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

Under the terms of reference you are required to consider and report to Parliament on growing the suburbs.

Firstly when looking at development particularly in the urban outer suburbs, we must look at sustainable development. So what is sustainable development? We believe this was very eloquently put in their Mernda Strategy Plan,

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development is not a fixed state of harmony, but rather a process of change consistent with future as well as present needs”. (Mernda Strategy Plan 1992, page 6)

In outer NE Melbourne we have two bioregions covering this area they are:

1. Plains grassy woodland (Whittlesea)
The most endangered in the Port Phillip Region with less than 5% remaining?

2. Dry Foothill Forest (Nillumbik)
The least endangered in the region with over 70% remaining since European settlement.

The reason for the difference is:

Grassy Woodland can be used for food production.

Dry Foothill Forest is unproductive for farming.
Ministers and planners must look to the future, not only with the view to saving threatened eco-systems but also for saving ever reducing farmland which is used to sustain the population.

The biggest anomaly in the Victorian planning system is in the 1967 map (MMBW The Future Growth of Melbourne) which clearly shows the growth corridors to be located along existing rail lines. The north east corridor (Whittlesea) is shown with a railway line ‘disused’. (map 1 of 6 shows the Whittlesea rail line as disused, all other maps show the Whittlesea rail line wrongly as an in use line. The Whittlesea line was closed in 1959, 8 years before these maps were produced. The later 1974 map also shows the Whittlesea rail line as in use. The Hurstbridge railway line has been in continuous use since opening in 1912, and is still in use today.

**Neither the 1967 and 1974 maps shows the existence of the Hurstbridge railway line.** (see attached)

Also, the former planning authority, ‘the MMBW’ planned and extended the Eltham main sewer through to Hurstbridge in 1986. Optimising the use of existing sewage infrastructure makes sound financial sense. The MMBW installed this sewer costing the Victorian taxpayers millions of dollars to sewer the Hurstbridge area. The MMBW clearly intended for development to occur along this rail line.

I now address the particular issues, mainly relating to Nillumbik:

(a) Identify existing public and private Infrastructure provision, including schools, hospitals, commercial and shopping precincts, transport and roads. Telecommunications, water and power;

**Medical:** Nillumbik is well serviced by doctors, pharmacies and related services. These services are supported by the nearby Austin/Repat hospital and Northern Hospital both with 24 hour emergency services.

**Schools:** There are a number of public schools, both primary and Secondary, in addition we have a number of private primary and secondary schools. Tertiary education to service this area is nearby: La Trobe University RMIT University (Bundoora Campus), Preston Institute, and the Northern TAFE College (NMIT).

**Transport:** The area is well serviced by rail to Hurstbridge. There are several bus services available at Diamond Creek and Eltham to the major shopping centres of Greensborough, Northland, Doncaster and others causing retail leakage.
Nillumbik is at the western end of the Metropolitan ring road, allowing easy access to the airports at Tullamarine and Avalon, the ring road also provides easy access for freight services delivery to and from Melbourne’s docks.

**Commercial and Retail shopping:** Both commercial and retail shopping exists in Eltham and Diamond Creek. Both Major Activity Centres have two supermarkets and a small range of other retail shops.

Eltham has the largest light industrial area to the south. Diamond Creek has a smaller retail and much smaller area for light industry. This results in leakage to the Major shopping centres of Doncaster, South Morang, Northland and Greensborough.

**Telecommunications Water and Power:** These are well catered for; Nillumbik is transversed in several places by high voltage power grid. As for Telecommunication with the advent of mobile phones and satellite internet there are few if any restrictions on these services.

**Water:** Nillumbik is serviced from both the Yan Yean and Sugarloaf reservoirs. All major residential areas are connected to reticulated water.

**Sewage:** Eltham main sewer was extended to Hurstbridge in 1986; this covers all the major residential areas in Nillumbik.

**Gas:** Gas is available from Eltham to Hurstbridge.

(b) Assess the capacity of existing infrastructure to accommodate increased population growth;

**Medical:** As in any area of expansion medical services grow according to need.

**Schools:** Some schools in Nillumbik can be deemed at risk of closure due to low enrolments. The Wattle Glen Primary for example was at risk until Black Saturday when Strathewen pupils were temporarily located at the school. There is capacity within the Nillumbik schools network for students and expansion. As the current population is tending towards an ‘aging population’ the capacity within the current system will increase.

**Transport:** Nillumbik is in an ideal position for growth. The rail service is underutilised, and all cuttings and easements are in place to duplicate this line from Eltham.

**Roads:** The ring road is excellent, currently being upgraded, but the missing link needs to be completed from Greensborough to Ringwood and not the option discussed by the previous Labor Government through Banyule. The completion of the ring road from Greensborough to Ringwood, through Nillumbik would improve
our access to commercial areas to the East. This would also reduce traffic on the wider suburban road system and allow safe and efficient movement of goods and services, to and from the Port of Melbourne, and perhaps Hastings in the future.

**Commercial/Retail:** The current retail and particularly commercial areas of Nillumbik are not adequate. This is mainly due to Council’s reluctance to source and re-zone appropriate land. There are areas within Nillumbik that could easily accommodate this need and services such as water and power are readily available. As with new commercial areas anywhere some upgrading of roads would be required funded mainly by the developer at little or no cost to Governments. The lack of these areas is one of the excuses repeatedly used by Council to justify the large residential rate increases, yet Council are unwilling to address the issue.

**Telecommunications, water and power:**

The basic infrastructure is existing and is easily upgraded if required. Any upgrades including sub-stations, costs are met by developers.

**Water and sewage:**

Electricity, water, sewage are all currently available to Hurstbridge. The Eltham main sewer was extended to Hurstbridge in 1986 at huge cost to the Victorian taxpayer clearly to facilitate growth in this area where the heavy rail already existed.

(c) Investigate options, based on intrastate, interstate and international evidence, which reduces pressure on infrastructure and essential services;

Reducing pressure on infrastructure and essential services, international best practice and common sense is to fully utilise existing infrastructure.

We believe the current infrastructure in Nillumbik is vastly underutilised.

(d) Catalogue the skills mix of outer suburban residents to identify those areas with a skills shortage and provide options for skills training and retention, especially as it relates to both younger and semi retired people;

Nillumbik has wide range of skills, including, trades and professional living within the shire. According to statistics well over 70% of the workforce is employed outside the shire. (Nillumbik Council website Community Profile) This is due to a lack of opportunity within the shire. Unless we grow this trend will continue. Younger people are forced to look outside the shire to seek work and semi-retired peoples skills cannot be harnessed because of a lack of local opportunities here in Nillumbik.
The Council’s reluctance to address the issue of the lack of commercial and retail opportunities is one of the main reasons for this leakage.

(e) Examine the role of small businesses, local councils and community groups (such as rotary and lions clubs) in developing local expertise;

Small business and community groups cannot develop local expertise whilst the local council are proactive in restricting development, particularly commercial development. NSC repeats they are a no growth shire with a small rate base and little revenue available from commercial land. This claim is false and there are numerous examples of rejected opportunities, the most recent being the Planning Minister’s ‘Logical Inclusions’ initiative. Although the Minister’s letter to Councils’ asked councils to invite submissions and asked that Council interview landowners, Nillumbik took no submissions and conducted no interviews.

There have been detailed and exhaustive planning processes recommending some growth in this shire, to name a few:

The Diamond Creek Urban Growth Review Study 1998,
The New Nillumbik Planning Scheme 2000,
The Independent Panel ‘B’ recommendations
Ministers Thwaites recommendations

Nillumbik council has continually ignored recommendations and opportunities and the latest ‘logical Inclusions’ is just one more.

(f) Investigate the value of sister city relationships with key trade and innovation markets; and
(g) Identify local manufacturing capacity and highlight export development opportunities available for businesses operating in the outer suburbs.

There would be little if any value in Nillumbik trying to form a sister city relationship. These relationships are based on trade or tourism and Nillumbik has neither.

There are only a few small reception/accommodation venues, so we cannot attract large corporate seminars. There are no Hotels with associated accommodation to attract large groups of tourists. We are a drive through to other destinations of tourism, Nillumbik is not itself a tourist destination.

The lack of commercial areas limits attracting manufacturing even of a small scale.

Council is active in stifling development be it commercial or residential. Nillumbik has nothing to offer for a sister city relationship without some change.
Conclusions

Nillumbik has the infrastructure, rail, electricity, water, gas, sewage, to Hurstbridge with available capacity to grow the suburbs.

National and International best practice is to maximise current infrastructure wherever possible.

The opportunity to utilise skills of some semi-retired local businesses are lost due to a lack of willingness to increase economic growth.

Nillumbik is well serviced locally by health providers and schools. Wattle Glen Primary at the time of writing has a total of only 40 to 45 total student enrolments for 2012. They have capacity for 100 or more. By comparison Laurimar in Whittlesea has 9 new prep classes alone or around 200 just for prep.

There has been much emphasis over the years using a selected quote by Mr Hamer the then Minister for Planning made in a letter dated 3 May 1966, referring to his ‘vision’ of seeing growth areas “separated from the existing metropolis, and from each other, by broad tracts of open country, natural parkland and recreation space.”

The letter from Minister Hamer to the Town and Country Planning Board, copied with a cover letter to the then chair of the MMBW.

This ‘vision’ as the letter clearly states was only if the option of “satellite” towns of 100,000 people or more was to be adopted. That option was not selected. The letter also refers to only a 20 year time span from 1966.

Since 1966 we have had a number of major planning initiatives, the latest being Melbourne 2030. Melbourne 2030 was a debacle as the responsibility for planning was granted to each council. The majority of Metropolitan councils said no to Melbourne 2030. When the then Planning Minister put forward ‘initiatives’ such as higher density housing and building over rail stations, the councils, as the planning authority, rejected the plans and almost all were heard in the VCAT.

Melbourne 2030 was so bad that even the MAV, who represent local councils, are urging this Government to “take a whole of Government approach to avoid the pitfalls of Melbourne 2030”.
Recommendations:

That the State Government:

1. Set up a single planning authority for the whole of Metropolitan Melbourne.
2. Restrict Local Government’s ability to alter the intent of the VPP’s through such applications as overlays and 173 Agreements.
3. Fully utilise existing infrastructure here in Nillumbik.
4. Complete the ring road for Greensborough to Ringwood, through Nillumbik (as per the original plan)
5. Mandate that the protection of human life be the first priority in all Government Departments, including Planning, Environment, Roads etc.
6. Fully address the fire risk throughout Victoria. The risk in most cases is directly related to fuel loads.

Additional Comment: Bushfire Risk.

When discussing growing the outer suburbs we need to address the issue of fire.

Captain Cook’s diary records Australia as being ‘a land of smoke’ and many other early explorers and settlers made similar comments.

Aboriginal elder, Joy Murphy, the local Aborigines burnt on a regular seven year cycle in this district. Joy Murphy representing the Wurundjeri people said in her nationwide memorial speech for the Black Saturday victims said ‘this lack of prescribed burning was a serious and damaging neglect of the land’. We agree.

We cannot eliminate fire from the landscape, but we can control its intensity.

Low fuel loads=low intensity fires=controllable fires
High fuel loads=high intensity fires=uncontrollable fires

This State Government has begun to address the fire risk issue with the 10/30, 10/50 rule. We are concerned that Nillumbik Council will use 173 agreements on new developments to circumvent the new rules. To make Nillumbik and all other communities’ fire safe we need to limit council’s ability to alter the intent of the laws, perhaps by strengthening the VPP’s. If the protection of human life is to be the highest priority, the State Government must curb this council’s ability to dilute and negate State Government planning. This will make these outer suburbs safer and more liveable.

Brian Murray  Director
Appendix

Original map from 1974

The missing Hurstbridge rail line added and the disused rail line removed
STUDENT numbers are soaring at Wattle Glen Primary. Principal Gerard Fay said the school had already attracted 10 prep enrolments for next year, the second double-digit number in a row after 14 new students started this year. Mr Fay said the school, under threat of merging until last year, had an air of excitement as work was expected to begin on a $250,000 library refurbishment and classrooms extension this week.

Mr Fay said students were already enjoying a recently completed arts room and classroom. “It is exciting after what this school has been through,” Mr Fay said. “We are now going through some good times and, touch wood, it keeps on going.”

He said the school’s new-found bright outlook was reflected in the achievements of three junior school teachers who completed a 10-day Spalding Education International course during the July school holidays. “They made a huge commitment of their time and skill to ensure that they bring children the best education,” Mr Fay said. “It is the Rolls Royce of integrated language teaching and we decided that only the best was suitable.”