

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Emerald – Thursday 10 October 2024

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Trevor Budge, Chair,

Claude Cullino, Committee Member, and

Kate Forster, Committee Member, Planning, Tourism and Environment Subcommittee, Emerald Village Association.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Climate Resilience here in Victoria. We are now joined by witnesses from the Emerald Village Association. Welcome.

All the evidence you are going to be giving today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings. The transcripts will ultimately be made public on the committee's website.

Welcome today. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the committee and Member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I will ask members of the committee to introduce themselves, starting with the Deputy Chair.

David ETTERS HANK: Hi, I am David Ettershank from Western Metropolitan Region.

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

Wendy LOVELL: I am Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region. Good morning.

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

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

Jacinta ERMACORA: And Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much for joining us today. If each of you could, before we go any further, state your full name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of for the purposes of the Hansard record.

Trevor BUDGE: My name is Trevor Budge. I am a member of the Emerald Village Association, but I also am Chair of the planning, tourism and environment committee.

Claude CULLINO: My name is Claude Cullino. I am also a Committee Member of the Emerald Village Association. Up until a couple of weeks ago I was chairing the resilience group. I am handing it over to the next generation to do it.

Kate FORSTER: My name is Kate Forster. I am on the new subcommittee, resilience and emergency, for the Emerald Village Association. I have an immune disorder, so I will just keep my mask on.

The CHAIR: As you please. Trevor, do you want to make an opening statement? Then we will get into some questions.

Trevor BUDGE: Thank you. We recognise that you want brief opening statements –

The CHAIR: Always.

Trevor BUDGE: so we will go to that. I first of all want to express the apology of our president, Peter Maloney. He is also president of the RSL, and he has a very significant funeral to attend, which is virtually happening right now. We would also like to acknowledge that we are meeting on Wurundjeri country, and we pay our respects to elders past and present. Also we recognise the land has never been ceded.

We really appreciate the opportunity to present at this. In our submission we made an express invitation to your committee to come to Emerald, so it is great that you have come, and we really appreciate that you have made the effort. I am going to make a brief opening remark, and then Claude is going to address three topics very briefly. Then Kate will address three, and then I will conclude.

As an opening statement, we believe this inquiry is timely, it is essential, and it is critical that the findings and recommendations are robust, provide a road map for government and are implemented through a commitment of resources, legislation and a transparent, accountable program of action. That is consistent in our theme.

To briefly introduce Claude, he has had a 40-year career working in local government and major metro councils. He is a long-time resident of Emerald, and as he indicated, he has been heavily involved in our climate resilience working group. He is going to address what they have been doing over the last three months. He will address the issue of vulnerable people, which we have heard a little bit about – we have done quite a bit of research on that – and also what we see as the role of councils. So over to Claude.

Claude CULLINO: Again, thanks for the opportunity to speak to you and present. I think it is wonderful to have an opportunity as a resident to actually speak up on our personal experiences. Since the inquiry submission, the EVA's resilience group has pursued a widespread collaboration with all key players in the district. We have tried to engage the Emerald community, the Gembrook community, Avonsleigh community, Macclesfield and Upper Beaconsfield. What we are trying to do is be a little more open and collaborative and collegiate, if I can use those terms. So what we are trying to do is have an informed input into what is going on, again, so that we are not competing with each other. We are actually trying to say we want a strategic approach to how we approach resilience, and if we have to wait in the queue, then we wait in the queue, because we know. I think it is important for the community to understand where we are and what is happening. I think there is not a lot of that actually happening, and that is why I make that comment.

Again, we have put three projects in as expressions of interest. One is a strategic look at the issue of what we need. The other one is looking at specifically an information kit that needs to go out to the community so that they can prepare for events and how to be less vulnerable and perhaps a little more resilient. The third one is looking at some specific scoping documents with actually what we need and how to apply for the grants that have been made available by the state government. That is the first one.

My other comment is with regard to vulnerable people. One of our members has put together a position paper, and we are working through that. We tend to have the view that, again, generally government and government agencies have a very narrow focus, whereas what we would like to think about is a broader focus, and that is what we would like to bring to the table and really say that people who are not vulnerable in one situation may turn out to be vulnerable should a tree fall down in the street and there is only one car in the family or there might be no car in the family. So we want to have a closer look at what really vulnerability means so that when we talk about resilience we are talking about everyone concerned.

Again, we would like to think that we are planning for the worst case scenario. Again, the February storm was a storm event. There was no heat, no cold, so it was a little easier to deal with. Mind you, if you drive around Emerald, you can still see the evidence of that storm in February. It is perhaps a reflection on the lack of resources to actually clean up.

My other comment would be that the council are crucial players, but they are not empowered to act and be proactive to plan for these events. Certainly from a community perspective that appears to be what is happening, but there is not a level of preparedness. They do not seem to be well resourced, and also they do not seem to be authorised to act and seem to be waiting for the state government or the federal government to actually allow them to react.

Again, I think the panel reports into the February incident highlighted the lack of integration or lack of cooperation. If I can just mention the lack of cooperation, there were seven visits by contractors in my one street, which to me demonstrated that there is a lack of coordination there somehow. There is also duplication,

and perhaps someone is not talking to each other. We would like to think that the council, in preparing a resilience plan, have a strategy that they actually implement and they can put the actions in a 10-year plan and communicate with the community so that we are engaged, we can see what is going on and we know the actions and we can debate the actions. Unless that occurs, and if it is just being imposed on the community, I think you would get some adverse reactions from them. I will hand it over to Trevor.

Trevor BUDGE: Thanks, Claude. Kate is going to talk next. Kate is a 38-year resident in Emerald. She has presented at previous parliamentary inquiries, and she is going to particularly look at the issues around the Network Outage Review Panel report and the issues of coordination and emergency planning.

Kate FORSTER: The Network Outage Review Panel's work and approach we highly commend. They listened intently, documented what they had heard and proposed and then returned to us here and invited responses for an informed report. It was great that they came back for that face-to-face. Some of the people in our community, their thing is not writing up a submission, but they have got tremendous knowledge and wisdom and local understanding, and it was vital and really appreciated that they really listened carefully. So we are grateful for this thorough community consultation, and they responded quickly, addressed the issues and shortcomings and made practical recommendations promptly. That is sitting with the minister, and we hope that that sense of action will continue on.

Overall, coordination, transparency and accountability by state government are crucial. The mechanisms, structures and resources to support local forward planning and coordination are not in place, and the local authorising environments are not clear.

We are seeing strong emergency planning locally, and from council to some extent, but in terms of future planning for climate resilience – no, not really. As attention was drawn to at the hearings yesterday, they are looking back rather than looking at the science to look forward. Considerable emergency planning has been undertaken locally. The interdependence of power and telecommunications, though, has not been adequately addressed or acknowledged, despite the evidence at hand. We need to build locally resilient infrastructure for power and communication and also community refuges from heat, cold and smoke that do not rely on an external emergency response that may not be available when needed.

In February all we needed was a couple of big trees across the critical entry roads to Emerald and everything would have been delayed even further. It was pretty chaotic. I walked over a kilometre to my home, past fallen trees and powerlines all over the roads. It took from Tuesday till Sunday for them to come and assess our road, and it took them 10 days to take the powerlines off the roadside. So there is a lot of work to be done there.

Also emotionally, in terms of communication, we had zero accuracy from the power company. That meant you would get a message saying 'Power will be on at your place tomorrow' and it would be seven days later. I even went and spoke personally with one of their wonderful, caring staff at Cockatoo, because he was present there. He rang through. The information that came back had no connection to the reality. The engineer that assessed our street was incredibly frustrated that all the work he was putting in recording details and sending them through for the community never got through and never reached us in terms of the timing and when they would be able to do the works. These things are important in terms of community resilience.

We need responsible authorities to address these needs in consultation with community. I will just mention that I would like to contribute further at open mic on the serious threats of smoke mitigation in buildings. I will hand back to Trevor.

Trevor BUDGE: Thanks, Kate. Just a bit about my background: I have only lived in Emerald for four years, and I have seen a series of major events in that time. I have spent most of my working life in the town planning field in state and regional organisations, in local government, in private consulting and in teaching and research at two universities. In 2023 I concluded a seven-year ministerial appointment on the board of the Victorian Planning Authority.

I want to address some issues around the planning system, the need for a new planning approach to climate resilience and the planning of our townships and share some insights into the unique dilemmas that are faced by the hills communities. I think we have heard quite a bit already this morning and in other hearings that you have had that the legislative triggers to address climate resilience in state-led and local planning development proposals are absent. There is a lot of goodwill, but when you have to resort to the legislation to back up what

you are doing, it is not there. We know the way the *Planning and Environment Act* and the local planning schemes work. There is a lot of pressure on councils to include certain things in their decision-making, but if you get to VCAT and you cannot reference the relevant clause of the *Planning and Environment Act*, then you have got nowhere to go; it will fall over.


What we heard this morning was that in the *Planning and Environment Act* – and I think there were proposals to renew and review the *Planning and Environment Act* – we need a clear demonstration that development proposals and the preparation of planning schemes have to demonstrate climate resilience, and we have heard that climate resilience mapping is the critical element in those.

One of the weaknesses in the way in which a lot of people look at the planning system is that they forget that a planning scheme only comes into action if somebody proposes a development that needs a planning permit. In respect to your Cowes example, if the Act and the planning scheme did not require that information, the person would simply build the house. It highlights the problem that we have got: it is so black and white. If it is in the planning scheme, you have to address it; if it is not in the planning scheme, it does not get addressed; and if nobody's proposing any development, the planning scheme sits there silent.

Going to the issues, particularly relating to Cardinia shire – and I think this highlights something that the EVA has been on about for a long time – Cardinia shire has nine township strategies. You heard that there are 40-odd townships, but nine of these townships have a strategy. The Emerald one was completed in 2009. Seven of the nine predate 2009, so seven of the nine strategies are 15 years or more old. Every one of them is an incorporated, extensively referenced document in the planning scheme. So you have to use the strategy in the planning scheme, but those strategies are all 15-plus years out of date. There is no mention of climate resilience in any of them. They are used when it is convenient to use them in respect of assessing applications, but they do not form a strategy that we can use going forward in the current environment.

We have been promised many times that council will review these strategies, but they have to date not set aside a budget to do that. They are moving away from a place-based, community-driven approach – it is very much a top-down structure approach that they want to apply – and there is no evidence as yet that they have got any intention of including climate resilience in those strategies. When we talk about the towns in the hills area, each of those towns has got one of these strategies – Cockatoo, Gembrook, Upper Beaconsfield. Monbulk in the Yarra Ranges has got its own township strategy. That is what we need: we need something that connects the bigger picture and how it applies to your town, and we will talk a little bit about how it does apply to Emerald.

I must take issue with something that was said yesterday. I was watching the webcast, and the chair of the Network Outage Review Panel made the comment that in dealing with issues around the Dandenong Ranges in the hills it was a regional issue. It is not a regional issue. The Dandenong Ranges communities are not suburban, but they are actually technically part of metropolitan Melbourne. This peri-urban zone, which we often talk about, or peri-urban area, is repeatedly misunderstood. It is overlooked in terms of funding and infrastructure, and I think some of the examples you heard from Yarra Ranges highlight that. We have significant environmental vulnerabilities that are not present in a suburban setting, and yet we are effectively part of urban Melbourne.

We are also part of Melbourne's tourism region. We are sitting here in a Puffing Billy facility, which is the third most visited tourist facility in Victoria. There are 250,000 people who come to this facility here each year. Can I use the example of what happened in February 2024. There were trainloads of people here, and Puffing Billy Railway had to get them out because they could not get them back on the train. You would have driven into the facility here. There is one road in, one road out. If that road had been blocked, we had potentially hundreds of people, half of whom – 50 per cent – were overseas visitors, with no idea of what was going on, no idea of the calamity that they were facing. 

The CHAIR: Trevor, we are just running short on time.

Trevor BUDGE: Okay. Right, we will keep going. Can I finish off by saying that the dilemmas of a place like Emerald are very similar to what you are seeing in North Carolina with places like Asheville, where you have got big cities with only a few roads in and out. In Emerald we have four roads in and out. If those roads get blocked or if the main street gets blocked, the town ceases to function, and that was the dilemma we faced. We have got many people living down dead-end gravel roads. We have got many people who are isolated and

in normal circumstances are not vulnerable, but they instantly become vulnerable in this situation. So we would strongly urge the inquiry, if they could, to adopt a case study approach, and we believe that we are a great case study, representing very much the types of issues that are felt in the hills. If that is something you want to pursue, we are very happy to assist you with it.

The CHAIR: All right. Thanks very much. We do not have a lot of time each for questions, but we will start. If members could just be targeted in their questions. We are here to talk about infrastructure and the built environment. Other matters are important, but we are focused on infrastructure and the built environment. Given the repeated experience the community here has had with disaster events made worse by climate change, what do you think the most critical pieces of infrastructure are that you have that have been impacted the worst by those events?

Trevor BUDGE: The others will have comments, but I would focus on the main street because basically everything revolves around the main street. Every major element that makes this town work and makes it resilient is connected immediately to the main street – so the SES, police, CFA and ambulance, the two supermarkets, the two schools, the banks and the two places where you can buy petrol. If the main street ceases to function, and that can easily happen, in many suburban settings you just go and use an alternative street. There is no alternative street. The main street is it; there is one street running through the centre of town. That is a very common occurrence in the hills if you look at not just the towns that we have been talking about but if you go to Kallista or you go to Sassafras or Olinda or wherever it is.

The CHAIR: When you say it needs to work, what are the things that are impeding the main streets working and what could we recommend be done to make sure that they do function properly in disasters and emergencies?

Trevor BUDGE: What we have been advocating for is the development of an alternative to the main street. There is a laneway that could be used in an emergency, but it is not fit for purpose. We have been advocating for a much better traffic management plan. We were in the situation in February where the emergency services could not actually get out of their own places to go anywhere because they were blocked in and they did not know where to go. We have urged the council to sit down with us and prepare an emergency management plan that deals with the issues around the main street and around traffic management and what they will look like in an event. Can I go to one point that was raised yesterday, which I think summarises a lot of what we are talking about. There was a point made yesterday that what we should be doing is using what the weather is going to be in 2070; not what the weather was like in the last 10 years. What is it going to be like in 2070? How can we prepare a plan that says ‘In 2070, or sometime between now and 2070, these are the types of events we are going to have, and in this situation this is what we will need to do; this is how we will need to manage those events’? Claude, you have also done a lot of work on infrastructure.

Claude CULLINO: I have been a resident for 48 years. Trevor has hit the nail on the head in the sense of how a township works. If the roads get washed away and there is a lot of heat or a lot of cold, you can walk into the town, provided there is a pathway. That is usually what the response authorities tend to do: they give you lines of access so you have got access to food and medicine and you can get fuel and you can walk home. What happened in February is you could not get food, you could not get fuel and you could not get medicine. The communication system was down. Your credit cards did not work. If you could get cash, you could buy something. I ended up having a few IOUs around. Traders were fantastic, but –

The CHAIR: All right. Just finish your comment, and then I will get to Mr Ettershank.

Claude CULLINO: The point was that if it did not work, a lot of people could not buy food, just the basics.

The CHAIR: Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you, Chair. Could I first of all just commend you as a residents organisation for the work you have done. Obviously the community has been hammered, but that ability to mobilise at a local level is so powerful, so congratulations. Would you like to just elaborate a little bit, Trevor? You mentioned a case study approach. What would you see as the major things that might come out of such an approach?

Trevor BUDGE: Two things come to mind. They are that I think for anyone reading a report – there are a lot of reports around – if they can relate to human stories and what actually happened in a community, they can relate it to their own life. So I think it is a more powerful report if you can use some case studies. I am not saying that we should be the only case study, but I think it has got value.

The second thing is that I think what we are looking to do is go much further than what we have been talking about. We want to build up that knowledge, and we have got to bring the community with us. There are 6000 people that live in Emerald; not all of them are engaged in this process. I think if they can see that a parliamentary inquiry is listening – ‘Here’s the case study on Emerald’ – we can build on that case study and we can do a lot more things with it because we can quote that. We have been just discussing this morning the possibility of linking up with that 21st-century weather ARC that you heard from yesterday. Here is a great opportunity. If we had a case study for Emerald, I am sure they would love to do a case study for their own work. What does it mean? We have heard that Upper Beaconsfield has been doing this for quite a while. Communities that show initiative but can also back it up I think often garner the support and the resources that they need.

David ETTERS HANK: Fantastic. Claude, I think you talked about how the association has produced an information kit for residents on resilience-related issues. Can you just share a little more information on what that involves?

Claude CULLINO: We have applied with an expression of interest again to AusNet, who are providing funds. What we see in the kit is really information on what you need if you stay at home, what is happening, how to go about it, where you can go to, how to source food and who is around to do that. Again, we will go into the detail as we explore, but it is input from a number of groups. The Cockatoo group, who are leading the process, have actually got a model in terms of – it is already working – how they communicate with their community, how they engage with the vulnerable people and how they can actually get food there. They have a mobile dispensing capability. So there are opportunities in terms of how things can be done and how you can engage with the community. Again, what we see that as is replicating it not just for one community but for a number of communities.

David ETTERS HANK: Fantastic. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you. Thank you very much for your submission. I am just interested in the resilience working group – the actual set-up. You were established 20 years ago as an offshoot of council and are now an incorporated body. Is that correct?

Trevor BUDGE: Yes.

Gaëlle BROAD: Is it similar to models in other areas? I guess I just want to see: is it duplicated or quite unique?

Claude CULLINO: I suppose I would say it is not unique. Again, I think there are a number of village committees; in Gembrook, for example, they have got a fairly active committee. I think what probably does not happen is we do not talk to each other much, and I think that is what we are trying to do now, actually talk to each other. We see ourselves as the hills committee community. Yes, we are Emerald Village Association. I think with the direction we have taken recently – I probably need the Chair to be talking about it – what we have tried to do is be the voice of Emerald in terms of actually getting a newsletter out; it has actually morphed into a magazine now. But it is actually to try and inform our broader community of what is going on and who is doing what. If you want to engage and you have a particular interest, you can find that. What we have tried to do is actually engage the community as best we can. It is very difficult, because there are a lot of greybeards and a lot of volunteers who are actually engaging probably your generation, which is really difficult.

Gaëlle BROAD: Yes. I guess I am interested because we do have 79 councils in the state. Obviously, with disasters it does not follow council boundaries, so you do need to have responses that are coordinated. And I saw in your submission that one of your meeting actions was to set up a vulnerable persons list. I guess just with privacy and information, being a group, I am wondering how that works. I am also interested: the SES do a lot in terms of response and recovery and also are keen to educate and inform people through information

kits, but I know that they receive about half the funding to run as an organisation, so they are on a very thin budget and do not have a lot to communicate. So what do you see? We are looking at statewide recommendations. Does there need to be similar groups like this? Or would SES have a role? How do you communicate with people?

Claude CULLINO: I would probably start by saying we do not have an answer. We have got a discussion paper, and we want to actually talk to our community and try to encourage the community itself to say what it needs to do and who is vulnerable – perhaps just to understand their needs and maybe talk to their neighbours. Yes, there is an issue of confidentiality, but neighbours are neighbours and we are human beings, and we hope we can help each other through the process. For example, Kate is one of my neighbours. I tend to – or my wife, I should say, tends to let her know what we are doing and where we are at so that if something happens she can look at our property and I can do the same thing for hers, and similarly with other people in the street. It is really just trying to connect with one another.

Gaelle BROAD: Are you trying to fill a gap because it is there to be filled?

Trevor BUDGE: There is a gap.

Claude CULLINO: Absolutely.

Trevor BUDGE: There is a gap, and recently we have been looking at the issue of dementia, which not necessarily immediately gets you onto a vulnerable persons – of course that falls within family support and so on. But we do make the point that for anybody – it does not matter whether you have got five cars and you have got every bit of telecommunications available to you – if the road is out of action and the phone system does not work, you are vulnerable. That is the reality.

Gaelle BROAD: It is a pretty big vulnerable register when you are in a disaster.

Trevor BUDGE: It has huge potential for – yes.

The CHAIR: Consideration was given to vulnerable persons issues in our last report. I might now go to Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your appearance this morning. I just want to touch again on that engagement piece. Claude, when you sat down you mentioned the next generation. How are you going about getting that next generation engaged in it? And secondly, is there something that the government could do to assist with that process?

Claude CULLINO: Again, I tend to think that younger people tend to be busy – busy at work, busy with raising families. I suppose the journey we are going on at the moment is using the newsletter to circulate and I have meetings outside business hours so people can attend – again, trying to just continually engage. I do not think there is any silver bullet in this; I think it is just a question of perseverance.

Trevor BUDGE: But importantly, Claude, we have brought into our Emerald Village committee a regular liaison with the students at the Emerald Secondary College, and we have got the four school captains regularly attending our meetings now. They express similar concerns – how do they get wider engagement amongst their own students? That has changed our thinking quite a lot, because it has really brought home that we do have a gap, which I think Claude is referring to, and that is: people between about 20 and 50 in a community like this are almost all commuters to work, and they have got so many commitments, they just have not got the time. As you would appreciate, a community like this runs on volunteerism, and if we find a person that is really great to work with, we then find that they are volunteering with the CFA or they are on the school committee or something like this. There are a lot of busy people. But we have had success in reaching out to the students, and we want to expand that next year and go deeper than just the school captains – get it into, say, year 10, year 11 and year 12. That has been quite fruitful, and they have really helped us with social media, which we all struggle with. They instantly have stuff on TikTok. They have said ‘Do this on Facebook’, ‘Do this on TikTok’ and ‘Instagram here’, and we are sitting back – ‘Wow, that’s fantastic.’ All of a sudden we are on social media.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. Your submission is very comprehensive. In the limited time I have, I have got two main questions. One relates to our discussion around the barriers Victoria is facing in upgrading infrastructure to become more resilient. In your response, in your summary, you speak about tree asset management on key roads. We love trees. We move to regions because of trees. In storm events they can be a killer or the major disruptor that you have just described. In a recommendation to government how do you get the balance right about asset management on key roads?

Trevor BUDGE: Yes. One, there are too many organisations involved in tree management. It is not just councils; there are a whole range of service providers. They all seem to have their own agenda. They have their own priorities. They have their own systems of what they consider. There is very little consultation. Two days ago one service authority – I presume it was something to do with power – came and started cutting down trees in front of our place – no consultation. You know, I can understand why they were doing it, but there is very little consultation. The second thing, though, is that what we are not seeing is regular maintenance. We do not want to go there too far, but we see certain critical roads absolutely need to underground the facility so that we can move away from this constant maintenance of trees and constantly trees falling down –

Melina BATH: In terms of power lines?

Trevor BUDGE: In power lines – undergrounding power lines. Now, we know it is prohibitively expensive, but you were talking about Yarra Ranges talking about the critical emergency routes – why aren't we focusing on those? I think we said in our submission there is \$40 million allocated across Victoria for undergrounding – well, you know, we talk about resilience planning; we talk about being forward thinking. Critical undergrounding of power on critical road infrastructure could be a major saver in terms of keeping roads open and so on. Did you want to comment?

Claude CULLINO: I think we either value vegetation or we do not, and if we have got a roadside vegetation policy, then we should be acting on it. It seems to me that the council in particular and the road agencies have all contracted it out. There is no ownership of the roadside vegetation, and it is haphazard. I said before I had seven contractors or seven visits from people clearing trees –

Melina BATH: So what is your position on hazardous trees in key roads?

Claude CULLINO: I am happy for the roadside to be managed. If it is a hazardous tree, then yes, it should be removed. But at the end of the day, manage it and care for it and provide a reasonable streetscape at the same time.

Melina BATH: Thank you. The Chair has just given me the 'I'm running out of time'. But maybe something on notice that you might like to address: we heard in the floods about, with climate change and flood events and the like, retrofitting current buildings. So it might be raising up the air-conditioning system that sits on the ground at my house and in schools and hospitals – retrofitting. Could you think of some examples that you could give to us – and it could be on notice – about retrofitting to support that sort of infrastructure?

Claude CULLINO: Certainly when I was in a work environment at the City of Manningham, what we mapped out was overland flow. Because of all the built environment along there, the water goes around buildings; it does not go in a straight line. What we tried to do is engage the local communities along those flow paths and try and put porous fencing so that the water would continually flow rather than bank up and keep surging, creating a problem. So the issue is again mapping the area – when there is hard infrastructure, where does the water go – and then trying to plan that. Yes, it is a lot of hard work, but it is working with your community and ensuring that those plans are in the planning process so that people can actually see and look at it and decide how to deal with it. If it is not there, then you do not know how to deal with it.

Kate FORSTER: Could I add: in Emerald there is the Hills Hub, a large community building that was opened three or four years ago here with Commonwealth, state and council funding. The community advocated strongly for two generators to be in that building. There are none. It is a short distance from the Emerald exchange, which Telecom set up to run indefinitely independently so we would have always a telephone, unless the line was actually broken. They function on the ground, but if they are broken, they are broken. They are just running through a node, so if the power goes down, there are 4 or 5 hours in the battery and then there are no NBN telecommunications available in that building. There is no smoke alarm. There is no plan to keep out smoke. There is no mechanism for that, and I have been told, 'It's new, so you're not going to have much

chance of improving things for quite a while.’ This just shows such a lack of foresight and a tragic inability to listen to the community.

Just down the road is the Emerald community’s cooperative Mitre 10 hardware store, with the same advice and the same people on the committee. The storm came, and 3 minutes after the power went down their generator was running and they had organised fibre to the premises. It ran right –

Melina BATH: It was the hub.

Kate FORSTER: The hub was closed.

Melina BATH: No, what I mean is it became the hub.

Kate FORSTER: Well, the community was not that aware that that was there, and this is also part of the problem. What had been funded for telecommunications was a tower down at the SES building. I went down there to use it for a meeting. The road was chaotic in front of it – it is steep. You can imagine they were in absolute crisis mode – vehicles in and out, in and out, and the other services too. They expected the community to be walking down into that environment and, as I did, sit next to the ambulance staff. I thought there were issues around confidentiality there too. They were there to use the telecommunications. These things look simple – that was a simple solution someone came up with – but we really must look at the devil in the detail for how it will work for community.

Let me just say – I kind of missed this – our sense of resilience is not just this emergency, this heroic, somewhat patriarchal, I would have to say, approach. We want to have ongoing resilience, because there are the big events that you see in the media but we have a lots of power outages. Now with fires they have made the lines much more sensitive and reactive, and they are going to keep shutting off the power when they sense that a branch has fallen on a line, even if there is not a problem it. It will be shut down until they sort it out to make sure there is not a problem.

We have got a lot more people working at home. We have got a lot of young families where Dad has gone out to work, and occasionally Mum, but they are at home. We found in these storms that some of those dads could not get back in to support their family. You cannot assume that people, even in those structures, and although they tend to, are going to be able to function as they had hoped in this sort of environment.

This issue of lines that are vulnerable underground – it is a no-brainer. The telecommunications line came down in front of my place. It laid on the ground for nine months. The transmission box had been shattered, and the tiny wires that were each of our telephone connections were there tied with a rope to the power pole. It took me nine months of intensive lobbying to get them to fix it.

The CHAIR: Who did you have to –

Kate FORSTER: Nine months.

The CHAIR: But who?

Kate FORSTER: Sorry, this is NBN. Part of our problem is contractors, and it is the same with power. It used to be that the staff knew the area, but particularly with power in the last three years, that has not been the case. We had a weekend where it was a long weekend and a lot of their contractors had gone away, hadn’t they? So that slowed things down. They are totally reliant on their mobile phones. Even the Telstra staff tell me, when I ask them about reception – I am no longer with Telstra, but when I was – ‘Oh, no, I haven’t got any reception here.’ That means I was literally forced onto NBN because I knew that I was going to lose that security because there was no reception in the house.

These are all intertwined, but the key point I want to come back to is that with these services, this slows down all the work to fix things. In the city if you drive down to one corner and the road is blocked, you go down to the next street around. Well, at the end of my road, for the next road along, you have to drive over 2 kilometres around the village to get there because there is a little valley and there is no road through there. The contractors were getting lost. People had to tell them where to go. There were many instances of missed damage that were not picked up. In a street nearby to me they came eventually and switched on the power, and they did not realise there was still a tree over the line down at the end of the road. So we are looking at infrastructure, but we

are looking at how that is supported to function. But what we come to back is we want this resilience. We need microgrids. We need the Hills Hub, which has, due to our renewable energy association, put solar on the roof. But it had no power, independent power, and the library is the same.

I will just finish up with mentioning the library, because the library is an absolutely essential hub, supportive of vulnerability in our community. If you do not have NBN at home, if you are not sure how to use your mobile phone or how to put that form in on the internet, that is the role of our community librarians. The people who are more vulnerable, the elderly who just need help, go there and our library was closed.

The CHAIR: Mrs Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: It says here that the association is committed to collaborating with council through initiatives like a community battery. Have we addressed that actual battery, or are we talking about other batteries and generators at the moment? Because I want to talk about the battery – the community battery. How is that going? Have you got it yet?

Claude CULLINO: The short answer is Worrell Reserve itself has got a backup system – solar, battery and generator – but it is the football club, cricket club and gymnasium so it is really not a centre as per the hub. Unfortunately we did not get there, but you could have had a bit of a walk around. What we are suggesting really is that the community battery can actually deliver maybe for the hub as well. One of our long-term aims is to make the hub itself resilient because it is on the main road, it can be accessed easily, and it is not down the back as Worrell Reserve –

Trevor BUDGE: It has got showers, it is fully –

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I want to know about the battery itself. How many businesses or homes can it provide power to, how much does it cost, how much does it cost to maintain and keep going? Do you know that?

Kate FORSTER: The current one is just to one small building, now designated the emergency building when it is not the footy club.

Trevor BUDGE: It is not powering a power system or anything like that.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: That is all right. I will go to my next question then. It also says proposed pilot projects to promote social, ecological and economic resilience, emphasises the need for futureproofing village design and using the natural environment to build adaptive capacity. Could you please elaborate on the natural environment to build adaptive capacity?

Trevor BUDGE: Well, you have already seen that Emerald is a village of trees, and there is actually an extraordinary amount of public land – we are sitting on public land now – right through the Emerald park and Nobelius Heritage Park, Worrell Reserve and other reserves that we have. It is the setting that is attracting people, but unfortunately I think the way that we have gone about these things means we have this dichotomy that it is either the environment or it is a community, hence some of the attitudes towards tree clearing. What we are really arguing for is that in that planning we need a holistic approach that says what the key values of the community are and how can we protect them. One of those key values is that we have got people here who have come here and live here because of the environment. Sometimes the approach of various authorities is simply to disregard that community. This is why we say that with this local strategic planning, which is a co-designed approach, we need to educate many of these organisations, including council, as to what it is that the community values, what the community is prepared to accept in terms of change and how do they want to see new development take place. We have had a couple of examples where I think we have had some success in changing the thinking on some development proposals as to how they can better address climate resilience. But that is purely a negotiation with the developer, nothing that could be required under the *Planning and Environment Act*. We have got some people who do developments in the town who actually want to be long-time residents here and they have respected that. But we need to build that into a consistent approach right across the town.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We are out of time. I really do appreciate the evidence that you have given and your submission. If there are any further issues you want to raise or things that you have sparked from this conversation, we are very happy to take that and some standing responses to questions on notice. We are absolutely out of time. You will receive a copy of the transcript of today's evidence to review before it is published on the website. With that the committee will take a short break to reset for the next witnesses.

Witnesses withdrew.