



Vulnerable Road Users Inquiry – Canberra Vikings Cycling Club Inc. Submission
25 October 2013

The Canberra Vikings Cycling Club (VCC) would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to make a submission to the vulnerable road users inquiry on behalf of its members and Canberra road cyclists in general. VCC supports cycling in all its forms and therefore also endorses the submissions by the Canberra Cycling Club, Pedal Power ACT and the Amy Gillett Foundation.

About VCC

VCC was established in 1996 to promote and provide opportunities for participation by South Canberra and Tuggeranong residents in all forms of bicycle racing. It now caters for cyclists who live all over Canberra including Northside and the Belconnen area, and members come from as far as Cooma. It conducts road races and other cycling events in the Canberra region. Club members also organise training and social rides.

VCC has almost 300 members, including a strong contingent of women cyclists, masters-aged cyclists, and also has several AWD (athletes with a disability) members. Our junior cyclists program is one of the most successful in the region. VCC also provides coaching and support for novice cyclists and has pioneered the Novice Road Cycling Program.

Our aims are to:

- encourage all levels of ability;
- promote junior development;
- provide a positive social atmosphere;
- organise a varied racing program; and
- encourage family and involvement with family membership concessions and low social membership fees.

In essence VCC is about road cyclists and we undertake the majority of our training and our racing on the public road system.

The Canberra Cycling Environment

Vikings acknowledges the ACT government's historical support for the sport of cycling, in particular the facilities provided at Stromlo Forest Park. This support has allowed our club to produce five world champions in the past 10 years, a Paralympic gold medallist, and two World Tour professional riders. The Canberra Times estimated that a team made up of Canberra riders would be ranked the 10th best professional cycling team in the world as of late 2011. This extraordinary record is both a testament to the suitability of the natural Canberra environment as a training ground and a result of the road infrastructure developed by the ACT government.

VCC contends that maintaining Canberra's record of producing cycling champions is worthwhile, but requires continued support from the ACT Government. Key to achieving this goal is setting policy in a way that allows continued, safe use of the roads by sporting cyclists even as the Territory's population expands and densifies.

Issues faced by road cyclists

In Australia, cyclist death rates per million kilometres cycled is three times higher than in the Netherlands.¹ Australian cyclists are also twice as likely to die on Australian roads than compared with the UK, where they have three times the cars and ten times more riders.² Although official statistics put the number of accidents involving cyclists in Canberra at approximately 200 per year, the Canberra Hospital estimates this figure at 400 to 500 per year³.

Road cyclists are especially vulnerable, as they tend to ride on busy roads in close proximity to cars. Segregated bike paths and shared paths, even when they are available, are usually not suitable for cycling at speed and for group rides. This forces road cyclists into on-road cycle lanes, shoulders and the main roads.

This should not be a problem per se. After all, cyclists are recognised as legitimate road users and all road users are expected to share the road and accommodate one another. Unfortunately, road cyclists face many dangers in this situation, most prominently from:

- Dangerous driving behaviour by motorists;
- Shortcomings in road design and maintenance; and
- An inadequate legal system that too often fails to protect cyclists.

1. Unsafe Driving Behaviour

The primary danger faced by road cyclists in Canberra is unsafe driving behaviour by drivers. This can be categorised into three observed types of driving.

The first is poor driving and is primarily due to a lack of care, consideration and respect for other road users. The “I didn’t see you” excuse after an accident is commonly heard. Most cyclists will have more than one anecdote about the vehicle that passes and turns left across their bike, or exits from a side road across the path of a bike, as if the bike wasn’t even there. This is a lack of due care, with many drivers simply not used to looking out for cyclists.

The second is hostile driving behaviour and is primarily due an attitude that cyclists should not be on the roads which in turn is due to unawareness or ignorance that the roads are for use by both drivers and riders, and that this is expressly stated in the rules of the road. The VCC has positively changed our Friday morning ride route away from Lady Denman Drive as a result of multiple incidents of vehicles blasting the group with their horns, dangerously overtaking the group with many near misses and sometimes causing riders to crash. The alternative route crossing the Lake is across Commonwealth Ave Bridge and incredibly, the group will still have vehicles blasting them with their horns at 6am when there is very little traffic on a three lane road.

¹ <http://theconversation.com/ride-to-work-youll-need-a-bike-barrier-for-that-19111>

² “War on our roads” Sunday Night Yahoo 7 18 August available: <http://au.news.yahoo.com/sunday-night/video/watch/18552758/war-on-our-roads/>.

³ Dr Drew Richardson, Canberra Hospital, ABC News Online, “Cyclists and drivers clash on Canberra roads” 18 August 2013 available: <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-18/cyclists-and-drivers-clash-on-canberra-roads/4894736>.

Thirdly we increasingly notice aggressive driving behaviour directed squarely at cyclists. There have been several instances of vehicles deliberately targeting cyclists and using their vehicle in a threatening manner. There are many discussions on social media about several incidents on the Uriarra Road and on the Old Federal Highway where a vehicle has been used in a threatening manner against cyclists. Many of these incidents have been so serious they have been reported to the police. This is a dangerous trend that needs to be reversed.

2. Road design and maintenance

Common shortcomings in road design and maintenance that endanger the safety of road cyclists include:

Road Design

- sudden narrowing or disappearing bike lanes, squeezing cyclists into a lane of fast-moving cars;
- poor and inconsistent treatments at roundabouts for cyclists; Some roundabouts direct cyclists onto off-road paths, others have a continuing marked lane while others have nothing. This lack of consistency of treatment is confusing for all road users.
- lack of continuity of bike lanes from one section of a road to the next. The piecemeal method of marking lanes only when a reseal is carried out is not satisfactory with often years elapsing before the lanes are completed
- narrow bike lanes next to parking zones, placing cyclists at risk of being “doored”;
- Narrow shoulders/bike lanes on arterial roads. The current TAMS road design guide provides for a 2m cycle lane on 80kph roads. Most experienced riders would agree that riding on Adelaide Ave is a much safer option than riding on Northbourne Ave due to the more generous bike lane width provided on Adelaide Ave even though Adelaide Ave is 80kph and Northbourne Ave (mostly) is 60kph. A 2m lane width does not provide sufficient separation on arterial roads.
- The Austroads Guides to Road Design have adopted a Safe System approach to road safety which recognises that humans, as road users, are fallible and will make mistakes, but that the consequences of making a mistake should not be penalised with death or serious injury. However the focus of these guides is almost entirely on “drivers of vehicles” and very little thought given to “riders” even though riders are legitimate road users and recognised as such by the road rules. Riders too should not be penalised with death or serious injury as a result of someone making a mistake. More space on the road and lower speeds would appear to be the solution.

Maintenance

- Bike lanes and shoulders littered with glass, rocks and other debris – often debris caused by road accidents are swept into bike lanes rather than removed from the road;
- The level of street sweeping carried out by the government is flimted, even on

major arterial routes. Many roads only get swept twice a year. The most regular documented road sweeping is on Adelaide Ave at once per month. Friday night beer bottles result in many cyclists running the risks of flats for 4 weeks after a single incident. Riders also have to ride in the traffic lanes to avoid debris which puts them at risk from other vehicles.

- The use of a spray seal to maintain the roads is a hazard to cyclists. While the upfront cost is lower to the tax payer, the resulting rough surface with loose stone everywhere is a false economy. A reseal treatment was never intended to be a maintenance solution in urban areas, and particularly not in residential areas. It has always been a maintenance solution for rural roads. Sydney and Melbourne use an asphalt overlay which provides a longer lasting and better road surface. The loose stone is a safety hazard for cyclists.
- Dangerous traffic furniture.

3. Inadequate legal system

Australian studies have shown that in around 80 per cent of accidents between cars and bicycles, car drivers are at fault. In the vast majority of cases, the cyclist comes off worst. While only 8 per cent of all motor vehicle crashes involved injury, 57 per cent of crashes involving bicycles were injury crashes. Nonetheless, it is still up to the cyclist to prove that the driver was at fault in the event of a damages claim. This is a heavy burden on the cyclist, who usually does not have the backing of an insurance company(although note that VCC does provide insurance cover for its members, and insurance is available through other cycling organisations including Pedal Power).

Recommendations

VCC supports all of the recommendations of Pedal Power and the Amy Gillett Foundation. Specifically, VCC recommends the following to safeguards for road cyclists:

1. Strict liability laws and improved enforcement

VCC strongly supports Pedal Power's recommendation to introduce strict liability legislation that places the responsibility for a crash involving a bicycle and another vehicle on the driver of the other vehicle unless the driver can show the person on the bicycle was clearly at fault, regardless of the intent of the driver.

These laws are designed to protect vulnerable road users from financial damages caused by drivers. Because they are more likely to inflict severe damage, it is only reasonable that drivers of motorised vehicles are held to a higher standard of accountability than cyclists.

Strict liability laws also take into account that drivers are obliged to be insured for such damage and non-motorised road users are not. The laws are also thought to be effective at bringing about a change in driving behaviour and reducing the accident rate. Most Western European countries have had these rules in place for decades and it is time we adopted them in Australia.⁴

⁴ See also: <http://bicycledutch.wordpress.com/2013/02/21/strict-liability-in-the-netherlands/>.

Hostile behaviour whether it is deliberate or just poor driving is a major issue for cyclists. A complaints system could also be set up to easily report hostile driver behaviour. A set number of reports about the same vehicle would lead to investigation by the police.

Strengthening enforcement activities by police, similar to Operation Halo conducted in Victoria, would also be a useful initiative to both reinforce any changes to the law, support cultural change in the road user community and providing evidence of concrete action the Government is taking to improve road safety for vulnerable road users.

2. Changes to road rules including safe passing distances and reduced speed limits

VCC strongly supports the Pedal Power and Amy Gillett Foundation recommendation that the ACT Government support and introduce road rules that require drivers to keep a minimum distance from people cycling on road. Again, these laws have been introduced in many overseas jurisdictions to good effect. The laws could be framed in such a way that the passing distance depends on the speed limit on the road, with wider passing distances required on roads with higher speed limits, given the risk is higher.

Reduced speed limits on key arterial roads, such as Gungahlin Drive, Northbourne Avenue, Limestone Avenue, Ginninderra Drive for example, and other roads used regularly by cycling groups (Uriarra Road, Cotter Road, Brindabella Road, Kuringa Drive and William Hovell Drive for instance) would also assist in mitigating risk to vulnerable, and all, road users.

Another option would be for cyclists to have priority over cars. This would have the effect of extending the “green zone” onto every intersection and every road. Most near misses and “I didn’t see you” incidents happen when vehicles turn left or right across a cyclists’ path. Slowing vehicles down at intersections because they don’t have right of way would improve safety for everyone.

3. Awareness campaigns and skills training

VCC recommends that both motorists and cyclists are better educated about safe road use behaviour and sharing the roads. Poor driver attitudes and poor road rule knowledge relating to cycling contributes to hostile driver behaviour. Most drivers get their licence in their teens or twenties and never look at the rules of the road again. A knowledgeable driver would be less hostile to cyclists and other road users.

Promoting the benefits of cycling to drivers in terms of less congestion, more available parking, faster trip times etc will help to get drivers to be more tolerant and understanding of on road cyclists.

We recommend that instilling awareness of road cyclists and how to interact with them is better integrated in road safety campaigns and new driver skills training.

4. Infrastructure Design

VCC recommends that the ACT Government maintains its policy of including on-road cycling facilities in road projects, taking into account the issues mentioned above. To avoid ill-conceived bicycle facilities, we recommend that the Government continue to consult with local cyclist groups when designing new infrastructure developments.

A road safety audit should be undertaken for every new road project and take into account on-road cyclists and their safety on the planned infrastructure. Proposing that cyclists use a low speed off road shared path is not a suitable alternative for a road cyclist.

On road cycle lanes should be increased in width to improve the safety of road cyclists. The conversion of more drivers to being riders will assist in reducing congestion.

Parking zones next to cycle lanes would ideally be oversized in width to avoid the possibility of “dooring”.

5. Improved Road Maintenance

We recommend that the Government ensure that bike lanes and shoulders are maintained and regularly cleared of glass and other debris.

We recommend that line marking of newly “surfaced” roads be extended to adjoining sections of that road and the road seen in its entirety and not restricted to just that section that has been treated. Line marking is a cheap way to improve safety on the roads if the lane widths are made sufficiently wide.

We recommend that the use of the chip seal treatment of urban roads cease and a more acceptable treatment of asphalt overlay be implemented as an alternative.

Contact

For further information, contact details are provided below. VCC representatives would be pleased to appear before the enquiry in support of this submission. Further we would like to invite members of the enquiry to join us any Friday morning for our regular club ride.

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Canberra Vikings Cycling Club Inc.

