

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

WITNESS

Ray Jacobs, Administration Manager, Central Coburg Business Association.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings of 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 given today is recorded by Hansard. 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.

We will make some quick introductions, and then I will invite you to speak in just a moment to your submission. I will start with Anthony.

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 Alison, Member for Bellarine. If you would like to give an opening statement of around 5 or 6 minutes, we can do that, and then we will start with questions, if that is okay.

Ray JACOBS: Yes. It can be quite a short statement. My name is Ray Jacobs. I am the manager, if you like, for the Coburg Business Association. I am not my twin from Bellarine island. I have sort of heard there is one around. The Association—it is just down the road from here. It is all the businesses along Sydney Road between Bell Street and Sheffield Street. It is about 230, 240 businesses. It is quite a large area. There is a special rate, so we have got some money to spend. There is me. We have got our social media and marketing area, and we do some public relations as well. I am there to make sure that the wheels do not fall off and also to make sure that the place is as good as it can be. We have had long-time concerns about the quality of the area: it is very old and it has not been maintained all that well. Sydney Road is a traffic sewer, as we all know. It is very dangerous, and we expect it not to get any better unless something drastic happens.

We had quite a few issues with bikes of course in the past. The new railway station with the new bike path has taken away a bit of that, but still there are lots of people riding bikes that access the area, and they need protection, as well as vulnerable people—NDIS and so on. Basically, people need to have better quality access from Pentridge and from the new health centre, because they will all come to us and, well, it is really substandard. That is why I am here, and I would like to answer any questions you may have.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you so much for that. I think being the local Member, you will have a very good understanding of this issue. We might go to you first.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes, thank you. Thank you for appearing, and thank you for the submission from the Coburg traders. I am very proud to be a member of an area with such a vibrant, beautiful, historic shopping strip—one of the longest, I should add as well, continuous shopping strips in the Southern Hemisphere. But I would actually like to ask about, I guess, two questions quickly. One is: what traffic mode do most of the shoppers who access Sydney Road currently utilise, would you say? And the second part is: how have the Upfield level crossing project and active transport cycling and walking corridor helped with commuting along the Sydney Road and Upfield corridor and supported traders?

Ray JACOBS: So the first question—can you repeat it? I did not quite get that. It was about the mode of transport?

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes. So in the traders' view, what is the highest mode of transport that consumers or customers accessing the Sydney Road shops—what is the most common way they would come to and from Sydney Road, would you say?

Ray JACOBS: Well, we know about a quarter of the spent money that we get is from locals, so that would maybe be riding by bike or walking. The funny thing is the other quarter of people that actually visit us come from far away—from Craigieburn, a lot of big spenders—and they would mostly come by car. Then there are people from Preston, and they obviously are going to come by car as well. There is quite a large car park on both sides of Sydney Road and it is usually very well occupied—70, 80, 90% sometimes. That is another one. But yes, bicycles, walking would be about a quarter.

Anthony CIANFLONE: And how has the Upfield corridor helped encourage more people to shop or alleviated other road safety issues for Sydney Road and traders?

Ray JACOBS: I know there were quite a few issues with the bike path before. We had people who did not actually stop in our place—I mean, they were driving through. I know there were safety issues with that. I do not think it would have actually assisted in the trade as such. I would like to increase that by having better access, and specifically with Pentridge, but I do not think as such for the businesses it would have made much difference—just to make a better amenity, which it definitely has. And I have a lot less complaints about doorings and other things, which is good.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you. Thank you, Ray, for your evidence, and thanks for your submission. Just going through your submission, I notice towards the back end of it it speaks about the business association's opposition to a bike lane on Sydney Road. Given that we have heard evidence earlier of people that live around that precinct that would like to access Sydney Road with a bicycle and shop there, I am just wondering the reason, I guess, for your organisation's opposition to a bike lane on Sydney Road.

Ray JACOBS: Well, the safety aspect—quite a few years ago before we had the level crossing removal we had quite a few codesigned projects to have a look at bike lanes, because there were an enormous amount of doorings and it was very unsafe. There was a bike lane alongside the railway line, but it was very narrow. People were using it to walk on, it was unsafe and it had usually people on the roads as well. That is why people are talking about having a bike lane on Sydney Road. There was much opposition from the traders towards that. That is why I have put it in there. That is still a thing we can sort of do, because at the time we did a survey, which was interesting. All the local businesses were against having a bike lane because it would take away car parks. Well, our customers were really quite happy to have a bike lane because it would make it easier for them. So I think that is a discussion we have not had yet and it is probably a thing that we need to do: have a look and ask whether the customers want it or not. But because that was the stated position of the businesses then, that is why I put it in the submission.

Dylan WIGHT: Yes, okay. Completely understood. So it is more of a historical position from the businesses that you represent rather than something that is necessarily reflected right this moment?

Ray JACOBS: Yes, exactly.

Dylan WIGHT: Okay.

The CHAIR: Wayne.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you, Chair. Thanks for coming in, Ray, and thank you for your submission. I apologise in advance: I do not live around here, so I do not know this area very well. I am from Warragul, but I imagine your situation is probably similar to quite a few councils around the state. What infrastructure changes are needed to make Coburg more pedestrian friendly? What would improve your situation?

Ray JACOBS: Well, Sydney Road is a bit of a traffic sewer, as I said. It is very, very busy; it is congested as well. I think traffic has no need to actually go there unless it is local traffic. I think that would definitely be one of the things I would like to see improved in that area.

Wayne FARNHAM: Yes.

The CHAIR: Wayne, do you have anything you want to follow up?

Wayne FARNHAM: No, nothing further.

The CHAIR: Jess.

Jess WILSON: Thank you very much for your time today and for taking the time to put in a submission on behalf of the businesses. Like Wayne, I am not from this area but have a sense of it, and the local member here has been very passionate talking about how wonderful it is today. I understand there are trams running through the shopping precinct and just want to get a sense—we have heard a little bit over the last day or so around the impact and road safety of tram users and getting on and off trams—from you, from the business owners and from shoppers of what the impact of that tram corridor is there and if there could be any safety improvement when it comes to tram users.

Ray JACOBS: Thank you for asking—I actually forgot about that. When we talked about the co-design process a couple of years ago when we did not have the bike path on the Upfield railway line, we did discuss at length the improvement of the tram stations we have. Specifically there is Victoria mall in the middle, and there is a tram stop outside of it. Improve that by perhaps making it look like other tram stops, like in Preston and what have you, so that cars would have more difficulty getting past. And also the area of Victoria mall would be a bit more extended and a lot more pedestrian friendly than it is now, because now it is just a crossing on a busy street and the trams pull up. Like every other tram stop, you just have to walk –

Jess WILSON: So there is no super-stop or raised –

Ray JACOBS: No, there is nothing like it; the tram just stops. It is one of the things that we discussed at the meetings then. It did not eventuate, but I think it is definitely an area where a lot of improvement could be made.

Jess WILSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. John.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Ray, for your evidence today. Your submission suggests redirecting local traffic away from the main thoroughfares. I know in my area of Glen Waverley we have got the Suburban Rail Loop coming through, and changes to traffic there can be quite controversial. I was just wondering: what do you think the best way for achieving that would be?

Ray JACOBS: It is a good question. I am not sure why most trucks and other traffic are using Sydney Road. It is definitely not local traffic. There are freeways all around if they have to go to town. I know my GPS, if I want to go to town, always directs me through Sydney Road and straight through to town, which is using the shortest—the road that takes the most time is the most dangerous. It is sort of the thing that GPSs do these days. I am not saying that you have to change every GPS. I am not a traffic person—I am not sure why people are there—but if there are reasons why they need to be there, fair enough. But if they just go there because it is a shorter road or they can avoid the tolls and that sort of thing, I think we probably can do something about that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I thought I might just talk a little bit about your experience. I am also unfamiliar with this area, but most of us could identify a very busy shopping strip in terms of a whole lot of users in one space. Have you seen things change over COVID and behaviours change in that time—seen an increase in walkers and an increase in cyclists? What has changed over that COVID period?

Ray JACOBS: It surprised me that during COVID we had traffic counters, I found out, in Victoria mall, and the traffic did not actually decrease. Of course it was a bit less, but I think most traffic would have been commuters going through. What has changed is the business mix has changed a bit. There are a lot more jewellery shops now and a bit more high-quality shops. The vacancy rate is still fairly high. But yes, it is a very multicultural centre. It is very, very diverse, and I do not think it has changed much. If anything, it has got better.

We have had issues with—how shall I say it—not vagrancy but with homeless people and with beggars, which is a bit different because some of them are more on the criminal side. The drug use and so on—I have seen quite an increase in that, but I mean that is a bit outside of this panel.

The CHAIR: But in that change, have you seen people's safety then compromised in that way in terms of the road or vulnerability? Have e-scooters or has cycling changed the mix so that it has become unsafe in some areas?

Ray JACOBS: No. I have not seen many e-scooters. The footpaths are too narrow for that, I would say. No, on that aspect, I have not—not that I am aware of.

The CHAIR: So what changes do you think may be needed for that section where you are and the businesses you are representing? Would a reduction to 30 k's or things like that be welcomed? Or how do you feel we could make improvements?

Ray JACOBS: That is a good idea. I think that would definitely be an option to look at. I think 30 k's—probably you cannot get to that speed normally on Sydney Road. But yes, you can make those streets look a bit different. I mean we know in Europe there have been quite a few places—I know in Holland, where I am from, there are actually places where they took away the road as a road. The cars can still get through, but it is sort of seen as a pedestrian area, so it is not like a road and a footpath and 'This is my road and I can do whatever.' So there are some visible things that can be done to actually reduce the speed and make people more aware that this is not just a highway.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I will open it up to the panel for any other further questions. Did you have anything further?

Anthony CIANFLONE: Yes. Like many of the areas we represent in respective ways, I guess there are some similarities in what is happening in Central Coburg. I mean, we have got that wonderful Coburg station and the beautiful level crossing project, which is starting as a catalyst to revitalise broader Coburg and help improve ambience and amenity for traders and the community and the shoppers. We have got Pentridge coming on line just around the corner from here—the major tourist destination that it will become in time, I believe. So what role do you think or do the traders think the council has in helping to better integrate transport—pedestrian and cycling and transport links—between the station, between central Coburg, between Pentridge and between the Coburg health hub, which you mentioned earlier? What is the role of council or has been its role to date in supporting those efforts, given that they are the major landowners of all those car parks that you have referenced earlier, which have been car parks for a very long time now due to the special levy paid by the traders.

Ray JACOBS: Well, I feel we are sort of the forgotten child. I know other areas in Merri-bek have been looked after very well and ours has not been, so there needs to be quite a major investment in upgrades and signage as well. We need to have good signage towards Pentridge and back to us and the health centre as well, where the parking is. The health centre will attract a lot more cars, obviously. Better signage, improved pedestrian access, improved bike access—they are definitely the things that council needs to do, plus an upgrade of the existing facilities, because they are really well past their use-by date.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Jess.

Jess WILSON: Thank you very much, Chair. I just wanted to get a sense, Ray, of what you think could be done to actually encourage more active transport and how the Government could encourage more people to walk, to cycle or to catch public transport to access the shopping strip, given there is a reliance on using cars to get there. What do you think could be done to actually encourage that more?

Ray JACOBS: I think a lot of the local people already use their bike and walk. I think that is there. There are a lot of supermarkets, and it is very hard if you want to do your weekly shopping to do it by bike. I cannot see anything directly you can do to reduce that. I think it would be a natural thing: if there is better transport people will use it. Also we are trying to make Coburg more well known, so I think we will attract a lot more people—tourists and visiting friends and relatives. But I think if you make the area more attractive, which we do, then it will get there. I do not see a major increase in more car traffic coming there, to be honest. It is a low per cent anyway. I told you about people from Craigieburn coming there. We still do not know why that is, but they do spend a lot of money there. I think it has something to do with the jewellery shops, but that is only just a very small aspect. We all know that cycling is good for us. In just the normal advertisements, where we

encourage people to come if we have a promotion and that sort of thing, we always ask them to use public transport.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Can I ask about the role car parking plays to help elderly shoppers, pensioners and culturally and linguistically diverse pensioners from the area, many of whom use the car to come and frequent the shops?

Ray JACOBS: Honestly, I would not know that. We do not have any information on that.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Okay.

Ray JACOBS: You would expect so, but I cannot corroborate it. I would not know.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time today. We really appreciate having a different perspective this morning from this local area, so thank you very much, Ray, for your submission and answering our questions.

Ray JACOBS: My pleasure. Thank you for hearing me.

Witness withdrew.