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JOINING THE DOTS

Health and obesity, climate change and drought, transport policy and traffic congestion, rising fuel prices and the reducing liveability of our cities and suburbs are closely interrelated issues.

Why is it that the links between these issues are obvious to most of us, but the majority of politicians and senior bureaucrats consistently fail to join the dots and do anything substantive to address these issues in a coordinated way?

We need to create healthy, active-transport communities, where good public transport and safe walking and cycling are planned in, where greenhouse gas emissions are minimised, people spend less on fuel, they shop and school locally. More people can then travel efficiently, reduce climate change and live in connected and sustainable communities.

While politicians and department heads claim to be moving in this direction, the reality is that most infrastructure spending is focused on building bigger roads and generating more traffic to the detriment of active transport . The opposite of what is desirable is achieved, as shops, schools, work and play are harder than ever to get to on foot, bicycle and public transport. While there are a few good “pilot programs” encouraging more active transport, they are under funded and the bulk of investment is heading us in the wrong direction.

However, some of the solutions are patently simple and entirely within our capacity. Take the example of school travel in Victoria. A majority of the 850,000 children at school (about 16% of Victoria’s population) are driven to (and from) school and school generated traffic is a major source of congestion in the mornings. Parents spend money and time chauffeuring children and creating pollution, while missing out on a “health opportunity”.

It would be possible to cut much of this car travel by requiring the Education Department and all schools to adopt a policy of encouraging and supporting “active transport to school”, to make all school catchments and immediate surrounds safe for walking and cycling and require all schools to become involved in TravelSmart, School Travel Planning and Walking School Bus programs. These administrative changes, investments and programs are consistent with Melbourne 2030, the latest Metropolitan transport strategy, the environmental curriculum of many schools and the needs of children and their families.

The cost – the equivalent of the new intersection of the Calder/Tullamarine freeways (at around \$200M or a few kilometres of Eastlink at \$50M/k) would go a long way towards implementing this for the state’s 2300 schools.

The benefits – reduced child obesity and improved health, lower congestion levels, reduced family fuel bills, less greenhouse gas, reduced climate change, and a better walking, cycling and living environment for all Victorians. Reducing congestion near all schools would benefit many more people than very expensive major road projects in select locations.

Let’s join the dots, tackle a range of issues simultaneously, and all benefit in so many ways.