

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

WITNESSES

Frank Archer,

Caroline Spencer,

Trevor Budge, and

Kate Forster.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee Inquiry into Climate Resilience here in Victoria. We are now moving to an open mic session, a practice the committee has done a few times when out in communities. When people have been in the audience listening to our proceedings over the course of the day, we provide an opportunity for members of the community to make short statements – not under questioning, so to speak, but just to give us their perspectives. People will get about 3 or 4 minutes each.

I will read out this statement again. All the evidence that we take, all the statements that are made, are protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* and under the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore all the statements that are made are protected by law. People who make statements are also protected against any action for what is said during the hearing, but if they go elsewhere and say the same things, those comments may not be protected. Any statements that contain deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

Obviously everything is being recorded, and people who make statements will be provided with a transcript following the hearing.

People probably know who we are, but we will just do introductions one last time. Ryan Batchelor, Member for Southern Metropolitan, Chair of this committee.

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

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Jacinta ERMACORA: And Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria.

The CHAIR: We are inviting people to make a contribution. People will be able to take it in turns. We ask, for the Hansard record, that you state your full name and whether you are appearing in a personal capacity or on behalf of an organisation, and then we will just hand it over to you to speak for about 3 to 4 minutes. Then we will wrap it up.

Frank ARCHER: With permission, I am going first.

The CHAIR: Okay. It is always important to have permission. Over to you, Frank.

Frank ARCHER: With apologies for my voice. I hope that is going to be okay.

The CHAIR: As long as you speak into the microphone, it will be fine.

Frank ARCHER: Firstly, thank you for this opportunity to have this forum here in the community. It has been a very well structured and very valuable exercise, at least from us as community members. We are here this afternoon as community representatives.

One of my aims this afternoon is to get Upper Beaconsfield on the map. We are from Upper Beaconsfield, or just a little community off Upper Beaconsfield. Of recent times, particularly with the storms, it was page 82 of the review of the storms before Upper Beaconsfield was mentioned, yet we had people without power for days – a couple for weeks – so we were certainly significantly affected by that. At least I have got Upper

Beaconsfield mentioned. These are just some notes that I put together a short time ago; we did not anticipate speaking, so we are grateful for that opportunity.

One of you – I think it was Gaelle – mentioned the vulnerable persons register. This was also something featured in the storm review report as being a problem, in there being multiple levels. I could just add to your reflections that this was something picked up in the Victorian royal commission following the 2009 fires. It was given to an agency to develop, and in essence it became too hard and they just were not able to flow it through. Now, I do know that vulnerable persons registers do exist. Out there we have a friend who is an older person who lives in country Victoria, and she has very good, strong support from a vulnerable persons register. I would just encourage you to flow it through and work it out, because it has been identified in this recent storm. I also, Mr Chair, need to just reiterate on your introduction: I am here as a community member, not representing any organisation, although I do have professional interests.

The second thing is that one of the things that I would put to you in reflecting on today is there has been not a lot of mention of people. The community gets mentioned – people doing this, people helping, people talking about the CFA, for example – but there has not been a lot of mention of people. This is probably related to your terms of reference, but I would ask you to, even at this stage of your development, do some thinking about restructuring the concept of infrastructure so that you are talking about the infrastructure of people, because it is people who use the infrastructure, it is people who are affected by the infrastructure. It is not the infrastructure per se; it is the people who are affected by the infrastructure, and it would be nice to have that reflected.

One of the things that I will offer with respect to the recent storms, the February storms, is that both Caroline and I came up here to Emerald from Upper Beaconsfield – it is only 15 minutes away – as community members in part because of our professional interests, and the key fundamental observation we made was: people did not know what to do. They did not know where to go. They did not know how to do it. For example, at a very base level, as Rachelle said before, the fundamental relief and recovery centre was down at the football oval in the football pavilion there, whereas most people would have thought it was up at the community centre hub, the Hills Hub. So not only did people not know where to go, they did not know what to ask. They did not know what was available.

The Cardinia council put on an outstanding relief and recovery centre at both Cockatoo and here. Here in Emerald they had a range of resources. They engaged very strongly with the people who came to them to ask questions, and the following week they then hopped in their vehicles and they went to each of the communities and spent a day in each of the communities to engage at a community level. We have done follow-up with that. The people who engaged on that and the community council people themselves felt that was very strong and very valuable, but they had to get out and do it. It was a matter of resources. They did not have the resources to adequately respond on those first couple of days.

The CHAIR: Yes. If you could just get to the conclusion. Thanks, Frank.

Frank ARCHER: Yes, sure. Okay, I have just got two more points. Thank you. The second flow-on from that was in the submission from the late Professor Douglas Paton in his response to the 2009 royal commission following the bushfires. He said that the CFA and other agencies gave valuable, well-resourced, clear information to the community, but the community did not know what to do with it. Secondly, the community had no way of impacting back to the central structure to influence that communication or to provide feedback, so there needs to be, I think, fundamentally some capacity for this two-way exchange. It is not just providing information. Information to people does not lead to change. We need to provide information and the support to enable behaviour change. It is that behaviour change that I think the CFA and the SES have done well in previous years in terms of the fire guard program, which Caroline will speak about in a minute, but we need to put this more formally in place.

Perhaps there is capacity for you to have a look at the health system, because in the health system each of the major health agencies, like the Alfred hospital and the various public health agencies, has to have a range of community consultation committees. It would be useful for the headquarters of EMV and for the headquarters of CFA to have a community council so that this program, which you are going through here with us today, can be right at the centre of the exercise.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Frank. We do need to move through.

Frank ARCHER: That is it; I will sign off just there. Thank you for your tolerance.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Caroline.

Caroline SPENCER: Okay. Thank you. My name is Caroline Spencer. I am a resident of Guys Hill, which is just down from Upper Beaconsfield. I lead our local fire guard. I am the previous past president of the Upper Beaconsfield Association, and I am also a retired academic. I do not promise any answers.

I will quickly talk about the fire guard first. We moved into Guys Hill, which went through Ash Wednesday, and at that time we had a fire guard that was very active with what I call the old guard, the people who lived through Ash Wednesday. We did not live through that, but the new people that have moved in have completely lost interest. In terms of providing infrastructure, I think there needs to be infrastructure to support some of these community initiatives. The fire guard is actually part of the CFA. I am not quite sure how it is funded. There seems to be very little interest. There needs to be something that I think tries to engage the community a little bit more, because we have got probably zero engagement now, whereas when we had the people who had experienced the fire we had probably 90 per cent engagement. I do not propose to light a fire to get that engagement, but it seems it is when people have storms and when people have fires that we get that engagement. It is also about I think understanding that risk.

When I was working as an academic we actually ran forums for the community about building community resilience, and this was statewide. We had, I think, close to 40 initiatives that were eventually put into the compendium. One of the things that we noticed about that is that there is an awful lot of money that goes into providing funding to communities to build their initiatives, but once that funding is gone they fall over – they are not sustainable. So sustainability of community initiatives, I think, is something else that needs to be looked at.

One of those really great initiatives was Be Ready Warrandyte. You probably cannot even find it on the web now. Another one was Whittlesea. Whittlesea got very interested after the 09 fires and put together a great program that included Craig Lapsley, the commissioner at that point in time. He was very supportive. That is sitting on a bookshelf somewhere gathering dust.

In my own experience, we had funding, probably about four years ago, to put together a bushfire and biodiversity tool. You can have a look at it online. We worked with Cardinia CFA, the council, DEECA, community conservation groups, Monash University and also Melbourne University to put together the tool. We surveyed our community. We actually got a better response than the council, which we were pretty chuffed about. It was not by much, but we beat them by a little bit. We actually had put together an online tool to help local community to understand their risk and what they could do to balance between biodiversity and fire, because we cannot chop down of all the trees; we need the trees for our own biodiversity.

One of the solutions I actually see for this is the Landcare model. Landcare has – I will call them Landcare officers, but what I am thinking of is a resilience officer that works through a community house. We have been some great advocates for the community houses across the state. They are a great avenue for these sorts of programs. In my view, it needs to be a paid position because the community are not funded to do this work. We talk about shared responsibility, but it is not shared. The cost is not shared. An awful lot of energy is being put onto the community to step up and do stuff, but there is no funding for them to do that. So I think having resilience officers in community houses or neighbourhood houses would be one way to try and develop the interest and also to engage community in these important issues to try and create some sort of energy to overcome some of the climate resilience issues that we are facing in the future.

Just two quick points, the builder was talking about people moving into new areas. We have seen that in our area – the street has completely changed, completely turned over. They move in, build up their high fences and take all the bushes away. Talking about education, the real estate agents are the people who sell the houses. They could provide people with education – that avenue or pathway – where it could lead them to that sort of information.

The last point is having a national resilience day. New Zealand has – I think they call it a national ShakeOut day for earthquakes. We could have a national resilience day where we build resilience for our communities.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks very much, Caroline. I will invite our next speaker up.

Kate FORSTER: Thanks for this second opportunity.

The CHAIR: If you could for the record just state your name, and then the 4 minutes is yours.

Kate FORSTER: Sure. I am Kate Forster. I am a long-term resident of Emerald. My career has mostly been in the children's services field. I have got a fairly recent bachelor of adult education and development, which I think is relevant to some of these issues, and I am also an active advocate on air pollution, particularly focused around the serious risk of smoke to our community, which is mostly unaware of really what the issues are. And I am also a self-appointed telecommunications advocate.

Let me see if I can whizz through. When I was told eight or so years ago that I would have to transfer to the NBN and I had no mobile reception at home, I was very concerned that I would lose what Telstra had set up, which was, as I said earlier, a reliable service regardless of whether power was down or up. You just required the exchange to be functioning, and it was set up to do that. So I just want to point out this issue – we get this polarisation of 'We can't afford to put lines under the ground.' I do not think it is an all-or-nothing situation. Really what we need to do is look for where the vulnerabilities are and focus on them.

In my street, above my property – it is up the hill – there are very tall trees, eucalypts that drop branches and might even fall over. The power company have bundled the line there, so it is much safer. And NBN: after nine months I finally got a manager up who could see sense – and my neighbour with a telecommunications licence pointed out that Telstra had set it up to be put underground; they just had not done it – and he agreed that he would break NBN's policy of only fixing to the current standard and put it underground, because he could see they would be back. And that is what happened. That line would have been damaged as it was further down where they had not done this, under the tall trees. But that line was intact and ready to go once the power came back on, and the cost to them in the end I am sure is going to be less. This is part of the community's frustration at times: that we see so much patching up and poor-quality work done, and then it is costing more down the track.

Our area is on the worst performing feeder for power in our district, so let us find the key vulnerabilities of the line coming in. Okay, in our little street, if a tree comes down there, I do not see that as a priority over a feeder bringing in a whole lot of power to many, many houses. But clearly there are vulnerabilities that need to be addressed, and our community experts are saying, 'Some of this can go underground.'

Just on a positive note, we have reached out to NBN and a change of personnel, and now we have connected with Nicole Blackwell, national emergency integration manager, stakeholder relations, corporate affairs. She grew up fairly locally and really understands and is very keen to meet with us and draw in the telecommunications companies that she has good connection with, because we have not really been able to connect with them. There is the Menzies Creek tower funded under the PUMP, peri-urban mobile program funding, and that is stalled at the moment, partly because the consultant did not have the full information needed – and the community did. But as the communication department in Canberra told me, you will not get mobile towers up unless you have the local MP, the council, the community and the telcos and their contractors all working together. We are seeing that evident: there have been another couple of towers knocked back recently. This issue of black spots is very serious, particularly when NBN can be so unreliable, linked to all of those power issues. So this interdependency is crucial. Can I just race on?

The CHAIR: Very quickly. Do you particularly want to make a point about smoke?

Kate FORSTER: Smoke – I did, yes.

The CHAIR: Let us get that done.

Kate FORSTER: So very, very briefly, there is no safe level of exposure to smoke. It is harmful. It is a silent killer. Deaths from air pollution in Australia are much higher than people realise. In Black Summer we had 34 deaths from the fires, but the experts have estimated that there were 445 deaths from the smoke, many of those people kilometres and kilometres away. This is because it gets into the cardiovascular system. It spreads throughout the body and is causal for cardiovascular disease but also triggers strokes and heart attacks. Most of those deaths were from strokes and heart attacks. That is never put on a death certificate. There is one death certificate in the world, because it was reviewed by the coroner in London, for a small child who died and

it was linked to air pollution. So this is a silent killer that is being ignored, and it is not just about dense smoke – it is any level and the impacts are cumulative.

Briefly, I just wanted to very, very quickly mention that complacency has been mentioned a number of times. I think the word ‘disengagement’ needs to be mentioned too. Personally the cry wolf – I recognise year after year is, ‘Oh, it’s going to be a bad year’ and you back off from that. But there is also a very strong aspect of emotional avoidance and wilful blindness by authorities. You can refer to Margaret Heffernan’s research into wilful blindness. In particular, rather than complaining that people are not reading the literature and so on, we could benefit from the behavioural psychology insights that are available now for effective approaches, and Dan Ariely is an easy way to start to understand that. Finally –

The CHAIR: A last ‘finally’.

Kate FORSTER: I submitted to the inquiry into air pollution – a submission – and was asked to give evidence. It was the same committee but in the previous government’s term. That committee reported on 18 November 2021. The government response was required by 18 May following that. This response is now 28 months late, and when I asked a professor of law at Melbourne Uni on a webinar about government ethical behaviour, she said this is illegal. It is disrespectful to Parliament and it is disrespectful to the community. I am hoping that this committee can get a prompt response from the government that actually means action rather than it sitting there. We have seen this so many times that reports are done – Black Saturday, Black Summer. CSIRO told me this: ‘We do the research and then it all gets forgotten.’

The CHAIR: All right. Thanks, Kate. We need to let other people have their say too. Trevor.

Trevor BUDGE: Thank you very much, and I will be very quick. I know time is pressing. We have heard a lot from older people today generally and I wanted to share something that has been said a number of times in the Emerald Village Association. Why are we doing all this? I think we can sum it up by saying we are doing it because we are doing it for our grandchildren and their children. We do not want them saying in 50 years time ‘What did our grandparents do that got us into this mess?’ and ‘What didn’t they do to get us out of this mess?’ I am sure that everybody who has turned up here has got that either front and centre or it is certainly driving them.

Can I make two other quick points. I think if we sum up what we have heard today, and I do not think these are any great insights, the reality is that what we have heard is we have got all these great systems and every one of these systems is only as good as the weakest point. More so, what we are finding is that the weak points are actually complete gaps that emerge. Almost nothing has to happen and all of a sudden the whole system breaks down. We are not talking about resilient systems, we are talking about systems which are almost bound to fail because there are so many weak points, there are so many opportunities for gaps to emerge and the thing just completely collapses. The link between telecommunications and power is a classic example of that.

I think it was the Chair asked when we gave our evidence, and we will follow up with a detailed submission on this, that if we were to adopt a case study approach, what would be the advantages. I was trying to think on the fly at the time, but I have had a chance to think a bit more about that. So I think these are the advantages of a case study approach. I think it personalises the report and it has a lot more impact if it is personalised. I think some of the evidence you have heard this afternoon, particularly from Monbulk and the CFA and so on, has really driven that home.

Secondly, it gives everyone an opportunity to share information and findings from other communities, and that is the way we all learn, by sharing that information. Thirdly, I think it reinforces the common elements but also shows how each community is different. There is a lot of commonality, but in fact one of the messages we have to get across, and I think it is coming across, is that every community is different. Not only is every community different, but each event is different. Events are different between fire and flood and storm, and everyone’s experience is different, but everyone has got something to learn from each other. I think the other thing it does is that it actually encourages further collaboration, because you realise what you can share with others, and certainly we have learned that.

I think the last point I would make about the advantages of a case study approach is that people relate to stories, they really do. I have seen lots of government reports, and by the time you get to page 50 the eyes are glazing, but it is when you read the stories about what has happened to people – and we want the communities to read

these stories and we want the community associations like ourselves to draw upon them, and I think we can do that. We will follow up with a supplementary submission pointing out this. I mean, it is obviously your choice what you do.

Can I just tell you one very quick story, which I think emphasises the problems we have got. Not the house that we live in now but at the house we were living in a couple of years ago, in that June 2021 storm the guy behind us had 17 trees fall on his property, including one that went through part of the house. At 3 am in the morning the tree severed an artery in his son's arm, so he phoned the ambulance. We were about a kilometre away from the ambulance. The ambulance said, 'We can't come.' So what did he do? He had to jump on his farm buggy. He had 10 acres. He jumped on his farm buggy, with wire-cutters to cut his way through the fences – because he could not get out of his own drive because of the trees that were down – and managed to get his son up to the ambulance, which was fortunately able to then take him down to William Angliss.

That is the sort of situation that people were facing. It is a miracle that in that February event we did not have, one, a big fire – we have heard the issues there. If we had had a couple of deaths or had a couple of road accidents, we would have been talking about severe issues. We need to share those stories because we need to all learn from them. We will address that issue of case studies in a supplementary.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Thanks, Trevor. I appreciate it. I think that is it. With that, we will declare today's proceedings closed.

Committee adjourned.