

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Wangaratta – Wednesday 4 December 2024

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

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Gaelle Broad

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John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

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Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

David Blore, President, Benalla Sustainable Future Group; and

John Naylor, and

Tony Lane, North East Regional Sustainability Alliance.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Climate Resilience in Victoria here in Wangaratta for our last session of the day. Welcome to representatives of local sustainability groups.

All the evidence that we take in this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide to us during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of the Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following today's hearings, and those transcripts will ultimately be made public and placed on the committee's website.

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I will let committee members introduce themselves.

Gaëlle BROAD: Hi. I am Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria, coming to you from Warrnambool today.

The CHAIR: For the Hansard record, if you could each state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of before we kick off.

David BLORE: Thank you, Mr Chairman. David Blore. I am the President of Benalla Sustainable Future Group. I have been a member of that group for probably 10 years and President for the last year or two. In fact I presented to a parliamentary committee of inquiry back in Mooroopna in 2020, and I am just looking back at some of the information we presented then. Some of it is still pertinent. I will be making a very short statement on my behalf, and I will be supporting my colleagues here on my left.

John NAYLOR: John Naylor, representing the North East Regional Sustainability Alliance and under the banner of that also the Wangaratta Landcare and Sustainability organisation.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks.

Tony LANE: Similarly, Tony Lane, representing North East Sustainability Alliance, and I am president of Wangaratta Landcare and Sustainability.

The CHAIR: I invite you now to make brief opening statements, and then we will get into some questions. I do not know who wants to go first. I am in your hands.

Tony LANE: I will lead off. I have got some more general things to say before other things start to happen. Having read many of the submissions, plus noting many other contributors to the inquiry, it is evident you have taken on a very important task. The outcome of this work will make a significant contribution to renewing the foundations of how communities prepare and respond to the impact of a changing climate. There are many presentations and submissions focused on the technical details and lived experience, but I want to also reflect,

in leading us off, on where the role of political representatives falls, both those that represent us now and those that will represent us in the future, because this will be a pretty long journey.

The unity of purpose on display in this inquiry needs to be maintained as political parties approach future elections with their priorities and commitments. This is in contrast to 10 years ago. In 2014 the Victorian Centre for Climate Change Adaptation Research, which was established in 2009 by the Brumby government, was defunded in the Victorian budget of that year. In the 2014 federal budget the new Abbott government also began reversing many of the policies that previously had bipartisan support. What I am really pointing to is obvious: this is going to be long journey. It needs continuity through election cycles, or we will be springing back, as we kind of are now, to where things were 10 years and trying to reinvent what needs to happen.

As president of Wang Landcare and Sustainability, we work closely with many partners, and at last Monday's meeting of the north-east sustainability alliance we also canvassed those attending on what should be included in today's presentation, so we are trying to represent the alliance as well as the views we bring from Wangaratta Landcare and Sustainability. Our group was formed five years ago from the amalgamation of the Wangaratta Urban Landcare Group, which was formed 23 years earlier and was the first urban landcare group established in Victoria. The Wangaratta Sustainability Network at the time was about 11 years old. We have 153 members and undertake a wide range of activities related to revegetation; assisting the community on their journey towards renewable energy, electrifying their homes and reducing CO₂ emissions; the well-recognised work at Mullinmur Billabong, where we have established an education hub to support schools with citizen science; and also undertaking community events. Also occurring there is the breeding of endangered native fish, in contrast to the other side of the work, which has seen us remove many tonnes of carp from the local rivers. Importantly, all of this stuff is done not by our group but in partnership, so I am really reflecting here about the need for strong partnerships moving forward.

Last month Wangaratta Landcare launched its Electrify Wangaratta project, which assists people who are continuing their journey to use more renewable energy – that is, electricity – reducing emissions, getting off gas and making financial savings. Later today, at 5:30, there is another event being run in coalition with the Rural City of Wangaratta for those who are renters and others who can only afford to take small steps towards sustainability and improving their household situation. We are trying to cater to those in the community that have got capacity to take the big steps in this direction while not ignoring those that need extra support on this journey.

At the Mullinmur Billabong education hub we have formal partnerships with schools, the North East Catchment Management Authority, the Victorian Fisheries Authority and many others. One of the upcoming projects is work with the Bangerang traditional owners, and we are supporting their ranger development group in various projects, including building native fish habitat to be used in local billabongs and streams and also undertaking further cultural burns at Mullinmur and in other spaces in this area. This is again meeting people where they are at and walking forward together.

During the recent local government elections a candidate forum on the issue of sustainability and landcare was held. That was initiated by Wangaratta Landcare and Sustainability and supported by other landcare groups. Apart from shining a light on the issues related to that topic, the forum also recognised that elected councillors needed to work as a collaborative team and not so much sparring partners. That approach that night seemed to work. It proved to be very effective, and there was a lot of positive feedback from the community as one of the best candidate forums, be it local government or state or federal, that they have attended, where there was a collegiate effort on display and not so much sparring of teams.

As mentioned, there is a lot of work that is happening in this inquiry and there is a lot of language that is being pushed around, and not all of it is understood by the general public. The differences between sustainability, resilience, mitigation and adaptation are not generally understood by the general community, in contrast to all those who are contributing to the inquiry at present. So it is essential that work be done on two fronts: the ongoing work to reduce CO₂ emissions as people and communities transition away from fossil fuels, while also delivering the actions needed – as part of this inquiry – in managing the impact of climate change while we are on that journey to reducing CO₂. So I am really pointing to the fact that we work in collaboration. There is a lot of great work that happens through community groups, but they generally do not do it on their own; they lean into the other work that the professionals are doing and work collaboratively to make the links back to the

community, where the community is at. That is kind of what I want to put on the table today. And from what I have seen and from reading some of the submissions, I saw that was a bit of a gap in the dialogue thus far.

The CHAIR: John or David.

John NAYLOR: David, would you like to go next?

David BLORE: Okay, I will. I have only got a few things to say. Firstly, I must apologise. I have to leave at 5; I have a council meeting back in Benalla. But I emphasise I am here not on behalf of the council but on behalf of the BSFG. We are a small community-based organisation. We have got a number of different action groups that tackle various areas – for example, Renewable Energy Benalla – and we have worked with Indigo Power and others on introducing concepts of renewable energy. In fact some of my colleagues are meeting with the council as we speak about a small new initiative that actually came out of the Electrify Wangaratta symposium that you had here about a month ago and ideas that we want to get going in Benalla.

In some senses it is small steps; we have to bring the community along with us. Each of our action groups has specific roles – for example, greening Benalla. We are interested also in subdivision and planning; I notice that is one of your key terms of reference. We have got interests there. I used to work in the planning system, but I am not going to present on that today because I am not necessarily up to date with the thinking that is happening right now and what you have done in the last few years.

One of the interesting things to me was when I looked at the *Local Government Act* just before we left. I did a word search for ‘climate change’ in that Act and found one occurrence of it. So I suggest that is a bit of a gap. Certainly it was in the overarching governance principles, so it should be up front and centre. But I suspect that, looking at municipalities across the state, that is not necessarily the case.

The BSFG is very pleased to be here. If I can, while I have time, I will be pleased to answer any questions.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. John.

John NAYLOR: Thanks very much for the opportunity to talk. I am here representing the North East Regional Sustainability Alliance, but also I have got the Wangaratta Landcare and Sustainability hat on. As Tony pointed out and David made clear too, we sort of work together on a whole lot of stuff, and I guess we network a lot and share our ideas around the place.

Wangaratta Landcare and Sustainability has been working in the community energy area for a long time, and over the last few years since we formed when the two organisations came together, we have done a few things. I think we have kicked a few goals in terms of increasing the energy independence potential of Wangaratta and this area and also reducing our emissions. That is our response to climate change and looking after the environment that sustains us. If we continue to load the atmosphere up with CO₂, the environment is going to stop working for us, and I would rather like to see it stay on for a long time.

Amongst the things that we have done is that in 2020 we spread the word on the government’s Solar on Public Buildings program through the community, and a large local sports group out at Tarrawingee picked up the opportunity there and put in a pretty large solar system on an old tennis court they were not using anymore. They are pretty proud of that; it is feeding into their community. We worked with the Hume community power hub in 2021, and that led to a 100-kilowatt solar power system in conjunction with Goulburn Valley Community Energy, Indigo Power and an organisation called Citizens Own Renewable Energy alliance based in South Australia, and that is powering one of their workshops. In the middle of the day it carries all of their load, reduces their energy costs and also reduces emissions, which is the thing that we are really after. I guess we are delighted that we have now got that alignment between being able to reduce emissions and also save money, that the two things go together rather than the situation that we were in a few years ago where there actually was a cost to look after the environment. It is great to be beyond that.

We worked with Mondo energy on Project EDGE, which was an ARENA-funded project to prove up the sorts of technologies that are being used now to run the Mallacoota microgrid, which was installed as a response to the climate disaster there back in 2019–20 when the bushfires went through. Mallacoota is now in a position of having a lot better chance of maintaining a resilient energy system and maintaining an energy supply through an event like those bushfires, which unfortunately we can probably say when that repeats. Tony pointed out our

work with Electrify Wangaratta. That is a project we have created there, and we are working with Rewiring Australia on that. They are helping us with information, and we have also got support from our local Glenrowan solar farm through their community benefit fund to help us with the work that we do. We could not do that without them. We have also done some work with Beyond Housing, one of the local community housing providers, to help them on the journey towards electrifying their housing stock and getting that powered with rooftop solar, and I would like to think we can get that with batteries to give those people affordable power and also resilient power supplies, because they are the people least able to look after themselves in our society, and to help them to get through the sorts of events which are likely to come strikes me as being a pretty reasonable way to go about doing some things.

I guess the big risks that I am seeing to the energy supply come from a couple of things, and that is events like storms blowing down transmission lines, and then there is the longer duration, less dramatic events perhaps but just hugely onerous events that we can expect because of climate change, like heatwaves, that will just stress our energy supply systems and stress the capacity of some people to have the right equipment to be able to cool the environments that they live in and then to afford to run that equipment. And that is why I think electrification and helping those people to power up is really important. The opportunities that I think are there are that we can provide resilient, affordable energy to all with small-scale improvements, and we can also do things at the large-scale end, and I think I see it as we can work at it from both ends.

At the local level we can have homes and businesses powered by local energy, and we can now control that, and the Project EDGE proved that we have got systems that can control that, so we can actually shut down the excess. We can control that so that it does not overwhelm the system, and then we can turn it back up again when there is an opportunity to do it. So we can use the resources we have been blessed with really, really well. The potential is there to roll that out, and at the big level we can do that as well. So you get the big systems and the small systems working towards the middle, and build a system that will be resilient as well as reliable and affordable for the people who rely on it.

The government steps towards it – I think government preparedness. I am really pleased reading the directions of the work that are in the *Victorian Government Response to the Expert Panel's Electricity Distribution Network Resilience Review* from 2023. It is a real mouthful, but the stuff that is in that is great because it shows the government actively supporting the setting up of really resilient power systems in facilities – what are they calling them? I have lost it here, but facilities like fire stations and community centres where people are going to go for support in emergencies, and they have got resilient power systems, and there are great examples of those in Yackandandah. After the bushfires of 2019 and 2020 there are terrific examples of work being done in Corryong – close handy – and also Mallacoota and at different levels. The Corryong stuff at this stage, my understanding is that really is looking after those small centres. In Mallacoota that is being done from the big end, where the whole of the town can run under a microgrid, so they are now probably more resilient than they were, so it is building back better.

The CHAIR: We might just get onto questions, because we are running out of time.

John NAYLOR: That is terrific, yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: It is the last session of the day, so I am going to change things up and go to Jacinta first.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. And thank you for the community work that you are doing in this space. There are two elements I am really keen to ask you about, even though there is quite a lot in what you have covered there. The Benalla Sustainable Future Group – you have got in your recommendation to produce targeted climate adaptation assistance for lower socio-economic and older demographics in heat-prone areas, including infrastructure upgrades and heat refuges. To me, that talks to environment adaptation equality. Can you flesh that out a little bit more, your thoughts on that?

David BLORE: In the submission, we commented on the state government data on housing that showed, in terms of thermal comfort, for example, that Benalla lagged. Forty-six per cent reported that our houses were too hot, compared to the state average of 44 per cent, and so on, so we have a bit of a gap there. In Benalla, while newer houses, of course, are being built to more modern standards of insulation and so on – thermal performance – we have a very significant stock of older housing, and a lot of it is also housing that is rented. So we have a lower socio-economic group, we have old housing and renters – it is a bit of a perfect storm, if you

like. And being able to adequately address the needs there in our community is one of the big conundrums, in our view.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. Would you say that developing some form of multiportfolio or multisectoral climate adaptation equality strategy is a good approach in expressing those values?

David BLORE: I think it would be. The issue is that there are different agencies involved – local government, of course, and various other state government bodies and the private sector as well. So being able to work across all of those and bring together a cohesive strategy also with the community – we must bring the community along, because if we do not do that, then we will encounter resistance. We have talked about that before. Some form of overarching strategy that brought those elements together I think would be very useful to progress improving housing stock.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you for raising that. The second thing I wanted to ask about was that you have got a recommendation to implement policies ensuring vegetation offsets remain within the affected municipality, benefiting the local biodiversity. This is one of my pet areas, because I know of examples where biodiversity offsets required in the vicinity of Warrnambool were only going to be achieved in Gippsland.

David BLORE: Yes. It is a big problem.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Is that what you were referring to?

David BLORE: It is a big problem, and the community sees large, old trees being taken out for housing, and there is a planning justification for that, but when those trees are isolated, they are very obvious to the community, and they do not see any value coming back to the community from the 5 per cent offset figure. So that is something that – I had better not say that as a councillor, because I am not here as a councillor – the community is very interested to see: some sort of accountability for vegetation destruction and how the offsets are effectively used.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Any benefits that come from it, because sometimes there are benefits, should be kept local. One of you mentioned Indigenous people. Do you see them as having a role in that space?

David BLORE: Sorry, I missed that word before ‘people’.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Indigenous people. Aboriginal people.

David BLORE: Yes, indeed. We certainly need to have a dialogue with our local Indigenous people, and a couple of those people have already reached out to me as a new councillor, so hopefully we can progress that. There is an existing formal arrangement between council and the local people, but I think that can be strengthened.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Mrs Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you very much. I am just interested in your submission, and you talk about the Benalla Rural City Council building the cinema in an area prone to flooding, and I am just interested in you talking about that, because we have talked a lot during this inquiry and others about disaster recovery funding assistance not enabling you to build back better, just building to the same standard. So that is something that needs to be addressed, and that has been raised multiple times in numerous inquiries. So we hope the state government does take moves to that. But what issues does that present, the building in that spot?

David BLORE: I really need to be very careful there now, because while I am not here as a councillor obviously I do need to take on board the responsibilities of being a councillor. I will say that in 2022 I was opposed to that project and explored all the available options and took all the available options to challenge the decision. The fact is it has gone ahead, and now it is a matter of having delivered it. The difficulty it presents to me is that it sets up a potential precedent when other organisations and individuals look to undertake development that would otherwise be inappropriate because it is within the floodplain of the river. We have actually got an interesting dilemma with another project in Benalla right at the moment which was historically a number of years ago not on the floodplain but very close to it, and the question is: what do we do about

refurbishment or replacement or removal? So there are similar strands to that point, and as I said I wrote this submission before I became a councillor, so I am in a slightly more difficult position now.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. Well, thank you for making a submission. More broadly, I guess this inquiry is about that whole building of resilience. The previous witnesses we talked to about solar panels, and Bendigo Sustainability Group also indicated that – we have heard from others like Deakin University that I think it was a 20-year life span for solar panels, and there are no plans for recycling. I just wanted to understand your perspective on such heavy investment in this area: what are the plans for the end of life? And we are importing the panels predominantly from China now too: what are your thoughts on that industry within Australia, and how do we make that more sustainable?

David BLORE: Interesting.

Tony LANE: Just a couple of comments, and I am no expert in the area, but I have got a lot of faith in the science catching up with the problem to solve it. It has already been demonstrated recently, where most of the content of solar panels can be recycled, and also the comparable situation with wind farms – they are also making good progress in how that can move into a recycling situation as well. I am relying on the science catching up with what people are defining as barriers and problems in some of this, because science generally will.

One other comment I just want to make generally about this transition to renewables, as people make choices about solar and others, is a lot of the access points to get to subsidy support through the Victorian system are where you sign up with a contractor to put – in my case recently it was a heat pump hot water system. But unlike other contracts you might sign, where you have labour and parts and so on, we ended up getting a price that was just, ‘This is what it’s going to cost you,’ and then I have to start making assumptions about labour. But without a detailed breakdown on the supplier, and the supplier has been through all the vetting processes that Sustainability Victoria or whoever has put in place, in my view it has ended up in a pretty even playing field where there is not actually much competition left anymore. The subsidies coming from the government drop in on one side, the funding gap from the individual property owner comes in the other, and sitting in there you do not actually know what the unit costs, what the value of a five- or six-year warranty might be, the support program about it and the value of the labour, whereas when I have contracts done on things I want to know all those bits. I just think this is an outcome which means there may not be efficiencies in the delivery because of that.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay.

John NAYLOR: If I could just have a crack on that recycling issue, I think at the moment we are in a situation where we can recycle but it is not economical. My understanding is that there is a company in Brisbane that is doing it and at least two in Melbourne that are doing it, and my understanding is it is a matter of getting to economies of scale to make that work and to a stewardship program, a bit like we have got with mobile phones, where the people who import or who build them – if we get to the stage of building them in Australia, which I would like to think we will get to if we can do that economically – have got a bit of responsibility to get them to go back around again, even though there are costs in that.

I think we have to balance that concern against the waste that we are getting from our present power systems. At the moment, from the latest figures I have seen, it is 500 grams of CO₂ for every kilowatt hour of electricity produced in Victoria. That is disappearing into the air and we do not count it, but it is out there and we are here because of the damage that is doing. That number was 1100 grams not very long ago, so we are really kicking some goals, but it is still there. And that is not taking into account the piles of fly-ash that are coming out of the bottom of the furnaces. So you have got fly-ash out the bottom and CO₂ out the top. Just to put that into context, there was some work done by Andrew Blakers at ANU going back to, I think, about 2020 or maybe even a little earlier where he quantified the amount of landfill you would need for all of the solar panels that Australia is likely to need over the next 20 years. While you really do not want to go there, the mass that would go into landfill was quite small compared to those other two huge waste streams that we just accept out of the coal-fired power industry. And the gas industry – well, that is another one where waste is going into the atmosphere and creating the problem that we are trying to deal with. So that is my context for that.

The CHAIR: Dr Mansfield.

David BLORE: May I make one quick comment before I have to leave, unfortunately?

The CHAIR: Sure.

David BLORE: I think it is a social issue. Unfortunately, certain news sources might promote the idea that solar panels cannot be recycled. The fact is they can be. I agree with Tony; I think as an economic opportunity rises – and it will because of the value of the components of those panels – then people will emerge who will take it on. As Tony said, there are already businesses that are setting up. We had a discussion about this at a social event last week, and people were adamant that they cannot be recycled. The fact is they can. There is even a machine I saw recently – for, I think, only about \$20,000 – which will take a solar panel at the start and spit out the components at the back. Whether that is an economic proposition at the moment depends on the feed from raw stock, but there are solutions, and there will be better solutions over time.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. We heard some evidence earlier about the importance of local community groups and community networks in responding, or adapting, really, to climate challenges – and I think some of the evidence you have provided has supported that – in that community groups like yours can identify infrastructure resilience priorities and potential solutions. What do you think the state government could do to support and enable the work of community groups like yours in that role?

Tony LANE: Look, I think that is a good question, and if it had not come up, I was going to make a comment about that. I was going to start with something like: each time you have a volunteer community group in the room, I bet the average age in the room increases significantly. Most sustainability groups and related groups have got an older cohort of people, mostly retired, doing a lot of great work, and that is common in a lot of community situations. There is a bit of a gap in the middle at the moment, with people who are under a lot of other pressure in their lives not finding the time and capacity to step up. I think there is a need to actually recognise the benefit that community engagement brings but also to be aware in some places of the potential brittleness of that, because a lot of it depends on key people. When we undertake projects through Wangaratta Landcare and Sustainability we do it off the back of the talent that gets recruited into our group. At the moment, and I mentioned before, we do a lot of work with native fish and such, and that is because we have got two or three people who are absolutely guns in that area and we have got to sustain their interest and so on. But I think there is a broader responsibility to ensure that, with groups who are providing a really valuable service back to the community in this space and also supporting a lot of other groups and partners, we try and find a way to make them sustainable.

Most people know the structure of Landcare is under pressure at the moment. It is not getting a lift in funds, which maybe it should. It is due. Next year is 30 years of Landcare Victoria, which was the first one established in Australia. So there are simple things around a show of support at that level. The change that has happened in Landcare – it used to be, Landcare, about farmers and fences and trees, and Wangaratta was the first urban Landcare, but they are becoming far more common. I sit on the Ovens Landcare Network, which is a little peak group over 22 groups in the north-east, and there is a broad spread of activities that now occur beyond what was the starting point in the first perhaps five years of its life. That is the footprint and process that we have got at the moment, which is really highly regarded in rural centres, and I think that is the one that has got to be backed, even though calling it Landcare in an urban environment is a little bit of a different kind of context. But in the rural centres, where a lot of the heavy lifting is going to be done with renewable energy, this is the way to do it.

John NAYLOR: And, Sarah, I think there are a couple of specific things that could be done or considered or used as models for what could happen to accelerate and I guess enhance what is happening at community level. I mentioned I think the Hume community power hub at the front of my little natter then, and I think that was a terrific model because it actually said, 'Here is some ability to get some things done; here's some support to assess needs.' And we went to people – we found a really big one. There were actually a whole lot of other ones that were sitting just behind that. It was, unfortunately, a one-year program that disappeared. Now, if that could just continue there, just to run that power hub, we could identify more. We could proof up the business cases for them. It did not cost the government anything to actually do the installation, but it was great to have

the support to do the assessments, to pay to have those done and then come up with a business proposition to fund the work that was there.

I have also become aware just in the last, really, 48 hours – and excuse my ignorance; I am not as well connected as I thought I was – that the Friends of the Earth are proposing a community-led climate adaptation fund. I do not know any of the details of it, so please, I might be talking way out of turn, but as an idea that strikes me as a ripper in that it makes some funding available in the community, because the community knows what it wants. I guess it is a bit like that example I mentioned of the Tarrawingee sports club. As soon as they knew it was on they had somebody who said, ‘Oh, that’s a great place to put it; let’s do this. This is how that works.’ And all I had to do was – I think I made one phone call to a bloke who knew somebody, because I was very new in this community and as such I only had really minimal contacts. But I could make that happen with just those minimal contacts.

So I think it is those sorts of things where you support the community, fund the community to do it in some way and then let the community sort it out. I think if you want examples of how well that can work, I guess the pinnacle of this game is probably, in this neck of the woods anyway, Totally Renewable Yackandandah and the work that they do, the examples of what they do as a not very supported – well, they just support themselves. It is just outstanding. What they could do with some money behind it – because all of these groups work on volunteer labour. I think Totally Renewable Yackandandah now at last after 10 years have got somebody they can afford to pay one day a week to do some of their administrative work. That work has to be done, and having to do that and to use volunteer labour to do that stuff drains you out. A friend of mine, a colleague who is in the game who can do this commercially, just looks at all us volunteer organisations and says, ‘Look, you’re not going to last,’ and he is probably right. He is right; I can name a couple that have fallen over because people have just become exhausted. So something to support the people who are doing it, and with the work that they are doing as well as funding the outcomes of that work, I think would be just a terrific step in the right direction.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

John NAYLOR: Sorry, it was a longwinded answer.

Sarah MANSFIELD: No, it was great.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you. I think my question was probably more for David, because he seemed to be the planning guy. One of you mentioned the removal of significant trees for housing. We are seeing now more and more designs with housing being built on very small blocks, where they build the house on every square inch, so there is very little in the way of greenery around the house and no eaves on the house, and even with the way the streets are designed, there is very little space for nature strips or any significant tree canopies. I just wonder if you have any comment on that, because it is a thing, balancing affordable housing with what is sustainable design, and if you have any comments on what needs to be strengthened in the planning scheme.

Tony LANE: This is a really interesting topic. Our group, Wangaratta Landcare and Sustainability, have been onto this for quite some time. What we see with the growth in rural towns, and Wangaratta has had a lot of growth with new subdivisions and such, is that when left in the hands of the developers there is a lack of respect for the existing significant trees. We have one or two members in our groups who are experts in this area. For quite a few years when each of these subdivisions turned up, we would identify the significant trees and put an argument to council about why they should be maintained for a whole bunch of reasons. In the end we got a bit tired of that and we started to meet more regularly with council. We wrote a document, or the experts in our group did, about the importance of significant trees. When they come to assess a proposal in the framework they have got in the planning system, and they will probably say they do not get enough discretion on what they can and cannot do, what we now ask them to do is to pay attention to the document we have given them about the importance of trees. That is doing two things. It is asking them to pay attention early, but from our perspective it has changed our role from being a bunch of letter writers saying, ‘We’re objecting to this because you’re not doing that.’ What we currently say is, ‘Are you paying attention to the detail we have provided to you about the importance of significant trees?’

There are two other comments that are relevant. Trees are important in the natural landscape in the farm landscape, and that is where a lot of Landcare started. I am sitting, as I mentioned, on the Ovens Landcare

Network, and one of the key proposals we want to do is to strengthen the importance of trees, not just farm trees for shelter and all those things but for shade and shelter for the community along the obvious tracks, bicycle tracks and other walkways in natural places, and also to get back to a better situation in development scenarios in towns, where they have not been respected and different approaches need to be taken.

I mentioned before we had our candidates forum. There were two things where there was unanimous sign up at that night from the candidates. One was the importance of trees. They said, 'We're moving into a hotter climate.' Although Wangaratta is pretty blessed with two terrific rivers and a number of creeks and open spaces, there is a real gap between the areas of established houses that have got 20- and 50-year-old trees and the newer estates that are filled up with all these black roofs. That needs really important attention. Local council, as I understand it, will say they are restricted on what they can do, but we know there are some councils that push through this and do good work in their communities and others maybe less so. So that is something that we would dearly like to see.

One of the projects that I have had in the back of my mind for a while is to actually get people who build new houses in these places – and good luck to them when they can make that happen; it is an important step in your life to get a house – to do a kind of survey six or 12 months later about satisfaction with that as far as the running costs, the shade, the shelter and all those other things that established communities can take for granted, because there is not much data about that. When people go in to talk to a builder or a developer of some sort, it is always about how many squares the house is and if there is a rumpus room, not the whole running costs of the place. The progress we are making towards 6 and 7 stars is no longer the real benchmark; there are places that are being done with 10 stars now. It is an area that needs a lot more attention, and it is one that we are taking baby steps in, but it is no good us running ahead of where the planning legislation is, because it will come back to 'This is the requirement; that's all people can afford.'

The CHAIR: All right. Last one from you, John.

John NAYLOR: Thank you, Ryan. There is just one comment I would like to make. We are going through this enormous transition in renewable energy, and some of the things that it is possible to achieve with it I think are really just quite remarkable. But I think one of the things that has to be done is we need to build trust in that system and its ability to look after us.

One of the opportunities that I would really like to see taken up at the moment is in the SEC's energy park being developed in Horsham at the moment, which I think might be in a couple of people's bailiwick. I think there is an opportunity there with that solar farm – which I understand will provide enough energy for five times the population of Horsham – and for a big battery system to be built in such a way that if or maybe when that disaster, that storm, comes along and cuts Horsham off from the transmission network around it, Horsham is able to island and, with the help of that battery, run and maintain its economy, maintain its care for its community so that Horsham does not go down the same path that Broken Hill went down back in October this year. They had a great big battery there, they had a solar farm, a wind farm, lots of rooftop, but they could not use it because the battery was not set up to look after the town.

I think using the technologies that we have got in ways that, obviously, look after people and prove that they look after their communities is one of the things that we can really do to kick goals in helping people understand the benefits of this transition, especially when some of them are seeing that there are disadvantages in this too. It is going to be a trade-off. Let us get as many of those positives made manifest for the communities that they are going to be in as possible.

The CHAIR: Indeed. Thank you so much for coming along today.

Tony LANE: Could I just make one final comment?

The CHAIR: Very quickly.

Tony LANE: I would like to congratulate all of you people and others that are not in the room but are part of the Environment and Planning Committee. You have been doing this for a long while, and there is a long way to go ahead, but it is critical work. I know that sitting in a room hearing similar stories day after day – and sometimes there are little gems that pop up that you want to make sure you do not lose – cannot be easy work.

But I hope that at the end of the day it is good collegiate work that is really highly valued, and we are finding a way to cross party lines through this whole process. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Tony. Very lovely words.

With that we will provide you with a copy of the transcript probably in about a week to review, and our proceedings are closed.

Committee adjourned.