

## Local Government and Road Safety

Road trauma is one of the major public health problems facing this country. In 2009 1,509 people died on our roads.

The Bureau of Infrastructure Transport and regional Economics (BITRE) report on the *Cost of Road Crashes in Australia 2006* estimates that road crashes cost the community nearly \$18 billion in 2006, equivalent to 1.7 per cent of GDP. There were an estimated 653,853 road crashes in 2006 involving 1.16 million vehicles resulting in the loss of 1602 lives. .

These are shocking statistics but what they don't reflect is the personal pain and injury experienced by the people directly involved and their families and friends.

The number of deaths on our roads is only part of the problem. The latest hospitalisation figures show that nearly 33,000 people were seriously injured in crashes during 2006-07. Many of these people are now living with severe and life-long injuries. Sadly, these figures have been trending upwards for several years.

Road trauma disproportionately affects young, healthy, Australians. About 30% of those killed, and 37% of those hospitalised in road crashes are under 25 years old. We have all seen the images in our papers and on our TV screens. The roadside memorials are a daily reminder. Indeed, it is sobering to think that school children today are unlikely to reach the age of 25 without at least one of their former classmates being killed or seriously injured on our roads.

Much good work has been achieved over the last 40 years to make our roads safer. According to the BITRE, annual road deaths have dropped from a peak of 3,798 in 1970 to an average of around 1,640 between 2000 and 2008, even though the number of vehicles on Australian roads has more than tripled in that time.

Tougher laws and better policing targeting speeding and drink driving, improved driver training, better road design, extensive education campaigns and new vehicle technologies have all contributed to a large reduction in the frequency, severity and economic cost of road crashes over recent decades.

Driver attitudes also need to change. According to the annual Survey of Community Attitudes to Road Safety undertaken by the Federal Government:

- 61 per cent of respondents said they use their mobile phone while driving;
- 25 per cent consider it acceptable to speed 'if you are driving safely';
- 16 per cent of respondents had fallen asleep at the wheel, with 43 per cent having done so more than once; and
- 6 per cent of respondents - and 11 per cent of those younger than 25 - 'always, nearly always or mostly' drive at least 10 km/h over the speed limit.

On a more positive note the same survey found that most people are well-informed about road safety matters and support the efforts of police to catch and punish those who break the law.

Ten years ago state and federal Transport Ministers, through the Australian Transport Council, on which I represent local government on today, agreed on the current National Road Safety Strategy, 2001-2010. The Strategy set a target of reducing the rate of road deaths by 40 per cent over that period, from 9.3 to 5.6 deaths per 100,000 people. To date we have achieved a 26 per cent reduction, but it is very unlikely that we will meet the 40 per cent target in the final year of the Strategy.

One of the major policy challenges that the Australian Transport Council will be grappling with this year, is the next National Road Safety Strategy to operate for the period 2011-2020. The new strategy will need to:

- have a national commitment to achieving ambitious reductions in deaths and serious injuries on Australian roads over the next 10 years and beyond;
- present high-level goals and specific policy objectives in areas such as acceptable road speeds, road infrastructure, vehicle safety, road user behaviour and institutional management; and
- identify agreed actions, timelines, responsibilities and performance indicators.

### **Role of Local Government**

The BITRE reports do not show what proportion of crashes and deaths occur on local roads controlled by councils. However, we can be certain it is a significant number, as councils are collectively responsible for over 650,000 kilometres or 80% of all roads in Australia. In most cases, it is local roads where there will be the greatest interaction between vehicles and pedestrians.

Roads are local government's biggest asset by some margin. Nationally, local government spends about 25% of its funds on roads, although in rural councils this figure is typically more than 50%. This means that the maintenance of the local road system is one of local government's major tasks and in the case of almost every council – the largest single item of annual expenditure.

Safety is a key consideration in the design, building and maintenance of roads and is a key factor in prioritising works. Local government also has a major role in the delivery of the Federal Government's Road Safety Black Spot Program which targets locations that have identified poor road safety history.

One of the strengths of local government is its ability to tailor services to local needs. In different councils, and different states, local government is tackling road safety in a variety of different ways each designed to achieve the best outcomes.

I would like to focus on three specific local government initiatives that are helping to respond to the road safety challenge:

- Moreton Bay Road Safety Partnership Project;

- Community Transport; and
- RoadWise.

#### *Moreton Bay Road Safety Partnership Project*

Morton Bay Regional Council (MBRC) to the north of Brisbane includes road safety in its corporate plan. In 2007 the Council established the Moreton Bay Road Safety Partnership Project (RSPP) with other road safety stakeholders in the region to work collaboratively to establish road safety as a priority and to develop frameworks to reduce road trauma.

The Project involved establishing a Steering Committee with representatives from the Council, the Local Government Association of Queensland, Department of Transport and Main Roads, Queensland Police Service, Queensland Health and the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia Queensland. The collaborative nature of the Steering Committee has led to a coordinated approach to road crash and asset data collection and management which, along with community feedback, has helped to identify and prioritise hazardous sites for funding.

The Steering Committee has developed a *Road Safety Strategic Plan and Action Plan* for the Moreton Bay Regional Council area which provides a framework and direction for an integrated approach by Council and other agencies to improve road safety. The *Road Safety Strategic Plan and Action Plan* identifies the priority road safety issues for the Moreton region and describes both behavioral and engineering actions which are likely to mitigate the problem.

#### *Community Transport*

The provision of community transport by councils, although not primarily a road safety measure, gives the often vulnerable group of disabled and frail and aged members of the community an alternative to driving when they need to access care and services.

Older members of our community face unique road safety challenges and statistics show that the highest fatality rates after younger drivers are those aged over 70 years. Offering alternatives to private motor vehicle travel, such as community run shuttle bus services, provides an opportunity to improve road safety outcomes for older Australians.

As the population ages, the demand for community transport will grow. For example the Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that almost 20 per cent of people aged over 60 in Victoria need assistance with transport, a figure which rises to 33 per cent in the 80-84 year old category and 43 per cent for those aged between 85 and 89.

In Victoria, 45 per cent of councils provide transport services for people who are transport disadvantaged. A report prepared by the Victorian Council of Social Service in 2008 examined six community transport services and found that they provided more than 78,000 passenger trips, travelled over 778,000 kilometres and utilised over 13,800 volunteer hours each year. This is the largely hidden, but rapidly emerging, public transportation of the future and it is being run out of local government.

### *RoadWise*

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) has developed road safety programs on a state-wide basis to actively engage and involve local government and the community in implementing specific initiatives of *Towards Zero*, the Western Australian Road Safety Strategy.

RoadWise Road Safety Committees are the formal structures and extend across eleven regions encompassing metropolitan, regional and remote areas of Western Australia. This network of Committees offers an ongoing mechanism for engaging and involving communities in the dissemination and sharing of information and knowledge.

The Committees provide a regular forum where road safety is considered and strategies are developed and tailored to address road safety issues at the community level. They represent local partnerships that enable collaboration and coordination with lead agencies.

More than half of the councils in WA have a formal local road safety committee. Action plans have also been developed by most Committees to focus on and monitor local safety activity in their area.

One element of the WALGA RoadWise Program has been to establish a network of Type 1 Child Car Restraint Fitters to help parents install child car seats correctly.

### **Conclusion**

The deaths on our roads of more than 1500 people annually is a major economic cost, but of far more pressing concern, this represents immeasurable personal anguish for the families and friends of those killed.

More can and should be done to improve our roads, vehicles and also our attitudes to road safety. Local government, as owner and manager of more than 80% of the total road system, has a critical role to play in road safety at the local level

Local government must ensure that its roads are built and maintained to a safe standard by working with the community to identify black spots, providing transport alternatives for the transport disadvantaged and vulnerable where possible and by playing a part in changing the attitudes of communities to road safety.

Safety on our roads is something which all three levels of government have a direct interest and a serious stake in.

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