



Victorian Planning and Environmental Law Association

Submission to the Inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria's rural and regional councils

12 September 2016

1. Introduction

This submission is made on behalf of the Victorian Planning and Environment Law Association (VPELA) in response to Inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria's rural and regional councils.

VPELA's broad membership base places the organisation in an excellent position to provide submissions to Government concerning proposed policy or legislative changes.

2. Infrastructure funding and delivery

VPELA submits that the current tools available for infrastructure funding through statutory planning mechanisms are not meeting the needs of regional communities. The model for delivery of a Development Contributions Plan (DCP) in a regional area is the same as requirements for a Growth Area. There are significant differences in the resources available for undertaking the work required to develop a DCP.

Often the amounts included within a DCP are best estimates and ultimately there can be a significant difference in actual costs for implementation. It is also noted that the standards required by other government agencies such as VicRoads and relevant water authorities appear to change regularly. This can require significant detailed design rework; often close to the cost of delivery of infrastructure improvements. There is evidence of requirements for infrastructure beyond the scope often specified in Precinct Structure Plans, with significant financial implications for development.

Further in regional and rural areas the scale of development is often significantly smaller in respect of the numbers of lots developed at any one time and the take up of lots is also slower. Consideration should be given to allowing the role out of a standardised contribution to all lots created, no matter how small the subdivision, to avoid the cumulative impacts that are occurring through smaller subdivisions over time.

Councils are often in the position of providing seed funding for development to see the implementation of necessary infrastructure such as traffic or drainage infrastructure. It is understood that in some instances banks require significantly higher percentages of lot sales, up to 100%, before funding is made available, which is difficult when lot sales are not consistent or are slower than can be expected in urban areas. In future, as a result of the introduction of rate capping, there will be reduced capacity for Council to provide seed funding. Access to an infrastructure fund would assist in this regard.

3. Flood Planning

VPELA submits that the strategic research and study role of the Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) should be strengthened with appropriate resources. Policy and infrastructure is Council's responsibility, but better resourcing the CMAs would mean they have the ability to drive and undertake the flood studies and flood amendments in conjunction with Councils. CMAs are the experts in flood planning and the relationship between Councils and CMAs is integral to ensuring flood planning is undertaken appropriately. It would be preferable that CMAs be properly resourced to become the lead agency in managing issues within a catchment, particularly in the absence of state guidance on best practice.

4. Weed and pest animal control

VPELA submits that there should be a greater investment by the State in the management of weed and pest animal control. It is evident there has been a shift in the management responsibilities of the management of weeds in particular, with Local Government now responsible for the management of all roadsides. Resources are still required from State Government to ensure that weed management can be tackled in a consistent and comprehensive manner across all regional and rural areas.

5. Conclusion

In summary VPELA submits that:

- Methods of infrastructure funding and standards for delivery for regional and rural areas need to be reviewed and improved having regard to the particular timing and resourcing needs of Councils located outside urban areas;
- Consideration should be given to an Infrastructure Fund to assist in regional and rural infrastructure provision which could be drawn upon by way of grant applications or the like;
- The role of the Catchment Management Authorities should be strengthened and better resourced to assist in strategic flood planning and preparation of mapping studies;
- Resources are required to assist Councils in their expanded roles in managing pest plants and animals cooperatively with State Government.

About VPELA

The Victorian Planning and Environmental Law Association (**VPELA**) is a non political multi-disciplinary professional association, concerned with the planning legal and environment fields. The Association draws its membership from professions involved in the planning and environment fields including:

- Architects – Building, Landscape
- Barristers
- Developers
- Economists
- Engineers – Civil, Traffic, Acoustic
- Environmental Scientists
- Heritage specialists
- Lawyers
- Local Government Officers
- Planners
- Social Planners
- State Government Officers
- Surveyors
- Transport Planners
- Valuers
- Urban Designers