New Submission to Inquiry on Growing the Suburbs: Infrastructure and Business Development in Outer Suburban Melbourne

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Inquiry Name: Inquiry on Growing the Suburbs: Infrastructure and Business Development in Outer Suburban Melbourne

Mr Mike Dwyer

SUBMISSION CONTENT:

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I moved to Mernda in 2009 with my then 40-week pregnant wife. We'd built a new house, like most folks in the area, and thus were part of making the City of Whittlesea the fastest-growing municipality in the country.

When we were looking at places to live, we were interested to see that the Melbourne 2030 boundary was barely more than a kilometre from our back fence--and yet, there were plenty of developments going on beyond it. "Hang on," I thought, "if Melbourne isn't supposed to extend beyond this boundary until after 2030, what's going on here?"

I discovered later that the Melbourne 2030 boundary was being pretty much ignored.

So we moved into the fastest-growing municipality in the country, where the pace of development was already outstripping government projections, and where--it rapidly became clear--young families were moving in in droves.

So now, in the City of Whittlesea in 2011, we have a growth corridor that has grown faster and further than people expected, and we have a large proportion of the population currently in the process of having children. The Council has done a great job of keeping up with this pace of development, with new services being offered in new places, and the duplication of Plenty Road
has been done ahead of when it is desperately needed, which is a nice change.

But collectively, we’re starting to worry about how our kids are going to be schooled.

My children are now 2 years old and 3 months old. I am investigating schools for them, so I can enrol them at a private school, in case that becomes valuable for them as they grow up. I was surprised to hear that the government is not considering the construction of any new schools in our area, because I can tell you they are going to be sorely needed in 5-6 years’ time. Already members of my wife’s mothers’ group (I can call it that because none of the husbands attend with any regularity) are planning to send their kids to school in Eltham, Arthur’s Creek or Greensborough because the schools currently available in the local Mernda/Doreen/South Morang area are simply too crowded.

A quality education is the most important part of a child’s young life, and none of us are keen on denying our kids that education because of government short-sightedness. In fact, there’s an empty site in our own estate, waiting for a school to be built on it. If construction doesn’t start soon, we’re going to have to begin thinking about schooling our kids in Eltham too.

Maybe you know something we don’t, about the size of the age cohorts that are expected to come through the local schools over the next 15 years, but if that’s the case then please share it with us.

As well as education, the other item of public policy that is prominent in conversation around our area is public transport. The Epping train line is finally being extended to South Morang, which is a great start—but it was only sustained pressure from lobby groups that forced the government to bring forward the construction of the station from 2021 to 2012, and the extension of the line to Mernda is still not slated to happen until 2027.

Frankly, this is unacceptable.

The population of our local area by 2027 will be something like 40,000 people. If even a fraction of them want to get on a train and go to work in the city, the 500 or so car spaces at the South Morang train station is not going to be enough. Where I live in Mernda, the trip to the South Morang station will be around 10-12 minutes by car when traffic is light, or around 20 when it’s heavy. For those living further afield in Doreen, you’re starting to push half an hour—which is why many of them have said they will continue to use Watsonia station rather than the new South Morang station.

What mystifies most of us is why the extension of the rail line is being celebrated as the first extension of Melbourne’s rail network since the 1930s. That’s not something to celebrate, that’s something to be ashamed of.

As for other factors, the centralisation of business in Melbourne’s CBD has meant that vast swathes of Melbourne’s population have to travel in to the CBD from outlying suburbs in order to work. This has led to increased congestion on our roads and public transport system, has reduced the liveability of many suburbs on the fringes of the city (because there is a relative lack of local employment opportunities), and threatens to create a monolithic herd culture of drones who mindlessly make their way in to the CBD of a morning and mindlessly make their way home of an evening.

I don’t know about my fellow workers, but I want to see my daughters, so I start work at 6am and finish at 3pm. Then I at least get to have dinner with the kids before they go to bed. I’m
lucky enough to work in a business where I can do that, but I know many aren’t. The problem is that if I wanted to use public transport the whole way in to work, and arrive before 7am to take advantage of the earlybird transport deal, I have to leave at 9pm the night before, and then sleep at work after I arrive at 11pm. There are no bus services in the area that link up properly to the train stations.

And I know that several decisions have been made recently to relocate government offices to outlying suburbs, or regional areas. But so long as government is viewed as private business’s poor cousin when it comes to efficiency and effectiveness, very few are going to pay attention.

So yes, I am saying that to solve the problem of fast-growing suburbs, one component of the solution needs to be a review of the effectiveness of performance management across all levels of government. Because all these things are interlinked and trying to deal with them any other way only invites a band-aid solution that fails to address the core problem—a lack of faith in government effectiveness and competence. And accepting that as the status quo is just admitting defeat.

Governing is hard. You can’t please all of the people all of the time, but you sure can annoy most of them most of the time. But that doesn’t mean that you should stop trying to do better.

The last topic I want to bring up is telecommunications. I am operating under the impression that the NBN will solve a lot of the problems I am about to relate to you, but nonetheless feel it’s important you know them.

When we moved in, we looked to obtain an internet connection. Being that we were in a brand new area, we thought this would be easy. After all, internet access has been labelled a basic human right.

We couldn't have been more wrong.

Telstra—the only company with any infrastructure in the area—was obstructionist and its our personal belief that they operated illegally when they told us that we could have an internet connection so long as we had our account with Bigpond and not a reseller. That being said, it still took eight months for us to get our internet connected—before then we had to rely on mobile wireless broadband, which dropped out for periods of 1-2 hours at a time, 2-3 times a day. The woeful levels of planning and service from Telstra weren't surprising, but they were frustrating.

So that's it. In short, in our area we need:
--more schools
--a train station in Mernda
--the NBN.

I'm sure some of this is starting to sound to you like you're dealing with spoiled children who just want want want without any concept of the balancing act that is required for good governance. But guess what? Balancing things isn't our job, it's yours. And beyond that, it's your job to communicate the balancing act to us, the public, in a way that we understand your conflicting obligations and are happy to wait our turn.

Parents do it with little kids all the time, it shouldn't be that tough to talk to a bunch of adults. You just need to do it more clearly.