

CORRECTED VERSION

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Subcommittee

Inquiry into environmental design and public health

Melbourne — 6 September 2011

Members

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Mr C. Ondarchie

Ms S. Pennicuik

Mrs I. Peulich

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Chair: Ms G. Tierney

Deputy Chair: Mrs I. Peulich

Staff

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Witnesses

Mr R. Hopkins, director, community services,

Mr G. Davis, general manager, advocacy and communications, and

Mr F. Hanson, team leader, urban design, City of Whittlesea.

The CHAIR — Welcome. I need to make a number of comments before we go on to your presentation. The first is that you are covered by parliamentary privilege, and the comments you make outside the hearing are not necessarily covered by parliamentary privilege. You will receive a transcript of the proceedings in about a week. It is important for you to proofread it for accuracy. If there are issues arising from the transcript, you can liaise with Keir Delaney. In a moment I will ask each of you to state your name, the organisation you are representing and your address for the record. Then you can follow with about 5 or 10 minutes of presentation, allowing us an opportunity for some genuine exchange of ideas and questions. Are you the fourth fastest-growing municipality?

Mr DAVIS — In Australia, yes. Would you like me to start with the presentation, some of which I can go through verbally, but obviously we need to introduce ourselves beforehand.

The CHAIR — That does not cause any issues for Hansard; it is a good suggestion.

Mr HOPKINS — Russell Hopkins, director of community services, Whittlesea City Council, 25 Ferres Boulevard, South Morang.

Mr DAVIS — Griff Davis, general manager, advocacy and communications, City of Whittlesea, 25 Ferres Boulevard, South Morang.

Mr HANSON — Frank Hanson, team leader, urban design, strategic planning department, City of Whittlesea, 25 Ferres Boulevard, South Morang.

Mrs PEULICH — You all live together?

Mr HOPKINS — Just good friends.

The CHAIR — I am glad you qualified that.

Mr HOPKINS — Sometimes!

Mr DAVIS — Thank you very much for accepting our submission, and also giving us an opportunity to come here and talk more openly about the subject matter that we put in our submission. What we are looking at today is providing some information in terms of Whittlesea in the context of that, and, Chair, you already started to refer to a little bit about it in relation to the growth of the municipality. As a consequence of that growth there are some critical issues that we are dealing with. What we are on about is improving our urban planning to improve the outcomes that we hope to get for our community, and we are wrapping that up with some suggestions that we thought might be useful for the government to consider via this committee. Essentially Whittlesea is a growing municipality in the north of Melbourne.

Mrs PEULICH — Did you say growing or grand?

Mr DAVIS — Growing. We are grand as well, but then every council says the same thing. We are growing; we are the fourth fastest in Australia, and second fastest in Victoria behind Wyndham.

Mrs PEULICH — What happened to Casey?

Mr DAVIS — Casey has dropped off. They are still very busy, but in terms of that hierarchy, Wyndham and Whittlesea have just been able to get a little bit higher up the ladder than them. I would say that we are just emerging as a growth area, whereas Casey has a long, sustained, high-level growth. It is all relative really. There is still massive growth going on in the south-east corridor as well.

We have a situation where we are about 30 per cent urban and 70 per cent rural. The northern part of our municipality in that rural area, as a local area, is the fastest growing in Australia. If you take out our existing suburbs to the south, which are Mill Park, Bundoora, Thomastown and those sorts of areas, we have got the fastest-growing area in Australia. That is just one way you can categorise the statistics associated with the growth, but essentially it means that we are growing at a high rate. We are growing at approximately somewhere between 10 000 and 15 000 people a year. That is the equivalent to establishing a town like Echuca or something like that on an annual basis. As you can imagine, there is an awful lot of infrastructure required for

a town like Echuca to be established, viable and so forth. That is the challenge we have in relation to the growth areas we have got.

The CHAIR — How many babies are born a week?

Mr DAVIS — I really do not know.

Mr HOPKINS — It is about 3500 a year.

The CHAIR — It is just a handy stat that Wyndham often uses that really crystallises in people's minds issues about the infrastructure that is required in terms of preschools, schools and everything else.

Mr DAVIS — I can say that in terms of the total population we are adding around a 170 to 180 people per week in our municipality, so that is the sort of growth that we are experiencing. By 2030 we are expecting about 300 000 people in our municipality. We are currently around 162 000 to 163 000, and it is growing at around 6 per cent per annum. We have that context in terms of the challenges of our growth. We still have no slides. We will be right before we finish this.

Interestingly, in relation to the demographics, nearly half of our municipality was born overseas and English is not their first language, so immediately there are some barriers in terms of the social and economic welfare of those people. We have the fourth highest indigenous population in Melbourne as well, and it is growing. It is a bit surprising to think that somewhere like Whittlesea might have that sort of effect happening, but it is quite significant, and it is creating some challenges for us as well.

As a consequence of the growth of those sorts of attributes, from a demographics point of view we have very high pockets of social disadvantage. On the SEIFA index, which I hope you are familiar with, we have a situation where in ranking we are something like about 66th, effectively highest or lowest, whichever way you put it, out of the 79 municipalities in those areas, so we are not travelling very well when it comes to the social and economic indicators.

What we also find is that within the growth areas particularly in addition to some of those difficulties about social and economic indicators are factors that affect their liveability, which is the mortgage stress and the high cost of transport. Those are other additional challenges that people in our growth areas are experiencing.

Some of the social trends that are coming out of our new growth areas are very similar to the trends that we have in some of our existing areas. Things like low retention rates at school, family violence, high gambling, all of that sort of stuff is emerging in those newer areas where effectively you have double-income families trying to accommodate those mortgages. So just because they have two incomes as a family and they are moving into the outer suburban areas does not mean they are able to cope any more than those who are on welfare or other low-income-type support. It is a bit of a challenge for us to get people to realise that.

There is a slide that shows the new urban growth boundary, and it takes it all the way up to Donnybrook where essentially the Hume Freeway is, and on that slide it shows some areas where we have our existing growth occurring. That is South Morang, which is already completed, essentially. There are 25 000 new residents in there. There is the Doreen–Mernda corridor which runs up the Plenty River towards the Whittlesea township. That area is going to be completed in somewhere up to about five years or so from now, and there are something like 45 000 people anticipated in that area, whereas at the moment there is something like 2000 to 3000, so that is going to increase quite significantly.

The other growth area is over in the western part of our municipality, which is Epping North, and the major development there is the VicUrban Aurora development. That area is a bit slower and is likely to be completely filled with residents in about 10 years. We are looking at around 65 000 people in that area as well. Then we have the growth area on top of that where we are expecting another 90 000 people at some point in time, and when we get to around 2030, based on what we know at the moment, those areas will be completed as well, so we will end up with that 300 000-odd population in our municipality. What that means in terms of the community, though, is that without the commensurate increase in service provision and infrastructure provision those people are going to suffer gaps in the ability to access things. Even the basic access requirements for retail shopping, medical services and so forth are going to be very difficult for those people when they are struggling with all of the economic issues of their households, trying to run one or two cars, trying to use roads that

effectively are rural roads, not built for the sorts of demands that we are experiencing and, as a consequence, we will find that they will become isolated in terms of what they can do. Instead of being connected and healthy and those sorts of things, they are going to go the other way. Again the indicators that we have at the moment are that that is where we are starting to head, which is pretty unfortunate.

What we look at in terms of that is that we think it is critical that we have timely delivery of infrastructure and services. What we have at the moment is a lack of commitment to provide that. Yes, there is lots of information out there in terms of research about what is required. I note some of the information that the Department of Transport provided to you about the provision of bicycle facilities and those sorts of things. Yes, we have a great strategy for our municipality as well, and on the current spend by us it is going to take 40 years to complete; we are putting in over \$1 million a year in that particular plan, and it is still going to take us 40 years. You can argue at one end there are the developers that are providing the local bicycle network and at the high end you have the state government providing the regional network, but there is that connectivity between the two that is lacking. The developers certainly do their bit, but with the principal bicycle network which is essentially run by VicRoads and Parks Victoria there is not the same sort of investment occurring in a timely fashion.

We have that as a simple gap in some of the infrastructure. The same thing is happening on the community services side from the point of view that, as an example, we have been trying to get a Medicare office located in our municipality for some time, and there are no plans for that.

Mrs PEULICH — In the entire municipality you have not got a Medicare office?

Mr DAVIS — No, and the same is true for a Magistrates Court. The nearest Magistrates Court is 20 kilometres away.

Mrs PEULICH — I think the City of Frankston would probably like to give you theirs.

Mr DAVIS — We would be quite happy to accept it. Effectively the two magistrates courts that we use are at Broadmeadows and Heidelberg, but there is no public transport to those areas for our community so how do they get there? Cars are a fail-safe system. That is the sort of issue that we have; we are struggling to have that access to even basic services. We were very pleased that we got the Northern Hospital, which was built about five or six years ago. On day one that was at capacity. Part of the problem was that a lot of the demand from the old Austin Hospital was transferred up to the Northern Hospital as it was a newer, better facility. That was great, but it meant that all of the growing population to the north, both in Hume and Whittlesea, was not able to get what it thought was a high level of medical service.

Mr HOPKINS — There are things as simple as providing locally based kindergarten services. I think you are all well aware of the recent changes at a federal level that require us to have 15 hours of kindergarten. That provides challenges to a municipality such as Whittlesea whereby we are providing basically a new kindergarten each year, and we want that integrated with a range of other community services facilities and state schools as well. Our budgets would be totally consumed by that. It always interests me to think what the state and federal governments would do if local governments simply said, 'Sorry, we will no longer build kindergartens'. I do not know where that gap would be picked up.

Mrs PEULICH — So what is the shortfall for your city in terms of the movement from 10 hours to 15 hours?

Mr HOPKINS — We are struggling at the moment. We will certainly not make the 2013 cut-off date. We are working with every one of our facilities — for instance, at Laurimar, which is in Doreen, we opened a preschool last year. It is a triple-room kindergarten. It is full; there is no space. It is completely wall to wall with kids. It is not just around infrastructure; it is all around workforce and those sorts of things. I will not get too caught up on that today, but we are already at capacity so we are unsure how we are going to cope with that.

Mrs PEULICH — So the second-fastest growing municipality has no room for kids?

Mr HOPKINS — I would not want the headlines to be that because we are accommodating them at the moment, but clearly there is an enormous challenge there for us.

Mr DAVIS — I have just been advised, Chair, that technology has beaten us on the PowerPoint presentation, so we will fly without that.

Mr HANSON — We will paint you a lovely picture with words, though, and it will be just as good.

Mrs PEULICH — Could we perhaps get a copy emailed to us? Then each of us can follow it on our own computers.

Mr DAVIS — Yes, certainly. What we have done for our municipality is effectively empowered ourselves in terms of planning. We have set in train a series of strategic land-use planning documents that go back to almost 2001, and even earlier if you take some versions, and as a result we have also been able to have a fairly robust development contributions plan structure under that. That helped us a lot to get developers to contribute to the infrastructure and in some cases services when they were doing various estates. With our planning we went down to almost the individual lot level of detail on those. A lot of plans, even the current precinct structure planning process that the Growth Areas Authority is undertaking, are more bubble diagram-type planning things, whereas we went down to that level. That enabled us to identify things like the open space that was required, corridors for regional services like train services, roads that need to be widened, walking and cycling paths and waterway corridors to enable the community to have some breathing space in addition to the open space for passive and active recreation. What we have found is that that has been very good from the point of view of giving developers confidence about knowing what can happen.

What it also does is reduce the amount of back end, or you could say front end, time for developers. They have been able to come in, look at these strategic structure plans, design their estates accordingly and almost get approval for those in a number of weeks or months instead of sometimes taking 18 months, if you start from scratch. It has been very good for us, and that is one reason why we have effectively got to the point where we are now where the growth in our municipality has not quite exponentially exploded but, over the last five years, has certainly taken off.

Before then you would say that Casey was certainly the standout leader in terms of development. Wyndham was predicted to be the second one to go, and it has gone, but we were not even on the radar. Now we are very much on the radar, and it is unfortunate that, in some areas, they still do not see that happening for Whittlesea. When you bring some of the senior public servants out to the municipality and say, 'This is why we need to talk to you', they get quite surprised at the level of urban growth that is occurring in the area. It is a bit of frustration from our point of view that they do not know that until they get out there. That is the landscape we are dealing with in that regard.

As a result of those strategic plans we have got some fairly good case studies that were going to be great in graphic form. Earlier Andrew mentioned the Broadmeadows town centre activity centre area. We have got one as well that it is not designated a central activities district like Broadmeadows, but the Epping Central structure plan centred around Epping itself is achieving exactly that form of development that a town centre would be expected to have — high density, based on public transport, walking, connectivity and those sorts of things, not the car. Hopefully we will have a couple of train services in that area. We have got one now via the Epping line, and that has been extended out to South Morang. We are hoping to have a spur line.

Mrs PEULICH — A great move.

Mr DAVIS — It is; it is fantastic. We have got some good graphics of some brilliant architectural results of that process, which occurred through negotiation between the Department of Transport, the alliance that is delivering that project, plus the City of Whittlesea, and Frank was instrumental in achieving those. We have effectively got a high-density concept for that area in terms of our planning. Already we have got expressions of interest from some developers who are tentatively looking at the five storey-type proposals, and we have got one who is thinking of a 12-storey development at the moment. That is taking it to a new level of development. That is an area that we are looking at and are very positive about, but we have driven that. We have got DPCD plans coming into play for that, but it is not quite there yet.

Another one is the South Morang rail extension, which is linked in to a community hub associated with the South Morang precinct. There is the Westfield shopping centre immediately adjacent to that. Plenty Valley Community Health is also establishing in that area a super-clinic, which is a federal initiative.

Mrs PEULICH — Is that a co-location of services?

Mr DAVIS — Yes, it is.

Mrs PEULICH — That is a state initiative.

Mr DAVIS — That was a state initiative.

Mrs PEULICH — Back to the 1990s.

Mr DAVIS — Yes, that is true. That plus the retail and an entertainment centre are going to make that an excellent hub.

Mrs PEULICH — That sounds good.

Mr DAVIS — We also have another process in place at Epping railway station which we are calling a community hub. It is a focus for learning allied with the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, which is right next door as well. That is trying to make Epping station a community hub rather than just one of those typical railway station wastelands. Those two examples are strongly leveraging off the urban planning we put in place in the first instance. While we are effectively enabling ourselves to achieve this process and are capitalising on development contribution plans where we can, the difficulty we are finding through this process is that state-based community infrastructure, community services and other infrastructure does not come on time for those developments.

We have effectively been pushing for the railway line to South Morang for about 20 years, and it has finally got there. That is great, but it hampered all of the development up to that point in time. It was very slow in that area. Westfield took a gamble and decided to put in a shopping centre, but it was probably three years too early in terms of its cash flow and returns. Fortunately they are big enough that they can carry that. The Mernda-Doreen area is currently going ahead, and yet there is no plan for any sort of public transport in that area. We have built around our structure plans and those of the DPCD which are predicated on a rail service going to Mernda. We have got high densities in that area plan, and developers are saying that if we cannot guarantee this public transport, then they will not guarantee the densities to which they originally signed up.

A committee member asked whether transport can drive densities. The short answer is no, they cannot, but certainly they can influence that in a back-end way. You need to have a planning structure in place to identify what the densities should and could be, and then you develop the infrastructure framework to sit there and support that. Unfortunately people from the Department of Transport and VicRoads do not have the authority to force a planning authority to change the density. They can offer advice.

Mr SCHEFFER — Should they have that authority?

Mr DAVIS — I would say no, because I do not think that transport should drive land-use outcomes; I think land use should drive transport outcomes. I think the end result might be the same, in that you end up with high densities with mass public transport access, but I think it should be the other way round.

Mrs PEULICH — But should local communities have the say as to where they want that density to occur?

Mr DAVIS — Absolutely I do; otherwise you do not get buy-in to these things, and the local community in effect includes developers as well. They will not commit unless there is that holistic commitment of a whole-of-government approach, and that is where it has been lacking up to this point in time. I would say that the various government departments have really good intentions in terms of the amount of research that they do. You can see that from some of the preceding presentations. Those vampire maps of Melbourne with the red through to the green are really good indicators of what is going on. Departments have got masses of research and can easily deal with the results in terms of coming up with recommendations, but commitment is the issue, and that is where we are struggling at the moment.

Mr SCHEFFER — I would like to come back to that. The issue on which I am picking up very strongly from the witnesses we have had is that we collectively need to understand that unless there are certain levels of density we cannot deliver the range of services that people have every right to expect.

Mr DAVIS — Yes.

Mr SCHEFFER — It seems to me that all of the agencies involved in providing those resources need to have the capacity to be able to put those propositions on the table — that is, if you do not have these densities, you do not get this level of public transport or this level of hospital services and so on, and that is just the way it works. It seems that collectively as a community we have not quite focused on that. We have still got a focus on the home as being the centre. You buy the home, you do the garden and you do all this stuff, but you do not think to yourself that you are buying your home somewhere where there is not the community that can provide all the things that you have every right to expect.

Mr DAVIS — I entirely agree with that from the point of view that effectively you have got to determine what the densities are to start with, and that is the planning function. But even the Growth Areas Authority is reticent to talk about high density.

Mr SCHEFFER — Why is that?

Mr DAVIS — I think they take a view that perhaps the community is not ready for some of those high densities.

The CHAIR — We have got to have the discussion though, don't we?

Mr DAVIS — An example I would use in that regard is again the VicUrban Aurora development. We were looking at two town centres where development of the order of somewhere between 20 and 40 dwellings per hectare was predicated around a railway line through those areas. Averaged over the whole area it was 15 dwellings, whereas at that time the average density was 8. This was back in 2001, so we have moved on by a decade. That was really gutsy stuff at that stage.

What has happened now is that the Growth Areas Authority has said 15 is it. They have effectively allowed developers to get away from necessarily having to do all of those higher density developments around town centres and have said, 'As long as you have an average of 15 per hectare, that is fine'. The reality now is that we should probably be looking at double that, or at least 20 or 25 or something like that.

Mr SCHEFFER — And that is the evidence this committee has been hearing as well. It is certainly in that ballpark.

Mr DAVIS — The Growth Areas Authority is not really tackling this from a holistic point of view of what densities do you need to support those sorts of community services and infrastructure. At the moment that is why you end up with the situation where we are not getting a Magistrates Court, hospitals or whatever.

Mr SCHEFFER — It comes back to a point Mrs Peulich raised about what communities want, but it is a dance between leadership and community.

Mrs PEULICH — It is identifying the areas where you want it. Whilst transport corridors are appropriate for certain suburbs, very much so, it is not necessarily a one-size-fits-all situation that suits all suburbs.

Mr DAVIS — This is where strategic planning has to be done at a local level, because it is a case-by-case situation. I am a bit concerned that the Growth Areas Authority, with the precinct structure planning process that it is undertaking, is doing a one size fits all for their process, especially for those ones where they are driving it.

Mrs PEULICH — Are you able to make some of these recommendations through the current planning review that is taking place? Are you having an input into that?

Mr DAVIS — To a degree, but some of those arguments have already been lost. The 15 dwellings per hectare density issue has already been lost.

Mrs PEULICH — It has been done?

Mr DAVIS — Yes. The framework that they put around the process has been decided in a way that excludes local government.

Mrs PEULICH — Further densification of those areas is not a proposition?

Mr HANSON — May I say something here just to add to it?

Mrs PEULICH — Please feel free.

Mr HANSON — Roxburgh Park was the barometer around which a lot of things were set in the early 1990s. I remember working on that project. It was 13 dwellings per hectare, and that was fairly radical. I see an irony with the precinct structure plan going on now. I could show you the diagram, but basically it is all the areas going north towards Donnybrook Road, Wallan and places like that. We are going to lock that in at 15 dwellings per hectare. Basically what you are saying is if we had said in 1989 that this is the way we want to do it, we are going to grow for the next 30 years based on that density. To me it is not flexible enough and it is not farsighted enough. Essentially this plan has a major arterial road running around it, but there is no commitment to any public transport or any corridors other than vague suggestions that there is going to be something in there. My point is that if we say 15 dwellings per hectare in 2011, we will look back 20 years from now, as I look back to Roxburgh Park now, and think, 'Goodness me, that is certainly not the density'.

I worked on the Aurora master plan. Some of the numbers we were looking at were the kind of densities you get in North Carlton and Fitzroy around good public transport. You cannot have it everywhere; I understand that. But it basically means you are locking in a density, and if we do increase the numbers over time, the plans that are standing in the amount of active open space and all those sort of things are locked in based on those lower densities. If the numbers do go up, we are going to be in trouble. Most of us will not be around to see it — present company excepted of course — but I do not believe that people are really thinking far enough ahead in that regard. That is my little soapbox.

Mr HOPKINS — Also picking up a point Inga made, it is so important to understand that it is not one size fits all. In those areas there should be areas where we can provide that higher density around appropriate supporting infrastructure. If I could pick up on the previous presentation you had from the Department of Transport, we talk about Doreen as being one of our outer suburbs, yet the design has meant that when we have our Ride2School days that area achieves the highest percentage of kids riding to school of any area in our municipality, whether it be established or growing. It shows that proper design can give you the outcomes you are after, but it is not one size fits all. It is not putting in a blanket policy of medium-density housing.

Another point, which I know Griff talked about, is that housing affordability is an enormous issue. People will say, 'You are out in the outer suburbs. Housing is not expensive', but there is that hidden — —

The CHAIR — There is the additional cost of transport.

Mr HOPKINS — Lack of discretionary income is very much the issue, as well as the cost of transport and those sorts of things. You have to have a job to get a mortgage, but discretionary income if interest rates rise or if there is a significant hit on your disposable income — —

Mrs PEULICH — And unemployment.

Mr HOPKINS — That is exactly right. Some of those social impacts we have found in some of our more established areas are clearly identified on the SEIFA index as being problematic. We are seeing the starts of some of those issues in those newer suburbs because of that lack of infrastructure and the lack of capacity to retrofit some of that as well.

The CHAIR — We are way over time, and I am really conscious of that. Are there any key points that you need to make? I saw the last page.

Mr DAVIS — There are two key recommendations, and I will go straight to them. What we find is that there is no long-term plan associated with both the delivery of infrastructure and the delivery of community services. I know the political landscape associated with that, but we end up with short-term cycles for plans. As an example of that, the former Brumby government developed a transport plan. That has now been put aside and we have a new transport plan being developed. At the end of the day, as an officer from a local government I do not care what the plan is; I want whatever it is to be funded and committed to over a reasonable period of time.

At the moment we are not getting that kind of a surety. The developers are not getting that as well, so in some cases they are always cash-proofing their developments to maximise whatever they can get at the moment, irrespective of whether that is of benefit to the outcome for the community in the long term. Those longer term plans are something that needs to be done. South-east Queensland has come up with something like that, and the state government and local government have committed to it, and they are both funding it. That is a great model that we can probably think about.

The other one is that funding is always going to be an issue, and what we are suggesting is that we tap into the investment market. Infrastructure bonds and those sorts of things are probably the way to go. None of us here are economists, so we do not understand all the intricacies of that, but it would be great if there was a recommendation made to the Department of Treasury and Finance to start investigating opportunities in that area so that instead of everybody looking at the state and federal government for money, we look at the private industry and the investment industry. There are billions of dollars floating around the world every day trying to find a nice little haven to sit in to earn some income, so why don't we have an opportunity to tap into that and perhaps use Infrastructure Australia as a mechanism to start doing that? We need it at a national level, I think. You will not get any one council being able to do it or 79 in Victoria doing it. It has to be a national thing. So it is just those two key points there.

Mr ELSBURY — It is not like this morning we all woke up and all of a sudden Whittlesea did not have the infrastructure it needed. How far behind are you guys with the infrastructure that you need — —

Mr DAVIS — It depends on the type of infrastructure. For instance I would say that for North Epping we have been behind in terms of the train line for that corridor for probably about six years now. Mernda is a little bit of a shorter time — maybe four or five, and yet Mernda is going to be completed before the VicUrban site, but that is another development issue.

Mr HOPKINS — I could also talk about respite housing. We have just received funding for our first respite house in a municipality of 160 000 people, so with some of those other things we are well behind. There is no emergency housing. If you are a — I will use a woman, because it is typically a woman — —

Mrs PEULICH — You did not get any of the social housing projects under the economic stimulus?

Mr DAVIS — No.

Mrs PEULICH — You didn't? Don't you have a marginal seat out there?

Mr HOPKINS — Not particularly.

Mrs PEULICH — No? Goodness!

Mr HOPKINS — If you are a woman who is in a situation of domestic violence, you need to be removed. You are basically removed from the municipality, away from all those links and supports that you might otherwise have. So there is a range of community infrastructure that we are well behind on.

Mr DAVIS — And I think those are less obvious types of needs. Everybody says, 'We do not have a train, so let's carry on about a train'. Some of those other things — there is a smaller segment of the community that is impacted by those, so sometimes they go under the radar as well. That is why sometimes you have a 20-year lag time in that, and the respite is classic — —

The CHAIR — I am conscious of the time. I am going to call for one question each, and if there some after that — Johan?

Mr SCHEFFER — It is probably too big a question, but I will throw it in anyway. I was going to ask you how you actually build — just in the terms of reference — community wellbeing into your planning, but unless you can answer really quickly, do not worry.

Mr DAVIS — I can probably answer that fairly quickly.

Mrs PEULICH — With money?

Mr DAVIS — With money!

We have our own subdivision guidelines which have formed the basis of the core guidelines that the Growth Areas Authority has developed. In there we talk about more traditional neighbourhood designs where we have high levels of connectivity and short links so that people can merge their way through there. We are planning all those open spaces — the other facilities.

Mr SCHEFFER — We have been told by other local governments that if they push too hard with community safety imperatives — for example, around the location of packaged liquor and the deleterious impact that will have on the local community — their own planners will advise not to proceed with that because they will be knocked off by the proponents at VCAT, for argument's sake, so they say that they are constrained to act in the interests of the local community by the fact that the planning act does not have a wellbeing imperative.

Mr DAVIS — Correct. Yes, it is. That is a big absence in the planning scheme. There are sections relating to disability access in the planning scheme but not for this. One of our big successes is University Hill, which is a multi-use land use site, and the only reason — well, not the only reason, but one of the fundamental reasons — that is a success is that the planning scheme got out of the way. It was left to local government and the developer to work out how to deal with that, and we framed it such that it effectively remove the constraints of the planning scheme. So rather than more regulation on planning, in some cases it is best to have less.

Mrs PEULICH — I was just about to pick up on that point, because clearly Mr Scheffer would not like to see the planning process streamlined but made even more convoluted, so I would just like — —

The CHAIR — No, the evidence we have received from a number of organisations is that they say it would make it more effective for planners executing their work if there were stronger words in the act around wellbeing.

Mrs PEULICH — I thought it was mostly referring to planning panels, but I will have to re-read the evidence. The question I would like to ask is: given your shortage of infrastructure — and obviously it has been in the making for some time — are you able to point to any successful examples where you have applied for federal regional development funds? What sort of projects have you applied for, and did you get your share of the economic federal stimulus money to kick some of these things along?

Mr DAVIS — The RLCIP funding, for instance — every council was given a nominated amount. We, with other growth area councils around Australia called the National Growth Areas Alliance, successfully argued for a top-up of that, so everybody got whatever the basic allocation was and the growth area councils got a top-up of that. We were able to use that for a variety of facilities such as sports lighting, upgrading the heating and cooling — —

Mrs PEULICH — So minor things, nothing significant.

Mr DAVIS — The one major one, which we are about to launch tomorrow, is a community and cultural centre at a place called Farm Viganò, which these days is a very historic Italian-based site. The federal government, for instance, put in \$2.45 million, and the total project is about \$4 million.

Mrs PEULICH — The economic federal stimulus money, what did you get out of that?

Mr DAVIS — We got — I cannot remember the total — about \$1 million out of that for bicycle facilities, so shared bike paths and that sort of thing, as we did out of the RLCIP. The RDA stuff we are struggling with at the moment.

Mrs PEULICH — Nothing from there.

Mr DAVIS — No.

The CHAIR — Is that because of the RDA you are in? That some of your projects in your particular LGA are not necessarily no. 1 or no. 2 on the priority list?

Mr DAVIS — That is probably a fair comment, yes.

Mrs PEULICH — Who determines the priorities?

Mr DAVIS — The RDA committee.

Mrs PEULICH — No, not according to my understanding. The RDA committee merely submits it to the minister to make a determination on the priorities. Correct me if I am wrong.

Mr DAVIS — I cannot correct you — —

The CHAIR — It is determined by the minister, but the priorities are submitted by the RDA.

Mrs PEULICH — In the region in which I am, the chairman of that particular regional RDA says that that committee will not be making a recommendation on the order of priorities.

Mr DAVIS — That is interesting because in discussions with the chair of the northern RDA effectively we had to convince the committee that the project we had proposed in this instance was worthy of their endorsement.

Mrs PEULICH — There is an obvious inconsistency here.

Mr DAVIS — There may well be.

Mrs PEULICH — A last question if I may. To what do you attribute your indigenous population growth? Just the other day when I was launching a new piece of research about our indigenous population we heard that a lot of them were coming into metropolitan Melbourne to seek mainstream opportunities, education, jobs and so forth. What do you attribute your growth in the indigenous population to?

Mr HOPKINS — There are a couple of factors. One is an already existing community, which it makes them comfortable to move into.

Mrs PEULICH — Sure.

Mr HOPKINS — We know that some of those living in Thornbury and Northcote are moving out, and we also know that some of those who are our rural and regional cousins are coming down to establish themselves.

You talked about federal funding. We have recently received \$8 million over four years to establish an indigenous early years centre, which we are developing in partnership with state, federal and — clearly — local government. That is an example of where by doing good work previously, it has come to us eventually. Similarly with things like the trade training centre, which is an important recent acquisition that is currently being developed adjacent to one of our secondary colleges in Lalor.

In answer to your most recent question, it is a bit of a mix. There is a strong and established community, some relocation — both internally and externally — and also things like the wholesale fruit and veggie market that is coming out that way, which will provide a greater level of unskilled labour opportunities and which might continue to attract them.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. You have enormous challenges on a daily basis, let alone having a future vision on how to take your community forward.

Mr DAVIS — It was a pleasure, Chair.

The CHAIR — Thank you for the time you spent with us. It helps us to concentrate on the significant issues that growth areas have.

Committee adjourned.

