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Our Ref: OUT23/3866

1 June 2023

Legislative Council – Environment and Planning Committee
c/o Ms Sonja Terpstra
Chair
Parliament House
Spring Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Ms Terpstra,

**MITCHELL SHIRE COUNCIL SUBMISSION – INQUIRY INTO THE 2022 FLOOD
EVENT IN VICTORIA**

Please find attached Mitchell Shire Council's submission to the *Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria*.

Seymour was the first major town to be impacted by the October 2022 flood event. Ultimately over 250 homes and business were flooded above floor level.

Mitchell Shire Council and the Seymour community are greatly appreciative of the support and assistance received during the event, much of which is still ongoing as we progress through the recovery phase.

Whilst the assistance received was greatly beneficial there were a series of issues and challenges which require urgent consideration and remediation. Council have identified 35 recommendations, which if implemented would ensure that the response to, and recovery from future disasters does not suffer the same challenges as confronted communities during the 2022 flood event.

Mitchell Shire Council has been proactive in the wake of the floods, developing a Flood Recovery Plan to acknowledge the devastation, provide information about governance arrangements, and set out objectives and actions to be undertaken in the immediate, short, medium, and longer term. It is Council's expectation that the State Government will undertake similar actions to assess, consider, and prepare for future events.

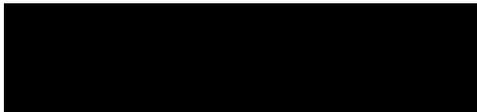
Mitchell Shire Council Submission to the *Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria*

With the impacts of Climate Change becoming ever more significant the frequency and severity of events like the 2022 floods are projected to increase. It is more imperative than ever that all agencies and levels of government undertake honest reflective practice and commit to genuine and effective change in the best interest of current and future communities.

Mitchell Shire Council's aim is to create and maintain sustainable, safe, connected and healthy communities. We hope that the Committee will carefully consider our submission and recommendations when developing your report into the handling of the 2022 flood event.

Mitchell Shire Council would be happy to present to the Committee to expand upon any of the recommendations, or any other elements of the submission. To make a time please contact Juliana Hummerston on (03) 5734 6201.

Your Sincerely,

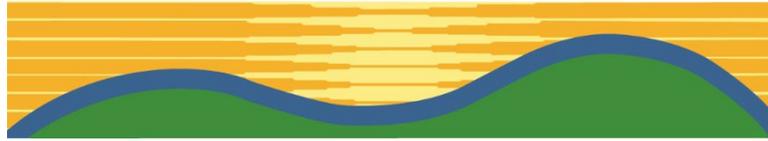


CR FIONA STEVENS

MAYOR

cc Hon Wendy Lovell MP
Samantha Ratnam MP
Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell MP
Sheena Watt MP

MITCHELL SHIRE COUNCIL



Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event

MITCHELL SHIRE COUNCIL SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE 2022 FLOOD EVENT IN VICTORIA

Please find below Mitchell Shire Council's Submission to the *Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria*. Whilst all agencies and levels of government deserve acknowledgement for the significant response and recovery effort, there are substantial areas for improvement to ensure that communities are more resilient to future events.

Mitchell Shire Council's Submission highlights 35 recommendations which should be carefully considered. If implemented, these recommendations would support the State Government and other agencies to be in a stronger position to respond to or mitigate future events.

BACKGROUND

- [1] Seymour was the first major town to experience flooding in October 2022, that saw the Goulburn River rise to 8.26 meters during between the 13 and 14 of October 2022. This resulted in over 250 homes and business receiving over floor flooding. Many other properties received inundation, impacting shedding, fencing and agriculture.
- [2] The township of Seymour within Mitchell Shire Council is located at the junction of Hume and Goulburn Valley Highways approximately 100km north of Melbourne. Seymour is home to 6,569 residents, as of 2021, and is expected to grow to 12,277 residents by 2041.
- [3] Seymour is the primary regional town, supporting a broader region with a catchment closer to 50,000 people. As a true regional hub, Seymour is home to significant transport, economic, and limited community services.
- [4] Despite functioning as the primary regional town, Seymour and its community faces significant intergenerational disadvantage. Seymour has an Index of Relative Disadvantage ("IRSD") score of 901.7, placing it in the bottom 10% of townships nation-wide. Significantly, some areas of Seymour display even higher levels of disadvantage with one area located in the centre of town recording an IRSD of 706, placing it in the bottom 2% of localities nationally.
- [5] The challenges of disadvantage in Seymour are further evidenced through a range of indicators and measures showing that Seymour has:

- a. Higher proportion of low-income earners (36.4%) than high income earners (4.9%), compared with 32.1% and 13.7% respectively for Greater Melbourne;¹
- b. Lower education attainment with only 35.8% of people having completed year 12 or equivalent, compared to 64.3% for Greater Melbourne;
- c. High levels of Youth disengagement with 14.7% of 15 to 24-year-olds in Seymour were disengaged with employment and education, compared to 7% in Greater Melbourne;
- d. High rates of social housing in Seymour 7.9%, compared to 2.3% in Greater Melbourne; and
- e. A family violence rate more than three times the Victorian State average at 4,125 incidents per 100,000 people.²

[6] Seymour has been identified in a number of consecutive *Dropping Off The Edge* reports. In 2021 Seymour was identified as a tier 2 disadvantaged township, with the township sitting in the bottom quintile across 20 of the 35 indicators measured.

[7] The harsh reality is natural disasters compound mental health and associated disadvantage, and following the October 2022 floods a further decline in these already alarming statistics is therefore anticipated.

[8] Seymour has extensive flood history including 1906, 1916, 1917, 1921, 1934, 1952 and more recently 1973 and 1974, 1993 and 2010.

[9] In 2016, a fatality occurred in Seymour because of flash flooding of Whiteheads Creek.

[10] In addition to the 2022 flood, Mitchell Shire was impacted by the 2009 Black Saturday fires and the 2014 Mickleham-Kilmore fire.

[11] Seymour has a Victorian State Emergency Service (SES) unit, Country Fire Authority (CFA) brigade and is home to CFA District 12 headquarters and Incident Control Centre (ICC).

¹ (for data 'a' through 'd') .idcommunity, data from Census 2021.

² Crime Statistics Agency, data at the postcode level.

CHALLENGES PRIOR TO AND DURING THE EVENT

Warning and Predictions

- [12] Council received advice on Wednesday 12 October 2022, to anticipate moderate flooding (6.2m) in the afternoon of Saturday 15 October. In response to this, Council Officers and Victoria Police, in response to an SES request undertook doorknocking of the five properties that would receive over floor flooding at this river level height. In addition, on Wednesday 12 October 2022, Council staff conducted a further 65 phone calls to the properties that may be impacted by moderate flooding.
- [13] Council did not receive further advice regarding these predictions until early afternoon, Thursday 13 October 2022, when new predictions had the Goulburn River peaking in Seymour at 7.3 metres on 14 October 2022 (evening).
- [14] Over the course of the afternoon of Thursday 13 October 2022, variations to the predictions were made, which resulted in the Goulburn River peaking in Seymour at 8.26m between 13 and 14 October 2022.
- [15] The variation in these predictions saw a difference of roughly 250 properties receive over floor flooding that did not receive early advice referred to in paragraphs [11] and [12].
- [16] The importance of early warnings, particularly in Seymour, which was the first major town to experience flooding, is paramount.
- [17] Flood warning data obtained by Council indicates that major flood warnings were sent after properties had already been inundated. Council has heard many stories from residents confirming this. On some occasions no warning was received at all.
- [18] Seymour endured many days of flooding from the Goulburn River. Initially, large inflows into Goulburn River downstream of Eildon resulted in major flooding on 13 and 14 October, and subsequent releases from Lake Eildon

then maintained moderate flooding for a number of weeks following the initial devastation.

Recommendation

- I Review, upgrade and maintain all emergency warning systems with a particular focus on improving flood forecasting including through the roll out of additional flood gauges.

Failure to use local Incident Control Centre

[19] Floods by their very nature have a flow on effect downstream. In essence, whilst other communities downstream were preparing for and dealing with the flood, waters had receded within Seymour.

[20] District 12 CFA headquarters in Seymour is the designated Incident Control Centre (ICC) for Mitchell Shire. Throughout the entire October 2022 Flood event, Seymour ICC was not utilised.

[21] As Seymour was the first town to be substantially impacted by flooding, the focus on response to flooding north of Seymour quickly became the priority of the Shepparton ICC. Unfortunately, this happened to the detriment of Seymour and its residents

[22] Should the Seymour ICC have been stood up, a more tailored response to Seymour's needs could have been achieved.

[23] Exacerbating this issue, poor and outdated connectivity into the Shepparton ICC for agencies unable to attend resulted in inadequate lines of communications.

Recommendation

- II Ensure future activation of ICC's considers the predetermined ICC footprints.
- III Ensure that all ICC's have appropriate connectivity to enable agencies to attend remotely when required.

Transition from Response to Recovery

- [24] Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) undertook a “Real Time Monitoring Evaluation” project into the transition from Response to Recovery. The report, which was provided to the State Control Team, highlighted a series of issues, including the lack of localised ICCs, challenges, and impediments to the transition from response to recovery, and the failure to implement a timely transition.
- [25] As Seymour was the first area to be impacted by the floods, it should have been chronologically placed to commence recovery planning first, however this was not the case.
- [26] Due to the incident being managed out of the Shepparton ICC, where local flood impacts were still being experienced, the response phase remained the major priority.
- [27] For many weeks when Seymour needed to transition to the recovery phase the Shepparton ICC was focusing on assisting other towns to manage preparations for flood, resulting in delayed recovery opportunities for Mitchell Shire.

Recommendation

- IV For all events, particularly those which are widespread, ICCs need to be placed strategically to ensure the timeliness of transition to recovery. Placement of ICCs should not unnecessarily negatively impact the support given to communities.

Lake Eildon and its flood mitigation capabilities

- [28] Both prior to and after the October 2022 floods, there was community sentiment that Lake Eildon was not being effectively used to mitigate flood. It is understood that Lake Eildon is primarily an irrigation dam, however further consideration should be given for its flood mitigation capabilities in high flood risk seasons.

Recommendation

- V The Minister should recommend, in accordance with s159E of the *Water Act (Vic) 1989* that the Governor direct the relevant water corporation, in this situation Goulburn Murray Water, that Lake Eildon be held below 95% capacity for the remainder of 2023, or until relevant Parliamentary Inquiries are complete.

Deployment of Australian Defence Force Resources

[29] Seymour is located almost immediately adjacent to the Puckapunyal Military Area. This is an Australian Defence Force (ADF) training facility and base that is inhabited by approximately 280 ADF families. During certain times of the year, the number of ADF personnel can swell considerably. Many other ADF personnel live in Seymour on and off base and form part of the Seymour community.

[30] The ADF was integral in the early relief efforts for the Seymour community however given the proximity Seymour and Mitchell Shire Council has to the Puckapunyal Military Area there were significant opportunities for this support to occur quicker and more comprehensively.

[31] Response and short-term recovery require coordination, speed, and capacity. Whilst this was theoretically available through proximity to ADF support, unfortunately during the 2022 flood event in Seymour the opportunity was missed.

Recommendation

- VI Implement a streamlined approach between State and Federal Governments to improve the speed and scale of localised deployment of ADF in response to emergencies.

Potential Impact of State Government Caretaker Period

[32] The State Government caretaker conventions commenced on 1 November 2022; this was at a time in which key recovery commitments were required to be considered and implemented.

[33] Whilst it is too early to determine whether caretaker period impacted the timely shift into recovery, understanding any potential impact and ensuring that future emergency events are shielded from this challenge is essential.

Recommendation

VII A report is commissioned to consider the impact, including the potential for impact, from State Government caretaker conventions and to make recommendations to ensure that emergency disaster response and recovery is not impacted.

FUNDING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Resilience Infrastructure

[34] Building resilience to potential and future disaster events is one of the most impactful actions which can be taken to protect communities.

[35] Whilst the importance of resilience infrastructure is acknowledged by local communities and Councils the costs of construction is often incredibly prohibitive. Mitigating infrastructure, when appropriately designed and constructed, can have significant risk reduction benefits.

[36] The 2022 Victorian Flood event highlighted the vulnerability of the State's road network. Greater investment is required to ensure that the network is not impacted by future events to the extent which it was in 2022.

[37] Floodplain management strategies should not assign responsibilities to Councils to provide more engineered structures as solutions to mitigate flooding without acknowledging and addressing Councils' and communities' financial constraints and addressing the liability provisions in the *Water Act*.

[38] The 2022 review of the Floodplain Management Strategy assessed progress on identified actions. The review presented all 56 actions as complete or as part of BAU practice. While the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority does have a rolling program of flood studies for implementation, there is a backlog of completed flood studies that are yet to implemented via Planning Scheme Amendments.

- [39] The 2022 review noted that Action 13d (2) was being completed through \$30,000 grants available to Local Government to progress flood study outputs into Planning Scheme Amendments. Whilst this is a good initiative, the funding available is insufficient to support a streamlined Planning Scheme Amendment process.
- [40] After seven years of rate capping, there are real financial sustainability concerns for local government, which need to be acknowledged by the Parliamentary Committee. The most recent Council rate rise was capped by State Government at 3.5 percent, despite Essential Services Commission recommending 4 percent and the current CPI running at over 7 percent.
- [41] It has been demonstrated that funding spent on responding to disasters often dwarfs what is spent on prevention or mitigation.
- [42] It is imperative that the funding balance between mitigation and response is reassessed, and more funding is urgently made available to vulnerable communities to construct resilience building infrastructure.

Recommendation

- VIII Urgently identify alternative State and Federal funding opportunities for the development of resilience building infrastructure.
- IX Betterment funding, including for roads and drainage is required to ensure that infrastructure is less vulnerable to future events.
- X Increase funding and support available to Councils to enable the implementation of a consistent system for the ongoing review of flood mapping within Planning Schemes.
- XI Consider the need to commence a review and potential development of a new Floodplain Management Strategy with a focus on implementation.

Funding Arrangements to Support Local Government During Response and Recovery

- [43] Local Councils are often one of the first agencies to respond to a disaster and are also the agency remaining at the end. Supporting the community through the entire breadth of an event is a significant undertaking in terms of staff, funding, and reallocation or reprioritisation of resourcing.
- [44] Whilst there are important streams of funding which are guaranteed to Councils, these are far from comprehensive and are often accompanied by a significant lag.
- [45] During the October 2022 flood event, Mitchell Shire Council were confronted with a range of essential decisions prior to the announcement of any State or Federal funding or program delivery. Mitchell Shire Council made these decisions based on urgent community need. This imposed on Council a significant and, if appropriate funding were not guaranteed, unnecessary financial risk.
- [46] As an example of the decisions made highlighted in [29], prior to the announcement of the flood waste levy and later Emergency Recovery Victoria Street Debris Removal Program, Council assumed all responsibility for costs incurred to ensure community were provided with free flood waste disposal.
- [47] Mitchell Shire Council acknowledges the introduction of the Flood Waste Levy fee waiver for Mitchell Shire Council which continues to support Seymour's Recovery. This is a significant support, however if processes were in place to guarantee the activation of support of this nature, this risk imposed on Council would be significantly reduced.
- [48] To date, Council has received \$1.5 million from the Flood Support Fund. This funding has been integral in Mitchells timely response and recovery. Whilst this funding acknowledges the challenges faced in Seymour, Council acknowledges that this was not available to all impacted areas, and it is not guaranteed to Mitchell Shire Council for future events.

[49] Council also receives a small portion of funding under the Municipal Emergency Resourcing Program (MERP) to support Councils to plan, prepare and deliver activities that will assist their communities in an emergency.

Recommendation

XII Implement guaranteed funding arrangements to support timely response and recovery efforts, and reduce financial risks being transferred to local communities and Councils.

XIII Guarantee future gap funding like the current Flood Support Fund and ensure that this funding is comprehensive for all impacted areas.

XIV Increase MERP funding to better support Councils' ability to embed emergency management as a core component of Council business as we experience more frequent and intense weather events as a result of climate change.

Emergency Relief Funding

[50] The October 2022 flood was the first event which relied almost entirely on the use of an online portal for the delivery of Department Families, Fairness and Housing's (DFFH) Personal Hardship Assistance Program (PHAP).

[51] Whilst the concept of online applications is sound, the roll out of this system was not supported through appropriate staff, training, or other resources. Unfortunately, this resulted in the allocation of Council personnel at emergency relief centres to support impacted communities through their application process, essentially diverting them from their primary roles.

[52] Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) notes that over 500,000 Victorians have difficulty reading and comprehending simple documents and written instruction. Qualitative data from the municipality indicates this to be the case within our Seymour communities where we have a high number of aged and disadvantaged residents, exacerbating existing digital literacy and connectivity challenges.

Recommendation

- XV Reduce reliance of on-line systems for PHAP applications, particularly in the first 14 days following an event.
- XVI Ensure that any roll out of on-line systems is appropriately supported by resourcing, training, and other necessary resources.

Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangement

[53] Council relies on funding through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangement (DRFA) for the rebuilding of its infrastructure following emergency events. Whilst the funding is essential it currently faces two key challenges: first, shifting evidence requirements coupled with funding uncertainty have resulted in serious confidence issues, and; second, the fund does not support betterment of infrastructure, which is essential for mitigation and to build resilience.

[54] Whilst Mitchell Shire Council has applied for DRFA funding during the 2022 flood event, over time, evidence requirements for this funding have shifted which has created additional pressure on recovery efforts. This has imposed an increased level of uncertainty surrounding the potential success of future or pending claims.

[55] If the evidence requirements were bedded down for set periods, and funding arrangements guaranteed local Councils would be far more confident in taking on financial risk to support their communities at times of crisis.

[56] A serious flaw in the DRFA is that betterment funding is not currently available through this arrangement. By failing to provide betterment opportunities, the DRFA limits Councils and communities to rebuilding disaster impacted infrastructure to its original specifications. This prevents the development of any increased resilience and abjectly fails to protect communities in the face of more frequent and increasingly severe weather events.

[57] Betterment funding will save money in the long term by making sure that infrastructure is rebuilt to withstand more extreme weather events. The lack of

betterment funding sees infrastructure damaged during disaster events receive only the bare minimum restoration works. This infrastructure is not being repaired to the current modern requirements or building codes, including through being unable to meet *DDA* obligations, detrimentally impacting the use of these community facilities.

[58] The Queensland Reconstruction Authority leads the nation in building resilient community infrastructure through its betterment funding model. This is the broadest model currently employed in Australia and really does set the benchmark for supporting communities through mitigation and resilience building. Beyond this, the model achieves a far higher level of confidence than the current DRFA.

Recommendation

XVII Introduce betterment funding capability into the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements to enable mitigation and the building of resilience.

XVIII Embed a principle of consistency around evidence requirements and funding arrangements to promote confidence around the funding available.

Emergency Relief Centre

[59] Council was requested to open the Seymour Sports and Aquatic Centre (SSAC) as an Emergency Relief Centre (ERC) as part of the immediate response to the 2022 flood event.

[60] Whilst the centre is the best available location for an ERC and offers many fundamental services, it is demonstrative of many of the challenges facing the funding and standardisation of ERCs state-wide.

[61] SSAC was able to provide safe accommodation with access to bathrooms, showers, food and a modicum of comfort. However, the centre has limitations when acting as an ERC.

[62] There are no comprehensive funding programs which enable identified ERC-capable facilities to be uplifted to a standard which would see them function in a safer, more effective manner. Funding which would enable better design, fit-out, servicing, and the enhancement of other functionality specific to ERCs

would give vulnerable residents a safer, more comforting place in which to seek immediate refuge. The lack of funding also results in a lack of standardisation in fit out.

[63] Alongside the physical limitations, there is no state-wide approach to coordination or operation, this is left to municipalities. Whilst local Councils endeavour to work in partnership with all service providers and bordering municipalities, the lack of state-wide coordination often means that there is significant potential for inconsistency, confusion, and implementation challenges.

Recommendation

XIX Provide funding opportunities specifically designed to enable ERCs to be uplifted and improved.

XX Consider development of state-wide standard operating guidelines for Emergency Relief Centres.

Street Debris Removal Program and Waste Removal

[64] The *Street Debris Removal Program* was integral to the recovery of Seymour. Despite this, in its initial stages, this program was designed in a manner which caused two fundamental issues: first, the definition and scope of waste to be removed was unnecessarily and inappropriately narrow, and; second, the restrictions on where waste could be collected from were applied in too strict a sense and imposed needless difficulties on suffering communities.

[65] The *Street Debris Removal Program* scope was initially limited to wet carpet and furniture. Council staff witnessed and spoke to contractors engaged under the program who were sifting through flood waste piled on the nature strips, leaving behind flood damaged material outside of this scope. Flood damaged waste extends significantly beyond this highly limited scope.

[66] Whilst some limitations of the program are acknowledged, including the inability for contractors to enter private property to collect flood waste, Council believe appropriate discretion was not applied in the delivery of this program. On countless occasions, property owners stacked their flood waste on their

front lawn abutting the footpath, however this rubbish was not picked up under the program, despite the contractors' ability to collect this waste without entering the private land. As a result of this failure, Council was required to engage its own staff to move flood waste from one side of the footpath to another (900mm) to ensure it was picked up under the program.

Recommendation

XXI Ensure future waste removal programs are broadened to consider all elements of community need.

XXII Ensure future response and recovery programs, including for the removal of waste, are carefully designed and implemented to avoid adding complexities and stressors upon vulnerable and impacted communities.

POLICY AND OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

Multi Agency Information Sharing

[67] During emergencies, large amounts of information is acquired from various agencies. This information is not shared and results in high levels of duplication and reduced confidence in 'the system' by impacted community who become frustrated with a lack of coordination.

[68] One example where essential information was unnecessarily delayed was the rapid impact data. Rapid impact data is the first snapshot which Council receives of the impact from the Incident Controller (IC). Councils rely upon rapid impact data to build their situational awareness, however access to this data during the 2022 flood event was unnecessarily delayed.

[69] Community often bears the brunt of these challenges with duplication in messaging and communication often occurring. This duplication happened at all stages of response and into recovery.

Recommendation

XXIII Implement a State-wide Memorandum of Understanding between State and Local Governments, including Emergency Services and other response agencies, to enable the sharing of critical information to support a timely and appropriate response during an emergency.

Mickleham Centre for National Resilience

[70] The housing of impacted residents is an essential phase in supporting community during the response, and then whilst transitioning to recovery.

[71] The opening of the Mickleham Centre for National Resilience for flood victims provided significant relief and support to many individuals who suffered greatly throughout the 2022 flood event, with 25 Seymour residents being transported from the Seymour Emergency Relief Centre to the Mickleham Centre.

Recommendation

XXIV Identify future opportunities for temporary accommodation, with a particular emphasis on localised opportunities, in times of crisis to ensure that future impacted communities will be supported through the emergency.

Social Housing

[72] A positive recovery experience relies on prioritising the return of displaced residents back to their communities. This enables impacted individuals to reconnect to their established support.

[73] Currently, affordable housing is unevenly distributed through Mitchell Shire. On average, 2.0% of households in Mitchell Shire are social housing, but in Seymour, social housing accounts for 7.9% of households.

[74] Approximately 18 state government owned homes in Seymour, situated outside of flooded areas, remained vacant following the October 2022 floods. Whilst it is acknowledged these homes are in various states of repair, opportunities to undertake and fast track these works were not considered.

[75] Failing to bring this housing stock back online in a timely manner has resulted in additional housing pressure in Seymour.

[76] Significant investment is now required to renew and future proof public housing within Seymour to ensure it is fit for purpose for future generations. This includes housing that responds to the demand of public housing wait lists which currently indicate a trend towards increase 1 bedroom housing stock. Existing public housing should be innovative and flexible to adopt to the changing circumstances in the housing market, alleviating the issue of township saturation by having existing public housing sites function more efficiently through their built design and integration to the surrounding communities.

Recommendation

XXV Fastrack the repair and upgrade of existing, damaged State Government dwellings to ensure immediate urgent demand, including in Seymour, is addressed in the short term.

XXVI Ensure that social housing stock is maintained to appropriate standards to be able to be utilised, when required, in response to events such as the 2022 flooding.

XXVII Consider implementing flexibility into building and planning controls to better facilitate temporary accommodation options such as pop-up caravan parks and shed/ container dwellings.

Homes at Home Program

[77] Seymour was excluded from a dedicated post flood Housing Taskforce which resulted in the recent deployment of 40 transportable dwellings under the *Homes at Home Program* to Shepparton.

[78] Whilst the potential from the *Homes at Home* program was essentially limitless, unfortunately no other towns received homes under this pilot program.

[79] Supporting impacted community members to remain in their home township enables them to receive support from an already established network. Inherently this builds community resilience based upon already formed social capital.

Recommendation

XXVIII Immediately expand the *Homes at Home Program* and ensure that future programs support all communities impacted by disasters.

Land Use Planning

[80] With the impacts of climate change resulting in increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events it is essential that land use planning, and the underlying studies which support the planning process, are responsive to the inherently fluid nature of potential natural disasters.

[81] The 2022 Victorian flood event, along with recent fire events have highlighted that as communities grow and expand the proportion of properties which are under potential threat is increasing. This is particularly notable within outer-suburban and peri-urban areas where State Government planning policy has encouraged rapid population growth.

[82] Current flood and fire mapping which supports the Victorian Planning Process fails to appropriately consider future predicted areas of increasing vulnerability. This failure will result in increasing risk being transferred to future communities.

Recommendation

XXIX State Government to fund and coordinate an urgent, state-wide review of existing flood and fire overlays, including the completion of required flood studies, to ensure that they best represent current levels of risk and vulnerability and appropriate planning scheme amendments can be undertaken.

XXX Explore and implement processes which can best predict future encroachment of areas vulnerable to flood and fire modelled for the impact of ever-worsening climate change and ensure that these predicted vulnerabilities are applied within the Victorian Planning Process.

XXXI Ensure that residential development is appropriately limited in areas of current and modelled future vulnerability.

Volunteers

[83] Volunteers play a central role in all stages of emergency management. The 2022 Victoria flood event highlighted the importance which volunteers have in supporting community, responding to incidents, and focusing and implementing many elements of the recovery.

[84] Whilst volunteers are vital to emergency management, recent data has highlighted the significant and continuing decline in volunteering numbers. On current trends there is substantial risk that there will be insufficient volunteers to support the community through emergencies.

[85] Coupled with this, volunteers need to be provided appropriate levels of training, support, and equipment. Without appropriate provisions volunteers have often been required to provide or use their own vehicles, equipment, and other supplies. This not only places an unnecessary financial burden upon volunteers, but also poses an inherent risk that unsuitable equipment may be used, or equipment may be used in situations where essential training has not occurred.

Recommendation

XXXII State Government should invest in volunteer recruitment strategies to increase the number of available people to support communities through emergencies.

XXXIII Funding should be allocated to provide appropriate and essential training, equipment, and other supplies to volunteers.

Insurance

[86] There are three key issues related to insurance in disaster impacted and vulnerable areas which need to be addressed: first, whether the insurance policy in place covers the disaster appropriately and how clearly this was articulated when insurance was purchased; second, underinsurance, and creep in this space driven by a range of factors including inflation in building

costs and materials, and third, the inability to afford reinsurance due to rapidly rising premiums.

[87] Unfortunately, many residents and businesses find out only after an event that their policy is complex and fails to cover the event in which they wish to claim against. Closely related to underinsurance, this issue is pervasive in the system and has been an issue during the recovery from numerous disaster events.

[88] The partner issue of underinsurance is often considered a failure on the person taking out the insurance policy. However, recent experience through the 2022 flood events in both Victoria and New South Wales have highlighted the significant impact which inflation, particularly through increasing construction costs and building materials, has resulted in many policy holders being significantly underinsured.

[89] Finally, the impact of climate change, which will result in increased frequency and severity of weather events, coupled with more detailed and comprehensive understanding of risk and vulnerability is resulting in many townships and communities being left essentially un-insurable due to staggering premium increases. Whilst it is acknowledged that risk-based modelling is essential to insurance practice, supporting communities to mitigate risk, and individualising premiums for people who take proactive risk-mitigating steps will ensure that communities can remain insured into the future.

Recommendation

XXXIV Commence analysis to understand how the combined challenges of policy scope, underinsurance, and perpetually increasing risk profiles can be managed to enable communities to remain insured against future events such as the 2022 floods.

Seymour Community Wellbeing Hub

[90] During the October 2022, the Seymour Sports and Aquatic Centre was utilised as an Emergency Relief Centre. This site provided emergency relief to over

160 residents and tourists over the space of seven days. To ensure a continuity of relief and recovery service were provided to the public, Council established a 'pop-up' Recovery Hub at its Seymour Library where it continues to operate.

[91] Following a recent State government funding announcement, Council has entered a two-year lease to establish a Recovery Hub in a local church hall. Council has concerns that beyond this two-year lease, the ability to deliver wrap around, place based services will cease.

[92] There is a clear and urgent need for a purpose-built Community Wellbeing Hub in Seymour due to its limited access to localised services and current vulnerabilities, anticipated to compound following an extensive natural disaster.

[93] The Seymour Community Wellbeing Hub will provide a no-wrong door to mental health and community wellbeing services. It will not only act to support communities at times of crisis, such as the 2022 flood event, but will actively build resilience, support the development of social capital, and provide the only local space to essential mental health services.

[94] The over-focus on funding recovery at the apparent expense of support for mitigation requires immediate rectification. Resilience building infrastructure such as the Seymour Community Wellbeing Hub have never been more important.

[95] The importance of this project was highlighted by community in 2019 and sadly, it remains unfunded. Failing to provide the community with appropriate spaces and services will see negative social impacts on the Seymour and wider community well beyond the October 2022 event.

Recommendation

XXXV Fund the Seymour Community Wellbeing Hub to support resilience building and provide local services to one of Victoria's most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mitchell Shire Council's submission highlights a range of challenges and opportunities as a result of the 2022 flood event.

Council makes the following 35 recommendations and expects that they will be carefully considered by the committee:

- I Review and upgrade all emergency warning systems with a particular focus on improving flood forecasting including through the roll out of additional flood gauges.
- II Ensure future activation of ICC's considers the predetermined ICC footprints.
- III Ensure that all ICC's have appropriate connectivity to enable agencies to attend remotely when required.
- IV For all events, particularly those which are widespread, ICCs need to be placed strategically to ensure the timeliness of transition to recovery. Placement of ICCs should not unnecessarily negatively impact the support given to communities.
- V The Minister should recommend, in accordance with s159E of the Water Act (Vic) 1989 that the Governor direct the relevant water corporation, in this situation Goulburn Murray Water, that Lake Eildon be held below 95% capacity for the remainder of 2023, or until relevant Parliamentary inquiries are complete.
- VI Implement a streamlined approach between State and Federal Governments to improve the speed and scale of localised deployment of ADF in response to emergencies.
- VII A report should be commissioned to consider the impact, including the potential for impact, from State Government caretaker conventions and to make recommendations to ensure that emergency disaster response and recovery is not impacted.

- VIII Urgently identify alternative State and Federal funding opportunities for the development of resilience building infrastructure
- IX Betterment funding, including for roads, is required to ensure that infrastructure is less vulnerable to future events.
- X Increase funding and support available to Councils to enable the implementation of a consistent system for the ongoing review of flood mapping within Planning Schemes.
- XI Consider the need to commence a review and potential development of a new Floodplain Management Strategy with a focus on implementation.
- XII Implement guaranteed funding arrangements to support timely response and recovery efforts, and reduce financial risks being transferred to local communities and Councils
- XIII Guarantee future gap funding like the current Flood Support Fund and ensure that this funding is comprehensive for all impacted areas.
- XIV Increase MERP funding to better support Councils' ability to embed emergency management as a core component of Council business as we experience more frequent and intense weather events as a result of climate change.
- XV Reduce reliance of on-line systems for PHAP applications, particularly in the first 14 days following an event.
- XVI Ensure that any roll out of on-line systems is appropriately supported by resourcing, training, and other necessary resources.
- XVII Introduce betterment funding capability into the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements to enable mitigation and the building of resilience.
- XVIII Embed a principle of consistency around evidence requirements and funding arrangements to promote confidence around the funding available.
- XIX Provide funding opportunities specifically designed to enable ERCs to be uplifted and improved.

- XX Consider development of state-wide standard operating guidelines for Emergency Relief Centres.
- XXI Ensure future waste removal programs are broadened to consider all elements of community need.
- XXII Ensure future response and recovery programs, including for the removal of waste, are carefully designed and implemented to avoid adding complexities and stressors upon vulnerable and impacted communities.
- XXIII Implement a State-wide Memorandum of Understanding between State and Local Governments, including Emergency Services and other response agencies, to enable the sharing of critical information to support a timely and appropriate response during an emergency.
- XXIV Identify future opportunities for temporary accommodation, with a particular emphasis on localised opportunities, in times of crisis to ensure that future impacted communities will be supported through the emergency.
- XXV Fastrack the repair and upgrade of existing, damaged State Government dwellings to ensure immediate urgent demand, including in Seymour, is addressed in the short term.
- XXVI Ensure that social housing stock is maintained to appropriate standards to be able to be utilised, when required, in response to events such as the 2022 flooding.
- XXVII Consider implementing flexibility into building and planning controls to better facilitate temporary accommodation options such as pop-up caravan parks and shed/ container dwellings.
- XXVIII Immediately expand the *Homes at Home Program* and ensure that future programs support all communities impacted by disasters.
- XXIX State Government to fund and coordinate an urgent, state-wide review of existing flood and fire overlays, including the completion of required flood studies, to ensure that they best represent current levels of risk and

vulnerability and appropriate planning scheme amendments can be undertaken.

XXX Explore and implement processes which can best predict future encroachment of areas vulnerable to flood and fire modelled for the impact of ever-worsening climate change and ensure that these predicted vulnerabilities are applied within the Victorian Planning Process.

XXXI Ensure that residential development is appropriately limited in areas of current and modelled future vulnerability.

XXXII State Government should invest in volunteer recruitment strategies to increase the number of available people to support communities through emergencies.

XXXIII Funding should be allocated to provide appropriate and essential training, equipment, and other supplies to volunteers

XXXIV Commence analysis to understand how the combined challenges of policy scope, underinsurance, and perpetually increasing risk profiles can be managed to enable communities to remain insured against future events such as the 2022 floods.

XXXV Fund the Seymour Community Wellbeing Hub to support resilience building and provide local services to one of Victoria's most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.

This submission was endorsed at Council's Special Meeting, held 29 May 2023.