

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 12 May 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Sonja Terpstra—Chair

Mr Clifford Hayes—Deputy Chair

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Cesar Melhem

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Nina Taylor

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Georgie Crozier

Mr David Davis

Dr Tien Kieu

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

WITNESS

Mr Alan Thatcher, Member, Green Wedges Coalition (*via videoconference*).

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the various lands which each of us are gathered on today and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I would also like to welcome any members of the public who may be watching these proceedings via the live broadcast.

I will just take this opportunity to introduce committee members to you. I am Sonja Terpstra; I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Mr Clifford Hayes is the Deputy Chair. Joining us via Zoom are Dr Samantha Ratnam and Mr Stuart Grimley. Back in the room we have Ms Nina Taylor, and Ms Bath and Dr Bach will be back momentarily, I am sure.

With that, all evidence that is taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975*, and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. 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 with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Could I please get you, just for the Hansard record, to state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Mr THATCHER: My name is Alan Thatcher, and I am appearing on behalf of the Green Wedges Coalition.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. All right. With that, I will hand over to you to make your opening remarks. If you could just please keep them to a minimum of 5 to 10 minutes, I will give you a 2-minute warning as we approach the end of the 10-minute slot. Over to you.

Mr THATCHER: Thank you. I would just like to say that the Green Wedges Coalition is pleased to have this opportunity to present to the parliamentary Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. The coalition was formed in 2001 to represent a wide network of community groups and work with the state government at the time to honour Rupert Hamer's vision for the green wedges from the 1960s, framed in legislation. Our presentation is concerned with the issue of ecosystem decline in the Melbourne metropolitan area. I just need to highlight that—that we are focused on the Melbourne metropolitan area.

The Green Wedges Coalition has a major overall concern that inadequate attention is being given to the role of planning schemes in tackling ecosystem decline in the greater Melbourne metropolitan area. To give some dimensions to this issue, the total area of the greater Melbourne metropolitan area is approximately 800 000 hectares. Roughly 200 000 hectares is the inner and middle-ring suburbs, and the remaining 600 000 hectares is green wedges. A bit more than half of that area of green wedges is private land, so a bit over 300 000 hectares of land is privately owned land. The future use and development of this private land is governed by planning schemes, largely under the day-to-day control of the 17 what I would loosely term 'green wedge' municipal councils. Hamer was concerned about the need for careful planning of a widely dispersed metropolis. He said that:

... nobody could happily contemplate a future metropolis of seemingly endless suburbia spreading outwards indefinitely. It must be strongly emphasised that future planning should take full account of the surrounding countryside as a vital part of the metropolitan environment ...

hence our concern about the value of the natural environment and ecosystem decline.

The vision for the Melbourne green wedges was realised in 1971 planning policies for the Melbourne metropolitan area, following the British approach of London's green belt. In 2001 and 2002 we saw the implementation of plan 5 for green wedges, its encapsulation in legislation and the formation of green wedge zones. And today, as you can see from the plan that is included in the presentation, it mostly forms a green belt around most of the Melbourne metropolitan area. When you go north, along the north area there is a bit of a split, but in the main it forms that belt around the whole of Melbourne.

The rural values of green wedges are underpinned by soil-based agriculture, the natural environment and semirural landscapes, so green wedges basically are about rural land uses. Overall the Green Wedges Coalition is concerned that without strengthened policy the future land use and development of green wedges could be dominated by urbanisation, resulting in the loss of Indigenous vegetation communities. We see the critical role of indigenous vegetation communities in habitat for indigenous flora and fauna; canopy cover that reduces the heat-island impacts of Melbourne, which is a major issue; critical connections between ecosystems by means of biolinks or wildlife corridors; and protection of green natural infrastructure of our waterways. We have covered a range of issues that we see as important to future land use and development in our submission and would like to emphasise our support for the urban forestry strategy released under the aegis of the Nature Conservancy called *Living Melbourne: Our Metropolitan Urban Forest*. This strategy provides a strong framework for action to develop with the involvement of both state and local government organisations and supports the policy in *Plan Melbourne*, which is to maintain and enhance the diversity of indigenous flora and fauna habitats and achieve a net gain in the quantity and quality of native vegetation. We also recognise the need to strengthen the green wedge management plans and the capacity to use land management plans as part of the statutory planning process. Just in summary that is what our submission is about, and it is focused on future land use and development. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. All right. We will hand over for questions. Mr Hayes.

Mr HAYES: Thanks very much, Mr Thatcher. Yes, I have taken some interest in the green wedges. I do not know if you heard the previous witnesses, but we were talking about the problems with the MSA in protecting grasslands and the futility of offsets to deliver what we need in the way of species protection. I am just wondering: you read out some good words from *Plan Melbourne* before, but you talk about the inadequacy of some of the planning provisions. Can you give us a bit of a guide to where you see the planning scheme facilitating the undermining of the green wedge intentions?

Mr THATCHER: It is the lack of strength of the planning scheme that I think is more the case. For example, one of the major issues that we have seen over the years has been the increasing urbanisation of the green wedges, because the policy is fairly weak. So we are getting what we call an excessive bulk and scale of urban developments in the green wedges. Basically the aim is that the primacy of land use in the green wedges is rural, but in fact we are seeing urban uses, whether they be schools or places of worship or tourist developments or whatever. We are seeing those as becoming dominant in the planning applications so that there are quite large structures with parking and associated facilities really dominating the landscape. The issue we see with this is that if this is allowed to continue, it is what they call death by 1000 cuts; it is a cumulative process over time. And we just do not see that that is strong enough in the planning process to actually ensure that the rural land uses have primacy, not the urban uses. That is one.

Mr HAYES: These urban uses are quite a threat to the green wedge intentions, and I see things like, as you say, function centres, schools, places of worship, places of assembly and even semi-industrial uses being allowed in the green wedge. You have got development almost jumping over the green wedge, encouraged by these facilities. At what stage were they allowed to enter into the green wedge planning decisions? Were they there right from the start or were they added by successive governments along the way?

Mr THATCHER: Look, you are probably well aware of Professor Michael Buxton. He has done a very good summary of the history of this. Basically, in 2001, 2002 they introduced some very strong legislation. But since then there have been some changes, and some of those changes have done things like include schools, primary and secondary schools, as allowable uses in the green wedge zones. Also, there has been some watering down of the rural conservation zone where there used to be—for function centres and hotels and residential hotels and the like—some constraints on number of patrons et cetera. That has actually been taken out of the rural conservation zone controls, although funnily enough it is still mentioned in the broader controls for the green wedges. So there has been gradual a change in some of the uses that are allowed in the zone. But I

think, more importantly, there is just more and more pressure from developers to develop, obviously, in the green wedges, and that pressure is very hard on the councils that are having to cope with that pressure and, as I said, the uses. I suppose we would say that there are too many urban uses allowed in the green wedges, but that has just happened over time.

Mr HAYES: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Dr Bach.

Dr BACH: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you so much for being with us, Mr Thatcher. It is interesting, as you were talking about some of the issues that you see when it comes to the development—and, in your view and the view of your group, inappropriate development—of our green wedges. As a metropolitan member I see some parallels to the way that green spaces are being used and developed within my electorate. It is wonderful to be talking about Dick Hamer and one of his initiatives. In my electorate he intervened to save Lorne Parade Reserve, for example, and there is a plan now to instead put a train station on top of Lorne Parade Reserve. Interestingly enough, it is a plan that is being championed by a different Hamer—just as a point of trivia for the benefit of the committee and for you, Mr Thatcher.

I am interested in monitoring. Taking what you say, that there is much development now of our green wedges, I wonder if you might talk to us about how that development is being monitored and if that monitoring is good enough. We have heard much about data and the importance of data if we want to get really good outcomes when it comes to the environment and protecting our biodiversity.

Mr THATCHER: Well, I think when a planning application comes in and a decision is made to allow the use, I am not aware that there is any monitoring that goes on as result of that. Basically, that is it: the use is approved and the use is allowed. Unless there is a section 173 agreement or some special agreement, then there may be some monitoring, but our experience from other areas is that enforcement is not particularly strong. But that is a very general statement I am making. I will just say that it is not monitoring that is the issue for us, really; it is more the issue of the excessive bulk and scale of urbanised development.

Dr BACH: All right. Thank you so much. I appreciate that.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Thank you. I am going to sort of step a little bit to the side. Thank you very much, Mr Thatcher. What is the Green Wedges Coalition's view—we have seen today, I think, demographics that Victoria will hit 7 million people in the next decade. I am a country MP and focused on regional Victoria. One of the solutions that I see is actually moving people out to the regions, whether they be new and burgeoning populations in Melbourne—to move them out to regional areas and set up in towns that may have been showing some decline for various reasons but also have infrastructure and facilities there. So I am interested in the Green Wedges Coalition's vision for Melbourne and part of that vision being moving people out into regional and rural towns and centres.

Mr THATCHER: Regionalisation has been around as an issue for a long time, hasn't it? I mean, I suppose we are concentrated more on trying to protect that green belt and really do not have a huge opinion about the regionalisation issue. It is not part of our core. I think what we would say is that, yes, Melbourne is going to grow to—figures have been suggested—something like 7 million and that *Plan Melbourne* seems to be suggesting that that can be covered by increased consolidation within Melbourne and increased density within existing urban areas. But I really have not got a useful comment to make about regionalisation; I am sorry.

Ms BATH: That is okay. I will make those comments then down the track, and the importance of it. My further question on that point, and an increase in density—you know, when you do do a drive around the city you know that there are once-upon-a-time thriving industrial areas that are now largely, I do not want to say decaying, but they are now empty and we are seeing the push of industry onto our fringes. Dandenong is the example that I know well, where certainly we are pushing more and more industry out onto the outer extremes of Dandenong whereas once upon a time they might have been closer to the city. So what in terms of housing development does the Green Wedges Coalition feel about regenerating our once-industrial zones, now slightly empty zones?

Mr THATCHER: I am sorry. It is not something that we have delved into. Basically, as I said, we have concentrated on the green wedges. We have looked at *Plan Melbourne*, which says that the issue is to consolidate Melbourne within the urban growth boundary. We really have not looked at what that means apart from increased urban density. Obviously there may well be opportunities for development in industrial areas, and you can see it when you go into the city. You can see warehouses that have been turned into apartments, so it is part of the mix, I suppose I would say.

Ms BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: And further to some of the issues just raised there about consolidation and density—and I know it is the ultimate challenge in the city areas as well—I just want to put a little side comment there before I get to my question. I will get to it as quickly as I can. When I went to Israel—and we should not compare because we are very different—there was a totally different mindset. Everywhere it was four and five storeys and I remember talking to one of the locals, who was saying, ‘Why in Australia is everything so spread out? Why don’t you all want to be together and more concentrated?’. I think because to a certain extent we have had the luxury, for want of a better word, of space, we have just got used to that, and so it is almost like needing a bit of a cultural shift to some extent in terms of expectations. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Mr THATCHER: Well, I am following the government’s approach of having activity centres where they put more of the dense populations. I can only say from my ad hoc observation of living in various areas that there is quite a lot of opportunity for increased density without necessarily having a lot of high-rise development, except in those particular locations, be they Box Hill or wherever. There is quite a lot of land out there, including where I live, which are quite large blocks which are now going from, say, one house to three houses, so that is a threefold increase in density, and I suspect that there are quite a lot of other areas where you can get quite a large increase in density without having to have high-rises.

Mr HAYES: The problem is rampant population growth, anyway.

The CHAIR: I will take that as a statement, Mr Hayes. All right, we are going to have to move on.
Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thanks very much, Mr Thatcher, for your submission in writing and being here today. Just expanding on what you have touched on a little bit before answering a few queries along this line, just in terms of getting a sense of what is happening around the growth boundary and some of the encroachment there, I guess there are two schools of thought. One is making sure that there is enough that is preserved through the boundary, so the boundary is set in the right place that enough of the green wedges are preserved; and then what you have spoken about, which is you might have the boundary but then you have exceptions that are made that are continuously like a thousand cuts, I think you referred to, into the green wedge areas that mean that zoning that actually gets undermined. In terms of planning reform, have you got a view on what the solution is? Is it just rectifying those exemptions that would potentially improve the biodiversity outcomes that we are seeing in the green wedges, or is it the boundary itself? What is your view on it?

Mr THATCHER: Well, it is interesting enough that we have just finished a process where there is a consultation paper on planning Melbourne’s green wedges and agricultural land, and one of the issues the state government has raised in that is the so-called ‘transition zone’. As the Green Wedges Coalition, we are totally opposed to the idea of a transition zone. In an ideal world we would like to see only rural uses in the green wedge zone and the current urban uses not further allowed there. If that is not to be the case, then I think the issue is one of trying to ensure that where there are urban uses they are subordinate to the rural uses, by which I mean, for example, that if the main attributes that underpin the green wedge are agricultural land, natural environment and the rural landscapes, as we see it, then any urban development that is allowed should be subordinate to that.

I think one of the things that we are looking at in regard to that is the idea that every application should have a land management plan, and that land management plan should actually look at the rural uses and ensure that those rural uses are maintained so that you are not getting your agricultural land fragmented, because what happens now is that you are getting developments taking place which might say, for example, that their footprint is 10 per cent of the total area of the site that they are wanting to develop, but in fact that footprint is scattered. You have buildings scattered over the site, so in the end you end up with fragmentation so that in fact any rural use, say, for agriculture could not happen. It just would not work.

But the other one too is that we are saying that nature conservation should be an important consideration for all applications. Farming does not exclude nature conservation; they can work hand in hand. We should look at the idea of having actually on-setting rather than offsetting. Sarah Bekessy from RMIT has raised that. It is a process of net gain. It is a process of saying, 'All right, we have this use, but how do we develop this use in a way that actually adds to the rural values?'. It is reasonably radical, I suppose, in some ways, but it is like everything: if you do it at the time, it can happen; if you retrofit, it does not happen. So if you look at it and you say, 'Well, how can you do this tourist development so in fact it is in a relatively small area and it supports the improvement in the biodiversity as part of that process?', that is the sort of thinking that we are trying to develop.

The CHAIR: All right. Thanks. Mr Grimley.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Alan, for your presentation here this afternoon, mate. I have just got a query in relation to the green wedges and how they are being monitored. Are you able to elaborate to the inquiry how the total impact of the development in green wedges is currently being monitored?

Mr THATCHER: Look, I do have an answer actually. I think that the urban forestry strategy was launched in 2019 on environment day, under the aegis of nature conservation—nature conservancy, sorry, I get that mixed up. That I think starts to provide that capacity to monitor, because in fact DELWP and RMIT, in conjunction with CSIRO and I think the University of Western Australia, have developed a process of mapping the vegetation apparently down to the parcel or lot level, so that is a very fine level. In our submission we actually include a map that has been produced for the urban forestry strategy, so I think there is now the capacity to do that; it is there. Also, as part of that strategy there is further work done by RMIT and CSIRO et cetera which actually has looked at trends in vegetation over time, from 2014 to 2018, across all the municipalities in greater Melbourne—in fact I think across Australia, but anyway, for the purposes of what we are talking about—in the green wedge areas so that we actually know how much vegetation has been lost in those four years, which starts to provide a trend. So yes, the long and short answer is I think we now have the capacity to monitor it quite accurately.

Mr GRIMLEY: Wonderful. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might just ask some questions now as we head to the tail end. What is your view on or impression of councils and how they are dealing with planning applications? Because it sounds like from what you are saying there is tension in the planning framework when councils are having to deal with a development application. It might be a use that is allowed in those sorts of peri-urban areas that butt up against a green wedge, for example. What is your view about how councils are managing those? Do you see good outcomes from planning applications or poor outcomes? Do you think that is increasing? Obviously there is tension, but I am just perhaps asking you for a commentary or an observation on how well or not so well councils might be dealing with those things—success stories and perhaps not-so-good stories.

Mr THATCHER: There are both, but I think that our overall concern is that there is an increasing amount of development being allowed. That is why we are concerned. That is why we are concerned that the planning policies need to be strengthened and also that the councils need to—not all the councils have developed green wedge management plans, and that is an important component, because that helps for the vision of what happens in the green wedges—

The CHAIR: Which councils are you aware of that have those? Do you know? You mentioned the green wedge management plans.

Mr THATCHER: Well, Mornington has got one and Kingston has got one. I think Melton and Wyndham have got them. I cannot actually list them all off. There is a range who have done them and there is a number who have not got green wedge management plans. So I think they are a key issue. But the other thing is that even with a green wedge management plan, at the moment they are not incorporated documents into the planning scheme, therefore if you go to VCAT, they do not necessarily take the green wedge management plans as weighty documents, rather as intentions. It can be very general. Look, the overall trend that we are concerned about is that because of the ambiguity of what is in the planning scheme in terms of what is in and what is out, there is a trend towards increasing urbanisation that is very hard for councils to counter.

The CHAIR: I have asked other witnesses this, but if I said to you, ‘What is your top three for us as a committee to look at in terms of how government could do things better?’ or whatever, what would your top three priorities be for us? One of them, it sounds like you are saying, is we need to strengthen the planning controls because of that increase in urbanisation. Is that right?

Mr THATCHER: That is right.

The CHAIR: What would your top three be if you would like to tell me?

Mr THATCHER: Well, strengthening the policies, cementing in place the urban growth boundary so that there actually is an agreed urban growth boundary, and one of the other ones would be to actually implement the urban forestry strategy.

The CHAIR: Okay. All right. Thanks. We have got a few more minutes, so we might go back for a second round of questions. Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: I am actually okay, thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: I did have a question. You did speak to how farming and nature conservation do not need to be—well, I will not put words in your mouth—at loggerheads, that they can work together. Could you expand on that a little bit more? Because it would be interesting to know in what way and what mechanisms might support that.

Mr THATCHER: Look, you know, the Landcare movement has basically been developed on that good relationship between the two. I think some examples that I have been involved with are—not involved with practically, but I am aware of—the development of basically fencing. So you fence off your waterways and you control the movement of stock, for example, with grazing. And that has been done in western Victoria, I know—one of the major trees on farms programs down there. You know, it has done a lot.

One of the key issues with grazing is that you need to fence off. It is a fairly simple concept, but obviously it requires planning and it requires expense. And I think one of the things that I have tried to emphasise in our submission is the importance of waterways and linking those to green infrastructure. So it is not just that landowners should do it. What we are saying is that we think the government needs to invest more in protecting the waterways. At the moment there is money for it. It is bits and pieces, and we just think there needs to be a more overall approach to it. It is actually mentioned in the infrastructure strategy as green infrastructure. But, you know, there has been an ongoing process with farmers. There are plenty examples of good relationships between farming and biodiversity, and I refer to Landcare groups as examples of that.

The CHAIR: All right. Dr Ratnam, another question?

Dr RATNAM: No further questions, thanks.

The CHAIR: Mr Grimley, any further questions?

Mr GRIMLEY: I am all good; thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: All right. Well, with that, it looks like we are all talked out for a change. Thank you so much for coming, Alan, and presenting your evidence today. I really appreciate you coming.

Witness withdrew.