can bring it down to just the top things: please support 30 k's an hour. Allow councils to impose 30 k's an hour in their neighbourhoods. Please build a network of protected bike lanes that links neighbourhoods. Of course protected bike lanes are expensive, but if people can walk, drive and cycle safely on shared streets within neighbourhoods and then use a network of protected bike lanes to get from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, that really works. Please build level-access tram stops, and please, if traffic congestion on our streets and on our state government-controlled arterials is too high, then just bring it back down to manageable levels by using demand-responsive congestion charges.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jeremy. I appreciate those opening remarks. I might, Molly or Ruth, if you are happy to speak to your submission?

Ruth JELLEY: Yes, I will. Thank you very much. My name is Ruth Jelley. I am a founding member of Streets Alive Darebin, and I am here today with another community member, Molly Hoak. Streets Alive Darebin obviously describe ourselves as a resident ratepayers group, and information about us is in our written submission. We advocate for well-designed streetscapes that focus on the movement and the needs of people. We believe that street design should aim to control speed, so by reducing vehicle speeds this makes an environment safer and easier for people of all abilities to access.

A well-designed street should aim to reduce conflict by separating bike riders and scooter riders from cars. Separated bicycle infrastructure is a real-life example of what I call the field of dreams fantasy, which is build it and they will come. It is about the only example I can think of of infrastructure where people will come once you build it. Wherever we have seen safe separated bike lanes rolled out across Melbourne we have seen an increase in lots of people using that infrastructure, but particularly women riding bikes, and that is a key indicator, as I am sure you would know. I am sure if you want any hard data around that, you could contact local councils, but also Bicycle Network would have a range of data around usage of separated bike lanes. But also a well-designed street should aim to increase liveability and equity. They should aim to make community services, schools and businesses easier for everybody to access regardless of their mobility and ability to move around with and without vehicular transport. Streets should be designed holistically, with the needs of older and younger people in mind as well, to enable and encourage people of all ages and all abilities to access the community services and businesses that they need and they want to have access to.

It is also important to note that not every street can be everything to everybody. If a street has a range of business services and community services or is located near schools, for example, people need to be able to access those services without having to navigate through thoroughfare traffic. If you take an example in Darebin, High Street is a key activity centre, to use some of the lingo, and St Georges Road, for example, would be one of those thoroughfares that we are talking about. What we are really looking for is for street infrastructure to be designed for the future, including for demographic change, including for the growth of families with young children, which Molly can speak to in a bit more detail if you want, but also our ageing population.

We should also be designing with population growth in mind. You can fit more people on bicycles on a road than you can fit more people in cars on a road and every example we have seen, all the level crossing removals that we have seen throughout Darebin, has just resulted in increased traffic, so trying to catch a bus from Reservoir—say, from Reservoir station to La Trobe University—is no better now that the rail line has been lifted above than it was before. In fact it is possibly worse. It is faster on a bicycle. Obviously planning for the future and a future that is people-centred where we really think about what people need and how they get there and what they need to access when they are there actually presents a great opportunity for future business growth and opportunities for people to think about how to shape their businesses around how the community actually moves and not just on outdated perceptions from narrow mindsets.

In summary, Streets Alive Darebin wants to see street designs that prioritise people and improve safety. As has been noted in this Inquiry, there has been a growth in the road toll this year and, as some of the previous presenters to this Inquiry have noted, it is not just the road toll but it is also the road trauma. Unfortunately I have my own unfortunate example of that just from a few months ago. Our submission provides details about some of the local statistics of road trauma and injury in Darebin, and we would dearly like to reduce that, particularly reduce the risk, whether that is perceived risk and/or actual risk, of death and serious injury of vulnerable road users in Darebin streets.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am sorry to hear that you are injured, Ruth. You will be able to give some lived experience maybe in your evidence today.

Ruth JELLEY: Unfortunately, yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for that. I might let John ask the first question of you today.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair, and thank you to the three of you for attending today. The Streets Alive submission goes into suggesting giving council the authority to design and install traffic control devices on

local streets. My question is: what types of powers should the Victorian Government give to councils to improve safety on local roads?

Dr Jeremy LAWRENCE: I would look towards the example of New South Wales, which has recently expanded powers for councils, and use that as a starting point. For example, I am looking for permission to install 30-kilometres-per-hour traffic speed signs in defined zones in neighbourhoods, and secondly, to install wombat crossings, which are raised pedestrian crossings, and then also turning bans and modal filters. For example, the best way to reduce rat-running through neighbourhoods, which most people in a neighbourhood do not want, is to put in modal filters. That means every property is still accessible by motor vehicle, but you might just have to go a long way round—you cannot just cut through a neighbourhood to avoid the congestion on an arterial. Those three changes—30 k-per-hour zones, modal filters and raised pedestrian crossings, or wombat crossings—I think would make a huge improvement and speed up councils' work in many areas across Melbourne.

The CHAIR: Ruth or Molly, do you want to answer that as well?

Ruth JELLEY: The only thing I would add to that is that we have been advocating to council in the past 12 to 18 months to reduce speed limits, and council has communicated to us—Darebin council—the barriers that they face in trying to implement lower speed signs and the length of time that it takes to introduce, for example, just a reduced speed zone. They might want to reduce a speed limit down to 30 kilometres an hour, but I think at some point they tend to give up. Rather than fighting the resistance, they go to 40 kilometres an hour when in fact they might want to go down to 30. I would wholeheartedly support everything that Jeremy has just proposed. Molly, did you have anything further to add?

Dr Molly HOAK: I am recovering from a sinus infection, so if I start coughing, I am very apologetic. I was also going to echo Jeremy's point about modal filters and rat-running, mostly because it is very dear to my heart in that I live in a neighbourhood that is used extensively as a rat run and on a street that is used where the street itself is 40 kilometres an hour, but nobody goes 40 kilometres an hour—everybody races down the street. If the council had the power to much more quickly respond to the concerns from me and the rest of my neighbours, many of whom are elderly and many have young families, it would help us as community members feel more empowered that our council is actually doing anything. We would actually understand that they are responding to our requests.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Dylan, I might go to you next.

Dylan WIGHT: Thanks, Chair. Streets Alive Yarra's submission speaks a lot about the Netherlands, and in your opening remarks you spoke about the Netherlands as well and the fact that Victoria could learn from the Netherlands Road Safety Strategic Plan. I was just wondering if you could elaborate on what specific parts of that plan you think are most positive and potentially what parts of that plan, infrastructure-wise, the Victorian Government and councils could perhaps pick up on.

Dr Jeremy LAWRENCE: I think the Netherlands is falsely perceived as having a cycling culture that goes back the last 100 years, but that is not really true in terms of the infrastructure changes they have made. If you go there as a tourist now and you look at the streets, most of what they have done they have done in the last 30 years—most of the bike lanes they have built, the neighbourhoods that they have calmed, the 30 k's an hour and the raised pedestrian crossings were all done in the last 30 years, or 90% of them. That is because they, first of all, adopted a Safe System approach, as Victoria has nominally done, but then they have followed up with street design guidelines or standards, so infrastructure specifications that federal, state and local governments are expected to implement when roads are redone. What happens is that every time a street is re-sheeted or major work is done or when they are dug up to change the sewers or the water supply, the street is brought up to this modern standard, and that is what Victoria can copy.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dylan, did you have something following on from that?

Dylan WIGHT: Yes. So what you are saying is it is not just the type of infrastructure that you need, because as you say, Victoria has adopted that Safe System approach. I guess it is capitalising on the opportunities that you have to do it is sort of what you are saying.

Dr Jeremy LAWRENCE: Look, both the Netherlands and Victoria have a policy of building a network of protected bike lanes, but only one actually does it, and why is that? Two reasons: first of all, they have got multiparty support for safe travel infrastructure. They have got the hard decisions through. They have published design guides, for example. The Government of Victoria commissioned design guides—The Urban Road and Street Design Guide, The Cycling Guide and The Pilot Guide—and these were delivered by the contractors three years ago to the State Government, and they have been sitting on the Government's desk and were not released. So first of all, publish a design guide that actually follows Safe System, that says you need to have separated lanes for cycling, you need a protected network of bike lanes and you need 30-k-an-hour zones—this is all just basic stuff straight from the Netherlands—and then provide the funding and actually do it.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Dylan. Thank you, Jeremy, for that. I am just mindful of time. We might have a few more questions, so Kim, I will go to you next. Thanks.

Kim O'KEEFFE: Thank you. Thank you so much for your submission and the work you are doing within your communities. We have touched on local government input, but I am really interested to see the collaboration with community groups and the opportunity to do that better. How can local and state government collaborate better with community groups such as yourselves to design road safety initiatives? Do you feel like there is a disconnect when it comes to getting your questions out and actioning those questions? How do you actually see improvement of collaboration?

Ruth JELLEY: I would like to jump in first, and then I will throw to Molly. There is a stronger connection between local government and the communities themselves, but the issues that we have been facing in the local government sector in probably the past two or three years are just the bias and the weight of whose voices are listened to and the degree or level of evidence that is being relied upon. We are finding that those community members particularly who have close personal connections with elected representatives on council have higher sway than other members of the community, and what I have noticed in council meetings—for example, I have been trying over the last 18 months or so through Streets Alive Darebin and my work in the community to actually get young family members, so people with young families, to attend council meetings, and frankly, when a council meeting happens at 6 o'clock in the evening, most people say, 'Look, I can't. I've got commitments with the children.' So the voices of the majority of people who are affected by council decisions—in Darebin one of the decisions that we are looking at that we are most deeply affected by is that a range of infrastructure programs that support cycling have been quietly shelved, and even programs that have had actually a really broad level of support through wide community consultation at a later stage get shelved by the influence of individual members, whether that might be from trading groups.

We are really looking at ways that government can listen more to the people than through influential groups, and I guess that is where groups like Streets Alive Darebin and Streets Alive Yarra come together to try and counterbalance those elements. That is a really important factor in our democracy, and I am not saying that we are elected members in our communities, but the weight of the evidence that has been used and the weight of the voices that are listened to really needs to be deeply considered. We are taking an approach. When you read the newsletters that are put together by Streets Alive Yarra and Streets Alive Darebin, we are telling the stories of everyday people in our community who have just gotten onto a cargo bike for the first time, have just discovered the new bike route that is through to their local school, and just the joy and the ease that it brings to families. It is those sorts of stories that we seek to amplify through our groups. Molly, did you want to add anything further?

Dr Molly HOAK: Yes. Thanks, Ruth. I wanted to echo, first of all, the sentiment that council meetings are usually in the evenings. I have an almost 1½-year-old, and I cannot get to a council meeting at 6:30 on a weeknight. That is his bedtime, so that is part of it. It is very hard for particularly families with especially younger children to have their voices heard. If you are in that stage between having a newborn and school, that time period is a time period when you do have a very vulnerable road user, in your child, but you do not really have much of a community voice unless you do something like join Streets Alive Darebin or another community group.

I also wanted to mention—and I think Ruth touched on it a little bit—that understanding where bias might come from when councils are listening to community voices. For instance, there was an example in the mid-2000s; they did surveys of the traders on the southern part of High Street in Darebin, and in that survey the traders assumed that most of their customers came by car, but when they did surveys of where the customers

actually came from, most of them did not come by car. It was either by tram or walking or cycling. Eventually, that data went out and we did get relatively good tram stops on the southern part of High Street, but when that sort of data is then influenced by the councillors or the council listening to just the trader voices, for instance, and not the community voices, that is hard to counter.

The CHAIR: Yes. Kim, did you have something to follow up on?

Kim O'KEEFFE: Yes, thank you for that. That is really interesting to hear that. I was in local government for nearly six years, so I hear what you are saying. Hopefully they represent you, like I did, as a whole community, but sometimes that does not happen. Probably just one comment: it is not the only way to get your message across—at a council meeting. You can put in some questions and you can actually hopefully interact better with your councils, but definitely look at those questions to council meetings, because they are public, they will be put on the table. I think that is really important, too, to make sure you are being heard. That worries me.

Ruth JELLEY: Yes, thanks Kim. Look, I have engaged in what I would like to describe as a one-woman campaign asking questions at Darebin council for the last 18 months or so—almost every council meeting, save for the one following my bicycle crash earlier this year and a couple with other life things interacting. I will be honest and say that I get a lot of pushback in the answers to the questions that I ask. I have been asking a lot of questions of my local council of why these pro cycling programs have been quietly shut down and what evidence they have, even though they are quite popular and there is lot of community support for those programs. There is a lot of resistance to actually providing truthful and whole and fulsome answers to those questions. And, you know, it takes a bit of time. I have got this schedule set up in my own personal calendar to remind me of when the council meetings come up and working out what questions to ask and going out to other members in the Streets Alive Darebin group and asking, 'Hey, has anybody got any questions you want me to ask on your behalf at council meeting or to put in a budget submission?' Sometimes that is quite effective, but it actually takes quite a lot of work to be able to be that level of engaged. I have seen how much work Molly puts into being a parent to her son. Even just catching up for coffee, you know, it is like a two-person job. It is like I am there as a support person to make sure that her child does not run away out of the cafe, because she needs her 5 minutes. So there is a lot of work, and I think we really need to look at the demographic representation and the burden that falls on different people. Different age groups often have more time and energy to commit to that kind of level of community consultation than others.

The CHAIR: Yes, thanks, Ruth. I am just mindful of time. Wayne, I think we could squeeze in one more question, if you have got one.

Wayne FARNHAM: Yes, thank you, Chair, and thank you for your submission. It is interesting listening to what you are saying. I suppose being a regional MP, I am not in the city. What you are saying, to me, works well in the city, but what about the outer suburbs and regional Victoria? How do you do that with a bigger area and less population, therefore less money to pay for it?

Dr Jeremy LAWRENCE: The Netherlands has got lots of villages dotted around. They are not a massive single-city agglomeration like Melbourne, and they do it with effective public transport. People ride to their local station, take a train, which goes every 10 minutes, go into a much larger city, they change trains and then they ride at the other end using a public transport provided bike that they tap on and off with their Myki, with a massive underground bike parking station, and then they get to their destination. So you can cover a whole large area, like the size of Victoria, effectively with functioning public transport and have a lot of people using it. And therefore you could have a temporary disability or be unable to drive, or you might be injured or old, but you can still get around. So I would say let us put a lot more into effective public transport.

Wayne FARNHAM: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am sorry, I am mindful of time. I think we could have chatted all day. I really appreciate your submissions and your answering our questions today. If there is something that you think we have not covered or if you would like to provide extra information, please do not hesitate to come back to the Committee. Again, thank you very much for your time today.

Witnesses withdrew.