

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Auditor-General's Report No. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands

Chelsea Heights—Tuesday, 3 December 2019

Members

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WITNESS

Ms Margaret Hunter, Secretary, Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands.

The CHAIR: We welcome the Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands. Thank you for appearing here today. As we have previously indicated—there may be some new people in the room—this is the Inquiry into the Victorian Auditor-General's Report No. 202: Meeting Obligations to Protect Ramsar Wetlands, which was tabled on 14 September 2016. Mobile phones can be put on silent, if they are not already. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today. But if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. We welcome any media who may be here today, but we remind you of the following guidelines: cameras must remain focused only on the person speaking; operators must not pan the public gallery, the Committee or witnesses; and filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing. Broadcasting or recording of this hearing by anyone other than the accredited media is not permitted.

Thank you for being here today, and I ask if you can make up to a 15-minute presentation.

Ms HUNTER: First of all, thank you for the opportunity. My name is Margaret Hunter. I am Secretary of the Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands. I have been Secretary since 2008. I basically do the admin work and I do panel presentations. I want to note the long-term involvement of environment groups since 1988, which grew out of the former Dandenong Valley Authority, which was the former manager. They were a very good group, and they did a lot of good work and were merged into Melbourne Water. We were very, very successful, because of our work since 1988, in winning a Kingston Community Group of the Year Award, which was a fantastic achievement after 30 years of work. We managed to reopen the bird hide, which we are going to see later on today. We also do a lot of community work in the environment, which is included in our submission.

Basically a lot of the stuff in there is supervising the bird hide in this building. We do tree planting at Seaford. Our tree planting coordinator has done the job for 25 years. He trains people in how to plant trees and educates them about the right trees, and he works with Frankston council. I would like to acknowledge also Melbourne Water and Frankston council for their contributions. We do a lot of interesting work with Melbourne Water. We have been a member of the CLC since 2004 and were involved in consultations for this building, consultations on the wetlands and a range of other areas. We have also been a member of the Frankston Environmental Friends Network for well over 20 years. A lot of our activities are in volunteer recruitment. A lot of my volunteers are sitting behind me, and I want to acknowledge their valuable contribution. The volunteer contribution to the environment is absolutely amazing in all areas, but particularly in the wetlands. We open the bird hide every weekend. We have 13 tour groups. We do tree plantings. We have schools that come and do groups. We have all kinds of things. We also have a website technology coordinator. We generated our committee several times and have done several things. This is our latest membership brochure, which is amazing. That was the old one. That had wetlands information on it.

The other thing we have got is in 1999 some very committed members decided that they would publish a publication on the wetlands, which is out of print, called *The Oasis Next Door*. It is an amazing publication with all facts about the wetlands which have been in use.

We also get a lot of media publication. We have eastern grey kangaroos. We have swamphens. We are regularly in the local paper. We work very closely with Tim Richardson, as the Member for Mordialloc, who is our local member. We also work closely with Mark Dreyfus, who is the Federal Member for Isaacs, who assisted us to get, along with Melbourne Water, \$40 000 to reopen the bird hide. The bird hide itself—you will see it this afternoon—is amazing. We have over 2000 visitors. It is an absolutely fantastic place, and we also do record the bird sightings and can get the volunteers in. But it is a different view from here. You are right up close to the birds.

We have also done a short DVD about the wetlands, *What's in the Reeds*, which will be online shortly. We are also on a number of regional committees: Frankston environment, Kingston council and Port Phillip Conservation Council. I think the CLC has been stated, but it provides a great opportunity for the friends group to raise any issues and for Melbourne Water to communicate what is happening on the ground. When we get an inquiry we forward it to Melbourne Water and it is fired up. I always get a phone call from Melbourne Water to say, 'Thank you very much. It has been monitored'. We had John Landy, the former Governor of Victoria, visit the bird hide in 1997 for the City Pride award.

I suppose I just wanted to finish with this, and I will have to read it. My apologies, but it came from the heart, and it is best if I do read it. Many of our members are long term or foundation members—a lot of them sitting behind me—who have maintained their interest and involvement in the group over a long period of time, and that is over 30 years. They remain committed and passionate to wetlands group involvement. This submission and associated work has been a team effort, and I thank the group members for their ongoing contribution and their knowledge contributions. The highlight for us was the Ramsar presentation. It was a really significant achievement that was achieved in August 2001 by a group of hardworking people that valued the wetlands and put, I believe, many years of work into it. It has led to where we basically are today. Basically we see ourselves as a valued and respected community group that support the Edithvale wetlands and all its inherent environment values through our activities, and we want to continue this role into the future in collaboration with Melbourne Water. I did just want to add a response to the previous submissions. Is that possible?

The CHAIR: That is fine, yes.

Ms HUNTER: As I said, I have already acknowledged Melbourne Water and Frankston council. We have been a long-term member of the CLC and we basically are involved in the Ramsar discussions re possible Ramsar extensions into the future, and these are mutual ongoing discussions that take into account ongoing investigations and the processes that are required within the time frame. We are also working with Downs farm to some extent to assist them as a new environment group. This will continue at CLC. That is the important information from our members.

I will just close with this: this is the Edithvale wetlands, a very old photo of it. It is basically, I think as you can see, an iconic place that our members love, we love and most importantly the community loves.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We appreciate you making the time to come today. What do you think are the current and emerging challenges for the wetlands since the Auditor-General's report?

Ms HUNTER: One of the current challenges is climate change definitely, because the water levels have varied over the years. We open and close our hide according to the water levels available at the time. One of the things that happened in 2011 was we had water for 18 months because we had that big rain event. We have also had different water levels there, and we do need to get the wetlands a little bit dry because they are ephemeral wetlands. So that is definitely one of the challenges. The others I think are just promoting the wetlands as a place to be and saying, 'Well, come here and enjoy it', because a visit to the wetlands is good for everyone in a lot of areas other than visiting the wetlands—your health and relaxation and walking tours and that. I think it is about promoting them as a place to be and getting the community involved—people do not have time these days to get too involved.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Margaret, for presenting today on behalf of the Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands and the work that has been done in the advocacy over three decades-plus, and also your work is integral for the Friends of Braeside Park as well. I want to go to the critical point in 2001, if you could talk us through the Ramsar listing and whether that brought about any difference in change of protection and outcomes for the wetlands post that listing on the Ramsar.

Ms HUNTER: I was not involved at the time but I was a very, very interested community member—I have been a member of the wetlands group since 1996—but from talking to the people involved at the time it was something that they really wanted. They were recognised experienced environmentalists, some of whom are still with us today, including Les Williams, OAM, and Malcolm Shapcott, that basically wanted to protect the birds and protect the values of the wetlands from urban development and from development in the wetlands. I believe it took four to six years because it is very, very hard to get, but since we have got Ramsar listing it has

actually led to involvement since 2004 with Melbourne Water on the CLC and before probably with other agencies as well—Kingston council and various other community groups. People always want to come to the wetlands. There is no issue organising a tour. My phone, my email, is always going with people that want to visit the wetlands.

Mr RICHARDSON: Even parliamentarians.

Ms HUNTER: Yes. The local kindergarten, for instance, always comes because they want to see the birds. We have also been able to upskill our volunteer force by having them take photos and write stuff, volunteer to do a Facebook page, do a website and basically make people aware of the wetlands so that when they come past they know what they are seeing. We recently had a strategy workshop to expand this and look at what we can do in the future to continue this involvement.

Mr RICHARDSON: And I think some of the remarkable work in terms of the sharp-tailed sandpiper and the evidence this morning from Melbourne Water that the proportion of global population could have gone from 1 per cent up to 3.5 per cent given the decline in global populations is extraordinary. How many people come through the wetlands or through the tours each and every year? I know I have probably put you on the spot there, Margaret, but what are the estimates there?

Ms HUNTER: No, that is all right. When we did the community book of the year award—we opened the hide in August 2016. We had about 2500 people just come through the hide. If you actually walk up Edithvale Road, as I was yesterday, or drive up, there are walking tours that come to the Melbourne Water viewing platform and all kinds of platforms the whole time. If you did a survey, it would be massive, because a lot of groups also walk along the main drain and see it as a huge recreational area because a lot of the areas around the wetlands are also protected as well and managed as adjacent lands to the wetlands. We are very lucky we have got the green areas around the wetlands at the moment.

Mr RICHARDSON: I might give someone else a go to jump back in.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I just ask a couple of follow-up questions? Firstly, thanks for your comments about the member for Mordialloc and how you work with him. None of us thought he would actually work in an iron lung, so it is nice to hear that he is doing something! No, sorry, that was a cheap shot.

But the issue of getting people out into the wetlands versus the need to protect the bird life in particular, how do you manage that? Given that I have not actually had a chance yet to have a look around, so I do not know what the physical geography of the place is.

Ms HUNTER: We get a lot of people that come to the wetlands that are interested in birds. One of the things we do at the bird hide is our bird hide coordinator organised a photographic display. We get a lot of photographers that come there and take photos. If you go into the hide on any Saturday or Sunday and you want to know about birds, one of the things that happened recently is I went into the hide and I said, 'What have you spotted?'. They said, 'A Latham's knot'. I said, 'Oh, lovely', and even if the photographer is not listed, they will show you the photos they get. So we do that to protect the photos. We monitor the birds as well. Probably monitor is the wrong word, but we have a list like so with a bird list on it, and when the volunteers spot a bird they tick it off. One of the best experiences was when I was doing the hide one day and the BirdLife photography group was there. I said, 'Oh, yes, I'll open up early', so I opened up early and they had five pages in 5 minutes. Absolutely. And you say, 'One over there, one over there, one over there', and I have still got the rest. That was their third wetland. So they send that to us. We work with BirdLife Australia. We also work with Melbourne Water and get information also, so it is a joint arrangement.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And can I ask from a voluntary group, how well are you supported and encouraged by Melbourne Water, councils, other agencies?

Ms HUNTER: I will do Melbourne Water first. Going back before Melbourne Water, we were well supported by DVA, which was the predecessor to Melbourne Water. Melbourne Water has been very, very involved with us as a proactive member through the CLC, through running Ramsar inspection tours and asking for information. We give them information. We have good working relationships with the Melbourne Water

officers, as I think you can probably see today, and we want that to continue. We have regular meetings with them and work with them very, very well.

Mr D O'BRIEN: They are still in the gallery, so if you want to put a confidential report in later about what they are really like—

Ms HUNTER: What was the second bit?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Oh, just the other agencies that are involved.

Ms HUNTER: Frankston council provide the plants for our nursery at Seaford. We have a very good relationship with the submission arm with Downs farm. We recently put a submission in on Downs farm with the planting group. With the Frankston council officers, any issues relating to the wetlands in Seaford with them—basically yes, we work very well with the Frankston council. We got an invite recently to Downs farm, so one of the things we are looking at is what we can do to probably work a bit more with the Downs farm group at the moment.

Kingston council—we went to their barbecue yesterday, but we also work quite well with them. We had a recent planting with them and we do work very well with the officers there, but a lot of their groups—there are only two other groups, two of which I manage so I am sort of—council groups that do not have constitutions are not incorporated, so it is a bit of an interesting situation there that is happening. At the moment, yes, we probably need to develop Kingston council more.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Great. Thanks, Margaret.

Mr HIBBINS: I wanted to get your perspective on how you see the challenges of urbanisation being managed. Obviously you have got developments adjacent to the site, and a couple of infrastructure projects that have been named. I just wanted to see your group's perspective on how those challenges are being managed.

Ms HUNTER: One of the things that we do is we monitor—we observe I suppose is more the word—the urban development. I have a 1994 photo at home of the Edithvale-Seaford wetlands. So we work with Kingston council's planning department. I get phone calls from them when they have a development. We have had one 5 minutes up the road at the end of the wetlands, at First Avenue, Chelsea Heights, that we were involved in. We get consulted on those and things like that and we monitor it. At Seaford we have an active group and we have been successful on two out of three occasions in actually working with Frankston council to modify and look at a development that was going to impact on the Seaford wetlands, which are a different kind of environment from this a little bit. But we have been successful with some planning issues with Frankston council. We are always consulted with that.

We basically have people—I do not know a lot about Seaford—that I refer as a cooperative matter to Seaford to Frankston council when I do Edithvale, because I live up Edithvale way. But they are what I would call experts that have lived in Seaford and know the environment better than I do.

Mr HIBBINS: Do you think there is anything further that can be done to enhance the protection of the wetlands? What else do you think needs to be done?

Ms HUNTER: That is a very broad question. One of our main objectives in our constitution for over 30 years has been to enhance and develop the wetlands and always look for new ways to do it. So, for instance, when we get a new councillor or a new member of Parliament or someone comes in that is interested, we will try to use their skills and update their interest in the group. As I mentioned before with the strategy workshop, the first stage has been to define our aims. The next strategy will be to look at where we go from there, just down exactly that track, and what protecting the wetlands means. This is one opportunity to look at what areas we need to look at. So that will be ongoing.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks.

Mr RICHARDSON: Margaret, I wanted to take you to the Woodlands Estate area and those wetlands. Pardon my ignorance, but my understanding is that they are just as significant from a migratory bird population

as the Edithvale-Seaford wetlands. How do we manage the differentiation? What is the relationship change? And maybe drawing on a bit of your experience with Friends of Braeside Park, how does that differentiate the relationship when it is a Ramsar-listed wetlands and then it is standard or protected by council and state overlays? Is there a differentiation in the support or interaction that you have with state agencies?

Ms HUNTER: The Woodland wetlands are—for those of you who do not know, if you walk up Woodlands Drive they are just the other side of Braeside Park near the Mordialloc Freeway route—Melbourne Water land, I understand. That was their refurbished wetlands in the Woodlands industrial estate. Braeside Park wetlands are man-made. There are some cooperative moves that we considered as part of this submission, and are included in the submission, as ongoing discussions with looking at including other wetlands perhaps down the track—in the right time frame, whatever way it can be achieved—to look at them and to look at their values.

One of the first jobs when I came in as secretary basically was to write a letter about this to someone and I said, ‘Well, I know nothing about them’. But basically I think that would be something that we could work on on a cooperative basis and discuss further as a committee and come up with a statement about what our view would be on that. But we certainly want to promote more wetlands in this area and at the first level identify them.

Mr RICHARDSON: Do you think that that Ramsar listing provides that greater protection or awareness or understanding of their significance?

Ms HUNTER: It would be my personal view. and probably the view of the Friends, without asking anyone, that the Ramsar listing has enhanced the friends of the wetlands’ status. In terms of getting volunteers, I will not say it is easy, having just said it is not, but it makes it easier because people like birds and they like the fact that it has got Ramsar status and it is going to be there. It also gives them, I think, more input into higher level processes as an individual and us as a volunteer group. For instance, when I ring Melbourne Water, they know my voice and they know my email, and I always get a nice lady that answers, puts me through to the right person and gives me a reference number. Then I get an email a couple of days later, and then I get a follow-up phone call. It is probably, as I said, one of our objectives with our strategy plan to look at it in the second stage of that strategy plan development in conjunction with our constitutional stuff and our work with Frankston council and Melbourne Water.

Mr RICHARDSON: Just finally, Chair, on the environment effects statement for the interaction with Edithvale, Chelsea and Bonbeach level crossings, obviously the Friends of Edithvale-Seaford Wetlands were featured in the media coverage leading up to the EES process and were significant parties to the submission. Are the friends satisfied with the ongoing support, protection and monitoring of impacts from those state agencies with the Mordialloc Freeway and the Level Crossing Removal Authority?

Ms HUNTER: I would like to take that one on notice, if I may, because that is probably one that I would like to talk to my committee about.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for coming along today and for providing your evidence. A proof of the transcript will be given to you, and that will then be available on the website as well. Thank you very much.

Ms HUNTER: With Tim’s last question, can I send a response to that in?

The CHAIR: Yes, the secretariat here will arrange with you to receive that.

Mr RICHARDSON: That would be great.

Ms HUNTER: Thank you.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Thanks, Margaret. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: That concludes our formal hearings here today. We obviously have our site visit as well, but we will close the meeting in anticipation of the site visit. Thank you very much, everyone, for your attendance.

Committee adjourned.