

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Wednesday, 10 March 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 Will Cheatley, Manager, Infrastructure Maintenance, Baw Baw Shire Council; and

Mr David Collins, Coordinator, Environment and Sustainability, Golden Plains Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for joining us today at this public hearing for the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations.

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

This is one of several public hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee will be conducting to inform itself about the issues relevant to the inquiry. Before we begin, I need to point out that all evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is really important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing even if you are restating what you said during this hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you for making the time to meet with committee members today. I think we will start by introducing ourselves, and then we can jump into some presentations and questions. My name is Sarah Connolly, and I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. I am also the Member for Tarneit, a district that sits within one of Victoria's and Australia's largest growth corridors.

**Mr FOWLES:** My name is Will Fowles. I am the Member for Burwood.

**Ms GREEN:** Danielle Green. I am the Member for Yan Yean and parliamentary secretary for regional Victoria and sport. I have spent a lot of time in peri-urban council areas, and I am really glad that you are presenting to our committee.

**The CHAIR:** I am just going to go by who I can see on my screen first. Will.

**Mr CHEATLEY:** My name is Will Cheatley. I am the Manager of Infrastructure Maintenance for Baw Baw Shire Council, and I am joined today by Cassandra Clark, who is the Executive Assistant to the Director, Community Infrastructure.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. And we have got David, who has just joined us. David, do you want to introduce yourself?

**Mr MORRIS:** David Morris, Deputy Chair of the committee, and Member for Mornington.

**The CHAIR:** Dave Collins.

**Mr COLLINS:** Hello. I am the Coordinator for Environment and Sustainability at the Golden Plains Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. So, we have only got the two councils with us today. We have got your submissions, but why don't we start with a 10- or 15-minute presentation and then we can kick off to questions. I know members will have lots of questions for you, but we would love to hear from you first. Will, would you mind starting?

**Mr FOWLES:** This is going to become very confusing very quickly with the two Wills on the call. I do not really have a suggestion other than—

**Ms GREEN:** And two Davids.

**Mr FOWLES:** Well, at least we have got a Dave and a David. I do not know—maybe people want to call me 'William', or Will Cheatley 'Bill'. Maybe we will call him 'Jack'; he looks like a bushranger.

**Ms GREEN:** We will call you 'Burwood', Burwood.

**Mr FOWLES:** Sure. Okay, good. Agreed.

### **Visual presentation.**

**Mr CHEATLEY:** Thanks for taking the time to hear our submission. I am actually appearing today on behalf of my director, who is caught up in budget submissions for council. I am just doing a bit of an overview of our written submission from back in September last year. On that, Baw Baw shire's profile: we are a peri-urban municipality situated on the south-east boundary of Melbourne and the western boundary of the Gippsland region—a fast-growing peri-urban council. Between the census periods of 2011 and 2016 the shire's population grew by 13.61 per cent with an average annual change of 2.72 per cent. The average annual growth rate is expected to continue at 2.19 per cent up until 2041, by which time the population will be approximately 85 000 people. This growth will be predominantly experienced within the Drouin and Warrigal areas as a result of the precinct structure plans for these townships. Along with the challenges identified in the report—just a bit of an overview of these—there is obviously the increased maintenance of parks, reserves and open space areas due to developer handover; the maintenance and protection of natural environment, bushland reserves and significant trees from development; the impacts of precinct structure plans and development contribution plans on sporting facilities; and then the impacts to Crown land committees of management.

So within the parks, reserves and open space areas, the challenge that we are experiencing at the minute is greenfield versus infill or brownfield development. So whilst land is often set aside within larger greenfield development, infill or brownfield development—where cash in lieu of donating the physical open space is necessary—can lead to limited opportunities to provide good quality parks and open space areas. This is exacerbated in broader built-up areas where there is insufficient land available to do so. The continuing increase in the market value of land is making it cost prohibitive for many councils to acquire land and invest in the development of quality parks and open space in existing residential areas.

There is also a varied quality of assets handed over to council for maintenance from development, so often within resource-constrained councils, such as Baw Baw, the standard of infrastructure and open space areas is determined on a development-by-development basis within the municipalities. This is often due to the lack of prescribed open space standards or the resources required to develop such standards. This development-by-development approach to open space assets can lead to significant discrepancies in the quality of open space, and it becomes particularly dependent on a proposal of the development.

This leads into the next point around quality infrastructure being installed during development and not post development—so the need for appropriate infrastructure to be installed at the time of development rather than having to be funded and implemented by council and, indirectly, the existing community. This would ensure that the burden of new development is not borne by existing ratepayers—so, for instance, we are not going back in there after these areas are handed over to council and putting in things that needed to put in during the development phase.

And then finally, there is obviously the impact of rate capping on local government. So Victoria's interface councils experienced the bulk of their growth prior to the introduction of rate capping for local government. The peri-urban municipalities that are only just starting to experience the sorts of development and growth that the interface municipalities have already experienced will not have the financial capacity to cover funding gaps and, as a consequence, the current planning system in a rate-capped environment. In addition to this, increasing operational and maintenance costs, labour and activities raise the need to consider some council services such as open space maintenance to potentially sit outside rate capping requirements.

There are natural environment, bushland reserve and significant tree challenges, so environmental infrastructure should not only include parks, sports fields and the like but also be extended to existing areas of land, patches of native vegetation or individual significant trees. It could be argued that diverse options of different environmental assets are important for community wellbeing and that the majority of new parks, reserves and public open space provide limited options for public open space that has biodiversity significance and is simply land developed for activities related to residential use. Ideally a percentage of identified land within townships in metropolitan [Zoom dropout] assets [Zoom dropout] in controls that are put in place to ensure that these areas such as [Zoom dropout] that are proven not to be efficient [Zoom dropout].

Next is the impacts of PSPs and DCPs on sporting reserves—so the indexation of land values. Baw Baw shire is experiencing issues with both the Warragul and Drouin precinct structure plans in that the indexation of land values has not kept pace with market values, leaving a shortfall that will have to be funded by council. It is necessary for the PSPs and DCPs to be reviewed and recast to enable site-specific land valuations instead of broad-hectare valuations. Price per hectare of sporting reserves: estimated project construction costs for recreation projects and sporting reserves within PSPs and DCPs within the Baw Baw shire have been prepared on a per hectare basis instead of itemised cost estimates, leaving another shortfall. And then the expected costs versus actual costs of sporting reserves: the estimated project costs to deliver the necessary infrastructure in line with the requirements and expectations of state sporting associations and the community significantly exceed the allowances made for the PSPs and DCPs. This poses a significant affordability risk for councils that may have to fund the gap to provide adequate facilities, and in the absence of being able to fund these facilities and infrastructure it will likely result in delayed development of these spaces.

So just on that, some considerations for future PSPs regarding sporting facilities have been identified in our submission. So assessment of land suitability for open space—that is, topography, drainage and other constraints such as native vegetation and ecology; use of site-specific land valuations, obviously not broad hectare valuations, which are appropriately indexed; use of itemised cost estimates based on sports-specific preferred facility guidelines for project construction costs, not per hectare estimates; ensure master plans are prepared along with the PSP for sport and recreation spaces and open space to provide key direction and certainty for community and development industry; and then advice to councils on options to acquire land and recommend the timings around these.

Further challenges we have identified are the Crown land committees of management. A range of matters relating to the management of land, namely Crown land, are considered relevant to this inquiry because differing approaches to management of land can have varying outcomes to the quality of parks, reserves and open space areas. We think there is a chronic underinvestment and a lack of support for these voluntary committees—that is, committees of management—which can result in cost shifting between levels of government. It should not be the responsibility of local government to invest scarce capital funds into assets which are the responsibility of the state to ensure that segments of the community are not subject to inequity of quality public open space and reserve facilities. So we are talking about section 86 committees there.

Many of the sites are not fit for purpose and do not meet current building recreation and sporting standards—that is, female-friendly universal design sport-specific facility guidelines. There is a lack of operational funding for Crown committees. So they do not receive any ongoing operational funding, and there are minimal DELWP grant opportunities due to their state ownership. These committees can be disadvantaged as local governments are often the only entity able to apply for certain grants through Sport and Rec Victoria, Growing Suburbs Fund and the like, and will more often than not prioritise the investment into their own assets.

And then obviously there is the public safety side of things. So council provides financial in-kind support, including insurance of buildings and annual maintenance allocations to all Crown, hall and reserve committees. Council has also prepared recreation master plans for reserves such as Darnum, Hallora, Longwarry and Thorpdale to improve grant opportunities for capital investments. It is questionable that the financial commitments relating to this should be the responsibility of council. Further, council has invested in delivering a range of capital projects over a number of years due to the insufficient capital funding provided to Crown land committees.

Again, smaller less significant sites on top of that, such as the Rokeby-Crossover regional parks, are not adequately resourced and rely heavily on friends-of and volunteer groups. So this leads to specific issues relating to public safety, especially in the Rokeby-Crossover area, where structures such as bridges are not adequately funded for maintenance renewal, which puts further pressure on council.

Finally, just to wrap up, just a few notes on the legislation and governance, especially the complexities in Victorian legislation. The Crown land Act and different policy approaches make it difficult for projects that span multiple agencies—that is, Parks Victoria, DELWP and local government. For example, several Gippsland-wide trails are being proposed, and challenges include being able to create a governance entity across these agencies and the affordability of offset policies. These projects are critical for the economic and health benefits they bring to regional areas and are also designed to provide people with opportunities to experience and appreciate nature.

So with that, that is just a little bit of a high-level overview of our submission. All the information within that presentation has come directly from our submission from September last year.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Will. Dave, are you there?

**Mr COLLINS:** Yes, I am.

**The CHAIR:** Do you want to give us a 10- to 15-minute presentation before we kick off some questions?

**Mr COLLINS:** Sure. I do not actually have a slideshow. I am just going to read a brief statement that we have put together. Thanks to the panel for the opportunity to present today. Golden Plains Shire Council acknowledges that environmental infrastructure is a vital part of the landscapes for both human use and from an ecological perspective. In many more heavily developed areas the opportunity to create new environmental infrastructure is rather limited. However, in areas like Golden Plains, where development is still occurring, we are presented with an opportunity to do better than what we have seen done previously. In our submission Golden Plains Shire Council has raised a number of points about environmental infrastructure, from ongoing maintenance challenges to competing interests.

In my opportunity to speak today, I will be looking to focus just on one thing: accessibility. What I mean by this is rather broad, as accessibility has different implications depending on the perspective. For a resident it may mean how close a park is—do they need to drive there or can they walk? Is there a path that a person with lower mobility can use? As a new parent I am now very aware of what paths a pram can go on and what it cannot. Accessibility is also a crucial term for the flora and fauna that rely on environmental infrastructure. Different species have different abilities to move between areas, which has serious implications for functional populations and ecosystems. So what we have here is a chance to improve the accessibility of our parks and reserves, and currently this is not done as well as it should be.

When we see developers building new subdivisions, they tend to focus all their efforts on what they can do within their development envelope, which I do understand, and in addition councils, particularly the small ones, often tend to look at one development at a time. However, government could drive the need for all layers of the public and private sectors involved to ensure that environmental assets are interconnected. In the case of human interaction with broad public open space, this may mean simple pathway networks. More often than not then it is up to the local government to figure out how to connect these areas as the populations increase and the pressure builds for people to become connected to these areas.

Just as important is the need for environmental areas to be appropriately protected. Areas such as the reserves, lakes, riparian corridors and coasts are being increasingly fragmented through the changes in land use for road construction and development. This places increasing and in some instances impossible pressure on all the layers within the natural system, all these layers that ultimately have evolved to be interconnected to one another. Once this fragmentation happens it is often left to local governments or in some cases catchment authorities to try and bridge the gap or repair the connection, which in some cases may be impossible.

A practical solution may be to encourage state legislators to start thinking about developing a code for trunk environmental infrastructure in a similar vein as they do for traditional trunk infrastructure. I have got one specific example to consider. Batesford in the south of the Golden Plains shire is currently undergoing both greenfield and some infill development. The greenfield development is occurring on the Moorabool River. As part of this process considerable open space reserves are coming to council. I inspected this land a few weeks ago and was struck by the natural beauty of the space, let us say. There were koalas, wallabies, wedge-tailed eagles and there were some platypus in the river. As well as areas of native flora, there is also remnant orchard and open spaces which people could access and use for low-impact activities. I am concerned that as development around these reserves increases it could become isolated and its ecological value will diminish. At the same time, points of access to the reserve for people are limited and it could become inaccessible for the majority of residents. There are pushes for this not to happen, and I applaud the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority for their Barwon River parklands project to try and address this. However, this project feels like a nice to have rather than a must-have, and that is what could change with specific legislation, regulation and support of the state government.

I hope the findings of this panel help put in place measures to make sure these spaces remain accessible for all users as we go forward. Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Dave. It sounds like both of you are in very beautiful LGAs. Dave, the fact that you have platypus there is absolutely extraordinary. I have only seen them once in my life, and that was up in Queensland and never again in the wild. Members of the committee are now just going to ask some questions. We have heard from quite a few councils and there are all sorts of common themes coming out, so it will be interesting to see where you guys and your LGAs align.

I just want to kick off with the first question, and it is really a question to both of you. How would you categorise the relationship between the state government and its departments with the local council with respect to the provision of environmental infrastructure? And specifically are there areas where you think that this relationship could be improved, where you want to tell us, ‘These are the problem areas, this is what you need to go away and improve upon’?

**Mr COLLINS:** Did you want me to jump in first, Will?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr COLLINS:** Okay. I am sure my answer will be not holistic and I am sure I will miss things, and hopefully Will can fill the gaps in, or what I miss out. Two areas that jump to mind are in terms of the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning and Crown land. We at Golden Plains do not always get well updated when Crown land comes to us. Sometimes Crown land comes to us, and we are not always were made aware of it. So we have land coming to us that we do not always have control over or realise we have control over initially, so there is a communication breakdown somewhere there. I am not saying it is super common, but it is something that happens.

The other area in particular is around water and waterway management, and we see the complexity of water as a space and dealing with land in and around water. So there might be multiple agencies involved. We might have ourselves and DELWP; we often have adjacent Parks Victoria land. The Corangamite Catchment Management Authority gets involved; in some cases Southern Rural Water gets involved where water takes play a part. Wathaurong, the traditional owners of our area, too have a large vested interest in water. So there are a number of key stakeholders, and water tends to be a tricky space to deal with.

**The CHAIR:** Will, just before you jump in—Dave, what would be a good handover? Like, for an example, what do you want to see? Do you just not get any information or what the state of the land is like? Secondly, on the waterways, who do you think needs to own and manage the stakeholders involved with the waterway management? Whose responsibility do you think it is?

**Mr COLLINS:** In answer to your first question around information, yes, sometimes there is a lack of information about the land, so we do not know what state it is in coming to us. The other times—and maybe it is just our council and what we are experiencing—there seems to be some inconsistency about when we find out about land coming to us sometimes. That may be a fault of our own systems, just as much as the department’s, but communication is often a two-way thing there.

To the second part to your question, around water, that is a really good question, and one that I do not know if I know the answer to. But I think having—hard to say—maybe one coordinating player might make things a little bit easier. I know from a resident’s point of view, they find it very hard to deal with, and they turn to us, but we at council sometimes find it quite hard to navigate this space as well. So I do not know how to answer your question very easily on the second part. Maybe some other people have better ideas than I do there about the solution to that particular one.

**The CHAIR:** Just sometimes when there are a lot of stakeholders—and not just state government—it can be really hard to manage those relationships: who is talking to who, is everyone on the same page? A lot of councils have talked to us about that. I am just curious to see what you would think: who needs to own that relationship and drive it?

**Mr COLLINS:** Maybe for us, because we are lucky in the sense that we have one CMA for our region and we do a lot of work with them, it would be great if they were the one avenue we went through for everything water—like, done. Then if there is complexity behind it, maybe we do not need to know about it as much potentially.

**The CHAIR:** Will, have you got some thoughts on that?

**Mr CHEATLEY:** I will just add to what Dave said around the water situation. That is a situation for us as well from a maintenance perspective with drainage and culvert clearing. We deal with the West Gippsland Catchment Management Authority in half of our shire and we deal with Melbourne Water for the other half. We are pretty well split down the middle, so we are dealing with two different water authorities in that space. We too have some endangered species in our waterways, such as the platypus and the burrowing crayfish, the giant Gippsland earthworm and those sorts of things. So there is some confusion from us, from a maintenance perspective in Baw Baw, around who to deal with and those sorts of things in the water space.

Branching out from that—and I can only give you a maintenance perspective on this because that is my area—it is probably more Crown land assets, so talking about DELWP and those sorts of things. The two that spring to mind straightaway would be the Rokeby-Crossover trestle bridge—that is an asset. We are getting a lot of heat from the community about that particular asset and renewing that. Also one that comes up quite often is the band rotunda at Walhalla. So these assets on Crown land, we are facing a lot of pressure from the community to invest precious asset renewal resources into these, which we cannot do because obviously we are inheriting more and more assets for maintenance elsewhere that we need to keep up with.

**The CHAIR:** So I am just gathering from that you would like to see state government fund those sorts of upgrades that you are wearing the heat from the community on—to go ahead and fund those things?

**Mr CHEATLEY:** Not fund them so to speak, but just to be a bit more active in the maintenance of those assets on Crown land—yes, that would be good.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. David, would you like to ask a question?

**Mr MORRIS:** Thanks. If I can just, firstly, duck back to the point Dave was making about notification with Crown land, and then I just want to ask Will a question about committees. Dave, can you give us a practical example of a situation where that might occur, with the transfer of land?

**Mr COLLINS:** Thanks, David. I cannot, right off the top of my head right now. I know I got one a few weeks ago, and I cannot remember where it was. It was in the north of our shire. The specifics—I can probably find it out for you. Like I said, I do not want to overemphasise that point because it could also be, as much as anything else, our systems and processes which might make it a bit funky internally. That is why I sort of tried to say that it is a two-way street, and maybe the department is doing a great job and we are failing in the way we handle it internally. It came to mind, and I know it is something that I need to look into because it has happened a few times. So, like I said, I really do not want to overemphasise that point too much if that is okay.

**Mr MORRIS:** No. Fair enough. I guess, because of the nature of the beast, the records are not always as good as they could be, particularly with smaller reserves. If you have a look at it and get any more information that you think might be useful for us—not to stick in a report and do over the lands function but just to provide us with the examples of where things might be made easier for local government—that would be helpful.

**Mr COLLINS:** I will try and find something. It is tricky. Our own systems are not always up to date either, too. We do our best. Things change rapidly and sometimes they are not updated. There is a lot of cross-referencing with the state government and calls back and forth. But if I can find anything, I am happy to provide it.

**Mr MORRIS:** That would be great. Will, if I can just ask you about the points you made about committees. Two years ago the Auditor-General did a report on committees and basically said they are frequently not competent to—

He was not this blunt, but the effective take-out from the report was that they do not have the competence to carry out the management functions that they need to carry out, and they certainly do not have the resources to carry out the functions they need to. I am thinking, for example, of the committees of management along the Western Port foreshore, which had been very local beach management committees. I am not sure where it is at now—I have not needed to worry about it for 12 months—but they were in the process of being rolled into one larger committee. The effective outcome of that was that the local communities lost control of the asset in their neighbourhood. You had a better resourced committee, but it was run by people from town who really did not understand the community, did not understand what they wanted out of it. They might have known how to manage a foreshore reserve but not actually in the way that that area has been managed for the last 60 years or whatever. I guess anywhere you lose that local input, which can obviously be considered to be amateur input,

you run the risk of breaking the link with the community. Is there a way to get resources in and capacity but still retain that link with the community? In the municipality that I was councillor for a million years ago, before my time they had actually taken over the role of the foreshore committees for exactly this reason. Now, you have talked about limited council resources, so I am not going to suggest councils take over every management committee, but this seems to me to be an emerging issue more in places like where you are and we are than perhaps in fringe metropolitan, but I would be interested to know your thoughts on it.

**Mr CHEATLEY:** I think when we are talking section 86 committees it is more around recreation reserves, so particularly your small rural country towns. Where I live in Trafalgar we have had a dedicated band of volunteers who have proudly maintained the oval surface down here for football and cricket forever, and they have been very self-sufficient in the way they have done that. These committees of management—as people are starting to age, the demographic of the people on those committees, these volunteers are finding it harder and harder, the older they get, to spend the time maintaining these assets, and the pressure is now coming back on council to inherit these at council expense, I suppose, and to find the resources to do so. I suppose in some parts of our shire we are maintaining council sporting reserves, which we maintain to a fairly high standard, and these committees of management at Trafalgar, Longwarry and those sorts of areas are seeing this and saying, ‘Well, we want that as well’, and that is the pressure we are facing from that section 86 perspective.

**Mr MORRIS:** Okay. That is useful. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Will. I will throw to Danielle.

**Ms GREEN:** Sarah, please throw to Will Fowles because he has got a commitment in a few minutes.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Will.

**Mr FOWLES:** Thanks, Danielle, and thank you, Chair. I just wanted to ask to both of you about your experience of the coronavirus pandemic. We understand there is heaps more usage of these passive rec-type facilities during this period, but have you seen any more long-term or structural change? Do you think the usage of environmental assets has changed? I guess, it is more tree change in your respective circumstances—with more of that going on do you think there will be more pressure on these assets over the medium term?

**Mr COLLINS:** I will jump in first. It is a good question. So yes, I am not sure if we are seeing specific tree changers directly from coronavirus—I know many shires are; there probably are some—but we are seeing in general quite a lot of development happening and the movement of residents from Melbourne and from Geelong in particular up through Golden Plains. The majority of the residents in Golden Plains work in either Geelong or Ballarat, we tend to find. It is interesting that as we do tend to get more and more people coming in, they have experienced probably a different level of service to the environmental infrastructure in their respective shires in places like Melbourne and Geelong to what they get in Golden Plains. We have a much lower population base and we are quite large from a geographical perspective, so we are kind of spread a little bit thinner and we concentrate on different things, so the level of service and the provision of assets is going to be different. They might have access to some larger reserves, but there might not be the infrastructure; there might not be the playgrounds, or they might have a mowing regime where they get mowed once a year before the fire danger period, and so they are left in a different state.

So there are these conflicting expectations that we do see I think from new residents and existing residents who also might want to see the infrastructure kept the way it was, and so that is something that we are facing as a challenge now. I do not know if that has answered your question. Sorry if it has not.

**Mr FOWLES:** And Will?

**Mr CHEATLEY:** Yes, we have seen a massive increase in visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially to areas such as the Rokeby–Crossover Rail Trail, the Uralla Nature Reserve in Trafalgar and these sorts of natural environment areas. As part of that I suppose our maintenance—the more people that are using these facilities, the more requests for maintenance we have been seeing in these areas. There is some data that we captured during the pandemic, especially for Rokeby in terms of people counters and the amount of people accessing that that I could send through to support that.

**Mr FOWLES:** I do not have any other questions, Chair. Thank you.



**The CHAIR:** Okay. Dave—

**Ms GREEN:** I do.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Danielle.

**Ms GREEN:** I let Will jump in because I knew he had to pop out shortly. Thanks so much. It has been great to hear the peri-urban presentation, because we had yesterday and this morning the interface, so it is quite different, and you are the first two that have referenced the Crown land committees. There used to be a program; I wondered whether you thought it would be useful. When I was first in Parliament pre 2010 there was a program called the Crown land improvement program, and it was just a small grants program that assisted those committees of management for those reserves and things that we are talking about. But also I suppose I just wanted to put to you too that I sometimes feel that, although on the one hand local government will say, 'We don't want to maintain this stuff; it's not ours', but for growing communities too having these Crown land reserves actually then means it is not something that council is having to fund and develop themselves and that developers are not—

So you sort of get a benefit from it too. I think it is a two-way street. But I wondered what you thought about that program that I mentioned, but also I think there is good reason why for the Growing Suburbs Fund and the sport funding, for example, local governments are asked to apply, but it does not necessarily have to be on your land. I have got a showground in my electorate and I have seen many projects across the state, particularly in small rural shires, where they have utilised that infrastructure, I suppose to ensure there is not duplication too. I strongly have a feeling that local governments should still be the ones to apply for the funding, but I can see why local government may not want to provide the matching funding. I am thinking out loud that maybe a recommendation out of our committee might be that local government is still the peak body to apply but maybe there could be a recommendation that maybe there is a funding stream from Parks or wherever it is that could co-fund. What would you think about that? You are not going to say no to free money but—

**Mr CHEATLEY:** I think that would take a lot of pressure off local governments. I think that would be a really good idea out of this, a really good recommendation.

**Mr COLLINS:** I tend to agree. I think that would be good. It is that fine balance where you really want to support committees of management and you want to see it, but it is tricky when they have different levels of resource and different access. So that could be a potential solution to that.

**Ms GREEN:** Yes. The other thing I wanted to just make as a suggestion in relation to that infrastructure that you talked about being difficult with trails and things like that is: I know that regional partnerships has really been a vehicle, and so for Baw Baw shire being part of the Gippsland Regional Partnership and Golden Plains being part of the Central Highlands, the ability for those regional partnerships to be able to get funding for a strategy, for a start, means individual councils can then go—that planning work can be done. I suppose I am suggesting that—and I mean my electorate is in metro and country, but the Northern Metropolitan Partnership, for example, got state government funding for the northern metropolitan trails, so that might be something that you might want to look at in terms of the cooperation to deliver environmental infrastructure.

**The CHAIR:** Just a pause there, Danielle. Dave and Will, if you do not have any comments on that, I will move to the next question. This question is for Dave. I can see your submission is suggesting that given the availability of open space in councils such as Golden Plains there is a perception that new developments do not need to plan for environmental infrastructure within their projects. I thought that was really interesting. How would you approach the strategic provision of environmental infrastructure in these types of new developments? That was kind of the first time I had heard that.

**Mr COLLINS:** This came from where often we get a contribution from a developer for public open space that will be instead contributed through cash to council basically, where they think there is provision for sufficient infrastructure nearby. But I guess—and this is why I mentioned accessibility today—it was extending from that partly in the sense that if you think about these things individually that might be the case, but the cumulative effects of not providing this or when we have little subdivisions here and there it might not make sense to provide public open space within that particular, small subdivision, but if we have enough of them it becomes a trickier proposition. And so where do we necessarily put that? Where do we have that space if we have had a number—

I am thinking, for example, right now we have the township of Inverleigh, where we have some development occurring along the Leigh River, and we have stages of subdivision occurring and our strategic planners are obviously doing work to plan out what will happen. But we get a lot of pushback on what is going to happen with this public open space within some of these developments. I am probably going off topic on your question here, but that particular part came from our planners, too, so this is something that they feel a bit of pressure on—that there are green spaces reserved and we do not necessarily need any more. And I think it also comes down to conflicting priorities, because in some ways on my team, the environment team, we love it when reserves come to us, but I know I do not pay and—Will will probably shake his head at me in a minute—I do not do the maintenance on those reserves too. So I understand that other parts of council do not necessarily want more land to come to them because it is expensive and difficult to maintain.

I have really probably answered your question in a very roundabout way, but I guess the essence of it was that where individual parcels of land come to us and the developer contribution comes as money, that is fine, but when it happens again and again it can lead to unintended consequences in the provision of space to communities.

**The CHAIR:** I thought it was particularly interesting, because in my district I feel like that is quite the opposite—we do not have enough. We cannot get enough open space being set aside, whether it is with the developer or on Crown land. It is so valuable, and it is really important to sort of plan around that and what it is going to be used for and then I guess maintained. So it sounds a little bit quite the opposite. It is really quite interesting.

**Mr COLLINS:** Yes, I think there is a perception that we have a lot of—we do have a lot of open space; we are on the Victorian volcanic plains. There is a lot of farmland, and there are issues, as I have said, with food bowls and everything. Theoretically there is a lot of space, but how that space should be used and what it should be set aside for can be contentious and I think maybe could do with more thinking in future. That is why I mentioned some of that trunk infrastructure.

**The CHAIR:** Just on that issue, do you think the community come to you with what they want to use it for, the types of parks and open space that they would like to see created, or is there just so much they are like, ‘We don’t need any more. We have our favourite place that we go to, and that’s it’?

**Mr COLLINS:** They do, and that is a really good question because we actually get quite a divergence in what people ask for, which becomes a challenge. We have some people who really want spaces left in pristine condition or at least in a remnant condition—we have a lot of grassy open woodland sort of space—and then other residents really want infrastructure put in place there; they want to see more barbecues, they want to see playgrounds, paths, concrete paths et cetera. And then on top of that too there is an underlying risk of the concern around fire in some of these spaces too. I have not got the data in front of me, but I really feel like we get a real range of requests about what that space should and should not be. And there are a lot of really passionate people on all sides asking for all different things.

**The CHAIR:** I love that you call them passionate. They are. Will, do you have any comments you want to make about that?

**Mr CHEATLEY:** Yes. It is interesting hearing your experience, Sarah, around wanting more open space. From a maintenance perspective at Baw Baw shire, we are in the middle of a three-year window here where we are inheriting around 60 hectares of open space—natural environment areas—through development, which is putting a lot of pressure on us to find efficiencies to maintain the standards that we have got set. The other thing we are finding, I suppose, and this is because of the development, is a lot of our open space now that we are inheriting is not traditional open space—like your traditional parks and gardens. We are inheriting a lot of what we call natural environment and wetland areas, which these developments need to drain into. Essentially our specific skill set is starting to change in our open space area. Where once parks and gardens were our bread and butter, we are now inheriting about 23 or 24 hectares of wetlands, which is a really specialised area for maintenance as well. So we are having to diversify our maintenance activities and also recruitment and those sorts of things with our teams.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. David.

**Mr MORRIS:** Thanks, Sarah. In the written submission, down towards the bottom of page 2, there is the discussion there about statewide minimum standards for open space. I am just interested in your thoughts on, first of all, who would set the standards, what that process would look like—your thoughts on that—and whether you or whether Baw Baw have any particular standards or requirements or thoughts about what should go into it.

**Mr CHEATLEY:** I would probably have to take that question on notice, if I can, and get back to you with a written response from my director, who has pulled together this submission. I could give you my point of view and my perspective, but I just want to make sure it is consistent with what he has written.

**Mr MORRIS:** If you would not mind doing that, that would be helpful.

**Mr CHEATLEY:** I will.

**Mr MORRIS:** Thank you. Sarah, while I am asking, can I just ask another—

**Ms GREEN:** David, do you mind if we ask Dave what he thought about that suggestion of statewide minimum standards, because I was going to ask that question anyway?

**Mr MORRIS:** Good idea. You are in the hot seat, Dave. You have been asked to answer it without the benefit of the submission in front of you. Just so you know what I am referring to, the Baw Baw submission said:

The development of consistent state-wide minimum standards, that determine minimum requirements to the standards of open space, that ensure a consistent minimum level of liveability across the growing municipal areas. This could then form the basis for minimum standards but also assist municipalities to simply add—

to the minimums as their communities desire.

**Mr COLLINS:** I definitely would support that statement. I think it makes sense, so thumbs up from me, I guess, for that. Was that your question? Was it, 'Do I support that?', or was the question—

**Mr MORRIS:** The concept, and what I was asking Will was basically who should take responsibility for pulling it together and whether there are any particular requirements that Baw Baw had in mind when they were raising the issue.

**Mr COLLINS:** I guess I cannot answer that second part, but we are supportive. We work closely with DELWP on lots of land issues, but especially, for example, the Ballarat office. We work quite closely with them on those sorts of things. I would be looking to DELWP as at least one very key player in that space, but I probably cannot say anything more on that beyond that.

**Mr MORRIS:** The other and final issue I wanted to raise—Sarah, do you mind if I just do that now? Will, again in the submission, on page 6 at the very end of it under the heading 'Other considerations' there is a discussion about the prime agricultural land that has been or is in the process of being lost, particularly with the Clyde expansion in the urban growth boundary in 2010, and there is a comment there about the need to protect the land around Baw Baw. Is that already done through the zoning process? I am just trying to think, if high-value land is adequately identified already or can be—I am assuming it has been—what are the sorts of threats that you are concerned about or the shire is concerned about?

**Mr CHEATLEY:** Once again, not having written the submission, can I take that question on notice and provide a bit of further information at the back end once I have spoken to my director? Is that okay?

**Mr MORRIS:** That would be good. I think it is a very valid and important point. It is probably on the fringe of this inquiry, but since you have raised it, I think it is worth making sure—I am sure we would all want to make sure—it is nailed down, if we can.

**Mr CHEATLEY:** I am aware there are green wedge areas that have been put aside outside the PSPs. But once again, speaking from a maintenance perspective, I am not overly across the planning side of things with those, so I will get the information and send it through.

**Mr MORRIS:** That would be great. Thank you very much. Thanks, Sarah.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, David. Danielle, did you want to ask a question?

**Ms GREEN:** Look, I had more of a strategic planning question overall, especially when both of you were talking about smaller developers. I know the Golden Plains shire pretty well because it is always our stopping point when I go back to where I grew up in Warrnambool, so I have stopped so many times in Inverleigh and Bannockburn and all of that and I have observed the changes in Shelford and all these other little towns. I just wondered what the capacity is within your shires to cope with the workload of your strategic planning overall, because it just seemed to me that that would underpin how you can actually try and get—I think you have made the point, Baw Baw has made the point, about how we have got to have the minimum open space standards. So that sounds good, but who is giving assistance to these little councils who are now experiencing rapid growth? It is not as bad as the interface, but it is spilling over.

**Mr COLLINS:** I will jump in, Will, if it is okay. It is a great question. I do think our strategic planning team struggles. I think they do a fantastic job with the resources they have available, but I would say there is a lot of pressure on them and then when something unexpected comes up it really can throw a spanner in the works. For example, in Golden Plains at the moment we have got a number of wind farm developments happening, and those wind farm developments are incredibly resource intensive when it comes to planning. So you can easily have a planner taken offline just to deal with that, and if there are only two or three planners available, that is a third of your workforce taken aside. Even the lag time in recruitment and getting resources in to deal with that is a real challenge for them. I think that is a difficult space. I am always incredibly impressed by the breadth of knowledge that the planners have and the work that they do, but I do think that they are often under pressure and that that pressure can really increase quite rapidly as well.

**Ms GREEN:** While I have got you, I just did want to say congratulations to Golden Plains about how you do balance—my observation of how you balance—all your different passionate groups. I particularly saw this firsthand with your Bannockburn play space. For those who do not know, they actually put, I think it was, three busloads of grade 4s onto a bus and took them to playgrounds in three locations across Victoria and then said, ‘Okay, tell us what you did like and what you didn’t like’, and guess what, none of them said they wanted a big slide. Every adult thinks a kid wants a big slide, and all the kids went, ‘Boring!’. I know, Sarah and Will, you have both got kids. You have probably got grandkids popping up somewhere David Morris. It is such a great spot to stop in Bannockburn, and it has got water play, and you can just tell that kids put it together. I reckon if you just follow the kids, you will never go wrong. And they are our future leaders.

**The CHAIR:** Sounds like I need to do a road trip. Will, Member for Burwood.

**Mr FOWLES:** Thank you, Chair. I was surprised to hear you, Will, refer to having wetlands within your remit. What do you know about the division between Parks Vic and LGAs when it comes to those more environmentally sensitive areas of open space, and where do you think that line should be drawn?

**Mr CHEATLEY:** That was not in reference to anything around Parks Vic. That was just internally here at Baw Baw in terms of us managing our wetland and waterway areas.

**Mr FOWLES:** No, what I am asking is, I am surprised that you have to manage wetlands. Wetlands are particularly complicated. Parks Victoria have particular expertise. They have got whole teams dedicated just to wetlands management. They are important for a whole bunch of ecological reasons that are quite different to maintaining the local oval. So I was surprised to hear that you are doing it, and I guess I want a picture of the extent to which you are doing it and whether you think you ought to be doing it.

**Mr CHEATLEY:** I think in a climate like Baw Baw, where we get so much rain, in urban areas we are always going to have flood overlay issues. We are going to need areas for water to go. That is where these wetland areas are. They are overflow areas for rainfall and drainage. So in terms of wetlands and waterways, we currently have three full-time staff overseeing contractors and engaging in works themselves in these areas.

**Mr FOWLES:** So you are using ‘wetlands’ in the sense of ‘lands that get wet’, rather than wetlands where frogs and ducks live.

**Mr CHEATLEY:** Both.

**Mr FOWLES:** Both. Okay. How big an area are we talking about? Are they particularly extensive, or are they particularly environmentally significant?

**Mr CHEATLEY:** We are just talking in terms of wetland natural environment areas. I am just thinking off the top of my head—I do not know if the team here are overly familiar with Warragul—as you drive into Warragul at Western Park there is an oval there. There is a wetland area adjacent to that oval area that the nearby housing development drainage flows into, and I would say that would be around 2 to 3 hectares in size. I am not talking total waterway. We are talking what we would term ‘a natural environment area’. So there will be some water in there, there will be planting, rock beaching and those sorts of things and then open space around that.

**Mr FOWLES:** If I could just ask one last question which is: we have heard a bit today about alternate uses or uses that have not been long-term historical uses. There is obvious stuff around parks, like walking and riding a bike, but we have heard a bit about mountain biking all the way through to petanque. Are there any particular uses that you think are emerging uses that this committee ought to turn its mind to?

**Mr CHEATLEY:** From a maintenance perspective there seems to be a lot of BMX trails and tracks being developed by eager young people in our council that we unfortunately have to go in and destroy, because it is on council land and those sorts of things and the risks associated with them. So I would say there is a lot of more active recreation going on in passive areas—so BMX, mountain biking, those sorts of things—but no, I could not talk to any others.

**Mr FOWLES:** And, Dave, how about in your patch?

**Mr COLLINS:** It is pretty much the same. We do clear up some BMX tracks that are built by enthusiastic youngsters in our shire quite a lot. Unfortunately they seem to really enjoy it, but from a risk perspective it is something that we do need to shut down once we find out about it. There may have been some increase in horseriding too. We have got a lot of horses and I think people at home with more time, so we see a few people get out on their horses a bit more than they have in the past. I do not have any hard data to back that up; that is just anecdotal from what I hear in the community.

**Mr FOWLES:** Sure. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Will. David and Danielle, did you have any other burning questions that you wanted to ask?

**Mr MORRIS:** No, I am done. Thanks, Sarah.

**Ms GREEN:** No, I am done too. But you have given us a lot to think about, and it was just a really different perspective to the interface councils’, so thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Dave and Will, is there anything else that you want to tell us, make sure that we take away? Anything last minute, you know: ‘If you’re going to do this, you’ve got to make a recommendation on this’, whether it comes to funding or different policies or anything else that you want to see state government do in this space? Sometimes stakeholders are worried we will be offended. I assure you we have heard a lot as MPs; we cannot be offended. Is there any kind of takeaway that you think we need to know?

**Mr COLLINS:** I really appreciate the opportunity that you are giving us. I am struggling to think on the spot, unfortunately, so I will let Will think a little bit more, and I will just babble on to give him another second. For us, as Geelong, Ballarat and Melbourne seem to continue to grow, we are facing increasing population size, increasing pressure and that real diversity of expectations around what infrastructure there is, what standard it should be maintained to and how we go about it.

I think for us, as a council, we are not a really big council. We have not got these big teams of people. We are not really mature in this space, and we are playing catch-up. So we need as much help as we can with some of the big-picture stuff, to be given advice on what we can and cannot do, because we do not always know, and we do not always know who to turn to as well, to ask for help. You know, it is our neighbouring councils and things like that too.

The other thing that I will mention, just while it comes to mind, is I guess fire is an increasing concern for many of our communities around environmental infrastructure. We have above Inverleigh the Inverleigh Flora and Fauna Reserve, which is really massive—well, not really massive compared to some, but for us it is one of our bigger forested areas. It is managed by Parks Victoria, and I think they do a really good job, as far as they can,

but there is a real concern: it is sitting to the north of the town, so in hot, dry conditions it is potentially where a fire risk is going to come from. So this is a concern for the community. It is just difficult to balance this out sometimes, and it just adds another layer of complexity for us to deal with. So any support that we can get from state government in particular for us and the communities that we work with is really appreciated. That is a very generic statement, sorry.

**The CHAIR:** I think that is a really important point—that you are a smaller council, and you have started to grow really quickly, but that expertise has not necessarily been part of Golden Plains, and you are looking to reach out. I mean, that expertise, I would say, does exist, and making sure that you are married up with stakeholders can assist you with getting everything that you can for local residents and how to do that, as it helps you gear up for the decades ahead. I think that is a really interesting point. Will?

**Mr CHEATLEY:** Good point, Dave. You have pretty much crossed over most of what I was going to suggest. We are in the thick of it at the minute in terms of development. You know, you are talking about strategic planning, and the amount of pressure that team is under at the moment at Baw Baw with the amount of applications coming through and everything like that and then the infrastructure—what we have got already in predevelopment, trying to renew that and fund our renewal in our capital program in a rate-capping environment is quite tough for us. And then also that extends to maintenance, so we have got the maintenance of everything we have plus what is being inherited through growth and development. It is a real challenge for us. It is one that we are in the thick of at the minute, and any support, any guidance or anything like that from the state government would be really appreciated from our perspective as well. Thanks for the opportunity to come in today and present as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. It is greatly appreciated. We have just had Paul Hamer join us. Paul, we are just wrapping up. I just want to say thank you on behalf of the committee, Dave and Will, for taking the time to speak to us this afternoon. I know there are a couple of you that need to take off at 3.15 pm, so thank you. Hopefully we will come out with some really good recommendations—I am sure we will—out of this inquiry. So we will say farewell.

**Mr FOWLES:** Thanks, guys.

**Mr COLLINS:** Thanks so much.

**The CHAIR:** Goodbye. Thank you.

**Mr COLLINS:** All the best with it.

**Mr CHEATLEY:** Thank you. Good luck. Take care.

**Committee adjourned.**