

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Rochester – Wednesday 23 August 2023

MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

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John Berger

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Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

The CHAIR: I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, a bipartisan committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to the Parliament which will include recommendations to government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery and remind those in the room to be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council's 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 this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. 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.

I will just take the opportunity to introduce myself, and committee members will introduce themselves to you as well. My name is Sonja Terpstra, I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and I am also a Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan.

John BERGER: My name is John Berger, Member for Southern Metropolitan.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

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

Melina BATH: And hello, Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

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

The CHAIR: Now just before I hand over, you have got 4 minutes to have your individual say. Before you commence, could I ask you just to state your name for the Hansard record. And so with that, we will start with you, sir. Four minutes, and also just make sure, because 4 minutes will go like that, you have got your top points off ready to go, and then go from there. Over to you.

Paul POORT: Paul Poort, from Rochester. We resided at our own home at 84 Victoria Street in Rochester. On 14 October at 17:00, the floodwaters breached the floor of our home and we were inundated with this water. When you realise that there is nothing you can do to stop the water coming in, the impact is devastating. Initially we were told that this flood would be about 100 millimetres higher than the previous flood of 2011. If this had been the case, we would not have been flooded, as we would still have had the clearance. We built our home 16 years ago, ensuring not only that we built it to the regulation height that we were given but that we actually built ours a level higher. Many residents in our town talk about the wave of water that came through at that time, and many of these residents, like us, did not have flood inundation in 2011 but did in 2022.

One of our big issues will be getting insurance for flood in the future. Will there be an embargo on our town for flood cover, and if not, will we be able to afford it, if we can even get cover? What, if anything, will our governments do to ensure that we are not disadvantaged by this event, regarding insurance cover?

We need a better water management system for Eppalock. The system is out of date, and gates or some other system need to be installed to allow more water release when we know that there is a rain event coming and that the levels in Eppalock are too high. But I am pleased to note that a technical assessment is in progress for Eppalock. I learnt that last night.

Many things need to change; complacency is not going to help anyone. We need a more proactive solution, not a reactive approach to this issue. I have just got a couple of suggestions; they may be repeated later on. The

Waranga channel, which is about a kilometre or two from Rochester on the north side, flows both sides of the Campaspe River and has banks not far from town. Does it cause a build-up of the water, not allowing it to get away, and then flows backwards, causing flooding to the east and west? Why can't we pipe the water either end of the site for about a kilometre in each direction and remove those banks to allow less-impeded flow during floods?

We have been displaced from our home, our safe place and our community. We have had to move to nearby Echuca. Luckily, we were able to get a rental property, not an easy thing to do with the current rental crisis. The emotional stress and anxiety impact that this has caused cannot be measured by people who have not experienced this type of catastrophic event. Thank you.

Judi McKAIL: My name is Judi McKail. I am from Maryborough, and I am also the owner of a property up in Carisbrook. I purchased that in 1989, and I still own the property there. It has been subject to inundation quite a few times. On my original section 32 certificate there was no mention whatsoever of water inundation issues in that area. Had I known about the water problems, I would not have bought the property there. Overland issues have been experienced from 27 December 1999.

No updates were given to residents, no food supplies offered. We were given 10 minutes after 8 o'clock at night to get out, when we were told the dam wall at Carisbrook threatened to fracture. It did not. We were supposed to have 5 feet of water coming through. Thankfully that did not happen at all.

Overland water issues have been along the southern side of the highway, which is the Pyrenees Highway. Victoria Street was raised and apparently used as a levee. The precise date is unknown but believed to be in the 1970s. Pleasant Street in Carisbrook was raised in 2021 as part of the levee. Water sat pooled in properties there, unable to drain away to the east of the homes in the south of the highway. In 1999 to 2000, water subsidence took three months, plus water was pumped from the paddock at the rear to the bluestone drain on the western side for weeks. There were health risks, with plagues of mosquitoes. And it is still the same today. Water is not draining properly to the eastern side, especially with the raising of a small street there and allowing three new homes on raised pads along the southern side, blocking the natural watercourse flow.

Community was not listened to by the authorities, and a lot of local knowledge and expertise was ignored. After being flooded in 1999, the SES chief from a local large city stated at the front of my then home that the water flowed east at the front of my property. There were heated words exchanged. I had watched it flow west to the bluestone drain every time there was flooding in the previous 10 years of living there from burst water mains, which were finally relocated to the northern side of the highway. The administrators and council staff refused to listen to local knowledge and are now refusing public meetings. The council staff are constantly changing. They have relied on people using computer modelling – to make decisions re the levee that is now completed after taking 11 years to be done – designing the western levee on their computer screens in their office in Tasmania. In my opinion new homes built on land subject to inundation should be constructed on concrete stumps with concrete footings, not on concrete slabs on top of raised earth pads. This should allow for water to move freely away from areas and not dam up in yards – and Colorbond fencing around the new subdivisions can also act as a water retention wall.

I would like to mention that there are many concerns raised about the Tullaroop Reservoir. We do not have floodgates there. We need some sort of water release there to keep the water level at least 10 per cent below the maximum level for when there is water coming down from the other creeks and so on so that we have that room to move and the floodwaters are not coming through Carisbrook.

My final point: I have a duty of care to the tenants in my Carisbrook property. Councils have a duty of care to their ratepayers and residents. Governments have a duty of care to their constituents. Are they providing this?

Wayne PARK: Hello, my name is Wayne Park. The title of my talk is 'Mitigation not litigation'. The first part of my presentation relates to Eppalock. If you have read the submissions, Eppalock gets mentioned a lot. Many suggestions are made. Some involve extensive earthworks, some involve very expensive engineering, but the most common theme is: let the water go; create some air space. Goulburn–Murray Water would see this as a waste.

My proposal is to let the water go when it reaches a certain level, but on the way out let it go through a turbine to generate electricity so it is not actually wasted. If it is winter, we will call it environmental flow. If it is

summer, it will get down to Rochester and we can pump it back into the channel. We might use some of the electricity it generated as it came out to do that. That water, when it is in the main channel, can then be bought by farmers as far away as Boort.

Rochester – I hear that we are on a flood plain and that we need to be more resilient. But our flood plain has had major works done to it, with government and council approval. These works include roads, railways, houses now built on mounds. All of these change the way floodwater flows. The biggest change, though, was the fact that we built a channel across it, and that definitely obstructs the flow. Aerial photos prove it. So my second point is: the main channel should be put underground, suggested by Paul and David Christie before. That would allow the water to get away from the town faster. In addition to that, I suggest we put a causeway on the west side of the railway from the channel spot to Strathallan. At Strathallan it is back into the river. That would take water away from town as well.

The other thing that David suggested and that I suggested in 2011 was that when the flood is coming, we let the main channel go. That in effect spreads the flood out. So when the floodwater gets here, guess what, it has got to fill the channel up before it floods the rest of the town, because that water is already gone. And there is scope to do that.

The third point of my talk is floodwater should not be allowed to get back into the Main Channel. Normally it is called the Waranga–Mallee channel, but at our place it was the Mallee–Waranga channel because it was going backwards. That spreads the flood plain from Tennyson to Timmering.

As I said, I was involved with the 2011 flood mitigation committee. Proposals were made, but our community could not agree, so very little change was made. This time we have to get it right. We have to agree. The future of our town depends on it. We need to add together all the little mitigation steps in the hope that it can just make the future of Rochester a better one. Let us mitigate, not litigate. Thank you, folks.

The CHAIR: Okay. I will call the next three people up to the microphone. I understand some people may not be here yet, but we will see how we go. So Shelley Nichol, John Oakley and Shane Wolfe: if you are here, could you please make your way up to the mic? I understand Shane is not here yet, so I will call the next person on the list that I am aware is here. So Tuesday Browell, if you could come up to the mic. If Shane turns up later, we can put him on when he comes. John.

John OAKLEY: Correct.

The CHAIR: Could you state your full name for the record, and then you have got 4 minutes. Away you go.

John OAKLEY: Four minutes. John Philip Oakley. I have lived in this town since 1990. I came here on promotion to Nanneella primary school. Basically, I believe that to allay the effect of a possible future flood here – I mean, there have been many positive suggestions which I concur with. Eppalock – maybe it could be extended. Certainly it needs airspace. It acts as a choke in this area so that the flood threat can be mitigated.

My basic proposal is that a protective wall with panels is built around our local hospital. It can be done. From the *Riv Herald* last week, I think it was, that can be constructed at Cohuna. I think it is time that our community gave a bit back. I personally received lots of assistance and help, as have most of the town. We have all been affected, town and district, to a greater or lesser degree. I think to pay for these panels, which could be stored – I have thought about it – locally, we, the community, raise the money. I do not know how much it will cost; it depends on the feasibility study. It has been looked at, but we need action. We need to make sure that it happens all right. I do not know how much it would cost, but I think we need to put our hands in our pockets and contribute something as seeding funding towards this project.

During the flood I was evacuated. I went to Bendigo hospital by ambulance. Somehow I got in there and got a bed for a night. I felt like some of the staff at times; I was not. I had an MRI on my brain – ‘Time you left. No reason to be here.’ I went to Mickleham, the emergency evacuation centre for flood-affected victims. Over 1000 people were housed there, paid for by the state government. Mickleham was built after COVID, because Mr Andrews – it is on federal land, actually. There was a variety of rooms there – families, individual people. The car park for the staff was car park 1. I was a resident – car park 2. We had guards on the gate – you are allowed out; you are allowed in – and they made sure that you said when you were going and who you were going with. Meals were provided in bags the night before – breakfast, lunch. There was transport from

Mickleham into Craigieburn, which is under contract. Now it is closed, I know that – I have a couple of contacts there – but I pray to God we do not have to use it again. It could be used for migrants. That is Melbourne. We are here. We are here.

The CHAIR: You have about 30 seconds left.

John OAKLEY: I beg your pardon?

The CHAIR: You have 30 seconds left.

John OAKLEY: Thirty seconds to sum up, okay. As I said, my suggestion is that we raise money within the community – there are lots of ways to do it – and we use that as funding towards protective barriers to be built around the hospital. Thanks for the time that you have given me. It is the first time I have ever spoken at such a high-level committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you. You have done really well. Thank you. Shelley.

Shelley NICHOL: Okay. I am Shelley Nichol. I live in Rochester, and I also teach at Rochester Secondary College. I am actually in the family of a fourth-generation residence in Rochester, and I have three sons. The fact that I have taught at Rochester Secondary College, I think I know Rochester and its people pretty well. I thank you all for coming, because this is the most positive event that Rochester has had since October last year. On behalf of the residents, thank you very, very much.

I am actually speaking because I want to speak for the people, and I want to speak for the elderly of our community and the people that are not here. Not many people realise, but there are a lot of people that are not living in Rochester and there are people interstate. They are the ones – I know Amanda spoke of the statistics this morning on that map. That map is not necessarily correct, and we need to make allowances. There are probably more dwellings that have been affected by the flood. Until we get that real data, we are not really going to know what Rochester has gone through.

I said I am fourth generation. I have been through lots and lots of floods in Rochester. We used to play in the floods. We are parallel with the Campaspe River. We would put the boats in, we would play in it and we would go for rides. But what happened in 2011 was not natural. I sat back – I think I was maybe naive; I might have been a little bit ignorant. I really believed that our local and our state politicians were going to do something for Rochester. We all believed something was going to be done with Eppalock – it was not. When 2022 came, I could not believe it, and that is why I have been so passionate about making sure that something is going to be done, because our community will be destroyed. You can see that firsthand.

I saw some of you go down the street and have lunch today. You went to the cafe, you went to the bakery. It was sunny. It looked beautiful. The gardens are pretty. I can tell you that Rochester is not like that. It is not like that. Some people have gone back into their houses – some people have, but not many. We have still got a long, long way to go. And you can see by those photos there in front of you – and I am sorry, I should have thought of this sooner – there is a photo of the floodwater, of Rochester and what it looked like. It is a drone photograph, and then the next couple of photos are how my family is living. We are actually one of the lucky ones. I went around to a girlfriend's place the other night and she has this caravan just backed into the front yard, and that is all she has got. We have managed to revamp our shed. I have got a 21-year-old living in a camper trailer in the backyard. I have got a 24-year-old living on the front lawn. Ed and me are in the caravan in the carport, and I am lucky to have Mum and Dad so I can have the odd night there.

People need to realise – I appreciate you guys coming, I really do, but I do not think you understand the gravity if you are not living it. I truly do. The old people that were put into the nursing homes when the flood occurred, we are not going to say goodbye to those residents because a lot of them will never, ever come back, and that breaks my heart as a Rochester local. It truly does. There are people that probably will not ever come back. The structure of Rochester has changed. There are lots of people with their houses on the market. If something is not done, it is going to destroy our little town, and we love it very, very much.

I think the main thing is: give us that 90 per cent airspace down at Eppalock. That is for the short term. Just give it to us to give us a little bit of hope. Keep us going. We love our little town, but if you can manage to give that to us, that will give us the time.

The CHAIR: Time has expired. Thank you.

Shelley NICHOL: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Tuesday Browell. Just state your name for the record, too.

Tuesday BROWELL: My name is Tuesday Browell. I live on Baillieu Road in Torrumbarry. I am a self-funded retiree and was on an uphill ride after COVID. Then the floods hit us like a tonne of bricks on 17 October 2022 – 1.5 metres of water bled swiftly in and out of my whole property and stayed with us for 3½ months. I know I am not from Rochester, and the rivers are different, but Torrumbarry does not seem to count very much so I thought I would pop a couple of suggestions in – and after all, the Murray–Darling Basin is all connected.

I was trying to obtain sandbags from about 7 October with no luck. On 14 October Torrumbarry had a meeting with the SES. It was our community information meeting. We had the CFA, the SES, the shire, the National Party's Peter Walsh was there, and at that point everyone knew that we were going to be getting a flood and it would be affecting our houses, our homes, our nature, our cattle and our crops. Everybody knew. Meanwhile on my property we had started to build a little levee around our dwellings. I asked for sandbags at that meeting and I was told that it was not actually an emergency at the time and that we could not have sandbags. So I was sitting there trying to get these sandbags. I ended up like a mad chook running around. Moama at that point had sandbags, and I could get 25 from them. Echuca had some. I begged for 50, because it is 25 per household. Then I had a brilliant wave, and I went and got pillowcases. I got 120 pillowcases and filled them up. I had the most colourful sandbag wall you have ever seen.

The rest of my community at that time – that was me and my family and friends – were building feverishly, restoring the levee bank between Torrumbarry and the Torrumbarry weir, which is 17 kilometres, so my whole community was busy building that and raising it. We were getting ready for the third-highest flood in history. My place was not within that levee. I was on the wrong side of the levee and I knew that. We lost the battle on the 19th. The levee was not high enough, even though it was over the one-in-100 flood marker. Our buildings were inundated with up to 1.5 metres, and that marker, the one-in-100-flood marker, was put there by a surveyor 27 years ago, so we had moved all our buildings up.

We existed on a sandhill for 3½ gruelling months on our boats on trailers on the sandhills. Our other sandhill had over 150 kangaroos. We had foxes, wallabies, echidnas, goannas, snakes, foxes and a panther, feral cats and lots of rabbits all scrambling. Nobody paid any attention to those, and I was feeding the kangaroos.

As I watched the river swell along its downstream course and talked to river folk up and downstream, I observed the South Australia SES and their efforts to protect properties in Renmark, Paringa, Berri and Lake Bonney. They not only built levees but they imported geosynthetic defence cells from overseas manufacturers.

The CHAIR: You have 30 seconds.

Tuesday BROWELL: I know I have got 30 seconds. What I want to say is I have actually ordered those cells for myself, and I want to know: South Australia has got them; why hasn't Victoria got those along all of our towns? They are portable; they are easy to use – you fold them away then you put them back out. They are massive, and they are not little sandbags. I think we need to get out of the sandbag phase.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you so much for that. Thank you all for that.

We will call our next three people, and I think Lilian is going to organise the next three to come to the mic. We have got Maree Traill, Royden Webb and Rodney Harrison – if you can make your way to the mic. Okay. I will call you, but also just state your names for the record when we go. We will start with you, Maree. Thanks.

Maree TRAILL: My name is Maree Traill. Firstly, I would like to thank you for coming to Rochester today and enjoying my fruitcake. I am here to speak to you about the 2022 floods. The people representing us today – I know you have heard from them and our community leaders throughout the day, so thank you for listening to us all. I am one of the admins on the Rochester Community Page Facebook page. Before October 2022 it was just your average page: missing cat, missing dog – public information-type stuff. But all that changed the day that Eppalock spewed its hateful life-changing contents at our entire town. You cannot unsee the destruction,

damage and mental toll on our residents. So if I speak with emotion, like I am now, it is because I speak for those who cannot speak today, and I speak from here.

We all know what happened to our town. What you may not know is that we were totally unaware of what was coming for us. Yes, we knew that there was water coming, but we had no idea of the ferocity or the volume of water that hit our town. After 2011 one of the mitigation solutions suggested and provided was for better early warning systems, and we believed that we were prepared for what was coming. We checked the mapping – the Flood Eye provided by the NCCMA – and we had been issued the generic warnings to evacuate. We had had town meetings and checked out our property height data, and we thought we knew what we stood. This is where we were blindsided and hit by a six-foot high tsunami of water. The far western side of Rochester, our last streets and those we would normally consider high and dry, were smashed: 822 houses in total, and counting. So many residents had been reassured by this AHD and considered themselves safe.

The other issue is that floodwater turns up when it likes. Unfortunately our luck ran out and it was very early Saturday morning. I know because I was awake. It would seem that for others in the skeleton staff at the ICC and our own emergency service volunteers – the only accurate and up-to-date river data was coming from me. I am not saying this for accolades, I am saying this because it was sadly true. I stayed up the entire night making sure that the locals were updated every hour on the hour – fielding questions and checking on people and making sure they were okay. I am honestly disappointed that it was up to me. This is no disrespect to our emergency services, but red tape makes warnings too little, too late.

Something has to change for Rochester. Early warning mitigation is a fail. We need and we deserve so much better than that for those we have lost, for those who will not come home again, for those who do not want to come back here because of trauma – my kids, everyone's kids, everyone. The only way to fix this is a mitigation solution at the source, the lake itself. I know that water is a commodity, but do you know what, human life is invaluable, and what price can you put on those we have lost? I ask you, I implore you, to read every submission that we have for this inquiry. I have read every one of them. I know most of their names and their faces and the lost, the hurt and the tired. I have dried their tears and given them homemade soups, biscuits and fruit cakes, because living in a caravan or a shed is tiring and awful.

Our farmers have lost their entire season – their income, their hay, their stock. Farmers can cope in a drought, but not in flood. We have groundwater available for dry years, but we do not have mitigation for wet years – fences, stock, cows from last year that have since calved recently and now have exacerbated health issues like black mastitis, infections. We need mitigation and someone with the authority and the cojones to call the shots and release water when we need it done. We have a huge catchment area and a small lake, and it is a recipe for disaster with no real form of large-volume releases. Channel modernisation has resulted in channels being removed. Water goes where water wants, and we cannot stop it.

The CHAIR: I am sorry, but your time has expired. Thank you.

Maree TRAILL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I will call now Royden. If you could state your name, Royden, for the record – full name.

Royden WEBB: I am Royden Webb. I live about half a kilometre from where we sit, just the other side of the river. I have been there since 1980. We are obviously in our early 70s and love the town.

I will say that historically most towns were built on floodplains because they had to have water. Now, engineering has changed how that is all handled and controlled. In my submission to you people, we talk about, number one, an engineering solution, which most people have talked about today. An engineering solution is always the best solution. Just get rid of the problem. Never mind about sandbagging or levees – stop it at its source. That is what I would like to see.

Eppalock has already had a major change. It was originally set up for irrigation purposes, but now it does a lot of urban supply. Now, if you can change the use of that water, surely you can change the operation of the dam. There is a pipeline now from the Waranga channel at Colbinabbin up to Eppalock. It was mentioned last night that you could use that pipeline to put excess water back into the channel. You could fill Greens Lake and Lake Cooper and use that irrigation water along the way rather than let it go to wherever it is going to go and do damage.

You also heard from Paul and Wayne about the idea of piping the channel north of the town – a great idea. But I would like to see it piped all the way back to Greens Lake with pumps on it. Use that floodwater for environmental purposes and other purposes to fill Greens Lake and Lake Cooper, which are interlinked. For you people that do not know, Lake Cooper is 4 miles long, a mile wide and 12 feet deep in the old money. If that water was out there in 2011 when it was bone dry instead of in the town, we would not have had a problem, but these things are there, and they happen.

As far as government assistance goes, I would like to see fast-tracked approval and certainty about rebuilding rules. We were recently advised that we may not be allowed to rebuild substantially above the flood level even though our footprint and the effect would be reduced by over 90 per cent. Now, this uncertainty just drives you mad.

To the next point of mental stress – when you are dealing with an insurance company. I really feel for AFCA. They must be run off their feet. We were recently advised that the subfloor damage at our house was caused by the trees and the shrubs, and therefore that claim was rejected. Now, this is just a nonsense.

When we talk about the control of floodwaters – my last point – mitigation, as Wayne said, is a buzzword. We do not want to go through all this stuff. We really need to protect our property. But the problem you have got is that if you put a bank around your property, you send the water to someone else's. So we do not want to do that either. There has got to be some big-picture stuff done. Some of the controls that are currently in place and happen sort of naturally – Campaspe shire currently sandbag the Cromwell Street drain in a flood, which protects the western side of town. That is okay if you are on the western side – not so good if you are on the eastern side. The Waranga–Mallee channel has been spoken about a lot. It prevents the water getting away. The railway line south of here –

The CHAIR: You have 30 seconds.

Royden WEBB: thank you – is the same. The major channel bank south of the town stops water going out the old creek near the cemetery. There is an increase in flooding in some areas just because of growth. I will conclude by saying: we cannot do this again.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Can you state your full name?

Rodney George HARRISON: My name is Rodney Harrison. I have got a property halfway between Rochester and Echuca at Strathallan, and so the water from here ends up at Strathallan going to Echuca. We are right on the Campaspe River. I have owned the property for 40 years and have been through a number of floods. I was advised that this flood was going to be the highest ever, as was mentioned. Fortunately, 35 years ago, after our first flood that we experienced, we put a levee bank just around our house – not around our property, just around our house. If you put it around the property, you would stop the water flowing. The water has got to keep going. We did that, and miracles of miracles plus lots of sandbags that we got from here in Rochy and from Moama – we were able to get them; we just had to keep going – that saved our mudbrick home. Right on the Campaspe River, our mudbrick home would have been completely washed away if it was not for the old levee bank that we have had there for 35 years and the great work – absolutely great work – of those that did the sandbags. I could not recommend those people and volunteers highly enough. We should give them a medal, absolutely.

I will get to the improvement points. Moving along, ladies and gentlemen, each of you here have a massive amount of weight on your shoulders. You have the chance to leave a legacy for the future by making change. If, as was mentioned earlier, we do not make any changes, like we did in 2011, you guys have failed. You were put here because you will deliver, so make the effort. Step out of the comfort zone and make sure that we get change.

My changes, as part of my submission – there are 800, and you have read all of the submissions. They bring tears to my eyes when I look at them. I had to have three. Firstly, do something about Eppalock. It does not need to be sitting up at 100 per cent; it could be at 60 or 50 per cent full. Make the gate to get the water out five times the size that it is. We can cope with a medium flood; we just cannot cope with over 100,000 megalitres going over that spillway every day in the flood time. I am conscious that Eppalock is 300. One hundred going over does not quite work out, so you have got to start early by letting more water out and having a big gap of space. That is number one.

Number two is regular updates – genuine, honest, as the lady mentioned here. I was relying completely on the BOM, the Bureau of Meteorology. Their water levels are fantastic because they tell you if the water is rising way upstream. What is going to happen when it gets here? It is going to come here. You know that, so you know in advance. The thing we have got to make sure of with BOM is that they take into account the water that comes in further downstream from the previous measurements, and I am not sure they do that. It has been mentioned before, but if we had really accurate forecasts and measurements of the water coming down, we could do something about it. It might just be to save your life and get out. So we need to pick somebody that is going to be responsible for that – not Facebook.

The CHAIR: You have 30 seconds.

Rodney George HARRISON: Thank you. The last one – I mentioned sandbags earlier. Okay, it is trying to put a small bandaid on a big issue. I give a special thanks to all those volunteers. They saved our house, because we were able to get the sandbags. One suggestion is – and for those that were involved, and I assume it was everybody here that volunteered – that there are mechanical devices that can significantly help with the number and the volume of sandbags. That can be all the – what do they call them – cement mixers and all those things that can do that job.

The CHAIR: Your time has expired.

Rodney George HARRISON: Thank you, everybody.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. If we could call the next three people to the open mic session, we should have in the room Brooke Ryan, Peter Conway and Elaine Breen. Can you make your way up to the mic, please.

The CHAIR: Again, just before you begin, make sure you state your full name for the Hansard record. We will start with Brooke.

Brooke RYAN: Hi, my name is Brooke Ryan. I have an emergency management background, and I am here today to present on some of the learnings and lessons that I experienced during the flood. I live at 21 Hansen Street so was on the Warren Street island that was declared an evacuation area. My parents unfortunately had recently moved up from Melbourne and live in Pakenham Street, and they were on the wrong side of the levee. So I have experiences of the two evacuation areas and was embarrassed and appalled at the lack of support from the emergency services of all agencies, knowing what we are capable of doing.

To me the evacuation areas were given because the agencies did not know how to deal with the situation. Calling them an evacuation area then exhausted any opportunities of providing support through the mechanisms that we know that IMTs are capable of. Two things that could have easily occurred: I think the IMT should have been based in Echuca and been locally supported by the SES. Secondly, I think it is really important that when evacuation areas are declared and that the houses are not inundated we provide support to those residences through the implementation of task forces. If we had done that, that would have made a significant difference to actually the mental health of people and getting through the emergency event. It was heartbreaking being in Echuca watching the army in High Street take kids around on tours in their trucks – great community response in educating children – whilst we had no support.

The community meetings were really frustrating. Water levels were not provided. Three-quarters of the way through the emergency event the question was asked about water levels, and the response was, 'It's a CMA issue,' and there was no CMA representation at the community meetings. Facebook is a social media tool; it is one tool. We should not be relying on that one portal to provide information during an emergency. Again I will say as an emergency responder myself it was embarrassing to have SES knock at my door and provide me with a newsletter that they had not read themselves.

There was lengthy support from within the community. I do believe that the community banded together, but we were let down by emergency services. I cannot say that strongly enough. There are things that we need to learn out of this.

The aerial support – fantastic that we had aviation services. We did not use that photography to provide information about where the floodwater was moving. That was a really valuable tool that we did not utilise.

The grant system process – my property had 25 illegal applications, right from Tasmania to Western Australia. My 80-year-old neighbours – it took me two months to get them support. Their house, property, was flooded, and the DEECA call centre did not know where to direct us. After numerous submissions they eventually got their grant funding, but we were told at the end of the grant application that the emergency had passed and that they should not be receiving it.

The CHAIR: You have got 30 seconds.

Brooke RYAN: Thank you. The community information and the timing – like I said, having them during the day was inappropriate for people that were working. Facebook is not the only platform that can be used for communication. I would really like to see, in the future, forward planning. The levee at Pakenham Street could have been built in the Banyula State Forest. It should have been built in the Banyula State Forest.

Campaspe shire reduced their emergency response role from a full-time EFT to a 0.6 –

The CHAIR: Thank you. Your time has expired. Peter.

Peter G CONWAY: My name is Peter Conway. I am a retired software engineer and I live in Echuca. People say, ‘What are you doing here?’ I say, ‘Well, I have got something to contribute for you.’ But first I want to say, I want to acknowledge the angels sitting behind me that wrapped their wings around the people of Campaspe and looked after them, thank you.

There is a lot of talk about Goulburn–Murray Water should do this, should do that. Goulburn–Murray Water is a private company, listed as a company under the government – fine. The issue with that is that it has a board, it has a dynamic team of management, it has 520 staff – it is big. It is part of the \$7 billion water industry that the Victorian government manages. Last year it earned almost \$200 million in gross profit. You have to ask: what played a role in the decision-making process to protect that asset? Lake Eppalock, if it was to be man-made, would cost more than \$4 billion to replace – we are talking big numbers. The people you sit in a chamber with know that. This is a government entity, so nothing is going to happen for this community unless it is in the business plan of that entity. And whilst it is priding itself that it takes considered risks and steps with conviction into a new future, that does not sound good for Rochester, because they are not in that consideration, the 26,000 customers are.

As for Emergency Management Victoria, it is also a company, and it is a private company. In fact it has got a \$10 capital. It is not owned by the government. It was created by the government, but it is just a \$10 company. Why is it a \$10 company? Does it have a board? No, it does not. Who runs it? The commissioner and the CEO. Who else? Put your hand up, the minister. So if you want to do something when you head back to Parliament, get a member on to revisit the *Constitution Act* and look at the separation of powers, and you know what they are: the legislation and the legislators and the executive and the judiciary. In each of these companies, it is wrong to have a minister sitting on top of them. It is wrong for them to be able to direct that company what to do. It does not happen in the real world – it just does not. So what has to happen is they need to step aside. We need to revisit that *Constitution Act* and we need to get a short circuit breaker in there, and that is the executive. We need to get a department between the entity and the ministers, so that these things do not get confused again.

The CHAIR: Twenty seconds left.

Peter G CONWAY: Commissioner Crisp could have fixed this; all he had to do was declare an emergency of state significance on 2 October when Eppalock passed the 1991–2001 capacity.

The CHAIR: Your time is expired. Thank you. Elaine.

Elaine BREEN: I am Elaine Breen. I have been a resident here for about 5 ½ years. My main concern was Lake Eppalock with the spillway and the weir down at Elmore busting, causing the floods. I think the water authorities have to take more consideration in how the dams with their levels are. I think we need mitigation controls so it does not happen again. We have at least two-thirds of residents not in their homes, me included, living in a caravan, and now nearly 11 months later, we are having trouble with builders. You see them for a couple of days, and then you do not see them for a month. I think a lot of people throughout Rochester are

experiencing the same thing. Insurance companies have been great, but it is the tradespeople. That is about all I have got to say.

The CHAIR: No worries. Thank you very much.

I will just call the next lot of people, and some may be here, some may not be. The next people I have on my list are Linda Dimsey, Shirley Wallace – and is Shane Wolfe here? No, okay. Then we have got Cassandra Evans. Could those people make their way to the mic. Linda Dimsey, Shirley Wallace – no. Geoff Carson – no. Anyone else? Kevin Long. Is Kevin here – yes. Veronica Groat – yes, come on down. Okay, thank you. When I call you, could you just begin by stating your full name for the Hansard record. Kevin, we will start with you.

Kevin LONG: Okay. My name is Kevin Long. I am a long-range weather forecaster from Bendigo. You guys have got a big job ahead of you, because I believe there is a lot of change that has got to come about. I would like to point out that the flood we got last year was not the biggest flood we could have had, because Eppalock, with 100 millimetres of run-off, will completely fill 300,000 megalitres. The bureau last year was forecasting 100 to 150 millimetres of rain events on several occasions during the springtime, yet our water authorities did nothing to try to minimise that large risk that was here in Rochester. Eppalock sat at 110 per cent full when we had another 120 millimetres over two days. Two 65-millimetre rain days, it was, nothing out of the ordinary as far as a single-day rain event goes, but that meant that 450,000 megalitres came to Eppalock in the next 24 hours. Eppalock stored 100,000 megalitres while it rose to 136 per cent full, and it passed 150,000 megalitres. It is quite likely that we could have 200 millimetres of rain in two days. We had it back in 2011 in the Bridgewater area in the Loddon Valley. We could have it here in this valley too. If we did get a 200-millimetre rain event in two days, you have got 600,000 megalitres coming through Eppalock. To pass that sort of rain event through safely, you have to have at least 200,000 megalitres of airspace. You have to start releasing water three days before, at 50,000 megalitres a day, so that you gain another 100,000 megalitres. You keep releasing 50,000 megalitres. So over a 10- to 11-day period you can pass your 500,000 to 600,000 megalitres of rain with only 50,000 megalitres.

For the first 48 years of Eppalock's life it never went over 55,000 megalitres per day released. That was because there was management going on. There was a hydro plant in Eppalock which used to pass water through and generate power. That has all been removed. They are not doing anything with the water, so there is no reason to release it. It stays there; it sits there. Today it is at 100.4 per cent. It has been like that for the last two months. They opened the pipeline, halfway open – 800 megs a day – for about a fortnight, and they dropped it. They shut it back down again. 150 megalitres a day is presently being released. Eppalock sits at 100.4 per cent. So a 50-millimetre rain in the catchment and you have got another big flood in Rochester. We do not need it.

We have the opportunity with all our reservoirs to maintain our space and to bridge out the flood peaks. Last year's flood on the Murray was made because they were dropping the level of the Hume and Eildon after a small rain event at the end of September because they had let the reservoirs go up to 99 per cent full. So all the way through October they were dropping them; they dropped 5 per cent out of them during October. So that was extra water going into all the rivers, making the floods bigger from the wettest month we ever had. The wettest October we have ever had was 250 millimetres of rain in this area.

The CHAIR: You have 30 seconds.

Kevin LONG: Okay. So thank you for your time. I hope that you can bring about change that will mitigate floods in the future, not make them bigger. The current rules are set up to save the maximum amount of water and make the biggest possible flood you can given the rain that you have got that year – the biggest possible flood. That is what the rules mean: make the biggest possible flood. They must be changed.

Cassandra EVANS: Hi, my name is Cassandra Evans, and I resided in Murrabit West, in the Gannawarra Shire Council, during the floods. In my experience the floods brought out the worst in our community. When the water arrived in our community, the meetings were only open to the people who were part of the CFA or the SES. We were shut off from the police, the council and the other government bodies who were keeping track of the water in our area. Only by social media did we become aware that the locals of Murrabit West, Gonn and Benjeroop were all behaving in an unacceptable manner in a way of deliberately breaching levee banks with their excavators outside of daylight hours and blocking water drains in our areas. They were

sandbagging residents' homes with sandbags and dirt mounds to contain water in their property. We found out that the ICC, also known as the incident control centre, only authorised the water warden to deliberately breach three levee banks to allow or control the water in our area. From Dawe Road through to Hickey Lane there were 15 breaches in that area. This is only a 10.4-kilometre area between the two streets, so every 500 metres there was a breach. None of these were authorised, and there was no proof that they were all natural breaches. Now, up to just recently, 10 months on, the water warden is now trying to scrummage around to get some or most of the breaches fixed in our area, because we are under threat again from water that can potentially flood our area less than 12 months from the last flood.

The local council and the NCCMA and the local SES have all put their hands up with a big, long shrug and told us they are not providing us with any assistance or funding of money to fix the breaches that were caused in our area. Those affected by the water who were not businesses in the area were given no assistance to remove the water from the property, no assistance for travel to come and go from their temporary home and to get the water off their property and no assistance to relocate their animals during the flood off their flood-affected land.

Apparently, these locals here in Benjeroop behaved the same way in 2011, and there were no repercussions for them behaving in such a manner, so they behaved as they so wished. I would like to state that people need to be accountable for their actions if they want to take it into their own hands to damage people's properties and to keep water inside their properties once they have done so. The government departments need to understand the way the water runs through our town and how it impacts us and that funds need to be allocated to people who need them most in our area.

Veronica GROAT: Hello. I am Veronica Jane Groat. I am a bit nervous. I am the co-proprietor of the Strathallan Glider Sanctuary, and I think I have got a good news story to finish up today. Our house, a little 4-acre block, was flooded. We saw the floods coming up. I rang the neighbours – Les Moon across the road – an older couple, like us: 'How are you going, Les? Have you got any water there?' He said, 'Yes, but I'm in Queensland.' So he sent his daughter across on a tractor to see us, and she sussed everything out. She went home. We knew she was there. She said there was space there if we needed it. She rang back later and said, 'Dad says you must come here,' which was wonderful. We had 16 cages with 45 squirrel gliders in there. There was no way that we could take our animals and go to Shepparton or Bendigo or anywhere else; we had to stay there. And the water was coming into the house. It did not do that in 2011, but it certainly did this time.

So we decided: 'Look, we'll have to do something'. We were just sitting there in gumboots in the lounge with the house covered. Next thing, the SES came from Swan Hill – flat-bottomed boat. They picked us up, and the two dogs, which was really quite exciting at the time, and we headed off across. We ended up spending 10 days across the road with Rachael and Michael Moon. Feeding the gliders was interesting from that perspective. We could get food all right, because Rachael seem to have plenty there. We cut up all the tucker for the gliders. There was a canoe that Michael had. Michael and John were getting the canoe across one part. They would drag the canoe across the road, get in the next part and go into our place and feed the gliders. That went on for 10 days, and that was pretty good. We were happy about that.

A lot has happened since. We have been to hell and back, like many people. Not to hell and back – that is a bit rough. We have had it pretty tough getting the house fixed up. The good news is we were back in the house on Tuesday, so we are a good news story from a couple of perspectives. The other good news story is of course all the gliders are fine. We did not lose any gliders, and at the moment we have got all the gliders in breeding pairs in the cages for the coming breeding season. So despite the flood – throw it at us – in Strathallan we can manage. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you all very much for those contributions. What we will do now is call the next round of speakers to the open mic. So thank you, Catriona Jenkins. I will again go through the list to see if these people turned up: Shane Wolfe – still no Shane; Geoff Carson – no Geoff; Linda Dimsey – no; and Shirley Wallace – no. Okay, Catriona, over to you, if you would like to commence by stating your full name for the record.

Catriona JENKINS: Catriona Jenkins. Can everyone hear me?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Catriona JENKINS: Okay, good. I did put my name down to speak here, but I got an email saying that I had missed the cut. So I have just hastily put something together, but what I want to talk about is my experience. My experience, sadly, has been characterised by slipping back into depression, which I experienced for a lot of my 30s and 40s. I thought I had dealt with it, and here it all is again. I think it comes down to, for me, a couple of things. It is feeling quite isolated in this town, not because it is not a town full of people who really care deeply about everyone else but just because that is part of my personality. I am not somebody who necessarily puts myself forward and seeks assistance. I like to sort of carry on by myself and get it sorted myself. But my experience has been – the strip out from my house did not happen until April. Just today it has been eight weeks since anyone came and did anything at my house. I have got a little bit done. I have got walls, which is better than a lot of people. I have got arches; I have got skirts. But I cannot see it being done by Christmas at this rate.

I am in a caravan. I do not have any kind of annex or anything else that I can be in. I have got a shed, but it is full of all my stuff. So it is the caravan or nowhere, really, for me, and when it is cold and it is wet, well, that is where my life is. I have found it really difficult to adapt to that life. I have arthritis, and I have a lot of trouble getting in and out of the damn thing. I had some steps put into the caravan, so that made it easier for me, but my house looks like a dump site at the moment, and negotiating everything in the house and getting everything done is really, really very difficult. I was spending \$80 a week just to keep it warm. This year was supposed to be the year I did landscaping at my house, so I have taken the whole year off. I am a teacher. I was working at the superschool in Shepparton, which is a gig that is likely to instil depression in anybody really, so I took this year off to sort of recover from that a little bit and to landscape my garden. Well, that has not happened, because there is a bloody caravan in the way and I cannot move in and out of my backyard to carry materials et cetera. So that has not happened, which is probably contributing.

It started up, I suppose, the feeling of depression, around Christmas time – I suppose after Christmas. I guess I have got myself to the point now where sometimes I cannot come out of the caravan, because I do not feel like anything is going to work. If I come out and intend to do something, it is not going to work out. It is not going to happen. Something will get in the way, so what is the point? I just bloody well stay there and stew, so I feel more isolated than ever before.

In other ways – and this is a positive thing – I have actually made connections with people in this town that I had lost contact with, so there are some positive things that have come out of it. But I cannot emphasise more just how demoralising and degrading it is to live in these conditions, to take your pisspot out once a week or more and drive it around the town looking for somewhere you can dump it and to have to fill up water tanks in the middle of the night when it is raining and it is cold because the other infrastructure in my caravan has basically conked out now. And the difficulty if you have a problem like that is actually getting somebody to come and fix it for you, because try and get a tradie these days – forget it.

The CHAIR: You have 30 seconds left.

Catriona JENKINS: I do not think there is much more I want to say. This cannot happen again. It cannot happen to people in this town. I am not the only one. I know I am not the only one. We have got to do something about this, and I implore you to go away, seriously think about what people have said today and get to work trying to do something seriously about the problem. You have heard enough today about the kinds of solutions that we could use. Please, please do something about it.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. That brings us to the conclusion of our open mic session, so I would just like to thank all contributors who came and gave their time for this afternoon's session. I just want to thank everyone who came to sit in the public gallery today and watch the proceedings, and of course we are back again tomorrow at Echuca. Thank you all again for coming.

Committee adjourned.