

CORRECTED VERSION

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Subcommittee

Inquiry into environmental design and public health

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Witnesses

Ms F. Horsley, manager, livability strategy, and

Dr R. Grenfell, strategic health adviser, Parks Victoria.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the hearing this morning, and thank you for the submission you have provided. As I told the previous witness, this hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege. What you say here is covered, but what you might say outside is not covered. A transcript will be supplied to you in about a week or so; you know the routine here. Could you please check it and if there are unresolved issues, please liaise with Keir so they can be sorted out as soon as possible.

Could we start with you providing your names, the organisation that you represent and your address. We will then go straight into your presentation. I ask that you allow us a good time to have some questions and answers.

Ms HORSLEY — My name is Fran Horsley. I am the manager, liveability strategy. I represent Parks Victoria.

Dr GRENFELL — I am Dr Rob Grenfell, and I am the strategic health adviser to Parks Victoria.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present the case of the value of environmental design to the public's health and wellbeing. We are clearly at a significant point in the history of Victoria with regard to the environment's impact, certainly after long periods of drought and the flood and the impacts they have had on our productivity, liveability and sustainability and also the resultant health facts as they have occurred. Fran is now going to make clear the historical part that Parks Victoria has played.

Ms HORSLEY — The role of public open space in contributing to community health and wellbeing is well founded in history both in evidence and in practice. The early reservations of parks and open space, both in Victoria and in New South Wales, were based on an understanding of the health outcomes as exemplified by the ring of parks that had been planned around Melbourne. In 1844 the proceedings of the Melbourne City Council stated:

It is of vital importance to the health of inhabitants that there should be parks within a distance of the town where they could conveniently take recreation therein after their daily labour.

In the declaration of the nation's first national park, the Royal National Park in Sydney, in 1879, with a population of 200 000 they declared the park as:

A national domain for rest and recreation. A sanctuary for pale-faced Sydneyites feeling the pollution, physical, mental and social, of the densely packed city.

In 1929 the Metropolitan Town Planning Commission report set what was ultimately a visionary environmental design blueprint for Melbourne that has created the legacy we enjoy today — the parks, bays, waterways, foreshore and recreation on our waters, which are loved and valued by the community. I have here the 1929 report, which is absolutely a planner's delight. It is an extraordinary blueprint for Melbourne. In fact at the time the commission argued:

Abundant evidence is available to substantiate the views of city planners, the medical profession and psychologists that proper outdoor recreation has the most beneficial effect on the health, morals and business efficiency of communities and consequently the national life.

Their task therefore at the time was not to prove the benefits but to decide upon how much public open space is enough to realise the benefits, which is a debate that still rages today.

Since that time the reports and findings of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works and the Land Conservation Council, now the VEAC, have also confirmed the health benefits of parks to society. Today, as Victorian cities and towns grow at unprecedented rates and as we become more urbanised and more alienated from our natural landscape and we are living and dying at greater rates than at any other time in history from non-communicable, lifestyle-related diseases, providing and investing in public open space is more important than ever. Our legacy is being formed by the decisions we make today. This is our moment in time to shape and define the form of the cities and towns that we leave for generations to come.

What is the role of Parks Victoria in this? As the manager of 19 per cent of the state's land mass, Parks Victoria has as its principal purpose the protection and improvement of this state's extraordinary network of parks and waterways for people forever. We have a history of delivery and achievement in environmental and community outcomes, and for more than 10 years we have been a world leader in the promotion of the Healthy Parks

Healthy People philosophy, which, put simply, makes the connection between community wellbeing and a resilient parks environment.

This underpins Parks Victoria's work and our entire approach to our work and, as of March this year, has been adopted as the central philosophy of the United States National Parks Service, the largest park management agency in the world. Parks Victoria has had a strong leadership role in open space planning for decades, particularly more recently in urban growth corridors for metropolitan Melbourne and in more recent years — which we will hear about soon — regional cities such as Geelong.

We have been integral to the shaping of social, economic and environmental outcomes through being part of the integrated approach to managing Victoria's biodiversity values. We have articulated a clear vision for community, industry and tourism outcomes around our bays and at a program level have looked for innovative opportunities to connect more people to parks and waterways to realise these health benefits. We have done Access for All Abilities initiatives, worked with culturally and linguistically diverse communities and newly arrived migrants, and we have a longstanding partnership with beyondblue in mental health and depression programs.

Dr GRENFELL — You may ask why a public health position is working for a parks management organisation! Probably in this inquiry you are actually aware of why that would happen. One translation of the evidence that Professor de Leeuw was enlightening us with in the previous presentation is to actually implement those research findings. The Healthy Parks Healthy People active in parks initiative is going to be launched in Geelong on 19 September. This is a groundbreaking example of a collaborative approach to creating a sustainable base for promoting physical activity in open space. The partners include Parks Victoria, the People and Parks Foundation, Medibank and the G21 organisation in Geelong. What we will develop is a replicable, evidence-based business model that can be extended across the state. Of interest here is the corporate sponsorship and the unanimous local and regional engagement the program is receiving from all of the five local government agencies, Barwon Health and the GP Association of Geelong, just to name a few. We have around 20 to 22 organisations that are involved in this program.

The evidence of health benefits of accessible open spaces is compelling. I will just point towards a recent paper in the prodigious medical journal the *Lancet* which demonstrates the link between health outcomes and access to open spaces. Basically the further you reside from an accessible open space the more likely you will suffer from ill-health and essentially a shortened life. There is a considerable body of research on the value of the environment and health from the population level in the provision of urban heat sinks and air and water purifiers to the individual level of the promotion of physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. The internationally renowned work by Deakin in reviewing the relevant literature about the health benefits of contact with nature and the park content is an excellent example of the research that has been occurring in this field.

On the community level I draw your attention to the VEAC report into metropolitan Melbourne and the recommendations and findings around the promotion of community strength and resilience by well-managed open space reserves, in particular the environmental hours for the community to interact — just consider the weekend activities in your own local parks from markets, sporting and cultural events, the casual kick of a ball to just simply laying on a rug and looking at the clouds. The essence of a community is the connection with your neighbours, friends and family, and you need open space to do that in.

Parks Victoria commissioned a report on the economic value of the three major national parks — the Grampians, Wilsons Promontory and Port Campbell — to the Victorian economy. In 2004 this was over \$500 million. This value to the community and the importance of parks to local business, tourism and hence community health and wellbeing has been tested following the recent floods of 2011 and the temporary closure of two of these parks. As you know, there has to be an investment in prevention of illness and promotion of community strength as a result of a considerable reduction in downstream health-care costs.

There are some opportunities we would like the committee to consider as a means of influencing planning design for health through open space. These are tangible, deliverable opportunities. The first is the linking of programs and services across an interdepartmental level and through all levels of government and to community-based groups. The Geelong project is an example of this. The range of areas includes transport, education, justice, health, immigration, industry and planning, and they are only a few of the organisations and sectors that we have in this project that we are launching. The second is normalising and mandating the

inclusion of health benefits of parks and open space into policy, planning and design, such as open space policy and strategy, and growth corridor and urban design guidelines.

Ms HORSLEY — The third is investing in the actual settings: the parks, bays and waterways. Healthy resilient parks have to be the foundation of what we are trying to achieve. There is a twofold approach. We need to revitalise the existing parks, many of which were created in the 1980s and 1990s and need to be upgraded to meet our contemporary lifestyles and community standards and expectations. In doing so this makes real economic sense because we will optimise the social infrastructure we already have. Secondly, we need to invest in the development of new parks that are being planned in our growing suburbs and regional cities such as Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong where 40 per cent of Victoria's growth outside Melbourne is being absorbed. This is health through environmental design that we can leave to future generations in the same way the commission did in 1929.

Dr GRENFELL — With an issue of such importance it requires overarching leadership. This could be explored in a number of ways, and Parks Victoria is certainly happy to be part of this conversation. For example, it may be appropriate for the health department to have a leadership role, or perhaps a Premier's council could provide overarching strategic vision, driving the linkages, policy imperatives and investment. We heard before in the previous submission about the limitations of putting this into just one domain for something that has such overarching inputs and requirements. The second part of that is the defining of tangibles or actual deliverables that occur at this space. Our attempt through Parks Victoria, with the stakeholder agreements that we have down in the Geelong region, demonstrates that you can put evidence into practice and that you can actually leave a legacy of enhancement of the community and its interaction with open spaces for the benefits on all those levels, as I have previously mentioned. We would like to conclude our brief statement here, thank you for your time and consideration and open for questions.

Mr ELSBURY — Just taking you up on some of the points you have made in your presentation today. You were talking about Wilsons Prom, the Grampians and Port Campbell as examples of great parks, but I think what we are talking about here are two different types of parks. You have the preservation parks and you have the recreation parks. Preservation is all good — you get to enjoy the Great Ocean Road, the Twelve Apostles and everything like that — but by the same token in urban areas there is the preservation of grasslands and the preservation of areas for golden sun moths, legless lizards et cetera. Do the two types of park not come into conflict in that particular area, especially when there is a developer who has to provide recreational space but then is forced to not develop a great big chunk of their investment because of a preservation concern?

Dr GRENFELL — There are two parts to that question. I will take one part, and I will let Fran answer the other because her area in Parks Victoria has been dealing with that. I guess one is: what does 'recreation' mean in the first instance? Most people participate in unorganised recreation — that is, being in preservation areas. It might be for bushwalking, although there are organised activities in those preservation parks. The tension when you come to urban fringe and urban design is what part do we have for organised recreation — that is, for sports or cultural events, such as the fantastic facilities we have down on the Yarra River. That is an example of higher order organised recreation through to that loose connectiveness that I am talking about — the capacity to meet your neighbours in the street and interact with a meaningful type of recreational activity such as sitting in a park, which is what most of us are very familiar with and engage in where possible.

Those are the two tensions that I think Fran has been working with in regard to Parks Victoria's role here. To add to that, our engagement in the Geelong region has been with local government on the perspective of all open space, because when we are talking about engaging people in activity in open space we are talking about every piece of asset in that region — that is, from national parks and state parks to small, urban-based, local government-managed areas as well.

Ms HORSLEY — We are well familiar with the continuum of parks. At one end of the spectrum in Parks Victoria perspective is Albert Park, which has something like 4 million visitors a year. It is a largely modified landscape, but in terms of city context it is still a natural setting even though in a biodiversity setting it is compromised. At the other end of the spectrum are the Grampians, the Twelve Apostles and Wilsons Promontory, where the size of the park is such that it is about preservation and protection of biodiversity. However, the visitation numbers are extraordinary. At Wilsons Prom, for instance, on any one night in a peak period you will have a little town of 4000 people. There are still extraordinary recreation opportunities, even in parks where the settings are such that protection of the biodiversity may be the primary or predominate purpose

of reservations. Those reservations then add to the liveability and other qualities that lead to health and wellbeing outcomes.

Mr ELSBURY — But each of those parks we are talking about are places to visit; they are not so much something in your day-to-day life. I am not going to go out to Wilsons Prom tomorrow because it is on the way to work; it just is not. I have another question along those lines, but please continue.

Dr GRENFELL — I guess in responding the Grampians are a good example of the community requirement for the asset. If you look at the towns of Stawell, Pomonal or Dunkeld, for instance, and the way that those towns have flourished — or struggled; Halls Gap certainly struggled through the period of the fires — and now, after the floods, the closure of a substantial part of the national park has meant that there has been a lot of business tension with regard to the capacity to go through those areas. It was demonstrated quite clearly at the start of this year that if it were not for the national park, they would not be the size that they are. I agree with you that Wilsons Prom is far distant from any supportive industry that occurs in that area. The Port Campbell National Park obviously has flourishing and supportive industries around it that have a lot to do with the national park being there but also the flow-on effect of accommodation and the like.

Ms HORSLEY — I will add just two points to that. Taking the broader perspective of wellbeing — health and wellbeing, mental wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing — the closure of Wilsons Prom has had a significant impact, and a lot of the feedback we are getting within Parks Victoria is that this is almost a mental health issue with people grieving about the loss of places they have a strong connection with. Similarly, we are working very strongly with indigenous communities in joint management to support the health and wellbeing of those communities so that they can be on country, not as visitors but as custodians of the land.

Mr ELSBURY — I have just one other question before I let my colleagues continue. Do you think that developers are getting better at urban design for people to have physical activity? People are looking for nice places to live. They are looking for the nice park out the front windows and they are looking for the ability to go for a wander down the street to the milk bar through a bushland setting. You see the advertisements on the television all the time. There are all these wonderful paths; isn't it a great place to live? Then at the end of it there is one place, Delfin; that is the sort of deal going on. Do you think they are getting better at it, or is it just the few that have enough money to go on television to show us how wonderful it is?

Ms HORSLEY — They are certainly cued into the advantages of public open space. You very rarely see the houses they are marketing; they are selling it on the public open space that comes within that setting. The importance is connecting those settings into local networks. Where we end up with closed communities where the setting is for that community, the interconnection, which is the partnership with local government and/or Parks Victoria, needs to be made. It is often the case that those assets are built and handed to local government, which then inherit an asset they may or may not be able to maintain to the same standards. But as a setting it is a wonderful quality, and people are responding and buying into those because they understand that when they walk out the door their transition, whether it is to shops or commuting to work, is through nature, through a landscape, which is a beautiful way to start the day.

Mr ELSBURY — What once would have been a D1 drain completely full of weeds is now a beautiful waterway with gum trees lining it all the way along.

Dr GRENFELL — I guess there is a tension between the commercial prospects of a development area and its liveability factors. Again one of the interesting things of bringing a health lens across to an environment organisation is looking at some of the research that goes with what a connected community means, also what ecological imperatives mean in a large-scale public health area and the value of green spaces within urban areas for actually promoting and supporting health. I am aware that the Department of Health will be making a submission to the inquiry on heat sinks and the necessity and the load that has on increased death rates through heatwaves and heat periods.

Of course that takes away the idea of a percentage of open land within development. On the developer's side you can understand that they need to make enough money to actually do it in the first place and then to move onto the next one, and that is to use all available land. With the percentages that you see in some of the urban developments you have to question where those percentages of open land are coming from and whether they are actually adding it in. However, in stating percentages of open land in a development, I cannot say to you that we

know what the ideal amount is for human health. No-one actually knows that. What we do understand through our program in Geelong is that in the suburbs of, say, Norlane and Corio, we have to take people out of their suburb to find the spaces for them to interact with because they are just not there. That is obviously not enough. However, those in the suburbs living along the Barwon Valley, for instance, only to look over the back fence and they have a wonderful park network that goes right through to the coastal areas.

Mr ELSBURY — Which is the crazy thing — it is over their back fence, not over their front fence.

Ms HORSLEY — Yes!

The CHAIR — So what are the health and wellbeing factors that are seriously considered when developing or revitalising parks?

Ms HORSLEY — There is the breadth of physical activity — so having active spaces — but also understanding, as we talked about, that a lot of the use of open space is informal. So it is about informal walking, resting and reading in nature. As to the mental health benefits, we have had programs with beyondblue that have been quite specific. There was the Feel Blue Touch Green program where we engaged with people with depression and other mental health issues by getting them into conservation programs. It has been clear that in conjunction with medical treatment where it is required these programs have benefited people with mental health issues.

There is also spiritual wellbeing — that real community connection and contact with the landscape. We consider that. When we do planning around parks it is not only just at locations starting with the nature-based setting, it is the diversity of experience within a community, so physical through to mental relaxation. We look for places with the appropriate sites to activate and have programs, whether it is mountain biking, rock climbing et cetera, and we also consider tranquillity. In the research the people that have been interviewed within parks have been asked, ‘What are you wanting? What is your motivation to go to a park?’. Even within Jells Park the common answer is to get away from it all. Within Jells Park, which would seem still very urban to us, people are saying, ‘I can be by the creek’, even if, from our perspective, it is not ecologically intact — it is a sense of, ‘I am in nature. I am away from it. I am away from assets, I am away from urbanisation and I can get the experiences I personally need’. Understanding personal motivations, understanding the barriers — we take that all into account when we are doing the planning for parks.

Dr GRENFELL — As to the driver for looking at what Healthy Parks Healthy People means in the sense of the healthy people part, if we look at the body of research we have sitting out there, we know that if we walk in the park, it is good for us mentally and physically. It is actually better than doing it in a gymnasium. We also know that about 75 per cent of us have the means to improve our level of physical activity but roughly 25 per cent of the population cannot do that for many reasons. It could be that they have a serious mental illness, they might be socially isolated for some other reason, they might have a disability that is precluding them from doing that. What we are doing with this model of active spaces is actually getting to those hard-to-get groups. We are running through about 10 subset groups. An example of that is serious mental illness. Where a group has previously been getting together for a day activity in a room, we are asking why they are not actually in an open space. So we are doing that. With teenage mothers for instance — we all know that if you are a teenage mother, you have committed to a life of poverty for yourself and your child — you can actually have a kindergarten in the bush. There are those types of engagements.

The other part is the stock standard prescription from a doctor. These are for specific groups that have chronic disease illness and about whom the doctor would actually make a value judgement. This person is unlikely to follow through with the interventions and doing those. Again, most of us will do what our doctor tells us to do for a while, and we may need to be motivated again obviously, but those things can be done. The design imperatives here are locality and also amenity.

The other part of that is, ‘What I do when I get to that park?’. If I have been distanced from open spaces or interaction with open spaces, I can be taken there but I do not know what to do. I could fear it. A very graphic example is recent immigrants to this country. In Geelong we are working with Karenni people. We are taking them into the park to introduce them to that. If we think of the history of the Karenni people, they have come from a forested area where they would either be blown up by landmines or killed by somebody. They will not

go into an open space lightly until those types of things are actually broken down. That is what I mean about amenity, but also people wonder what to do when they actually get to an open space — how do they use it?

It is a sad reflection on Australia that we have reached a point where we have to write physical activity guidelines for children. How did we get to this? That is the question I come back to. If we think of our own childhoods, for instance, it was hard enough for your mother to round you up to put you to bed at night. This is a perverse area where we are really at that flashpoint of how we actually shift this around.

Mrs PEULICH — There was no Facebook and internet.

Dr GRENFELL — On that side of technology, there is a wonderful technology for parks available through apps on smart phones. You can take children back to use that. There are commercial ones that are available and Parks Victoria has been involved in developing those — having fantasy excursions into parks so children under the age of four can participate in a story that is actually written around those parks. You can actually re-engage them through technology.

Mrs PEULICH — I think it is about engaging with nature, though, isn't it? I am aware of some initiatives where mothers, young children or babies were reintroduced or introduced to nature to experience natural play. I think that is more of a sad reflection that it is good that people are going back to — —

Ms HORSLEY — One quick point I will make in relation to the open space planning and the application of the Healthy Parks Healthy People philosophy is to move from the 'biodiversity or recreation' perspective of parks and make them part of life. You can commute to work through nature or work in a park. We are sitting in offices, but we have mobile laptops — why wouldn't we be out in parks? There have even been some programs recently with the Department of Justice and corrections people. They are actually oversubscribed for working at Lysterfield Lake Park. Often the retention rate is only 60 to 70 per cent. There is almost a waiting list of people under correction orders to work at Lysterfield park to get into working in parks because of the socialisation, mental health and wellbeing. Parks are very much about everyday life and not just about weekend recreation opportunities.

Mr TEE — In your presentation at the end I think you read out a number of recommendations. I know it is in the transcript, but it would be helpful if you could send those to us so they just do not get lost in the transcript.

Ms HORSLEY — Yes, certainly.

Mr TEE — Because I thought they were quite helpful. The point is I suppose that in many ways we are losing the battle. I think it was the VEAC report that came out last month that showed that for a lot of suburbs there is a very small amount of green space and that small amount of green space is actually shrinking. We are currently reviewing the green wedges to look for development opportunities. In a sense we are going the wrong way. I am wondering should we, as part of those reviews, be recommending that the sorts of recommendations you have put forward be included — that is, when you are reviewing green wedges you do it on the basis of what community space is available, what access there is to it, and if you take that out of the equation, what do you have left for those communities? Is that what you are saying in terms of trying to rework and rethink about how we look at things like the open space?

Ms HORSLEY — One of the brilliant outcomes of the VEAC report is that it has given us a measurable benchmark. There has been a policy of no net loss for some years under the previous government, but in terms of being able to measure that no net loss, there has not been a benchmark to do so. The open space planning that we did in both 2002 and the one we were preparing under the previous government — Linking People and Spaces — assessed on a network-wide perspective the haves and have-nots in relation to where open space is and made recommendations based on whether it is parks or trails, where new trails need to be, where the revitalisation of the existing parks needs to be. There is considerable amount of work that has been done. That work was done in consultation with all of the councils around Melbourne, with the Growth Areas Authority, DPCD, Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria and DSE.

There is considerable work that is sitting there that we have been feeding into the Growth Areas Authority and other avenues to try to have the work that has been in collaboration with councils to say, 'This is where the need is in quantity but also quality of the open space'. There are those two tensions about you have to have the parks but the parks also have to be relevant in their asset, appeal and marketability about why would I go there.

Westerfolds Park of 10 years ago was a brilliant park; now it has aged assets. Is it appealing? Is it relevant to the way of our lifestyles, or are we just appealing to the same people who go there who always have been? How do we engage the people who are not in our parks with the parks? That is where our research into understanding the barriers has been quite insightful in terms of you cannot not just build it and they will come. For some people there are these programs of connection and of supporting people into parks so they make that connection.

Mrs PEULICH — Further to the issue of things about the green wedges, if I may, just on that issue — —

Mr TEE — It is about having a more holistic approach, is it not, in terms of our open space, in terms of how you approach it, whether it is green wedges, parks, state parks or other open land?

Dr GRENFELL — I guess to add on to that is the short-term cycles we have of governance of these areas which takes it away. If I can point out, the reason we bought this was because 1929, as we all know, was when we then plunged into the Great Depression. Those parklands and those plans actually survived that period of obviously enormous financial constraint that the state would have been going through at that time.

Mr TEE — Ironically we survived that tough period, but we are struggling to survive this tough period.

Dr GRENFELL — We are in a different cycle of wealth. The other one was in the late 1800s. Again we plunged into a massive recession around the early 1900s which did not, again, put pressure on those open spaces whilst Melbourne was still urbanising in an extremely unhealthy way at that stage.

Mrs PEULICH — We also have to distinguish between the nature of open space. It would be unfortunate to talk about it unilaterally, because in terms of the many of the green wedges we are talking about privately owned space which is not available as open space to the public. In actual fact it is often in a very poor quality such as the tips and landfill — say in Clayton, Clarinda and so forth. We would just like to make sure your comments are not taken too broadly, because in some instances the review may lead to an increase of open space and the realisation of long-held dreams such as the chain of parks concept in the south-east which has been in abeyance for far too long. The last bit of additional space that was added to the chain of parks was Karkarook Park back in the times of the old Kennett regime. The reason I am raising this is that I would not like Mr Tee's general comment to lead to an inadvertent misinterpretation of your comments.

Ms HORSLEY — There are four planks within the open space planning we focus on: revitalising what we have; finishing what have we started, whether it is Plenty Gorge Park, Cardinia Creek, the chain of parks or sand belt parks; planning for the next wave of parks; and the programs and services that create the connection so we do not get left with the idea 'if you build it, they will come'. Let us make the programs, services and marketing information a part of 'access' as much as physical distance is regarded as access.

Mrs PEULICH — To do nothing basically means that the chain of parks concept ends up collecting even more dust.

Ms HORSLEY — Yes.

Mrs PEULICH — There is no advancement.

Ms HORSLEY — Yes.

The CHAIR — I think that draws this session to a conclusion. Thank you very much; it was very enjoyable as well as very informative. Thank you for the presentation and the way you also answered the many varied questions you received today.

Ms HORSLEY — Our pleasure. Thank you very much for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.