

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne – Friday 3 May 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

Nicole Werner

**WITNESS**

James McLean, Senior Policy Adviser, Sustainable Development, Municipal Association of Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the public hearing into securing Victoria's food supply. I will just run through a few formalities before we begin with our next session.

All evidence today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without any fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing, even if you are restating what you said during the hearing.

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

Thank you for making the time to meet with our committee today. Can you please state your full name and title and make any opening remarks.

**James McLEAN:** Of course. Thank you, Juliana. My name is James McLean, and I am the Senior Policy Adviser in Sustainable Development at the Municipal Association of Victoria – a lot of words there, but basically it means I am the planning person at the MAV on of course urban, rural and environmental planning issues.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent, and we are delighted to have you here today. You might have heard we were just talking about the role of federal and state and local governments. We all know that when the three levels of government work together we get much better outcomes. Would you like to have a bit of a chat and a discussion, and then we will move to some questions?

**James McLEAN:** Yes, of course. I have prepared a brief statement, if you would not mind.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. That would be great.

**James McLEAN:** Fantastic. I have already introduced myself, but basically councils understand their important role in the planning system and the planning decisions they make every day to ensure the security of local, regional and state food supply. When it comes to food supply, councils hear about increasing demand on local food banks, they hear about and experience cost-of-living pressures and they note the erosion, contraction and decline of agricultural land in their municipalities. You will have read in our submission a broad overview of all the various ways councils have responded to planning for food supply, and I of course recommend to you all to closely read the individual council submissions that speak to their local priorities and community and economic experiences.

The council submissions to this inquiry provide a wealth of detailed information on local farming and food supply issues, and they speak to the importance of the matters being investigated by this inquiry. It also needs to be said from the outset that councils understand the current housing challenge. Councils are ready to work with the state to ensure that everybody has a home over their head. I have seen other submissions to this inquiry have pushed for unlocking all available land for housing and removing urban growth boundaries and the like as a priority. However, our green wedges and agricultural lands are not vacant spaces waiting for development. These lands are productive economic drivers of our state. These lands feed us. They also provide intrinsic social and cultural connections that are best understood by those who farm and live on them. They are still unceded productive lands shaped by our First Nations people for thousands of years before colonisation, who still to this day have deep understanding of the capacity of country.

My point here is that in the push to build 80,000 homes a year we must remember we still have to feed these new communities, preferably with fresh, locally produced food. No doubt the inquiry will also hear that rural and regional communities are experiencing the firsthand challenges of the rollout of renewables and those competing demands between agricultural land and medium- to large-scale renewable energy projects and their associated infrastructure. These are really tricky issues. Communities, and farmers in particular, feel left behind and out of the loop on these changes. Councils report as concerns in particular the fragmentation and loss of their important agricultural land due to the rapid pace of the renewables rollout.

The MAV can and hopes to support the state to deliver a transparent regional approach to these planning challenges, and we must ensure food security and energy security exist together. The terms of reference to this inquiry allowed me to cover a wide range of issues in our submission, and many of them have been on the MAV's agenda for some time now, particularly in response to the most recent round of state government proposed planning reform for Melbourne's green wedges and agricultural land – that is, land within the arbitrary 100-kilometre radius of Melbourne. You will have read in our submission that the MAV and councils have been broadly supportive of the state government's policy approach to date. We have encouraged the state to get on with implementing their work program in this space. This is based on the condition that councils are meaningfully engaged and are able to work with the state to ensure that any reform reflects the needs of their local economies and communities.

Finally, our submission explained that the 100-kilometre radius has been arbitrarily applied but also speaks to our state's at times confused approach to rural and regional planning more broadly. The shifting nature of state policy in relation to agricultural land demonstrates this. Councils and the state must collaborate, as councils process the vast majority of planning permit applications and planning scheme amendments in relation to agricultural land. Indeed councils process and approve 95 per cent of all permits in the state. They have the detailed knowledge on these matters. Councils are the state's key partner in reform in this space to monitor and improve the performance, map out an approach to protecting and enhancing all agricultural land and support our rural and regional planning departments and communities. Thank you. I am happy to take some questions.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. Thank you very much, and thank you very much for your submission. I worked with MAV previously through the gender equality advisory committee, and they do very good work. I might open up to the group and see if they would like to kick off. David, would you like to start?

**David HODGETT:** Thanks, James. I note in your submission there is a recommendation that the government develops a statewide approach for agricultural and rural land use planning and that the government should commit to the development of a statewide food system. We heard a similar presentation of ideas from the VFF, and I agree with that. I actually am supportive of that. However, I am wondering how confident you or others would be that this will assist in conflicting land uses, given that government is all about managing priorities. By way of example, I live in the Yarra Ranges, and I often see in housing where people want to age in place but they have got very important agricultural pursuits out there as well. I would be arguing that the government consider both as priorities, but how confident are you that, if we had a statewide mapping and strategic plan, that would actually assist or deliver better outcomes?

**James McLEAN:** It is a really good question, David. I think it really goes to the heart of what this inquiry is about today – managing land use conflict and the various roles that state and local government can play to manage this. As I said in my submission, the state and councils need to work together on this sort of stuff. When we say we want the state to do a broad statewide planning policy framework, I do not think we necessarily mean right down to the lot level. I think there is a role for the state to set better rules across the state and set much stronger state policy and then work with councils at the local level to implement that and see what that looks like. So, for example, out in the Yarra Ranges it is making sure that long-term property owners can step back from managing their operations and perhaps hand it on to the next generation or sell but stay in place. You might have noted in our submission that there was some discussion about small second dwellings provisions and those sorts of conflicts – I am speaking in my role at MAV but also from my previous life as a council planner down at Moyne shire – and hearing about farmers wanting to retire in place and hand the property on to their children but wanting to stay on the land. How do we stop a proliferation of dwellings? Councils deal with those matters every day. I am sure in speaking to council planning officers they will say, 'We dealt with this planning permit where we ensured that the son's dwelling is located close to the existing one or done in an extension this way.' There are a lot of different ways you can do it at the lot level, but I think a lacklustre state planning policy framework does not give councils a lot of confidence at times in making those sorts of planning decisions at the local and lot level.

**David HODGETT:** Thank you.

**James McLEAN:** Pleasure.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** My question – thank you, James – is: what are some of the other challenges faced by local governments and planners seeking to protect agricultural land? And added to that is: does the sector more broadly have the skills needed to protect our food supply?

**James McLEAN:** What a great question as well. I am really glad you asked that one.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** Oh, thanks.

**James McLEAN:** No worries. I saw it come up in a few submissions in my mad cramming this morning and last night – not going to lie – and I was surprised at the broad range of submissions that talked about planner capacity and capability on these matters. I was lucky that I went to university up at La Trobe Bendigo, where the degree was focused on mainly rural and regional planning issues. Later this afternoon you will hear from Andrew Butt, who was my lecturer – and I was a tutor for Andrew for a few years at RMIT for his regional planning course. What struck me is I spent four years up at La Trobe pretty much learning rural and regional planning in particular, and then when I came to Melbourne I was like, ‘What’s urban planning?’ When I tutored for Andrew, that four-year course was condensed into one semester at RMIT. So I think there is genuine concern out there that perhaps a lot of the new planners coming out today, particularly if they grew up in Melbourne, do not understand the broader agricultural and economic issues connected to food supply in rural and regional Victoria.

That being said, I do not want to understate the really important work that all of my colleagues out in rural councils do every day working with farmers. They talk to Agriculture Victoria’s planning advisory service, and I know the AgVic team do fantastic partnership work with council planners every day and do everything they can to help them understand the intricacies of agricultural economics, agriculture policy and the interactions with the planning system.

There is also the regional planning hubs program, which again is a great program full of some excellent state government planners, who partner with rural and regional councils to improve their planning systems and processes, and that is a popular program. It is all about building up the capability and capacity of regional planners.

But also, the other big issue we have, along with education and support, is the fact that lots of councils struggle to recruit and retain staff. I am sure you folks hear about this all the time – I hear it every day – but it is really massive issue. Sitting in meetings I hear, for example, that one of Victoria’s largest regional cities does not even have a full-time strategic planner, and this is a city sitting slap-bang in the middle of a major food bowl. Their capacity to plan for their city, let alone their outlying rural hinterlands, is severely limited because of those resource constraints. The state is stepping in to help, but perhaps there are some larger structural workforce issues out there, whether that is education and training through rural universities or lack of incentives for younger people and professionals to move out to the regions. It is broader than the planning system there. But I think, speaking on behalf of my colleagues in rural and remote councils, they would appreciate all the help they can get to deal with these matters.

**Martin CAMERON:** Thanks for coming in, James. In saying that, how do the local councils find that balance between the residential builds that we need to do and the food security with our farming land? Also, in my seat of Morwell, down in the Latrobe Valley, and around the state we have got the energy security with transmission lines and so forth coming through, so there is a lot on their plate to take in. How do they balance all of that to come to the right decisions, now and looking forward into the future?

**James McLEAN:** My first response is: I do not know. Because it is really hard, right?

**Martin CAMERON:** Absolutely.

**James McLEAN:** There are lots of different parts to that question – housing, energy, protecting the food bowl. The way the planning system is set up is to balance decision-making with the general net community benefit. I think what council planners, when it comes to food supply and protecting agricultural land, are most worried about is almost death by a thousand cuts, in a way. It is like if we allow this little lot to go, then the next lot will go, then the next lot and then the next lot. So for them it is about having really strong policy to say, ‘We’re drawing the line here,’ and go, ‘Actually, the housing supply needs happen in these areas.’ Sometimes it is a line on a map, whether it is an urban growth boundary or a regional structure plan, and it is about sticking to

that line. And sometimes that requires political discussions in the council chamber and dealing with difficult conversations with community members or the farming community. One of the big ironies that council planners often find is that farmers are often very anxious about urban encroachment, but when it comes time for them to sell and retire: 'Oh, you won't let me subdivide our properties.' There have got to be some strong policy responses, but also maybe some better incentives to help council planners make decisions and stick to the line.

Renewable energy is a lot more tricky, just because of the rapid pace and scale and also the urgency of dealing with climate change and the state government needing to meet its renewable energy targets. You might be aware that there were some recent changes to the *Planning and Environment Act* that restrict communities from objecting to and challenging the renewable energy rollout, all in the name of ensuring that we can just get permits approved. There is still an ability for communities and councils to make submissions. I think when it comes to the renewables rollout, it is all about transparency and knowing what is coming and when and having a fair way of ensuring that communities are perhaps compensated or brought along on a journey. I think it has all happened very rapidly, and when things happen rapidly and there is a lot of change, the rumour mills begin in town the next minute.

I think there is a lot that some of our renewable energy companies have to answer for in terms of lack of transparent consultation and engagement – not coming to council in the first instance and saying, 'Hey, we've got this proposal. We're thinking about it. What's the community like in this area? What's the way that we can talk to communities about this and get a good outcome?' My home area, Moyne shire, is a hotbed for renewable energy and wind farms. I remember as a kid going to the opening of the Codrington wind farm, and they gave us a little wind turbine. It was really exciting, and now the landscape is dotted with them in the space of just 20 years, and that is a lot of change. And there has not been a lot of transparency with that along the way. The state has made inroads with the creation of VicGrid, the authority sort of set up to do a better strategic plan. Councils have welcomed that and are looking to work with VicGrid for a more transparent process from here on.

**Martin CAMERON:** Thank you.

**Martha HAYLETT:** James, you touched on some of it before. It was really interesting hearing how you went to La Trobe Bendigo, and now that is reduced to just a semester.

**The CHAIR:** At RMIT.

**Martha HAYLETT:** At RMIT, exactly.

**James McLEAN:** Yes, but the La Trobe program is not what it was back then, unfortunately.

**Martha HAYLETT:** Yes. Do you think the local government sector have the skills needed to protect our food supply? Maybe they do, but if they do not, how do you think we improve that for local government?

**James McLEAN:** Yes – a really good question. I genuinely think we do. I think councils are full of planners and staff that really understand and care about these issues. Rural and regional councils – they all live in rural and regional Victoria, right? A lot of them work and live and grew up on farms themselves, so they understand these matters. When it comes to council resourcing, it is a huge challenge, whether it comes down to relocation, hybrid work arrangements, those sorts of things – keeping people in the job once they move out to regional Victoria –

**Martha HAYLETT:** They always get poached.

**James McLEAN:** They always get poached. I am aware, for example, of a young planner who actually won the PIA Young Planner of the Year and worked for a regional council, and he got poached by a metropolitan consultancy. But the irony is that here I am – I grew up in regional Victoria but live in Melbourne. But I like to think that I am trying to help my rural and regional councils still in my role at the MAV. I do not have an easy answer for that, but I will stick up for my colleagues in councils and say that they are really trying. I will also say that current tools like the urban growth boundary are really strong, and councils really support that. Councils are required by the Act to prepare and maintain green wedge management plans through lots of community consultation and engagement with industry in those areas, and councils rely on those plans to make

really strong decisions. The farming zone, which covers – I do not have the exact number – the vast majority of land in the state, is actually a pretty strong zone, but when it comes to the policy hierarchy above, that state policy and then its interaction with local policy to guide decision-making at that level is sometimes where I think councils feel a bit unstuck. Then we end up at VCAT, with all the delay and cost and uncertainty that causes. I mean, if we can avoid going to VCAT as much as we can, then that will also save us a lot of time and money and trips to Melbourne for hearings.

**The CHAIR:** James, I live in Ballarat, and obviously during COVID people worked out that regional Victoria was a pretty great place to live. What we have got now is housing prices in Ballarat – the average housing price has gone up to \$550,000, as opposed to when I bought my house, when it started with a 2. So it has been really big. People are really worried about their kids buying homes. They are really worried about first home buyers being able to get into the market. What is MAV's view in terms of addressing issues of housing affordability, particularly for first home buyers, as well as saying that, 'There's a farmer who wants to retire and move off his land'? My example is: in my class Danny used to walk across the paddocks to come to primary school and now there are 700 houses on that farm just in my lifetime. Does MAV have a policy position on the issues of housing affordability or give directions to councils about how they keep housing affordability in range of first home buyers?

**James McLEAN:** Off the top of my head, I do not know if we have an exact policy statement on that, but absolutely MAV supports any approach really, in the current housing affordability crisis we have, to find better ways for young people and first home buyers, like me quite recently –

**The CHAIR:** Congratulations.

**James McLEAN:** thank you – to get into the market. There are lots of ways to do that. In places like Ballarat, for example, I understand that there is an increasing push to densify the city centre and look at different ways of doing housing. Perhaps in regional Victoria the goal is more the detached dwelling on the block, and that is where you need greenfield development. There is a process and a way of doing that, right? You can plan for greenfield growth through land capability, unlocking infrastructure in appropriate areas and making sure that new greenfield development is close to a main road and a bus route or that you can walk to the train station – those sorts of things. What MAV would caution against is an ad hoc approach where you go, 'Well, a couple of kilometres away a farmer wants to sell, and they can subdivide,' but then that new estate is isolated from the rest of the town infrastructure and there is no bus link or those sorts of things. That is when we talk about wanting a proper planning process that identifies logical inclusions. I think that is the term sometimes used in planning for urban growth and development. In regional centres like Ballarat I think there is a shift underway. Ballarat has got a Nightingale apartment building, for example.

**The CHAIR:** It does have a beautiful Nightingale apartment.

**James McLEAN:** Indeed, and so that is a really unique thing for Ballarat. That is a new –

**The CHAIR:** It is a shift.

**James McLEAN:** It is a real shift. And there are townhouses. Different ways of living I think might be more exciting for young people perhaps, and there are big demographic shifts going on too, right? Young people are getting married later, they are starting families later and when they do their families are smaller, so their housing needs are going to be much different. We heard questions before from David over here about retiring in place and staying connected to your local community. We are going to need different sorts of houses for that too. You talk about a young person buying their first home. Well, I think about my aunty in Port Fairy. You talk about house prices in Ballarat. Well, Port Fairy, I tell you, is next level. I will never be able to buy there, but my aunty wants to downsize. She cannot maintain the garden anymore, so she wants to find a unit in Port Fairy. But with the property prices in Port Fairy she will sell her house and then still pay \$800,000 for a two-bedroom villa unit in Port. She will get nowhere. She will not have any money left over to go travelling and those sorts of things. There are real generational issues right across, from first home buyers to older people wanting to sell and downsize in their local communities. So it is not going to be all about rolling out new developments in greenfield areas. It is going to be looking at how we use the land internally in urban areas more efficiently too.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** Can I ask, now that we are talking about housing: when councils are developing up PSPs – this is something I am really passionate about also – in that new housing estate is there anything in that

policy setting within local planning to have spaces for community farms and neighbourhood batteries for where we are actually going? Maybe the Cape in Cape Paterson is an example. They have a very small envelope for houses, so you do not end up with the whole block being the house itself. Is there something that the MAV are doing in that space, or is that state government?

**James McLEAN:** It is not something that MAV is doing. The Victorian Planning Authority and councils work together in developing the PSPs. But certainly if that wants to be done, it can be done. I understand the VPA a couple of years ago now reviewed their PSP process to look more at sustainability within the communities being delivered through PSPs so that they are not generic, almost like what you see on the front cover of the *Age* – you know, urban sprawl type photos. I am sure councils would be only too glad to find ways to work into public spaces and within development areas to grow food.

I was reading Banyule City Council's submission to the inquiry earlier, and they were talking about ways that they want to encourage food-growing in new apartment developments and townhouse developments. Those sorts of developments are increasingly happening in PSP areas as well, and I think there is a good opportunity to do that. The thing with PSPs is there are lots of different landowners, and the way the PSP process is done is the landowners kind of jostle over who gets the majority of housing on their lot versus who gets the public parks and the farmland, the schools and all of that. There is a bit of an equity process there as well among all the landowners, but generally you get a larger developer – you know, I am thinking Stockland, Villawood – who can perhaps deliver those precincts a bit more, if they see that kind of demand in their communities. I think that will increase over time.

I will spruik my apartment development. We have rooftop gardens, and we have beekeepers as well. It is nowhere near enough to feed the whole development – we have got a Coles at the bottom. But people have their little veggie patches, and I grow some veggies on my balcony. There are lots of different micro to macro ways of doing it to connect people to fresh food.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** That is something I guess the VPA needs to set some really serious standards around.

**James McLEAN:** It would be more the role of the VPA, but I am sure councils would be only too happy to support them in looking to those things.

**The CHAIR:** Talking about beekeeping, I know at the local government authority in Paris they have beekeeping on their roofs. I am pushing for Ballarat town hall to start making honey at the top, so stay tuned.

**James McLEAN:** When I moved in, they gave us a little pot of bee honey from the development. It was the most delicious honey I have ever had, so I need to sign up to the bee club.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. I am concerned about our terms of reference now, James.

**James McLEAN:** Yes, I know. We have really gone off track. Sorry, my bad.

**The CHAIR:** Bring us back, Nicole.

**Nicole WERNER:** I will bring us back. From the point of view of the MAV, how well does the Victorian planning framework protect farmland along the fringes of the city?

**James McLEAN:** We welcome the state government's most recent work in this space. You would have read in our submission that we very much supported them in their 2019 and 2020 consultations – we provided submissions to both with broad support and wanted them to implement that work.

Currently it is a bit ad hoc. Speaking from my previous life as a planner but also what I hear from councils today is again getting back to that almost death by a thousand cuts thing that happens on the periphery of our city. For example, I know that schools and places of worship are increasingly trying to find cheap land to grow, particularly religious congregations, so they look at the land in the green wedges, cheap agricultural land. But then as a result it gets eaten up and used for purposes that are not for food growing, landscape protection, waterway protection and those sorts of things. We really need the state to implement its green wedges and agricultural land policy proposals.

We welcomed the planning minister's action plan released a few weeks ago, or maybe a couple of months ago now, which provided us a bit of a time line to implement those reforms over the next one year to three years. They have got a lot of work to do there, though. I think that if they talked to councils, if they talked to the MAV about how we can get this done a bit quicker, I am sure we would be happy to help them find ways to get that work done to make sure that we continue to not lose agricultural land. I am sure that between 2020, when that consultation was done, and now – we are almost halfway through 2024 – that some planning decisions and some rezonings might have been made such that we are losing it each day. Currently, though, the zone controls are relatively strong. We have an urban growth boundary that has been held there for the last decade or so, as far as I am aware. We need to keep doing those things. I know you talked to the state government earlier this morning. They have gone through a bit of a restructure internally, so hopefully they have got some resources now to begin implementing that green wedges work.

**Martha HAYLETT:** Just on that action plan, James, what actions do you think are the most effective in that action plan? Which ones do you think could be strengthened? I am quizzing you now on your cramming this morning, but what do you think? Are there ones that you looked at and you thought 'Oh, these need to be strengthened' or 'These are better than others'?

**James McLEAN:** I do not want to list them all in order of favourite to least favourite. I think the thing that is most important to councils is getting clarity of guidance for decision-making – and that is getting back to those points I was saying before, where we have got this wishy-washy state agricultural policy that has moved around a bit over the years. We have got local policies, which I think a lot of councils will tell you have been watered down by various state government planning reform programs, and then we have got individual zone decisions. So guidance around how we make strong, consistent decisions in the peri-urban areas will be of benefit. I think councils would welcome that. I think the state has got great resources in the regional planning hub program and AgVic to talk through what they hear about councils. But there are a lot of councils within that 100-kilometre zone who I am sure would be willing to say, 'This is what our permit data is telling us. We recently dealt with this quite peculiar issue, but broadly these are the kind of things that we are dealing with.' So we need some guidance to help us make some decisions but also some guidance to help us help our communities and our farmers understand what is, let us be honest, really complex stuff. Planning is really complex. There are lots of layers to it, and it pulls in lots of other legislation. It is a lot to get your head around, so guidance is important. But also, something that really piqued my interest when I first saw it back in 2020 – this green wedges and ag land work, and I have since heard a fair bit from the more outer councils – is: how does this 100-kilometre barrier work? Why 100 kilometres? Maybe there was some study that said transport links are better within the 100-kilometre zone, but what happens when you are just over the 100 kilometres?

**The CHAIR:** Well, Ballarat is 110 kilometres.

**James McLEAN:** Yes, there you go. So you are just up the road, right?

**The CHAIR:** We can see it, but we are not included in it.

**James McLEAN:** Yes. And I have no doubt there will be some farmers where half the farm will be within the 100 kilometres with all these stricter provisions and the other half of the farm will not be, so we are going to need some pretty good guidance there. We are going to need to work through that particular issue. I know that is on the minds of a lot of the councils that straddle that border.

I think also, more broadly, councils see this as an opportunity to almost test-run some of these reforms, such as stricter subdivision controls, such as a right to farm. Those sorts of things, I think, have got councils really interested to see how they work. Maybe the current approach to just dealing with Melbourne is a bit of a trial run to see what will work across the state. I understand those reforms also look at an overlay to protect irrigation districts around Melbourne. I know there are some really important irrigation districts along the Murray that could use some planning controls to protect them too. I think it is going to be about managing the data and seeing what comes out of it. It is also going to be about seeing how mapping works for the 100-k radius and also which bits of ag land get best protected through right-to-farm provisions and those sorts of matters, but we just really would like the state to talk to us and to get some of those provisions and strong guidance in to help my colleagues in councils.



**Martin CAMERON:** As we head along that planning journey, has there been an uplift in conflict between agricultural and other land users, because we always hear that there is conflict at council between developers and other stuff – has there been an uptick in it or not?

**James McLEAN:** I am not too sure, Martin, if there has been an uptick, I just think it has always been a thing. When I was a junior planner at Moyne shire I was dealing with dwellings on small lots in the farming zone, and today at the MAV I am still talking about dwellings on small lots in the farming zone. It is the same with some of the matters that you have pressed me on around what is appropriate greenfield development as well. I was reading the Whittlesea City Council structure plan for the township of Whittlesea, the namesake town, about their strategic process of identifying which bits of land they would support for rezoning – and we are talking about green wedge land, so it needs to go through Parliament to actually get rezoned – and the strategic justification for doing that. Those are things that those councils have always dealt with, and I think will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

That is not to say that with the flick of a pen we can solve all planning problems instantaneously. The planning system is a deeply human system, I think – going away from what MAV might say – but you know, we are all people at the end of the day and we are all dealing with particular challenges. When it comes to farmers wanting to put a second dwelling on their lot or somebody who is pursuing a tree change; you know, they were glad to get out of Melbourne post-lockdown and they bought a cheap block and then council goes, ‘It’s under 40 hectares in the farming zone, you can’t put a house on it,’ and they go, ‘Oh, this is my life dream.’ So there are some deeply personal issues here that councils deal with every day, and they deal with them as kindly and as empathetically as they can, but it is really challenging out there. I definitely took a lot of difficult phone calls and counter inquiries in my time at the council desk, and I am sure if you were to speak to any council planner at this inquiry they too could tell you multiple examples of having to deal with quite emotive issues despite the strong planning controls. It is about educating communities on what the policy is and why we are doing it, and maybe some of the outcomes of this food supply inquiry might talk to the need to go on an education journey with communities on the importance of this stuff and why we have the planning controls we do; that might be helpful. I just made that up, but it made sense.

**The CHAIR:** We are getting towards the end of our time. Are there any other final questions that people would like to hear the views of MAV on?

**Nicole WERNER:** Yes, if no-one else has anything.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that would be great, Nicole.

**Nicole WERNER:** You said ‘death by a thousand cuts’. You would not know this, but the Victorian Farmers Federation also shared that same line.

**James McLEAN:** Did they?

**Nicole WERNER:** Yes, that is how they started.

**James McLEAN:** Maybe they stalked me, I swear I said it to their policy adviser the other day. I will claim it first. It is a good line.

**Nicole WERNER:** Marty was asking about that conflict in land use. So in your view, how can local government mitigate and help resolve that conflict, when you are looking at all these deeply personal cases like you shared?

**James McLEAN:** Yes, sometimes I wonder if this goes beyond the planning system as well. Kind of going back to these housing issues as well, housing is also driven by taxation and lots of different policy there, and it is the same with agricultural policy too. Maybe part of it is how we incentivise people to farm more and to perhaps provide some better guidance on what can help farmers make better decisions when dealing with land use conflict, but also figuring out with communities what the best environmental considerations are for areas for farm zones and what we let go for township growth. But I think I will just get back to the points I have made throughout this morning: when councils are empowered with strong policy, strong controls and good guidance that they have helped influence, then I think they will feel empowered to have sometimes difficult conversations with community to say, ‘Actually, hey, you know what – this town straddles some of our most

important agricultural land, and we need to protect it, so we're actually going to focus growth over here instead.' We have really got to stick to those decisions, and that is not just at the local level, it is at the state level; they control the urban growth boundary as well, so that is vitally important.

I understand there is huge pressure from the community, from the development sector, from the state government, because we need to house more Victorians. Our population is growing, but we also need to feed everyone. We have a lot of changes coming our way to the quality of our arable land and where it is, so we need to do all we can now to make sure we have really strong planning frameworks to ensure that we are directing population growth where it needs to be – so that first home buyers can get into the market and so my aunty can downsize in Port Fairy. But we all need to eat, and I think a better way of doing that is getting the mapping right, getting the data right, seeing what sorts of decisions are being made where and when and going from there. I encourage the state to get on with it and get those green wedge and agricultural land reforms in. I know you spoke to Michael earlier; I hope to continue to press him on that.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. Thank you so much, James, for your great interest and the work that you have put in to prepare us today. It is great to hear from local government on these important issues, reflecting the important role they play in planning issues across the state, so you have given us a lot to think about. We might come up with some more questions that we would love to be able to send you.

**James McLEAN:** Of course.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for coming today. We will have a break in transmission, thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**