

# TRANSCRIPT

## STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

### Inquiry into infrastructure projects

Melbourne — 20 April 2016

#### Members

Mr Joshua Morris — Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh — Deputy Chair

Mr Nazih Elasmr

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Ms Gayle Tierney

#### Staff

Secretary: Dr Christopher Gribbin

#### Witnesses

Ms Anne Kershaw, school council president, and

Mr Jim Kounetas, school council member, Strathmore Secondary College.

**The CHAIR** — I will reopen the Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing. We are hearing evidence with regard to our infrastructure inquiry. All evidence given today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected for what you say in here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

I welcome you both here today. I will ask you to state your names and the capacity in which you are here. You have obviously got a presentation to move through, at the completion of which we will have some questions for you, so I hand over to you.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — My name is Jim Kounetas. I sit on Strathmore Secondary College school council.

**Ms KERSHAW** — My name is Anne Kershaw. I am the president of Strathmore Secondary College council. Jim is our treasurer.

**The CHAIR** — Fabulous.

**Ms KERSHAW** — We are both the community parent reps on college council. I think it is probably worth emphasising that we are not staff at the school. We are not state government employees, and so we can probably speak more candidly than some of the school staff would be able to.

**The CHAIR** — Great.

**Ms KERSHAW** — We are here to talk particularly about one aspect of the CityLink-Tulla widening project, which is the bridge that will connect Bell Street to Pascoe Vale Road. So it is the new connecting bridge.

#### **Visual presentation.**

**Ms KERSHAW** — As I think is highlighted in this image here, our particular concern with this bridge is its size and its proximity to the school. It will be sitting 15 metres high and it will come within 5 metres of classrooms at the school, so this is the particular aspect we will be talking about.

One of the things that particularly concerns our school, the school community and the local community is the extent of consultation that has not happened with the school. I might be a little old-fashioned in how I view consultation. I would go back to 1969 to Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation or even draw on the International Association for Public Participation, which I know from previous work informs what the state government does. The level of consultation we have had from VicRoads sits at the bottom of both of these ladders and these spectrums. We have been 'informed' about the project. At no point has the school or the school community been consulted about this bridge, and to add insult to injury, the school was never informed about this bridge by either VicRoads or by CityLink. In fact the school was informed about the project by the contractors who are building it. So Thiess — which then became Leighton, which I think now is CPB Contractors — were the ones who actually advised the school that the widening project included this enormous bridge.

From our perspective, and despite some communication that has come out of the VicRoads office, there has been no consultation with the school, and information has been poor. If we had been consulted about the bridge, this is, if you like, the highlights of the feedback we would have given. Essentially this 15-metre high bridge abuts the school, and a bridge of this size and this scale is not compatible with an education facility. It is enormous, it is high, it is right on our northern boundary. As I think Jim has said, if you dropped something over its southern edge, it would land in the schoolgrounds. It is a moot point that it does not actually encroach on our grounds.

It is not compatible with education because of the noise pollution it will involve, the air pollution that is involved, the risk of something falling off the bridge. The incident 18 months ago on the Bolte Bridge where a truck came off — we would love to have a truck fall onto classrooms at Strathmore Secondary College. And overshadowing. The overshadowing is what is highlighted in correspondence we have seen coming out of the minister for roads' office, but it is one of a list of issues we have with the project.

The other context for Strathmore is it is a large and growing school. It is a highly popular school; families in our area almost fight to get their students in. It is a school that is contained by a catchment zone. It is a large and

growing and very popular school. The point in the school where we would be putting in more portable classrooms to accommodate the growing numbers is right where the bridge is now going to hit the school.

You will see in that picture there — that is a picture of the current school site — it is highly constrained and compacted and condensed. So the idea that there might be funding available to shift portable classrooms around, we actually cannot see where you would shift portable classrooms to. The other impact there is on the northern corner of the school. Those playing fields are actually classrooms, so at any particular point in the day there are four PE classes that are timetabled into those spaces. That is not free, open space — playing space — for the school; that is timetabled space.

And we would argue that this project actually takes away what we would call the quiet enjoyment of our constrained land parcel by about a quarter. We would say there is now a quarter of this constrained, compromised, compacted school ground that we really cannot use if we are going to have any sort of facility that supports a learning environment. That is our 5-minute summary.

**The CHAIR** — Fabulous, wonderful. Thank you very much for that. I am quite astonished at the way that you found out about this proposal. It shocked me, but based upon the plans you have seen, is there any possible way that you could work around this particular off ramp? Is there something that can be done? Obviously I see it is quite a constrained site. As a former PE teacher myself, I understand the importance of having that space available to students as well. Is there any way the school can move forward?

**Mr KOUNETAS** — If we were originally consulted, probably we would have looked it. Where the current or proposed bridge abutment is going now — they have actually started doing the works, but there were a couple of different versions prior to that. VicRoads did confirm to us in a meeting we had a few weeks ago that it was a monetary issue. They could have moved that whole bridge more towards the north rather than bringing it to the boundary. There were opportunities. The problem was that you have got a creek and a railway line and the span of that bridge would have been bigger, so it became a cost factor to bring it closer.

**The CHAIR** — Do you know the order of that cost difference?

**Mr KOUNETAS** — It is significant. It would be a significant amount of money. I would say it would be quite a few million dollars to actually move it. Because all of a sudden, hypothetically, if you are spanning 100 metres, now you would be spanning 200 metres. So the bridge itself would have been a much more complex design issue, and you will be going over a creek bed with silts and all sorts of issues. Driving piles down to bedrock would have been a bit of an issue for them. I have a little bit of technical knowledge because I am a civil engineer, so I know a little bit about that aspect. However, having said that, we only got the information at school council when the builder, as Anne told us, came and did a 3D modelling presentation to school council. That is when we sort of stood back and said, ‘You guys have got to be kidding me’. Then we started asking a few questions.

**The CHAIR** — We actually have VicRoads appearing later on this afternoon, so it is a question we may be able to ask in terms of the other designs — the opportunity for those designs to be — —

**Mr KOUNETAS** — They did tell us; I heard it with my own ears. They said it was a monetary issue. Bearing in mind this is a Transurban-funded project. Am I right by saying that?

**Mr FINN** — You are.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — It is not 100 per cent state government. When the consortium originally came to VicRoads and said ‘via Transurban’, VicRoads jumped on it.

**Ms KERSHAW** — I guess the other thing in response to your question — and Jim is treasurer at college council — is your standard state school does not have an ongoing capital works budget that lets it rebuild a school or take on major capital works in response to something like this. The options for the school to respond to this level of infrastructure that comes so close to it are negligible.

**The CHAIR** — And has the government made any commitment at all to additional funding to address this?

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Initially, now, after asking quite a few questions and having a few relevant meetings, the principal of the school has been offered some minor reshuffling — taking away some of those portable

buildings and bringing in what we call double-storey portable buildings. So reducing the footprint of that area and bringing it back closer towards Pascoe Vale Road, which has less of an impact. I think that is happening sometime this week. That is only a temporary fix. They failed to understand, as Anne said, that the open parcel of land is actually classrooms. They cannot fit. If at any given time, there are not four classes on the field, they cannot have those four classes in the classroom. There is not enough room for them. They think it is open land, but it is not. It is actually classroom land.

**Ms KERSHAW** — Strathmore currently runs a period 0, which starts at 10 past 8, and a period 7, which starts at 3 o'clock. That is a situation that has been in place for a number of years because it is a facility that is so demanded. There are not enough classrooms already to have a standard 9 until 3 school day. This is a large, growing school, which is partly why it has a period 0 and a period 7, and now it has a bridge beside it.

The other thing we should say in terms of what has been offered to the school is that the shift to some double-storey portables is a short-term solution, because while these construction works are underway, we have classes being taught and students in those classes. My youngest daughter is currently in year 12 at the school. As a parent and family member, I want students to be able to continue learning while this is being built. Some short-term work has been offered to the school in the last six weeks — very, very short time lines. Contingency responses have been offered, but we have been advised that in the next state budget we will have access to the pool of money that is available for master planning funding. So we are one of the schools that is eligible to make claims on that bucket of money. But then of course our long-term aim and task is to ensure that whatever comes out of the master planning project is funded in full.

**The CHAIR** — Indeed.

**Ms KERSHAW** — We have had eventually a short-term response to the construction works. There is an offer of some planning money, but the idea of rebuilding the school, which is essentially what needs to be done given how constrained the land parcel is and how compacted the school already is, the impact of this bridge. It seems that if the bridge cannot be relocated, then a rebuild of the school, which is not going to be a cheap option.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — What this whole process has done is it has made a parcel of land at the school an artificial easement and you really cannot build over it. At our school, now with the double-storey portable buildings, they just cannot go in those areas. Therefore we are moving those portable buildings further back, again constraining the school. Having said that, we approached VicRoads, and I have raised a few issues with them and I am yet to see a response from them, but now that we have double-storey portable buildings, what does that do to their acoustics modelling and what does it do to their dust, because all of a sudden that building was there, the bridge was there — noise travelled this way. Now all of a sudden the buildings are there at the same level. What does that do? I have yet to hear responses. There have been a couple of articles in the *Age* regarding dust — where did they get their information from? Is it actually derived from that area, or is it interpolated from other reports? I am still waiting to read those real technical reports. Some of the articles that I have read regarding that are a little bit scary.

**Ms TIERNEY** — I have quite a few questions, but they are mainly for VicRoads. I had heard about the offer of the master planning money, so I think that is good.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — That is good. From Danny and Lizzie.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Unlike previous times, if there is a commitment of master planning funding, there is a staged approach. You do not waste taxpayers money on a plan essentially and then put it in the bin. I think that is at least a good thing, and to be quite frank, at some stage, given the popularity of your school, something like that was going to have to happen anyway. I know you do not necessarily want to hear that, but in a very practical sense that would be the case. The other thing I just wanted to raise with you is that because of the difficulties that you have had, I understand there is an offer on the table too to actually have a dedicated liaison person with VicRoads and the school. Have you heard that?

**Mr KOUNETAS** — There is a liaison. The deputy principal has a liaison person. They talk to the contractor regarding day-to-day activities and all of that type of stuff, because there is a gate there that kids go through to go home and all of that, so there is that sort of coordination. The relationship between the builder and the school is fine. There is no problem from that aspect. They have been very accommodating from that aspect, but at the

end of the day, they are a builder and they are about to start major works. So really up until now it has been quite good, but we will just wait and see what happens from now on.

**Ms KERSHAW** — That was one of the offers that came from Transurban and VicRoads not long after they informed us of the project. Our response from college council was that we would probably fight each other for that job, because really they are building a 15-metre bridge that abuts the school, and the offer we had was a full-time position during the construction process to communicate — —

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Communicate what? Tell us that it is happening? We can see it with our own eyes. What were they really going to do? That was our view as school council — what was that position really going to entail?

**Ms TIERNEY** — Are you feeling as if you are starting to be listened to?

**Ms KERSHAW** — Starting to be.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Yes.

**Ms KERSHAW** — But to be honest, the school was informed of the project in September or October last year. The school year has started. We are into term one — so we have had the first term of school with this construction work happening, and it is only now, in the last I would say six weeks, that there is any sense of what is going to happen to help the school manage in the two years of the construction process. So we are starting to get a response, but this is six months afterwards and after the school year has started with the construction work happening.

**Ms TIERNEY** — And just for some background for me, I am quite familiar with that area where the school is, but I am not sure where it is up to. Have they actually started the construction?

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Yes. The piles for the bridge to support the elevated section of that are going in right now; it is happening. It was surveyed, the land was cleared and the piles are going in as we speak. Us saying to relocate it — it was not going to be relocated. To build a bridge, the design process and the procurement of the materials had been done months ago — it would not have just happened last week or the week before. They were placing orders for the supply of the panels, the T-beams and all that last year — at the time they were consulting us.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Did you get a sense that members of staff knew about this before it came to council?

**Ms KERSHAW** — No, we heard within days of the school staff being advised. The history of communication with the project was that when the project was being tendered, which was back in 2014 ahead of the last state election, the two tenderers who were involved in the project came and spoke with staff. I have some notes here I will refer to. Then in July the contractors — Leighton, as they then were — came and started talking to the school as well. The principal and the assistant principal of the school actually got the detail of the project and its scale and its proximity to the school when they took themselves to an out-of-hours community information session. That is the level of information even that the school has received from VicRoads. The staff had to go to a voluntary community meeting — they were treated as a local resident stakeholder in this project.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — I will go back one step. When the consortium did go, they were just concept marketing drawings. Looking at a dotted line does not really reflect on that paper exactly where that bridge was going, whether it was going left or right — it was just a dotted line of a new ramp coming off Bell Street to hit Pascoe Vale Road. Only when we got the detailed drawings, when they did the 3D modelling and they came to school council and when I started asking questions — ‘You guys have got to be kidding me, this is on the boundary; that top T-beam is in line with the school’s cyclone fence’ — it is only then that we started asking. They just had a dotted red line on their concept drawings. Do not get me wrong, the principal would not be able to pick that up — no-one would be able to pick up that it is actually on the boundary. They never did inform back in — what was it? — in June last year. It was only when the school community got involved in those formal VicRoads meetings that they really picked up that this is on the boundary.

**Ms HARTLAND** — I too think that most of my questions are going to be for the EPA and VicRoads this afternoon. Having visited the school and having driven past it a thousand times, I never realised how land

constrained the site actually is. Do you think there is any option of the school actually being relocated in the local area?

**Ms KERSHAW** — We know exactly where we would love to relocate the school too, but it is local government land.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Where would that be?

**Ms KERSHAW** — It would be Cross Keys park, which would be a 5-minute walk.

**Ms HARTLAND** — That is just a bit further up, is it not?

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Yes, that is right — it is on the corner of Pascoe Vale Road and Woodland Street.

**Ms KERSHAW** — Just behind the shops there.

**Mr FINN** — Behind the pub.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — There is a pub and there is a plumbing store on the corner, that is right. There is a massive park there, and it is basically swap for swap, but that is a local government park.

**Ms KERSHAW** — It would give you a greenfield site to build on, it is even closer to public transport, you would not have to shift the boundary of the school at all because they are blocks away. It also means that the school is not even going to be close to the existing road infrastructure there. It would take it a long way away from the railway line — —

**Mr KOUNETAS** — There would be a lot of pluses — —

**Ms KERSHAW** — But it is local government land.

**Ms HARTLAND** — I have friends whose children are at the high school, and the reason they went was around the music program. I understand that one of the really big things at Strathmore high is the music program and that it attracts kids from all over.

**Ms KERSHAW** — It does, well, within the catchment zone! It makes the catchment zone. I think it offers maybe one or two music scholarships a year. It is an outstanding music program. Of my two daughters, one of them was very involved as well. A couple of examples to highlight how unique and special that is as a state education offering: Strathmore was the first state school to be invited to travel to Gallipoli for the Anzac Day celebrations. That is going back maybe six years ago. The school was the first state school from Australia to go and perform for Australia at that ceremony. I can also tell you it is the only state education department that offers bassoon, because bassoons are so complex and such expensive instruments. So it is an amazing project. You would think it would be a jewel in the crown of state education in Victoria.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — My son just finished VCE last year and I have got one to join next year, so I am very anxious about this whole process. I have just had one who has done very well. When we started at the school six-odd years ago, it was only roughly 1200-odd kids — I think it is up to 1600 kids now. Everyone is buying into the area to get their kids into the state school. I will be honest, we are some of those parents — we moved from Brunswick to Pascoe Vale. My wife is a teacher, and she knew the school's reputation. We have just ticked one off, and I have got one to start next year. I am very anxious about the little one. I do not know if you guys saw the *Age* article about a young boy; that was me and my son. He is asthmatic and I have got my wife now questioning everything, saying, 'How good is the school going to really be for our young son, who is severely asthmatic?'. We are really very conscious of that, to the point where we may not even send him to that school now.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Because we do have the opportunity to talk to VicRoads and the EPA this afternoon, what is your top question for both of those agencies?

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Top question?

**Ms HARTLAND** — Yes.

**Ms KERSHAW** — For the EPA I think it would be picking up on some of the conversations that we overheard from your previous presentation, which would be around air pollution — not just dust, but we are going to have diesel trucks going over this flyover. They are currently going to be 5 metres from a growing school of 1600 students, teenagers with your standard sort of health profile. We know that the modelling for air pollution in Australia does not meet international standards, and I know that in the last week or two Moonee Valley City Council has also raised concerns about the impact of this bridge on the air quality around the school. So for the EPA it would be around pollution.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Pollution, noise, and then obviously the blatant question is: why did they put it in that position, why didn't they put it somewhere else? They will give you a range of reasons but at the end of the day — —

**Ms KERSHAW** — I think for VicRoads — you have not warned us of this question but I would like to ask VicRoads what the cost saving was to put the bridge so close to the school, because we would like some of that cost saving to rebuild the school.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Because there was no environment effects statement done for the whole project, do you think if they had actually done that, then you would have been made aware and they would have actually picked up on the impact of putting a bridge through a school?

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Yes. When VicRoads, Transurban and then the builder came over to the school council and they presented, I raised the issue of, 'We're going to have double-storey portable buildings' — we were even contemplating that at that stage, because the school is landlocked and we need to grow — and they were surprised. If they had had this consultation, they would have known. So they had to look at redesigning their noise barriers.

**Ms KERSHAW** — To be honest, I think this might be rather speedy planning. I think that actually when the senior Transurban and VicRoads people came and stood on school grounds and saw how close the infrastructure was going to be they surprised themselves.

**Ms HARTLAND** — Something on a map and standing in the school grounds is totally different.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Yes. I tend to agree. I do not think they really understood the complexity of it and now they are backtracking, thinking, 'What can we do? How can we minimise this? What offers can we make? What can we do to get this thing?'. Even in the meeting he said, 'We haven't got an open-ended chequebook'. Transurban made that comment to us.

**Ms KERSHAW** — We wanted to know what their cost saving was.

**Mr FINN** — I reckon they might.

**The CHAIR** — On some of these projects.

**Mr FINN** — I think after the Transurban decision with the western distributor their chequebook might be pretty much endless at the moment. You have hit them hard. I am just wondering, in the short term would a sound tunnel, such as the likes of what we have down at Flemington, on that bridge help in your situation?

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Not necessarily. They did offer. They did say they are going to be putting up a timber fence on that northern boundary, but that has not happened. I drove past there the other day and it has not happened as yet. I do not know exactly how high that was. At the moment all it is is a cyclone fence and they have just put the shade cloth on it to separate the kids from the construction zone. As far as I am concerned, that is unacceptable, just to put — —

**Mr FINN** — I totally agree, absolutely agree.

**Ms KERSHAW** — I would suggest that sort of tunnel actually is going to make the structure larger and so the overshadowing of the school, which is not our most significant concern but it is part of our concern. The higher that structure is — and it is on the northern boundary of the school — the greater the overshadowing. And that sort of tunnel does not actually look at air quality at all. It is only for possibly sound, which is one of a list of concerns we have got about the structure.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — They are not going to build a particle wall that high. Once they get the piles up and they are putting the T-bends in, the noise is going to be up here. They physically cannot build a barrier that high.

**Mr FINN** — Well, going back to the relocation of Cross Keys — and I am glad Ms Hartland raised it, because I was going to — would that impact on the parkland there, the sporting grounds?

**Ms KERSHAW** — We could relocate, yes.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — You would do a swap, yes. You would do it like a Royal Children's Hospital scenario, where you take one and then you relocate — —

**Mr FINN** — Yes, that is what I was going to say, we could just swap them over.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Swap them over, yes.

**Ms KERSHAW** — We have got more substantial sports infrastructure at the school than they have got. They have been going through a master planning process for Cross Keys Reserve in the last couple of months. We could do a swap and they could use the sporting facilities currently at the school and have all of that space as well.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — The old buildings I think were built in the 50s. They certainly could be pulled down and become parkland, but there is a new gymnasium and a swimming pool, there is artificial ground and there is open ground there as well. So those more newish buildings do not need to be pulled down. Certainly the council would benefit from having those facilities, bang, straightaway.

**Ms KERSHAW** — That Cross Keys Reserve I would argue is a fairly undeveloped sporting reserve, from a local council perspective.

**Mr FINN** — I think that would be a fair point, yes.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — There is nothing there. There is just a toilet block, basically.

**The CHAIR** — As there are no further questions, I thank you for your attendance here today. We will look forward to asking some of those further questions this afternoon to those other agencies. Thank you for your time.

**Ms KILKENNY** — Thank you.

**Mr KOUNETAS** — Thanks for your time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**