SUPPORT FOR RURAL AND REGIONAL LEARNER DRIVERS

Organisation: Bourke Shire Council

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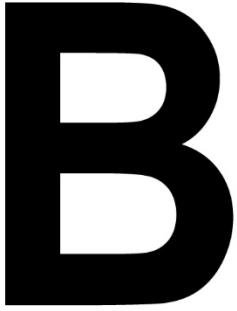
The Hon. Louis Amato, MLC

Chair

Staysafe Committee

Parliament of New South Wales

Macquarie St

Sydney NSW 2000

By email: staysafe@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mr Amato

Re: Inquiry into Support For Rural And Regional Learner Drivers.

Thank you for the opportunity to present Councils views to the Staysafe Committee in respect of the Inquiry into Support For Rural And Regional Learner Drivers.

Bourke Shire is located in North Western NSW and covers an area of 43,116 square kilometres. The town of Bourke is located on the banks of the Darling River and is the intersection of three significant cross country transport routes - the Kidman Way, Mitchell Highway and Kamilaroi Highway. The Shire is considered a gateway into south west Queensland and the far west of New South Wales and is home to many small villages including; Byrock, Enngonia, Fords Bridge, Wanaaring and Louth. The Shire comprises 571km of regional roads, of which 380km are unsealed and 1846km of local roads, of which 1834km are unsealed. Bourke is located 370km from the major regional service centre of Dubbo and 780km from Sydney.

The resident population of Bourke, as at the 2016 Census, is 2,634 people. In excess of a third (31.5%) of its residents identify as Aboriginal (829), significantly above the National average of 2.8%. Half (or 50.2%) of those residents identifying as Indigenous are aged 24 years or younger.

In terms of driver education, training and road safety, the location and social demographics of Bourke brings its own set of challenges.

Whilst a motor vehicle driver's licence brings an opportunity for freedom, education or employment, the limited financial capacity of many families and individuals often restricts prospective drivers from being able to afford the fees to commence the process for achieving a Learners Permit and then a Provisional Drivers Licence. The prospect of achieving a Provisional Licence is often lessened further having regard to the need to undertake 120 hours of supervised driving.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to source suitably qualified supervisor drivers and a registered vehicle. In terms of Bourke residents who attempt to achieve their driver licence, whilst I don't have the data, it would be interesting to analyse pass rates in terms of the theoretical component of the process given expected lower than average reading and writing skills amongst the population.

Notwithstanding the above, the Birrang Enterprise Development Company in Bourke provides a Learner Driver Program in Bourke. They assist in working out the finances of getting a licence, with eligible students able to access funding in respect of test and licence fees. Birrang also assist students master the Learner Driver knowledge test and then help students accrue the driving hours needed to finalise their licence. They have had great success with their learner driver training program; however, the number of participants is limited to available funding.

Notwithstanding the above issues, which I suspect others have made comment on to the Inquiry, and whilst challenging in themselves, if we can get to a point where all members of our community can at least access a driver's licence, it is considered that a genuine focus needs to be forthcoming in terms of driver training that provides skills in addressing Fatigue, Speed and Outback Rural Roads.

As I write this submission, I note media reports of the tragic passing of a 17-year-old female having been killed in a single person, single vehicle accident on a rural road outside of Narromine. Was it a case of fatigue, speed, the quality of the road or some other contributing factor? Ultimately inexperience would come into play.

Whilst it is acknowledged that inexperience takes time to overcome, the question is raised whether the existing 120-hour driver training regime provides sufficient exposure to the real dangers of fatigue, speed and outback roads.

Driving long distances is a requirement if you are going to travel by car in rural and remote locations. Fatigue can set in very quickly and the impact of a potential micro sleep are well documented. Education in recognising and addressing driver fatigue is a requirement. When fatigue is coupled with speed the result is often disastrous. How we get the message through to all drivers, let alone our youngest drivers, of the dangers of speeding is a conundrum that road safety advocates have looked to address for a considerable time.

Outback rural roads are dangerous. Often tree lined, these roads see wandering animals, even during daylight hours that come out of nowhere which can induce an inappropriate, and often tragic, response from the inexperienced driver. Road surfaces in the outback range from sealed and marked highway carriageways to wide open and badly corrugated dirt roads that require very careful attention when navigating. Wandering animals and corrugated dirt roads are even greater hazards for those travelling on motor bikes.

In addition to the above, Bourke is a destination for tourist travellers and with the closure of borders, numerous people are now choosing to travel to the outback rather than overseas. The addition of tourists travelling on roads who are not familiar with the driving conditions, the distance between towns and the changes in weather conditions, all impact these travellers. A number of these travellers are pulling large caravans with limited experience which also impacts their ability to arrive at their destination safely.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the issues are easy to identify, how such issues are addressed is a different and difficult matter.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Yours faithfully,

Mark Riley

General Manager

5 October 2021