

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Emerald – Thursday 10 October 2024

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

Richard Welch

WITNESS

Mary Farrow, Resilience Project, Centre of Resilience, Emerald Community House.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Climate Resilience here in Victoria. I welcome our next witness, from the Resilience Project.

All evidence we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearings, but if you go elsewhere and repeat these 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, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted 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 ask my fellow committee members to introduce themselves, starting with the Deputy Chair.

David ETTERS HANK: Hi. I am David Ettershank from Western Metropolitan Region.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi. I am Gaelle Broad from Northern Victoria.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Northern Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Hello. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: And online?

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria.

The CHAIR: For Hansard, if you could state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of, and then I will invite you to make an opening statement.

Mary FARROW: Okay. My name is Mary Farrow. I am from the Emerald Community House, which is based in Emerald.

The CHAIR: If you want to make an opening statement, then we will get into questions.

Mary FARROW: Yes. Look, I will try to cram it all in because I am the last one. I have been the manager of the Emerald Community House for a long time and on the committee volunteering before that. We run child care, we run programs for people with disabilities, we feed people who are homeless and we help people with domestic violence. More than that, we took on the role of helping the community in disasters after the 2009 fires in Kinglake and that area. We learned from that. We are one of the few groups that are actually preparing. We had not been hit by a disaster up until the recent June storms but have been preparing since then to keep operating.

I think that we are in a situation here – I have listened to all the other presentations – where if we are not careful we are not building resilience; we are building reliance on the government to do everything and sort it all out for us. I do not see the government coming and helping me brush my teeth or paying my loans or doing that kind of stuff. The community need to do what they need to do, even as individuals. We learned this during COVID, when people were encouraged to not do anything, to stay out of the hospital so that people in need got the attention. What we are doing now is developing people who want internet all the time and their phones all the time and do not want to have anything interrupted. I have seen it over and over on social media, monitoring those things.

So what we did at the community house – and it took us a long time, because there was a real resistance, not only from council but from other grants, where we were not a priority area or whatever it was – was we finally got, through a collection of grants, off-the-grid operation. We are the only business in Emerald operating with an off-grid set-up. We have got two buildings that can operate off-grid that withstood that storm in February for six days and had power. People could come and get food, because we had food – we do Foodbank; we gave them credit, because we were running a little grocery store with food; we ran the child care – all these things. So what happened in that storm did not impact us. It impacted our staff – some people could not get to work – so some things we could not run all the time, but we were there. We have been providing this support for years.

I appreciate that the Emerald Village committee has got involved in this. The community house has been on the council's municipal emergency relief and recovery committee since 2019, attending meetings. I have never seen anybody from Emerald other than the emergency services attend those meetings. Now everybody is kind of waking up, because we have had three storms in a row. We lost power for a week and we lost communications, so we need to teach people how to get by without it. We ran a WeatherSmarts forum for two years at the community house, which brought speakers to the community house, including people from the NBN, people from the council and people from emergency services like the SES and CFA, to talk about how climate change is making their job harder. They were not there to tell everybody what they needed to do; they just talked about how they could not get volunteers and 'Gee, we're having fire at night' and the power – all these things.

We polled the people about the information that they knew and what they learned, and without a doubt – and we have seen this impact, it is fantastic, in the last 18 months – they all said, 'We need to get a generator.' We saw the results of what happened in the storms in June 2021 and October 2021 – that was the cup weekend, where council actually asked us to open because they could not get anybody to work at the hub to support the community. They wanted us to man that and run that, because we have to understand council have people who are employees. They have OH&S requirements. The community does not have any OH&S requirements, right, so the community does what the community needs to do. So they asked us to run support showers and all that stuff, because they could not get anybody on the four-day weekend holiday.

What happened after those two storms, especially after the June one, and this was really noticed – even though Emerald had a bigger impact from that storm in October, it was more Kilsyth and all that in June; we had impact but not like there – was the lines to the petrol station to get fuel for their generator went down the street. That is a first. Thank God Barney had a generator to run the petrol station. That is a single point of failure right there. You can support the whole community if you just make sure that the petrol station gets a generator. So we applied for a generator through a capital works grant to put on a trailer so we could use it for our three buildings and then go down and help Barney keep the petrol station going, because if we cannot get any fuel, then we do not have any generation, right? He is a community guy. He kept it open for 8 hours. It had to be cash, no EFTPOS. The council said, 'No, no. You can't have a generator on a trailer' – not like the medical centre next door that gets one in every time it has a power outage. So we have established in Emerald a solar off-grid area between the community house, the medical centre – the largest medical centre up here – and a building behind the Commonwealth Bank, which we lease, that belongs to the bank. The bank is a pretty good partner to be working with. We are not using businesses in this relationship. We should be talking about the Holy Trinity, which is the community, the government and businesses.

We could do a whole lot more if we were to have grants that say, 'Let's have the community and let's have business and let's have the government all play a role.' It is in their interest. If their EFTPOS cannot work because they have not got any power and they have got to close their bank because their security system does not work and they have got to have police stand out the front for three days until they can get a generator, and right behind them we are running a community grocery that is totally off grid, we are saying, 'What power outage? Sure, come in and get your food. We'll charge your devices for you too,' because we are here. We put a power point outside our building so people can come and charge any time they want. This is the kind of stuff that needs to be invested in.

We talk about case studies. My colleagues Frank and Caroline are here from the Monash University disaster resilience initiative. It has been running since 2009, since those fires. That is how I got involved. I did not know anything about this stuff. I was working at the community house; I needed child care. We started to learn what was happening to everybody and what we need to do to get ready. We need to help people get ready. We need to help them learn how to take care of themselves. People who go camping did not have such trouble up here

when the power was out. They had all their stuff. They have got their trailer and they have got their cooking equipment. I am glad that the village committee is involved, but the village committee represents the village committee. They have never come to us and talked to us, despite us being involved for 15 years.

The CHAIR: Ms Farrow, I am just conscious that members have got questions. If you can bring your statement to a conclusion.

Mary FARROW: Right. Okay. The last thing I will say is that now that we have put all this infrastructure in place in our council-leased buildings they have not extended our lease, after being there for 47 years. So that is the end of community provision for that, unless we take our Tesla battery out and put it somewhere else.

The CHAIR: Ms Farrow, obviously there is a range of issues we could canvass with respect to community resilience, but we are trying to focus this inquiry on the built environment, because it is in our terms of reference. Based on your experience in and around this community, as an example of a community that has been affected continuously by disaster events over many years, what do you think the biggest pieces of infrastructure are that the community relies on the most to get through those times, and how well do you think that the maintenance of those pieces of critical infrastructure has been done by the level of government or the organisations that are responsible for them? So what is most critical and how well do you think it has been maintained?

Mary FARROW: Funnily enough, the social media is surpassing the power, even though they do not realise that you kind of need one to have the other. People go crazy because their internet is down. I think that we are not educating people on what they need to do, how to get by without social media to find out what everybody else is doing, because that is all that is happening on social media – no real value added. Within neighbourhoods we find this.

There is so much research out there you guys could bury yourselves in already on all of this stuff. In communities, in the neighbourhoods, if somebody has got solar and a battery back-up or they have got power or they have got a generator, they help each other. We put in a request for a grant to the state government about four years ago, with Monash and with the Commonwealth Bank – all these different groups were involved – to build on that infrastructure, to make sure that in areas of risk there were homes where if they have got solar or if they have got a battery, they will help support each other in their local area. If the trees are all down, how are they going to get to their community battery in town? They cannot get here. So help them survive where they are, and it does not take long – it is not an eternity – to when the roads get cleared. The SES is amazing. But our expectations that we are going to have everything all at once – we need to lower that expectation. I looked at the submissions, and they are all about ‘We need more money to put more stuff in.’ Nobody is going to be able to get to town to use the town generator until the road gets cleared, so how do they survive at home? We need that kind of guidance and to encourage them. More people are getting generators, which has helped reduce the need. It is about getting the need off the list.

I think that needs to be more of the focus. I know it is difficult politically because everybody wants the government to fix everything. We are going the wrong direction if we do that, so we need to be creative about where do we put those sources, because people in those neighbourhoods will help each other. It happens. It happened in Kinglake. They all talk about it. Let us encourage that, not so much ‘everything comes into town and we want you to pay for everything’. Those grants that we got took us years to get solar battery, generators, years, and they did not come on resilience grants; they came on a food grant or this grant or whatever grant. We were able to keep our fridges going that had food in them for six days without power. That means food for people, so it is addressing what actually happened when this happens.

I encourage the committee to really think very carefully. You are at a fork in the road, and if we do not help people to survive where they are in place, then you are making a rod for your back, because the expectation now has gone through the roof. A whole bunch of people did move up here during COVID and started working at home. Imagine, ‘I am out of power for overnight.’ They have got no imagination about, ‘What do I do? I haven’t got this. I can’t do this.’ We have made people do this. They have got to have it everywhere, wherever they go. If they have got 5 seconds, they have got to have it. If they do not have it, the dopamine, it makes them nervous and makes them more crazy. We need to teach people how to get by.

The CHAIR: Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERSHANK: Thank you for your presentation and attending today. Could I just ask you: in the document you provided you talked about –

Mary FARROW: I did not provide a document; I did not do a submission.

David ETTERSHANK: I see there was no submission. There is a reference here to Neighbourhood House Victoria's establishment of a community resilience task group. Could you elaborate a little bit on what that is?

Mary FARROW: They have not involved us. We drove the resilience initiative since 2011 to the neighbourhood house, and Neighbourhood House Victoria only got involved in the last few years because of the disasters now that we are seeing and that their neighbourhood houses are getting dragged into it. Do you know what I mean? They are out there supporting people because they are in the neighbourhoods, they are in the communities, so Neighbourhood House Victoria thought, 'Maybe we need to try to get some funding for this.' There has been no funding established for neighbourhood houses to do this work at all, and I have even drawn that comment to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, which provides funding for the neighbourhood houses. They do not mind giving money after the event. You know how it is: it is all right after the event – 'We can give \$10,000 to clean up whatever happened or take care of all the stuff that got donated to you.' But nobody wants to invest up-front. We put our money – our own money, I might add; it is not all grants from us – a lot of our own money where our mouth is to create an environment where we can keep going no matter what. That is a business continuity philosophy, but it is a community environment.

That is really where your investment, the small amount of money that we got from grants – and I am not talking about a lot of money, what we built at the community house – has made a huge difference to people. You talk about how to involve the kids. We have got families with children. We have got single women with children, a pop-up vulnerable group, coming to our child care every day. What do they learn? They learned that this Thursday is going to be an extreme fire event day. We are going to be closed on that day. We are not going to be open if it is a heat event. We talk about air conditioning and all that kind of stuff. You have got to be open. You got to have power. The first thing that happens here – storm, fire; I do not care what it is – power goes out. We need to teach people how to get by without that instead of saying, 'We're going to put it all underground.' That is not ever going to happen everywhere, and to talk about that is ridiculous, because you cannot go everywhere. My power on my street – I live 6 kilometres from here – runs through the street on the telephone pole, and then it goes underground to my house. I do not worry about being out of power now; I have got a generator, and I have got a can of Start Ya Bastard. I do not know if you know anything about that stuff, but if you leave your generator sitting for six months and do not use it, you have got to have Start Ya Bastard. They will all tell you about that. It made me laugh, such an Australian – that is the name of it. But give that out to everybody in Victoria if you want to make everybody more resilient.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much. We hear a lot about strategies and research. You say we need to teach people to become more self-sufficient. What do you teach them? Where do you start?

Mary FARROW: Well, the good example for us was the climate program that we run, the weather smarts program, because we taught them how hard it is for the people they are relying on. We had somebody up here from emergency management from council, right? The best thing she said, and she had the courage to say it, was, 'You know what? We're not going to get up here for three days. We're not going to be able to get up here.' I mean, what a great, you know –

Melina BATH: Enabler.

Mary FARROW: Yes, right. So people are going, 'Oh, I didn't even know council was involved in disasters,' so that is important because the pressure that goes on those people in the emergency management for the council to have to be everything, everywhere – the hub is not open. Even if they have power, they are not open all day long and all night long when people need it.

Gaelle BROAD: So if a household knows no-one is coming – a disaster has happened – what do they need to do to prepare?

Mary FARROW: They need a generator. They need to know what to put on that generator. So many people had generators, and they threw all their food out and then they complained that they did not get the \$1000 because their power was not out for eight days. This was on social media. And I think, 'You had a generator; what did you throw your food out for?' Teach them food safety, what can last in the freezer, all those kinds of things, those real practical things that do appear on social media, but social media is becoming so nasty now people start saying, to start with, 'Look, don't everybody start hammering me before I make this suggestion'. It is full of that. It is just a nasty place to be. So that aggro that happens in the communities – a disaster happens and then everybody is working together and it is great, and then all of a sudden it starts falling apart. The wheels start falling off the wagons, and 'Who's not getting what' and 'I didn't get my \$1000', and that is really destructive. The stories about that are real. We have that evidence. Do a case study on that. What do people do to get by when they have not got power? We did a link with Kinglake once when they had a big windstorm up there and we were having it too. We still had the internet. So we said, 'Hey, Kinglake,' because we have done a lot of work with them, 'So what are you doing?' People start saying, 'Well, I'm doing this, I'm doing that,' and one person wrote to me and did a private message that, 'I'd like to tell everybody what I'm doing, but I don't want to get hit with, "Oh, you're just a show-off."' You put the stuff in place.

Gaelle BROAD: So do you think it is up to individual households, or do you think there is a role for a community facility such as yours for people to come to?

Mary FARROW: Well, there are roles for that. That is an important aspect. Like I said, what happens in town – towns are very important. If you wipe the town out, if Emerald gets wiped out, then that is the end of it, because it is very much and it has always been a central business area. You need that so people can recover.

Gaelle BROAD: And what do you think the role of the SES is in being able to inform people –

Mary FARROW: Clear the roads. Not to do everything – they are not the insurance make safe. I swear to God, they get called to do all this. We should have – what do you call it when you put a fee on insurance that says, 'Okay, this amount of money is going to go to the SES because they're the insurance make safe up here'? The pressure is on them to come and get the wood out of the driveway. Let us make sure everybody has got a chainsaw, or let us make sure they can get one, you know – we can have community chainsaws, have equipment so that people actually get on with this.

In fact after the storm in June, there was an SES person and a CFA person who got together as individuals, not as part of those organisations, and they set up a chainsaw group where people could come and help people. And they went around and they started clearing people's properties, because insurance does not cover it unless it hits your house or it hits your fence. You are stuck with that tree, and then they are thinking about, 'Okay, fire, disasters, we've got to get rid of this before summer', so they went around for several weeks – fantastic effort. That is documented on Facebook – just go around and just let people know if you could not use a chainsaw, you could come and help drag the stuff out of the way, and people came out of the woodwork, as they do. As they do in Wye River and all these disasters, they come out and they do it, so capitalise on that. Help people do that. But then help people stand on their own – if we had everybody who had COVID go to the hospital, where would we have been? Wasn't that the message? 'Don't come to the hospital. Let's reduce that need list so the people who really have needs get attention,' and others who can actually do something for themselves – we are teaching them that they cannot do anything for themselves without power or Facebook. That is what we are teaching.

The CHAIR: Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Thank you very much for your presentation. You seem like a person who is very self-motivated and gets on with the job, which is what we need in community. And yes, we do all need to take more responsibility for ourselves. There are a number of plans. The council would have an emergency management plan. The SES put out quite detailed documents for people on what to do in an emergency. I just wondered if you had thought, through the neighbourhood house, of calling together all those organisations that have these plans and saying, 'Let's produce this document which actually prepares people and tells them what to have in advance of an emergency.'

Mary FARROW: Well, there is a plethora of information out there. Even the AusNet paperwork that comes through and says your power is going to be out next week because they are going to do something – on the

back it always has this fantastic information about what you should do without power. I do not think anybody ever turns it over. We photograph that and put it up on our Facebook. When we know the weather is coming, we just say one thing: charge your rechargeables. Everybody knows what that means. We do not go, 'Oh, the weather – here's the thing.' We just say, 'Charge your rechargeables,' because people do not do that either.

Emerald is falling over itself with community groups; we have every possible thing. I have said this for years: if every one of those community groups had to take a position to support the community in some way – I do not care what it is, whether the footy club at least open their showers and let people use them, not just, 'Oh, it's the footy club's showers, a council building.' If they were to put that into their constitution or their policies – to help people who are displaced by disruptive events is one of our principles in our constitution. It does not matter where I go, it is what we stand by.

Wendy LOVELL: It just needs somebody to coordinate that and somebody to start it by calling a meeting.

Mary FARROW: Yes. And these committees change – you know, next year the tennis club will have all new people. All those people who are on the village committee will not be there in two years; it is all new faces now. And then people are taking an interest because we have had a storm – okay, but then councils move on. It is all transient, a revolving door. You need to have investment. These communities have all these community groups, and there are lots of them. Every time you put out a grant, you say, 'How is this money that you are asking for going to help your community be more resilient?' And they will go, 'If we need a generator, then maybe we put in that box that we'll be open to helping people in a disaster.' Let them say that, let them commit to that, because that commitment is a floating, invisible thing. We have taken that stand to do it. And we close at the end of the year because council are going to take our buildings, after us completing all of this infrastructure – unless we can get somebody to take the Tesla battery out and we put it in our other building, which belongs to the bank. It is outrageous. Okay, we will deal with that.

This is a frustrated, angry community, but it also wants things to happen. Everybody wants to do everything, and it is very competitive – you know, who gets the grant? When you put grants out and say the council can apply for this or the community can apply for it if they are in a council building, do you think I am going to get a letter of support from the council when they are going to apply for that grant and they want to put their stuff somewhere else? No, I am not going to; I do not care what we have done. There are a lot of politics involved in this. It is very hurtful, okay, very hurtful in communities. Lots have suffered before us – lots of research done on this. There is a research project called *We Just Want to Help* – I encourage you to look it up – written by Fiona Roberts. Look that up – community groups trying to get involved in these things and the obstruction. We have had nothing but it, but that is why we are so feisty. Of course I am from Berkeley, California, so I would be feisty. But I have been here for 25 years. I come from an IT background as an IT executive, from the tools all the way up to consulting governments, consulting the US government Department of Defense and NASA, so I know about power outages and I know about redundancies. It is always about 'We need to make everything redundant. We need to have everything running all the time.' Until you give them the price, and then all of a sudden it is 'Okay, we can't do that. What can we do?'

The CHAIR: Ms Farrow, we are at the conclusion of our time for the session. Thank you very much for coming in and being so animated and passionate about –

Mary FARROW: Kept you awake!

The CHAIR: absolutely – these important issues.

Mary FARROW: Thank you for inviting me. I did not put a submission in because I thought, 'Let's hear from somebody else.' I put one in for the other one earlier.

The CHAIR: That is all right. You will receive a copy of the transcript to review in the coming weeks. With that we are just going to break for lunch.

Witness

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