

The Committee Manager  
Legislative Assembly, Environment and Planning Committee  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
East Melbourne VIC 3002

26 August 2019

## **Macedon Ranges Shire Council Submission Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities**

### ***Disclaimer***

*This submission has been prepared by Council officers and was not presented to councilors for formal adoption or endorsement.*

### **Scope of Inquiry**

Macedon Ranges Shire Council welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities conducted by the Parliament of Victoria's Environment and Planning Committee. Council understands that the Committee is to conduct:

*An inquiry into what urban, rural and regional communities in Victoria are doing to tackle climate change and how the Victorian Government could support these communities, to the Environment and Planning Committee for consideration and report no later than 30 June 2020.*

Furthermore, Council understands that the areas of interest to the Committee are to:

- Actions being taken by our community members and organisations to mitigate the severity of climate change, including actions to reduce greenhouse emissions
- Actions by community members and organisations to adapt to the current and future impacts of climate change
- Ways in which the government can best support communities in their efforts
- Interstate and overseas best practice models that could be implemented in Victoria

## Introduction

The task of reducing greenhouse gas emission is urgent. Global emissions are on track to result in 1.5°C of warming above pre-industrial levels in as little as 10 to 15 years. Some scientists consider that we have already reached this threshold and that significant carbon sinks are required to prevent further warming which will result in catastrophic impacts to society and the environment.

In the Shire of Macedon Ranges, the community is already experiencing the impacts of climate change. Over recent years we have experienced a series of bushfires and heat waves as well as periods of reduced rainfall which has placed stress on our urban and rural communities. These experiences are only likely to increase, impacting a range of ecosystems at different altitudes and aspects, on agricultural production, on the local economy (including tourism), and on the community's exposure to heat waves, floods, fires and storms.

The current climate crisis means it is critical for all levels of government to take action through policy, regulation and direct investment. While communities play an important role in achieving change at a local level, voluntary organisations and individuals cannot be relied upon to achieve the level of economic and behaviour change required to address the crisis.

It is Council's experience that local communities want to transition to a low carbon future. However community based and individual efforts are often hindered or undermined by the lack of supporting state government policies, legislation and infrastructure. This is particularly the case in relation to the built environment, transport, renewable energy generation and waste management. Additionally, the short term and ad hoc nature of grants available for community led projects prevents thorough project planning and implementation. This is particularly the case for large scale projects that require collaborative planning across different communities and government agencies.

## Current mitigation actions

*Actions being taken by our community members and organisations to mitigate the severity of climate change, including actions to reduce greenhouse emissions*

### Council mitigation efforts

In 2017 Council adopted a Climate Change Action Plan which sets out a program of works and activities to reduce the organisation's emissions by 25% by 2021 from 2015 levels, with the longer term goal of achieving zero net emissions by 2030. In implementing this Action Plan, Council has made several investments to reduce emissions from its operations, including:

- **Renewable energy** - Installation of 320kW of solar panels on 14 Council-managed buildings
- **Retrofitting** – Implementation of a range of works to improve the energy efficiency of Council-managed buildings, including installation of double glazing and pool covers
- **Street lights** - Conversion of over 2,000 residential streetlights to energy efficient LEDs
- **Vehicles** – Transitioning to hybrid vehicles for its fleet, with the aim to introduce electric vehicles as they become a more viable option for long distance travel
- **Sustainable subdivisions** – Macedon Ranges Shire Council is one of 16 local governments working to develop an assessment framework for subdivisions to reduce emissions resulting from small and large scale subdivisions. This work is being led by Wodonga City Council with funding from the Collaborative Councils Sustainability Fund Partnership Program.

Council is also supporting the community take action through the following initiatives:

- **Local Community Climate Change Action Plans** – In 2018/19 Council facilitated the development of Sustainable Malmsbury, a community based action plan developed by and for the Malmsbury community to guide their efforts in addressing climate change. Council will continue to facilitate the development of similar local action plans across the shire over the coming years.

- **Sustainable Design Advice** – Council provides individual advice to residents about how to improve the environmental performance of their new home or renovation. This service will be extended to businesses in 2019/20 to facilitate take up of Environmental Upgrade Agreements. Council also hosts workshops and information sessions about sustainable design for residential buildings at different locations across the shire throughout the year. Funding for this function is due to expire at the end of 2019.
- **Private land conservation** – Delivery of a series of workshops and information sessions about regenerative agriculture which, when implemented, can increase carbon storage in soils. Council is also soon to employ a Private Land Conservation Officer who will work with rural land owners to improve pasture management and encourage re-instatement of native vegetation which will increase carbon sequestration in the region. This program is funded by the National Landcare Program.

### Community mitigation efforts

There are several community groups within the shire acting to reduce emissions through projects that facilitate local sustainability, most notably the Macedon Ranges Sustainability Group and associated Action Groups.

Key community based emission reduction initiatives which Council is aware of include:

- **Community Energy Park** – A proposed wind and solar energy generation project (with 10MWh battery storage) with the capacity to provide electricity to all homes in the shire. The community energy park is proposed for a site of cleared land previously used for pine plantations in Woodend (Macedon Ranges Sustainability Group).
- **Community funded solar panels** – Financing of solar panels on local schools and community organisations through a Revolving Energy Fund (Macedon Ranges Sustainability Group)
- **Residential energy audits** – The Sustainable Malmsbury Action Group has received a small grant from Council to conduct household energy audits within the town.
- **MASH (More Australian Solar Homes)**. Over 350 householders in the shire have participated in the solar bulk buy program, having panels installed on roofs to supply renewable energy to their homes.

- **“Feed it forward” / foodbank projects.** There are several projects in the shire that reduce the environmental impact of food waste disposal by collecting and cooking and distributing edible food which is not suitable for commercial sale.

## Current adaptation actions

*Actions by community members and organisations to adapt to the current and future impacts of climate change.*

### Council adaptation efforts

Future climate forecasts increasingly inform Council projects and business planning. This means that, what could be badged “adaptation” initiatives, is increasingly a part of “business as usual”. This manifests in the following ways:

- **Emergency management** – Council has a robust and sophisticated approach to emergency management which ensures the organisation, along with other partners, are well placed to respond to the impacts of heat waves, fires, floods and storms.
- **Water for open space** – Most of Council’s sports ovals and parks are irrigated with recycled water from Western Water and Coliban Water’s Waste Water Reclamation Plants ensuring open spaces can remain green and usable during dry conditions.
- **Support to farmers** – As mentioned above, Council is currently implementing a capacity building program for farmers aimed at promoting land management practices that reduce carbon emissions and build resilience to the changing climate. Council also partnered with Deakin University to prepare a Jobs for the Future report which, amongst other things, analysed how farming in the shire will need to adjust to the region’s changing climate.
- **Indigenous plantings** – Increased use of indigenous species for street trees and urban landscaping which are tolerant of drier conditions and enhance habitat values in urban areas.

## Opportunities for government support

*Ways in which the government can best support communities in their efforts*

Key initiatives that would support Council and the community in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts include:

- 1. Publicly acknowledge the climate crisis** - The global community has approximately ten years to take effective action to prevent catastrophic climate change. Some argue we have even less time. This needs to be publicly acknowledged by the State Government in order to raise awareness and facilitate action across the economy and community. Providing clear and consistent messaging about the urgency of the climate crisis is critical to motivating local action across all sectors, particularly when pitched as an opportunity to create a better future for current and future generations.
- 2. Resource State Government departments and agencies** – Acknowledgement of the climate crisis needs to be accompanied by commensurate resourcing of state government departments and agencies to not only take action directly, but also support local action and ensure local community-based activities are delivered in a coordinated, strategic and sustained manner. Relying heavily on volunteer organisations and supporting their efforts with ad-hoc competitive grants and pilot programs is not sustainable or sufficient to address the scale of action and behaviour change required.

In a crisis, local action should not rely on volunteers with varying levels of knowledge and expertise to compete for small amounts of funding for short term projects that seek to address the issues at hand. Alternatively, direct funding and partnership programs are more efficient, create certainty and deliver broader, more enduring outcomes. This could be achieved by:

- ✓ **Local climate facilitators** – employment local climate facilitators to work directly with communities to develop and implement local climate change programs and projects. These facilitator could be hosted at local councils, at regional greenhouse alliances, or at regional environment networks.
- ✓ **Local climate fund** – Empower local climate facilitators with sufficient funding to work effectively with local communities.

- 3. Resource local government** - Local government is well placed to support communities transition to a low carbon future. With dedicated resourcing, local government could coordinate local efforts and support capacity building and behaviour change. This could be achieved through funding for:
- ✓ **Climate Crisis Officers** – Employment of staff to work within local government to achieve emission reductions, as well as with the community to develop local action plans and coordinate efforts. This model could be similar to the approach adopted in the emergency management sector where the State Government funds Emergency Management Officers responsible for coordinating emergency planning, response and recovery activities.
  - ✓ **Community led climate change action plans** – Funding development of community led, local climate action plans that respond to local circumstances and need, and providing a base level of ongoing support throughout implementation of plans.
  - ✓ **Sustainable Design Officers** – Employment of staff to provide sustainable design advice within local government organisations and to the community. From Council’s experience, residents are keen to live in home with high environmental performance to minimise emissions while maximising comfort. However, there is a lack of objective advice about how to retrofit existing homes and how to design new homes and renovations that are energy efficient. Similarly, while Environmental Upgrade Agreements provide a useful funding mechanism for businesses wishing to reduce emissions, resources are required to promote the benefits of different sustainability initiatives to business.
  - ✓ **Extension Officers** – The agricultural sector plays a critical role in producing and / or sequestering greenhouse gas emissions. Farming is also one of the most vulnerable sector to the impacts of climate change. Opportunity exists to work with farming communities to promote animal and land management practices that reduce emissions from livestock, store carbon in soils, sequester carbon emissions through revegetation, while also building on-farm resilience to drier conditions and extreme weather. This could take the form of one-on-one advice as well as workshops and financial incentives. This function could be delivered by local government, catchment management authorities or state government departments and agencies.

Funding these initiatives internally can be prohibitive given the existing cap on rate increases and legislated responsibilities of Council, particularly in regional or rural councils.

- 4. Support Greenhouse Alliances** - Council advocates for increased state government support for existing Greenhouse Alliances such as the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance (CVGA). Council is one of 13 member councils of the CVGA, one of seven Victorian Greenhouse Alliances, which operate as formal regional partnerships of local government councils driving climate change action across 70 of the 79 municipalities across Victoria. Greenhouse Alliances work across networks, communities and partners to deliver regional mitigation and adaptation programs.

Support to the Alliances may be increased both directly, for example, funding to cover administrative costs of the alliances, thereby enabling member councils to retain funds that would otherwise contribute to membership fees, and indirectly, through increasing the amount of funds in grant programs. The Community Climate Change Adaptation (3CA) program was significantly oversubscribed, indicating the desire and scope for action by community groups, local councils, and partnerships. The delay in notifying successful applicants also may also restrict the time for project delivery, limiting the ability for the full potential of the funded projects to be realised and shared across communities.

Council also advocates for state government investment in establishing alliances in areas where none currently exist (for example, the Wimmera / Mallee). The Alliances provide an important support structure for local government and facilitate coordinated partnerships between state and local governments to deliver programs that facilitate community climate action.

- 5. Provide climate information at a local level** – While data and information is available for the State of Victoria, little information is available at the scale of a local government or locality. The following information would significantly enhance the ability of communities to motivate behaviour change within their community and prioritise local mitigation or adaptation efforts.
- ✓ **Community emissions profiles** - While Council could afford to have data (mostly from the ABS) analysed to obtain a high level emissions profile for the shire, not all local government councils can afford to undertake this work. The state government could direct that this information be provided to all councils, to be used as a communications tool and also to inform which sources of emissions should be targeted for action.

- ✓ **Future climate scenarios for local areas** - Council would like the state government to extend its Climate Ready Victoria work to provide climate forecast information at a more local scale (5km grids or finer), to enable more meaningful communications with the community. This is particularly important when working with different community sectors located at different altitudes within a short distance – for example, in the case of Macedon Ranges Shire, communicating climate forecasts and associated implications to food production relies on different data for landholders on the southern slopes of the Great Dividing Range compared to landholders located on the northern slopes, and different data for fire risk at 300m above sea level compared to 550m above sea level. The finer detail for climate forecasts is essential to enable meaningful communications to all sectors of the community.
- 6. Facilitate conversion of cost shared street lights** - Define a standard approach and funding model applicable to the Department of Transport (former VicRoads jurisdiction), Regional Roads Victoria, host distributors such as Powercor and local councils to facilitate the conversion of cost-shared public lighting to energy efficient LEDs. In the Macedon Ranges Shire alone, the conversion of 315 cost shared lights will reduce Council's corporate emissions profile by 1,490 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>-e over the 20 year life of the lights.
- 7. Upgrade the transmission network** - Facilitate upgrades to the transmission network to maximise opportunities for local renewable energy generation, including through roof top solar. At present, transmission constraints limit the ability to feed renewable energy into the grid, requiring building or facility owners to upgrade transmission lines or install costly safety meters.
- 8. Support local waste reduction efforts** - Support local community efforts to reduce waste (and the emissions associated with manufacturing and recycling) with state-wide policies and legislation aimed at phasing out unnecessary single use plastics such as water bottles and packaging.
- 9. Support organic waste processing** - Establish organic processing facilities at several regional locations across the state to reduce long distance transport of food and garden waste and avoid emissions associated with decomposition at landfill. This should be complimented with support to local initiatives for reducing and recycling organic waste, through providing incentives to hospitality and food outlets and community gardens for minimising and repurposing organic waste.

**10. Support low emission, resilient buildings** - Improving energy efficiency in the built environment represents a significant opportunity for emissions reductions by the wider community, and for ensuring buildings can perform well under changed climate conditions. These opportunities include:

- ✓ Increasing the minimum energy efficiency standard for new buildings and large renovations through the planning and / or building approvals process.
- ✓ Supporting low emissions construction materials, including supporting the low carbon cement industry through government sponsored road and infrastructure projects.
- ✓ Increasing the minimum energy efficiency standard for appliances.
- ✓ Introducing energy efficiency standards for rental properties and public housing.
- ✓ Funding sustainable design advisory services within local government.
- ✓ Continuing to provide financial incentives and support for installation of solar panels and energy efficiency upgrades across the residential and commercial sectors.

**11. Support low emission transport options** - Significant investment is required in regional areas where trains and buses are infrequent or non-existent, thereby entrenching car dependency for short trips. This needs to be complimented by investment in the electric vehicle industry and charging infrastructure to facilitate the switch away from fossil fuels.

**12. Support transitions in the business sector** - There is scope for business operations of all sizes to minimise the offsite environmental impacts of their operations and to transition to changed climatic conditions. Council would like to see the state government continue its support to the business sector through programs that direct energy efficiency in current operations, and provide additional programs that support businesses to transition away from fossil fuels (for example, converting from gas to renewable energy) and to transition to changing markets (for example, proving incentives or subsidies for local small scale economic development like clothes production).

## Best practice models

*Interstate and overseas best practice models that could be implemented in Victoria*

Council is not in a position to promote any one model from other state or national governments. Instead Council recommends that the Victorian State Government take a coordinated and holistic approach to facilitating climate change action in all community sectors, through streamlining initiatives and programs for Education, Engagement, Infrastructure and Regulation.

## Summary

In summary, Council encourages the state government to strengthen the foundation work in climate change action undertaken in the past few years through responding to and acting on the suggestions above.

Council looks forward to increased support from the state government to communities across the state, both through directly working with community sectors and through increasing support to local government councils, alliances and networks.