

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Coburg—Wednesday 9 August 2023

#### **MEMBERS**

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

#### **WITNESSES**

Faith Hunter, Convenor,

Lisa O’Halloran, Secretary, Merri-bek Bicycle User Group; and

Chris Star, Member, Yarra Bicycle Users Group.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the public hearings of the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee 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 this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

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Thank you for your time today. I thought we might start with maybe about 5, 6, 7 minutes of your time for a bit of an opening statement to talk a bit about your submission, and then we will have some questions. I will just do a quick introduction though.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan.

**Jess WILSON:** Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

**John MULLAHY:** John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

**The CHAIR:** And I am Alison, Member for Bellarine. I will hand over to you.

**Lisa O'HALLORAN:** Excellent. My name is Lisa O'Halloran. I am the Secretary of the Merri-bek Bicycle User Group. We are an advocacy group run by resident volunteers who advocates for greater commuter and recreational cycling in the City of Merri-bek, and we have done so since 1990. We have over 650 members in the City of Merri-bek, which includes the suburbs of Brunswick, Coburg, Pascoe Vale, Oak Park, Hadfield, Glenroy, Fawkner and Gowanbrae. In response to the parliamentary Inquiry we conducted a survey of our members, which informed our submission, and 111 responses were received from all over the municipality and all different sectors of the community, which we have outlined in our submission.

**The CHAIR:** Wow. Thank you.

**Faith HUNTER:** I am Faith Hunter. I am the Convener of Merri-bek Bicycle User Group. I am just trying to think of what to add. I think one thing with Merri-bek is we are very aware of the wide range of people who ride and want to ride. To give you a picture of those people, if we look at our surveys, for example, the gender split in responses was pretty close to 50-50. We also had 6% of responses from disabled people or people who ride with medical conditions that might impact their other transport options. If you look at figures for general in Merri-bek, you can see especially in the south we do get close to 50-50 gender splits when we do Super Tuesday counts and things. Our schools, especially with the Ride and Stride program that Anita Curnow referred to, have quite high active travel rates. Coburg High School does and so does Brunswick Secondary College. So there is a really wide range and diverse range of people in Merri-bek who are using bicycles and want to use them, and I think that is the community we are hoping to speak for.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Thank you.

**Chris STAR:** Good morning. My name is Chris Star. I am from Yarra Bicycle Users Group, and we have been around in some form or another since about 1996. We are based in the suburbs of Abbotsford, Alphington, Burnley, Carlton North, Clifton Hill, Cremorne, Collingwood, Fairfield and through to Fitzroy and Richmond. We are predominantly inner urban-based. The main focus of our group is advocacy towards our local council and authorities. Since 2008 on community radio 3CR we have broadcast a weekly radio show about those issues and broader issues. Basically, it is a lot of stuff that mainstream media does not touch, but our focus for the group is low emissions transport towards a safe, comfortable and fit-for-purpose bicycle network for everyone aged eight to 80, as age should be no barrier to riding a bike. The issues in the inner suburbs are basically space and competing interests. Yarra has, alongside Merri-bek, one of the highest cycling

participation rates in Melbourne, if not Australia, and we have a very good proactive relationship with our council.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Would you like to just maybe have a few minutes to talk about your submission? That would be great. I am not sure who wants to do that.

**Faith HUNTER:** Our submission had, I think, 111 respondents, and 77% reported that they have found road behaviours have changed for the worse. I think that is the major takeaway from it. The main behaviours that have changed are speeding and much more aggressive driving. The aggressive driving I think came out in two ways, in that it was drivers driving more aggressively and that having an impact on vulnerable road users, but there was also a higher level of drivers actually aiming their aggressive behaviour at cyclists, which is another whole level of aggression. The really concerning thing about it is that a lot of people said it was impacting their decision to use their bicycle. And for us, keeping in mind that wider community in Merri-bek who do want to use a bike but do not yet, that is not only turning off people who are currently able to ride but deterring people who might take that up as an option, so that is a big concern as well.

**Lisa O'HALLORAN:** Mobile phone use was definitely something that was highlighted by a number of our respondents as being an issue. When you are on a bike you certainly notice the number of people that are staring at their phones a lot of the time, and it is really quite concerning. But technology in general—you know, changing technology and changing delivery modes—was something that was also highlighted by our members. The prevalence of home delivery services by supermarkets being done by rigid trucks in suburban streets—once upon a time a rigid truck used to move people in and out and be an uncommon occurrence, whereas now Coles and Woolworths are delivering your groceries weekly with those vehicles. Amazon deliveries and all sorts of deliveries—the ways and the frequency of these things being done has just changed. And the fact that a lot of the vehicles are not branded means that it does not give people a visual cue to know whether or not something is going to stop or behave erratically like a taxi might. That was something that definitely came through in submissions as well.

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to add anything?

**Chris STAR:** Speaking to our submission—and it goes back to the terms of reference for this Inquiry—from 2020 to the present, road user behaviour has anecdotally and statistically changed, directly and sometimes indirectly, with the interruptions due to the lockdowns. What we found was that from a cycling perspective too many vehicle drivers now appear to ignore soft controls—not observing road users' positions in the road environment; driver inattention or distraction; moving erratically or speeding inappropriately to pass cyclists; ignoring intersection traffic signals and directions; intimidating both pedestrians and cyclists who have right of way—this is a very large topic, who has right of way, and people, particularly cyclists and pedestrians, are just kind of backing off; and aggressively not giving cyclists enough minimum passing distance, which is now law in Victoria. We can probably speak to that later, which was one of the questions about minimum passing.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that additional information. That is a good start. Jess, I might hand to you for a question.

**Jess WILSON:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your submissions and for your presentation this morning. We spoke to a couple of probably the more peak cycling groups yesterday, and we spoke about the need to potentially have greater consistency between local council plans for bike paths and then the wider state's plans for the bike network. I know this is something I have worked on, Chris, with Boroondara BUG. I know you work closely with them as well around the Walmer Street bridge, and that is a key part of the network. We see local councils in that instance doing upgrades but the State Government not necessarily doing it in the same time frame. Do you see that consistently around the areas that you are in, and do you think there is greater opportunity for working together on that overarching strategy so that particularly local groups and local councils have a sense of where to prioritise their own investment so it aligns with the broader network? It is a probably a question to everyone.

**Faith HUNTER:** I think what we see in Merri-bek is they have worked really well, for example, with Darebin Council in building a lot of the bridges that are needed to link the two councils across the Merri Creek. They do work together with Moonee Valley with the Moonee Valley creek in how paths link up and bridges are built there. There are officers spending quite a bit of time getting routes in Merri-bek onto the State

Government's strategic cycling network. But I think with everything it seems to all come down to budget and how you find the funds for those projects, and it is just never enough to do things in a timely way. Merri-bek have a 10-year capital works plan for building the bicycle network. It is revised frequently, but what we see is projects constantly being pushed out because they are waiting for the next opportunity for a TAC grant or something. So it is this sort of game of searching around for opportunities for funding, even when you have put things on that State Government network and are working together with the councils around you. It seems to be the funding that is the block.

**Jess WILSON:** Thanks.

**Chris STAR:** To speak to that, I can speak of two infrastructure issues that are now underway in the City of Yarra. Walmer Street is a very good case in point, and I want to bring these up because it shows how small some of these infrastructure projects are but how important they are, and the timelines are incredible. Walmer Street goes back to the 1990s. Unfortunately, in the middle of a campaign to get that replaced, it was heritage listed, so what has happened now is that both councils—or on one side, Salta is redoing it—have to build new land bridge approaches. And we now have a separate campaign being started to get a new fit-for-purpose bridge.

Now, park that for a moment. Gipps Street steps: now, Yarra Bicycle Users Group, alongside several other groups, including Bicycle Network—which was then Bicycle Victoria—back in 2005 we started a campaign to replace that. I do not know what many people here were doing in 2005, but now in the last fortnight we have just seen those steps actually physically removed, after so many false starts. I understand the technical engineering things for it might be difficult, but it is a relatively small project and it has taken 18 years—on the Main Yarra Trail. These are vital connections for vulnerable road users, so to speak—to speak to the terms of this Inquiry—and these things should not take such a phenomenal amount of time.

**Lisa O'HALLORAN:** Building on that, I would bring to the attention of the Inquiry that we have got the principal Bicycle Network; we have the *Victorian Cycling Strategy*. We have had both those documents for a really, really long time. Some of them are on council roads and some of them are on state roads. The cycling strategy outlines the standards that those key corridors should be built to. However, I would challenge the Inquiry to look at what percentage of that principal bicycle network actually meets the standards that are outlined in the cycling strategy, because I think you will find it is significantly lacking. We need infrastructure that is safe, that is separated and connects people to the places they want to go—to schools, to shops, to child care. We do not need to push cyclists into creeks and into dark corridors where cyclists, particularly women, feel unsafe.

**Jess WILSON:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. John.

**John MULLAHY:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks for your submissions and your appearance here today. We had some evidence yesterday with regard to drivers licensing tests from seniors peak body groups. I would be interested to know if you have any thoughts with regard to your feedback that you have there on how drivers licence test renewals processes could be changed to raise drivers' awareness of vulnerable road users such as cyclists.

**Chris STAR:** Okay. I will speak to that. I was just having a look at the practice learners permit test, and there are currently 32 questions. Three questions in that directly relate to bicycle riders, but I will note that it is only recently you have had the *Road to Solo Driving* re-updated this year, so that could be something that is in train, and that is quite proactive. There is also a supplementary note to do with distracted drivers as well, which gets back to the technology thing. The issue with these additional pieces of information is: how do government authorities promote and get that out to the driving public about—I just have to reinforce the thing about soft controls. There is a massive pushback on that. It is good to have these government guidelines, but how much they are absorbed into people's daily activities is another thing.

**Faith HUNTER:** I think we do need to have more regular testing, because, you know, the Department of Transport regularly put on their Facebook page details from the road rules, and if you look at the comments, especially when those are rules about pedestrians and cyclists and how you drive around them, it is very clear that a lot of people do not understand what the rules are. And more regular testing associated with renewals—it

is not only keeping those details fresh in their minds but it does send a message that it is important, whereas when you do it at the start and then you never hear about it again I think, you know, things lapse. Especially if you drive in an area where you are not going to see a lot of pedestrians and cyclists, then you are not often being reminded by your environment about how those interactions are meant to work.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Can I just ask: when you say regular testing, you are proposing or suggesting more regular practical testing when you renew your licence, or similar to when you do your Ls and you have like a written sort of –

**Faith HUNTER:** I think a test of your knowledge of the rules—and that could be managed online possibly—and then, if you struggle with that, maybe you have to do more practical testing. But it is the knowledge of what the rules are that seems to be lacking.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Wayne, I might head to you.

**Wayne FARNHAM:** Yes, sure. Thanks for coming in today. In your submission you talk about changing the road hierarchy, like it is in the UK. Can you elaborate on that and explain to us why Victoria should adopt that?

**Chris STAR:** Do you want me to speak to that? Okay, I will speak to that. It is a high-level change, and it is not that Victoria should adopt it, it should actually come through the National Transport Commission, which I think you have got the second-year renewal coming up for this year. There are eight changes to the UK road hierarchy, and it is more to do with the user hierarchy. There are a couple of very good diagrams which basically put the most vulnerable road users at the top of that hierarchy. I am just trying to bring up the diagram here, but basically it puts people at the top and then wheeled users and then cars and then down to your lorries, trucks—that sort of thing.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Dylan.

**Dylan WIGHT:** That is me. Thank you. Firstly, thank you so much for coming in, and thank you for your submissions as well. You guys are part of community-led organisations, and I understand how labour-intensive their submissions can be, so thank you so much for that. Chris, you spoke in your opening remarks around minimum passing distance laws. We obviously do have that legislation in Victoria where there is that minimum passing distance. Have you noticed a change in behaviour since those laws have come into effect? And when I say that, has there been a positive change? Are people aware of it, are they observing it and, if they are not, how can we better enforce that?

**Chris STAR:** Anecdotally, yes, there has been a change. Also anecdotally—we are still waiting for the statistics to come through—is this a positive move? The only thing I could really point to is a recent study that came out in 2021 on changes to car drivers' attitudes and behaviours following the introduction—this was a Western Australian study, and an important point to bring out in this which probably reinforces what we have observed in the inner suburbs is:

... such laws may need to be rigorously enforced and to be accompanied with other interventions targeted at changing attitudes and norms concerning cyclists.

So at the moment we are at an anecdotal thing: we are seeing better behaviours. But again, is it being enforced? And again, I would like to see what the police's attitude to actually enforcing that is.

**Faith HUNTER:** I would say there are a significant number of drivers who are being much more careful, and I notice that in inner Melbourne but also on regional roads when people are travelling at much higher speeds. But there are still a significant number who are not, and I think again that seems to split into two groups: those who are deliberately being aggressive and unfortunately a large group who just are not looking. So yes, I think it has improved. In terms of what enforcement there has been, I mean, that is hard to know. But I do notice that on local community groups on Facebook people complain about getting a speeding ticket or a ticket for using their mobile phone in the car, and you will get a lot of responses from people who have had the same experience—and I have never seen anyone complain about getting booked for close passing.

**Lisa O'HALLORAN:** In the hierarchy of controls there is a lot of room for error with an intervention like a minimum passing distance, so I think we need to acknowledge that the Safe System approach that we talk

about in our submission acknowledges that people make mistakes and humans make errors, whether they are in a car, on a bike or as a pedestrian. It is a subtle blend of traffic engineering and psychology: about what people do and how they move and how we separate people and keep them safe. There is a really great book called *Movement* by a guy called Marco de Brömmelstroet. It is at Merri-bek library, and I recommend everyone has a read of it. It talks about how we combine these elements to actually give people the room for error without getting seriously harmed or killed.

**Dylan WIGHT:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Anthony.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Thank you. Thanks for appearing and thanks for all your work and your submission. Again, picking up on Dylan's comments, I know that takes a lot of work with all the voluntary effort, so thank you. The thing that struck me in your submission was that of the 111 people who were surveyed, 64% noted more aggressive driver behaviour and 63% reported an increase in distracted drivers. Do you think there is an opportunity through this Inquiry for the Government to look at pursuing public awareness campaigns which, aside from the testing side of things that was discussed earlier, actually proactively educate the community, drivers and the general public about the importance of being mindful and supportive of vulnerable road users such as people that ride bikes?

**Lisa O'HALLORAN:** I think that is a lower order control. I think the higher order controls are separating cars, bikes and pedestrians and not combining them. There is a place for it and it belongs somewhere, but number one needs to be building the safe, separated network.

**Anthony CIANFLONE:** Picking up on that, then, how can we look at better leveraging level crossing projects like the Upfield corridor, for example, to better integrate what you were talking about earlier around strategic cycling corridors? What is your view about that?

**Faith HUNTER:** The work done on the Upfield corridor through Coburg has been a really good example of where that can work really well. What it does not address is that you need to build the network based on where people want to go. Particularly in Merri-bek, Sydney Road, for example, is surrounded by people who get on their bikes every day to drop the kids at school, to go to work, to go to the library and to go to wherever they need to, but we do not see those people shopping on Sydney Road because it is inaccessible if you are on a bike. The network needs to be built to get to all the local services and the local destinations. We have been really good at finding those opportunistic spaces along the railway line and along the creeks and building paths there that pedestrians and cyclists can use. They work for some people, particularly if you are moving north-south and trying to get in or out of Merri-bek, but we do not have that network that takes you to the shops and takes you to the school. Some of the parents doing Ride and Stride programs, particularly in Brunswick West, have said they can find a safe route through the backstreets to the local primary school, and they are happy to let their kids do that. But as soon as that kid needs to get to Brunswick Secondary College or Coburg High School, there is no safe route across the city for a 13-year-old to travel independently on a bike, so that is where it all falls down.

We have made really good use of those opportunistic spots, but we need to start looking at where people want to go and who they want to travel with. They want to travel with their children. Disabled people want to be able to use bicycles. The Chair of the Merri-bek Disability Reference group told me that a bicycle is one of the cheapest mobility devices you can get. Elderly people want to be able to stay active. Bicycles enable people to carry more stuff and to go further than they can on foot. We have a really large chunk of the population who cannot use a car. If you are 12 to 18, you cannot drive. There are a lot of disabilities and medical conditions that prevent people from driving, and increasingly the cost of living is putting pressure on people. Bicycles really increase transport accessibility, and we need to be building the network to the destinations people need to get to.

**Lisa O'HALLORAN:** I think, as well, it is not just about travelling north-south and it is not just about travelling into the CBD, particularly as you live, you know, further north than Bell Street and even go out into Whittlesea and Hume. When your local supermarket is 2, 3, 4, 5 kilometres from your house, a bike gives you an option of getting to those places without a car. It is not just about travelling north-south. I think at the

moment the Upfield is really great if you live 500 metres either side of it, but we just lack the east–west connections to make it accessible for everyone else, and that is where the network needs to develop and grow.

**Chris STAR:** To speak to that network issue, it is like during COVID-19 and the lockdowns the Government actually did some great work with the pop-up lanes program between VicRoads and the Department of Transport, but the problem with that was that the Department of Transport from our perspective seemed to fold under the lightest bit of pressure either from community pressure groups or the councils. There was so much hard work and planning that went into plans to separate bicycle infrastructure. They have seemingly been put on permanent hold. Some of those were High Street, Northcote; Sydney Road, Brunswick; South Crescent, Northcote; the southern suburbs, including Inkerman Road and Kerferd Road; and Heidelberg Road. Hopefully they will be made permanent. Some of those programs were fantastic, but they seemed to lack that higher level support. There are a lot of plans out there that exist for the network, but they have been put on permanent hold because ‘Oh, we can’t do that, it’s too scary; it will take away parking’—which is the issue in the inner suburbs, especially around the Yarra area. But that pop-up bike program really was something incredibly innovative and good from the State Government, and they should not have folded so easily on some of those programs. Actually most of them had plans going back several years, if not more. and what is going to happen to them now? The State Government have the innovation and the data; they have the principal bike network; they have that data on the strategic cycling corridors. You know what needs to be done. We just lack the political will to do it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are nearly at time, so I am going to squeeze in just one last question. Yesterday I was really struck by a witness talking about humanising cyclists. It was that we are not talking about cyclists, we are talking about humans on a bike, and that really impacted me. You have mentioned also some of your people that you surveyed or were part of your group have medical issues or disabilities. Can you just talk a little bit about that, that human element of what this means? I would like to know a little bit more about that and their experience on our roads.

**Faith HUNTER:** Yes. A lot of people who are living with disabilities or medical conditions do not have access to using a car. Sometimes it limits their use of public transport, and sometimes they cannot walk particularly far. It is an area where—unfortunately in Australia—we do not know much about people with disabilities using bicycles. The UK are much better at collecting information on this, and it is something we have been talking to Bicycle Network about—doing a project together to try and find out more. Really, that transport accessibility—if people are forced to maybe use an Uber every time they want to move around, they end up isolated from the community. They are not visible on our streets. They do not have an owned presence on the streets, and we need to be able to see and have people actively taking that part publicly on our streets.

I think one thing we notice in Merri-bek is when you look at people riding you see people in normal clothes, you see a lot of women and children and you cannot tell often if someone is disabled when they are on a bike. You do see people riding upright tricycles, which can mean that they do have a disability or medical condition. I know one woman with cerebral palsy who rides a recumbent tricycle, and one of our shops actually does quite a lot of work adapting bicycles for people who need them. It is a really important part of the community I think and, as I say, in Australia we are pretty poor at knowing very much about them. But it also speaks to how many more people could have another transport option available to them if there were a good network of protected bike lanes, because often they are even more vulnerable on a bike. Yes.

**Lisa O’HALLORAN:** And I think it is just worth noting that at the moment everyone is really feeling the pinch. You know, even buying a Myki—a daily ticket, 10 bucks a day—is feeling really painful for some people, and often a lot of the groups that Faith talked about are some of the people that are affected acutely by these issues. But I think everyone is feeling that at the moment, and a bike is just such an equitable way to get around, because a couple of hundred dollars on a bike will pay for itself in Myki tickets very, very quickly. So I think it is just worth noting that with the cost-of-living pressures, even just replacing some of your trips by bike is a real financial benefit as well as an environmental benefit and a social benefit. There are not a lot of modes of transport where you can say every time someone just swaps one trip out everyone wins, and this is one of them.

**Faith HUNTER:** One other group we are working with is women from the CALD community in Fawkner, where we are running a program. We got a community strengthening grant from Merri-bek to provide them with free bicycles from CERES Bike Shed, and they are being taught to ride a bike and then they will go on to

do confidence riding classes. Now, we had a couple of women approach us at community festivals but we were not sure how many women would want to do this, and within the first two weeks all 10 spots were filled and we have a waiting list now for the next round. These are women who culturally are not allowed to drive and they walk huge distances with their kids, and a bicycle is just going to make that so much easier for them and their families.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. It is lovely to end on that note. Thank you very much for your contributions and submissions and answering our questions today. It is very much appreciated, so thank you very much.

**Witnesses withdrew**