

# **TRANSCRIPT**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into Tackling Climate Change in Victorian Communities**

Melbourne—Thursday, 5 December 2019

#### **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

**WITNESS**

Ms Mary Farrow, Manager, Emerald Community House.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Mary. I just want to run through some important formalities before we begin. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to any comments made outside of 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, and you can check and approve it. 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 you please state your name and your title before beginning your presentation.

**Ms FARROW:** My name is Mary Farrow. I am the Manager of the Emerald Community House in Emerald, Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. We do apologise for running well over time.

**Ms FARROW:** That is all right. I get paid anyway.

**The CHAIR:** Very good. Over to you to give your presentation.

**Ms FARROW:** Thank you for inviting me to come to this. This presentation is brought to you by SDG two, three, four, five, seven, eight, nine, 10, 11, 13, 16 and 17.

**Mr FOWLES:** SDG?

**Ms FARROW:** SDG, the sustainable development goals of the UN. It is a big part of the work we do, so we start everything with that.

The climate change disasters and emergency management have been merging for some time, as we all know, despite the rhetoric to the contrary. Emerald Community House was one of the first community houses to win an award at the Fire Awareness Awards in 2010 after Black Saturday. We hold the most awards of a single not-for-profit organisation with five awards including best project in Victoria in 2014. This is important because we are feeling the impact of climate change in the Dandenongs, as you can well imagine. The Emerald SES, which is the only SES—or what would we call it, a garage or whatever—that supports the entire Dandenongs, is getting a brand-new building finally, but there is no solar on top of this great expanse of roof, which is crazy. I just wanted to stick that in there, because I was thinking about that.

We have also won a Resilient Australia Award in 2016 for our project, which is the Centre of Resilience, operating with a resilience framework in mind in everything that we do. We are one of the oldest community houses in Victoria, starting in 1977. Climate change back then was called greenhouse gases and various other things, so it is not like it is a new thing. As community development practitioners we facilitate and generate community actions and implement solutions to common problems like preparing to live in high-risk fire areas, supporting sustainable practices, community advocacy, flexible employment and support for women, and running community enterprises. Community not-for-profits like neighbourhood houses are really forced to run all kinds of community enterprises to just make the money to do the things that we need to do, especially the free stuff. There is a lot of free stuff needed now.

ECH is the largest funder of the Emerald Community House. I do not know if you have seen our presentation, but it has a nice big graph which I will just show to you. In blue, that is the funding that comes from the Emerald Community House that we generate. In the orange is from the Department of Health and Human Services, and in the little grey area there is the department of education, because we do adult education, including permaculture training. The council is 2 per cent. So there is quite a variety of funding that community houses live with, but that is where we are at.

It occurred to me this morning as I was thinking about this about what Greta had said about, 'I shouldn't be here, I should be in school'. I kind of felt like, 'You know what? I shouldn't be here dealing with this and talking about this', because we have a lot of demands on us to support child care; disability; hungry and unemployed people; family violence issues; homeless women who need help; ageing, isolated people and other priority groups, yet we are having to set strategies now for climate adaptation and strategies for our own organisation and our own business to make sure that we can survive and keep running. I am not going to cry or anything like that, but she made that point, 'I shouldn't even be here', and I thought we should be doing our regular thing and this stuff should be happening and being led by the State. So I want to say that eco-anxiety—

**Ms GREEN:** Sorry, Mary, with the greatest respect, I think we are trying to do that, and that is why we have invited you here, because we want to learn from you. I am sorry, but—

**Ms FARROW:** Do you think that I am saying that you are not running it by the State?

**Ms GREEN:** No, I just thought you were saying the State should be running it, and so I thought—

**Ms FARROW:** No, I am saying that that is where the leadership should come from. It is not coming from the Federal Government.

**Ms GREEN:** Oh, okay. Yes.

**Ms FARROW:** Sorry if you thought that I was having a go at you. There are gaps there that need to be addressed, and I am here to talk about those—

**Ms GREEN:** And we appreciate it.

**Ms FARROW:** We should not be trying to figure out how we can help Emerald survive, yes? I do not mind participating. I do not mind even doing what we are doing, but we are doing it because we do not see it happening around us and we are not getting any leadership from the Federal Government.

That eco-anxiety is really running high. People are feeling quite stressed. Their mental health is really quite frayed. Ordinary people feel helpless, leaderless and negative, and they are trying to respond to the impending threat they are feeling every day because it is everywhere, isn't it. And it is not only that; it is everything else that is going wrong in the world which we are hearing about all the time, so anxiety is running very, very high. We see this in parents coming to pick up their children from child care, how just one little thing can really set them off because they have just driven for 2 hours and now they have got to go and get food and there is all the stresses that are happening.

We are trying to help people through our own local leadership to exercise that need to do something, because you cannot do anything about it globally, but locally we can try to do something. We try to change their mood, because that is about all we can do in some instances. The flat-earth approach from the Federal Government is exacerbating the problem. We can only look to the State to set a serious agenda in a sweeping manner. That is what I am talking about. I know you have been talking about it for a while. We have had numerous guidelines. We have applied for all the grants. We have not gotten any of them, but that is okay because we end up doing it anyway. But there is a structure here. We are hoping to see more action and start to move on from the guidelines and the frameworks.

Emerald is a self-declared solar town, generating up to 150 kilowatt hours just inside the business area alone, with a total of 594 solar systems in the township. In the town those 150 kilowatt hours come from six community organisations, 12 businesses and seven council/government sites. That is quite a healthy number there considering that they all did not get together and say, 'Okay, let's build this thing'. That kind of local investment builds our resilience against power outages caused by regular destructive winds, storms, bushfires and even load shifting or outages because of the fire risk. That is a really important thing. We have seen what has happened in California. I am from California. My son just flew over there—the day that they knocked the power out—about a month ago for a holiday. While he was on the plane two million people got their power turned off just because of fire risk. Of course the fire started and calamity ensued, but I have to say I felt that he was better placed than most Californians to address it because he is from here.

We restored an old bakehouse, which is the property of the Commonwealth Bank, and it is an off-the-grid solar generator, basically, in the town. It has got solar power with a generator, with a battery backup, and it works off the grid, first of all, because we could not get power to it. There were all kinds of rules where you could not go through the bank and you could not get a trench in and all that stuff, so we thought, 'Right, we're going to do this'. The Federal Government contributed \$15 000 towards that and we put in the other \$8000. This is coming from a not-for-profit place that runs child care, adult education and all that kind of stuff. It is a lot of money to start coming up with all the time. But we are putting our money where our mouth is, and we advocate that others do the same. This bakehouse is being used for different activities—adult education. The council was the first tenant to rent it, as a music residency, which was great because then we got a bit of income out of that, and that is the idea. But having a relationship with the Commonwealth Bank, that is a really good thing to do because they do not work with the community much, so this is a learning thing for them. I am not talking about the local bank; we are dealing with the headquarters. They have never seen us. They have never been to that bakehouse. They have only dealt with us on the phone and email, yet we have gotten a building from them. The building cost us about \$50 000 to renovate—our own money, not the bank's money—and we have the solar on top of it. So it is completely restored to the 1914 building. It has got a heritage overlay on it.

Our 12 000 litres of water storage allows us to have emergency water and to water the garden and reduce our water usage. We head off food waste to the tip by receiving food from Woolies that would normally go in the bin. We have been doing that for seven years and providing regular community dining to people. We practise community dining because one day we know we are going to have to do it for real. We supply free food through the Foodbank—we go and pick up food twice a month—to the community, to anyone who needs it, no questions asked. We actively participate in the development of the Resilient Melbourne strategy as well, based on our initiatives.

Our solar shade shelters—this is the latest thing that we are doing, where we applied for a grant to put in shade in our playground. Three times we did apply to the State for shade grants. Three times we got knocked back. It was a little bit sad because they said we were not in a priority area. We thought, 'When are our kids going to have priority?'. Then the next request would come out to apply again for the second round and the third round, and every time we got knocked back. So we thought, 'Okay, to heck with that'. So we applied to the council for a capital works grant to put in two big shade structures with solid roofs, and we are going to put solar on that. So that sun that is damaging the kids is going to build power for us, and there will be a battery with that too. That adds to our little precinct there. It has the medical centre in the middle, the community house on one side and the old bakehouse on the other, right in the middle of Emerald, the largest town in the Dandenongs.

We intend for our services and programs to keep going, where safe and possible, in the advent of climate-extreme impacts, not to close down. The practice is to just say, 'Oh well, the power has gone out. I guess we go home. The computer doesn't work'. Well, let us put some things in place so we keep going. The last power outage we had, during that high-risk fire day a week ago or 10 days ago, knocked out our UPS that supported our file server—it had finally taken as many hits as it could get—so we will get another one of those. But we have a backup mobile to act as a modem, so when the power goes down—we think about these things, because we live there; we all live there, we do not live somewhere else.

We are one of the largest employers of women in the area, especially those over 50. That is an important number considering what happens to a lot of women in the homeless situation. Keeping them working, earning and contributing to their super is an important responsibility, and I do not think enough talk is happening about the impact of climate change on jobs and income when businesses have to close because of extreme events. Because there is a domino effect, you know? If I close the community house, then all these parents and their child care is not going to happen; all my people are going to go home, they are not going to get paid; and the whole system starts to fall apart. And people begin to get a bit jittery when they see us close, because they know we do not close for just about anything; we are practically open 24/7.

So in asking for information from the community, you said, 'What actions are being taken to mitigate severity and adapt to current and future impacts?' Well, we know we can look forward to longer and more frequent power outages, roadblocks, food scarcity and greater demand for the care of children—longer periods to take care. We added half an hour either side of our child care so that parents did not have to stress so much to try to get home to pick them up. You cannot get back at 6 o'clock; we did not charge them. It costs us money, but it

was not about that; it was about getting them to kind of relax and not think, 'I'm going to have to pay an extra—', whatever they think they are going to have to pay for a penalty, which we have never charged them, ever.

Employment security, climate-driven disasters, like fire and super storms—look what happened to Sydney. They are still out of power, aren't they? Those people did not expect that, that storm coming in. How long did that storm last—what, 15 minutes? There were days and days and days of power outage. I know people can get used to not having power for awhile. That is all right. That is good for them to do. But we think that there can be a lot of things done to increase power availability by having renewables, battery backup, solar and other options. Because we all rely on power to get our emergency information, and everybody gets referred to the app and all that stuff and then guess what? It is the first thing that goes, every time.

Ten days ago it was the last thing that went, after we had all the fires around Emerald coming from every different direction. Then we had the thunderstorm asthma warning. Then we had the road closure warning because the trees were down. And then the power outage went when the thunderstorm hit. So that is like, 'Okay, there you go; that's the four horsemen of the apocalypse for that day'. We did not stop running. We still had the child care going. We just watched. It was almost like playing a video game: 'What's happening next? Keep things moving. Okay, that's broken now. Get the cell phone out. Whatever it is, bring it on'. But that is how we kind of look at it because we think about it a lot. When the storm warnings come out in the hills for high winds and damaging winds we put out a message on our Facebook. We do not say, 'Okay, look at the website. Look at what's happening'. We just say, 'Charge your rechargeables'. Everybody knows what that means. Nobody wants to get stuck in a house with a child with a screen that does not work, so they make sure they act.

So how can we mitigate severity? Let us start with increased support for the installation of solar with battery backup so that services do not have to close when the power is out. I went to an RMIT workshop some years ago, which made me start thinking about this—this is how we started going. The question, 'What happens when the power goes out?', was to these primary care services—groups that were looking after people with disabilities or various other things. And they all kind of looked at each other and said, 'Well, we just close up'. And I thought, 'No. No, man, you got to keep going. You can't just close up because of that'. So it is about how you figure out how to keep going, and there are loads of ways we can do that in our own businesses and in our own community organisations—keep going because that sends a signal to the community that it is not so bad; we are still open. We know that that is the symbol of recovery—when things start to open. We are not going to try and be nurses or to save people's lives or run into the streets with wheelchairs—we will just run the child care. We will just keep the kitchens going and keep employing my women, because they are going to need those jobs. We do not talk about what happens in disasters. If you look at Kinglake and all of the things that have happened, we do not talk about, 'Well, what do those people do the next date of their mortgage?'. There were people that had to stop working for months and months and months. We are at the edge of problems right now with income and people surviving, and then all of a sudden they cannot work. So my thing is to make sure they can keep working. If they want to work and it is safe to work, make sure that they have got a workplace, make sure we have got money that we can pay them and make sure we keep going—support the parents.

So this is the thing: include generator backup with rechargeable batteries. If you have a generator, you can recharge your battery. This should be part of these packages. It is our model and we want to get a generator and to get it on a trailer, because we have got three buildings. We do not need to have three generators—let us get one on a trailer and we will take it a step farther: we will go to the local petrol station, who has not got a generator. We had a business discussion in town about what to do if the power goes out, and all the businesses said, 'Well, we'll get a generator', and it was like that was the end of the meeting. I thought, 'Okay, what happens when the power goes out and the petrol station hasn't got a generator', which he did not. So I went down and talked to him and I said, 'You haven't got a generator, have you?', and he goes, 'No, no. I lose \$8000 a day when the power goes out'. I said, 'All right, we'll get a generator, we'll put it on a trailer, we'll come down here, you can run your business during the day, and we'll go back and charge our batteries at night'. This is the flexibility of the kinds of things that would happen when a disaster happens. But put it on wheels—do not make us drag this thing. You see these women dragging generators out from building to building. But guess what? When we tried to apply for that to our local council as part of our solar package, they said 'No, you can't have a generator on wheels because that's a portable device. It has to be in concrete.' I thought, 'Oh, for crying

out loud. All right, we'll get one for nothing somewhere'. Anyway, that is really important. Somebody has got to have some generators. You cannot get fuel for your generator if the petrol station has not got fuel, so forget your generator.

Maintaining food stores within the community is a really important thing. There are churches who do that kind of stuff and we do all of the non-perishable stuff. We have got perishable stuff too, but if we have got a generator and a battery and solar, well, that is okay, we will still run them or we will start cooking.

The other thing is—I do not know if it has been discussed much—electric buses. In the Dandenongs we have such limited transportation, and the system is built that way because it was never intended to develop. We held a transport summit at the community house with Yarra Ranges and we had 15 different groups who are involved in transport, including a Yarra Ranges councillor, and what we came up with after talking about how the problem has been going on in the Dandenongs forever—where people cannot get anywhere and the kids suffer from that, they are quite isolated from that and they stop going to school because they cannot get to school—is that we need some kind of shuttle. We need some kind of shuttle that the community can run, and it can just go around to Olinda, Belgrave, Emerald, Monbulk and round and round and round. We said, 'Let's get an electric one and let's provide an electric power point.' We could do that. We need a bus, but we could run it. If we have to buy it, it is going to be hard, but if you think about these things as pilots, it is like, 'Well, we could run that', and maybe we could solve that problem.

You could solve a whole lot of other problems too, like kids not being able to get home after parties. That is important. My son told me, when I asked him about that, he said, 'Well, we can't get a taxi because we might be in an area that doesn't have the network, and we can't get Uber because there's too many of us', and so he said—and this was quite staggering—'So we're forced to consider getting into a car of somebody that we shouldn't get in'. Wow. Okay, well I put that on my list to bring to you today.

Encourage the development of centres of resilience: we could do this, you know. If an organisation wants to commit to resilient strategies, we will say, 'Put the strategy into how they are going to operate'. Yes, they are doing all their other regular things, whether it is the RSL or the footy club, but let us see some resilience components in there as to how they operate with their members and with the community—you know, how they network. You could do that in grants. I mean, when we respond to grants, we have got all these hoops to jump through: all the groups that we have to tick off, all the criteria. It would cost you nothing to put that into a grant. You could still give away the same money, just make us work for it. For some of us it will not mean any extra work, but it will be recognition that this is important to you. It is important to us, and we can deliver.

Require mobile phone service providers to have longer backup power provisions so that we do not lose communication when the power goes out. Do you know how long the generators last for the mobile towers when we have a power outage? Four hours. That usually happens in the afternoon, and then it usually all goes dark at 5 o'clock if it is winter or whatever, and then we have nothing. Well, can't we have a little bit longer? Just require them to do it. Make a rule that says that you have got to have a solar backup or something. If people can communicate, they can start to take care of themselves. They know where they are going. They can check on what is happening, they can check on their neighbour, they can check on their roads. They can do all those things. You take that phone away—see, you have got that one on your lap. It has not left your leg since I came in here.

**Mr FOWLES:** To take notes on it.

**Ms FARROW:** I am not complaining; I am just saying we all know where our phone is. You lose your phone, well, you do not exist. You do not know what to do. You do not even know your kid's phone number because it is all in there on a button push. So if we could keep those going longer, that would allow people to either leave, get out, prepare. I know I am talking about disasters, but this is what climate change is bringing to us. This is the reality at the coalface down in the trenches.

All right; I will go through these quickly. 'How can government best support organisations?' Fund or match funds of community groups that have a strategy to support their community and are using renewables. Look for that. Look for groups that are already doing something. Often with grants it says, 'Okay, this grant is for new things, not for if you're already doing it', and we all go, 'Tsk'. There are a lot of groups that are doing stuff and

that started it on their own—put it together and scraped their money together. But now they have started it, they are eliminated right at the get-go—pipped at the post. There are some grants that are starting to show up like that. They say, ‘Well, this is if you have an ongoing project and you need this or that’. These groups, maybe they only one need component or one thing, and all of a sudden—

They do not want to be hanging off you guys. They want to be on their own and be proud and renewable and off the grid or whatever it is. Help them achieve that and help them start to feel good about what is going on, because that is the kind of thing that starts to change how people feel.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Mary, I am happy to give you another 5 minutes. We have got some of these dot points that you have made in your submission. So if there are particular salient points you want to touch on, that would be really handy for us.

**Ms FARROW:** Okay. Let me just look. I have not looked into wind power that much, but I think that a lot more can be done with that. Heck, we could put a turbine on the community house in a New York minute. We do not have any residents around us to complain. It would be great, right on the main road. The wind that blows and takes the power out—power the thing. Look, I will not go on anymore. You probably do not have any questions.

**The CHAIR:** Your submission has been very detailed, and thank you for that. Colleagues, I do not have any particular questions because of the quality of the submission.

**Mr HAMER:** The only one that I was going to raise is obviously Emerald and the Dandenongs in general is a very fire-prone area. Just wondering about what you might call the fire refuges and I suppose the extent of those and whether they need to be increased, because you talked a lot about—

**Ms GREEN:** Paul, do you mean refuges or places of last resort?

**Mr HAMER:** Well, you probably clearly should define what the difference is.

**Ms GREEN:** I live in Diamond Creek.

**Ms FARROW:** Okay. So they are quite controversial, these places of last resort. I can tell you, from the community standpoint what I see in how people communicate on Facebook, as we manage about six Facebook sites and we are members of others, is that once you establish that, they go, ‘Okay, that’s good, that’s where I am going’. No matter what you call it, I do not care what you want to say—‘If you go here, you’re going to die’—it does not matter; they are going to go wherever they want to go. So our job is just to kind of keep giving them the message, to say, ‘This is when you should leave: when the power goes out’. That is what we tell them, ‘When the power goes out, get in your car’, because now you are not going to know what is happening. When the change comes through they go, ‘Oh, it’s all fine now’. I say, ‘Well that’s actually when things happen’. So we jump in there and put those messages out there to try to educate them, and the community kind of self-educate each other. They do check with each other what they are doing. But it is getting those kinds of small, incremental details—not the whole bushfire planning thing, just like, ‘Pay attention to this. When the power goes out, that’s your signal to go if you haven’t gone’.

**Ms GREEN:** I just want to say thanks, Mary. You are well known. I live in Diamond Creek and I had 48 hours without power last week, so I was identifying with everything you said. And having been a veteran of Black Saturday, it is quite well known the great amount of work and leadership that the Eltham Community House has taken—

**Ms FARROW:** It’s Emerald Community House.

**Ms GREEN:** What did I say?

**Ms FARROW:** Eltham.

**Ms GREEN:** I am sorry; I am overtired. I meant Emerald. But yes, particularly getting that 2010 award, many of us have looked to you since then. And I think some of the other places we have been and many other

people who have made submissions have talked about the importance of neighbourhood houses and—even those that are not doing what you are doing—the potential.

**Ms FARROW:** Sure. I think that we could be asked to deliver on that. I think we should. I think it should become a part of the next round, because they are kind of grabbing that space and saying, ‘Well, we’re working this space’. So let us put it in the DHS agreement the next time round, add it to the adult education so that it is recognised that community houses are doing this kind of work—then make us work for it, yes? Because it will raise the bar for some that are not doing it, and for those that are it is like, ‘Oh, this is excellent’. Because just that little bit of ‘You’re doing the right thing’ means a whole lot to groups who are pedalling hard and think that nobody is paying any attention. And then they will go forever.

**Ms GREEN:** And I will undertake to send to you the guidelines from the Assistant Treasurer about solar on government buildings for the SES, because I think he sees it from the climate change perspective. But also, they have done a formula about what the ongoing recurrent expenditure is, and the payback is much better and—

**Ms FARROW:** Well, what a great resource in the town.

**Ms GREEN:** It does seem ironic, given the SES are the ones that are responding to all of those events.

**Ms FARROW:** Yes. We want to look after them.

**Ms GREEN:** I will undertake to send you those guidelines, so you can continue the conversation with them and maybe the emergency services building authority.

**Ms FARROW:** Yes, of course. I will just leave a couple of copies of *Emerald Messenger* for you, because we write about this stuff every month.

**The CHAIR:** Might be best to hand that to the secretariat.

**Ms GREEN:** And well done on getting the Commonwealth Bank to do something good, because we have heard about lots of bad stuff they have done.

**Ms FARROW:** Well, listen, we have got more in charge for them, don’t you worry. Putting that kind of money into their building kind of puts them on the back foot. It is a good thing for us to invest in that. We will be coming for it in a couple of years.

**Ms GREEN:** I have just looked up the size of it on Google maps. Well done.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Mary, we very much appreciate your time.

**Witness withdrew.**