

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Health Impacts of Air Pollution in Victoria

Melbourne—Monday, 28 June 2021

(via videoconference)

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 Stephen Meloury, Unit Manager, Building Services and Environmental Health, Moreland City Council.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Health Impacts of Air Pollution 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 Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we 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 as well.

At this time I will take the opportunity to introduce the committee members to you. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Also with me today are Dr Catherine Cumming, Dr Samantha Ratnam, Mr Cesar Melhem, Ms Melina Bath and Ms Nina Taylor.

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.

If I could please just get you to state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of just for the Hansard record initially, thanks.

Mr MELOURY: My name is Stephen Meloury, and I am presenting on behalf of Moreland City Council.

The CHAIR: Great, thank you. And with that I will hand over to you to give your presentation. If I could ask that you keep your comments to about a maximum of 10 minutes, that will then allow committee members plenty of time to ask you questions. Also if I could just remind committee members to please keep your microphones on mute when you are not speaking, then that will help to minimise background noise. All right, thanks, Stephen. Over to you.

Mr MELOURY: Thank you, and thank you for the opportunity to present this morning. During 2020 the northern suburbs of Melbourne experienced impacts from a number of industrial fires which adversely impacted air quality and the environment, and residents from the City of Moreland were particularly affected by some of these incidents. In these cases the initial response to air quality and the environmental issues sits with the Environment Protection Authority, with subsequent follow-up undertaken with other stakeholders, including council. Although measures already exist enabling the Environment Protection Authority to respond to these types of pollution incidents, the new *Environment Protection Act*, which comes in this week, should significantly enhance the ability of the EPA to proactively manage those high-risk sites before incidents occur. We saw this as an important step in terms of addressing issues in relation to air quality and the impacts that this might have on council residents.

In addition to this, in 2018 Moreland City Council adopted the *Moreland Zero Carbon—2040 Framework*. This framework outlined the community vision and strategic actions for the transition to zero carbon in Moreland by 2040. The framework reflects our focus on driving emissions reductions across three key sources of our community's greenhouse gas emissions, and these three areas relate to strategic energy, which is efficient and 100 per cent renewable powered energy; transport, which relates to active or zero-emission transport; and the waste sector, revolving around the circular economy with zero waste.

Some of the challenges identified in relation to our rapidly changing world and what we believe are relevant to this inquiry include managing urban growth while creating a socially inclusive and walkable city which maintains clean air and waterways; preserving, creating and having green open spaces as our city population grows; overcoming barriers to shift away from fuels and gas for space heating and cooking; and overcoming cost-of-living pressures that can be a barrier to adopting sustainable technologies for our residents.

The final point we really wanted to make today was that the council receives a small number of requests at the commencement of each winter season for the banning of wood heaters in our municipality as a direct result of poor air quality complaints. While Moreland City Council has not banned the use of wood heaters in the municipality, in line with federal and state government review recommendations, complaints regarding air quality are ultimately resolved through restrictions that are imposed through our own Moreland local law 2018.

So just in conclusion, we believe that in the number of areas identified above, if those areas are addressed, it will help us to ensure that there is good air quality for our residents as they move around our municipality, particularly in the current environment where being active and out in the environment is more important to our community than it previously has been. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks very much, Stephen. Okay, we will open up to questions. Dr Cumming.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Chair. I have got a couple of questions, Stephen. I was on Maribyrnong City Council for 21 years. I have previously been a councillor and a mayor, so I am fully aware of what councils have to deal with when it comes to residents and air quality and some of the questions that we have and submissions that councils in the past have submitted to the government. I have got two questions. The first one is: to what extent do state and local government transport strategies take complementary approaches towards the mitigation of vehicular air pollution? And my second question is: do you see any value in developing a communitywide education campaign about the risks of air pollution, and if so, what would you prioritise in this campaign?

Mr MELOURY: To answer the first question about state and local government transport functions, there are—I apologise that I am not a planning expert, but I do understand from our strategic planning area that there are a number of linkages between state and local government, particularly around managing transport. We have our integrated transport strategy, which responds to a number of those issues where there has been some interaction or engagement between state and local government. I cannot speak much more to that without having a detailed understanding of how that has worked from a planning perspective.

Dr CUMMING: You do not have to answer things on the spot. If you wish to get back to the inquiry with more of a detailed submission on the questions that we raise, feel free to. But it is more around, I guess, community complaints about air quality or in regard to transport and congestion and those kinds of things and what the state government could actually do on behalf of your community if they do have concerns about the smog and pollution that they experience in Moreland.

Mr MELOURY: I probably will have to get back to you on that. I do know that we receive complaints around transport, but whether any of them relate specifically to the air quality aspect of it, I do not know, so I will need to get back to you on that.

Dr CUMMING: And my other question was around a community campaign promoting better air quality and talking about air pollution, probably educating the community. I am wondering if you see a benefit from the state government actually taking that on. I experienced myself when I was a councillor that you receive a lot of complaints about wood fires and people burning off. You raised bushfires, and we understood that the air was coming from New South Wales in 2019. It was a wake-up call for Victorians. Then obviously you have a lot of industries in your area that could possibly benefit from better filtration or better worldwide standards rather than the very low Australian standards that we have currently that the EPA are trying to enforce—very low standards. So along those lines, but obviously you would see planning applications around kindergartens and the like and people have concerns around trucks and things going past and air quality for small children and schools and those kind of things. That is where my line of questioning is coming from, Stephen.

Mr MELOURY: Sure. So we would certainly be keen to see an education program that started from state and involved local government in that. My experience is that we deal with or respond to these kinds of things on a case-by-case basis. So we provide information to residents as they are complaining, or if we get a pocket of complaints about a particular area in relation to this we will go out and do some work to that particular area

in response to that. But the experience tells us that either residents do not know who to complain to or, if they do complain to council about it, they are not really aware of what information is out there—not only in terms of regulation and what should happen but also measures that they can be taking themselves to minimise impacts on their own health and wellbeing. So it would certainly be of benefit to have a much broader education piece so that we are not continuing to deal with things on an individual case-by-case basis.

Dr CUMMING: And I guess, Stephen, that your council would understand from your health statistics where you would have possible cancer clusters or asthma clusters or those kinds of things. If you wish to show those to this inquiry, that would be great, because I know that all councils actually look at that data—your community's health outcomes—and information around that would be very helpful to this inquiry.

Mr MELOURY: Okay.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you, Dr Cumming. Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: Let me unmute myself. It is the word of the year—or century, probably. Thank you very much. I will put a clause out: I am a Gippsland MP, so I used to actually travel into Moreland City Council because there are some great nut and fruit suppliers in there, but I am not totally familiar. When we had the stockpiling issue and we were on the waste and resource recovery inquiry, there were fires in the Laverton and CBD or Melbourne environs. Can you tell me: was Moreland City Council affected—as in the residents within that zone? What was the air quality in that? Forgive me, I really am inquiring because I am not across whether it affected Moreland. And what has council done in terms of any proposed areas that they have, under your control, in relation to stockpiling and potential hazardous fumes into the air?

Mr MELOURY: Yes. So, Moreland was directly affected more by the Campbellfield incident that happened it would have been in August of last year. A significant part of the northern catchment of Moreland was impacted by that. Not so much in terms of the other ones, though you do get some drift coming through, but the Campbellfield fire was certainly the one that most affected us. That should be the response. I do not actually have the air quality results for that specific incident at hand, so I could obtain those for the inquiry.

In terms of our own sorts of measures that we take, as a direct result of the Campbellfield incident council did seek to obtain one of the officers for the protection of the local environment through the Environment Protection Authority. We were not successful in obtaining one of those officers to help us with the incident, and we also—

Ms BATH: Could I just interrupt you there? Could you expand on why? Did you not meet criteria or what was that? What was the problem in not being able to obtain one? Or are you questioning that?

Mr MELOURY: No. So we put a proposal just on behalf of Moreland, but we also put one as a joint one to say that we would join with Darebin if we needed to share one. According to the EPA's data we do not have any stockpiling sites within our municipality. Our understanding was that the last round of OPLEs that they were putting out was specifically around industrial types of activity and events, and although we do have industrial areas in the northern aspects of our municipality, none of them really met the criteria of the EPA in terms of that higher level stockpiling, which was what their focus was at that time.

Ms BATH: Could I ask: how far as the crow flies were you from Campbellfield and that fire—from the edge of Moreland?

Mr MELOURY: I believe it is around the 10 k range—10 to 15 kilometres.

Ms BATH: Thanks. And from that have you had any of your ratepayers, residents, come in to council with concerns around the fallout from that, the health fallout—you know, respiratory issues? Has there been any documentation from that, or have you worked with other councils on that? Is that something that has come through your door?

Mr MELOURY: No, it has not. We have not had any direct complaints or inquiries from residents that I am aware of in relation to that. There were some inquiries in relation to impacts to the broader environment rather than human health, and we did work with the EPA on those matters. Primarily the EPA took the lead on those

matters, and we provided support as needed to that in terms of testing and monitoring of local waterways and other areas that may have been impacted.

Ms BATH: Thank you. Chair, just one quick one more. Thank you very much for your response. I could see some of the footage or the photos during our waste inquiry that were pretty horrible of the creeks being turned from a creek into, really, sort of a toxic soup, and so again—but not being totally familiar with your area—is council satisfied that the quality of the water of the creeks in Moreland city is back to a reasonable level, or do you need to see anything else coming from that? At the moment you have got the ear of government, the ear of this parliamentary inquiry. Is there any feedback you would like to give?

Mr MELOURY: I think generally the quality of the water has returned to what it was previously. We do know that there are point sources within the northern aspects of the municipality that continue to discharge into waterways such as the Merri Creek, and while we have programs and discussions with the EPA fairly regularly around those kinds of things, there are a number of incidents that we are just unable to find point sources for. So we continue to see these pollution events sporadically happen without any way of, at this point, being able to identify where that comes from.

Ms BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Great, thanks Ms Bath. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thanks for your contribution today. I am just wondering about this issue of wood heaters. Are there a lot of people in your municipality that have wood heaters, and how much does it contribute? I have to admit, when I went up to Bright for that sitting I delighted in a little one. Normally I use an electric heater at home, but it was like, 'Wow'. I understand why people like them, but I see the flip side of it as well. So can you speak to that a little bit? It would be quite helpful.

Mr MELOURY: Sure. We do not know exactly how many residents have wood heaters across the municipality. We do know that for some residents wood heaters continue to be the only source of heating that they have, which is part of I guess our concern when we get these complaints come in and when we assess those complaints doing site visits—that some people rely still very heavily on their wood heaters for heating and other measures as well.

We generally get maybe about three or four complaints a year. So we do not get large numbers of them, but what we do get are around school zones—so higher-risk areas where we do not have monitoring happening as such to verify what sort of level of contamination is in the air or pollution is in the air. But they are around for higher-risk sites, so it does require us to work with those residents when they are complained about a bit more heavily each year to make sure that they are trying to do the right thing—burning the right materials—providing educational material to them in that regard.

Ms TAYLOR: Okay. I will finish there but just say: it does not sound like it is a huge issue, then. You are more concerned about other contributors to air pollution. I do not want to put words in your mouth. If I am wrong—

Mr MELOURY: Yes. So wood fires are certainly not our biggest air pollution causes.

Ms TAYLOR: It is one of a number.

Mr MELOURY: It is one of a number that continue to pop up every year, although in small numbers.

Ms TAYLOR: Okay. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Taylor. Dr Ratnam.

Dr RATNAM: Thanks very much, Chair. Thanks, Stephen, for presenting to the inquiry and for your submission as well. Just following on from Ms Taylor's question about wood smoke, what are the barriers to more data on how many wood heaters are used in a municipality? Do you think it should be a statewide issue? Has council attempted to try and collect a bit more data on how much wood heaters are relied on in the municipality?

Mr MELOURY: I do not think we have attempted to obtain that information. I think at this level a lot of that data is—I do not know if it is captured by state or at a federal level. The reviews that happened at state and

federal level talked about what kind of measures need to be put in place to maybe improve wood heaters, but we do not actually have any mechanism in place at the moment to record which properties use wood heaters, what standard those wood heaters are at or what they are particularly used for unless we are resolving a complaint. So it would be useful to have potentially a database of all wood-fired heaters across not only our municipality but also the greater Melbourne area. We know if there is a wood fire being used in, say, Darebin or Moonee Valley and the wind blows in a particular direction, that does have the potential to impact on Moreland residents, particularly if there is a cluster of them together, so it would be useful from a planning perspective to know where they are all located so that we can try and resolve those issues.

Dr RATNAM: Great. Thank you for this useful suggestion. Can you talk us through the levers that you all have to minimise impacts of air pollution? You talked about being able to talk to residents, should there be a complaint, about using better materials and reducing the kind of intensity of pollution. Are there any other levers that local government has that you know of to better manage air pollution or mitigate air pollution?

Mr MELOURY: The only other measure that I am aware of is in relation to development, so sustainable development and making sure that new development is happening at a standard that minimises impacts. I know that there are some programs in terms of retrofitting old properties, but how far we can go with that program I am not really sure. I could provide some further information.

Dr RATNAM: Great. Thank you. So you have got some preventative tools, but in terms of reactive tools, they sound like they are a bit limited and potentially particularly because we do not have good data; we cannot do our monitoring that well.

Mr MELOURY: Yes.

Dr RATNAM: Just one final question. You talked in your submission about concerns around transport emissions, and I was wondering whether diesel emissions on main roads are a concern in Moreland. Are you all monitoring or tracking that in any way? Are there any comments you can make about what can be done there?

Mr MELOURY: I do not know if we are tracking that. I can provide some information and get back to the inquiry. I would need to check with our transport area.

Dr RATNAM: That would be great. And added to that, Stephen, if you would not mind, if you could find out how you all track your transport emissions. I know it is a big task, but I know it is a significant goal for council in terms of reducing transport carbon emissions. So for the inquiry it would be good to know how you are tracking that, because it potentially is instructive to what we can suggest as a finding or recommendation from the inquiry as well for other areas.

Mr MELOURY: Sure. Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Dr Ratnam. I might just ask a question, if I can. Just reflecting on your earlier evidence, Stephen, you were saying that complaints around air pollution are not a large factor across your municipality. But if council was going to make some suggestions for this inquiry about what state government could do to better support councils, what would be your top three priorities if you had the opportunity to make those recommendations?

Mr MELOURY: So I think our top three priorities would be what can happen in the preventative space. I understand the EPA has databases of high-risk sites, so expanding that out to others other than just stockpiling of chemicals. Providing information to local government in terms of where those high-risk sites are would enable us to help with some planning. Education would be a second one in terms of being able to provide information both to council and to residents so that when an incident does happen we are able to respond as quickly as possible with the right information.

The CHAIR: Would you say—it seems from what you are saying, and correct me if I am wrong—that levels of concern around air pollution are usually heightened because there has been an incident like the things you have referred to: there has been a fire and people can obviously smell something in the air. So there has been an incident and that tends to spur on complaints or concerns around air pollution. Would that be right?

Mr MELOURY: That would be right. That is my experience, that we do not usually get too much in the way of complaint unless it is in response to a specific incident.

The CHAIR: An event, yes.

Mr MELOURY: Yes.

The CHAIR: And can you just tell me as well: what sort of things are council doing to assist in improving air quality? Are you transitioning your vehicle fleet to low-emission vehicles—those sorts of things—and does your transport strategy, if you have one, address air pollution? Could you just unpack those things for us a little bit?

Mr MELOURY: Council does have a fleet of vehicles that currently has a proportion of those that are electric vehicles. Our new policy will transition all of our fleet vehicles to electric, so that will assist as part of our zero-carbon scheme. All council vehicles will be electric. We do have access to electric bikes and also encourage particularly staff when they are moving about to go on public transport rather than using cars. There are a number of options available to staff to try and minimise their footprint and impacts while they are travelling around.

The CHAIR: Just one final question from me: you said earlier that one of the priorities if state government could assist more would be around developing an education campaign for the community, so what sorts of things should be in an education campaign? Should it be about where people can find up-to-date information about air quality or where to make a complaint or report something of concern and who has responsibility for what? What sort of things should be part of it, and how should it be rolled out?

Mr MELOURY: The key aspects in terms of that would be what they can do to protect themselves for a particular type of incident. We know from our experience that people will shut their doors, but they do not necessarily know what to do from there. So information about health impacts would be important—how to protect themselves. Also there would be a piece of work about who they need to contact to seek information and advice from. While council in a lot of instances can provide some advice, in a lot of cases we are a referral body, so a resident will complain to us about something and then we will refer that to the Environment Protection Authority for their response. Sometimes it is unclear who is responsible for it, so there will be a bounce-back—we will refer it to the EPA and the EPA might refer it back to council. It takes some time to get some resolution to that, and quite often by the time somebody is designated as responsible the incident has passed and the opportunity to respond to that has gone. So we really need to have clear lines of responsibility for responding to incidents and where complaints can be lodged.

The CHAIR: Okay, great. Thanks, Stephen. We will go around for a second round of questions now. I will start with Dr Cumming.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Chair. Stephen, I obviously understand that all councils have a municipal public health and wellbeing plan, and that would obviously have information around your community's health outcomes. One of the reasons why I brought this inquiry up to the state Parliament was my concerns around the siloing effect of air quality and health outcomes, being that you get complaints via planning, you get complaints via your own health department, but it does not fall under just health or environment. It actually is right across from your transport strategies to your planning strategies. It is something that affects a lot of things.

So obviously, Stephen, your community would have had some asthma storm events. You guys plan for those, which obviously has got to do with our air quality and what is in the air in the way of pollen and other things. As a council I am guessing that you would be looking at the trees that you plant to reduce that as well as some of the other things that you touched on. We all know that the pollution that is in our air, once you add rain, falls onto the soil and then ends up in our creeks and waterways. And you would know, under planning and other things, the amount of pollutants that are in our soil and the pollutants that are in our waterways and creeks.

Stephen, I am just wondering, would you be able to provide your municipal public health and wellbeing plan and other plans that possibly would touch on air pollution so that we can get a better picture of how we could as a state government make things better in the way of all state government departments making sure that they look at air quality? It does not sit under just the environmental minister, just the same as it does not sit under your health department at council; it should sit under all the different departments. Is there something that the state could actually help with in making sure that that integration occurs? And I will leave it at that.

Mr MELOURY: I know that when, as you say, complaints come in they are not linked to any one particular area, and usually the complaint will get lodged against what is the main thing that that person has got a complaint about. So while it might have impacts on a whole range of other areas, predominately that complaint will get seen by one department and probably not by any others when that initial response has been provided.

Dr CUMMING: So in other words, Stephen, there is probably a way of actually collecting air complaints or pollution complaints from all of the departments and capturing them in one space. That might be a suggestion to this inquiry that could possibly be fed to the Department of Health or something to that effect. Do you see any benefit in that?

Mr MELOURY: Yes. For example, Moreland would be able to provide data on all of the complaints that are received through the system that we have of monitoring complaints. I do not think there is a program at the moment in terms of reporting that data necessarily. My experience is that that data reporting is probably a unit-by-unit kind of requirement rather than an overall 'This is the number of complaints that may involve air quality or water quality' or that kind of thing. So expanding out some of the existing reporting mechanisms would assist in being able to do that. We know that there are a number of reporting processes for councils to different state government authorities, and this is one that could be easily added to one of the existing reporting tools that are already out there.

The CHAIR: Great. Okay. Thanks, Stephen. Ms Bath.

Ms BATH: No further questions from me, thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. Dr Ratnam?

Dr RATNAM: No further from me. Thanks very much, Stephen.

The CHAIR: Ms Taylor?

Ms TAYLOR: No. I am good. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Fantastic. All right. Dr Cumming, one last from you before we call it a day. There is nothing further from me.

Dr CUMMING: All I can say is, Chair, thank you. No more questions from me. And, Stephen, if you wish to provide any more information that is raised from this inquiry, please feel free to do that.

Mr MELOURY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Great. Well, thanks so much, Stephen, for your evidence today and your presentation. We really appreciate it. Thanks for coming in, and I hope you have a great day.

Witness withdrew.