

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities

Mooroopna—Wednesday, 12 February 2020

MEMBERS

Mr Darren Cheeseman—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

WITNESSES

Mr David Blore, Member, and

Ms Kay Blore, Member, Benalla Sustainable Future Group.

The CHAIR: I just want to run through some important formalities before we begin. All evidence taken today by will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give; however, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing, even if you are restating what you said during the hearing. You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so for you to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the Committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report. Thank you for making the time to meet with the Committee today. Could each of you please state your full name and title before beginning your presentation.

Mr BLORE: Certainly, Chair. David Blore; I am a committee member of the Benalla Sustainable Future Group, BSFG for short. I will be using that abbreviation regularly.

Ms BLORE: Kay Blore; I am also a member of the committee for the Benalla Sustainable Future Group.

The CHAIR: Over to you.

Mr BLORE: Thank you very much, Chair, and members of the Committee. We are very pleased to be able to make a submission—it is a little late, but better late than never. Firstly, on behalf of the chairman I apologise for his inability to attend, but we have stepped into the breach, so to speak. I understand you have already got copies of our written submission and I will deal with that fairly briefly in the context that we developed this submission whilst the fires were still raging. Of course since then we have seen massive floods in New South Wales and early potential for even further inundation and sea-level impacts on the coastline of New South Wales—hopefully not going to affect Victoria.

I will take you, if I may, not to the recommendations but to the specific individual comments that we make and start with the global picture. I think we are quite safe in saying even here that it is almost universally accepted as a scientific fact that climate change is occurring and that human activity—that is, burning fossil fuels for power production and so on—is the main driver of the change that we are seeing.

We know that if these practices cease now, we are probably still going to struggle to hold the earth to 1.5 degrees of warming. The evidence shows that we have got approximately a 1-degree change since the temperature graph started to rise significantly in the 1950s, but it had been rising steadily, although gradually, since the start of the industrial age. Without decisive action in that context projections that we have seen show potential temperature increases of up to 4 degrees by the turn of this century, and that poses unimaginable consequences for humanity and our global environment.

Our starting premise is that a far more ambitious reduction target than that accepted by the Commonwealth Government, flawed as it is, with universal bipartisan support is urgently required. The independent expert panel reporting to the government on interim targets for Victoria posed two targets: a range of 32 to 39 per cent reduction below 2005 levels by 2025—just five years away—and 45 to 60 per cent below those 2005 levels in 2030. It is our contention that the targets that are adopted should be informed by not only the science but also the recent events, which, I have pointed out, have been forecast by scientists for more than a decade—several decades in fact. Thus the most ambitious interim targets should be adopted as a minimum, and by ambitious I mean 39 per cent by 2025 and 60 per cent by 2030.

We believe that such an action will provide a platform for positive transformational change, and that will have far-reaching economic, environmental and social benefits compared to the current trajectory that we are on for Victoria at the state level, but equally importantly I believe it positions Victoria as a leader in the national context. The cost, as we know—or we should understand, I believe—of inaction from this point onward will only drive further costs higher and higher. So the increasing gap between where we need to be and where we

should be will involve a commensurately greater increase in the remedial cost that our actions then will need to incur.

A little bit about our group: as I have said in our submission, we are a local group established in 2010 by local residents concerned about environmental sustainability and the lack of action on climate change both locally and nationally. Our primary purpose is about protecting and enhancing the natural and built environment. We have a number of aims by which we seek to achieve that purpose. I will not read them all, but I guess key among those is involving households, schools and businesses in sustainability programs—and those involve energy, water, land and other resources—operating education and awareness programs and so on.

That takes me to the role of action groups within BSFG and what we have achieved to date. I emphasise that we are a small group in a relatively small town compared to Shepparton, Mooroopna, Wangaratta and elsewhere, but we have been working pretty hard over that decade. In saying that, Kay and I have not been members for the entire period—we are probably fairly recent imports—but we find ourselves on the committee and here today, so that is fine.

The first one is our food cooperative started nine years ago. It had a membership then of 12 and it has grown significantly; we just ticked over the 4000th customer last year. I guess the key benefits that we wanted to achieve, and which we are, are good-quality food products sourced locally where possible from local producers and contributing to less food miles and less packaging. We have a small group called Plastic Wise Benalla and that is focusing on reducing the use of plastic, particularly shopping bags. Obviously some of the recent changes with our supermarkets are helping that significantly, but they have been dedicated and working away for a number of years. Last year they made and sold about 250 bags.

We are aware of some other groups that have sold considerably more than that, but we can only do what we can do with the resources we have available.

We have a local food network, and that is obviously different to the food co-op. It is about strengthening the local food system, and it is working on a local food strategy which is shortly to be released. The council is heavily involved in that I understand.

We also have a Renewable Energy Benalla group that is actually a standalone incorporated association, but effectively it operates under the umbrella of BSFG, and its main focus is how we implement the *Benalla Stationary Energy Transition Strategy* that we developed with the support of Beyond Zero Emissions and launched a year and a half ago. It has got three major elements: the energy measures to reduce energy use overall; to promote and install local rooftop solar; and to investigate utility-scale renewables.

In that context we have undertaken energy efficiency sessions, and they are about trying to assist our local residents on understanding energy bills—and that can be a challenge for anyone—how to implement energy efficient lighting, reducing your costs that way; draughtproofing; insulation; windows; hot-water systems; and heating and cooling options. We propose that those sessions will be repeated in following years to help contribute to the goal of reducing our energy demand by a third or more over the next 10 years.

Rooftop solar is another part of that strategy. We followed Yackandandah's lead and tried to initiate a group buy, which unfortunately when it was initiated it was not accepted by the community. Now, there are a lot of reasons for that and we are exploring those, but I do not think that is going to deter us. We will continue to push for more integration and uptake of rooftop solar.

We have a community energy project which is just getting off the ground, and that is looking at establishing, if you like, a revolving donations fund, and that fund would support the introduction of rooftop solar on community infrastructure. I guess we are setting the bar fairly low, but we are looking at a couple of the preschool operations in Benalla to put 3-kilowatt systems on their rooftops, and we had hoped to get that going by later on this year.

We are also looking at the possibility of a regional waste-to-energy project in Benalla, and Benalla council has been involved in those discussions to look at the feasibility. Obviously that will need some further investigation and discussion before we can come up with a model project to put forward.

I should say grant applications have been very important to us in facilitating some of the work we have been doing. As I said before, we are a small group, and with small numbers and a small budget from local contributions those grants are very important. Similarly, getting better community engagement is very important for us to achieve our vision. We are looking at the ways we can better do that, and I suspect that would help any future community bulk-buy program.

Some other activities: local people and beyond know about the Swanpool Environmental Film Festival. Swanpool has a little cinema centre that became famous when it got going again in the town hall some 25 years ago, and we have used that for seven years for a very successful environmental film festival. Last year's speakers are listed in our submission with three very important and insightful films. That has been a very significant success, and as I said that is supported by locals but certainly by people beyond the region.

Last year we supported a young gentleman's—Shannon Loughnane—extremely long walk. That was a walk from Coburg in Melbourne to Canberra to present to the Federal Parliament a petition seeking more action on climate change. It occurred just before May, and of course we all know what happened in May.

He refused to accept any lifts. In fact our president offered him accommodation at his place while he stayed overnight in Benalla and because the president lives some 15 kilometres out of Benalla, he said, 'I can't do that', and he ended up staying with us.

So wherever he went he walked, until he got to Canberra. We organised a welcome event with the mayor's welcome, overnight accommodation, obviously, and petition signatures.

We see lots of opportunities in the future for promoting a much broader view of sustainable living topics, like agriculture, food, biodiversity, transport, sustainable consumption, a sustainable population target, economic growth and, importantly, limits to growth, including such aspects as environmentally sustainable development. They are all significant to our future, but they are beyond our scope at the present time.

Looking at our gaps and needs, and Kay will talk more about the immediate action we are taking in regard to interaction with council, we have had strong support from council in a number of areas, including council grants. Kay will speak on the next logical step we see Benalla taking, which is to join the many councils across the nation and globally in declaring a climate emergency. But in respect of this Committee's role, we see it as an opportunity for you, and Parliament, I should say, to provide support, strong encouragement and, if necessary, a direction to council to recognise the reality of climate change and to ensure that they position themselves and their communities for the changing future we all face. We understand that many mechanisms are available to you, and we do not propose to provide anything other than one solution, which Kay will talk about.

One of the things that we are aware of is the issue of implementing environmentally sustainable design and development in municipalities. I have a background in planning as well as engineering, so I am well across the planning system. We understand you have already had a submission from the Council Alliance for a Sustainable Built Environment, and they would have emphasised this issue to you. We would like to support any initiative that the Committee might recommend to overcome the dilemma of essentially a gap in legislation and subordinate instruments, like the planning system and the guidelines for construction, to overcome that problem. We see that realistically it has to start at the State level.

Benalla council is also a member of the Goulburn Broken Greenhouse Alliance, and I understand you are hearing from them or are going to hear from them. Our only concern with their submission is that it appears to deal more with adaptation than mitigation. I read recently an interesting example of the difference between mitigation and adaptation in the context of the Blitz in World War II, with Churchill saying, 'All right, we'll go and live underground'. That is adaptation. Mitigation is putting the RAF fighter pilots up there to defeat the Luftwaffe. Clearly both are necessary, but I suggest that adaptation without mitigation is addressing the problem after it has occurred, rather than trying to reduce or eliminate the problem.

I have talked already about staffing, funding and grants applications. One of our concerns is that as a very small group we find it difficult to match larger, well-resourced groups in terms of existing funding and the staffing resources to make applications for funds. We would suggest that a mechanism or a program that addresses that

disparity would certainly be of great benefit statewide, not just from our perspective. Another issue that we see an option for the State to assist greatly in helping us is to set aside funding for, if you like, a resource officer for community groups such as ourselves. We draw attention to the very successful Landcare program that has been running for many years and which had such support, at least in the early days. We also see that the Community Power Hubs power program provides a way forward. I understand it was funded up until June 2019; I am not sure what the current funding arrangements are. It was funded for Latrobe Valley, Ballarat and Bendigo. We would certainly be very keen to see one established in the north-east, where I think per capita we have probably got the greatest number of community programs in renewable energy.

I will ask for Kay to support me now and talk specifically about her perspective on this issue but also our work in developing a climate emergency petition.

Ms BLORE: Thank you for the opportunity to present on such a critical issue. My perspective on this matter comes both from my membership in the BSFG and my role as a mother and a grandmother. Almost 20 years ago our older daughter was serving with the UN peacekeeping force in Bougainville and was directly involved in relocating islanders from their ancestral home due to flooding from sea-level rise, a most traumatic experience for them and for her.

As a grandmother with four young grandsons I am deeply concerned about the sort of future they will face if we do not act quickly and decisively to address climate change. The BSFG has in the past several weeks conducted a signature-gathering exercise in the main street of Benalla in which we have been directly involved—on days of 44 degrees, I might add. Our petition, to be presented to Benalla Rural City Council on 25 March, asks our council to join with the nearly 90 other councils in Australia and over 800 jurisdictions worldwide in declaring a climate emergency. Doing so acknowledges that human actions have contributed significantly to the increasing levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, resulting in the warming of the planet and an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events. It would also commit the council to implementing policies and actions to reduce our community's greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2030. This is an important step, but much more needs to be done—and urgently if we are to avoid the worst outcomes of global climate change.

Your brief asks, 'How can you help us achieve our aims?'. As David outlined, action and leadership from the top is essential if we are to win this existential battle. A declaration from the Parliament of Victoria of a climate emergency would be a major step and provide strong, clear leadership to the whole state and beyond. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, David and Kay—

Mr BLORE: If I might just—

The CHAIR: Sure.

Mr BLORE: Sorry, Mr Chair, just to leave you with one quote in conclusion, apart from expressing our appreciation again. I notice that on Australia Day Greg Jericho, writing in the *Guardian*, wrote the statement:

If you love Australia, climate change should scare the hell out of you.

I will leave that with you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Colleagues, do we have any questions?

Mr FOWLES: You note in your submission that you would prefer grant applications that were, I think, rolling, non-competitive and objective based.

Mr BLORE: Yes—

Mr FOWLES: How do you think that marries up with the need for some diligence about the application of public funds—to have non-competitive grants—

Mr BLORE: I think it has got to be a second stream and clearly they have to be framed against which submissions are judged and equally clearly that you have a measure of the outcomes achieved by that funding.

But the difficulty of us having sat on both sides of the table in terms of receiving applications and so on—I understand completely where assessment processes and procedures have to come—however, and I will not digress into Commonwealth territory at the moment and comment on other programs there, I believe that some subset of funding under various programs should take account of this difficulty. And I do not run away from the need to make a submission that addresses the program guidelines and equally that anyone who gets a submission needs to be accountable for the wise expenditure of those funds in achieving the objectives of the program.

But the mechanism I think is something that I will leave to wiser heads than ours. But in some manner or form, some sort of equity which recognises the disparity between a small group of 40 people who are already heavily committed in the fight and with the limited resources trying to make application after application for grant programs, competing against other significant bodies. Can I will leave it like that?

Mr FOWLES: You mentioned that you had both planning experience and engineering experience. I will not ask you an engineering question; I will leave that to my engineer colleague, Mr Hamer. But on the planning side, there has been a lot of discussion as we have gone around the state about ESD principles, how you incorporate them, how you measure them, how you ensure there is compliance to them. Do you have a view about the best way to ensure that new builds in particular reach a particular environmental standard and how you check and audit that?

Mr BLORE: Sure. I am not sure if you have heard it yet, but the City of Wodonga produced a useful document—it is on the web, so I hope I am not quoting it out of context—*Environmentally Sustainable Design for Subdivisions in Regional Victoria*. I hope I do not steal their thunder in commenting on it, but at I think page 50 it talks about ‘Key learnings: Gaps analysis and opportunities’. It talks about:

The primary regulations and policies impacting on ESD subdivisions—

may include the National Construction Code, the NCC, the VPP, or the Victoria planning principles, and local planning schemes. I am sure you are aware, but others may not be, that the VPP are essentially the tools that cover the state in terms of setting planning directions. Local planning schemes have to incorporate those but also include their own local planning direction, starting with a municipal strategic statement, and taking on board all the other elements of planning, together with their own individual application of zones, overlays and policies supporting the VPP and their local direction.

What this report says is that:

There are a number of gaps and inadequacies within each of these and also in how they relate to each other ...

So that is the area where there needs to be substantial work. The report further says there is a:

disconnect in how different policies and regulations apply to various parts of the subdivision process and subdivision itself—

in terms of development, in terms of neighbourhoods, lots and dwellings.

So certain objectives are not often carried through—I am paraphrasing here, if you do not mind—ESD and subdivisions, and there is another report that is quoted there, which I am sure you will either be taken to or can reference, Moore 2017. It talks about a ‘lack of ESD policy and leadership at the state level’ and it talks also about resourcing limitations may constrain council opportunities to improve their ESD delivery. For example, a new permit trigger or assessment requirement for single dwellings on lots of over 300 square metres would be quite a resource burden, additional resource burden, on local councils in assessing planning applications.

That section of the report talks then about the gaps in the relationship between the building code and planning. I will not go into it. It talks about adequate policy objectives at international and national levels not linked to local policy, lack of a statewide ESD approach and commitment and there are specific weaknesses in the planning system. I will not quote further from that. There was considerable work done by some very qualified planners and consultancy and taken on board by the Wodonga and other councils.

The CHAIR: David, that document, would you be happy just to leave that with the secretariat? It might help when we go seeking—

Mr BLORE: Certainly. As I said, it is on the web. Is anyone here from Wodonga? No?

Mr HAMER: Just a question. Is it correct that you were saying that when you were promoting a community energy project amongst the local Benalla community you did not get a lot of support? Is that what you said?

Mr BLORE: That is correct. That was last year or the year before? I am losing track. I have to say I was not directly involved in that. I have come on board in active involvement in the REB, Renewable Energy Benalla, since that time. It followed a very successful program in Yackandandah. There was a bit of surprise about the fact that we did not get the same uptake. I think it is fair to say though that the demographics of Benalla are quite different to Yackandandah, and I am talking there about financial and age groupings. Benalla is an older town. It is significantly further down in council rankings compared to Wodonga and Indigo, where Yackandandah sits.

My take on it, looking from the outside at the time, was that perhaps Mondo was not necessarily pricing it for the local population of Benalla. But, as I say, there is some work being done by REB in an attempt to follow up and see whether a better offer in the future might attract more attention.

Ms GREEN: This might be a question for Kay. What role are children and young people playing in the network and more generally, especially given you have talked about the older age profile in Benalla?

Ms BLORE: True. It is very much an older age group in Benalla. However, yes, there are still young people. And interestingly, while we were collecting signatures on a couple of very hot days, we had an amazing number of young ones, ‘Can we sign? Can we sign?’. They saw the climate sign, ‘Can we sign? Can we sign?’. ‘Sorry, you can’t. You’ve got to be a resident’. They were obviously visitors to Benalla and similarly.

But as part of the group it is involved with the schools too if they want to be involved. Young ones come along to information sessions, which is good to see, and it seems to be a little bit the case—

I have quoted the story of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, if anybody knows the story, where the king walks out on the street with no clothes on. And it does seem to be that the young ones are the ones—they are up there. They have got the knowledge. It is only people like us, who have got a little bit of time, that can actually step in.

Mr BLORE: It is a delicate balance, I would have to say, in terms of accessing the schools, for reasons you will all understand.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Colleagues, any other questions? No? Thank you for your time. We very much appreciate it.

Ms BLORE: Thank you.

Mr BLORE: Thank you for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.