

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into the Environment Protection Amendment (Banning Plastic Bags, Packaging and Microbeads) Bill 2016

Melbourne — 1 December 2016

Members

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Ms Samantha Dunn

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Cesar Melhem

Mr Richard Dalla-Riva

Mr Daniel Young

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Witness

Cr Jenny O'Connor (affirmed), Mayor, Indigo Shire Council.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Welcome, everyone, to this hearing of the Standing Committee on the Environment and Planning in relation to the Environment Protection Amendment (Banning Plastic Bags, Packaging and Microbeads) Bill 2016. You should note that the evidence is being recorded. To the witness, Cr O'Connor, presenting today: welcome to the public hearing. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. I now invite you to take an oath or make an affirmation before we get underway.

What we now invite you to do is provide a brief overview for the committee. We have allowed 45 minutes in total for this session. So that we have enough time for questions, I invite you to confine your presentation to 5 minutes before we get underway.

Cr O'CONNOR — If it is okay, I will just read this, and then please ask me questions, obviously. The Indigo Shire Council, of which I am now the mayor, supports the private members bill being considered by this committee, banning plastic bags and microbeads and prohibiting supermarkets from selling fresh fruit and vegetables in unnecessary plastic and polystyrene packaging.

A resolution was passed by Indigo Shire Council in early 2016 for the development of a policy banning single-use plastic bags and water bottles within the council's operations and events. Indigo shire has started on its journey to transition away from harmful polluting plastics, and it is being supported by its environment advisory committee and the broader community.

A community forum was initiated by the environment advisory committee in September 2016 with the aim of forming a subcommittee to oversee council's transition away from single-use plastic bags and for developing strategies aimed at the broader community. The community forum was very well attended by more than 40 participants — which is pretty good in our little neck of the woods — who provided their ongoing support and enthusiasm for community education campaigns to develop branding concepts, behaviour change programs and alternatives to single-use plastic bags, including compostable bags.

Neighbouring councils in Benalla, Wangaratta, Albury and Wodonga also participated in this forum and have expressed an interest in developing a coordinated approach across north-east Victoria. Indigo shire supports the introduction of the bill, as the protection of the environment is absolutely critical. Protecting our environment from pollution and protecting from our wildlife from harm from soft plastics should be paramount to the considerations of this committee.

It is well documented that only 3 per cent of single-use plastic bags are recycled and the rest end up in our environment or in a landfill. Single-use plastic bags have been banned or levied in a number of jurisdictions within Australia and internationally. Over 100 states, countries and municipalities have introduced bans and levies. In Australia, the Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT have all banned lightweight single-use plastic bags. So Victoria is actually well behind the rest of Australia.

This bill imposes a blanket ban on all single-use plastic bags and prohibits supermarkets from selling fresh fruit and vegetables in unnecessary polystyrene packaging. So it provides the legislative support required by many Victorian communities, including ours, that have already started taking action.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you very much. That has been very helpful, Ms O'Connor, in relation to the position that Indigo Shire Council has taken. I would like to get some further information from you and from the council as to the differences and the distinguishing features that you see between biodegradable on the one hand and compostable on the other and what the alternatives are as they are able to be provided to consumers to assist with the transition from that immediately available packaging to carrying things home, for example, and phasing them out altogether. I note that there has been a concerted effort to encourage people to bring their own cloth bags and to reuse bags and that that has been going quite successfully for a number of years. But how do we take those next steps in your view?

Cr O'CONNOR — There are a couple of things that we are looking into. One is that we have introduced a three-bin scheme in Indigo shire; therefore we have an organics collection. To facilitate that, every household gets a caddy and they use cornstarch bags, which are compostable. Now that the householders are getting used to using those and are seeing how effective they are — because you can put wet things in them for three days and they still do not break open and they are fully compostable; they go into the compost system — there has

been an investigation now by people in the community, not from council as yet, as to how we could start getting businesses to use these cornstarch bags as opposed to plastic bags for things like meat, things where you do need things to be wrapped up in something. That is something that we are looking into.

They are more expensive. Some businesses are already using them just by choice because they have a concern about the polluting aspects of plastic, but obviously this is where if we can get a regional approach, then our buying power is much better. So I am talking to other councils at the moment. We are all newly elected, new mayors, so we are all trying to do a lot of things at once. But this is something that is on the radar, and people are interested in looking at whether we might be able to do some kind of procurement policy regionally to decrease the cost and to implement these for those times when people need something as a single-use bag.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — When you say that the cornstarch bags are durable and able to be used in a number of ways for, for example, perishables such as meat, you have also indicated they are more expensive. How much more expensive are they?

Cr O'CONNOR — I actually do not have those figures, I am sorry. Because we have just been looking at it at a very local level, we have not looked at what a wholesale buy-in would be. But what we did find was that when we introduced the organics scheme and were able to buy these through Halve Waste, which is our contractor, they have been able to reduce the cost. So it is looking at how we do it in a way that is not individual businesses buying them through a supplier but actually maybe the shire or regionally being able to buy them wholesale and then distributing them that way. They are the things that this committee is looking into, but because we have been in recess none of that work has actually been done. It is all new for us.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — It is all new. We are in new territory as far as the local government cycle is concerned.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes. Sorry, to finish your question, the other thing that is happening is that we are looking at opportunities to market our brand as a tourist thing by producing bags that advertise the towns such as Beechworth, Rutherglen and Chiltern on calico bags, which all the shops would be able to buy. Again, produced on a scale rather than by individual businesses, that then advertises our towns to tourists. That is kind of seen as a bit of a win-win for the reusable, bring-them-back-again bags.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Just back to cornstarch for a moment, corn, rice and other primary substances are used to create compostable bags, and the technology has come a really long way. Do you know where these cornstarch bags are produced?

Cr O'CONNOR — No, I do not.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — One of the things that we have to weigh up is environmental cost, and to play the devil's advocate for a moment, if those bags are produced in, for example, chemically contaminated processes internationally using a workforce that is being exploited, to take a scenario to its natural conclusion, and then brought in for the purpose of reducing reliance upon one type of product in exchange for another and costing more, we need to be smarter about the solutions that we are creating. I would be interested in any further information you can provide to the committee about where those cornstarch bags are produced and what the costs are. As well as that, I just wanted to get your views on the education focus on the change from single-use bags and that throwaway mentality, where they might be used for collecting dog poo in the park but that is about it, to a totally reduced reliance upon available packaging at the point of purchase?

Cr O'CONNOR — I think, as you said, it is an educative process. I think we have already seen it happen, as you mentioned before. The whole idea of bringing bags to the supermarket et cetera is something that the community has embraced really well just off their own bat really. I think from the Indigo shire point of view we would be looking at running a strong educative process, as we have done with the three-bin system. As always, there is a bit of blowback — people go, 'Oh, you know' — and it costs more.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — That is the nature of change.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes, always. We have had to deal with the blowback around these increased costs and 'We do not get to use our bins as often for things' and all that, but just as what happened with recycling, eventually it just becomes common practice. So we expect that it will take some time. It requires a concerted

effort and a resolution of council to do this, but that is how we make a lot of changes and it is just part of that process that we would normally undertake, I think.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — And you are confident that you have the social licence to be able to keep going with this?

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes. That is why having the community meeting and getting people on board was really important. Perhaps the difference in what happened in Indigo shire is that the trigger for us was actually around single-use water bottles. That came about because we have had a big issue with water mining in Indigo shire, where a contractor has been buying orchards to access water. I do not know if you know about this thing, but it is a real problem. It is actually in the Supreme Court now, which is the first time it is really being tested, because the Stanley community in my shire has taken this water contractor to the Supreme Court, so it is going to be very interesting to see what happens.

But it was in response to that and the threat of our water that is needed for agriculture and the environment being used for commercial bottling for a product that is not necessary when we have water coming out of taps. That then brought about this whole thing, 'Well, we need to stop using water bottles in our shire', much as they have done in Bundanoon, where they have the same kind of model. Then it was just a natural addition to that to say, 'Well, if we're going to take on plastic bottles as an issue, partly because of the water use, partly because of the litter and the problem with the bottles, then we should also be looking at plastic bags'.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — It is a natural progression.

Cr O'CONNOR — It was a natural progression, and the other thing that is worth noting — and this has happened out of the three-bin system — is that I was talking to our manager of waste the other day and our contribution to landfill has already reduced by 50 per cent.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Over what period is that?

Cr O'CONNOR — About 18 months. The Wodonga mayor told me yesterday it was 73 per cent in their shire. So this organic system is having a massive impact.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Just through the change to the organic sorting system?

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes. Between recycling and organics, the amount of stuff that is now not going into landfill is extraordinary. We could not believe it. It is a massive saving for us. But the other part of that is: the manager of waste said to me yesterday, 'The only thing, pretty much, that is now in the bins going to landfill is soft plastics — nothing else'. So if we banned them, there would be virtually nothing going into landfill from households. On every measure that is a fantastic outcome. Obviously there are some exceptions to that, with disposable nappies and things like that, but honestly that is pretty much all that is going into the red bins now, and I know that from my own home. There is not much else going in. Therefore we have reduced our collection to once a fortnight, and the amount that is actually in those bins is just massively reduced. We are seeing firsthand that when you take out the recycling and the organics the only things that are left are soft plastics. So if we can get rid of them, that is a pretty good outcome.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you very much for that, Ms O'Connor.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Thanks, Deputy Chair, and welcome, Ms O'Connor. Did you like that — 'Deputy Chair'?

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I did. I like the putting of me in my place. Terrific.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Correct. Can I just ask: you are a member of the Australian Greens?

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes, I am.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — And obviously part of the Australian Greens' policy platform has been plastic bags.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — So are you here representing the council or as a member of the Greens?

Cr O’CONNOR — I am here as the mayor of Indigo Shire Council, and this policy was adopted by the seven councillors, one who is the president of the National Party, one who is the now president of the Liberal Party and one who is a former Labor candidate and a strong member of Labor, so this has been cross-party, absolutely. The fact that the Greens have this policy is simply because it is good policy, and most of the people who came to that meeting would never vote Greens in a pink fit. So it has been very heavily endorsed by the community and not as a political issue.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Were you at that meeting, Mr Dalla-Riva?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — No, I was not, actually, but thank you for asking.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — No worries.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — In terms of the community buy-in, because often politicians and public reps have a view on particular issues, but the broader community may have a different view — just look at what happened in the US recently — —

The DEPUTY CHAIR — What happened in the US?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Well, there was somebody who was never expected to be elected, because people have a different view.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Ronald Reagan?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes, Ronald Reagan. That is it.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Terrific.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — So I am just curious: what sort of community engagement have you undertaken as a council? What would be the results of that community engagement in terms of the banning of plastic bags? And have those results been made public anywhere?

Cr O’CONNOR — Once we put this to council and it got past unanimously, I am a member of the environment advisory committee, so it was referred back to them and they then set up a subcommittee and invited expressions of interest from the community through the local paper and the local media. We had — I cannot remember the number — more than the positions on the committee, so we extended the number of people on the committee. They have set up a subcommittee that has only met once because then we went into recess. They are scheduled to meet again I think some time in the next month.

That committee had a meeting, and their decision was to hold a public meeting and invite all the community along. They also selected people such as the chamber of commerce and targeted business groups et cetera, and that was where we got the 40-odd people coming. What came out of that was an agreement that this was an important thing to be enacted, that we would get a pilot program going in Beechworth and Yackandandah, as two of the five main towns, and that other towns could buy in as well if they wanted to, but we wanted to trial it and see how we went. Also at that meeting were representatives from other communities and other councillors again who are not Greens councillors but they are interested in this outcome.

So when you ask ‘How did we go about it?’, there were a number of ways. At this stage, wherever I go in my community people are saying, ‘So when are we getting this happening?’. As I said, some have already brought in cornstarch bags instead of plastic themselves and are prepared to wear the cost of that. Others are asking if they can join the committee. So there is just a general sense that people think this is a really good idea. The chamber of commerce has had a meeting. They have been very proactive. They have gone out and got these quotes on having bags made up that have the towns written on them, and they are offering them to businesses to buy themselves through them, so not through the shire. They have met with the local supermarket to see if the supermarket will stock these bags. They have said they will. This is all still in process, but I would say in terms of the kinds of things that we implement as a council that this has had a fantastic uptake from the community.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Thank you. That is a very solid answer. In terms of the chamber of commerce, so you have got the local businesses and I did hear the supermarkets. Beechworth is a lovely place.

Cr O'CONNOR — Thank you.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Lots of good people come out of there.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Lots of good bakery items come out of Beechworth.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Lots of good people. That is where I grew up.

Cr O'CONNOR — Lots of good wine.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I grew up in Beechworth.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — You grew up in Orbost, didn't you?

Ms DUNN — I wondered where you came from, Mr Dalla-Riva.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I was born in Orbost.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — How many places did you grow up in? You could claim the whole of regional Victoria for your own.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I have been. But, yes, all my relatives are still up in Beechworth. That was my issue with the thought process — that you get a lot of tourists coming in, and obviously you get a lot of people who will go into the gold shop and buy something that they might stick in a plastic bag. It might be the rocks or something there. That was my concern: how the local businesses are reacting to this, because there may be a on-cost to them.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes, and that is why we are looking at whether there is potential to buy in these — to get a better price really on the cornstarch stuff. A lot of the businesses do not use plastic anyway. I had a retail business there some years ago. I just did not have plastic bags; I had paper bags. Look, they have all got their own issues. There is nothing that has no environmental footprint, but more and more in Beechworth in particular — it is where I live so I see that, but I know it happens in other towns — you will see people walking around with their little trolleys and their tote bags. It is that cultural shift. Many stores in Beechworth now just do not have plastic bags anyway. They will have a little sign just saying, 'We are trying not to' or, 'If you want a plastic bag, pay 10 cents and we will donate it to the CFA'. So lots of people were implementing strategies way before we did anything, just because they felt that it was a good outcome for the environment.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — A final question. Obviously as a state Parliament we are going to be looking at the impact across the whole of the state; this legislation is not just unique to one area. I can see how it would apply to your area where you have got very strong tourist locations, and that makes sense. This is probably more of a generic question, but how do you think this would play out in some areas where you do not necessarily have the level of buy-in, the level of management control where you can bulk order plastic bags — because it is not Beechworth labelled; it is a suburb in downtown Melbourne or a large regional city? How do you see that playing out?

Cr O'CONNOR — I guess I have really been looking at it as a shire-wide issue —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I understand that.

Cr O'CONNOR — but again, I think the same principles apply. If the Parliament made that decision, then I assume education and giving people options for what else to do — bring your own, use a box from the supermarket that they have otherwise got to get rid of. There are ways, I guess, of creating this as a win-win. If, for example, businesses can get rid of their packaging that they have to now put into recycling or landfill by their customers taking it home with their groceries in it, that is a good outcome.

I have seen this happen in other places and it has been exactly that. The businesses have said, 'Within our communities we do not want to do this anymore'. They usually say when I have asked them, 'Have you had any bad reaction to that?', they say, 'You know, sometimes people say, 'But I want a plastic bag' and I say, all right for 10 cents you can have one'. But it is that educative process: the next time they do not ask. So often it is that

people get caught out at the start and they need something to carry their groceries home in or whatever, but if they cannot do it, the next time they know to bring their own bags. So there is that process.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Like at Aldi.

Cr O'CONNOR — Like at Aldi, exactly.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — You never forget to bring your own bag.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes, you never forget.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — More than once.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes, so you forget the first time. But I assume that if the Parliament made that decision for the state, then there would be that education, there would be that reminding, there would be options for people. I might just say that we are not banning them in Indigo shire, because they are legal so we cannot ban them, but we are encouraging people not to use them. So if the state was to ban them, that would be great for us. That would actually completely support what we are already doing in a way that would make some of that optional stuff less of an issue.

Mr MELHEM — Thank you, Cr O'Connor. On the last comment you just made that if you had the chance, you would ban them, do you ban everything to do with plastic bags — all plastic bags, full stop? Or would you have exemptions?

Cr O'CONNOR — Would we?

Mr MELHEM — If we look at the proposed bill, it talks about certain exemptions and even giving the minister flexibility to exempt where it is medical, security and various other things. There has been a lot of focus on single-use bags. So if you reverse the role — you are not in the Indigo shire, you are in Parliament now — what would you ban? Would you ban the whole thing or give exemptions, as the bill talks about?

Cr O'CONNOR — My reading of the bill is that made some sense. It is not that plastic is evil; there are uses for it, but at the moment the single-use plastic bags that are used unnecessarily are creating a problem environmentally et cetera. So where plastic is required for hygiene purposes or that sort of thing, then of course I think that is totally reasonable unless you come up with a better alternative, which may happen in the future. But for now, yes. So having exemptions makes sense to me, but if the overall intention is to really remove from our system single-use plastic bags that are not necessary — and I would add single-use plastic water bottles as well — —

Mr MELHEM — I am going to come to that.

Cr O'CONNOR — Okay. I know the bill does not address that, but it seems to me to be a sensible outcome. It is being done all over the world. It has been a good outcome, including within Australia.

Mr MELHEM — So in a practical sense the bags are used by Coles, Woolworths and IGA, for example, for shopping. That has been the number one target — the ban — the single one?

Cr O'CONNOR — I assume a ban is across the board.

Mr MELHEM — Yes, but I am talking about the types of bags.

Cr O'CONNOR — Right, yes.

Mr MELHEM — The types of bags, that is what you would be looking at — —

Cr O'CONNOR — The supermarket.

Mr MELHEM — Yes, the supermarket-type, which is single use. Actually when you put the stuff in them, they have got holes in them anyway and sometimes the shopping falls out.

Cr O'CONNOR — That is right.

Mr MELHEM — So you are looking, number one, to ban that?

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes.

Mr MELHEM — Other plastic bags like, for example, from Target and Myer that can be used more than once, I understand there are the options you talked about — 'If you want a bag, you pay 10 cents', which I think used to be the policy of Target, for example, but now they have changed it. They do not ask you, they just give you the bag.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes, they did.

Mr MELHEM — Are we going to treat these bags in your submission in the same way as the Coles and Woolworths bags, or do we do it differently?

Cr O'CONNOR — My reading of the bill was that it is around the lightweight, single-use plastic bags, because they are the least necessary and they are the least reused; they are the most problematic, in a sense. I do not really know about how to approach what you are talking about, the heavier duty shopping bags that they use. Again, as I say, in our town — and certainly when I was a retailer — they were expensive. It was just as cheap for me to buy paper, so I did, because I preferred that and customers preferred that.

I guess by saying we are trying to remove plastics from the environment for pollutant reasons, you start with the low-hanging fruit, if you like, or the biggest impact. That does not mean that you do not then, in the process, I guess have the education around the dangers of plastic and the problems that it causes. It becomes easier to say, 'No, thanks; I don't really want a plastic bag' even when they are available or I have my reusable bag with me when I go to Myer or wherever.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — The breaking of a habit.

Cr O'CONNOR — I just do not use them anymore. I just say, 'No, thanks; I don't need a plastic bag'. I carry a tote bag. So that has just been an educative process for me and it is that cultural shift, which happens. You start with one thing and it kind of flows through. So I guess I am saying that I do not think you need to do a really heavy duty 'There's to be no plastic anywhere', but I think by doing what this proposes there will be a natural move away from using plastic generally. I am sure some people will still do it.

Ms DUNN — Firstly, congratulations on your mayoralty.

Cr O'CONNOR — Thank you.

Ms DUNN — You talked about cornstarch bags and there was a bit of discussion about where they are actually manufactured. It is my understanding that they are manufactured in Campbellfield.

Cr O'CONNOR — I think that is right, actually. I wanted to come back to that.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — If you could just get back to us with that.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes.

Ms DUNN — If your council confirmed that, that would be fantastic. My question is in relation to Indigo shire and the implementation and I guess the work of that committee and what they are doing. Has the shire done any work around what the cost is to administer that versus the costs of not doing anything at all, so really I guess a cost-benefit analysis and whether any assistance from the state is part of that package. Has that work been done as yet?

Cr O'CONNOR — No, it has not been done in detail. As I mentioned earlier, there is an obvious saving to us if we can remove soft plastics out of our landfill because that is one of the biggest expenses to council. Already the reduction in that is a huge saving to us, which we are pretty happy about. If they are doing that, it means the cost is definitely in our favour, even if there is some cost in running the education programs or whatever. But in a sense, that is part of our business and we do that around other issues anyway, so I would not see it as an additional expense to council that I am aware of at this stage. The businesses themselves are buying the bags. It is not a cost to council; we are not buying them for them or distributing them. That is where the

chamber of commerce has come in and taken on that role very happily. So at this stage I cannot see any real costs other than that we provide the tea and biscuits at the subcommittee meeting.

Ms DUNN — Which is an excellent role local government does play at committee meetings. You talked about your good news story in terms of what is ending up in landfill, and that is a very good news story. Has there been any work done in relation to, I guess, a waste audit as yet, a more formal measure of what is happening with your waste?

Cr O'CONNOR — I am also the representative on the North East Waste and Resource Recovery Group, which is a statutory body. We get reports in from around the area now, from the waste auditing that is being done across the region. Without exception, all the different shires, including the alpine resorts boards, are reporting at least 40 per cent and over 70 per cent. I have not got the official figures with me — I am sure I can get them for you from our region — but it is a phenomenal result. So of course the councils that have not come on board yet are really keen to do it. It is not an easy thing to roll out. There has been quite a bit of concern in the community initially, but now it has become common practice.

The biggest issues about it are for people with little babies who use a lot of disposable nappies. They find that a fortnightly collection is not great, for obvious reasons. However, we have the option of saying to people, 'Look, you can have a bigger bin', as one option. They pay a little bit more. There are some ways that we try and support people who might have circumstances that create a need that is outside the normal usage. But overall it has just become completely normal practice and everybody is really happy with it.

The other group who really objected were the environmentally very friendly people, who had their own compost bins and worm farms et cetera. They were saying, 'Why should we pay for this? My chooks eat everything'.

Ms DUNN — 'We're doing it already'.

Cr O'CONNOR — 'We're already doing it'. The reality is that they cannot compost as much as you can in this system. Things that normally would go into landfill now are not, so it has increased what can stay out of landfill from just a normal home composting/worm farm system.

Ms DUNN — So things like putrescible waste, because that can go through your organic system?

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes, meat, bones. Stuff that could not be put into your own home-based compost system actually can be dealt with in this industrial-style compost. Of course the end result is great, because it goes back into farmland to help grow food. So the whole system really is a sensible one. It is working really well in terms of that. If we can get the soft plastics out, then I think we have almost got a closed loop of almost totally avoiding landfill, which has got to be a great outcome in every way, financially, environmentally et cetera.

Ms DUNN — Absolutely. It would be great to get those figures. If you are able to provide them to the committee, I am sure we would love to have a look at them.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes, certainly.

Ms DUNN — Because this changeover to cornstarch and the ability to put putrescible waste in has created, I guess, a very viable waste stream for composting, at the end of that journey, if you like, you produce the compost. Is that something the shire sells or provides or what happens?

Cr O'CONNOR — No, it is not in our shire. There is a bit of a fight going on at the moment — you are probably aware — about where this thing is going to be located. As always with these things, there is a bit of concern in the community. If Howlong does not want it, then I would actually be putting our hand up and saying, 'Let's look at it in Indigo', because there are areas where we could do it which are quite remote from any towns, and there is a cost benefit to the shire. You get paid for taking the compost from where it is collected and then when you onsell it back to the farmers there is a benefit there, so it is a good business model.

Ms DUNN — Yes, so there is an enormous benefit for getting rid of single-use plastic bags.

Cr O'CONNOR — Huge.

Ms DUNN — And changing over to a biodegradable — or compostable, I should say — model because of that.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes.

Ms DUNN — That is great. Thank you.

Mr MELHEM — In relation to plastic bottles, have you got any figures — if you do not, you can take it on notice — to indicate how many of these finish up in recycling bins and get recycled versus disappearing into the ether?

Cr O'CONNOR — I am really embarrassed because I do have these figures and we did use them in my submission, but I have forgotten what they are.

Mr MELHEM — You can actually send them.

Cr O'CONNOR — But there was a significant amount of what was meant to be recycled that actually ended up in waterways, which is one of the big issues, but also in landfill. Of the amount of plastic water bottles that should have been going into recycling, I really cannot remember, but it was an alarming amount.

Mr MELHEM — If you can take that on notice and then email that across to the secretary, that would be great.

Cr O'CONNOR — Absolutely, sure.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Just further to that, if I may, Mr Melhem, to pick up from that, what indication of cost and time have you got on what is required to remove soft plastics from waterways and environmental areas of significance?

Cr O'CONNOR — I have not got figures for our shire specifically, but I have seen the figures that I think were — again, I could look it up on my phone — for the state.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — We have got the general state information.

Cr O'CONNOR — Yes, they are the only figures I have got. I will find out if I can.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — If you have done any local work on that, that would be useful as well just to provide to the committee, again through the secretary.

Cr O'CONNOR — Sure, absolutely.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving your evidence to the committee today. I just remind you that there are a couple of things that you have indicated you will provide on notice, so the secretariat will be in touch. You will also receive a copy of the transcript once that has been prepared by Hansard.

Cr O'CONNOR — Thank you very much. Great.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thanks, Cr O'Connor.

Witness withdrew.