

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 21 April 2021

*(via videoconference)*

#### **MEMBERS**

Ms Sarah Connolly—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

**WITNESSES**

Mr Rodney Thomas, Manager, Environment and Waste Services,

Ms Sue Hawes, Senior Open Space Planner, and

Ms Jessica Hurse, Manager, Planning and Growth, Greater Geelong City Council.

**The CHAIR:** Hello. Welcome. I hope everyone is well. I can see we have got Sue, Rodney and Jess. Thank you so much for joining us today for this public hearing for the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations.

On behalf of the committee, I acknowledge the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land, and we pay our respects to them, their culture and their elders past, present and future, and elders from other communities who may be joining us here today.

This is one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee will be conducting to inform itself about issues relevant to the inquiry. Before we begin and go through some introductions, I need to point out a couple of things to you. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. What this means is that you can speak freely, without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give, but it is really important to remember that the parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments that you make outside this hearing even if you are actually just restating what you said here today.

You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so to check and to approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you again for taking the time to talk to us this afternoon. I can see that Geelong City Council has not put in a submission yet; there has been perhaps a little bit of talk about maybe putting one in, I am guessing, this week or next week, and we can talk about that. I will start with introductions of the committee first and then jump to you guys. If you have a 5-minute presentation that you would like to do, if you have got PowerPoint slides, great; if you do not, no worries—a statement is fine. Then I know committee members would love to ask you some questions. It is really just about having a broader type of discussion. Our role here today is to listen and just talk about the things that matter to the council and residents and things that you would like to see state government do better or improve upon. My name is Sarah Connolly. I am the Chair of this committee and the Member for Tarneit.

**Mr MORRIS:** I am David Morris. I am the Member for Mornington and Deputy Chair of the committee, and shadow Minister for Local Government, for housing and for ageing.

**Mr FOWLES:** I am Will Fowles, the Member for Burwood.

**Ms GREEN:** Danielle Green, the Member for Yan Yean and Parliamentary Secretary for Sport and regional Victoria.

**Mr HAMER:** And Paul Hamer; I am the Member for Box Hill.

**The CHAIR:** Do you want to start, Rodney?

**Mr THOMAS:** Yes. Thank you for the introductions there and thanks for the opportunity to present today. Rodney Thomas; I am the Manager of Environment and Waste at the City of Greater Geelong.

**Ms HURSE:** Thank you. I am Jess Hurse. I am the Manager of Planning and Growth, our strategic planning function.

**Ms HAWES:** Hi. My name is Sue Hawes. I am the City of Greater Geelong's Senior Open Space Planner.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Now, is there a presentation or statement that you wanted to start with?

**Mr THOMAS:** Yes, if we could perhaps make a statement. We have not prepared a PowerPoint presentation as such today, but we have prepared a statement.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Over to you.

**Mr THOMAS:** Fantastic. Thank you, and thanks again for the opportunity to present today. We were excited to come along and I suppose provide some input into the inquiry.

What we would like to do today is perhaps provide some background to the City of Greater Geelong, just detailing some of our growth, but also talk about some very specific issues that we have identified which we would like to present to the committee as well. I will start before handing over to Sue and Jess later on in the presentation. But just a bit of background: as I am sure you are all aware, Geelong is a rapidly growing city. Currently our population is about 268 000, and it is actually forecast to rise to 393 000 by 2041 at an average annual change of approximately 2 per cent. This rapid population growth is partly driven by our attractive natural assets, and they include an extensive range of parks and reserves. We have also got about 133 kilometres of coastline and over 13 000 hectares of public open space. The city does not have management responsibility for all of that; we share that with agencies such as Parks Victoria. But certainly it is a major drawcard for new residents and also visitors to the region.

That open space has been really, really important during the pandemic as well. We have really seen people utilise that public open space more than ever, and that leads us to think as well that having really high-quality environmental infrastructure is really important moving forward for the community.

From a strategic perspective, we have got a number of documents which help guide us in terms of open space as well as environmental infrastructure. Firstly, we have got our council plan. Obviously we have got the planning scheme. We have also got plans such as our social infrastructure plan, our environment strategy, an urban forest strategy as well as a clever and creative vision which was developed in consultation with our community. There was a lot of feedback through the development of those strategies and plans that highlighted to the council just how important good-quality public space is, that there needs to be enough of it out there in the community and that we need to make it accessible for all members of the community.

I will switch to perhaps the first of the main talking points that we wanted to cover here, and that is called the Barwon River Parklands initiative. That is a project that is looking to establish a continuous chain of urban parklands, open space and conservation reserves along the Barwon River—that is basically from the ring-road in Geelong right through to the Barwon Heads estuary—but also part of the Moorabool River, so that is from the confluence of the Barwon River and the Moorabool River in Geelong right up through to Meredith in the Golden Plains shire. It is looking to establish that continuous chain of parklands.

For those that know the area, it is really, really well utilised for a range of recreational purposes at the moment. There are literally thousands and thousands of people that use it for dog walking, bike riding, sporting activities and so on, so it is really important for the community. This initiative is looking to increase public access into that series of reserves that we have got. This will have a broad range of benefits for the community—obviously increased sporting opportunities, recreational opportunities—but it will also be a tourism destination for visitors. We are finding that visitors from Melbourne and other areas are becoming more familiar with this location, packing up their kids and the bikes and bringing them down and enjoying the many kilometres, for instance, of trails that we see along there.

One of the things that we are looking to develop is a new master plan for that area. We have got one that dates back—it is over 10 years old now, so we do need to update that. That master plan will help guide the infrastructure and cultural, environmental and community projects that we want to see through that area in the future. We have put in some funding requests to the state government on that. Because it is such a large piece of work that will involve extensive community consultation, the amount we are requesting here is in the order of approximately \$1 million, but if we can complete and then obviously implement that plan, it will again transform these series of reserves into something that is very unique to Geelong but also really, really important for the community and tourism as well. So that was probably sort of a bit of a wrap of the first initiative that we are looking to present today. I am not sure, Sarah, whether you want to take questions as we go or perhaps at the end. What is your—

**The CHAIR:** I think at the end. We are just writing notes. At the end, I think, would be best.

**Mr THOMAS:** Fantastic. The second thing that we wanted to present today was around opportunities for greening our region, with particular emphasis on native vegetation offsets. Just as a bit of background, within

the City of Greater Geelong we have less than 5 per cent of our indigenous vegetation left; most of it has been cleared through urban development, farming activities and other activities as well, so we do have very little native vegetation left in the region. Much of what is left is managed by the city and other public organisations such as DELWP, Parks Victoria, Barwon Water et cetera. Current native vegetation offset policy allows for third-party offsetting of native vegetation removal to ensure that there is no net loss of biodiversity as a result of the removal, destruction or lopping of native vegetation in Victoria. So basically whenever there is urban development, as an example, and the developer removes vegetation, they are required to offset that vegetation loss by finding another similar site, which is protected in perpetuity. These third-party offsets can be located either within the municipal boundary or within the catchment management boundary, which is obviously a much, much broader area.

The issue that we have got in Geelong, though, is because we have got such little indigenous vegetation remaining, most of the offsets that are going through urban development are actually finding their way outside the municipality. So there are areas being protected perhaps in neighbouring councils or further afield, but what we are not finding are areas being protected within the City of Greater Geelong. The current practices that are occurring there are in accordance with state policy, but what we would ideally like to see happen is a review of that policy, perhaps with a lens to helping ensure that we see vegetation offsets occurring within municipalities where the native vegetation loss is actually happening. So that would be something we would like to put forward.

The other thing that we do wish to put forward in terms of native vegetation offsets is that generally the offsets are set aside purely for conservation purposes only, and public access is either not allowed or extremely restricted. We would like to see whether there is any option to perhaps allow more public access to native vegetation offset sites. They could potentially be really good locations to provide community education or really passive recreational opportunities, such as walking on designated paths. Again, that could contribute in some way to our open space within the City of Greater Geelong as well. So perhaps I will hand over at this stage to Sue and Jess to talk about our open space policy within the planning scheme.

**Ms HAWES:** Thanks for that, Rod. Currently the City of Geelong are undertaking a review of our open space policy within the planning scheme. The aim of this project is to review the existing planning scheme policies, provisions and the issues and prepare a new local policy and update the direction of open space planning within the municipality.

The key issue that we are wanting to try and address is the imbalance or inequity of open space across the municipality. Much of the local established area compares themselves to the new growth areas in Armstrong Creek, where open space provision has been at a higher quantum and a higher quality than in previous development areas. So we will be particularly trying to address that inequity. We also want to sort of address the role that encumbered open space plays within that recreational open space network. We acknowledge that it has a particularly important function to offer within the network, but we are also conscious that we need to have the correct provision of unencumbered open space provided in order to meet the primary recreation needs. That is the open space that is able to be diverse, to be adapted easily and be multifunctional across a municipality.

In our open space planning scheme amendment we are looking to seek to have definitions included with regard to what is actually encumbered versus unencumbered open space, and particularly around the definition of what 'fit-for-purpose' open space is, because these are the things that we frequently have lengthy conversations with developers over. So to have those approved definitions within the planning scheme would be, we consider, advantageous. We are embarking on an open space strategy at the moment, of which a significant proportion of work will be undertaken to review the quality assessments with our existing network. So we will probably be seeking government funding to assist with that large piece of work. We also see it as being important, even though COGG will be looking to implement definitions within our planning scheme, that if the state government were able to provide a set of open space planning definitions across the whole state, that would be an advantage so developers have a clear understanding of what is encumbered and unencumbered and fit for purpose, for example.

The second issue we want the state government to address is what is the appropriate level of contribution for land for recreation. The VPA guidelines, as we all know, have become the cited standard across the state, recommending 10 per cent of net developable residential area and 2 per cent of developable employment area as the appropriate primary recreation open space that is needed for the community. This rate was formulated a decade ago based on development densities of 15 dwellings a hectare. Last year the draft PSP guidelines were

released for consultation, which had the recreation open space provision rate unchanged, yet we have now seen densities between 20 to 30 dwellings a hectare. So we are requesting that the state government undertake a review of the appropriate amount of open space required to meet the current densities. Just for example, the provision rate for land for indoor sport is population based, so it is 1 hectare per 12 000 people. So why isn't outdoor recreation also able to be adjusted according to the population which it is going to serve?

The final issue is: we are seeking further support to ensure high-quality fit-for-purpose open space that gives the community access to the highest amenity locations within developments that contribute to a great community. We are finding that open space does not have primacy in the design process for new estates. For example, we frequently have issues with co-locations, particularly with drainage assets. So developers have a subdivision plan approved, adopted through council and then they go into more detailed design for these assets, and quite frequently we are seeing the stormwater assets change in size—that is, they have not allocated enough land and these basins become bigger, and if co-located with open space they tend to eat into open space because they are unwilling and do not need to go back to readdress the subdivision plan. Or the other option is to make the basins deeper, which then requires safety fencing, which is a poor outcome from an amenity and maintenance perspective. So we would like to see further support with policy that changes to asset layouts will trigger a subdivision change. Jess, did you want to add anything?

**Ms HURSE:** No, you have covered it well, Sue. Thank you. We are probably at the end of our presentation and are happy to take questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Jess. Rodney and Sue, that was really insightful. There are a lot of points that you have raised that I know are issues in my local area, there in Tarneit. I wanted to ask you about those sorts of new estates that are popping up. Sometimes houses are being built woe to go in five months flat and people move in, so this creates a problem we know, not just around infrastructure, transport infrastructure and other things. Residents and communities talk a lot about buying into house and land packages on these estates with developers and then waiting years and years and years for the lovely park that they wanted their young children to play in. Is this a particular issue in your local area that you are having to deal with? I am just wondering what your thoughts are on that. Is that something that you think state government could be stepping in earlier in the planning process to deal with, the issue of open space?

**Ms HAWES:** If you take Tarneit, I used to work for Wyndham so I am quite familiar with Tarneit.

**The CHAIR:** Many of you do. You live in Geelong and you come up. You could move up.

**Ms HAWES:** No, I live in Ballarat actually. I mean it all depends on whether the subdivision has actually got a park planned for that area. Generally, if you have a developer that has got a large enough parcel that has got a number of parks within it, certainly we will negotiate with that developer that within the initial stages a park is delivered with regard to that. So it is dependent on the developer's timetable. We will encourage that that occur—if they have got 10 stages that it will be delivered within the first two. Generally, developers are keen to deliver that passive component up-front because they use it as a marketing tool as well.

The real issue we see is the lag with regard to sporting provision, because they are usually larger blocks of land, usually straddled over multiple land parcels, so there is sort of the acquisition process that can be quite convoluted. Then there is obviously the programming time to deliver. So an active open space—currently with Geelong we are setting out to bring this work in-house now instead of developers delivering them. There is a four-year process from master planning to basically a child being able to kick a ball on an oval, so it is not a quick process. Coupled with issues with getting the land up-front and then the design process, that tends to lag behind, plus we do not want land in isolation. We need land that has got services to it, so we normally have to wait till development comes up to that parcel for us to be able to work with them.

**The CHAIR:** Are you a council that supports removing nature strips from a developer's open space contribution?

**Ms HAWES:** Nature strips are a road asset as far as we are concerned, so they are part of the road reserve. If a road abuts an open space, the footpath will be in the verge and the verge is considered part of the road asset. We require all of our open space to be a continuous parcel and not part of the road reserve, because usually you run all your subterranean utilities through that road reserve, so it is an encumbrance.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. I am going to throw to David.

**Mr MORRIS:** Just picking up very quickly on that last point first, one of the councils we have spoken to this morning has talked about road reserves not having sufficient space to plant trees, which is the point Sarah was coming to. They were saying that they were achieving broader streets in the subdivision but the developers they were talking to were suggesting that that was a public open space contribution, so they were seeking to have their main public open space contribution discounted by the amount that they have provided for sufficient space to plant trees. I am just wondering whether that had been an issue in your patch—before I ask my substantive question.

**Ms HAWES:** No, we are pretty firm on that. If the road cross-section is required to be 16 metres and then, let us say, 2.5 metres on either side is verge, then that is road asset—that is not open space asset.

**Mr MORRIS:** Yes. It was in the context of trying to improve tree coverage.

**Ms HAWES:** Additional planting? No. I mean, it is all sort of site dependent. If we require an extra wide verge for a reason, for extra tree planting—maybe we have got a reasonable shared path network that runs beside it or something—then no, we would treat it as road reserve.

**Mr MORRIS:** Right, okay.

**Ms HURSE:** I was going to contribute to that point about the tree canopy. The challenge of delivering tree canopy within the road reserves exists for us as well and is a very topical issue at the moment in terms of objectives emerging from DELWP policy work about strengthening tree canopy, and it is really consistent with a lot of council policies—the urban heat island effect—and all of those good policy objectives that we are trying to achieve, and they are emerging from the VPA guidelines as well, but the barriers to delivering that are very significant. We are working with a number of other councils at the moment on a pilot investigative study about how you could meet the tree canopy objectives by relocating services or alternative construction methods to try and get that good urban amenity outcome.

**Mr MORRIS:** If you have got any thoughts on that that you think would be useful for the committee to see—the time lines might not match up but if they do—I think it would be useful for us to consider them as well.

**Ms HURSE:** We could include that, at least the work that is underway and the councils involved, as part of our written submission if that is of assistance.

**Mr MORRIS:** I should have said at the start—particularly the planning scheme stuff that you ran through and the public open space planning—that most of that was stuff we have not heard before. So please make sure we see that in writing, because I think it would be very, very useful.

If I can now, having delayed the process, just ask about the urban forest strategy. I think the longer term intent was increasing canopy from 14 per cent to 25 per cent over 30 years. I am just interested to know what actions the council needed to take to start to move towards those objectives. Also, how is it going and what sort of challenges have you encountered along the way?

**Mr THOMAS:** I can perhaps answer that, David. As you may be aware, we have just recently introduced a new urban forest strategy. The context to that was that particularly in our northern suburbs there was not a lot of tree cover, and the tree cover that was there was getting old and some of those trees were being removed. There are some other areas in Geelong that have really good cover, so they are well provided for, but basically in terms of the street trees it required a funding boost from council to get more trees in the ground. For the last two budgets officers have put forward budget bids up to council, and those budget bids have been approved. So we are on our way, but it is really, really quite expensive to put in the tens of thousands of trees which are required for us to reach our targets.

**Mr MORRIS:** So is that the main impediment?

**Mr THOMAS:** The cost is certainly I would say the largest impediment, because it is very expensive, but probably other issues that do crop up very, very regularly for us are around selecting the right tree and perhaps getting residents to accept that there is going to be a tree in the nature reserve. We get a lot of requests to remove trees or trim them back very substantially. Often the requests come in under the guise of perhaps a risk issue or a safety issue, but quite often when we go and inspect and talk to the resident it is more that perhaps it

is really relating to their amenity rather than any real risk issues. Nonetheless it is often quite a contentious point with some residents.

**Mr MORRIS:** ‘Cultural’ is probably the wrong term, but is it simply that there have not been many trees in the area? Particularly in terms of planting I think probably everyone on this call, all the parliamentarians, would have plenty of experience with constituents wanting trees pulled out. I certainly do in this patch. But in terms of resistance to trees going in, is that because of a historic lack of trees or very thin cover of trees in the area? I guess what I am asking is: is it something that can be changed over a period with just expectation or education?

**Mr THOMAS:** It is hard to say. We have not really sort of done the research, I suppose, to provide a definitive answer to that. But anecdotally I would say that, you know, I think community education is required. We do consult with residents obviously before we go in and plant the trees—and typically it is not just one tree; we will go in to perhaps a street and put the plantings in, so we will letterbox drop, explain the benefits of trees et cetera, et cetera—but it is probably that change. You know, whenever you get change in the street some residents may not necessarily favour that change, and that is where we have to do further consultation. But we also find the issue in other suburbs where we have got well-established trees, and the trees in those cases might cause residents other issues. For instance, you might have leaves dropping at certain times of the year, and it is those events that are often a trigger for complaints and then requests to take the tree out or cut it back.

**Mr MORRIS:** Yes, the old ‘I moved next to the airport, now you can shut it down, or stop flights at night’, or whatever.

**Mr THOMAS:** Exactly. And with some of our trees, you get those requests in and go and visit and the tree might be 70 or 80 years old, in good health, and it has been there forever. Our policy is quite clear in that in those circumstances we retain those trees.

**Mr MORRIS:** Absolutely. Thanks, Sarah.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, David.

**Ms HAWES:** I can add a little bit more with regard to planning for trees. In the open space planning area we assess obviously new landscape master plans. So we will endeavour, particularly within the passive park network, to try and get the developers to deliver a 30 per cent canopy cover. Within our active open spaces we will aim at about 10, because obviously due to the functionality of the reserves we cannot place a lot of trees within them; we will certainly try and install as many trees as we possibly can. But one thing is the street trees are a particular issue, with getting high numbers in, due to the fact that the lot frontages are becoming more and more narrow, so the opportunity to plant trees is becoming more problematic, as Jess indicated earlier on.

**Mr MORRIS:** Yes. Thank you for that. That is helpful. Thanks, Sarah.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, David and Sue. I can see Danielle has got her hand up, so I am just going to throw to Danielle.

**Ms GREEN:** Thank you. Firstly, on the tree issue and then I have got a substantive question. It occurred to me, especially talking about the northern suburbs, that state government is a significant landholder there and landlord. I know that state government is retrofitting houses, you know, for new environmental standards and energy use and all that sort of thing. Is state government doing anything in contributing to increasing the tree canopy and that sort of environmental aspect and working with council; and, if not, is that something that you think that the committee should be making a recommendation about? The final part on trees is—Christine Couzens may know the answer to this, but she would not forgive me if I didn’t ask—if the local Indigenous community is involved in the expansion of the tree cover in the City of Greater Geelong.

**Ms HAWES:** I can start with the first question. There is concurrent upgrade of the private realm by the state government and concurrent programs for the streetscape upgrades. So there are some initial discussions happening at the moment between council and the state government in relation to urban renewal opportunities, particularly around Corio and Norlane, in response to the big build initiative and council’s social housing plan. There was a recommendation there for further investment in the public realm. So those discussions are commencing, and we are really hopeful to see a program of works undertaken that contribute to both the public and the private realm in that Corio and Norlane area, and tree canopy and streetscape upgrades will be a part of that.

In terms of engagement with the traditional owners, Rod, I might hand over to you on that one.

**Mr THOMAS:** Yes, absolutely. I am pleased to say that, not necessarily on street trees but for all of our conservation reserves, we work very closely with the traditional owners and are actually currently negotiating with them to form what is known as an Aboriginal cultural heritage land management agreement, which will see us working even further with the Wadawurrung to restore our reserves. That includes native grasslands, shrubs but also tree cover as well, so we work very closely with traditional owners.

**Ms GREEN:** Thanks for that. Well done on trying to do the retrofitting to the suburbs that have not got as much open space and environmental infrastructure as the new suburbs. You do not need to answer it now, but would you think that the committee should be making a recommendation around communities in that category? And finally, probably a question for Sue. Sue, I was really interested, given you live in Ballarat and have worked in Wyndham and Geelong, whether there is anything in the planning scheme that disadvantages regional areas as opposed to metropolitan areas in the provision of environmental infrastructure. If so, and you can take this notice if you like, are there any recommendations that the committee should specifically make to redress this?

**Ms HAWES:** Okay. Well, that was a big question, that last one. As I said, I have only worked in Wyndham and Geelong. Things in a planning scheme that would disadvantage regional areas: nothing comes off the top of my head. The VPA standards have fairly much been adopted across Victoria, even though they originally only applied to the growth areas. They are the sorts of standards which now everyone at least at a minimum is trying to achieve with regard to their open space, because I think people have seen enough new developments come on board and seen the inequity in the areas where it was only subject to the 5 per cent of the subdivision Act, and even then it was not quality open space. There is evidence in Wyndham and in Geelong that we were getting drainage assets as part of the open space contribution. That is pretty standard. I think over the years we have become a little bit more savvy in trying to be far more prescriptive in what is acceptable and not acceptable, but getting some definitions into the planning scheme would certainly help to assist us in that regard, because we seem to have the same conversations over and over and over again with developers with regard to what is suitable as primary recreational open space versus just other types of open space. Can you just repeat your first question?

**Ms GREEN:** It was just about whether there were any recommendations that you would like the committee to make in relation to assisting councils to retrofit older suburbs that do not have as good environmental infrastructure as places like Armstrong Creek—the new greenfield sites.

**Ms HAWES:** Okay. Having agreed provision rates based on population would be highly advantageous. With Geelong, we adopted in our SIP a hectares per thousand people provision rate, and we will be assessing the established area against that provision rate. So to have that in state policy would be very advantageous so we do not have to go through planning scheme amendments and panels and potentially have that knocked back. To have an across-the-board about what is the minimum acceptable open space requirement on a per person or a hectare per thousand basis would be advantageous. And then if a council wanted to go for more, they will do a strategy in order to justify that and then do the appropriate planning scheme amendments. But we spend a lot of time doing all the strategic work, and I think every council is the same—we are all doing the same work to justify a minimum position—so to get the state government to set what that is and have one that really picks up the nuance of density would be very handy.

**Ms GREEN:** Thanks, Sue. That is excellent. I think that nails something that we are all concerned about.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to throw over to you, Paul.

**Mr HAMER:** Thanks, Sarah. I had a question about access to some of your passive recreation areas. It strikes me that Geelong is in a way very blessed because it has got two coastlines and in fact a very long bay coastline because of the indentation of Corio Bay—plus running through the middle, obviously, Barwon River and the wetlands—yet by way of the history of the way the city has developed there is a lot of industrial land that is on the periphery of the bay and still many of the river elements are not actually that accessible. I was just wondering—you talked at the beginning of your presentation about the amount of both active and passive recreation that is occurring in some of the elements along the river. There has been an enormous amount of work over, say, the last generation on the Geelong waterfront, but are there larger strategic issues that are preventing better access for the community to some of those broad recreational spaces?



**Mr THOMAS:** Jess, did you want to answer that? I am happy to have a shot.

**Ms HURSE:** Go for it, Rod, and I will follow up if you like.

**Mr THOMAS:** Yes. Thanks for that question there, Paul. You are right: Geelong is very lucky, particularly with our waterfront, which is really accessible, and again, the Barwon River, which is likewise. Historically, though, I would suggest that in the development out in the northern suburbs, just basically because of its age and perhaps the planning regime that was in place at the time, accessibility is far more limited. So if you travel out north of Geelong, you get out to a place called St Helens, which is only probably 3 kilometres from its CBD, and from that point on, really right out to almost as far as Geelong Grammar, public access to the foreshore is very limited because of the industrial nature of all the activities that are occurring there. Feeding inland through that area are a number of creeks which, if developed today—if those suburbs were being developed—would have really, really nice walking and cycling corridors along them. But because they were developed some time back, access is very restricted. I can think of one creek out there, Cuthbertsons Creek—there is just no opportunity now, unless something major were to occur around forcing, if you like, neighbouring properties around Cuthbertsons Creek to open the land, for public access to whole sections of the creek line there. So there are some strategic issues that limit our development of those areas and public open space, but on the flip side we are probably pretty lucky in what we have got.

**Mr HAMER:** I suppose I am also thinking about those that are perhaps just beyond the immediate environments of, say, the CBD and the suburbs. Look at, say, the eastern side of Geelong, where you have got the saltworks and the former Alcoa site, I mean, obviously the geography plays a part, but, say, compared to what you have got down in Portland, where you have got that bushland walk and the coastal reserve where people can actually access that around the site. It is the same, I guess, on the north side of Corio Bay, where perhaps the private land goes all the way to the water's edge, virtually, and there is all this frontage. Even if they are not in walking distance, they are the prize assets that people in the community, even in the northern parts of Geelong or people in Wyndham, can actually access. I guess I was also alluding to those—I mean, obviously we cannot change the subdivisions or the planning of 100 years ago—and whether there are broader opportunities that the state and councils should be looking to and that could apply across other coastal areas as well.

**Mr THOMAS:** I think there are some opportunities there. Some specific locations come to mind where the state could work with the city as well as private landholders to open up some areas. But if I extend that sort of viewpoint along the Bellarine Peninsula, we are very, very lucky in Victoria in that basically the public has access to significant areas of coast, and really within our whole 133 kilometres of coastline there are really only some very specific areas where that access is blocked. I am not saying that they are small or insignificant, but at the same time we are very lucky in contrast perhaps to the United States, where that access is nowhere near as available as it is here.

I think probably the main opportunity there in that regard are the wetlands which you are describing, the Cheetham salt wetlands. That is obviously an ongoing process that Jess might mention further, but there are some opportunities to the north, particularly along the coast, that I think exist and that we could work on in partnership together.

**Mr HAMER:** Thanks, Rod.

**Ms HURSE:** Certainly making those connections—and it may not be that the coast is always an opportunity, but certainly using existing corridors like the rail corridor, for example, connecting Geelong and Wyndham is something that has been identified as an opportunity. I mean, ideally, connecting Geelong and Wyndham via the water treatment plant and the coastline would be a significant aspiration. There are a lot of barriers to that at the moment. But at least creating connections, even if we cannot get the access to foreshore land, is something that we are investigating certainly as part of our shared trails work.

**Mr HAMER:** Thanks very much, Jess.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Paul. I am going to throw to Will.

**Mr FOWLES:** For a super quick question, I just want to know to what extent the mixed management of various bits of coastline impacts on you. And by 'mixed management' I mean sometimes they are marine reserves, sometimes DELWP is the committee of management and sometimes it is you guys. Is there an

opportunity for simplification there? Are there things you would like to see government do to make the management of those coastline assets easier?

**Mr THOMAS:** Yes. Within the City of Greater Geelong's boundaries we have got obviously a number of coastal managers—Parks Victoria, the city—but probably the two other major ones that we have got are the two foreshore coastal committees, the Bellarine Bayside Foreshore Committee as well as the Barwon Coast Committee. We work very closely. I would not say it is necessarily seamless, but it is pretty good. We communicate regularly. We work on similar issues. But sometimes there are challenges, for instance, where there might be a certain way that we look after a reserve, and right beside that reserve might be a reserve managed by one of those foreshore committees, and they might manage issues in a different way. So as an example, seaweed removal on the coastline. Weed control is another. So you do get those changes, and the community does pick up on that, and we do get, I suppose, a level of complaints—I would describe it as a low level—but there might be some opportunities perhaps in the future to work even more seamlessly together.

**Mr FOWLES:** Are these specific recommendations, though? I mean, it is easy to have a general goal like 'We should all work together better', but are there actual changes you would make to the structure of these governance arrangements?

**Mr THOMAS:** I would probably take that on notice, Will, if I could.

**Mr FOWLES:** Sure.

**Mr THOMAS:** I probably would not make those recommendations today without consulting perhaps with others in the organisation, but we can include that in our submission.

**Mr FOWLES:** Perfect. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Will. Well, Sue, Rodney and Jess, for a group that has not formally put in a written submission, this has been a wonderful discussion, quite insightful. There are lots of things that you have been able to provide that I think will be up for discussion and quite powerful when it comes to recommendations that this committee will be making, so thank you very much.

If you are going to put in a written submission, could you please just let us know when you are ready and when to expect that. We would be more than happy to take it from you. On behalf of the committee, thanks.

**Mr THOMAS:** Thanks for the opportunity to present today. We have really enjoyed it and look forward to putting forward a submission in the next two weeks.

**Ms HAWES:** Thank you.

**Ms HURSE:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Sounds good. Thank you. Enjoy the rest of your day

**Committee adjourned.**