

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

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

Ballarat – Wednesday 22 May 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

Nicole Werner

**WITNESSES**

Cliff Bostock, Coordinator, Strategic Planning, and

Sarah Kernohan, Manager, Growth and Development, Moorabool Shire Council; and

Ron Torres, Executive Manager, Development, and

Kendall Sinclair, Manager, Community and Economy, Hepburn Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the public hearing at the beautiful Ballarat Mechanics' Institute. It is beautiful to be here in their library today for today's hearings. I will just run through some important formalities before we begin.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege.

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 from in our final report.

Thank you very much for making the time to meet with the committee today. If I could first go to our representatives from Moorabool, would you please provide us with your full names and titles, and then we will go to the Hepburn representatives.

**Sarah KERNOHAN:** Thank you. Sarah Kernohan, Manager of Growth and Development at Moorabool shire.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. Thank you, Sarah.

**Cliff BOSTOCK:** Cliff Bostock, Coordinator, Strategic Planning.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Cliff.

**Ron TORRES:** Ron Torres, Executive Manager of Development at Hepburn Shire Council.

**Kendall SINCLAIR:** Kendall Sinclair, Manager of Community and Economy at Hepburn Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. On our committee today we have the Member for Croydon David Hodgett, the Member for Warrandyte Nicole Werner, the Member for Ripon Martha Haylett, the Member for Morwell Martin Cameron, the Member for Bass Jordan Crugnale and the Member for Monbulk Daniela De Martino, and I am Juliana Addison, the Member for Wendouree.

We have had the pleasure to be out in Moorabool this morning. We have had a lovely trip out to Bungaree. We have been able to visit the cool storage out there as well meet Mark Trigg and see his dairy farm as well as Elizabeth Lewis-Gray and Sandy Gray. We have been out in Moorabool today.

We will all be driving through Hepburn as we go to Bendigo for tomorrow, so I strongly encourage people to go and spend some money in Hepburn, a beautiful part of Victoria, on the way through.

Moorabool, would you like to start off with some opening remarks?

**Sarah KERNOHAN:** Thank you. I would just like to thank the committee as well for having us here today. I also just wanted to note that this submission was made by officers and we did not have the opportunity to have it formally endorsed by councillors. We have just got a couple of slides.

**Visual presentation.**

**Sarah KERNOHAN:** I really just wanted to provide the committee with some context for Moorabool shire and talk about strategic importance and also the pressures that we are facing, and then Cliff will briefly speak to the rural land use strategy which we are currently preparing.

Moorabool is what is classed as a peri-urban council. We are located between metropolitan Melbourne, Ballarat and Geelong. We are what is considered a transport gateway. We are between Melbourne and western Victoria. We are located within proximity to Melbourne Airport, the Port of Melbourne and Avalon Airport, and the Western Freeway and the Ballarat rail line run through our shire. When we talk about strategic importance, we are really strategically located in that we have got proximity to a lot of those export markets that are really important for producers within the shire. We are also proximate to some of the fastest growing urban areas in Melbourne, and that is what happens when you are a peri-urban council. Melton is right on our doorstep, along with Geelong and Ballarat, which we know are some of those fastest growing urban areas. We are really settled right between some of those areas. We also consider that we are in a highly strategic location because Moorabool is offering this increasingly scarce opportunity to provide high-quality food and also energy and resources to a rapidly growing in Melbourne while concurrently supporting the state's population and economic growth.

We are also home to a state-significant waste hub and state-significant sand quarries, which are providing a significant amount of construction sand to Victoria. We are also home to a state-significant irrigation district, being the Bacchus Marsh irrigation district; it is also one of only two irrigation districts within 100 kilometres of Melbourne. Further, a second irrigation district is currently under construction south of Bacchus Marsh – that is the western irrigation network.

Moorabool is also home to some of the best quality agricultural land in the state. The towns of Bacchus Marsh and Ballan have also been identified for growth in state, regional and local policy. In addition, the Western Renewables Link is a 190-kilometre overhead high-voltage transmission line that runs through the entirety of our shire. Sixty kilometres of that line will run through our shire, running through some of the best agricultural land within the state.

In summary, what I am trying to allude to or point to is that there are a lot of competing priorities within our shire. There is a lot happening, and with that proximity to Melbourne and with that attractiveness – such as the rail, the roads and the airports, and we also have things like national parks – it is a really attractive place for people to live. Council is really supportive of the growth that is occurring within our townships, particularly Bacchus Marsh and Ballan, but with that comes increasing pressure for growth to spill outside of those townships and in particular into our rural areas, and we are seeing a lot of pressures in those areas currently.

**Cliff BOSTOCK:** Okay. I will give you a quick run-down on our rural land use strategy, because we believe it is actually very relevant to what we are talking about here today. Rural land use strategies can take into account a broad range of things. It does talk about things like tourism, but as with what Sarah said, at the moment in Moorabool there is definitely some very strong contention around growth and also these rural lifestyle properties, particularly post COVID.

This map is just a little bit interesting for you because this is one of the maps that was actually behind the green wedge and agricultural land project prepared by DTP, and Mark Imhof and David Rees were involved in preparing it. I only note that because with the next slide they actually assisted us with preparing it. We used the same people; they assisted us with our more specific land capability map. This one is important because, within that 100-kilometre radius of Melbourne, what it really shows is the rarity of class 1 and class 2 land. You can see Moorabool, which is the green, so just where Ballarat is on the very left-hand side of the screen there, and the black line going through is the border between Moorabool and Hepburn, so you can see that basically Moorabool and Hepburn have the largest component of that class 1 land.

Next slide, please. As I said, we had Mark and David assist us with creating a more specific map at a Moorabool scale, which is what you see there, and then our rural land use strategy is based off this map. As you can see, basically our classification, so this class 1 and 2 land, is very high. That is where you really want to be using that land specifically for soil-based agricultures and possibly even restricting non-soil-based agricultures from coming in there – so not for grazing and so on. Class 3 is actually still quite high on the spectrum and can definitely be used for soil-based agriculture. Then class 4 is the remainder, or the olive green there. The important thing to know or to learn about the map is that it is not low-quality farmland, it is actually suitable for many types of agriculture – maybe not specific to soil-based, but if you can get water in there or you can do other management, you can bring it up. The other thing that is just useful to note that has come out of our rural land use strategy and from our consultants that have assisted us with it is that, as they noted, Moorabool has

quite low land fragmentation compared to some councils. That is because we have a legacy minimum subdivision size in our planning scheme of 100 hectares for the farm zone.

A little bit more detail about the rural land use strategy and what we are seeking to achieve with it: it is certainly seeking to promote more sustainable use of agricultural land within the shire. It promotes uses that align with the classification map as a starting point and it will recommend policies to either encourage or discourage certain types of uses. Some of the key findings that are interesting that have come out of the study both from the experts that we have talked with and from the consultation that we had – and we had a very successful consultation with the community; we had over 800 submissions which, for a population of 35,000 for Moorabool, is incredibly high, so they were very involved in that – are that Moorabool has and contains very high-quality and viable agricultural land. It highlights the unique position that we are in with regard to assisting with food security.

The demand for lifestyle dwellings is a significant threat to our farmland. Many people have plans to construct rural lifestyle properties in Moorabool in the future. We did note in that consultation that many of them already own the land, so it is just a future plan. We certainly have had, both through the consultation and just through inquiries to council and then presenting to council at council meetings, farmers concerned about land speculation and the rising rates on farmland. I might leave it there.

**Sarah KERNOHAN:** Yes. I will just point out on that map, it is not on the legend, that that red line that is running through the municipality there is the alignment for the Western Renewables Link.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Hepburn, do you want to make some opening remarks? Thank you, Moorabool.

**Ron TORRES:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for allowing us this opportunity to speak to our submission. We intend to highlight key points of our written submission and bring to you some added context. We will first cover Hepburn shire's context socially and strategically. We are keen to share with you a case study that points to one of the focal areas of this inquiry and there is a big piece that I will speak to around our strategic planning program responding to the first two focal points around planning controls and urban growth and that sort of thing, and welcome any questions from the committee afterwards.

Hepburn shire, firstly, is on Dja Dja Wurrung country. Our main townships are Glenlyon, Clunes, Creswick, Daylesford, Hepburn Springs and Trentham, and several other smaller settlements. If I could, through the Chair, provide the committee with a printed map –

**The CHAIR:** Great. That would be terrific.

**Ron TORRES:** just so you can make your way around. I will refer to that in the planning section.

**The CHAIR:** As a former geography teacher, I welcome this very much.

**Ron TORRES:** We are home to just over 16,000 residents but are anticipated to grow to just under 18,000 residents by 2036, so by neighbouring municipalities standards we are relatively small. Fifteen per cent of our population, though, are engaged in accommodation and food services, and 10 per cent are actually engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing.

Now the eastern half of our municipality – and thank you, Moorabool, for having that map up before, but you have got a printed one as well – is in the outer edge of the peri-urban area. The agricultural sector remains a significant part of Hepburn's economy, covering most of the shire's land. However, over time our economy has diversified with construction, health and tourism sectors. Our social mix has also diversified over time, ranging from traditional farming communities that have been there long term to a growing commuter population and part-time residents. So the risk to food security in Hepburn shire is very real: 43 per cent of our population is over the age of 55, and that poses certain potential risks in terms of our broader population, and 12.2 per cent of our family households are one-parent families, 73 per cent of which are female lone parent households. In 2021 it was calculated that 13.9 per cent of our Hepburn households had a family income of less than \$40,000 per annum.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, what percentage was that?

**Ron TORRES:** 13.9 per cent. And quite well known are the impacts of natural disasters on Hepburn shire. Fire, floods, storms and so on have a really significant and exaggerated impact on our shire and really touch on our food supply for our local community, amongst other things.

In terms of our strategic vision, and I am really talking about our community vision and council plan for the organisation, we have a number of elements embedded or enshrined in those strategic documents that really support food supply security, amongst other things. This is embodied in our community vision, council plan and municipal public health and wellbeing plan. We have five strategic pillars out of the six which support what the inquiry is looking into, and it is detailed in our submission, but we list a couple of objectives from our council plan with subsequent strategies. I will just read them out for the record. Within our council plan we have strategies to strengthen and protect existing agriculture to support the availability, sustainability and accessibility of local food sources; lead by example by supplying and promoting local, sustainable and healthier food and drink options across council-run events, activities, facilities and programs; and also partner with organisations to increase access to healthy and affordable food, including for vulnerable groups, and to support positive food system change. The importance of our strategic aspirations embedding food supply principles is that that influences the culture of our organisation. The approach by our community influences the services we deliver, our projects and our strategies, so it is important that an organisation has that sort of high-level trickle-down system.

So that is some context, committee. We wanted to share with you a pilot project that responds to one of the committee's focal points of resilience of the Victorian food system. Please tell us whether we are going too far or not with time, but I will throw over to Ms Sinclair.

**Kendall SINCLAIR:** Great. Thank you, Ron. And thank you, panel, for listening to Hepburn Shire Council. The key project that Ron was referring to is our artisan agriculture project. Artisan agriculture actually encompasses the production of high-value produce or premium food on a small scale by specialised techniques and with a clearly identified provenance, so that is what artisan agriculture is.

Central Highlands is one of Victoria's most important food bowls. It has an increasing number of food producers. A lot of our producers operate at a small scale and use low-impact farming methods or process food using artisan techniques. The artisan agriculture project was a pilot project, a three-year project, and it was developed and led by Hepburn Shire Council. That was in collaboration with Agriculture Victoria, Regional Development Victoria, Central Highlands regional partnership and local artisans. We had a project advisory group that was made up of about 12 members – including up to 9 members who represented a range of producers in the artisan agriculture sector and staff from Agriculture Victoria and Hepburn Shire Council. We got some grant funding to run that pilot project, and really the aim of the project was to find ways to support a more independent, less constrained and more collaborative artisan agriculture sector in the Central Highlands region.

I will not go into too much detail, but generally the project identified six main barriers to artisan agriculture in Hepburn shire and across the Central Highlands region. The first barrier was inappropriate business services, so there were some activities undertaken by the group to respond to this. There was a series of webinars run to help our artisan agriculture producers with social media tips and tricks. We held a webinar for their smartphone food and farm photography, so ways to improve the look and feel of their Facebook and Instagram photography. Then the second barrier was limited access to shared markets, so distribution channels, and barrier 3 was limited access to shared markets and processing plant and other equipment. As part of the activity, we developed a Hepburn food and produce community workshop, and that workshop worked really well to help our artisan producers. We developed an online food hub that was called the Central Highlands Growers Collective. That was an online platform – it is still ongoing; it is now with Commerce Ballarat – and that was for growers and producers to join online. They can actually showcase their products to their customers and what they do. Barrier 4 was scale-inappropriate food regulations. Barrier 5 was limited access to grants and finance to scale up. The activity undertaken there was a webinar on grants and reducing the regulatory burden on some. There were 18 grants provided to small artisan agriculture producers. That helped with things such as business development, strengthening online presence and some equipment upgrades, and that was up to about \$2000 per group. Barrier 6 was competing land use pressures and the cost of land, including planning regulations being a barrier to entry, and Ron may elaborate a little bit more on that. But as part of the activity, we had a land use planning forum for agriculture farmers and producers. It was an opportunity for small-scale

producers to raise their concerns about regulatory approvals. We also onforwarded a lot of referrals to the AgVic planning and advisory service, and that was great for our small-scale farmers.

Really the project delivered a broad range of activities. The key outcomes are also outlined in the submission, but just at the high level there were 15 events delivered to 432 participants. We made webinars available online after the initial events, and we attracted 1452 online views. We awarded \$34,000 in grants to 18 artisan agriculturalists. We provided individual professional mentoring support to 29 artisan producers and growers. We established that online food hub, and a lot of marketing materials were established. Ongoing funding was not provided by the state government, but we continue to work with our artisan agricultural producers today. It was a great piece of work to be involved with, and we have now got some ongoing legacy work associated with that. Thanks.

**Ron TORRES:** Thank you, Ms Sinclair. One of the barriers was land use planning and the regulatory framework, which I will touch on. Currently Hepburn Shire Council is undertaking a once-in-a-generation project called Future Hepburn. This is a really ambitious strategic land use and transport planning program to set out the strategic direction and vision for the next 30 years for the shire. It consists of three components: an integrated transport strategy; a rural strategy, which I will focus on; and five township structure plans. It is quite unique in that respect. Currently we are undertaking community consultation. Documents are not finalised, and I do not want to pre-empt any final outcomes before the August council meeting when these documents are to be presented. We have received much community interest so far.

On the rural strategy, Hepburn shire, as Moorabool has also emphasised, is in a region with some of Victoria's highest quality agricultural land. Seventy-three per cent of our shire's land is in rural or public use or is low-density residential, and a small 5.5 per cent of our land area covers townships. That gives you a clear picture, and the map that I circulated shows that. This context has really driven our strategic approach of outside in. What I mean by that is we really set about to not focus on the individual townships as a starting point but focus on our entire shire and agricultural land. That was first and foremost the consideration in our strategic program – protect high-quality agricultural land. Stemming from that, then, was a focus on residential growth being contained in our five townships, not sprawling into our agricultural land and then protecting and enhancing the character of the towns within. They were the key considerations or strategic goals. The beauty of doing all this at one time, whilst quite resource and labour intensive, is all these strategic documents talk to one another and inform one another and underpin each other. They will also, as we go through consultation with our community, provide our community, public agencies and the state government with the big picture that Hepburn is trying to achieve so that meaningful dialogue and comment can be achieved through that process. If adopted, hopefully in August, these strategic documents will provide a comprehensive framework for decision-makers in land use planning, infrastructure planning and that sort of thing, all being done in one go.

Committee, as you know, any strategic planning work is a delicate balancing act between community aspirations and feedback and state government requirements and the state government planning framework, and the challenge for council is to try to navigate through that. But in our rural strategy our key considerations for work are around agriculture, population growth, land use conflict, climate change, renewable energy – which Moorabool also touched on – landscape, cultural and natural values, and biodiversity, so they are the key considerations impacting our rural strategy work. But the greatest emphasis we are imparting in our strategy for decision-makers will be on the protection of productive agricultural land, significant landscapes, biodiversity and water catchments. That is what we are trying to achieve through our draft strategy. It is not one size fits all, our approach, because as you can see from the map and perhaps through your experience with Hepburn shire, it is not the same throughout the shire. Various parts of the shire have evolved very differently, and there are very different environmental conditions across the shire. Therefore our draft strategy has approached this with a two policy area approach, and that is signified by the different colours in the plans you have.

Policy area 1, which is the yellow on the plan you have, is located from Eganstown westward, so predominantly the western part of the shire. But there is a smaller section east of Daylesford, and from Trentham eastward there is another area for policy area 1. Policy area 1 is our agricultural engine room, so to speak. It includes farmland of strategic importance, and it contains the most significant productive agricultural land we have, which has not been fragmented over time, in the shire. We have our large-scale agricultural activities typically in policy area 1. What we are proposing in our draft strategy is to retain the farming zone provision but to modify that and back it up with policy. You have heard about the pressures of rural living, lifestyle pressures and that sort of thing, and growth from Melbourne. What we are, perhaps contentiously,

trying to achieve is a minimum subdivision area in policy area 1 of 40 hectares, nothing less, to prevent the fragmentation of that area. Contentiously, we are recommending that you need a planning permit for land below 80 hectares; above 80 hectares you do not need to go through council for a planning permit. That is very different to the framework we have today, with a smaller threshold. This is to protect that land. We are also looking at implementing the rural conservation zone on heavily forested areas in policy area 1. Our work will be very strict in preventing or prohibiting any uses that may lead to the loss or fragmentation of productive agricultural land and a similar approach with subdivision.

Policy area 2, which is the pink section on your plans, if you have been in those locations, is heavily vegetated, forested and hilly, and it is typically that middle band in our shire north and south of Daylesford. It is what we have termed the mixed rural activity policy area, and that recognises that in that pink area the land types are diverse. Their uses, which have occurred over time, are diverse and fragmented. Our draft rural strategy also recognises that agricultural capability is variable in policy area 2. Activities range from hobby farms and rural tourism right up to commercial activities. In that area our draft strategy is recommending we explore the rural activity zone, which will support that diversity of land types, land uses, and the evolution over time. It will implement that you require a planning permit through council for a dwelling at all times to ensure that we properly manage that, and there will be provisions that support mixed farming and tourism in certain parts of that policy area. So that is really an area that recognises that this has a distinctly different sort of context to the broader Hepburn shire area. That is it in a nutshell. It is underway at the moment.

Lastly, committee, I would like to support, I guess, the Moorabool submission on renewables. Whilst Hepburn shire supports the transition to renewable energy, we have raised significant concerns on the impact of the transmission line, the Western Renewables Link, on our farmers through policy area 1, our agricultural engine room, and we are concerned about the risk to the agricultural capability through there. In the map you saw on-screen the proposed line will bisect Creswick and Clunes; it goes down that line. We call on the committee to really provide guidance in the upcoming environment effects statement process and input your learnings into that process through this inquiry. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Ron, can I just clarify? We talked about how, of the 190 kilometres of the Western Renewables Link, 60 kilometres would be going through the Moorabool Shire Council. Do you have the kilometres for Hepburn?

**Ron TORRES:** I do not have it on me, but I can provide that.

**The CHAIR:** That is all right – a question without notice. Who would like to lead off? David Hodgett. Thank you.

**David HODGETT:** Thanks, everyone. I was going to come back to Cliff and Sarah, but Ron, you have probably touched on it at the end there. In the submission from Moorabool shire you detailed the impact of the Western Renewables Link on agriculture, and you have put through the red line there. We are probably going to have to have a discussion about it in our report, so I guess now is the opportunity for you to outline to us how you think the Victorian government can minimise the impact that the infrastructure is going to have on the agricultural sector. I mean, I take your last points, Ron, but what should we be looking at, what should the government be looking at, in terms of minimising that impact, or are there areas we should be focusing on?

**Sarah KERNOHAN:** From Moorabool's perspective we are similar to Hepburn in that we are supportive of the transition to renewables. Our advocacy to date has been around undergrounding as an option for the lines. Moorabool had some work commissioned by consultants that not only shows is it feasible but also provided some indicative costs. It is more expensive as an option, but that could be – whether it is for the full route or for some of those areas where that high-quality agricultural land is – considered an option.

**Ron TORRES:** We concur with that.

**David HODGETT:** Okay. I think it is front of mind for us all, and we are practical as well. I support the transition to renewables, and it is not practical to put the whole thing underground. But if we can hear firsthand some things the government perhaps should be looking at, we are happy to put that forward and then it is obviously up to the government. So it is an opportunity to tease that out, but I understand what you are saying.

**Nicole WERNER:** What stood out to me was when you were talking about the fragmentation, because we have heard about that arable farming land through different witnesses we have heard from today and other days and this is a big swathe of land which is not as fragmented. So you have got this big open space, and it would be such a shame to lose it to that and lose so much arable farming land too and then not be able to use it. So I appreciate you all raising that. Thank you.

**David HODGETT:** Do you have a feel from your farmers, if it was all above ground, what they might be looking at in terms of lost productive land? Has there been any work done around that, or is it just a bit of guesswork?

**Ron TORRES:** It has not been quantified in Hepburn shire, but our local farming community have raised significant concerns on the potential impact on the productivity of their operations and their land. As member Werner mentioned, whilst it will not show on a title, this actually fragments land potentially and ruins potentially the economies of scale that large-scale farm holdings have.

**David HODGETT:** Would it make any farms unviable, to your knowledge?

**Ron TORRES:** That is unknown at this point.

**David HODGETT:** Yes, okay. Sorry, Sarah, you were going to –

**Sarah KERNOHAN:** I have some figures if that would assist. That is for the entirety of the alignment. They are not specific to Moorabool shire, and these are figures that have been provided to Moorabool by AusNet. The Western Renewables Link easement comprises 1835 hectares of agricultural land spread across 290 grazing, cropping, horticultural and plantation properties. Whilst some farming can occur within the easement area, there are a number of farming activities that cannot. We know aerial spraying and irrigation are two examples of farming that cannot occur, so that would be across that 1835 hectares.

**Martin CAMERON:** We have got transmission lines coming through my area too, down in the Latrobe Valley – we are talking into Loy Yang, coming from offshore wind. Talking with the farmers and land users and landowners down there, the talk is that it could be up to a 3-kilometre buffer zone that will track the actual renewable transmission lines as they come through. I think they are in the same situation, where they are uncertain of what they can actually farm in there. But it virtually segregates their farms – they have got parcels of land. So it is a concern moving forward. I think, speaking with them too – and I am not sure in your council areas – that if it is above ground it makes it easier if there are add-ons to the transmission lines, as in solar farms and batteries, to the extent that they can actually be inside that buffer zone and hook into the transmission lines. Are there similar things that you are hearing as well?

**Sarah KERNOHAN:** I think if there is maintenance, things like that, it is probably simpler as well above ground, but look, there are probably pros and cons to both. Certainly part of our advocacy has been also around – Hepburn touched on it – some of those significant climatic events that we have had. We have had a number of storms, and Moorabool and Hepburn were both impacted by storms, where we had significant power outages, trees down, properties lost. That is part of the advocacy as well: what is that risk of having those towers? We did recently see in the Colac area some towers come down as well. And then again there is the fire risk, which we have talked about throughout those forested areas of both of our municipalities.

**Martha HAYLETT:** Both Moorabool and Hepburn have been very vocal, which has been very helpful to many locals as well on this issue. I am a bit more aware of what you are up to in this neck of the woods, but just for the committee's benefit, are you able to share what your engagement to date has been with AusNet Services and currently where you are in terms of your council engagement with the EES process with AusNet, just so we can have that on the record as well?

**Sarah KERNOHAN:** I do not have a lot of information. It does not sit within our service area. We have certainly been very engaged along with, yes, Hepburn and Ballarat. Melton has also been involved, and there have been a number of working groups. We have had the opportunity, along with the other councils, to review all of the background reports that have been provided to date and provide that feedback to AusNet and their consultants. The significant work that Moorabool specifically have done is commission a lot of own reports, and that has come at a really big cost. We have spent over \$200,000 in consultant reports, particularly in that agricultural space. But also I touched on that alternate option for the undergrounding. We were originally told



that it was not an option, so we sought to actually get a report done to show that it is an option. It is an expensive option, but it is an option available. That is because it is obviously something that has been very upsetting to our community and we have been wanting to advocate for them.

**Ron TORRES:** That is right, and when the environment effects statement is issued it will have a significant impact on our resourcing of small shires to properly respond to that. Typically we would not have the expertise to properly analyse that and would have to seek outside assistance, so that poses a significant challenge down the track for us all.

**The CHAIR:** Daniela.

**Daniela DE MARTINO:** Moving on to another area that we have been discussing, something that has come up from several different witnesses we have heard from and submissions made has been about the changing of land use as new people come in and buy up agricultural land. How aware are both your councils of the cumulative conversion of farmland to other purposes within your area? Is it being tracked, and if so, how are you tracking it? And how is that informing your planning decisions?

**Ron TORRES:** From Hepburn shire's point of view, in the absence of up-to-date strategic plans and up-to-date provisions, unfortunately many of our decisions around those changes of use and that sort of thing are probably done in isolation, so to speak. The work that we are doing now will really assist those future decisions to properly track but also ensure that there is a clear approach to what we are trying to achieve with farmland, and it will benefit everyone involved in the planning process.

**Daniela DE MARTINO:** That certainty?

**Ron TORRES:** That certainty.

**Daniela DE MARTINO:** From Moorabool?

**Cliff BOSTOCK:** Certainly. Probably the biggest transition, from farmland to rural lifestyle, is what we see the most. Moorabool have our fair share of rezoning pressure, where people come to us and say, 'We'd like to rezone a parcel of land for housing.' We do pretty well on pushing back on those, and we do not have too much issue. We have the *Ballan: Strategic Directions* and we have our *Bacchus Marsh Urban Growth Framework*, so it is reasonably easy for us to say, 'We have our framework for growth. This is where the growth should be directed, and it should be contained there. We are not looking to rezone other land for residential purposes at this time.' So that works well. What we probably see the biggest transfer of is ad hoc rural lifestyle dwellings into the farm zone. Moorabool Shire Council does approve dwellings on farmland. We have approved approximately 147 dwellings since 2016. Most of those decisions are made at council, so at a council meeting. They end up there because it is generally, almost in all cases, against the officer's recommendation; the officer is recommending that the house not be built on farmland. It goes to council, and council obviously have the ability to ask for an ultimate recommendation, which they do. It is not common in Moorabool for councillors to overturn officer decisions in general, it is quite rare, but in these cases is where we do see it. I might leave it at that.

**The CHAIR:** Cliff, can I jump in here. We were having a good chat today about the role backpackers play in supporting farmers both in Moorabool and, we know, more broadly across Victoria and across the nation. Obviously worker accommodation is a really significant issue that we are looking at as a state government. In terms of the strategic planning portfolio at Moorabool, are any works going on in terms of how we could provide some worker accommodation to ensure that our food supply is not jeopardised by skill shortages?

**Cliff BOSTOCK:** Specifically, no. We have seen some applications come through for worker accommodation, and it is interesting that there can be quite a hard line walked, even with the tribunal. Obviously very close to Bacchus Marsh is the Bacchus Marsh irrigation district, which is a state significant irrigation district. We try to keep accommodation-type uses and residential uses out of there as much as possible. However, there have been some applications that have come through where they have looked to put rural worker accommodation in there. I have seen the tribunal take a fairly hard line and say no, and particularly with the proximity to Bacchus Marsh. They say, 'No. It is a close enough distance that you should be living in the residential area and transferring to the site.' In the matter I am thinking of recently, the applicant withdrew their application. It did not go all the way through, so there was no final resolution to that one.

It is difficult, because absolutely you do want the ability to service the land, but the risk, and obviously the risk that farmers worry about is – and the green wedge and agricultural land project the state government is doing does make some changes regarding the right to farm, which are very welcome. But before then – the EPA noise regulations in Victoria very, very strongly protect sensitive uses, and accommodation comes under sensitive use. That means if someone makes a complaint, generally then the burden falls on the person who is making the noise. And with farming we know – we talk to farmers all the time and they tell us – farming is a 24/7 activity. They cannot farm 9 to 5. They go when they need to. They go when the weather is right. So they are out there at night making dust and noise, with lights and whatnot, and if they get a complaint, they are in trouble, and then it falls on them to prove that they are not, and they probably cannot meet the requirements. So what would tend to happen, then, is that parcel that is within the proximity to the sensitive use is no longer farmable. That is the risk, and then that is what erodes your farmland. There are some changes there, which are good, regarding the right to farm. How long that takes to come in and whether that then begins to impact our decision-making, we can say, ‘Okay. Well, we put rural worker accommodation there but now the rights with regard to the rights to farm have changed,’ it may in the future impact. But we have not seen exactly how that will be implemented or how the new legislation will be worded.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. Ron, obviously Daylesford, particularly in Hepburn, is an area that people want to live in, which often makes it hard for workers in beautiful spots like Daylesford to find worker accommodation. Is there anything you wanted to add about worker accommodation in your region or your council area?

**Ron TORRES:** Affordability, accessibility and appropriate housing is a significant issue in Daylesford, and that includes worker accommodation. It is high on our agenda through our affordable housing strategy. Worker accommodation is vital, but in a rural context it is important that where it is located is carefully thought through, ideally in townships, but that is not always practical. If it is in a rural area, as Cliff has mentioned, it needs to be carefully thought through so that it does not detrimentally affect the future productivity of that farmland. Through both our draft strategies we hope to provide clearer guidance on how we accommodate that.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for that. I am very conscious of the time, but if there is anything else the committee wanted to raise. Were there any final comments you wanted to make? Sorry, JC, please.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** I had my little hand up.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, big hand up.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** The work that you have been doing, which will go to council in August, all that big body of work with your community and council –

**The CHAIR:** The Future Hepburn.

**Jordan CRUGNALE:** Future Hepburn – that is right, thank you. I did not have the word written down here. Because we are obviously doing the plan for Victoria, and with a lot of those four pillars and conversations and literally what you have been working on already, how are you aligning or putting that information into our plan for Victoria, and I suppose also with the rural land use strategy, how are you fitting that into the plan for Victoria work that is happening at the moment?

**Ron TORRES:** That is a very good question. Our work is quite well progressed. It has been a four-year journey. Plan for Victoria is relatively new, and I think on the minds of every council is what impact will plan for Victoria have on our strategic programs? So it is a very valid question, and I am not sure we have the answer. Each council is working closely with state government senior officers to ensure that they do not produce something that may not receive the support of the planning minister, but I think in plan for Victoria’s infancy not a lot of information is coming out. The state government has touted housing targets, let us say; that could have a real impact on each council’s strategic aspirations and programs in how they are implemented and that sort of thing. I am not sure we have the answer, but it is a very real thing on our minds as councils.

**Sarah KERNOHAN:** I think similar to Hepburn, we are reasonably well progressed with that work. It is certainly consistent with the current state direction. We are in a little bit of a policy vacuum in that we do not know what is going to come out of *Plan Melbourne*. We speak with the regional office in Ballarat, which is our contact, regularly. But as we have discussed with a lot of these issues today, we cannot wait. We started this work about three years ago, and we have got significant pressures in our shire. Similar to the work that we have

done with the Bacchus Marsh irrigation district planning study, we just need to move on it. Some of the work – not plan for Victoria, but certainly the green wedge and agricultural land – has been three or four years in progress, so we just need to keep progressing at our end.

**Ron TORRES:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** Terrific. I know I certainly have a few more questions to ask about artisan agriculture that you are doing. Is it all right if we forward any other questions that we might have through to you to answer? Thank you so much for all the work that you have done coming to present to us. We know that you work really, really hard at shire councils, so we have added an additional burden of work to you. We are very grateful and appreciative of you appearing before our inquiry today. Thank you very much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**