



14 February 2023

Committee Secretary

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and Transport

PO Box 6021

Parliament House

CANBERRA ACT 2600

By upload

Dear Committee

Public Submission – Inquiry into the implications of severe weather events on the national, regional, rural and remote road network

I refer to the above inquiry. This is the Northern Grampians Shire Council's submission to the Committee's request for recommendations relating to the inquiry's terms of reference.

Overview

Located 230 kilometres north-west of Melbourne, the Northern Grampians Shire is a region of over 11,800 residents spread across a geographic land area of almost 6,000 square kilometres.

The Northern Grampians Shire Council manages 3,369 km of local roads to help support an economy underpinned by agriculture. Our geographic size and underlying economic activity require a more extensive asset base to cater for local community needs and the provision of economic infrastructure over a larger area than most of our metropolitan or regional counterparts.

Context

Council faces frequent conundrum in determining the stretches of road to maintain to the standard our community expect given that limitations of our community's capacity to pay. The sheer cost of servicing the entire network to meet a consistent standard is implausible because of this constraint. The result of this is that Council constantly works within the confines of an already unsustainable environment, only being able to fund 45% of the work we know is required. Our road network is old, ageing and at increased likelihood of failure because of these competing priorities and cost pressures. It is critical that the 143 bridges, the 275 major culverts and the 3000 or so other drainage assets in our road network are able to withstand increasing severity of weather event to remain operational and sustain the economic activity of our community.

Challenge

The points of failure that exist on many stretches of the rural and remote road network continue to remain not just because these assets are ageing and under capacity but because betterment, at the time of first funded



Northern Grampians Shire Council
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CONTACT US



ngshire@ngshire.vic.gov.au



www.ngshire.vic.gov.au



(03) 5358 8700



PO Box 580 Stawell VIC 3380

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flood reinstatement, to a current engineering standard that would enable the point to withstand future flooding of similar severity, is not possible because of the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) funding criteria that *No betterment is claimable only reinstatement to pre-flood condition*.

In some cases, improvement can and has been sought by Council 'paying the difference'. However, Council has a far reduced capacity at times of response to a severe weather event to implement this course of action. This is further constrained by the current timeframe of only 3 months in which to claim against available funding and the expectation that the assessment is conducted in real time by a small number of assessors, which creates compound bottlenecks in the process.

For the most part, however, as both noted above and because of the aforementioned funding criteria condition, Council is unable to enhance the resiliency of future road construction. This results in a repetitious, inefficient cycle of defect remediation, not defect mitigation.

Opportunity

Resilience is both the capacity the asset has to tolerate increasingly severe weather events coupled with the capacity of Council to respond to the impact and 'build back better'. The building of capacity requires gains to be made to improve the network's ability to withstand future shocks.

To build resilience into the rural and remote road network Council needs to be able to improve road assets that are repetitively impacted by severe weather events at the time of remediation to a level that withstands subsequent events of similar severity. There is opportunity here to reframe the perception that Council is to be seen at a zero gain at end of remediation works undertaken in response to any severe weather event.

There is also opportunity for State or Federal Government agencies to work with Council to enhance road resilience through effective planning and strategic investment to reduce likelihood of failure before future severe weather events impact Northern Grampians Shire.

Until such time that there is the political intent, enabling policy, financial means and resource capacity, the resilience of the network as a whole will be held-to-ransom to attend by these frequent points of failure.

Recommendations

Council advocates strongly for improvements to the resilience of Australia's road network and supports mechanisms that increase the agility of agencies involved in our collaborative response to future severe weather events.

Council puts forward the following recommendations to the Committee for their consideration:

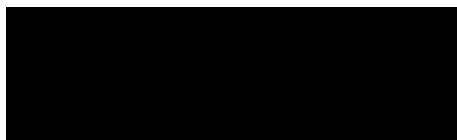
- 1) The timeframe to claim against available funding is extended from 3 months to 12 months
- 2) While noting a recent revision to claims criteria received in December 2022, it is still critical claims criteria extends to incorporate the use of in-house plant equipment cost and materials
- 3) The claims process is automated through an online portal
- 4) A scale of funding response to magnitude and frequency of failure is developed and agreed, to assist in the automation of claims processing and identification of qualifying criteria for betterment
- 5) Service level agreements between parties involved in the claims process are agreed and implemented
- 6) An auditing approach is adopted to redirect effort to re-operationalising the network over the requirement to evidence a claim in real time



- 7) Funding agreements incorporate the upgrade of or betterment to aged or not current engineering standard road infrastructure assets
- 8) Funding agreements are established to strategically invest in tackling persistent points of network failure and close the renewal gap.

The Northern Grampians Shire Council looks forward to your favourable consideration of the points raised in this submission. Should you require any further information, please contact Council's Manager Government Relations, Engagement & Advocacy on [REDACTED]

Yours faithfully



CR KEVIN ERWIN
MAYOR