

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Securing the Victorian Food Supply**

Geelong – Tuesday 21 May 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

Nicole Werner

## WITNESS

Peter Smith, Acting Manager, Planning and Growth, Greater Geelong City Council.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the public hearing. We are in beautiful West Geelong in Pakington Street, and we just need to run through some important formalities before we begin.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so for you to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you for making the time to meet with the committee today. I will just quickly introduce our committee. We have got Jordan Crugnale, the Member for Bass; Martha Haylett, the Member for Ripon – so Bass, Phillip Island, Wonthaggi, Central Highlands. I am Juliana, representing central Ballarat; Martin Cameron, Deputy Chair, representing Morwell and the Latrobe Valley; Nicole Werner, representing Warrandyte and East Doncaster east of the city; and finally and importantly, David Hodgett, representing Croydon and Maroondah and surrounds.

Would you please state your name and your title before making any opening remarks.

**Peter SMITH:** My name is Peter Smith. I am the Acting Manager of Planning and Growth at the City of Greater Geelong. I did circulate a statement, which I am going to read from. I will skip through some of it. This is a submission, for want of a better word, into the inquiry into securing the food supply on behalf of the City of Greater Geelong. The city welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Inquiry into Securing the Victorian Food Supply.

My understanding is that you are examining the impacts of urban sprawl and population growth on arable land and the farming industry. My background is in town planning and strategic planning, so I can cover off on those issues pretty well. Some of the details of agriculture I cannot necessarily help you with, but I can take questions on notice if you do that. Greater Geelong is a peri-urban council. We are experiencing very strong population growth, and we are dealing with the impacts of urban expansion and population growth on arable land and the farming industry, so your inquiry is very relevant to Greater Geelong.

The city wishes to acknowledge the land now comprising Greater Geelong has been managed by the Wathaurong peoples for tens of thousands of years as part of their traditional fire, farming and lifestyle practices. Geelong has a long and proud post-colonisation agricultural history dating back to the 1830s, including the production of livestock, wheat, grains and other crops. For many years the city was known as the wool centre of the world. Our economy and our city have been built from agriculture.

The rural land of Geelong and the Bellarine Peninsula is a significant contributor to the agribusiness and tourism economies. It also makes a significant contribution to landscape values, with green breaks between settlements, and that is where the agriculture and the planning really do coincide in areas like the City of Greater Geelong. We have been proactively planning for and managing population growth and rural land through the development of various strategies, and we have listed some of the recent ones there.

There is the G21 regional growth plan and the G21 sustainable agribusiness strategy. We have got our own settlement strategy, which is a long-term strategy for the next 30 years showing where housing is going to be located across our municipality. We are part of a distinctive area and landscape under the *Planning and Environment Act*, so we have got statement of planning policies for both the Bellarine and part of our municipality, which is in the Surf Coast statement of planning policy, from the DAL process. And we are currently reviewing the long-term boundary of the urban part of Geelong.

I will not read all this out in detail, but there is a little bit of information here which is derived from our rural land use strategy, which I must say is quite old – it is 2007. Some of this will not be up to date anymore, but we have about 55,000 hectares of land, farmed at a commercial level by about 300 producers. The most significant commodities in terms of gross value for agricultural production are poultry, eggs and meat, cut flowers and turf, meat and wool, grains and vegetables, and some other key commodities there – dairy, pigs, grapes for wine, and horse breeding. Most farms in Geelong fall into the part-time and small category, and about 14 per cent are

of a scale with capacity and scope to more readily grow and change. We see that smaller farm businesses are more vulnerable to market and climatic threats and face greater challenges to remain in the industry. Certainly with these businesses it may result in greater pressure for land use change, although many of these farming businesses are supported by outside income for lifestyle reasons, and the location of this area and its access to urban employment ideally suit this situation. I am not speaking to my notes at the moment, but obviously we have got the Bellarine Peninsula, we have got hinterland areas up around Lara and Anakie which are rural, but they are also very close to the second city of Victoria, Geelong, so easy to get access to Melbourne for work. There are a lot of people moving here for lifestyle reasons; obviously it is not just about agriculture, but the two do coincide.

I have given some facts and figures there which are more recent from the G21 agricultural profile. G21 is a grouping of councils – the City of Greater Geelong, Colac–Otway, Surf Coast shire, Borough of Queenscliff and Golden Plains. There is a lot of work done across that regional grouping in planning, in economy, in transport and in lobbying the state and federal governments for funding and other support. Just in case you did not do what G21 was, that is our regional –

**The CHAIR:** They get a lot of money, says a Ballarat person.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** It is not G20.

**Peter SMITH:** I do not think I will read through that part. Obviously I will take questions, but that is just from a document which is listed on the last page in the footnotes, the *Sustainable Agribusiness Strategy for the G21 Region 2017–2022*. It just gives a bit of a breakdown of some of the stats regarding agriculture in Greater Geelong and the broader region.

Moving on to impacts of urban expansion and population growth, Greater Geelong has seen and will continue to see strong population growth. We currently supply housing in greenfield areas. So the proportion of new housing coming onto the market at the moment is about 70 per cent in greenfield areas and about 30 per cent in established areas. We want to shift that to get it more to 50–50. The state government is moving towards the opposite, which is 70 per cent infill, 30 per cent greenfield, but Geelong has some very major growth corridors to the north and west which have not commenced yet, so it is going to be some time before that balance changes. We still have got a lot of greenfield land to work through, but at the same time we are seeing a lot of change within existing suburbs in Geelong and the towns on the Bellarine; they are consolidating, and density is increasing, so hopefully over time that will prevent us having to expand outwards. We have policy settings in place to achieve this objective, which will see a reduced pressure for continual urban expansion onto rural land.

Our location means rural areas in close proximity to urban centres, so Geelong and Melbourne, make rural land an attractive lifestyle or hobby choice. Like many other peri-urban locations, shifts from full-time farming and the increasing linkages to urban-based employment suggest that trends of decreasing total area farmed, and the number of producers is likely to continue into the future. Increases in land prices have resulted in a move to more-intensive agricultural businesses, such as poultry, nurseries and grapes, and the decline in traditional broadacre enterprises. It has also led to broadacre producers leasing land. That is a pretty big thing. Particularly on the Bellarine, most of the land is farmed through releases. Leasing land to grow their farm businesses is an alternative to land purchase. In the long term broadacre producers looking to expand the farm business may look outside Greater Geelong for more affordable land. We are increasingly urban in a highly populated area, so it becomes more and more challenging for farmers to be able to afford to buy land here and continue to maintain it. Urban and other non-farm encroachment often places pressure on farm businesses through upward pressure on land prices, hampering some farm operations, with conflict between urban and rural neighbours arising from farm activities and broad perceptions of future land use change.

I have got a section here about how we use planning controls to protect agricultural land. We are currently reviewing our long-term boundary around Geelong to really lock that in to create more certainty for the rural fringe and just certainty long term with our planning policy. The statement of planning policy from that distinctive areas and landscape process has introduced protected settlement boundaries around the townships on the Bellarine Peninsula. It also sets out objectives and strategies in relation to the areas in between the towns, the non-urban or the rural areas. We have developed several of our own planning policies to deal with planning applications that we get in the farming zone. We have got a policy on how we deal with agricultural rural dwellings and subdivision – so that is one; we have got another policy on tourism accommodation and function

centre development in rural areas; and a third, which is discretionary uses in rural areas. I am not sure if the committee is aware, but under the farming zone the name virtually does not describe what the actual zone allows. Reforms to the zones over the years have meant that there are a whole range of uses that permits can be applied for in farming zones – things like schools and trade supplies, places of worship.

**The CHAIR:** Similar to our green wedges.

**Peter SMITH:** Yes. So farming is a bit of a poorly named zone, to be honest. It is sort of the default zone outside the urban areas. It is the default zone that we use. It used to be called the rural zone, but it changed quite dramatically, probably about 10 years ago. It really opened up the number of uses, which makes it more and more difficult to manage those conflicts that you sometimes get from those non-agricultural uses in amongst agricultural enterprises.

We did make a submission to the *Planning for Melbourne's Green Wedges and Agricultural Land* consultation paper in 2020. We support the initiatives identified in that process, such as strengthening the statement and planning policy to protect agricultural land and the right to farm, and the introduction of the agent-of-change principle, which aims to protect agricultural land. We welcome the establishment of the Agriculture Victoria planning and advisory service, and the feedback I think is that our statutory planners have found the quarterly updates on VCAT decisions in the farm zones useful. However, the city would request that the service has its funding restored so it can provide referral advice on pre-application and planning permit applications. It is not an area that naturally falls to local government to have a lot of expertise in, so it is useful to have experts or people we can refer applications to for advice on agricultural-type matters with planning.

We did note in our submission to the *Planning for Melbourne's Green Wedges and Agricultural Land* paper that many of the issues discussed also impact rural and regional Victoria. So that was focused on Melbourne, but the feedback I have got from my staff is that that paper is very relevant to the rest of Victoria. We also noted in our submission to that other process that many of the green wedge provisions could equally apply to the peri-urban areas, and statewide guidance would be beneficial beyond peri-urban Melbourne. The green wedge zones are only available in the Melbourne metropolitan area, so that is where we do not have an equivalent zone. We tend to use the farming zone with a mixture of policy to try to direct what sorts of uses and how we make decisions on non-farming related uses.

So the plan for Victoria, which is being prepared at the moment, could be a good opportunity for the state government to ensure regional and rural Victoria have the same consideration that is applied to peri-urban Melbourne regarding protection of agricultural land and food systems. And just towards the end of my opening statement – sorry, I am probably going a bit over time here.

**The CHAIR:** No, you are all right.

**Peter SMITH:** In terms of the resilience of the Victorian food system, including the production of food, its transportation and sale, we say that climate change, small farm viability, transport costs, production costs et cetera will continue to challenge the sector into the future. The Geelong saleyards – which is quite close to here, in north Geelong – closed for sheep and cattle sales in 2017. Poultry sales closed in 2018. The challenges of scale and viability of such facilities means a regional approach is often required. This means transport connections are critical, including truck weighing and washing facilities. General transportation issues include the condition upkeep of rural and regional roads, designating freight networks with high levels of connectivity between key destinations, minimising the impact of large freight vehicles on residential and commercial centres, promoting local food to reduce food miles and transitioning to a lower carbon transport system. They are some of the transportation issues associated with agriculture.

Climate change obviously continues to pose a challenge, including reliable water sources. We do have a major sewage treatment facility on the Bellarine at Connewarre, the Black Rock facility. It does actually pump recycled water back into the Armstrong Creek growth area, and it does serve some agricultural enterprises. There is a similar, much smaller, facility down at Portarlington as well, so there might be opportunities to continue to use recycled water for irrigation on the Bellarine and surrounds. We mentioned the ACCC supermarkets inquiry; hopefully that can assist in informing initiatives around food production, transportation and sale.

Just to conclude, food production and agriculture has and will continue to be an important industry for Greater Geelong. Agribusiness and food manufacturing has been nominated as a priority industry in the draft Greater Geelong economic development strategy 2024–34. The city awaits the findings of this inquiry and looks forward to working with the state and other local governments to secure the Victorian food supply. That is the end of my statement.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Peter. It is great to be here in Geelong on the land of the Wadawurrung people. Being a Ballarat person, I also live on Wadawurrung country. The growth projected for Geelong is incredibly significant, and many of us can see why – it is a beautiful part of Victoria. With such growth and the plans that you have for Geelong, how prevalent is land banking in this region?

**Peter SMITH:** It is very prevalent. It is not really a problem if land banking is within the areas that we have planned for growth, but there are certain land speculators who buy land outside the town's nominated growth boundaries and put pressure on council in particular to open up new areas. That has been an ongoing pressure we have felt for – I have been working in this area for 20 years, we get pretty good at basically saying 'No, sorry, we've got really strong plans for where Geelong's going to grow. You're not going to get anywhere if you are outside the town boundary.' But we do have substantial areas set aside for new growth. Whether you call it land banking or owning land within those areas – I would not really call that land banking – that is just basically developers buying land.

**The CHAIR:** Speculation.

**Peter SMITH:** It is not even speculation; they are buying land ahead of the next level of planning going ahead. Land banking does occur, 100 percent, around parts of Greater Geelong, but it does not normally have success in terms of – unless it is in a nominated growth area, they do not get the fruits of their land banking, basically, or pretty rarely.

**Martin CAMERON:** The planning controls you spoke about. You as a council are trying to balance competing objectives, such as promoting the housing supply, which we know is an ongoing concern to accommodate population growth, or reserving the best quality agricultural lands for farming purposes, whether it be for our fruit and veg or cattle and livestock. How do you balance that in your projection of where we are going to end up with the forecast population growth?

**Peter SMITH:** A lot of our plans for where the growth areas are going to go have been in place for some time, so we are sort of more in the implementation phase. But what did happen in some cases, when growth strategies for Geelong were prepared – there are normally a whole range of studies to work out what land is suitable for urban expansion, and they did do some agricultural quality type of assessments. Back in 2007 we had a rural land use strategy prepared which does look at land capability. We do try to avoid high-quality agricultural land with our areas that are going to expand. Sometimes it is hard to avoid if those areas are really well located with transport and infrastructure.

In my mind there is not high-quality agricultural land in areas that we are changing to urban growth, but there are still substantial areas of agricultural land. So I guess the answer is that it is one of the constraints we look at when we look at converting any rural land to urban. We do a whole stack of studies on flora and fauna, Aboriginal cultural heritage, drainage, transport networks and agriculture, and cultural heritage. It all falls into the mix. But the horse has bolted in some cases, and we are just going to the next level of planning when they have already been identified as future growth areas.

**Martin CAMERON:** When you identify those areas, if it is agricultural land and the farmers are going to move further out, do you do any pre-work for areas that the farmers go on to, or is it just up to them to choose where the best land is? Does the City of Geelong do its homework and say, 'This is what this land can provide for you' – as in soil content and stuff like that – or is it more left up to the farmers that are heading out that way?

**Peter SMITH:** I think we would leave the private market to work that out. When growth areas are nominated, say in the long-term strategy, then into the planning scheme, it is not proactive, in some ways. It cannot force change. It can say, 'If you want to have growth, this is where it's going to go,' but we cannot actually make people go and buy the land and develop it. So the moving forward or the changing land use or the changing of ownership is in the hands of the landowners. For instance, on the Bellarine we have got a

growth area down near Drysdale which has quite an established winery as part of it. We are not putting any pressure on that person to change, but they are in potentially part of a growth area right on the fringe of Corio Bay. So we are very careful we do not make people feel like they have to move out. Often they can plan long term and go, 'Okay, the next generation – by then we'll probably sell up and move on,' and they will make their plans accordingly. But most of the time what happens is that the actual farmers are the ones that are wanting us to change their land – that is nine times out of 10. It is pretty rare we have got a fully blown, high-value piece of agriculture in an area that we are rezoning. Normally it has moved on decades ago by the time we get to that point.

**Martin CAMERON:** Sure. thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Question.

**Martha HAYLETT:** Peter, we have been hearing a lot, especially in the Melbourne hearings, from experts in the planning world – as you are as well – that as we expand out more and more, there is quite a bit of a divide. There are a lot of disputes and things as people go further out, and they are actually not quite used to being right across the road from a farm. We were obviously hearing about that from a chicken farming perspective as well. As a council are you hearing a lot of those complaints? How do you deal with those complaints? How are you dealing with that? Because there is so much sprawl in this LGA.

**Peter SMITH:** We think of it as more controlled growth than sprawl. But no, you are right. We call it in planning the rural–urban interface. It is always a huge issue, and so it is really important to try get a logical boundary for an area. Some boundaries are just naturally there, like a river – the Barwon River – or a flood plain. The sea is a good one, or a lake, a main road, a freeway. Normally we have got reasonable boundaries, but there is always going to be a case where there is not a logical boundary like I have just described in the vicinity, so it tends to go to a title boundary and then you basically have to try to design in some sort of appropriate interface so that the urban can coexist with the rural. It might be something like – and we have done it a few times – putting a linear park around the edge with a bike path and having it heavily planted so at least there is a bit of separation. That is one way to do it. Often you would put a road around the fringe, so the houses are set back, there is a road reserve, there is landscaping and the houses face onto it so you do not just have paling fences for as far as you could see. We try to avoid that as well. It is one of the most difficult parts of planning from the urban into the rural.

Look, to be honest, I do not know how many actual complaints there are from people living next to farmers, from either the farmer or the urban resident, but it does happen and it is something we try to manage. But it becomes really difficult. This is a bit anecdotal, but I kind of expect the farmers probably manage themselves a little bit just realistically. Even though they were probably legally entitled to run a tractor right behind someone's front door or do some cropping on a really dusty day or something, they tend to manage themselves because they are probably reasonable people and they do not want to impact on the neighbours. So that in itself starts to impact on them; they cannot just do their normal farming operations. It is obviously a huge issue unless you have got a really solid boundary and there is a big gap between the actual housing and the rural areas.

So, yes, there are different techniques. I think the main sort of issue we seem to get is when we get non-agricultural land uses in the farming areas. That is where we tend to get most of the complaints. Function centres are a classic, and weddings. Sound travels in quiet rural areas, so if there is a late-night party at a wedding or a function centre in an agricultural area we get a lot of complaints from those.

**Martha HAYLETT:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Questions?

**David HODGETT:** Hi, Peter. I read with interest your submission and your settlement strategy in 2020 write-up predicting your housing growth to 2036. You were probably ahead of your time given the housing crisis that we are facing at the moment. You put in the figures there are about the amount of rural lots that have been lost or reduced. Noting your comments about the planning controls and planning work you have done, I just wonder if there has been or if there is intended a similar piece of work to be done mapping around how much farming land you have got for food security and how you might look at protecting that. Can I preface that: at an earlier thing today we heard about the competing priorities of housing and land. That is not what I am

about – to set government priorities, that is up to them – and you are aware of what our inquiry is about. But it seemed heavily weighted in one area, and I just wonder if there is intention to do some work in the other area.

**Peter SMITH:** Yes, I think we are due to basically do another rural land use strategy or something similar. Back in 2007 when we were planning for quite major growth in Geelong with the Armstrong Creek growth area we were looking at what towns on the Bellarine can handle growth. We nominated Ocean Grove, Drysdale and Leopold. We did that at the same time as looking at all the rural land. I think that was a really good process. Now we have had almost 20 years of that growth occurring I think we are due to have a good look at our rural land again and just see where it is sitting, what sort of enterprises are out there.

To be honest, I have got a little bit of a gap in my knowledge as to whether our economic development strategy has done some of that work. I would probably recommend if you were to look at that – it is on our website; I think it is a draft – that might cover some gaps. Also, the G21 work that was done, which is referenced in my notes – the *Sustainable Agribusiness Strategy for the G21 Region 2017–2022* – could have some more up-to-date information. The main focus on rural land, to be honest, in planning has been partly for agriculture, but it has also been to protect the landscape values and just the general open green areas between towns, particularly on the Bellarine. Agriculture just sort of coincides – you know, the two things work in parallel. Protecting the landscape and agriculture means you have green breaks between towns. We understand the landscape really well. We have done a lot of landscape assessments. We know which landscapes are significant, where they are viewed from and how you need to manage them if you are having any development in the area. I would say that we do need to pick up the ball again on rural land.

**David HODGETT:** Yes. And a further question: there is discussion and debate on at the moment about, as you highlighted, areas where 30 per cent of growth is in inner areas and 70 per cent is out further. The government is looking at 30 per cent out and 70 per cent in, and you said you are going to try and shift Geelong back to 50–50. You mentioned a couple of planning policies, but I just made a note wondering: how specifically is the council trying to address that, like getting it back to, at this stage, 50–50? Are there aggressive tactics and policies to encourage development?

**Peter SMITH:** Okay. In our planning scheme we have policy, and local policy content is normally derived from a strategy. So we have got rural policies derived from, say, a rural land use strategy. We have got housing and settlement policies which derive from our settlement strategy, which was a big piece of work done in 2018, being implemented into the planning scheme. That has at a high policy level to seek 50 per cent of new dwellings being in infill areas and 50 per cent in greenfield areas. We have got a housing and settlement framework plan which identifies areas around Geelong in existing areas that are suitable for quite high-density development. We basically do it through identifying individual large sites that can handle a six- to-10-storey development. The Geelong saleyards is one.

**David HODGETT:** Encourage that.

**Peter SMITH:** Yes. The saleyards next to the former Target headquarters is a huge piece of land in North Geelong well located. It can handle basically a new village of townhouses with a mixture of densities. There are sites like that. Barwon Water have got quite a bit of land next to the South Geelong railway station. We have just done work in Pakington Street – a major piece of work with the community, an urban design framework. They are probably our main focuses in the inner suburbs of Geelong to identify sites that can handle greater density, and over time as they develop that will get out infill percentage up.

The big one for Geelong is central Geelong. The state government is the responsible authority with the minister for the central part of Geelong, the CBD. But that has got really generous planning controls that allow apartments. The market is starting to mature so that apartment living is becoming quite viable in Geelong. There are some already there on the waterfront, but there are a lot of apartments, sometimes combined with hotel complexes or offices, that are planned to be built within central Geelong. That will help get the figures up across the board – and using zonings that are attractive in certain areas, like new public transport and shopping centres. We have got a policy that we want more people to live close to those facilities, so we put them in residential growth zones and zones that allow more density that are less restrictive. They are basically our techniques that we use over time.

**David HODGETT:** Fair enough. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Jordan.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** Further to that – hello, Peter – around that sort of infill going to 50–50: is that sort of timelined, just going, ‘We’d like to get to 50–50 by whenever,’ with the view to then go 70–30 in line with the state government?

**Peter SMITH:** We have not stated that, or that is not part of a council position to go to 70–30. We are pretty focused on 50–50 at the moment. But I guess speaking as a planner, not on behalf of the City of Greater Geelong so much, that is always what town planners want; we want more infill and less expansion. So maybe beyond the life of our settlement strategy, once we have exhausted or at least partly developed our growth areas, we might try to go harder than 50–50. But it is not part of our policy at the moment.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** Is there a timeline to go 50–50, though?

**Peter SMITH:** Well, it is kind of in line with the settlement strategy. I think it goes up to something like 20–40 in the next 15, 20 years. We are trying to change that shift, which is a big challenge because we have got the northern and western Geelong growth areas. They have got capacity for 110,000 people in greenfields. That is going to really dominate our figures for quite a while, so we are really going to have to amp up the amount of development within Geelong and the existing towns to get that balance. But that is what we are trying to do, and it is happening.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** With the new estates, do they have that sort of density so that in the middle of a new estate you have got a bit of density and then going out it meets with a kind of rural boundary?

**Peter SMITH:** Yes, 100 per cent. The newer estates, particularly the new northern and western Geelong growth areas, where we have almost finalised our first precinct structure plan for one of the precincts, have much higher densities along what is called a clever and creative corridor – a corridor of public transport, mixed-use activity, retail and jobs. It is going to be much higher density than what you would normally see in a growth area. We want to build it in from the start. Growth areas have struggled in the past from having just single detached dwellings and not much housing variety, so we want to build in that density from day one.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** Yes. Can I ask another question, Chair?

**The CHAIR:** Go for it.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** Just looking at food relief, noting that Geelong is growing and thousands of people are needing access to food relief, obviously I read that I think you have invested \$1.7 million with the Geelong food relief fund to progress that and support community members. That is only going to grow. I note we were out on a farm recently – and I take in an area of Cardinia shire as well. They have been very progressive, and they did a community food strategy. I cannot remember the dates – there we go, 2018 to 2026. It is a whole strategy within the shire around protecting and utilising fertile land as a source of fresh food for current and future generations, growing a vibrant local food economy which supports growers, enhancing food knowledge with the community and diverting food waste from landfill, amongst a few other things. Given Geelong is Geelong and food insecurity – which the Legislative Council is doing an inquiry on; ours is around food supply – is the council looking at: ‘You know what, we actually need a whole community food strategy for the entire Geelong city because we’re going to have to be doing something more than just relief centres and handing out food?’

**Peter SMITH:** I am not aware of that being done, but I must admit –

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** Maybe the council is considering something.

**Peter SMITH:** Yes, it is possible because we are a very large council. We have got a number of departments. We are not siloed but we tend to specialise in our own area. I did not have a heap of time to prepare for this to interview everyone who might have the information across the council.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** You can take that one on notice. I would be keen to see if it is being discussed.

**Peter SMITH:** I really do not know. We tend to try to be quite progressive in those sorts of areas, but I cannot give you any information as to whether that is happening or not.



**Jordan CRUGNALE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Peter, can I just ask: in terms of the urban development, whether it be northern, western, Armstrong Creek or Lara West, what is the type of land that has been previously in those new areas of growth?

**Peter SMITH:** Okay. The Armstrong Creek growth area was quite fragmented in terms of quite a few small rural holdings but had general sheep grazing and cattle grazing. There are a couple of broiler farms which have got quite large buffers around them. There is of broiler farm just off Barwon Heads Road which basically affected the staging of the growth area. We had to wait until they wanted to move because I think it has got a 1-kilometre buffer. You cannot have any housing within a certain distance to do with quarantine-type stuff.

**The CHAIR:** Biosecurity.

**Peter SMITH:** Yes. A little bit of cropping was within the Armstrong Creek growth area, but from memory it was mainly sheep grazing and cattle grazing, perhaps some flowers up towards Mount Duneed, but nothing substantial. The northern and western Geelong growth areas – well, a big part of the western growth area is a quarry, which is probably something I should have mentioned. We do have quite a bit of extractive industry land around Geelong. We consider that more as a brownfields development. We are not converting rural greenfields into urban, we are converting a semi-industrial use. We have converted a quarry at Fyansford into a residential area. We have got the McCann quarry, the main one at Batesford. It is a big part of the western growth area. It is going to be partly retained as a major lake feature, but the surrounding land there – I think it has been quarried a bit over time – that will be converted to rural. But in that northern area, Lovely Banks – this is a little bit anecdotal, I am afraid; I do not have all the details – I expect there is –

**The CHAIR:** A broad brush is really good.

**Peter SMITH:** grazing, a bit of cropping. To be honest, the developers tend to do cropping pretty soon once they get hold of it because it takes out any flora and fauna and those sorts of issues so that they do not have as many constraints. So, often the land has been cropped for some time before it gets up to a rezoning process.

**The CHAIR:** Have there been any strategies by the City of Greater Geelong to offset the loss of agricultural lands?

**Peter SMITH:** I think that is a similar question to Mr Cameron's earlier. I think it is quite difficult to offset the loss of agricultural land in some ways. I do not quite know how we would achieve that. I guess just having clear long-term policies enables people to plan their lives and their farms around future change. I guess we do work with other municipalities in the surrounding area which are more rural, through G21 in particular, to work out longer term agribusiness-type strategies. If you are going to clear, for instance, native grasslands, you have to find an offset site. There is not necessarily that mentality in planning as to how you deal with agriculture. There is no policy around that. It is just that we have to try to protect high-quality agricultural land and we have to try to manage the interfaces to protect existing agricultural enterprises, but to go much more proactively and help relocate – the only one I can think of is maybe one of our main abattoirs. It has not happened, but I think our economic development officers, when it has come up in the past and they might have wanted to relocate – there has been some effort or some help given to those enterprises to find suitable relocation sites, but not for actual farming enterprises as such.

**The CHAIR:** Nicole, did you have a question?

**Nicole WERNER:** I think we have covered most of them, to be honest.

**Martha HAYLETT:** I have got just one more, Peter. In terms of keeping the farms that we still do have in this region viable, I am just wondering about how the council is ensuring that especially rates are set appropriately for agricultural businesses. Is that something you are thinking about? Have you set them at a particular level to keep things viable and sustainable?

**Peter SMITH:** Rates for primary producers are much lower. You have to demonstrate you are a primary producer, because it is all about land use, not so much as the zone. We might have people just living on a farming-zoned block of land with no primary production at all; they would find it hard to justify getting the discount. I do not know exactly what the discount is, but it is quite heavily discounted, primary production land.

This is something we cannot really avoid. It is difficult, but rates are obviously a factor of the value of the land times the rate. In really attractive areas like the Bellarine Peninsula the land values go up, so the rates tend to go up even with a discount put in for primary production. But I think you can apply for rate relief and those sorts of things, so we do have mechanisms in place if people are suffering from hardship. But generally it is just a blanket – primary production gets a much lower rate in the dollar.

**Nicole WERNER:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Just finally to really wrap us up, in terms of mapping the region's food supply, I am very conscious of the great dairy we get from Colac and the beautiful vineyards down in Queenscliff and different berries from the Otways and a range of other things, which makes the G21 organisation of councils so important, with really Geelong being the capital of the region. Is there any work being done by council saying, 'Look, actually we do need to be producing stuff in our own municipality, not just relying on our neighbours'?

**Peter SMITH:** I think with agriculture we tend to look more broadly at the region. We try to ignore the municipal boundaries a little bit and just work out what is happening across the region. I think that is naturally how it works anyway. For instance, when the saleyards closed I think it was going to be relocated; they were going to open one at Colac. Maybe that is more of an agricultural town, so it is more logical. Beyond our economic development strategy, which is being prepared, which I must admit I have not really looked at in preparation for this inquiry, I do not think we are doing a lot of active work on agriculture within the City of Greater Geelong. We tend to contribute through the G21 forum.

**The CHAIR:** And it makes sense. We have moved our saleyards out of central Ballarat out to Miners Rest. You do not need to have those big trucks coming in to North Geelong if you can have it at a better location. But I am just sort of thinking, as we look at Melbourne with their urban growth boundary and stuff like that and saying this is a metropolitan centre, Geelong really is going to be the metropolitan centre with the agricultural and food supply really being outside of the City of Geelong.

**Peter SMITH:** I think you almost have to look at a map of the City of Greater Geelong. It is quite narrow through the middle.

**The CHAIR:** It is, north to south.

**Peter SMITH:** So our urban area is not that far from Golden Plains. We have got quite a northern hinterland up towards Anakie and Lara, with the You Yangs and all that area. That is pretty well all in farming zones. Then we have got the Bellarine. I think we understand what agriculture we have got pretty well within our municipal boundaries, but the bigger game is sort of in the broader region down to the Otways and more that hinterland area. It is much more significant in terms of agricultural production. I just go back to the fact that we use G21 in particular for that type of thing.

**The CHAIR:** Absolutely. I lived in Wollongong for four years, and it is really interesting looking at that natural boundary of the north to south. I used to say Wollongong was a lot like Geelong. They are very similar in the north to south with the natural boundaries and everything. Was there anything else, because we are right on time? We have got every moment of your time. Was there anything you really wanted us to take away in terms of our report, any final statements that you feel that you would really like to make sure that we have heard?

**Peter SMITH:** Probably I would just encourage some involvement in or understanding of the plan for Victoria. We just had a seminar in Geelong about it this morning, so that is fresh in my mind. It is basically a plan being prepared for areas outside of Melbourne, which is pretty significant. We have got regional plans. This one is meant to stitch together the rest of Victoria. I think it is well and truly needed. And I cannot quite place what your role is in that, but just being aware of that as a process. I think the two things might coincide, the objectives. There is a lot of discussion about planning for housing, which is important, but we do have to keep looking at the rural areas and what is the long-term future for those as well, not just having every discussion housing dominated. Plan for Victoria hopefully helps us achieve that balance and looks at the network of towns across Victoria and how they can work, so it is not so Melbourne-focused.

**The CHAIR:** Absolutely. As many regional Victorians are on this panel, I am sure we would all agree. Thank you so much.

**Witness withdrew.**