Bigger, better roads may not always be safer

Safe and Scenic Toodyay Road
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A RECENT report by the State Auditor General has highlighted the fact that despite spending more than $1 billion over 10 years on road improvements, WA traffic deaths and injuries remain virtually unchanged and unacceptably high.

The report to the WA Government details shortcomings of the Road Trauma Trust Account (RTTA), funded by speed and red-light camera revenue which totalled $127 million last year and is expected to keep increasing.

The trust account partly funds planned improvements to Toodyay Road, presumably guided by the fact that between 2010-15 Toodyay Road had the worst death toll in the Wheatbelt.

Our campaign has acknowledged the shocking state of Toodyay Road undoubtedly contributed to its poor safety record, and improvements were clearly required.

In the case of Toodyay Road, the former Federal Government was persuaded by a dubious Main Roads WA business case to tip in a lot more dollars.

This will handsomely support the State agency's desire for a bigger, better Toodyay Road with more passing lanes, extensive realignments and more large-scale land clearing.

Yes, we need major highways for a healthy economy, and it has to be accepted that death and serious injury will occur on high-speed roads.

The strong link between death, injury and speed undermines the goal of a zero road toll, and the latter is therefore unattainable at speeds in excess of 100km/h.

However, as we move away from freeways and major highways onto lesser thoroughfares such as Toodyay Road, the supposed value of bigger and better runs into serious problems, as evidenced in the Auditor General's report.

It is scathing about organisations that administer the Road Trauma Trust Account, highlighting various deficiencies which match our experience over the last three years.

A key failure identified in the report is whether any RTTA-funded road safety project actually delivers its promised benefits.

Project self-assessments do not include safety outcomes – only whether the work was finished on time and on budget.

This strongly accords with Main Roads' desire to promote the efficiency of the grand engineering ideology evidenced in its annual reports.

The Road Safety Council – one of two bodies that administers the RTTA – does not study past performance when considering whether funding should be renewed.

This highlights one of our own concerns about how the Killed and Seriously Injured Index (KSI) is used by Main Roads to justify improvements.

We drew attention in the early days of our campaign to that fact that from 2015-20, the KSI fell from a higher figure in the previous five years.

Since nothing occurred to change the state of the road, the decrease was attributed to various other initiatives such as driver education campaigns, but this has been studiously ignored by Main Roads.

We acknowledge that the fall may be a statistical anomaly – we need to see updated figures for more recent years.

Our attempts to get this information from Main Roads have been met with silence, which only contributes to our belief – echoed in the Auditor-General's report – that much of our State's road safety policy is not sufficiently driven by outcomes.

The report also identifies conflicts of interest within the Road Safety Council which recommends projects for RTTA funding to the Minister for Road Safety.

The council appears to include representatives of organisations such as Main Roads that also receive money from the RTTA.

This reflects our early criticism of the Community Reference Group, which Main Roads said was a valid forum to discuss how Toodyay Road could be improved.

It contained many unstated but obvious conflicts of interest, serving as a rubber-stamp for Main Roads engineering designs to make Toodyay Road faster.

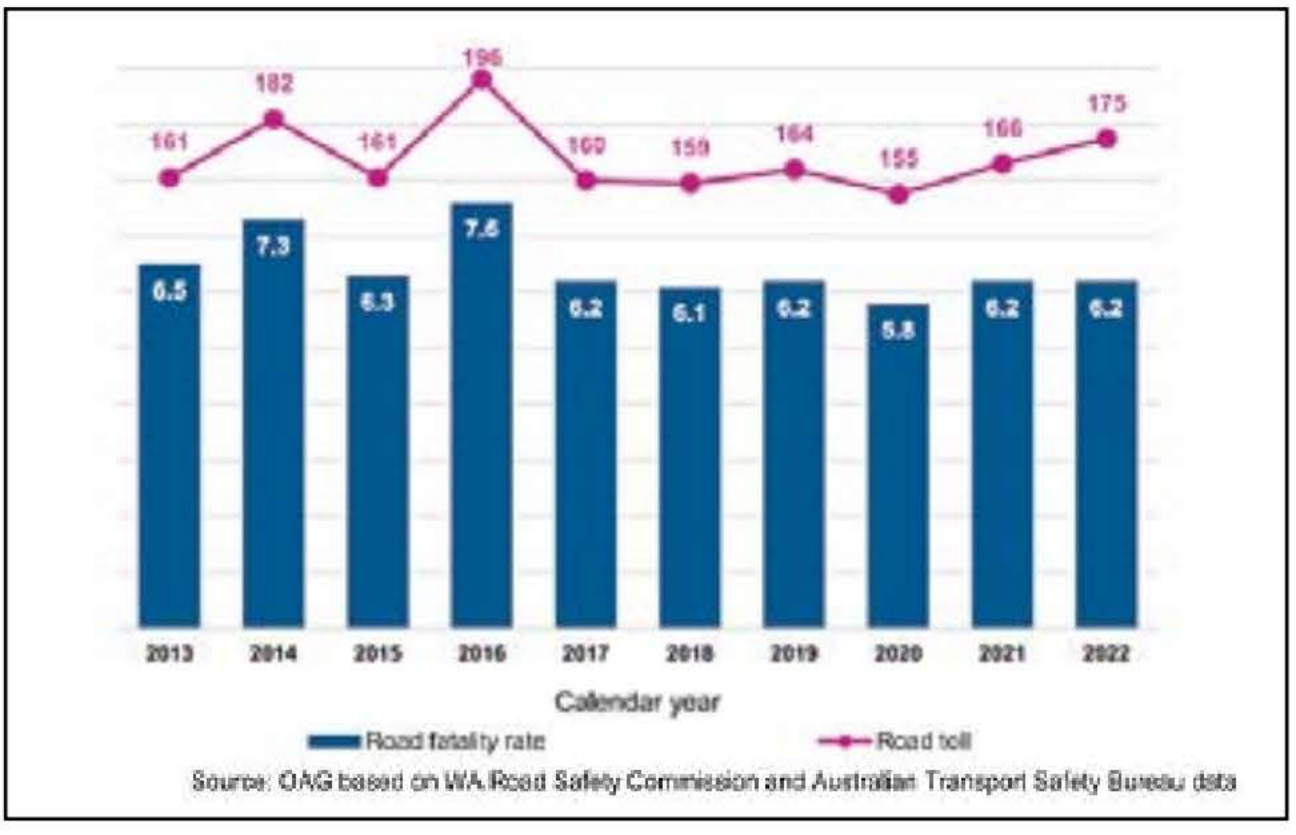
We accept that not everyone shares our concerns about how large-scale roadworks affect our roadside environment.

The road or trucking lobby in particular will not be satisfied until its members are allowed to drive at 100 km/h on all roads.

But leaving vested interests aside, surely the rest of us want safer roads designed according to policies that actually deliver safer roads when completed.

We need to find new ways to reduce the risk of death or serious injury on roads where speed is not paramount.

These include combining sustainable road design principles with strategies to address driver behaviour.



Graph indicates the number of lives lost per year and solid bars indicate the annual rate of fatalities per 100,000 population. Source: Office of the WA Auditor General.