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Submission to Road Resiliency Inquiry

Murrindindi Shire Council is pleased to be able to lodge this submission to the inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network.

We understand the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and Transport will inquire into and report on the implications of severe weather events on the national regional, rural, and remote road network, with a particular focus on:

- Road engineering and construction standards required to enhance the resiliency of future road construction;
- Identification of climate resilient corridors suitable for future road construction projects;
- Opportunities to enhance road resilience through the use of waterproof products in road construction;
- The Commonwealth's role in road resilience planning; and
- Any related issues.

Murrindindi Shire Profile

Murrindindi Shire is situated on the northeast peri-urban fringe of Melbourne. The Shire has a total population of just under 16,000 and covers an area of 3,879 square kilometres, encompassing the charming rural townships of Alexandra, Eildon, Kinglake, Marysville and Yea.

The Shire boasts great natural beauty and tourist attractions such as Lake Eildon, Kinglake National Park, Cathedral Range State Park, the Goulburn River and Lake Mountain. There are picturesque walking, bike and horse-riding tracks and trails across the Shire, including the Great Victorian Rail Trail.

The majority of the Shire's land is classified as agricultural. Agriculture (including forestry and fishing), construction, manufacturing and tourism are our key industries.

Murrindindi Shire is country to both the Taungurung and Wurundjeri People.

Being a small rural municipality, with dispersed and remote communities, the maintenance of our roads is paramount to the wellbeing of our residents. Our 10 Year Community Vision is that "Through our combined efforts, our community is vibrant and resilient". One of the Strategic Directions within our current 4 Year Council Plan is that of 'Resilient Communities', whereby we "recognise that resilient communities are connected communities with access to services that support physical and mental health in a safe environment". Within our Plan "we also recognise that growth and opportunity are key to supporting individual aspirations and our communities." Refer to <https://www.murrindindi.vic.gov.au/Home> for more information.

Safe and resilient roads are a key to realising these aspirations for our community.

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Natural Disasters

As we continue to recover from the devastating October 2022 flooding event, there are still some areas across the Shire that are closed to the public due to unsafe conditions. The road network suffered significant damage, with large potholes and sections of road severely impacted, along with a number of bridges, which necessitated some temporary bridges to be installed to allow for local light vehicle access.

These floods will have a lasting impact on the Murrindindi community. Each of the towns within the municipality has been affected by this significant event, either directly or indirectly. The area suffered mass road closures and widespread property damage, particularly on Thursday 13 October and Friday 14 October 2022. This resulted in delayed heavy vehicle access for major industry and lost revenue for small business and tourist operators.

Public Infrastructure Impact Summary

- Number of roads impacted - 15
- Arterial Roads affected - 202 km
- Bridges impacted - 13
- Culverts damaged - 27
- Cumulative value of restoration of road network, infrastructure and bridges - \$25M+

Being located on the upper reaches of major waterways and due to our topography, when an extreme rain event occurs our roads are damaged by both inundation and water runoff/overland flows, and our roads can be more severely damaged by the strong water flows than from long standing flood waters; although both are a problem.

Whilst the primary purpose of this inquiry is to review road construction, road resilience, and road planning and engineering standards, we take this opportunity to provide further context as to how severe weather events impacting on our roads then impact the whole of community. Refer to attachment 1 for further information. Some of the consequences include:

- Impacted communities are less resilient to subsequent impacts/emergencies, in particular vulnerable community members;
- Impacts to farm profitability, as farmers depleted due to loss of income and inability to transport harvested crops and livestock;
- Flow on impacts to markets/trading;
- Inequity in access for the community;
- Isolation of parts of the community, and disconnection of towns from rural areas;
- Inability to provide supplies, services and assistance to those impacted; and
- Impacts to the mental health of affected community members.

Safe and resilient roads are key to how our communities thrive.

Key arterial linkages that, as the name suggests, are the main arteries for the municipality include the Maroondah Highway, Melba Highway, Whittlesea-Yea Road and the Goulburn Valley Highway. Though not Council roads, these state highways need to be made as resilient as possible to minimise the disruption caused by natural disasters.

From an extreme weather event perspective, Murrindindi Shire is also one of the most vulnerable regions in Australia for bushfires. The cost of addressing an event like Black Saturday, which impacted 600 km of roadsides and 24 bridges in Murrindindi Shire alone, stretched into the millions of dollars. Wooden bridges, guard rails, road furniture and signs were all burnt, and asphalt road surfaces were burnt, damaged, or oxidized and became

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brittle. This has led to our roads deteriorating at a greater rate than expected. Trees were also burnt and fell due to the fire, some of which damaged the roads. Apart from the restoration costs, there is a need to make our roads more resilient to minimise disruption and to aid recovery.

Furthermore, extreme weather events can detrimentally impact many other asset types, apart from roads and road infrastructure, such as flood events on wetlands and riparian zones, which can be quite costly to reinstate and can suffer from interim environmental damage before they recover.

Road Safety Trauma Study Across Murrindindi Shire

In 2022 we conducted a Road Trauma Study, together with Strathbogie Shire Council, which identified a number of alarming statistics regarding the safety of roads in Murrindindi Shire.

Sadly, the Study found that from 2010 – 2019, Murrindindi Shire had the highest number of road fatalities (49 deaths), which is significantly more than any other small rural shire in Victoria. Indigo Shire has the second highest number of road fatalities, with 29 deaths during the same period.

Murrindindi Shire also had the highest number of crashes (1,068) during this period – almost double the number of crashes than that of Mansfield Shire, who had the second highest number of crashes (569). Of the 1,069 crashes in our Shire:

- 55% of vehicle and 70% of motorcycle crashes occurred on Local Roads.
- 92% of crashes occurred in rural areas.
- 38% of vehicle and 55% of motorcycle crashes occurred on Local Unsealed Roads.
- Most crashes occurred in 100 km/h speed zones.
- The majority (72 %) of persons involved in crashes reside outside the shire. They appear to be largely from Metropolitan Melbourne. This indicates a large proportion of crashes involved tourists in the region.

Police feedback offered the top three road safety issues that contribute to majority of crashes as:

- Drug driving;
- Speeding; and
- Tourists who are unfamiliar with the area or the road rules.

The scope of the Road Trauma Research project aimed to identify initiatives to address issues or mitigate impacts arising from high levels of road trauma. The Project will assist the Murrindindi and Strathbogie Shire Councils to better understand the issues and challenges underlying the high rates of road trauma incidents within their region. The project highlighted the contributing factors that underpin road trauma as well as the impact on local communities and economies.

The recommendations to address road safety issues for the Murrindindi Shire included, amongst others, (i) sealing road surfaces on high-speed unsealed roads, particularly on popular motorcyclist routes, (ii) providing information packages and educating tourists / road users who are unfamiliar with the roads in locations of high-risk and with road lengths within Murrindindi (particularly motorcyclists), (iii) treatments should be investigated to address any road safety gaps in consultation with motorcycle groups, (iv) additional warning signs and safety treatments on high-risk areas identified in the crash cluster maps may be implemented, and (v) provision of more rest areas.

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Municipal Association of Victoria's (MAV) submission to the inquiry

Council would also like to express its support for the Municipal Association of Victoria's (MAV) submission to the inquiry, and would like to re-emphasise their points around:

- (i) Financial sustainability under the current rate capping environment - There are real financial sustainability concerns in the sector after seven years of rate capping in Victoria. Recent work by the MAV shows the asset renewal gap for local government is growing.
- (ii) Infrastructure maintenance and delivery challenges - Costs are increasing rapidly. Services, materials and skills shortages detrimentally impact the maintenance of the 87% of the Victorian road network that is managed by councils.
- (iii) Importance of local roads - First and last kilometre access issues are an essential element of many freight movements. Most of these movements are part of the local road network managed and maintained by local government. Although, Murrindindi would note that often the whole route can be formed by local roads, in order for farm products to reach local markets. Furthermore, the paucity of public transport in rural areas adds to the pressure on our road system.
- (iv) Disaster Recovery Funding arrangements - The Victorian Department of Transport and Planning (DTP) provides a team of assessors to work with councils on Disaster Recovery and Funding Arrangements (DRFA) claims, but more can be done to streamline claims and ensure the program is supporting asset repair in a consistent, efficient and effective way.
- (v) Additional investment required to mitigate flood and natural disaster impacts - Due to floods and continued wet weather, local roads are in poor condition. Many remain closed. There is real concern about the consequences for Victorian farmers, tourism and disaster recovery associated with a degraded road and transport network.
- (vi) Betterment - The MAV and councils are calling for betterment to be permitted and supported by a betterment fund, like the model applied in Queensland.
- (vii) Day labour - With such widespread damage, there is competition for materials and contractors. For rural councils which still largely use their own crews and equipment for roads maintenance, the ability to use day labour, plant and equipment under the DRFA in Victoria is a priority.
- (viii) Proactive asset assessments - The MAV is advocating for centrally funded or coordinated, proactive, pre-disaster mitigation assessments of infrastructure.
- (ix) Consistent flood modelling - Up-to-date flood modelling that takes account of existing flood and/or inundation risk as well as forecast climatic changes is a necessary precursor for any assessment of transport resilience. Nationally consistent flood modelling available as a common data set for all relevant authorities would provide a very sound starting point for planning and protecting resilient communities, including resilient transport networks.
- (x) Road construction and maintenance technology and innovation – Many councils have trialled different techniques, technologies and approaches to improve disaster resilience of their roads and drains, but they need support.
- (xi) Access to shared asset data and analysis - There is an opportunity for the Commonwealth to improve access to new and improved data collection methodologies that are available to assess road conditions and changes in road conditions.

For a municipality with a small population covering large distances, many of these issues are critical to our future survival. A solution is needed to enable local government to keep up with the escalating costs caused by contractor shortages and material increases against a rate capping system that is tied to the consumer price index, which does not have regard for these cost imposts. At present, councils are faced with having to consider service level reductions to accommodate the budget impacts, like cheaper road surfacing.

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Proactive Asset Assessments

As the Goulburn Murray Climate Alliance points out in their submission, which we fully support as a member organisation, councils need support to incorporate asset vulnerability assessments as 'business as usual' practice based on long-term climate change forecasts, and the resulting financial impacts on local government assets.

A number of Victorian Greenhouse Alliances, namely South East Councils Climate Change Alliance (SECCCA), and Goulburn Murray Climate Alliance (GMCA) have, and are currently undertaking asset vulnerability assessments with their members.

In the context of road construction, asset vulnerability assessments are focussed on a full benefit-cost analysis approach and on enabling climate change risk to be embedded in organisational asset planning and decision-making.

To this end, climate impact financial analyses are incorporated into:

- how much extra an asset or service will cost to maintain or deliver, assuming no adaptation action;
- how much extra councils can expect to pay to respond to damages or pay in insurance;
- how much would be the expected cost of making assets resilient; and
- how might income streams to councils, contractors, and ratepayers be impacted by climate change impacts to the asset/s.

The weighing up of other indirect costs, such as health impacts to employees and contractors, are also considered in such an assessment.

Regional local government relies solely on grants to undertake such assessments, which although currently considered novel, should be business as usual, considering the regularity of extreme environmental events impacting these municipal assets. The lack of access to financial and knowledge-based resources to undertake asset vulnerability assessments is an enormous barrier to most regional local governments.

Prevention Ahead of Recovery

In addition to the MAV and the GMCA advocating for centrally funded, proactive asset vulnerability assessments, it would seem prudent for the Federal Government to help fund preventative road works determined through such a process, and in that way reduce the need for recovery funding after an event, which does nothing to avoid the disruption and economic impacts. Spending on preventative works would also be money more wisely spent than on the more exorbitant cost of reinstatements.

Renewal Efforts

In addition to the Road Safety Trauma Study that was conducted in 2022, results from the Local Government Customer Satisfaction Survey indicate that 'Roads' are the worst performing measure for customer satisfaction in Murrindindi Shire. Around 30% of our road network is predicted to be in 'Poor' condition at some point during the next ten years. Over the next ten years, Council expects to spend \$77.1 million on maintenance of roads, \$61.49 million on renewal of roads and \$53.9 million on upgrade expansion and acquisition of new assets. Required asset renewal works, that cannot be funded, have the potential to pose a financial burden and reduce the standard of services we provide in the future.

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We are spending more on maintenance than we should be, due to unsealed roads that have high maintenance needs. Sealing our roads will reduce our maintenance costs and allow funds to be used for other needs.

Impacts to our road network due to the recent October 2022 floods have exacerbated the need for further funding and action to support the modernisation of our road network over the next ten years, including upgrading our bridges and culverts to allow for higher river surges.

Murrindindi requires some \$100 million to modernise the network over the next 10 years.

Refer to attachment 2 for further information.

Fuel Excise

It is understood that, while total Government spending over the next four years is high, this hides a forecast decrease in fuel tax spending over the coming years. The proportion of excise returned to land transport infrastructure is forecast to decrease to only 61% in 2025-26. This highlights the need for an established system of hypothecation to guarantee all net fuel excise is returned to the land transport network. (*Source: Australian Automobile Association – ‘Fuel Excise Explained’ website)

In addition, there needs to be an equitable distribution amongst states and a larger proportion of the funding for Local Government given that Local Government maintains 80% of the national road network.

In Summary

Murrindindi Shire is a small, regional municipality that is subject to the ravages of natural disasters like floods and bushfires, which are only getting worse as a result of climate change. With a small, dispersed population of limited resources, it is extremely important that we are able to acquire the tools to manage our road infrastructure in a resilient manner, from both a preventative and a recovery perspective. Roads are the lifeline of our small, rural communities, and minimising the disruption caused by natural disasters is essential.

Councils like Murrindindi desperately require support from all government levels, by way of:

1. Increased funding for bridges (we have 300 bridges) to make them more resilient to extreme weather events (as evidenced in the October 2022 floods).
2. Increased funding (\$100m over 10 years) for resilient road reconstruction, so that they can be built with better materials, stronger foundations and more robust edges, especially in disaster prone locations.
3. Increased funding for research and trials into different methods of construction, aimed at improving the longevity of roads in the face of climate change.
4. Increased funding regionally for the development of asset vulnerability assessment models, and then on an individual council basis to incorporate the modelling into routine asset planning.
5. A focused approach to improving the resilience of the main arterial roads within the municipality, which are vital arteries under normal circumstances and even more so in disaster response and recovery times.

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We trust that our above submission will be beneficial, and we look forward to reviewing the Government's response to this inquiry. Our nominated contact for any further discussion is Vito Albicini, Director Assets & Development, who can be reached on either

[REDACTED]

In addition, Council would welcome an opportunity for panel members to visit our Shire to see and hear firsthand the magnitude of the problems we face.

Kind regards

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