

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Inquiry into infrastructure projects

Melbourne — 21 June 2017

Members

Mr Bernie Finn — Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh — Deputy Chair

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Mark Gepp

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr Shaun Leane

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Luke O'Sullivan

Participating members

Mr Greg Barber

Ms Samantha Dunn

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Witnesses

Mr John Merritt, Chief Executive, VicRoads.

The CHAIR — Mr Merritt, this committee hearing is evidence today in relation to the inquiry into infrastructure projects, and the evidence is being recorded.

Welcome to the public hearing of the economy and infrastructure committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here tonight, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

Again, welcome. Thank you for coming in. I understand that you do not have an opening statement so we just might go straight to questions and get out of here — well, it is too late to get out a reasonable hour. But if I could just ask you: as the VicRoads boss, do you feel that VicRoads is sort of the poor relation of this project, that you have sort of been left out in the cold?

Mr MERRITT — No, Mr Finn, I do not.

The CHAIR — You don't? Because we have been examining tonight. First we have spoken to, as I am sure you have heard in the gallery, Mr Charlton and we have just spoken to Mr Sammut, and it seems to me that it is very much a set-up between the company and the authority. I am just wondering what role VicRoads has in all this. It may well be that I am wrong, but it seems to me that VicRoads has sort of been given the cold shoulder in all this.

Mr MERRITT — Our responsibility is to run the road network, and we need to be satisfied that the project will strengthen the road network, so we have had dedicated staff working closely with the authority since the initial market-led proposal was put in. That working relationship has worked very well, and we are satisfied with how the project is progressing and the impact it will have on the network.

The CHAIR — I am concerned about the truck problem. We have heard over a period of time that Transurban has been, what I would suggest, quite greedy actually in the way they have lifted the tolls, which has caused trucking companies to find other ways to avoid those tolls, and to send even more trucks onto the streets of the inner west. What proposals do you have to prevent that happening when this particular project is up and running?

Mr MERRITT — The government has announced that there will be curfews on the four critical roads in the inner-west: Francis, Somerville, Buckley and Moore. It will be our job to impose those curfews and to police those curfews to get the benefit to those suburbs that we really want out of this project. Clearly a critical objective is to improve the amenity in those areas. Those residents have been campaigning for truck reductions since long before I become involved with VicRoads. So that will be how that will be delivered across the streets.

The CHAIR — How are you going to enforce those curfews?

Mr MERRITT — We have curfews now on different sections of those streets — night-time curfews around Francis and Somerville as well as school drop-off and pick-up times. VicRoads operates a heavy vehicle unit called the Transport Safety Services crew, and it is our job to enforce those curfews using those patrols.

The CHAIR — And that is successful to this point?

Mr MERRITT — Yes, they have been successful. If residents are concerned about trucks breaking the curfew, they will routinely contact us, and we will ensure that there are additional patrols in the area to make that happen.

The CHAIR — What sort of input has VicRoads had into the West Gate tunnel project considerations?

Mr MERRITT — Very significant. We have had full-time staff working with the authority, as I said before, since the market-led proposal was first submitted. Our input covers everything from the nature of the West Gate Freeway widening and how that will work, and I think some of the earlier comments from earlier speakers talked about some of those issues to make sure the traffic works. We have had significant input into the Hyde Street ramps, which for us is a really critical part of getting more trucks out of the suburbs and onto the project. Those are just two of the instances where we are really closely involved in supporting the authority team to get the best project.

Mr LEANE — I do not want to verbal you, Chair, so please correct me. The Chair is very big on showbiz, as we all know. In the Legislative Council I have heard the Chair call the West Gate tunnel ‘the tunnel to nowhere’. Taking your evidence that VicRoads and yourself have been responsible for the whole road network, how does it link in, and is that unfair criticism by our Chair?

Mr MERRITT — From VicRoads’ point of view it is an important and actually quite exciting piece of the whole road network. I think you have heard a number of comments about the various pieces that are happening around Melbourne at the moment. We are well underway in the widening of the Monash Freeway from Berwick into EastLink. That gives us a big uplift in capacity there to manage some of that growth. We have got some unused capacity on EastLink. We are widening them and we can bring more traffic in, but we have got some unused capacity at EastLink.

We are now underway on the really important decisions around the north-east link, so we can bring more volume there, we can take it up EastLink and we can eventually connect up to the M80, or the Western Ring Road. We are now funded and out to market on the final three stages, so we are well underway on the widening of the M80 around the EJ Whitten Bridge section. We are out for expressions of interest for that last section from the Western Highway to the West Gate Freeway itself, and we have now started working with the commonwealth around the funding of the last two sections, the Greensborough end and that last piece of the puzzle around Leakes Road and Sydney Road. And now we have got the widening of the West Gate going from eight lanes to 12.

So we are actually now realistically going to see this major orbital around Melbourne. And we know when we have built these big pieces of road, such as the ring-road and the Deer Park bypass, in the past they have had really profound impacts on the economy and the social growth of the city. So that is for us extremely important. On top of that we have got a really exciting project in the outer suburban arterial road project, which is the major uplift of seven really critical roads in the western suburbs, a lot of which is around heavy vehicles but also around the growth areas there — Point Cook, Tarneit these areas — so we are trying to bring these suburbs that have got a capacity to get onto the road. We really need this road to be able to do just that. And then for us running the road system you are obviously critically enabling people to live their lives, but there is this huge freight task. Because of the way our economy is just changing all the time the movement of goods is just becoming this enormous challenge for us. Getting those goods into the port, given how our economy works, is really critical, and making sure that we can move them without rattling past the houses of Somerville Road, Francis Street, Moore Street and Napier Street is a really exciting proposition for us.

Mr LEANE — I did have a follow-up question, but I think Francis Street, seeing you mentioned it, I reckon Ms Hartland might — —

Ms HARTLAND — I have got several questions. If we could start off with the Hyde Street houses, I was with the residents recently when they had a meeting with VicRoads employees. I have to say they were extremely helpful, but the problem is that because several of these houses were bought with the acquisition overlays in place they do not qualify. I just think somewhere along the line someone has to start using some imagination for this set of houses. I am not saying that it is VicRoads and I am not saying that it is Transurban’s fault, but someone has to take charge and come up with a package to actually not just move these residents out and buy up their properties. Those houses should be demolished so nobody else can actually live there. Turn it into parkland — it is in the blast zone — everything else. Is that something that you can make some commitment to at least start talking to other people about to try to come up with some solution?

Mr MERRITT — Yes.

Ms HARTLAND — And can that be conveyed as quickly as possible to the residents? Because they are feeling quite desperate.

Mr MERRITT — There might have been some misunderstanding. I know in talking to my colleagues who were there in the initial meeting, we have given those residents — I think eight of the 10 were there at the meeting — a contact detail into the organisation. We are certainly not closed to them coming to us around the hardship provision that we have used elsewhere. Clearly we have to demonstrate that hardship, but we are completely open to this process.

Ms HARTLAND — Because interestingly if any of them lived beside the railway lines that are going to have the crossings changed, all of them would have qualified, so I think that is an interesting factor. In terms of the truck bans, can you tell me in the last two years how many trucks or owners have actually been fined for breaking the curfew?

Mr MERRITT — Can I take that on notice?

Ms HARTLAND — With the project it is fairly clear that a lot of trucks are going to be displaced onto Millers Road and through Brooklyn and onto Hyde Street. None of those streets have truck bans, so it feels to me like we have got the truck bans here but they are just going to be displaced off to other streets. What is the intention? How is that going to be dealt with?

Mr MERRITT — The model numbers on Millers Road will definitely be the subject of part of the EES inquiry. I have got no doubt those Brooklyn residents will raise that issue, and I would expect the inquiry to have quite a bit to say about that. We will wait on that process as to how the inquiry views that outcome. Obviously many of us have been deeply involved with that Brooklyn community. In trying to approve their amenity there, I have the utmost respect for those community groups. I am sure they will be organised in how that works. I suppose from a VicRoads point of view Hyde and Miller are not like Francis and Somerville in that they are wider and, apart from the 10 private houses on Hyde, the rest of it is appropriate. Indeed even Miller has industry on one side of it. But we will certainly be following with interest as to how the inquiry deals with that issue about the consequence for the Brooklyn residents west of Millers Road.

Ms HARTLAND — I have four questions on behalf of my colleague Sam Dunn, but they are quite technical. You might need to take those questions on notice.

Mr MERRITT — I am happy to take things on notice.

Ms HARTLAND — What is the strategic plan from VicRoads to discourage private vehicle use so that we can look at how we can use pedestrian walkways and cycling et cetera — so overall?

Mr MERRITT — The establishment of Active Transport Victoria and the seeding of the \$100 million funding by the government into that means that it is their responsibility to set that strategy, but when it comes to encouraging or supporting people in more active transport we are working with them. The active transport plan is due for release shortly from Active Transport Victoria, and that will, I think, answer some of the issues that the other member is raising.

Ms HARTLAND — The widening of the Chandler Highway bridge to six lanes means it will basically become a holding area for slow-moving traffic. To not block the exit round from the Eastern Freeway, considering that the six lanes end at Heidelberg Road, is there no chance of this traffic being smoothly integrated? Is it official VicRoads policy to build roads that will be congested immediately after construction? The Yarra bike path trail will clearly be adversely affected by the widening.

Mr MERRITT — There are two issues there. Ironically, were we to build only a four-lane bridge we would actually be building a road that would be congested on opening. Our modelling indicates that that capacity would be taken up quite shortly. That is why we are putting in the six, because we are trying to put some future capacity in there. Our modelling still indicates that it will provide significant benefit, but I think the member is right to point out that it is not just about the bridge. Clearly the level crossing at Grange Road is to be removed. There are treatments at the Heidelberg Road intersection, and our work is looking at the entire corridor that runs down Grange Road and up through Power Street and Denmark Street in Kew to see how we treat that major north-south movement.

Ms HARTLAND — This is one that Sam has given me but I was quite intrigued by it myself. It is the shared use bike path infrastructure and this whole program you have had about safety campaigns. It is my understanding that when you look at how many cyclists have killed pedestrians rather than how many cyclists have been killed by motorists it goes very much one-way. Why? How much money has this campaign cost?

Mr MERRITT — I do not have the numbers, but it is a very modest messaging to cyclists on shared pathways. We do have issues with the historic design of a number of our shared use pathways. They are not as wide as the lanes that we are building now. I think the lanes on the project you have been talking about this

evening are about 4 metres wide because we now understand particular how commuter cyclists use these lanes and the sorts of speeds they want to travel at. Given our time again we would be separating cyclists from pedestrians completely. We cannot go back and retrospectively fix that overnight, so we are reaching out to what I think is a very small percentage of cyclists who do provide quite an intimidating experience for pedestrians. Of course our pedestrian numbers are growing as well, so it is not for a moment suggesting that that is a big issue than cyclist safety on the roads. Clearly statistically it is not.

Ms HARTLAND — I have got one more question. This is in regard to the exploratory work for the Mordialloc bypass, which has started, and according to VicRoads construction will begin mid-2019. The project is continuing, but it is unclear what environmental impact assessments have actually been undertaken, so will an environmental impact statement be done?

Mr MERRITT — My understanding is that that is a matter for the Minister for Planning to determine. Clearly we have got that. The corridor that runs beside Braeside Park there has been a long-held road reserve. That will be a critical issue in terms of the environmental values of the vegetation in that corridor versus the rest of the park, and there are some other sensitivities to the south there in the wetlands as well. So we will be supporting the planning minister in making the appropriate decision as to whether an EES process is warranted or not.

Ms HARTLAND — I just wanted to make one last comment so I do not always sound like I am completely mean: I just wanted to congratulate VicRoads on its collaboration with Launch Housing. The idea that you would use land that may not be used for decades for housing I just thought was a really nifty idea. There has been some opposition in Footscray, but it is from people who do not want to live next to those kinds of people, and I do not really care because I am happy to live next door to them. I just thought it was a great use of land.

Mr MERRITT — Look, thanks for that. It is a really exciting proposition. The team is looking elsewhere to see what other assets we have got. This is one of those situations where we hold land that we are unlikely to use in the near term. We buy a lot of land on a 20 and 30-year basis. Sometimes those properties get run down. This is a really good location, and actually it is a win for us as well, because the site is put to use, it is looked after and it does not annoy other neighbours for other reasons, so it is a really great thing to be a part of actually. Thanks for that.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Mr Merritt, I have just got one question for you. Transurban has stated to us that they spent \$2 billion on the road networks in Melbourne. Can you give us a breakdown on where that \$2 billion went and where it was spent?

Mr MERRITT — The two obvious areas are the widening of the Tullamarine Freeway, the so-called CTW — CityLink-Tulla widening project — which is about \$1.25 billion. The other big piece is the widening of the Monash, which we are undertaking at the moment, which is \$400 million I think. So they are the two. I will have to check with Mr Charlton to see what else he is referring to in other pieces, but they are the two big investments at the moment. As he said, the City-Tulla is in three stages, the first stage being effectively from just this side of the tunnel out over the Bolte and all the way out to the Bulla Road intersection. So they are doing that and then we are doing the other two stages after that, but they are funding that major upgrade.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Can you come back to us with a breakdown on that \$2 billion?

Mr MERRITT — Okay.

Mr EIDEH — John, there are other projects in the west including the western suburbs roads upgrade package and the M80 ring-road upgrade. Can you tell us more about these projects and if there are any plans for similar projects for the northern suburbs?

Mr MERRITT — As I was saying, the most exciting one, as we get the extra capacity onto the M80, will be the outer suburban arterial roads package. This is for Dunnings Road, Palmers Road, Derrimut Road, Leakes Road, a couple of sections of Dohertys Road, the freeway interchange at Forsyth Road and the Duncans Road interchange at Werribee/Werribee South. I had the chance to drive all of these roads in the last couple of weeks to get a feel for what a difference they will make. I was really struck by the amount of industry around those roads and the opportunity to allow those industries to get a real boost in productivity from that work, but I was also really struck by the growth around Tarneit, for example, as I think everybody is who goes to the west, and I

am really pleased to see what we are doing there. There are also a couple of side issues there. I think there are three or four grade separations for the Federation Trail, so it eliminates those dangerous crossings. I think this is a really quite historic uplift in that section of Melbourne, and that combined with the widening of the West Gate and the upgrading of the ring-road I think ultimately should see those people opened up to a lot more opportunities both in business and in community.

Mr EIDEH — What about the northern suburbs, near Settlement Road? One of my colleagues asked me to ask you.

Mr MERRITT — Obviously we are out doing some critical pieces around Yan Yean Road, Bolton Street, Plenty Road. The most eagerly anticipated piece of work in the north, judging by some of the public response, is this north-east link proposal, but for us it is the completion of the M80 at the Greensborough end there. We are really excited about being able to get that work done.

The CHAIR — Just a couple of last questions — I am really hopeful. The north-east link that you referred to: how long before we know which parts of Ivanhoe are going to be turned into a six-lane highway?

Mr MERRITT — I think the public commitment is for the route to be determined by the end of this year.

The CHAIR — Okay. I will look forward to that. You would be aware of the problems surrounding Point Cook Road?

Mr MERRITT — Yes.

The CHAIR — People have spent most of their lives on Point Cook Road trying to get onto the freeway and continue to do so. What can be done to ease the problems there? I have been stuck on there myself for an inordinate amount of time on a number of occasions, and the people that have to face that every morning have my sympathy. There must be a way to fix this though.

Mr MERRITT — That is right. From Point Cook Road to the Princes Freeway in that section of Dunning Road and Palmers Road is one of the upgrades that we are doing there in the area. We are also improving Palmers Road as well, with the bus lane and the interchanges there as well. The growth of Point Cook is quite something, and we are continuing to look at what we can do to help that movement. Critical for us is getting the interchanges around the freeway working better, because that appears to be the choke point for those residents coming up there. Getting some of those people off Palmers Road onto the bus to get to the station there as well we hope will make a difference there as well.

The CHAIR — At the moment you go down Point Cook Road, over the bridge and around through Laverton, which presents problems in itself. What can be done there? Can some sort of interchange be put in there to help traffic movement?

Mr MERRITT — I am not that technically familiar with it, but increasingly we find that we can look at intersections and how they work and how they can be smoothed out. Generally what we are finding with a lot of our intersections in Melbourne now as our traffic volumes grow is that we are looking at ways of simplifying the cycle in the light set. For us, we have a lot of intersections where we have got through traffic in both directions but also right-turn lane provisions, and because those right-turn lanes are cutting across ongoing traffic it is a danger so we give them a dedicated space. That means that in a typical 90-second light cycle, straight-through traffic might only get 25 per cent of that time. That is what causes that big build-up. It causes that experience where it might take a couple of light cycles to get through, and that is really painful. Then you will get through and you will find a bit of clean road.

A lot of our work on intersections now is how we might make changes to those cycles, changes to those right turns and take those people elsewhere simply to return back to a 50–50 split on a light cycle. That is the classic story that you are seeing with the Hoddle Street treatments and those we are looking at elsewhere out there. We have just traditionally tried to give everybody a go through these light systems. As we get a bigger population and a really denser population, we have to get smarter at tuning those intersections.

The CHAIR — So can I give the people of Point Cook any hope at all that we are going to make the trip at least down to the freeway any easier for them any time soon?

Mr MERRITT — You certainly can. We are doing a pilot piece of work out in the Monash area at the moment which is partly about that but also: how might we get better information to drivers who use routes every day?

The CHAIR — I think they know the information. They are pretty familiar with it on a daily basis. They know it is stuffed!

Mr MERRITT — I do take your point. There are opportunities for us, if we can equip people with better information about what is the best time to make their trip and how might they get a more reliable space, that can influence a small number, and small numbers make a big difference on a tight road space.

The CHAIR — Mr Merritt, thank you very much for coming in. We do appreciate it. You will receive a transcript of the hearing sometime soon. If you could check that for anything that may need changing — I am sure it will not happen, but if there is, if you could get back to us, that would be a marvellous thing. We thank you very much again for your further cooperation with our inquiry.

Mr MERRITT — Thanks.

Committee adjourned.