TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Recycling and Waste Management

Morwell—Wednesday, 21 August 2019

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WITNESS

Mr Matthew Peake, CEO, Gippsland Waste and Resource Recovery Group.

The CHAIR: I declare the Environment and Planning Committee public hearing open. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent. I would like to extend a welcome to members of the public.

The Committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the Inquiry into Recycling and Waste Management, and the evidence is being recorded. I welcome Mr Matthew Peake, the CEO of the Gippsland Waste and Resource Recovery Group.

Mr PEAKE: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and is further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council's standing orders. Therefore the information you give today is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside this sitting may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the next few days.

I think we have allocated about 5 or 10 minutes for an opening statement or any comments you want to make, and then we will go to questions by the Committee. So, Mr Peake, it is all yours.

Visual presentation.

Mr PEAKE: Thank you very much. I will provide a very brief presentation, and it is really just to give you some context as to waste management across the Gippsland region.

We are 41 600 square kilometres. We have a population of around 271 000, so quite small. We generate about 3.8 per cent of the waste generated within the state, so quite a modest amount. Of that, around 70 per cent is recovered for further reprocessing. In terms of the value of the sector, we are probably worth roughly around $87 million total value per annum, and there are around 590 000 tonnes of material generated in the region that go to some form of re-use, recovery or possibly landfill. At the moment local government runs nine landfills; one is unlicensed and the rest of those facilities are licensed facilities. It is about 130 000 tonnes that are disposed of to landfill each year. That is split almost equally amongst industrial waste, so the waste coming from commercial and industrial sector, and that coming from the municipal sector, or households and councils.

In terms of our plan, I have just given you a quite brief four-pager there. I think the plan itself is about 280 pages. It is quite lengthy and full of data and information. But that gives you a rough idea of where we are trying to head in the Gippsland region in terms of our priority actions. Obviously it is aligned with the statewide infrastructure plan prepared by Sustainability Victoria. As would be expected, one of our key priorities is to reduce our reliance on landfill. I think if you look at Gippsland over the last 30 years, we have something like 42 landfills that have been closed over that period of time, so it is quite a substantial closure program. There are about 120 past landfills that we have identified across the region that would still pose some sort of environmental issue to the region.

We are looking to stimulate the introduction of innovative waste and resource recovery infrastructure within the region; drive greater responsibility and accountability in our industry, community and public sector; and as well as that, try to improve the performance of the industry and local government in that space. Obviously planning for events, either emergency events or market failures, are some of the areas where we plan, but also we are very keen to improve the quantity, consistency and accuracy of the data that we actually receive, so that evidence base is really important for the decision-making in this space.

In terms of some of the key achievements, since the plan was gazetted in 2017 we have recently closed and evaluated an expression of interest for our project called Gippswide Kerbside, which is a collaborative procurement project involving the six Gippsland councils. That has signalled an appetite from industry to actually respond to increasing economies of scale and ensure that we have improvements in the infrastructure and the services provided to Gippsland. We also did a review of the infrastructure of 40 facilities across the region. We have an extremely large number of transfer stations right across the region, most of which are run by local government. That was to assess their capacity and capability to deal with changes in the sector particularly around e-waste but other hazardous waste materials that are being generated more generally by our household sector.

In terms of understanding how we move material around, when you see how large our region is, efficient transport is an area which requires consistent improvement and focus on the efficiency gains that we can achieve through moving those materials and aggregating them so they can be further processed.

I am pleased to say that most of our facilities are located on land-use zones that are appropriate for those types of facilities. That is not the case necessarily elsewhere in the state. However, convenience is certainly something that we are hearing from our community in terms of those facilities being appropriately located.

We are working very closely with Sustainability Victoria in rolling out the ResourceSmart Schools program. We have one of the largest proportions of schools actually participating in that area. We are very proud to have over 75 schools participating in that program and actually being active. And we also have done some recent benchmarking to make sure that with any improvements that we can see or obviously any changes to the sector we can actually benchmark against some data.

I will move on to the Gippswide Kerbside project because I think this probably speaks to some of the activities around actually encouraging increased recycling and resource recovery. So we started this program back in 2014–15 where we led with a market sounding. That was to understand industry’s appetite to actually provide services that were essentially alternate to landfill. The small landfills that we run in Gippsland are very expensive, so we were looking at alternatives to ensure that the increasing cost and that increasing liability to future communities was actually mitigated and options were looked at to change the nature by which we actually treated the material. We then, following that response—and it was a very good response—prepared a business case, and that was to look at all streams that are provided currently to households, so in the organics, recycling and residual collection streams, and the processing of those materials once they are collected.

We have now moved through to the next stage, which is stage 3. It is an expression of interest process just to see how we would best go to market for those services and how to best leverage the economic scale of our very small region. The next stage would be a tender phase. We are really looking at going through that process now and requesting councils to sign up to that process, so it is very much in their hands at this point in time. The objectives of the EOI were a shared objective across the six councils, so delivering regional solutions in trying to increase to a best practice model that had greater breadth and the amount of processing capacity across the region, and maximising the resource recovery and minimising the waste going to landfill, so further reducing our liability in that landfill space.

We have a fairly mature, I would say, organics processing capacity within Gippsland, which were quite proud of, and it continues to grow and become probably the area where a lot of regions look to for an example. We would like to build on that. Obviously increasing the amount of food organics recovered from the residual stream is a key component of this project, and also delivering a sustainable procurement activity, so ensuring that we have a greater input of local jobs and growth in that economic sector. Of course obviously the economics come to it and councils are very much focused on achieving greater value for their communities. We received 15 conforming responses to that approach. We are very, very happy with that. We would see that that sort of gives us an idea of how interested the industry is actually to respond to it moving forward.

We are quite a small team, so I am joined by Kathleen Raymond with me here. We are about 4.8 EFT at the moment. Look, largely we have been focused on that work with local government. It is an area we know quite well, and we do have a focus on trying to implement a consistency across the way councils actually provide that service to their communities, so very much around increasing the amount of materials that are recovered from the waste stream, reducing the community’s liability in the landfill space and increasing the infrastructure that could actually recover that material.

I have got a few little pie charts there. We have managed to have one council move over to FOGO—I think you might have spoken to Deirdre Griepsma today. It has been fantastic for the region actually because we have been pushing this since about 2011. That actually shows other councils what can happen in that space, so it really builds their confidence moving forward. So you can see that the shift is quite dramatic. That does further reduce our reliance on the nine landfills we currently operate and quite possibly reduces it further if we can find some alternative treatment facilities that can deal with that residual as well.

One of the areas where I think we would like to do more work—we just have not got the capacity at this time—is with industry. Understanding the commercial industrial sector is probably an area where I think most regional waste or waste and resource recovery groups are having trouble just to understand what the opportunities are there. We would certainly see that as being an area we would like to work in in partnership with industry to understand what some of those opportunities might be. Certainly around the ResourceSmart Schools—that is a very rewarding area to work in in terms of behaviour change. There are other areas where we would like to spend some time, particularly around introducing FOGO or some of the issues related to education and recycling that are currently existing in households at the moment. That is all I have.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Peake. I am going to ask you a question about—I think it was raised earlier by previous witnesses—who you feel you report to. Are you representing council or State Government?

Mr PEAKE: I represent the State Government in my role currently.

The CHAIR: Right, because I think among some of the councils that issue was raised. You mentioned something about industry—learning the capability of industry, whether industry can actually provide some sort of solution. Are you talking about the players in industry, like Suez, for example, Cleanaway—is that what you were referring to as industry, or recycling in general? What precisely? Surely we know what technology is available around the world. We do not need to talk to them—it is there.

Mr PEAKE: Yes.

The CHAIR: Because I wanted to sort of flesh that out a bit further. It has come across to me as, sort of, what are the barriers, but surely we know what technology is available out there. The question is whether we are ready to bring it on.

Mr PEAKE: Yes. Look, I think that some of the barriers around actually engaging with industry are that being in a very small region we have very small or reasonably modest volumes available to us to actually drive some of the changes that we know could possibly happen. They are generally based on reaching a threshold or an economic scale that makes it viable to get that return on investment. One of the issues in working with industry is that often a commercial waste collector or processor might have are very short contracts and yet some of that infrastructure takes a reasonably long time to get that return on investment. So for some of the more expensive equipment it might be that it is a 10- or 15-year time frame, and yet some of those contracts are two or three or maybe five years in terms of their length. So I think trying to provide some sort of stability and assurance to industry that they will be able to make some sort of return on their investment over that period of time is really where we are trying to have that conversation with industry. So they need a certain amount of material to make it worth their while, and they need it for a period of time that can actually underpin the investment.

The CHAIR: I want to explore some of these things further with you because I hear the same. For example, if you look at waste to energy—I am not talking about a particular technology, whether it is any technology they tell me you need a 15- to 20-year contract so you know that there is supply coming through. Not necessarily exact volume, but you need to have a long-term contract to be able to make the investment and the return. So that is one example. I mean, recycling and sorting could be another example—to put in and buy the latest technology to separate. So they are the things you are talking about?

Mr PEAKE: Yes.

The CHAIR: Now, where would that sit with your regional group, or the metro group as well, if they are looking at acting, or someone used to work the cartel to get one group and say, 'Okay, we are just going to go with this'? We have seen the experience with SKM. Thirty councils—the business model did not work. Now we have discovered this morning that one of the big players in the industry, Cleanaway, paid $60 million. So maybe there is some hope there that they might take over the business and make it work. But how that could work—I mean, we could be creating a culture where we are not encouraging competition, we are not giving council flexibility. If someone came in and said, 'Okay, well, I can give you a better return, a better return to the environment as well, a better option than landfill', how do you balance the two?

Mr PEAKE: I think it is incredibly difficult, particularly when you are faced with, I suppose, a situation where there is not a silver bullet to actually deal with waste management. There is not one technology that you could apply to it. I think the process that we have gone down so far is to try and provide as much assurance and stability to the market so that the systems that we do know can work. I will not talk to the SKM issue because I think that is probably an area where we have seen, I would say, probably a race to the bottom in terms of actually providing a service at a rock-bottom price—there is no room to move, there is not enough investment in future-proofing.

The CHAIR: So whatever the context, it should not be based on price. I mean, price should not be the major factor.

Mr PEAKE: No.

The CHAIR: How much weight would you give that out of 10? Because SKM, my understanding, got the contract based on price—because they were the cheapest, the councils liked it, and they blame not you but the group that told us, 'That is the best one because it is the cheapest'. So I am interested in hearing from you on that.

Mr PEAKE: I think what we have done in the expression of interest, as an example, is to actually understand what are some of those other benefits, other than efficiency and cost, that actually are there to provide some assurance to not only the client who is paying for that service but also the industry to know that they do have some level of, I suppose, protection from the market fluctuations that are likely to occur or what are the factors that may be unforeseen at the beginning of a contract that they can build into that, so in terms of the expression of interest that we have and the next phase, which would be the tender phase, to build in some ability to understand the likely variability that we can see today but also allow for some of those changes and mechanisms—that line of sight between what are some of the issues that industry are likely to face that they can already see now that might need to be built into a contract—so that you can actually have a functioning system that continues to provide the asset and the outcome that you are actually looking for, that is not actually impacted by, say, a wild market swing in commodity value but also potentially energy costs and other things that might come through.

Mr LIMBRICK: A perfect segue into what I was going to ask about.

The CHAIR: We actually set it up exactly for that.

Mr LIMBRICK: You set it up just for me. I wanted to drill in a bit on energy costs. One of the things we have heard from a number of the recycling companies is energy is a massive input cost into their business. I know in the glass recycling they use a lot of gas to heat it up and make the asphalt, and in other industries they use a lot of electricity. It has also been suggested to me that one of the reasons it was going offshore in the first place was because high energy prices made it uneconomic to recycle. How do you think energy plays into the problem? We have been hearing constantly that we are pretty good at collecting recycling, we are pretty good at sorting it and all that sort of stuff, but the problem is there is no market for this because you cannot do anything with the plastics and that, so that is why we have been sending it overseas. How do you think energy feeds into this whole problem and how can we fix that, do you think?

Mr PEAKE: Gee, I do not know if I could give you the solution on how we fix the energy—

Mr LIMBRICK: I am not asking for the solution, but you know—

Mr PEAKE: I would love to—

Mr LIMBRICK: It must be a big issue, right?

Mr PEAKE: Look, it certainly is. I think we could probably characterise our entire economy as that transition to potentially an area where we have to spend less money and less effort in the energy sector. We have got to really find some alternatives to how we actually overcome that from a household cost perspective and from an industry cost perspective. In short, I am not quite sure that we can see any immediate solutions around the energy costs at the moment. Obviously we are somewhat trapped in a situation where the market value of that is determined through demand and supply, and I would suggest that probably, unless there is some really clear policy about how we actually deal with that, I do not really have any answers for how that might be avoided.

I think what we tend to do is not look at the energy avoided by not having to go and find those materials and extract them and reprocess them. In some cases I think we tend to have very mature extraction and manufacturing processes that mean we do not necessarily offset them against the recycling benefit that is provided through recovering it through the sector. So maybe we are not looking at the whole picture for the actual energy costs themselves.

Mr LIMBRICK: Certainly gas seems to have come up a few times, because I know that the glass recycling facilities use a lot of gas. The whole point of the waste-to-energy facility was to overcome gas prices. That is why it is economic in the first place, because of high gas prices.

Mr PEAKE: Yes.

Dr RATNAM: Thanks very much for your evidence and for the work that you do. I was just wondering if I can talk a little bit more about the mechanics of working with some of the councils in the area, because we have been hearing some significant evidence today about councils not feeling like there has been a whole deal of communication, particularly during the crisis—to avoid the crisis and to respond to it as well—and I am just trying to understand what the role of the resource recovery groups is in that as well and what role can be played going into the future to help mitigate some of the issues that we are experiencing now, which is the absence of a statewide approach really failing and now councils really have to find solutions alone. So what has been the role of the recovery groups, and what do you think should be the role of the recovery groups in that?

Mr PEAKE: What was quite difficult at the time when essentially it was Visy who probably sent up the first flare, so to speak, in terms of the change to the market and the fact that they would—well, essentially it was a force majeure: ‘We’re not going to accept your material in a month’, which soon became, ‘There’s a market reset occurring’. Not being privy to the contracts that were actually at play at that particular point in time made it really difficult for us to actually determine, ‘Well, what is really happening here? What is the situation that each and every council would be under?’. Because they essentially have in Gippsland six different contracts with a number of different providers, whether that is directly with the recycler or with a collector who is working on their behalf as their agent. So it is quite difficult to actually provide that consistent approach that might be beneficial to each and every one of those councils in that situation.

I know as we were moving forward we had one council that kept saying, ‘We’re fine, we’re fine, we’re fine’—and they were not fine—but at the last minute all of a sudden their change occurred. So I think for our particular group it was quite difficult to understand how we could be of best effect and most useful to those councils going forward. I think we did look at a lot of contingency around, ‘Well, how can we actually store and’—I think—‘mitigate the option for landfill?’. I think we saw landfill as being the absolute worst option. We have spent 20 years trying to encourage our communities to recycle. For them to see it then be turned away and go down to the landfill would be, I think, quite disappointing and does play, I think, into the hands of those that always believed that this was just this false sort of industry that was just masquerading as recycling.

So I think our focus was really primarily to make sure that that was not going to happen for councils. We have to stop short of being in that space where we are negotiating anything with the contractor. We are not party to that contract, so we had to be very careful about how we actually dealt with each council because each council’s situation was actually different and commercially sensitive.

I think our role was then to ensure that the information that we knew was factual and correct was actually being passed on to the right people—that we actually informed council and councillors as to what was going on in the sector—because there was certainly a lot of media there that made it seem as if everything was just collapsing.

Of course what we learned very quickly—probably within the first six to eight days—was, 'No, this is a market reset' and that the recyclers that were engaged to receive Gippsland material were still in business, they were still moving forward. There was some delay and stockpiling, particularly in mixed plastics and mixed paper, and we needed to understand, 'Well, how exposed are our contractors in terms of maybe not meeting the storage requirements for that material?'. I think that was an area where we touched base with all of the industry players just to make sure that was not the case and just to give some assurance to the community through some key messaging that—'Continue to recycle. This is not something that you need to stop or abandon'.

Dr RATNAM: And in terms of the relationship with each council, is it a formalised relationship where the recovery group has a contact point? How does it work with each of the councils?

Mr PEAKE: Yes. So through the legislation we have a waste forum, a local government waste forum. So that is the formal—

Dr RATNAM: With the councils, that is right. That is the main conduit?

Mr PEAKE: conduit. We have only six councils, so four of the councillors on that forum actually sit on my board as well. They have a dual duty, I suppose, in terms of their role.

Dr RATNAM: That is the extent of the relationship, is it, between the councils and the recovery groups? You are talking to officers in between those periods as well in terms of advising them on approaches and things like that?

Mr PEAKE: Yes. So we have a very close contact with them. We have a technical reference group that we engage with, and that is really around understanding some of the operational challenges or opportunities that might be available. We have an education group as well, and it is for a similar reason—to understand: 'What are the things we need to be promoting on a regional basis?', and trying to get that consistency of approach. So we do work quite closely with them, and for specific projects as well. Whether it is around collection of data or whether it is around the expression of interest that I spoke of earlier, we have that connection with council very, very closely.

Dr RATNAM: When Visy first signposted that things were changing, and obviously SKM, throughout the time line, were your recovery groups given instruction about how to support councils or the extent of the support that you could provide? Were you a conduit for State Government? Were you a conduit for what the State Government wants to do?

Mr PEAKE: Not explicitly. I think we were the conduit between what was happening at the coalface, I suppose. We tried to understand as much as we could of what was going on in our local area and then pass that back up, and vice versa in terms of what some of the situation might be in terms of support coming forward and those sorts of initiatives. So we were not giving written instructions in terms of, 'This is how you need to'. We have very lengthy relationships with each council. I think the former regional waste management group was the preceding entity that was replaced by the waste and resource recovery group, and through those relationships I think that was probably how we continued to have that fairly close dialogue over that time.

Ms BATH: Matthew, can you walk me through? Once upon a time we bought a television and it lasted a long, long time. Now we buy them from Aldi, for example, and they last a couple of years and we throw them out. Our e-waste is a growing concern and a growing pile. There is the new legislation in, and rightly so, but can you tell me what happens in Gippsland to e-waste now? What are some of the challenges, what needs to be overcome and what are the opportunities with recycling? Walk us through that discussion.

Mr PEAKE: Yes. I think e-waste is growing about three times faster than any other area of waste. It is quite challenging. I suppose the common description of e-waste has been computers and televisions and the things that probably fit within the federal scheme, the product stewardship scheme, which give it some sort of carriage through to being recycled. It is far broader than that under the current statewide ban—so essentially anything with a battery or a cord. We have actually been recycling whitegoods for a very, very long time. That has actually been a staple for recycling for an extremely long time just because of the valuable metals in those products.

Ms BATH: Would any of that be done locally in Gippsland?

Mr PEAKE: If it was the moving into a scrap steel, where you will find the whitegoods and those sorts of products, most of that would be taken into the scrap metal merchant, so most likely over to Laverton and areas on the other side of Melbourne. That system still remains. I think we have seen a greater degree of understanding of the value of materials. We did a project with Lifeline back in 2010 where they were recovering the components within computers and televisions and recovering those for some value. It was a workshop-type process where they were removing those materials. Unfortunately a lot of those materials are probably, in terms of their intrinsic value, very low value products. A hairdryer or an electric toothbrush and those sorts of things are not something that is going to have particular value. In fact it probably has cost in terms of pulling it apart and dismantling it.

Ms BATH: To recovery, yes.

Mr PEAKE: So we are yet to really value some of those commodities at a rate which allows us to further recover. However, those materials are now, as I understand, being extracted and prevented from going to landfill wherever possible. There has been about $2.1 million spent in Gippsland in ensuring that there are facilities there at transfer stations in Gippsland to facilitate that segregation of the product. In terms of local processing, there are some small social ventures that are possibly pulling those materials apart, but generally I think they would go to the bigger processors like the Sims metals and those types of entities.

Ms BATH: This might be something that you are not totally familiar with, but in terms of recycling and removing and taking them apart, is that done all manually by humans or is it done by machinery?

Mr PEAKE: There will be instances of both. I think probably the more efficient way is they are done by machinery. So they are crushed and there is technology—optical recognition and heat sensing and those sorts of things.

Mr HAYES: I would just like to ask Mr Peake: we were just talking about the long-term amortisation of equipment costs and energy costs and things like that, and the problems of setting up local industry. That has been a really important last stage of the circular economy. How do you see the Government facilitating that? Have you got any ideas? To what extent can Government be involved, considering that there is quite considerable risk in setting up the initial stages of these plants, the initial processes, and seeing if they work?

Mr PEAKE: Look, I think there is a role for all the three tiers of Government in that space. I think there needs to be a clear signal, in my opinion, from the Federal Government around product stewardship, so actually getting a mandate for product stewardship or the manufacturers taking some onus on the end-of-life stage of that particular product. I think with that in place it actually drives the need to provide services, and extract and do the best we can with that material once it is returned. So that can lead to all sorts of opportunities, particularly for job creation and innovation in that space.

It also provides, I suppose, a signal to those manufacturing either in this country or elsewhere, to think about the end-of-life phase of the products that they are actually marketing. In terms of actually moving forward, I think there is a role for industry, possibly in partnership with the State Government, to really lead the development of that infrastructure and put it into place and give it some surety over the longer term. I think that would give the stability for the industry to invest and it would give the community maybe the confidence to understand that the sector is actually taking responsibility for what it is there to do and providing that longer term stability to the sector.

Ms BATH: Just coming off the back, and you mentioned opportunities for industry. For example, at the moment in the Latrobe Valley in the Morwell region, there is a discussion around recycling of batteries by a Chinese company. What would your organisation—do you have any advisory role? Do you run away and think, 'No, I don't want to deal'? Do they seek your opinion? Are you an intermediary? How does that work for you? Because you are in an advocacy role, so what happens there?

Mr PEAKE: I suppose our implementation plan provides an indication of where we need to be strategically over the next 10 years. We would perhaps have a discussion with the proponent in terms of that, and we have already been brought into those discussions with other State Government entities, to understand what are some of the pros and cons of that particular development, what are some of the issues that we would probably see in terms of siting, and is it reflective of what we actually want to see in terms of the development of infrastructure in the waste sector? We step back from that regulatory space obviously, so EPA provides that element. But we would be looking at the appropriateness of the siting: 'Is it something that is going to be supported by the infrastructure, like the transport and other elements, such as energy around it?'.

We would probably also take a more global view of that and say, 'Well, there's an opportunity here'. Obviously with that one in particular you have got, I think, around 150 000 tonnes of batteries being essentially waste products every year. About two-thirds of that goes overseas for recycling. I think in terms of actually listening to our community, we would say that just like they want us to be responsible for the recycling, and they are extremely unhappy when it goes to landfill, we would also believe that they would be extremely unhappy if it was sent overseas to be recycled in a country where we do not actually know too much about what is going on. We certainly do not have a close understanding of what is going on. So to have it here under our own reasonably stringent environmental standards, we would say that that is probably a reasonably good outcome. We would also see the actual industry and the jobs and the possible flow-on jobs that might be attached to a development like that as being reasonably positive as well. But it is weighed up against some of the cons, which may be air pollution, extra traffic and other amenity issues that are probably going on.

Ms BATH: And I guess, Matthew, it is also getting that social licence and that comfortable level within the community to know that their water streams will not be polluted—but to ensure that that would not happen, as well—and that is where some confidence can come in the community.

Mr PEAKE: Yes, for sure. I think that social licence across much of the waste sector is something that we have got to really work hard at achieving, probably similar to a water authority would get the social licence for a sewer treatment plant, for instance. And we need to be, probably, mindful of those parallels that are going on between the sectors.

Ms BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Peake, thank you very much for your time and making yourself available and for your excellent contribution. Thank you very much.

Mr PEAKE: It is my pleasure.

Witness withdrew.