

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Closure of the Hazelwood and Yallourn Power Stations

Traralgon—Wednesday, 24 November 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Mr Mark Gepp

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Mr Andy Meddick

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

Mr David Davis

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

Ms Wendy Lovell

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESSES

Ms Nina Burke, President,

Mr David Langmore, Vice-President, Great Latrobe Park Group.

The CHAIR: The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Closure of the Hazelwood and Yallourn Power Stations continues.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

My name is Enver Erdogan. I am the Chair of the committee, and I would like to introduce my fellow committee members that are present here today. I will go from left to right: Mr Rod Barton, Ms Melina Bath, Ms Harriet Shing, Mr Lee Tarlamis and Mr Andy Meddick.

I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching.

To witnesses appearing, all evidence given is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to standing orders of the Legislative Council. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded and you will be provided for transcript following today's hearing, but ultimately transcripts will be made public and put on the committee website.

We welcome your opening comments, but I ask that they be kept to a maximum of five to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions with the committee. Could you please begin by stating your names for the benefit of Hansard and then start your presentation. Over to you, Nina and David.

Visual presentation.

Ms BURKE: Good morning, members of the committee. It is lovely to see you here. Thank you for coming, and thanks for the opportunity to make a presentation to this important inquiry. My name is Nina Burke, and I am the President of the Great Latrobe Park Inc Group. The group is a voluntary community group whose aim in summary is to advocate so that the open cuts of the Latrobe Valley are repurposed so that they become valuable environmental, economic and social assets in perpetuity for the benefit of the state and region through being useful for a range of recreational tourism, sporting, educational and conservation purposes.

There is widespread support for the objectives of the Great Latrobe Park Group within the Latrobe Valley, including from the Latrobe City Council and a number of service clubs and community groups. A detailed response to the committee's terms of reference has been submitted by our group. We will now briefly summarise some of the most important matters reviewed in greater detail in our full report. At this point I would like to introduce Mr David Langmore, former regional planner for Gippsland for over 30 years and author of *Planning Power: The Uses and Abuses of Power in the Planning of the Latrobe Valley*. Thank you.

Mr LANGMORE: Thank you, Nina. As Nina said, my name is David Langmore, and I am Vice-President of the Great Latrobe Park Group. We have prepared quite a detailed submission, and I hope you have all had the opportunity to have a look at that, and we will just summarise some of the key points in it. Some of the issues that always need to be impressed upon us all are how significant the power industry has been in Victoria. The power industry has been in existence now for almost exactly 100 years, so quite an amazing thing. Started in a small way with Monash there, built up, built up, built up, now three huge, gargantuan open cuts. We have had estimations of the amount of coal. There has been one with 3000 million tonnes of coal, contributing something like \$200 billion to the Victorian economy in that 100-year period. I mean, it is enormous—three gargantuan open cuts. And I would like to bring up a picture on the screen here of the Hazelwood open cut, if I could bring that up.

Ms SHING: Not on fire this time.

Ms BURKE: Not on fire.

Mr LANGMORE: There is a photograph of Hazelwood open cut as of a few years ago. These particular visuals were prepared for the inquiry into the Hazelwood open cut. You will notice around the open cut a yellow line.

If we could have the next one. There is that yellow line overlaid at the same scale across an aerial photograph of central Melbourne. I think you will pick up a few of the features of that map of Melbourne, extending from Punt Road in the east, across East Melbourne, across the CBD of Melbourne and extending down to and including Docklands, and just a little area covering the south bank of the city as well, and extending north as far as the exhibition building. I never get over that photograph. That is the scale of the Hazelwood open cut, which is not the largest open cut in the Latrobe Valley, but it is when you compare it with other features that we are all aware of and very familiar with that one realises the scale that we are talking about.

The closure of Hazelwood power station obviously was a major event and had a significant impact in the Latrobe Valley. The proposed closure of Yallourn is going to compound the issues that have occurred with Hazelwood. Fortunately, there is a period to prepare for that. But our view is that in order to avoid a negative cycle of economic impact on the Latrobe Valley, government initiatives are going to be absolutely essential. We acknowledge important government initiatives that have been taken after the closure of Hazelwood. Some very important infrastructure developments have occurred, which are greatly appreciated and will be of great benefit for the Latrobe Valley. I guess our concern is, though, that although these are terrific developments, we do not feel that a lot has been achieved in terms of establishing and generating new economic opportunities, developments and enterprises in the area, so it is a bit of a mixed picture. We think with the closure of Yallourn a much more intensive exercise is going to need to be given to identifying and attracting new economic activities.

One of the things that is obviously going to be needed is to repurpose the three gargantuan open cuts. Total area: 50 square kilometres, roughly equivalent to the area of Sydney Harbour. Again, that is a visual image that is hard to grasp but is important to appreciate. Our view is that very careful planning is going to be required to undertake the repurposing processes. It has got to be thorough, it has got to be technically competent, it needs to be open to public scrutiny, and ultimately it needs to be evaluated by independent experts. We think it requires an environment effects statement or effects statements.

The state government has specified goals for the repurposing of the open cuts. They have specified quite clearly that they should be made to be safe, stable and sustainable. Our group strongly supports and agrees with those three goals, but we think they in themselves are not adequate. There need to be two additional important ones: that the open cuts should be made to be visually attractive and that they should form an economic value for the Latrobe Valley and Victoria. It would be possible, if you think about it, to produce something that is safe, stable and sustainable but could be an absolute mess of no use to anyone. It is not good enough for that possibility to even be allowed. So we strongly advocate for the addition of those two goals.

Each of the companies that has been operating the three major mines has been asked previously to prepare plans for their rehabilitation. They were asked to do that individually, and they have attempted to do that work to the best of their ability, and to achieve what they would perceive to be the best outcome for their particular mine. Our concern is, though, that this process really cannot be done just by individual mines. It has got to be done in a way which is going to work as a strategy for the whole Latrobe Valley. The concern for that to be done has really now been highlighted by the whole issue of water availability.

Each of the individual mines has proposed that the way to rehabilitate their open cut is to flood the mine. It is very understandable that that is what they would see as being perhaps the easiest and best way to rehabilitate the open cut. Figures that are now available clearly indicate that there is not sufficient water that can be made available to do that—for each of the three mines to be fully flooded. There is water available of course, but it is going to have to be allocated and rationed according to priorities. We think a very major government decision is going to have to be made about how much water can be made available, under what conditions and what priority should be given to where it is allocated. This major issue has really not been addressed at the moment. It is becoming increasingly critical that it must be, and it is something that we would believe this committee should make representations to the government about.

With careful planning it is our view that it is possible to achieve a very attractive outcome with the rehabilitation of the open cuts, that they cannot be gigantic wastelands but they can become very attractive, economically valuable—perhaps even internationally significant—multipurpose environments for an exciting diverse range of, as Nina pointed out, sporting, cultural, education, conservation and recreational activities, in fact to become a wonderful Great Latrobe Park.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, David and Nina, for that informative presentation. I enjoyed the visuals and comparisons. They do put it into perspective. I might go straight to the committee members because I know they are eager to ask questions. Ms Shing, would you like to go first?

Ms SHING: Yes, thank you. Thanks so much for your attendance today and for your ongoing advocacy around not just what this project looks like, as you have proposed it and as we have discussed many times before over a number of years, which I am sure Mel will also back up from her perspective, but what this looks like as far as rehabilitation is concerned. So you have mentioned safe, stable and sustainable—quite a mouthful if you try it as a tongue twister—but the earth resources regulator and mine rehabilitation commissioner really do have a lot to say about the way in which the site is rehabilitated and the way in which private operators and site controllers have that responsibility. We have then got an inherent tension between the way in which those operators and site controllers see that they can discharge and acquit their obligations on safe, sustainable and stable on the one hand, with the best solution that is available and possible, given that we are in a bit of a long-term water shortage and filling this with three times the Sydney Harbour is a big thing to contemplate with irrigators and primary producers around the area having a lot to say about that, alongside environmental water users and traditional owners. How do we reconcile those things with what it is that you want to achieve around a usable space that sits at the heart of the valley and starts to redefine what it means to connect with a park-like environment and all of the benefits that that brings? And the second part of this question: what does that look like in terms of cost, and what work have you done to engage with various stakeholders around what that costs and how you might then advocate for and lobby for the envelope that is needed to deliver something like this?

Ms BURKE: We have actually approached a number of organisations, like the Latrobe Valley Authority, the Latrobe Health Assembly, for funding to initially have some help but also a business case. But at each opportunity they have said, ‘Look, this is a government problem, not ours’. And we are saying, ‘Well, you are government’.

Ms SHING: Who said that to you, Nina?

Ms BURKE: The Latrobe Health Assembly, and the Latrobe Valley Authority said it just was not the sort of project they dealt with.

Ms SHING: Did they provide reasons for that?

Mr LANGMORE: Well, I guess the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority has been established to spearhead that work, and that is great.

Ms SHING: Is that because they were saying it was a mine rehabilitation commissioner role or—

Ms BURKE: No.

Ms SHING: Because this is about rehabilitation.

Ms BURKE: This is about rehabilitation.

Mr LANGMORE: I mean, we would love to have done more backgrounding work on rehabilitation options and so on and so on and be able to be in a position to advise you about relative costs for different options. We are not in a position to do that unfortunately.

Ms SHING: Do you have even a ballpark on costs?

Mr LANGMORE: No, we don’t. We don’t.

Ms SHING: Or time frames?

Mr LANGMORE: No, we don't. I mean, because of our limited resources we have basically got to take a role of being advocates for the goals and end points that we want to achieve, and to some extent we are very dependent on government resources and technical capabilities to evaluate what the options are.

Ms SHING: So you are at the blue-sky inventive stage of the plan now?

Mr LANGMORE: Yes. But we have—

Ms BURKE: Not exactly.

Ms SHING: Okay. Sorry. David, I might just come back to Nina on that point if I can. So without having the costs or the time frames, where are you at? Having crystallised what it is that you would like to achieve, how far have you gotten beyond that?

Ms BURKE: Well, with engagement with, first of all, the mine commissioner and his group of people, we found that their sole focus was one option only. And we found that quite difficult to deal with, because we felt that there were numerous options available to government and the mine operators. But it happened to be at the time when we felt government, advised by the mine operators, was limiting its vision to what they wanted.

Ms SHING: To rehabilitate?

Ms BURKE: Yes, and it is not enough. It is not good enough.

Mr LANGMORE: If I could reinforce what Nina is saying—

Ms SHING: Yes.

Mr LANGMORE: I mean, we were very concerned with Hazelwood that Engie quite understandably proposed that the rehabilitation for Hazelwood open cut would be full flooding of the mine. Now, if I were Engie, that is probably what I would be advocating too. However, it may or may not be possible to make sufficient water available for that to occur. The same applies to Yallourn and the same applies to Loy Yang.

So we have been trying to do get a developed methodological change, if you like, in the way the approach has been taken to mine rehabilitation—for example, with Hazelwood, not just to say it has got to be full flooding of the mine. That is an option. It is clearly an option. Of course it has got to be on the table as an option, and in many regards it would be desirable option. We understand that. But it may or may not be possible to make that sort of water available, in which case there has to be a plan B and a plan C and a plan D, you know, for possible different levels of water availability.

Let us just take Hazelwood. If, for example, just say, it was only possible to half-flood that mine, then that might have other implications as to what you did with the repurposing of the embankments around the mine. If you know you are going to fully flood it, you put your embankments in a certain way. If you can only half-flood it, you will probably need to change the battering around the mine to make it work, to be attractive and still useful. So we were concerned that there was a—

Ms BURKE: A lack of vision—

Mr LANGMORE: Yes, and a hell-bent view which was being given tacit government support that, yes, you could flood fully flood that mine and therefore you did not need to worry about the possibility of what sorts of embankment arrangements you might have around that mine. Under plan B or plan C, it might be different.

Ms SHING: Sorry, just very quickly, I might just disabuse you of any concern around any position around government support for a full fill. That decision has yet to be made and will be guided by what the mine rehabilitation commissioner puts in terms of discussions with the operator and meeting those legislative obligations and regulatory obligations to rehabilitate so we do not see another hole in the Princes Freeway outside of Morwell.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that.

Ms SHING: Thanks.

Ms BURKE: Which is quite possible.

The CHAIR: Yes. I might go to Mr Meddick, who has been patiently waiting, and then Ms Bath. Ready?

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you both. I will ask my question first, and then I want to give some context to it, and that might also then colour your answer a little bit. So the question I have is: what lessons can the Latrobe Valley learn from other mine rehabilitation projects around the world? Now let me give some context to you for that. I live in an area of the world where we have had an open-cut coalmine close down—Anglesea, Alcoa—and the rehabilitation project surrounding that is also helped out by the Eden Project, who you might have heard of, from Cornwall. This is what they do. They go and rehabilitate mines into tourist destinations, and they do that in a very environmentally sensitive way in that they take into account what the original landscape was—because let us face it, once you have had an open-cut mine there is no restoration to original landscape. That is just not possible.

Mr LANGMORE: Correct.

Mr MEDDICK: I am looking in terms of the different operators. That is a point you made before about how their thing is like, ‘Let’s just flood it. Let’s just flood the whole thing’. Well, that is just not possible, to my understanding, with any open-cut mines, because you have seams; you have fissures. To flood a mine—you then will have toxicity moving through in that water seepage, potentially into groundwater tables. It is just not an option to do that completely. What Alcoa have done is take a completely different approach. In the meetings that I have had with them they would take this into account and do this regardless of whether Eden Project was looking at being a tenant there or not, in that they have rehabilitated—again, economies of scale; I appreciate that, it is a much, much smaller hole in the ground—and did as much sealing as they could of the hole, of the pit, before then grading everything around the outside, on the batters, to a point where it resembles the natural landscape. At that point First Nations people came in. The entire revegetation project has been governed by them. There is not one non-native species there, and they have encouraged native species to come back in. They have done all that sort of thing.

But they looked at it from the point of view of ‘Well, what’s our first option? Easiest option: let’s just flood it’. Non-availability of water—it just does not happen. So it is a combination of the two of those things. Yes, there is going to be water in the pit, but there was an enormous amount of preparation, guided by an EES to begin with that said, ‘In order to do that, you need to do this first’. So there is a differentiation between the two, and I am wondering: how do you see that? Would you like to see a complete shift, I suppose, in how that operator is looking at things here or have that forced upon them? Is that what it is going to come to in your opinion? And my view is of course: as an operator they have gotten a lot of money out of this; they have a responsibility to spend whatever money they need to spend to rehabilitate the sites. Is that sort of something that you feel? Are there others that you can think of, apart from the Eden Project, that have done this around the world that might be able to be brought in as consultants to say, ‘Hey, this is the best way to do things’?

Ms BURKE: Exactly. We have had quite a deal of communication with the German system of mine rehabilitation, but we have also had discussions with Alcoa, and they have offered to come and talk to our mine operators to advise them or talk to them about what would be the benefit of doing this sort of collaborative approach. And, Mr Meddick, when you get a chance, that document is on our website. We talk about the Eden Project because it was an abandoned, neglected industrial site, and look what they have done with it. Whilst we have spoken to the Eden Project people a number of times, they have said, ‘One project per continent’. So you have got it, you lucky fella.

Mr MEDDICK: Well, it is not over the line yet, but we are pushing.

Ms BURKE: So we have actually visited your patch and had a look and talked to the Alcoa people, and it was valuable. But we find with our mine commissioner, our mine operators, whilst they appear to be saying, ‘Yes, we love you’ and ‘Yes, we’ll talk to you’, nothing happens. We feel we would like to see the German approach. One of the documents I have actually got here that I have not given you is called the ‘Lusatia Charter’. Have you ever heard of it?

The CHAIR: I have not heard of it, no.

Ms BURKE: I can submit this. It has 10 propositions for the handling of post-mining landscapes, and they are so good. They talk about ‘Setting an example’; ‘Using resources’; ‘Fostering identity’; ‘Broadening the planning horizon’; which is what we are talking about; ‘Shaping the process’; ‘Allowing for creativity and innovation’; ‘Generating pictures’; ‘Ensuring transparency’—yes; ‘Building the organisational structure’ to do this; and ‘Taking responsibility’. They are talking about how the ‘polluter pays’ applies to rehabilitation.

Mr MEDDICK: Can I ask: if it is possible can you please send that to the secretariat? They will ensure that that gets shared amongst us.

Ms BURKE: Indeed.

Mr MEDDICK: That would be wonderful if you could, because I think that would be a really informative document for us all to look at.

Mr LANGMORE: If I could follow up from Nina’s comments, there obviously are rehabilitation projects that have occurred all around the world. None of them I think are exactly comparable to our situation here. I mean, you are all aware of the situation with our limited overburden relative to coal depth and so on, which makes it a very different situation. But I guess, as Nina has pointed out, there are elements about the approach in Germany which are very impressive in terms of their thoroughgoingness; the collaboration between various elements in the community—the companies, the communities, the government and so on—

Ms BURKE: And the private sector.

Mr LANGMORE: which is extremely impressive; and their commitment to high-quality end products, which I have seen, and they are fabulous. We are not going to be able to replicate those because of the difference in circumstances, but the attitude and approach I think we have got a lot to learn from. And things like the Eden Project and the Butchart Gardens in Canada—fabulous things which demonstrate wonderful environmental outcomes of great economic benefit but that also can be achieved in certain circumstances, and we reckon with careful planning it is possible here too.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you so much.

Ms BURKE: And not to be afraid of using the structure of the mines. They are quite unique, and they can support things like a railway line, cycling tracks, walking tracks. It is a hell of a bike ride, 42 kms.

Ms SHING: Mostly uphill, depending on where you start.

The CHAIR: I think it is important, yes. I think it is a great point. Talking about the costs, I just searched and I realised that the Eden Project, for example, in Australian dollars cost over \$260 million at the time. That was for that project. Our mines are potentially much larger, and we have many more in the region. That is the kind of money that that costs, so you can put it into perspective with the kinds of costs involved today in today’s dollars. On that note I might pass over to Ms Bath, because I know she has been patiently waiting.

Ms BATH: Thank you, Chair. David and Nina, you have been having a very fruitful discussion, and it is quite good. The people on my left, the Labor Party MPs and Mr Meddick, actually voted against this inquiry in the upper house. They did not want to see it come to fruition, so I am really pleased today. And we will continue; all of our presenters will actually provide some very valuable information.

Ms SHING: We turned up, Mel. That is what matters. We’re here and we’re listening. We don’t have any other coalition members here. You’ve got to turn up.

Ms BATH: It is quite a stark contrast. To that point, I know my Eastern Victoria colleague Ed O’Donohue would naturally have been here, but he has thrown in the towel and is going on to other pastures and we are yet to put in our other Eastern Victoria member. With that, I am the sole representative of the Liberals and Nationals, and we have Mr Barton here, who is a committee member as well.

Ms SHING: But you are not here as a party member, mate, you are here as a committee member.

Ms BATH: I am here as a representative. To that point, when I think about the Hazelwood mine and all of the mines, they are really an engineering problem that must be overcome. In effect, if they are safe, sustainable

and stable and your particular points need to be covered off, need to be enacted, in order for there to be something happen to them for rehabilitation, whether it be a Great Latrobe Park or filled with water partially with batters or completely, it is an engineering issue that has to be dealt with. One of the things that I guess I have learnt through going to Hazelwood mine and having a tour et cetera is that constantly water is having to be pushed down because we are a high-water area and there are aquifers that continually have to be pumped out or kept under pressure. We have had the Morwell River recently flood into the Yallourn power station, and they did a fantastic job of curbing that and creating a divergence, but some of that actually ended up going into Hazelwood mine. What has your group done—understanding your limited volunteer status—in relation to your thoughts around solving that engineering problem, noting some other great projects like the Eden Project et cetera but noting that this is quite a deep mine with significant issues to overcome?

Ms BURKE: Well, on the Great Latrobe Park Group we have the former manager of Hazelwood mine and we also have—

Ms BATH: Who is that, Nina?

Ms BURKE: That is Richard Polmear. He resigned or moved on about 10 years ago.

Mr LANGMORE: Correct, I think.

Ms BURKE: Nevertheless, he is on top of the issues with regard to Hazelwood mine. Secondly, we have Robert Gaulton, who is a geologist who has worked in all three mines. What we are very conscious of is that we cannot solve this one mine at a time. These have to be looked at in concert. And that is why this EES process is really important. Also, it would re-establish, hopefully, some trust in government, because right now for 100 years we have dug coal without any kind of community contribution to how these mines should certainly be made, at the end of their life, to make an economic contribution to the next future we have. We read all sorts of technical reports, and we are quite capable of doing it. We review everything and we talk to everybody.

Mr LANGMORE: We would like to read some more of the technical reports. I have got to say that with the initial work done on the Latrobe rehabilitation strategy, which is some very good work, unfortunately we could not get the detailed reports. We have been limited to seeing summaries of those.

Ms BATH: Assuming that they are not a public document.

Mr LANGMORE: We feel that is unfortunate. We actually do have people, as Nina has pointed out, who have got the technical capacity to make sense of those sorts of documents, and there are other people in the community who will also. I think this is indicative of the need for greater public openness and transparency about some of the processes. It is not to say that good work has not been done in that exercise; it has. But I guess we are also concerned that the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority, which we think is a good initiative—in fact I suggested it to the Hazelwood inquiry—has been pretty slow to get going. I mean, they should have geomechanical people on their staff. They should have landscape architects on their staff. They should have hydrologists on their staff, I suspect. They have got established just—

Ms BURKE: 18 months.

Mr LANGMORE: but it has been a pretty wonky start really, and unfortunately they have lost their CEO. I think it is very important that they staff up and increase their technical capacity and skills.

Ms BATH: I would hope that we could actually hear from the mine rehab commission in general here at this inquiry, because I think it is a valid and important step in the future of the Latrobe Valley. We can have that discussion I guess offline as a committee as to additional witnesses. It is really interesting the discussion around the environment effects statement and the importance of it. I think it just came out today or yesterday about the Kalbar mine in East Gippsland. There was an environment effects statement on it, and it has halted that process. You may have heard with Voices of the Valley their desire for an EES on ULAB in the Hazelwood North area. I am interested in what you would like to see out of the environment effects statement. Have you made a submission with regard to that? Those situations, for example, have had a stop or a go on them. Kalbar put a halt on it. ULAB got a call-in from the planning minister. But this has to be solved, so what sorts of things would you like to see come through an EES—looking at environmental, social, economic—

Ms BURKE: Economic.

Ms BATH: Yes. What would you like to see through that process?

Mr LANGMORE: I think the great advantage of environment effects statements is that there is a capacity. It opens up scope for technical evaluation of all those sorts of issues, and it does it in an open, public way. We did advocate the need for environment effects statements in an open letter that we wrote to Mr Merlino, who was Acting Premier at the time, saying that we felt certain things were moving but other things were going too slowly. Unfortunately the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority Act does not really enable a clear public comprehensive evaluation process in the same way that an environment effects statement does.

I have had involvement with various environment effects statements over the years, and it is a very rigorous process. It is very helpful to get people that are both independent of government and independent of the companies involved and so on to put their technical evaluation into whatever proposals are there. It is not satisfactory if there is too much of a close relationship between the companies and the government and so on. You need some sort of distancing, I think, between some of the technical expertise and the evaluation process.

Ms BATH: Thank you. Sorry, Nina, you were going to make one more comment.

Ms BURKE: Yes, I am going to make a comment. Great Latrobe Park would like to see far more productive engagement with each of the mine operators. We do have a concept that we believe would help our tourism industry, seeing we are talking about transforming our coalmining past into a tourism—well, tourism is one of the building blocks for the future. And it is to establish viewing platforms in each of the mines, because these mines are amazing places. We are on a direct route from Melbourne. We are 2 hours from Melbourne or less, unlike the Eden Project, where you have to get a train for 8 hours and then a bus for 40 minutes. So we would like to see a gesture of goodwill from the mine operators to establish a viewing platform in each of the mines. But these viewing platforms need to be able to accommodate, say, two large buses. We are talking car parking, we are talking toilets, we are talking some sort of seating area and kitchen facility but we are talking about a viewing deck. And it might be like a cantilevered something that hangs over the mine so you can appreciate it.

This second item that we have left you with is that as part of these viewing platforms we would like to see an immersive digital experience so people understand what the mines are and what they have done. For instance, you could recreate the Hazelwood chimneys. You could go into the water and subterranean areas through this sort of digital experience. But you also light people's fire about what can be—what these mines can do. So that was actually a request. It is a tender document, but it talks to the kind of thing we would like to see.

Mr LANGMORE: I might just add to that. This obviously has to be done in conjunction with the companies. We have had discussions with Ian. I know Engie are quite interested in the possibility. Loy Yang have a very good lookout position, but it really needs a lot of improvement in terms of the services and facilities there, and they are quite interested in those possibilities. We see this as quite a valuable short-term initiative that really could be taken which could be very valuable in terms of—

Ms BURKE: Stimulating the economy.

Mr LANGMORE: increasing the exposure of the public to the mines and what the opportunities and challenges are.

The CHAIR: I notice we are really running short on time, because our next witnesses are due soon. I know Mr Barton and Mr Tarlamis have not had an opportunity to contribute. Mr Barton, did you have a question?

Mr BARTON: No. I was going to actually let Ms Bath—

The CHAIR: Melina? Okay. Ms Bath, continue.

Ms BATH: Thanks, Rod. Thank you. It was interesting—one of the comments you just made before. When we are in Parliament we often hear from certain sectors—small sectors—particularly those in the upper house, for example, the dim view of the coalmining industry and its history et cetera. I am really pleased that from your perspective you have embraced the great role that coal has played in our region and for the state and its economy and positivity.

The CHAIR: For our nation.

Ms BATH: That is exactly right. So I am really pleased that you hold that view, because it has been vital, and I do not think it deserves the disparaging remarks that it has had from some. You talked about uses and abuses of planning. I am interested for you to develop that issue, because planning is a conundrum. Planning can be positive, and we can have housing developments et cetera. There are issues around coal overlays at the moment that are still there from a council perspective, and we are going to put some questions in to the Latrobe City Council for the consideration of the committee. But it really is fraught, I think, in many ways.

Mr LANGMORE: If I could say, the phrase ‘uses and abuses’ in plain was a subtitle to the book I wrote about the planning power—

Ms BATH: I am giving you an avenue.

The CHAIR: Maybe submit a copy of your book, David. We have had that in the past for this committee; remember, we have had this at this committee before.

Ms BATH: Would you like to provide that?

The CHAIR: We have had people submit their books, their published works.

Mr LANGMORE: I would be very happy to do that. But just to take a case in point, it is all historic, but there were some terrible abuses in planning in the last hundred years.

Ms BATH: Can you bring it back a bit?

Mr LANGMORE: To position an open cut 400 metres from a town which then had a population of about 11 000 people was an absolutely outrageous thing to allow to happen.

The CHAIR: Well, I live near Fishermans Bend; I live on Lorimer Street in Port Melbourne. Do not tell me about planning!

Mr LANGMORE: So some of these are historic factors which we have to live with now and try and ameliorate as best we can.

Ms BATH: But moving forward, David, what do you see?

Mr LANGMORE: Moving forward, always I believe in careful, rigorous public processes: proper exhibition and advertising of the proposal, information available, independent review—these sorts of things. They seem like barriers and nuisances, and governments actually get sick of them sometimes because they can delay things—they can. But by cripes, usually in the long term they pay off in terms of the benefits, and I think we just need to be disciplined in a sense as a community to go through those sorts of processes.

The CHAIR: Mr Tarlamis has I believe one or two questions.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, David and Nina. I just wanted to ask quickly: what engagement or discussions have you had with the Latrobe City Council about your proposal, and what if any support have they expressed for it?

Ms BURKE: We went to them about four years ago with the concept of what we wanted to do, and for Latrobe City Council they did something remarkable: they unanimously voted in favour of the concept of the Great Latrobe Park. And we have good dialogue with Latrobe City Council but they feel they have been sidelined in this whole process—that government talks somewhere up there, and here they are, the closest to the people, not being engaged.

Mr TARLAMIS: Have they done any work on a feasibility study or put anything in their draft budget or anything towards the project?

Ms BURKE: Yes, in terms of walking and cycling tracks they have got a very good plan.

Mr TARLAMIS: But that includes this program?

Ms BURKE: It would be part of what we see needs to happen in terms of walking and cycling tracks and using the mine benches. I mean, the mine benches are a hundred metres wide. You can plant trees, you can do railway lines—you can do all sorts of things.

Mr TARLAMIS: I can see David sort of gesturing in a certain way. Do you want to reply to that?

Mr LANGMORE: Yes, I think the issue with Latrobe city is they have not done a lot of technical work, and it is not necessarily within their capacity to do it. But they are very interested, and I think we have helped arouse their interest in these issues. Quite frankly it is a neat and funny thing that we have got these gargantuan open cuts, but for people outside the Latrobe Valley they are out of sight, out of mind—and quite frankly for a lot of the population in the Latrobe Valley they are out of sight, out of mind. It is very easy to forget them. We just think about the towns and the highways and all that sort of stuff. So we all need to have our consciousness aroused about these important areas of land and their implications to the amenity of the whole Latrobe Valley.

And we would have a particular comment about the Latrobe Valley Authority. They have done a lot of good work I think in terms of some of the infrastructure proposals that they have helped to facilitate, but we think there needs to be a better liaison arrangement between the Latrobe Valley Authority and the Latrobe City Council. And we would wonder whether the Latrobe Valley Authority in fact should not have a board, which would include membership from Latrobe City Council on it—

Ms BURKE: And the community.

Mr LANGMORE: as well as possibly businesspeople and some community reps. It is just an idea. I think it might help the liaison mechanisms, which I think need to be improved, so that hopefully we are all working on the same page as well as possible.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that input, David and Nina. On that note I want to thank the Great Latrobe Park Group for your submission and presentation today. It has been very helpful and an interesting discussion—a lot of ideas teased out and especially around the Eden Project and some of the other processes you would like to see and the digital transformation and I guess that information about the history. I found that quite interesting as someone that likes knowing the history in a museum. You see it at Ballarat, for example—a great regional tourism destination with the mining there. So that is an interesting perspective you have brought to the inquiry. So I want to thank you both for your submission and presentation. On that note the committee will now go to a short break before our next witness. Thank you.

Mr LANGMORE: Thank you.

Ms BURKE: Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.