

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

Brent Houghton, Principal and member,

Catherine Hall, Chair,

Jane Holroyd, Parent member, and

Joshua Riordan, School Captain and student member, Coburg High School Walking and Riding Sub-Committee.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. While all evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside 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 do a quick introduction, and then we will hand over to you. I am Alison, the Member for Bellarine.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

Dylan WIGHT: Dylan Wight, Member for Tarneit.

Wayne FARNHAM: Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

The CHAIR: We have got a few minutes. If you would like to introduce yourselves, give an opening statement, talk to your submission—whatever you would like to provide—and then we will go to questions.

Catherine HALL: Well, if it works okay for you, we were going to take the five minutes. I am going to do three, and Josh will do two. I am here with Jane, a parent member; Brent, the Principal; and Josh, school captain. I am a parent member, and I am the Chair of the Sub-Committee. Thank you again for the opportunity. It is wonderful. Coburg High is a fast-growing school. It has had a tenfold increase in the nine years since it was established and is expecting at least 1,300 students next year. We set up the walking and riding Sub-Committee back in 2017. Our first action was around increasing bike parking; we got funding from RACV for a bike shed and workshop. Then the next thing was safety within the school, and that included infrastructure paths and reducing car access so parents could not come in anymore unless they had a particular reason. Then we mainly focused on safer routes to the school, and that basically means advocacy. One of our wins was to secure crossing lights at an intersection near the school that was fully funded by council.

All of this, plus a higher proportion of local students over time, has contributed to an increasingly high active travel rate. Coburg High's third yearly travel census shows a 77% sustainable transport rate. I am pretty proud of that. Fifty-three% of that is active travel, and the rest is mainly bus. This equates to 1,000 students riding or walking on local roads twice a day. That is 1,000 students not in cars on the roads. So we have done our bit, but we can only get to a certain point with this, because the school is surrounded by a moat of hostile 60k roads, which get more dangerous every year. Students come from all directions, and students have been hit coming from most directions.

It is telling that there are at least three road safety campaigns for roads around the school. There is safe access across Bell Street bridge, whom you will be hearing from later, safe pedestrian crossing for Elizabeth Street and Safe Walking and Riding for Murray Road, which I mentioned earlier and on which two students have been hit on bikes since COVID and a very recent three-car pile-up took cars up onto the footpath when there were Coburg High School kids standing around. So that is like our worst case scenario that nearly happened there.

One hundred of the 350 respondents to the Murray Road survey are Coburg High families, and just one sad response is just an example of many, many:

My daughter—
this is a respondent—

has been yelled at riding her bike to Coburg High because she was on the footpath for Murray Road. She does not feel safe riding a bike on Murray Road. She now no longer rides her bike.

Big change is needed on all routes, and that does mean big funding. There is no way to avoid that. It can be done. My home town of Christchurch is halfway through spending \$301 million for 100 kilometres of

cycleways, and they only have 400,000 residents. Roads need to be calmer and safer so mistakes do not result in tragedy. And just reiterating what you have heard many times so far: what we need are wider footpaths, separated bike lanes—preferably a mapped network of separated bike lanes—safer crossings and intersections and a reduced speed limit. I will hand over to Josh. Thanks, Josh.

Joshua RIORDAN: I am the school captain at the school as well as a member of the walking and riding Committee there. I commute daily by bike from Preston to school, and I have undertaken this journey for the past six years. Unfortunately I am here to express a growing concern that affects not only me but many students who choose to take active transport to school. Over my six years I have observed with great disappointment that our daily commutes have not become any safer at all. Despite the passage of time I find myself in dangerous situations far too often. What is worse is that the issue is not confined to school hours, it continues outside that. It extends to weekends and beyond, and I have noticed that the roads around school have become extremely hazardous for those of us who choose to walk and ride.

I know I am not alone in this worry. A recent survey conducted at our school has emphasised our concerns. For instance, Miro, a year 7, recounted cars driving dangerously close to them through roundabouts on multiple occasions. Theo seconded that experience, as well as me. I have noticed that many times. These instances highlight the presence of aggressive and impatient drivers within our community who seem to disregard the safety of youth, all for convenience. Even more alarming is the account of Sage, a year 11 student, who reported they were hit by a car that wrecked their bike and also hit them onto the road, saying that nobody got out of their car to check on them and cars even beeped at them while they were crying and trying to get back on their bike. Equally distressing is Oscar's story—a year 9 student who was recently hit by a car coming the wrong way down Stockade Avenue as they were coming down to the bottom of the hill at Pentridge Boulevard, hitting them off their bike and into the intersection, leaving them to have to go to hospital.

These incidents are not isolated. They highlight a recurring pattern of reckless driving that threatens the wellbeing and safety of students and community members. The lack of sufficient infrastructure only compounds these problems. Our school's efforts to promote active transport are hindered by inadequate support for those of us who choose to walk or bike. Due to lack of infrastructure, parents are growing hesitant in allowing their children to travel to school actively, leading to more congestion and amplifying the issue. This in turn leads to increased impatience among drivers, resulting in more accidents. It is a deadly cycle. In the absence of proper infrastructure, we will continue to face this risk daily, and it is important that this issue is addressed as soon as possible, because the current infrastructure surrounding the school is a disaster waiting to happen.

Catherine HALL: Well said.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Yes, wonderful. Are you happy to take some questions? Wonderful. Thank you, Josh. That is actually wonderful, really, to hear directly from a student, so thank you for being here today. That is great. I might kick off with a question, then. You have gone through a pandemic that none of us have experienced, but you have really been acutely affected. Have you seen a change in people's behaviour since or during COVID? Were you cycling during COVID and getting out and about? Did you feel safer then? And what is the change you have seen after COVID?

Joshua RIORDAN: Yes, that is a good question. Definitely I noticed before COVID it was fairly similar to now, except it is starting to become slightly more dangerous. During COVID was great, because there was just no-one on the roads. I could do whatever the hell I wanted to do. But after COVID was a bit of a disaster. All of us kids are being driven by our parents. I feel like a lot more are being driven by their parents to school after COVID, because just as they ease back in parents are slowly now letting more kids ride actively. But I have noticed that there are a lot of dangerous situations when I am riding to school where parents just are not used to having—with the transition back to driving their cars, they are not used to looking out for students riding or walking, and the ignorance is quite dangerous.

The CHAIR: And that aggressive behaviour—police talked about it yesterday and others have brought it up—are you seeing that sort of aggression and not really patience?

Joshua RIORDAN: Yes. I notice when I ride to and from basketball on the weekends along Murray Road, there is a lot—like, you have to ride on Murray Road. You have to ride in one of the car lanes—there is no bike

lane—and cars will come past you with literally this much space. There is no reason because, like, you have got two lanes, so they could merge, but they choose to go directly past you, which is just pure aggression.

The CHAIR: Are you learning to drive?

Joshua RIORDAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Okay. And so how do you find getting in a car and learning to drive, being a cyclist? Do you feel like you have a different perspective?

Joshua RIORDAN: Well, yes. Being a cyclist, I think it definitely is quite helpful. It opens your eyes to a lot of road users, and you know to give a lot more space to people. You definitely also notice while you are in the car that a lot of active travel users are actually quite vulnerable, because you see it firsthand. You see cars in front of you doing really stupid things, coming really close to people riding and walking on the side paths.

The CHAIR: Interesting. Thank you for answering that. I might go to Anthony.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Okay. Thank you. Thanks again for your submission and all your advocacy work to improve active transport safety for all the students. Just going back to your opening comments, Cate, you said that Coburg High has 53% of students who walk or ride to school and a further 23% who walk from a bus stop or a tram stop. So that is over 77% of students who are active transporting to and from the school, which is huge—1,000 students a day.

Catherine HALL: Exactly.

Anthony CIANFLONE: I guess in that context—it is an open question to all of you, I guess—how do you think the Government and this Inquiry can look at improving safety in and around the school more broadly as a catchment, as opposed to simply directly in front of or the immediate perimeter of the school?

Brent HOUGHTON: Do you want me to go first?

Jane HOLROYD: You should. You go first, yes.

Brent HOUGHTON: I think, yes, we are a little bit atypical, our school, in that we are not located on a main road; we are actually just surrounded by main roads. So we are atypical in that way. We do not have a 40-kilometre-an-hour zone outside our school. But you talk about those statistics—over 20% of our students catch buses to school, and they do not come into the school or nearby the school. Students have to get off on Bell Street or Murray Road, which are 60-kilometre-an-hour zones, and cross over those roads to get into school. So it just really emphasises that it is not about the infrastructure right around the school, it is actually the infrastructure at those peak times—start of the day, end of the day. And really, you know, as Cate said, it is a lot about infrastructure, which is costly, but it is also about speed and speed limit reductions. So as in that example I said, because we are not located on Bell Street—we are less than 100 metres away from Bell Street—we are not regarded as being in a school zone. We have got those great statistics of students who want to travel actively to school, but sadly we do not have that safety to think we are doing everything that we reasonably can to make that journey safe for them. As Cate said, we would think that there is an economic argument here to say you want kids walking and riding to school; it is better for their health, it is better for the environment, it is better for the number of cars that you have on the roads. There are going to be things that need to use local roads—trucks and businesses need to. There are users that need the roads, but people do not need to drop their kid off at school if they feel safe that their child can walk or ride to school safely. So I guess they are the points that we wanted to emphasise in terms of it is really about infrastructure and speed limit reductions for us. They are the things that can really make parents and kids feel safer.

Jane HOLROYD: Yes, I just wanted to pick up on what Brent said. There is this idea that we are worried as a school community about the roads immediately around our school, but we have got kids coming from the whole school zone walking and riding the whole way. So my kids, for example—we are up near Fawkner on the train line—they ride 2 k. Kids are coming from all over, and because the school is in the middle of all these multilane high-speed state government roads, it really feels like all of the crossings and all of the roads are unsafe for those whole routes. So I do not think you can isolate it to sort of the area right around the school. And with the examples of kids who have been hit by drivers, you know, in recent years, as Cate mentioned

earlier, there have been incidents coming from all directions and not right around the school. We did have one earlier this year on Pentridge Boulevard, which is a council road, but it is collecting cars from Sydney Road and moving them down to Bell Street. You have got an off-road bike path there, but it is where the bike path crosses roads—and Josh mentioned that a driver coming the wrong way is not looking for a kid on a bike coming down that hill. So there are safety improvements that are really needed at every crossing and intersection to make people who are walking and riding much more visible to drivers. I think that is the main issue.

Catherine HALL: I will just add—I know we have repeatedly talked about separated bike infrastructure—that having a network of separated bike infrastructure and a mapped network is something that parents might feel more comfortable with, knowing that there is this mapped network. They can see where they are going, and they know that that is safe. They exist, the strategic cycling corridors et cetera. It is huge money of course, building them and having them visibly mapped.

Jane HOLROYD: Part of the reason Coburg High has so many kids riding particularly is because we are lucky to have some off-road bike infrastructure along O’Hea and Pentridge and down the Upfield shared path. But it is where there are missing links or there are bits missing that you get kids riding on footpaths, where there is a danger of cars in driveways not seeing the kids and also kids being hit by other kids on bikes. I know it has been said a million times, but that separated bike infrastructure everywhere, from all directions, would be so valuable.

The CHAIR: Dylan.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you, Chair. Thank you to everybody for coming in, and thanks, Josh—it is really fantastic to have the perspective of a student in respect to this stuff. It has already been spoken about, and it is obviously contained in your submission, that 77% of your students get to school in a way other than a car. Coming from Tarneit, which is a really growing area, I have got a primary school in Tarneit with 1,800 students, just about all of which get dropped off by car on a small suburban street. So my question fundamentally is: how did you do it? Was it student driven, was it organic, was it parent driven? I obviously know you have got the Sub-Committee, but I am really just after some pointers, to be frank.

Catherine HALL: You want to know about the data.

Dylan WIGHT: How you did it.

John MULLAHY: You mentioned in your opening statement about the travel census. That is what I wanted to ask about.

Catherine HALL: Yes, John was interested in that. I will pass to Brent for that bit, but for how we did it, well, obviously it is multifaceted. We did start with the bike parking—secure bike parking, I forgot to say. That was something people were concerned about.

Dylan WIGHT: Like caged?

Catherine HALL: Yes. We got \$15,000 from the RACV. And, I did not mention, there have been some education and behaviour change programs. The ones that were mentioned earlier are council and Bicycle Network things. So we did those sorts of things as well—education stuff. But the secure bike parking was step 1—making it safe within the school so that they felt safer. It was not just for cyclists, it was for people walking as well. I suppose I am just reiterating what I have already said. What else did we do? The census has been good for advocacy, but it also drives interest, doesn’t it? They can see we have got this percentage and they want to get it better. It was really great that Brent did it. I will pass over to him, because John is interested to know how you are doing it. No other schools I know of have three years of data like that, and it is very useful.

John MULLAHY: I love data.

Brent HOUGHTON: It is good to see there is a trend that is increasing. Part of it as well, I guess, is that we are a local school, so the closer the students are, the more likely they are to walk or ride than if they are coming from long distances. So that helps as well. But basically what happens is that on a Monday morning we give a survey to the teachers and say, ‘Can everyone put up their hand who walked to school today?’ and then, ‘Who

biked to school today?’ et cetera. It is a Google form. You have got the data. We get somewhere around a 70 or 80% response rate across the school, so that tells you that it is a pretty legitimate sample of the school. The fact that the data is consistent and going in the right direction is all good too. So we are pretty confident that it is pretty accurate to say on a particular day, ‘How did you get to school?’

John MULLAHY: How often do you do that?

Brent HOUGHTON: We have currently just done it once a year. I just want to add: I guess we are trying to do our part here by collecting that data, and it is useful to you, hopefully. But I guess as well, we think that there is some data that we understand the Government has that is not being shared in this space. I think if we are trying to talk about evidence-based approaches, that data that we do not have, since 2019, about the crashes and the incidents that have occurred—it is pretty incumbent I think upon people who are making the decisions to have that publicly available so that we can make the best decisions, because yes, there is a limited pot of money to spend on this infrastructure and you want to make sure you are doing it in a way that gets the most impact. I would say as well: speed reduction is something that is pretty low cost. It is not necessarily popular, but out here today Bell Street is a 40 k-an-hour zone. I am sure when that was introduced it was contentious and people went, ‘Isn’t it annoying that you’ve got to slow to 40 ks an hour.’ But would we go back to anything more than 40 ks an hour out here now? No. We just get used to it. So it is annoying and it is frustrating for drivers, but do we want to have a safer society or do we want to prioritise vulnerable road users? Sadly, sometimes teenagers are vulnerable road users. They do not always do everything like an adult does, because they are teenagers. We just need to do everything we can, within reason, to make things safer.

Catherine HALL: Yes, the data is the mapped crash data, which is useful when you are working out efficacy, but it only goes up to 2019. I tried to get it from VicRoads, and I got a bizarre response about how they are trying to work with X, Y and Z; 2019 is a long time ago. And just touching on what Brent said, yes, a state government policy I strongly support is around the zoning of the public schools. It really helps encourage local students. It is actually a really big part of active travel to school, the two go together, so I hope that it remains as is.

Brent HOUGHTON: And you will hear this from Jose and Lanie perhaps, but incumbent upon that is that there are people who are in our zone—their local school is Coburg High—but they have to travel, for example, over the Bell Street bridge or over Murray Road or over Elizabeth Street, which are 60 k-an-hour zones without good crossings. We support students coming from as close as possible, but that means that we need to make those roads as safe as possible.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. I am sorry, we have run out of time. It has been a wonderful submission that you have made, and thank you for answering—and Josh, particularly, thank you for sharing your experience. I actually think I will end with: if you have got that many active walkers and riders going to school, you are going to create very good drivers as well, I think, because of that.

Jane HOLROYD: Good point.

Catherine HALL: We are happy to be a case study if you ever needed to look on—we are available.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.