

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Climate Resilience

Aireys Inlet – Wednesday 23 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

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John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

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Rachel Payne

Richard Welch

WITNESS

Ian Laging, President, Aireys Inlet and District Association.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Climate Resilience in Victoria, here in Aireys Inlet. Welcome to the rep from the Aireys Inlet and District Association.

All the evidence that we take 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 those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of the Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council. I will ask the committee to introduce themselves. Deputy Chair.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Hi. I am David Ettershank, Western Metropolitan Region.

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

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi. I am Gaelle, Member for Northern Victoria.

Melina BATH: And hello there. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: If you could state your name and who you are appearing on behalf of for Hansard, please.

Ian LAGING: Certainly. My name is Ian Laging. I am a resident of Aireys Inlet and I am representing the Aireys Inlet and District Association here today. First of all, I would like to acknowledge the Wadawurrung people and the peoples of the Eastern Maar as the traditional owners of the land on which we meet.

The Aireys Inlet and District Association is quite a significant association in this part of the world. We started 60 years ago as a group opposing inappropriate development on the wetlands of Aireys Inlet. It seems we are still in business on that subject as well as many others. Over the time, the organisation has grown its aim to conserve the natural environment and special character of this area – and I hope you have had a bit of a look around to appreciate what we call the paradise that we live in but also the slightly risky paradise, as you have heard from some of the witnesses today. Our area of special concern lies between Eastern View and Urquhart Bluff and the adjacent hinterland. The Aireys Inlet and District Association has over 500 members, which is not bad for a community of just over 1000 people – although it does swell during the summer months, naturally.

I have got two apologies today from AIDA committee members who would have liked to have attended but could not be here. They are Charlotte Allen, our immediate past president for the last 10 years, currently our vice-president but of more relevance an active member of the Great Ocean Road Communities Network; and also Christopher Ryan, professor emeritus in design and regenerative futures at RMIT University. He is an active member of the Painkalac Valley Network and has prepared various papers and submissions on climate change and resilience, and I am going to see if I can talk him into submitting something, even if it is perhaps at a later time in this inquiry.

My own background is I am a retired architect with over 50 years of practice and a fellow of the Australian Institute of Architects. Of more relevance to this inquiry I have been reviewing all planning matters for AIDA for the last few years until I recently became President of the association. When I say 'reviewing planning

matters', that is actually looking at planning applications and reviewing them against the bushfire management overlay, the neighbourhood character overlay, heritage, environment et cetera on behalf of our members. You have got to remember that I live here and that I have to play a fairly straight game with that sort of thing, but I am buoyed by the fact that I have a lot of support from the local community of our planning scheme, and I think that is a reassuring place to be when you are assessing planning applications.

AIDA has a very strong relationship with Angair, the Anglesea Aireys Inlet Society for the Protection of Flora and Fauna, and also for the newly formed Painkalac Valley Network. In this room next Saturday the Painkalac Valley Network will be holding a community forum of people interested in the future and the issues around the Painkalac valley. This has come from within the community. It is not a council-sponsored event. It is not coming from above. It is from within the community. That is the message I want to get across, that we have got a community very active and interested in environmental issues down here. That is one of the main messages I want to get across to you today.

AIDA is also represented, as I say, on the Great Ocean Road Communities Network. That network in 2021 produced a four-part webinar series which explored the implications of and government response to climate change and coastal erosion along the Great Ocean Road. I believe it is available on YouTube. I can provide some details of the link for that particular series of webinars. Both our organisation and GORCN, the Great Ocean Road Communities Network, are currently corresponding with the Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority, GORCAPA, who I must say I would have liked to have heard from today, because I think as managers of the coast in this area it would have been interesting to hear some of the things that were said, which were music to my ears, from the Corangamite catchment authority about openings of the Painkalac estuary, of which GORCAPA is now in control.

AIDA is also corresponding with GORCAPA and the Surf Coast shire on the impact of large vehicles and tourist buses on our local infrastructure. It is quite an issue down here, and of course there is a lot of angst amongst local residents. A joint study on this issue has been proposed for 2026, although I think we are anxious to resolve this problem sooner than that. Of course we work very closely with the Surf Coast shire, who we heard from first thing this morning, on major issues to do with planning and infrastructure, and we will be meeting with the shire executive, including Robyn and Chris, who you saw here today, early in December with, hopefully, some newly elected councillors to discuss the issues of concern to our organisation. I am rather flattered that they take us so seriously and listen to us. But our membership is very earnest and dedicated to environmental and conservation causes in this area, so it is good to talk to them face to face about such issues.

Some of the things that we will be talking about, again of relevance to this inquiry, are coastal township issues regarding the current planning scheme review and *Urban Futures Strategy* in the Surf Coast. It is happening at the moment, and AIDA has responded in particular to the *Urban Futures Strategy* draft document, which does canvass issues to do with climate resilience and issues also, particularly importantly, to do with neighbourhood character and bushfire management overlay requirements. There is a great tension between the two. We have local residents who are here to appreciate the natural environment, but as local residents they are also aware of the bushfire risk. The tension in the planning regulations between those two things is quite strong, and certainly we get a lot of feedback from planning officers on the difficulties that they have in managing a planning scheme in an area which is subject to a bushfire management overlay.

I will finish by saying that we have got three major concerns regarding the impact of climate change on the built environment and infrastructure. The first is coastal erosion along the Great Ocean Road and in particular the resourcing of the Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority so that they are actually able to identify and manage the problem. We are concerned that they have sufficient resources to do so. We are also concerned about water quality and flood management along the creeks and waterways of the Great Ocean Road. Obviously the Painkalac Creek valley is of concern to us, but we understand that there are problems at Wye River and other points along the Great Ocean Road. Again, we want relevant authorities, such as the CCMA and the Surf Coast shire – and it was good to hear that the Surf Coast shire has actually got funding to do some studies into the Painkalac Creek – sufficiently funded to identify and mitigate these problems. This is where we see the issue is: resourcing these authorities who own the problem to actually do the work. Lastly, our concern is, of course, bushfire risk management. With the *Urban Futures Strategy* the approach is containing the current coastal townships along the Great Ocean Road within existing settlement boundaries. Now, we support that and we think it is a good idea, although we think improvement needs to be made to the definition of those

boundaries in terms of residential zonings and the surrounding conservation zonings where you also have a lot of residential development.

So I guess overarching these concerns is a recognition of the need to protect what we see as a unique and valued environment – landscapes and built heritage – in this area. As I say, we greatly enjoy living here but are aware of the risks. And concurrently, we are actually trying to achieve night sky accreditation as a dark sky location.

The CHAIR: Mr Laging, we are going to have to wrap it up because we have got some questions.

Ian LAGING: I will finish with this one last sentence. Thanks. The strong local community recognition of the need to take action on climate change and a willingness to become involved in designing and implementing appropriate solutions is within this community, and what we ask of you is to convey to the state government that we are a great resource on this particular issue down in this part of the coast. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. We will now move to questions. We are a little pressed for time because we have got an appointment down at Fairhaven at 2:45, so we will be brief. You mentioned in your review the planning applications in the local area. One of the terms of reference of this committee's inquiry is to assess the adequacy of the planning system in dealing with climate change and the built environment. Based on that work that you do, how well do you think that our planning system is taking account of the way our climate is changing and the way it approves the built form in that environment?

Ian LAGING: There is a lot of discretion given to planning officers in exercising judgement on planning applications, and we support that. There is no one-size-fits-all. When our organisation reviews a planning application we are looking at it on matters to do with neighbourhood character, because these are things that have come from the community and their own studies, which are now embodied into the planning scheme. When it comes to bushfire management overlay questions, that we accept as a given.

The CHAIR: Do you think the scheme is robust enough to deal with the risk?

Ian LAGING: It is actually not very nuanced. It is actually quite prescriptive. We think it could be a little bit more nuanced in terms of its approach to, rather than just clearing trees, sort of clearing ladder fuel and so on around those trees and particular types of scrub which is flammable.

The CHAIR: We have obviously got the bushfire risk. Are there any other natural disaster risks that you think the planning scheme does take account of well, or poorly?

Ian LAGING: Certainly I was listening with interest to the CCMA about the flood risk issue, and one of the problems that we have in Aireys Inlet is frequent opening of the Painkalac estuary, because of housing that has occurred along the Painkalac Creek, which is flood-prone. That housing was given permission through VCAT. It was actually opposed by the Surf Coast shire. So I thought the idea of an overlay which incorporated flooding risk was a very good idea.

The CHAIR: I might leave it there. Mr Ettershank.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you. Can I say I have been coming here for 30 years or thereabouts, and it is always lovely to be in the Aireys Inlet, where there is such strong community engagement and ownership. I guess thinking about the issues you have identified, and it is great that you have spent so much time fighting and thinking through these sorts of things, what do you see as the biggest obstacles to building climate resilience in the Aireys Inlet area?

Ian LAGING: I think we have the willingness of the local population to support such things. I think we have difficulty in energising relevant authorities to, say, do water testing of the Painkalac Creek or to take action on other matters to do with, say, increasing the resilience of the creek so that we do not have to open the estuary so often. It is good to see, as I said, the Surf Coast Shire have now got funding to do a study to inform them of how they might approach that a little bit better. So I see it as a resourcing issue, and I am particularly concerned about the newly formed Great Ocean Road Coast and Parks Authority having sufficient resources to do the work that they are being asked to do.

David ETTERS HANK: As you think that they are more interested in tourism than in preservation?

Ian LAGING: Funding. Basically people and funding. In our communications with them we are having difficulty contacting them and then getting action on certain items.

David ETTERS HANK: Like what?

Ian LAGING: Well, to do with, in this particular instance, the testing of the water quality in the Painkalac, which of course needs cooperation with the Surf Coast shire, which have now initiated a study. That is one example.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. We heard in Parliament last week that bushfire conditions this summer will probably be the worst since 1983.

Ian LAGING: I have heard that too.

David ETTERS HANK: So when you look at the extent to which areas are stretched back and inland and in towards the forests, does the association have a view on what action should be taken to control risk?

Ian LAGING: Controlling risk, yes. As I said in my submission, the containment of the settlement boundaries and around those settlement boundaries, the construction of approaches to risk management within those boundaries, but not to allow the development to bleed out into the bush itself.

David ETTERS HANK: And do you think council is onside but perhaps VCAT is not so sympathetic? Is that sort of a part of it?

Ian LAGING: No. Sorry, who was not sympathetic?

David ETTERS HANK: VCAT.

Ian LAGING: VCAT. No, the issue with VCAT was to do with flooding. The council, certainly it is in their future strategy that this is a principle that should apply in the new planning scheme – or the revised planning scheme – and we support that. So all we are looking for is some definition, a better definition, of those boundaries than simply calling it a residential zone as distinct from a conservation zone, because there are a lot of people also living in the conservation zones.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. Thank you very much for appearing today. I am just interested – you are an architect by background; what are some practical suggestions that you have for how buildings can be upgraded to be more climate resilient?

Ian LAGING: Climate resilient – I thought you were going to say bushfire resilient. Of course we have quite improved building standards now at various bushfire attack levels, and that is then nominated within the permits that are given for building these days. I imagine in most instances we are talking about the same thing – climate resilience, bushfire resilience for our houses, except for those, of course, which are flood-prone. In containment of the urban boundaries of our municipalities all houses have a life span, and as they gradually improve so will the construction of those houses be improved in terms of their resistance to bushfire. Modern houses are certainly better than the older ones at resisting bushfire.

Gaelle BROAD: Do you think with retrofitting, are there any cost-effective solutions, particularly with bushfires, to improve buildings?

Ian LAGING: I think we have got things pretty right with the current regulations, and they have been well and truly tested, particularly down at Wye River. So no, I think we have got that right. I am particularly looking at planning issues rather than building permit issues. One of the things with our local area is that we have increased setbacks between buildings, and one of the things that came out of the Wye River episode was that the further apart the houses were the more likely that one catching fire would not set to the other. So we have 3-metre side setbacks here and a 9-metre setback from the front, and we believe that that is a good thing, not only from the terms of a bushfire approach, but also in creating open space around the buildings we have got more

chance for the environment to absorb rainfall. We have only got a 35 per cent site coverage here in Aireys Inlet, and that means less runoff into the into the Painkalac Creek valley. So we think that is a good aspect of our neighbourhood character overlay. And I might add one thing: at the moment you have recently introduced legislation for second small dwellings. That second small dwellings legislation excludes neighbourhood character overlay requirements, and we have actually written to the government suggesting that it should comply with all neighbourhood character overlay requirements, even second small dwellings, because the same principles apply that I was just talking about in terms of fire separation and in terms of the resilience of the area to absorb water.

The CHAIR: Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you for appearing today. You mentioned that the community here are very willing and able to partner with other organisations, whether it be government or other authorities, to help build climate resilience and take action. What would better partnerships look like? What would you like to see in terms of partnering with community and working closer with the community on these sorts of things?

Ian LAGING: That is a good question. At the moment we have got a group rewilding part of the Painkalac valley on what is called Lot 2 Bambra Road, where they are actually through Angair selecting plants appropriate for the area and replanting. I think guidance and support from local authorities such as the Surf Coast shire – I think we work very well with the Surf Coast shire, and the Surf Coast shire certainly have a good track record on environmental issues in terms of the way they present themselves, so I think working with the Surf Coast shire on such projects would work well.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. You have even just in a short time demonstrated a lot of thorough local knowledge of the impacts of climate on this community and the built environment here. Do you feel that current processes adequately tap into that local knowledge? I mean, perhaps the local council works well with your group here, but if we were to take some learnings from this, from your experience here are there things that we could recommend, say, out of this inquiry that would improve that partnership with local community to draw on local knowledge about climate risk?

Ian LAGING: Thank you for the question. It was a point that I made on ABC radio this morning that if I can leave you folks with one message, it is that we have an environmentally educated community down here who are willing to help. We think that is recognised by our Surf Coast shire, but we do not think it is recognised at state government level. When we write to them about issues to do with second small dwellings or other things such as that, we do not have that level of engagement at all. So I think that could be improved. We would like to help is the message.

Sarah MANSFIELD: What benefit could that potentially bring if you had those better working partnerships and were able to tap into them?

Ian LAGING: Just a better understanding of our particular circumstances. I mean, you are looking at big-picture things to do with climate resilience, but in effect it becomes a whole series of local decisions about how you improve things. That is something I heard about today: what does remedial action look like? The answer is: well, it depends on the circumstances of each individual situation and how you might improve things. If the state government were looking to take actions on climate resilience in this area, you have got this great resource in terms of the local community to say, 'Hey, here are some good ideas for you.'

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Berger.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. And thank you for your contribution this afternoon. You have obviously got a fair range of people that you represent here by that number of 500 in the group.

Ian LAGING: I am conscious of it, yes.

John BERGER: I am particularly interested in that community group: is there anything that you are really concerned about with the increase of the severe weather events that come along – any particular parts of the community that you are worried about?

Ian LAGING: I mean, our age profile is quite old here, which I guess you have realised, so yes, we do look out for each other, and I know neighbours of mine and so on who tend to look out for people who would need assistance in an emergency. I think that is the answer to your question: yes, there is no older cohort here that would need to be looked after. Hopefully, with sufficient notice they would not even be here.

John BERGER: Because it would be different for events: for an extreme rain event you might get a little bit of warning; fire, you might get a little bit of warning; but both –

Ian LAGING: Two hours, we get.

John BERGER: But both different outcomes.

Ian LAGING: On a hot north wind day, if there is a fire up there, you get 2 hours.

John BERGER: Yes, one road in, one road out. Do you think you are sufficiently equipped to deal with that and the resources that you –

Ian LAGING: Look, I do not think I could answer that, but you would like to hope so. We have got a place of last resort, which is sitting down there by the bottom shops near the junction with Bambra Road. One hopes that that would do the work, but I am not able to really say one way or another. You would have to ask our good friends at the CFA and emergency services.

John BERGER: Okay, thanks.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much, Ian, for your dedication to your community. I am over here in Latrobe Valley at the minute, but I recently, a few years ago, had a lovely few days away at Lorne, Aireys Inlet and Wye River. I note your comments around the importance of mitigating bushfire, and I guess maybe that is part of my question: what actions – again we are making recommendations – or policies could be implemented to reduce the vulnerability of your community and, by association, some of the others along that patch in terms of road infrastructure, transport and energy? Roads first: what could be done, what could we do? What could we recommend to government on roads, on transport and on energy?

Ian LAGING: That is a great question. As was just pointed out, one road in, one road out. There has been a lot of work done to actually clear the sides of the road in and out of our area to allow firefighting to take place and to allow people to evacuate at the same time. As you are travelling, perhaps, back to Melbourne, you will notice the tracks on either side of the road which have been cleared, enabling that to happen. Some of that work has not been done terribly well, but at least it has been done. The bush is recovering from that clearing, but it needs to be kept up. We have got to be very conscious of the fact that there are very few ways in and out and those ways need to be protected. Sorry, what was the other part of your question?

Melina BATH: Thank you. I appreciate that. Before I go to that other part of my question, sometimes you have to take a little bit of that nature and just widen that road a bit in order to protect a broader aspect of conservation. Is that something that would sit reasonably well with your members in terms of that road verge?

Ian LAGING: Yes. In fact I do not know if the members here are going to actually have a look around Aireys Inlet and Fairhaven this afternoon, but you will see in fact some of that road verge work caused a collapse of an embankment at Fairhaven, which is currently being repaired. The qualified answer to your question is yes, but they would want to see the details. We are all aware of the risks as residents down here, but I think it would need to make sense to them and we would also need to see the care taken for that work to be done.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I guess the second part was in relation to energy. What actions or policies could government do? Clearly if there are more frequent storms – you have got powerlines – we have heard from other inquiry hearings that it is very expensive to go underground. Does your group have a sense of that, or have batteries ever been discussed at some of your meetings?

Ian LAGING: No, we have not formed a view on that, but we often take surveys of our members on these sorts of subjects. I was going to suggest that one of the things we might do is actually undertake a survey of our

members on climate resilience itself so we can have a better view of what they are thinking, and that question to do with power is certainly one that would be on it. The other one of course would be communications through our rather iffy communications network down here, which causes a lot of angst as well. But we would be happy to actually do a survey of our members on this particular subject, and we could perhaps suggest a questionnaire and get your feedback on it before we circulated it.

The CHAIR: I am sure we would be happy to do that. Ian, thanks so much for coming in and for your evidence today and hosting the committee in the community. It has been great to be down here, and we are taking a visit down to Fairhaven beach shortly after this. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings to review before it is published. With that today's proceedings are adjourned.

Committee adjourned.