

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 21 April 2021

*(via videoconference)*

#### **MEMBERS**

Ms Sarah Connolly—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

**WITNESSES**

Ms Sharon Terry, Manager, Environment, Greater Shepparton City Council; and

Mr Keith Oberin, General Manager, Community, Campaspe Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks for joining us and taking the time this morning to speak with the committee at this public hearing for the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations. On behalf of the committee

I acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of this land, and we pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be joining us here today.

This is one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee will be conducting to inform itself about issues relevant to this inquiry. Before we begin I need to point out a couple of things to you. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. What this means is that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give today. However, it is really important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments that you make outside of this hearing, even if you are just simply restating what you said today.

You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so, and that is for you to check and to approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report. Thanks again for joining us. Can I just remind members and witnesses to mute their microphones when not speaking to minimise the interference that sometimes happens with Zoom meetings.

My name is Sarah Connolly and I am the Chair of this committee. I am also the Member for Tarneit. Tarneit is in Melbourne's western suburbs and is in one of the largest growth corridors both here in Victoria and indeed this country. I am going to throw it open to my colleagues to introduce themselves, and then we will go to Sharon and Keith.

**Mr MORRIS:** Thanks, Sarah. I am David Morris. I am the Deputy Chair of the committee and the Member for Mornington. I am also shadow parliamentary secretary for local government, for housing and for ageing.

**Mr FOWLES:** I am Will Fowles. I am the Member for Burwood, which has the distinction, according to the *Australian's* demographer, of being the most suburban area in Australia.

**Ms GREEN:** I am Danielle Green. I am the Member for Yan Yean and the Parliamentary Secretary for Sport and for regional Victoria. I represent a very large growing area, but I am familiar with a lot of the issues in Greater Shepparton and Campaspe through my work with the regional partnerships. Thank you for presenting today.

**Mr HAMER:** I am Paul Hamer, and I am the Member for Box Hill in the eastern suburbs.

**The CHAIR:** We might start with Sharon. Do you want to just introduce yourself, and then we will go to Keith and then we will come back. If you have got a 5-minute presentation or statement that you want to make, that would be great.

**Ms TERRY:** Thanks very much, everyone. Thanks for the opportunity to present to you today. My name is Sharon Terry. I am the Manager, Environment, at Greater Shepparton City Council. I have been working at council for almost 12 years now and have been working in this space for all of that time.

**Mr OBERIN:** Good morning, everyone. My name is Keith Oberin. I am the General Manager of Community at the Shire of Campaspe—40 years experience in local government in Bendigo and in Campaspe, a local resident for all that time. Thank you again for the opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** Sharon, do you want to kick off with some opening remarks or a presentation?

**Ms TERRY:** Thanks, Sarah. I do not have a presentation, but I am happy to provide some opening remarks. Are you happy for me to speak for 10 or 15 minutes now, or are you looking for a shorter introduction first?

**The CHAIR:** Just a shorter introduction, because I know, having spoken to members of the committee, they have got a lot of questions for you, and I am mindful of the time that we have got today together and want to maximise that time. We have all had a look at your submissions, so if you just keep it to 5 minutes, and then I know we have got great questions to jump in with and we will sort of have a broader discussion to flesh out some more things that we are looking for.

**Ms TERRY:** Great. Thanks very much. A few of you are certainly familiar with our landscape. My response is really around the context of our landscape. So environmental infrastructure is something that is wholly valued in our community and within the organisation. We live in a very cleared landscape, though, so there is only 3 per cent of our remnant vegetation remaining. So the opportunities for interaction with the natural environment are fairly limited without council investing in recreating or constructing those types of opportunities.

So the public land that is in Greater Shepparton municipality is managed primarily through Parks Victoria and jointly with Yorta Yorta nations, and I recognise I am coming to you from Yorta Yorta lands today. So council has invested fairly significantly in creating opportunities for the community to interrelate with the natural environment. One of those ways is through our developments and utilising the water-sensitive urban design principles, where we have constructed a number of stormwater treatment systems in our developing residential areas, and those areas also incorporate walking paths and open space.

We also manage quite a bit of native open space, and often that is adjacent to public space. We have worked really strongly on developing a partnership with other land managers and agencies who are responsible for those natural resources. We have a system of shared paths that run through Parks Victoria/Yorta Yorta-managed land and that partnership is really critical, and I would love the opportunity to talk to you a bit more about that.

What we have found through the pandemic is that that need to connect to nature, whether it is in a natural environment or in a more urban environment, is really strong. The pandemic really highlighted to us the importance of creating those natural spaces for the community to come to as a place of refuge. That refuge was because of an emergency through the pandemic, but council is also very committed and very focused on the emergency of climate change and how we design our spaces to create safe places for the community to come to as a source of refuge, as a source of cooling or as a response to other forms of natural emergency or weather conditions so that they are accessible to everybody in the community regardless of your socio-economic status or your ethnicity. I might leave it at that, thanks, Sarah; I am just mindful of time.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Sharon. I am going to throw to you, Keith.

**Mr OBERIN:** Thanks, Sarah. I do not really want to highlight what is already in the submission. I guess the single point there was that from the point of view of our community and ourselves as a local government entity, we have had ongoing frustrations with being able to provide community access to land that is managed by VicTrack, and I am sure that the panel have got a whole range of questions that they can go into from there. That frustration is both from community usage but also commercial usage of those areas which may be available for development.

I guess in an overall sense some of the other things I would just comment on: I agree wholeheartedly with where Sharon is coming from in regard to the recognised value of environmental opportunity for communities and visitors. And obviously with Echuca being the focus of the Shire of Campaspe and the high tourism rates that we receive, that is driven largely by those reserves alongside the Murray River going up to Gunbower and the Ramsar-listed wetlands there.

I guess I would highlight the concerns that we often have around the resourcing of Parks Victoria to be able to manage those spaces in an appropriate manner and to be able to allow the community access to those areas. I guess the other thing building on from that is that the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council have undertaken a number of reports—the river red gum report and the box-ironbark report—which made significant recommendations, and it is concerning that none of those really fairly robust recommendations have been implemented to their full extent. That would be something that I think the committee could give some consideration to into the future. There is a simple example of where time has eroded the opportunity to undertake the formation of significant environmental opportunities for residents and visitors to Echuca in particular.

Back in the late 70s, early 80s, the then State Rivers and Water Supply, who were concerned about not just supplying water but also drainage, were purchasing lands on the flood plain to the north-west of Echuca. There were a whole range of privately owned dwellings which had been inundated by flooding, and so there were a series of purchases made over a period of time. But they ceased, so there are still on that flood plain in grave danger, although they cannot be on-developed, I think up to 11 residences. So we are just waiting for the next significant flood, which could impact those. I think that opportunity, which is now alongside the major new crossover, which will happen in Echuca because of the new bridge which is being built, the new entry into the city, could all become an area of open space and parklands into the future. I think I will leave it there, Sarah, and I am happy to answer questions based around the submission or any of those points that I have raised.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Keith. Look, I might just jump in and jump straight onto your submission, Keith, and the primary concerns with VicTrack. I can see your submission has highlighted really two primary areas of concern, firstly around the lack of opportunity for community use of underdeveloped and redundant rail land and then secondly by VicTrack the commercial return on the sale of underdeveloped and redundant rail land where commercial opportunity may exist. Can you just hash out for us and explain in more detail what council's concerns are, and then, really importantly, what do you want to see government do to improve its policymaking in order to ensure a good outcome for all parties?

**Mr OBERIN:** Okay, and I know that we are dealing with public lands here, so the state would want to see maximum return or maximum community benefit from the lands under whichever agencies manage them. I guess an example of the community access is in the former rail corridor between Girgarre and Stanhope. The area in the town of Girgarre and the first two rural blocks going out of that town to the south were converted to Crown land. They were handed back to the Crown from VicTrack. The Crown then provided for a committee of management of locals to develop the area. They have managed that space. They have created a trail along that space. They have repaired the fences. They have undertaken weed control. They have undertaken some replanting and revegetation. From there through to Stanhope, where they would actually like to continue, the land is still under the control of VicTrack, and up until Monday of this week VicTrack had refused to enter into any community leases with a community organisation even if it was an incorporated and legal entity. For the last two years that has been the case, and all of a sudden—and I may be cynical and sceptical, and this inquiry is underway and I do not know where there may have been some influence—they have indicated that they will enter into a community lease. I do not think they should need to. I think any land in a rural context that does not have any future commercial value should be transitioned back to the Crown and DELWP, and there the community can enter into an arrangement, a committee of management with the Crown, as has occurred in that small stretch in and around Girgarre. So that would be I guess my overall point. That is something certainly this council has communicated through to the MAV and to local members, and hopefully those local members have also spoken in Parliament in regard to this matter.

On the commercial return, I recognise that. I also recognise that to a certain extent VicTrack may be hamstrung by their own processes and own policies. They will receive a significantly greater return for dealings around commercial land availability in metropolitan Melbourne than they will in rural areas. That is just a given. We understand that. An example I will give is in Echuca in an area that on a cooperative basis VicTrack, V/Line, the Department of Transport, the council and a whole range of other stakeholders as well entered into the development of a master plan for a whole range of disused sites. That has basically stalled because of the processes and the policies of VicTrack, and we cannot move on. An example of it in that space is that the council approximately 10 years ago entered into a lease of a site in that area on Sturt Street to develop a car park. It was a gravel car park, and it cost an annual lease arrangement in the order of \$5000 a year. Council then spent approximately \$180 000 redeveloping that—sealing it, putting in curbing and lighting and making it safe, line marking et cetera—and because of the commercial value increase the annual rental cost was then upgraded to \$30 000 a year. I find that a bit unfair. The council undertook all the work—

**Ms GREEN:** It is just rude.

**Mr OBERIN:** and improved the asset to find that that has occurred. We then said, 'Okay, if that's going to be the case, we'll buy it. Have a valuation and we'll buy it off you'—'No, why would we sell it to you when we're making money off it as it is at the moment?'. This type of attitude to me is inappropriate, unjust and unfair. There are other areas within that site that could be developed, and I recognise that this is a commercial decision. The priority for VicTrack is to look at those areas in metro Melbourne where they would actually for their efforts get a far, far greater return. I guess they are the two areas that you were mentioning, Sarah.

**The CHAIR:** That is really interesting—some very interesting points there. I am going to throw it open to David for a question.

**Mr MORRIS:** Thanks, Sarah. On a slight change of topic, but I will stick with Keith for a moment. Sharon, I will come to you shortly. Keith, you talked about the river red gums report and the box-ironbark report. I think both those reports might have actually been tabled prior to my time in Parliament, which dates from 2006, but I was certainly part of the conversation about the river red gum national park and the work that was done there. You were referring to recs that were not implemented. Can you give us a bit more information on that aspect of your comments?

**Mr OBERIN:** I think—exactly, in your intro you talked about the river red gum national park, the creation of a national park along the river from basically Gunbower through to Echuca and beyond to Barmah, something of that ilk. If that actually occurred, I am sure then the interest of the general public but also the access to resources by the managing body would be significantly increased, so just that simple thing alone. And I know that in the area around Victoria Park, which is where the new bridge is being constructed at the moment, the crossover point, it has actually segmented Victoria Park. On one side is the active recreation area with the oval and the sporting facilities et cetera. On the other side is the bushland and it is the junction of the Campaspe and the Murray rivers, and that is an area that was felt could be ultimately managed by the local First Nations and Yorta Yorta. So there are those types of opportunities, I guess, which, as you say, probably predate 2006 and yet have not been acted upon.

The other one, the box-ironbark—I know that within the box-ironbark it was recognised, and I will just go back to VicTrack for a moment for you, David, sorry—

**Mr MORRIS:** No, please do.

**Mr OBERIN:** The rail corridor from Rushworth through to Colbinabbin has significant box-ironbark habitat that has encroached into that reserve because it has been disused for so long. It was recommended that that be actually handed over to DELWP and forest management to manage that particular area, and that again has not occurred. So they are just two examples of things that the VEAC report has put up and appear to have been lost.

**Mr MORRIS:** Thanks for that. Thanks, Sarah.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, David. I am going to throw to Will.

**Mr FOWLES:** Thanks, Chair. I just want to I guess focus in on what our recommendation might be in relation to what are currently VicTrack tranches of land. Keith, is it your preference to actually have DELWP become the committee of management and then to be establishing its own parks so there are Victorian government parks, or would a better scenario be that the shire become the committee of management and you then get to control directly what sort of recreation outcome there is?

**Mr OBERIN:** Sorry, Sharon, for dominating. I think, Will, it depends upon the circumstance and obviously the merit of each particular area, but overall in a broad sense no. I think the opportunity is that rural land that is not in a township that has some commercial possibility should be handed or transitioned back to the Crown, which is where it would have been in the first place over a century ago, and the Crown should then determine: will that portion of land be included within a forest reserve or within a state park or a national park or is it available to then be made accessible to the community through a committee of management status? The examples that I have given around Lockington, around Kyabram and around Girgarre and Stanhope are all ones where the community want to develop and in some instances have probably developed those sites without permission. They have taken the attitude that it is easier to seek forgiveness than to seek permission. When I spoke to VicTrack five or six years ago I spoke of the area between Stanhope and Rushworth on the rail corridor there. The local Landcare groups had planted out those sites and there were 25-foot-high gum trees in a habitat corridor completely covering the rail reserve. VicTrack sitting in their Docklands office said, 'Oh no, that wouldn't be the case. We haven't given permission for that to occur'. They need to get out of the office and come and have a look at these rail reserves. They are not maintaining them. There are weeds, there is poor fencing—

**Mr FOWLES:** Look, I appreciate the current model is not great. I guess what I am trying to direct you towards is: what is the best model? I am a bit surprised that you are saying it goes to DELWP and they have got

to make some evaluations or whatever. Are they the right authority, the right department, for that? Are they going to be able to do that sufficiently quickly and responsively do you think?

**Mr OBERIN:** My dealings with DELWP Crown land division are at a regional level, and that is through the Bendigo office. They are, and I think they can pretty quickly assess what those opportunities are. I mean, they are the biggest land manager in the state, so they have got the processes. I just think that they are a much better opportunity. So yes, that would be my recommendation.

**Mr FOWLES:** No worries. Look, thank you for that, Keith. Chair, if I could ask Sharon a quick question: given the nature of your patch—you have got some very urban areas, you know, covered in hard surfaces, and my question goes to stormwater treatment, and you have also got those genuinely rural parts of your area—to what extent can councils like yours, where you have got those two types, use your proximity to non-urban land to assist in the treatment of stormwater or the development of waterways? Or do you have just kind of conventional stormwater problems as you would experience in other urban areas?

**Ms TERRY:** That is a great question, Will. I think our capacity to utilise land outside of the urban environment is restricted by who owns that land. We have a heavily invested in irrigation district, and the community places high value on that land and the use of that land. Of course with that fringe there is growth, so the land use is changing on the outer fringes of our urban centres. But at this point council is very much restricted to treating stormwater within land that we manage, and I think that is fair.

As I mentioned before, we have been engaged in water-sensitive urban design for around 17 years now, and we have extensive, constructed wetlands, which have greatly increased the availability of natural spaces for the community to utilise, but on the other side there is an expectation of a high standard of maintenance on those. The more of these that we take on, the greater the cost to local government. If you do not mind, I would also like to just jump into that conversation or the question you raised with Keith.

**Mr FOWLES:** Sure.

**Ms TERRY:** Councils—we, Greater Shepparton—are very restricted on how much we can continue to take on with limited income sources. I mentioned the expectation of a high standard of care. We are going through our consultation for our council plan. Some initial feedback is that that high standard of care for our public open space is highly valued, but that comes at a cost for us, and the more we take on, the greater that cost. So along with the constructed wetlands we have also worked closely with the CMA in the past to put in gross pollutant traps along particularly the Goulburn River. We have seven in place. There are still two large stormwater outlets that are draining straight into the river. This of course has [Zoom dropout] issues, litter issues, and there are significant engineering problems with those remaining outlets. So we are thinking about the integrated water management plan and the integration of different council policy—state government policy—that is currently underway and under review. There is a real opportunity there for investigation, visibility and that whole process to look at: how can we resolve these issues? So we do require assistance from the state in this space.

**Mr FOWLES:** Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Will. I am going to throw to Danielle.

**Ms GREEN:** Thanks to both Keith and Sharon. Sharon, I was interested in knowing more about the relationship between the Greater Shepparton council and Parks Vic. You have discussed the strong relationship that exists and the constraints, being funding and resources of the local Parks Vic team. Can you provide more detail on how the relationship works between council and Parks Vic? Besides additional funding, what other things do you think government can do to improve the outcomes of this relationship? I am also interested from the Parks Vic point of view. Do they have local traditional owners or Aboriginal staff, Aboriginal rangers on staff in Greater Shepparton?

**Ms TERRY:** Thanks, Danielle—some great questions there. I might need you just to bring up a couple of them as I work through our response. One of the key partnerships we have with Parks Victoria is through the RiverConnect project. It is a project or a partnership that has been in place for 15 years now. It came about because of concern from the community about how the rivers, waterways and flood plains were being managed by the various agencies that have a stake in these areas. So 15 years down the track we have an implementation advisory committee that has all the agencies represented on that committee, along with five community

members, Yorta Yorta and other groups as well including tourism groups, the education department and a few other things. The partnership is both from a land management point of view and from an education and connection point of view. Parks Victoria have an education officer—I think it has not long been a full-time position—and they work closely with the RiverConnect project officers in council to undertake education activities both formally through the schools and also with the broader community. To undertake that education, we need infrastructure in those areas. Council has invested in being the leader in developing those projects both from quite extensive community consultation to identify what the community want to see happen in those areas to funding those projects, often in conjunction with the state and the federal governments. At the moment we are finalising two projects right now to extend the shared paths system.

We have a very strong relationship with the local Parks Victoria team. One of the issues is around the assets that council owns on public land and the opportunities to formalise that relationship with Parks Victoria. What we found is that we have been engaged in about a nine-year process to come to an agreement to have some form of licensing or committee of management arrangement. That has waxed and waned over time due to constraints in both organisations. We are at the point now where we have a direction forward, but it is a clunky, difficult process to work through, and we are finding at times there is inconsistency between the advice we have received from different departments within Parks Victoria and within the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. This creates delays in the projects themselves, in delivering the projects. We have been told we absolutely cannot construct any new assets on Parks Victoria land until there is an arrangement in place, and we are dealing with the legacy of bringing all those assets that have been developed on Parks Vic land to be part of the committee of management. Streamlining those processes is really important.

I am just going to refer back to Keith's points again about some studies and some strategic documents and work that has been done. Included in that is the *Biodiversity 2037* strategy for DELWP. All of that strategic work is talking about enabling a sense of ownership and custodianship from the community onto our public space—there is benefit there for the state and there is benefit there for the community—but also investing in the resources to support that to happen, to increase the biodiversity outcomes on those public lands. We have continuous strips of native vegetation, but it is declining, and that has been recognised in the recent state of the environment report. There is a real desire within the community to do that, to see that happen, but there is still a clunkiness in approvals, in who pays for what, who is responsible for what and where that money might come from. I am sure I have missed something that you asked, Danielle.

**Ms GREEN:** Just about whether Parks Vic, actually council as well, have got Aboriginal rangers and traditional owners actually involved in paid employment in caring for these areas—both entities.

**Ms TERRY:** I know that there are rangers in the Murray national park. I am not up to date on whether there have been traditional owner rangers incorporated down in Lower Goulburn National Park, in our Shepparton Regional Park and the other public land that surrounds us.

In terms of Shepparton's connection with the Yorta Yorta, it is a relationship that we are working towards strengthening. The RiverConnect program has again created a really integral platform for agencies to come together in a neutral space. So we have had some really good outcomes. One of the paths that we are updating at the moment is the Flats path, which is recognising the Cummeragunja walk-off, and there is signage along there as well. That has a really strong tourism potential. We are hoping that it is going to support the Yorta Yorta's aspirations to build a tourism industry around cultural tourism, and we are very committed to supporting that where we can.

I am afraid I am probably not in a good position to really answer that relationship between the Yorta Yorta and Parks Victoria. I know there was a formal agreement in place, and I presume that will be a work in progress.

**Ms GREEN:** Sarah, if I may, I just have sort of a follow-up question for Sharon. Just in relation to what you said about the drainage into the Goulburn, I know that there is still quite a bit of greenfield development and I am not sure whether that is, you know, with any particular developers, like a Stockland or whatever, but do you think there is any capacity for council to acquire any developer contributions from those developers for that purpose, or indeed any industrial users?

**Ms TERRY:** For the new developments, the existing outlets that I spoke about, Danielle, are in our contained catchments so they are very well developed. One of them, for example, is from the CBD area. An issue there is that the outlet pit is, I think, around 7 metres lower than the street level, so to capture the pollution

that is coming through those requires quite a bit of an engineering feat. In terms of new developments, because we subscribe to water-sensitive urban design and through the *Infrastructure Design Manual* that I think around half of the councils in Victoria are a part of, we have very specific requirements for developers when they are looking to develop a brand-new—a greenfield—area, and water capturing is part of that.

There is a lot of work to do, mind you. Under the veil of climate change we need to really assess the suitability of those developments and look at dealing with the impacts that climate change will create on those existing structures and then how do we be a bit smart about how we design what we do in the future. Again, in those Integrated Water Management Forums that I know are starting up again, it is going to be a really important conversation for that. And certainly developers do contribute to those open spaces or those community-owned assets that are part of those developments, and water retention, stormwater, is part of that. I think, though, there is probably room for improvement.

**Ms GREEN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Danielle. I will throw to you, Paul.

**Mr HAMER:** Thanks, Sarah. It has been a really comprehensive discussion, but I was actually thinking that perhaps it was an opportunity for some blue-sky thinking that might be not necessarily unique but distinct to your local areas. As was discussed before at a meeting, Campaspe is largely a rural shire with a number of sort of urban localities, and Shepparton obviously has a large regional centre in its centre, so I guess the demands and the access to open space and that environmental infrastructure is quite different from what you would need in Melbourne, particularly in terms of even the distances that you need to travel. I guess I am particularly thinking in terms of some of the new developments. I am not sure, Keith, of the growth of Campaspe, but last time we passed through Shepparton, certainly on that southern side, there does seem to be quite a level of growth. So I guess I would just be interested in what you see as perhaps some of the specific challenges relating to rural and regional Victoria in creating better access to environmental infrastructure that you might not have already touched on.

**Mr OBERIN:** I might start, Sharon. Similarly, in the Shire of Campaspe we are part of the Goulburn-Murray irrigation district, so a lot of our land has been cleared for agricultural purposes. So when we talk of remnant vegetation it really tends to be located along the watercourses—so the Campaspe River in the centre of the shire, the Murray River to the north, the box-ironbark forest around Rushworth and Whroo area. Rural people wishing to participate in a bushland area or a grassland area will have to travel there some significant distances. I think opportunities exist for connectivity utilising those corridors along the edges of those rivers similar to what Shepparton are doing at the moment, or what they have been planning over the last 15 to 20 years. We have a little partnership with them, which we are lagging on, in the rail corridor from Murchison across to Rushworth. They have built their little bit and a couple of significant bridges and we are only in the process now of doing our design for that rail trail, and that is going to link those two communities. It is going to be valuable from the locals' point of view but also they see it building tourism.

We have already had discussions with Parks Victoria and DELWP around utilising existing pathways and trails, roadways, in the Whroo forest to have connectivity through to Heathcote, which will link in with the O'Keefe trail, which links into the goldfields trail, so you start to have a statewide network. You start to see what can occur.

From the point of view of urban development, yes, really our smaller towns are either stagnant or declining from a population point of view, so there is not a huge amount of residential development. The towns that probably are growing slightly would be Rochester and Kyabram. They are around the 3500 to 5000 persons population. However, Echuca is growing strongly. It was at a point where there was very limited land available for that development simply because of the inundation issues around the junction of all the rivers in this area. So together with Victorian Planning Authority we have been processing an outline development plan to the west of the city, and again that has got a significant drainage area through the centre of that corridor, which has been utilised as a connectivity point for pedestrian and cycling trails. All the recreation spaces and open space will be off that as well in the centre of the whole development. Then we are trying to connect that back into the rest of the city, where the commercial areas are, where the retail areas are and where the schools et cetera are.



I guess we are in a similar situation to Shepparton, where we have got a largely rural area and those people have open space around them because they are farms, but that is a different sort of open space to the vegetated areas of forestation et cetera.

**Mr HAMER:** Thanks, Keith. And they are also not recreational. You cannot just go for a walk on someone's farm.

**Mr OBERIN:** No. They may be able to fly a kite, but they may take umbrage at someone else coming in and upsetting their sheep or cattle if they were trying to fly a kite. Exactly right, Paul.

**Mr HAMER:** Excellent.

**Ms TERRY:** Paul, I guess, apart from our submission, one thing I would like to highlight is some issues around the value of native vegetation as it is defined under the planning scheme. So for us, we have significant natural assets in our scattered trees, and one of the things we are seeing as greenfields come online for development is that under the planning scheme those trees, while they have a higher level of value accorded to them under the framework than they did in the past, we are still losing those significant structures from the landscape, whereas in fact there is a great opportunity to utilise those within open space to create a framework, I suppose, for some really innovative open native space. So we look forward very much to the reviews that are going on at the moment.

Another one that we are really quite excited about is the potential from the environmental sustainable design roadmap that is being developed, and that is looking at amendments into the planning scheme to identify how those principles can be incorporated into the planning scheme to enable effective and efficient decision-making from planners. We think that that has a really strong potential role to play in terms of what our rural or regional developments look like into the future and really helps to build on what we are trying to achieve and what Campaspe are trying to achieve as well.

**Mr HAMER:** Thanks, Sharon. Just another question that has come to mind is about what you might call an urban greening strategy. I know you are talking about some of the larger places, but I am just wondering in terms of your streetscapes, particularly in some of your newer developments, about how you might be looking to provide greater tree coverage so that people, if they are just going for a walk, do not necessarily have to drive to a larger regional park. Is that part of the process or are there barriers to actually implementing that?

**Ms TERRY:** It is certainly a desire, Paul. Shepparton have developed a pandemic recovery action plan, and one of the themes in that action plan is the environment. It was strongly recognised by the working group who worked on that action plan—the need to, through pandemic recovery, identify ways to increase the opportunities for the community to engage in environmental infrastructure really close to the home. So again, the pandemic really brought out the need for that or the desire for that from the community.

Council has currently an urban forest strategy. It is due for review, and the timing is great because we have a lot more science and knowledge around climate change and the impacts. Again, the lens of climate change really must be considered in all these discussions, so we have at the moment a target of 40 per cent canopy cover for our urban areas. We are looking to increase that. We are also looking to review the work that we have done in the past and how that has translated to action on the ground or outcomes on the ground and what we need to do to improve that.

From a developer's point of view, like most local councils we have a list of species that need to be planted in areas. Developers are looking to maximise their profits, so the conflict can be around what high-quality outcomes we are able to receive out of that. Once those spaces have been handed over to council, we have found in the past that the quality of the vegetation that has been put in has been really poor and we have had to go along and replace those plants. And with some of the plants, even though we provided recommendations on what should be planted, those species have not been planted, so they have created other issues around poor stock, so limbs fall. We have had situations where trees have been planted in the ground for a year or two, we have had a big storm come through and an entire tree has just popped out of the ground because the hole that it was dug in was bored into very hard clay and the plant was just popped in there, so it was like a pot plant in a ceramic pot. So monitoring of that is significant. And I guess the other thing is really education with developers. How do we engage with developers to see those broader community outcomes that we require from these standards that we are asking for?

**Mr HAMER:** That is really good. Thanks very much for that, Sharon.

**Mr OBERIN:** From our perspective it is exactly the same. From the new development perspective, the outcome that we achieve is not always what is highly desirable from the developers with species. Even when they get the right species the stock that they utilise may be the poorer of the lot. From our own perspective, especially retrofitting in a streetscape, as Sharon mentioned earlier, we are currently going through a process of going to the community with engagement around our new council plan and our vision et cetera. We had 12 meetings across the municipality in little townships through to obviously the larger townships of Echuca. I would say that almost 100 per cent of those meetings highlighted that the community would like to improve their streetscape through better plantings et cetera. When you are retrofitting into those sorts of established places the issue we then have is the overhead powerlines often, and that then inhibits our selection of what we can do. And even if we have existing trees, the way in which they have to be pruned to allow for the powerlines almost makes them non-worthy at all. They are our major issues, I think, Paul.

**Mr HAMER:** Thanks very much, Keith.

**The CHAIR:** Danielle—I think Danielle had the last question for this session.

**Ms GREEN:** Thank you so much. Firstly, before I go to my question, part of my electorate covers the City of Whittlesea and we have got lots of magnificent river red gums that the developers have worked amazingly with. The protocol that the City of Whittlesea has around river red gum protection is really well regarded and was led by a previous CEO, the late David Turnbull, who then went to Mitchell. So if either of you want to come down, I am happy to show you around and we could meet with the local council and you could have a look at some of the new areas. Stockland in Mernda Villages, for example, won a UN environment award, so it would be great to actually come and see, I think, because then you might be able to get some of the other developers to be led by these guys and improve what they are doing.

But my substantive question was: I bang on about heart health all the time because I lost my father to heart disease at 44 on the cricket field in Mildura. The City of Whittlesea, until the last reporting by the Heart Foundation, had the highest rate of heart disease in Victoria, but it has now been knocked off by the City of Greater Shepparton, which is a dubious honour to have. So Sharon, my question was: we know post-COVID the benefits especially for people's mental health with environmental infrastructure. I am making an assumption that you will be building some of this into your health and wellbeing plan, but what sort of recommendations could our committee make that could assist you with redressing some of that pretty awful health indicator?

**Ms TERRY:** Great question, Danielle. I think we have spent a bit of time talking about developers, so I feel that there is opportunity for some requirements through the VPP to increase the contribution that developers make to this space. As Keith mentioned, we need to travel a long way. We are very much committed to encouraging people to utilise passive transport, so looking at how we get people onto our shared path as a way of commuting to the workplace, understanding that we really need to be designing buildings or supporting businesses to incorporate facilities to allow for safe storage of bicycles and just having a shower or being able to look after their hygiene once they get to work. So a public campaign is going to be really important in doing that but [Zoom dropout]

**Ms GREEN:** We have lost you, Sharon.

**Ms TERRY:** I have lost my train of thought. I am sorry.

Commuting is really important. So how we design our cities, how our urban design is going to be retrofitted to incorporate those passive transport options, is going to be really important. We are a flat environment. We do not have any hills. It is no barrier for someone who does not like going up hills on a bike. So we need to remove those barriers that might be existing there for the community, understand what people see the barriers are and then work to address those.

**Ms GREEN:** Thank you, and I hope to have you come visit soon.

**The CHAIR:** I just want to thank you both, Keith and Sharon, for taking the time to talk to us today. It has been a great discussion. It is much appreciated. I do hope that you find some of the recommendations that come

out of the report are pleasing and address some of the issues that you have talked about today. It has been a great discussion, so thank you.

**Ms TERRY:** Thank you for the opportunity.

**Mr OBERIN:** Yes, once again, thank you for the opportunity and best of luck with your deliberations.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**