

CORRECTED VERSION

SELECT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LAND DEVELOPMENT

Coburg — 17 March 2008

Members

Mr D. Davis

Mr P. Hall

Mr P. Kavanagh

Mr E. O'Donohue

Ms S. Pennicuik

Mr B. Tee

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Secretary: Mr R. Willis

Research Officer: Mr A. Walsh

Witnesses

Mr G. Carden, chairperson, Merri and Edgars Creek Parkland Group.

The CHAIR — The committee welcomes Greg Carden. Greg, could you just make a brief statement? Again, thank you for your assistance this morning on the tour.

Mr CARDEN — Thank you for the opportunity. I do not intend to read our submission per se, but hopefully more to summarise the mood or feeling in the community — similar, hopefully, to Anne's passionate response. The Merri and Edgars Creek Parkland Group — a specific name for a relatively specific purpose — was formed to stop the sale of this fabulous public resource and to advocate the commitment for the land to be retained as open parkland. As a group — a poor group — we have seen it as our role to inform the wider community and the local residents of the impending sale that was looming and has been stalled. We have been visible and active in pursuing the council and the state government in trying to make our voice and the local and broader community's voice heard. I would put an estimate of possibly over 1000 letters being delivered to the ministers concerned. We have approximately 500 people on our mailing list at present, which gives an indication of the numbers of people who are directly concerned about this issue.

We as a group have been successful in forcing this issue onto the table of council and making council make clear decision as to their position on the future of the land. We have endeavoured to engage with the government. Unfortunately we have found that very difficult, and we find our local minister and the Minister for Planning somewhat dismissive or removed from our written presentations and attempts to contact. It should be noted that we believe it was our group who pointed out to the department that it is their minister who is the person who signs off on the sale of these parcels of land and also has the ability to enact exceptional circumstances. In the first instances our letters were coming back being pointed out that, 'It is not our issue; it is a VicRoads issue'. That alone raises the concern that the government did not believe that sale of parkland was a planning issue. This is the sort of road we have been travelling and we believe we have been successful, even being here today. We have come a long way.

In terms of the mood that exists, I suppose we ask ourselves questions — especially in terms of this opportunity today and your reason for being — about what is it that we are trying to establish. I think that we are truly arguing the worth of something in monetary terms versus its intrinsic qualities that cannot be priced, and then therefore who has the right to benefit from its value. Is it the people? Is it a developer? Is it the government, to put money in their pocket? What are the devices for measuring what we are endeavouring to achieve? How do we measure the value or the worth of a parcel of parkland? How do you put monetary value on something that gives enormously just by being in existence? It does not need to be built, developed or marketed; it just needs to be mown, weeded and cared for. This parkland has never been built on. Why start now?

Why should the people pay twice to own something that they already consider their own? The land was purchased by, we believe, the MMBW for a freeway reserve, and now that people have to pay again to own something that they already maintain and use. The land has zoning that allows for development. This is how a value is placed on the land, but truly this is an opportunity for the government to stand by their policy of Melbourne 2030 and leave a legacy to the people, a gift of a magical resource. So what do we do? We rely on a financial assessment of something that is priceless. It has been valued only under the guise of turning a public asset into a private profit. Where does this provide a future for the community? How does this provide guidance for the community? In simple terms it is selling the Crown jewels, throwing the baby out with the bathwater — it does not make sense. Unfortunately to some it makes good policy, and that is all it is — policy, not law. The government is hiding, afraid that it may give something other than economic profit to a small number of developments. The development of this land may bring jobs for a period to build some houses or apartments, but it is a once-off opportunity: 'Come now, buy before it is sold. Highest bidder wins the prize because once it is sold you will have missed your opportunity to develop'. If it is maintained as parkland it will provide enjoyment and delight forever.

I am not opposed to development; as an architect that is how I make a living. We are always required to respond appropriately. In fact I do not shout that I oppose inappropriate development; in fact I actually prefer to support appropriate development. Let us think positive. To think positive I believe one must look at the bigger picture and choose the path that provides the best long-term outcome over a short-term gain. In the end it is by chance, community desire — and with regard to stopping the freeway — the community's daily usage, tree planting and council assistance that an old dairy farm remained intact as open land. It is part of the linear parkland chain along the Merri and Edgars creek that allows for movement of parrots, honeyeaters, water birds, snakes, flying foxes, moths, ducks, herons and, if we are lucky, maybe frogs again. The parcels of land in question are a buffer to the residential and industrial areas, providing better water filtration and run-off into the water catchments and river

flows — an urbane island of nature. It is a rare parcel of land in the middle of Melbourne. The erosion of this land is a slap in the face to the title of garden state.

I am sure the developers of Pentridge and Kodak sited this site. The existence of this parkland is further justification to the level of density proposed on their sites. Why now develop this park? The Merri and Edgars Creek parkland is a rare example of open parkland in the middle of suburbia bounded by industry. The idea of open parkland is special in itself. The word 'open' allows for free movement, something that is stifled in a modern city; open to choose your recreation, not formal, not organised, not restrictive. This is an opportunity not to be missed, so do not close the door on the opportunity.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Greg — again, a lot of passion, and I can understand that very much. You mentioned at the start the issue of your local member and Minister for Planning, and obviously there has been communication. Are copies of those letters available?

Mr CARDEN — Yes.

The CHAIR — That would be helpful.

Mr CARDEN — We have got many letters that we can drum up. The first ones, yes; and even the recent ones which, as Anne mentioned, make more reference to ongoing negotiations rather than a desire to engage and understand the mood that we are presenting.

The CHAIR — Has the minister at any point indicated a willingness to come and look at the site to understand the issues?

Mr CARDEN — Not through us, no.

The CHAIR — Has an offer been made?

Mr CARDEN — We have been asking to meet and greet. Potentially there has been some words through our local Labor member, but there has been no success that we are aware of.

The CHAIR — Who is your lower house member?

Mr CARDEN — Christine Campbell.

The CHAIR — Is she supportive of this campaign?

Mr CARDEN — Yes, she is supportive, but I believe it would be — I do not know. It is probably hard for her to make an impact, I think.

The CHAIR — Right. In terms of the minister's involvement here, are you convinced that he has received the correspondence?

Mr CARDEN — Yes.

The CHAIR — He has signed all the — —

Mr CARDEN — Yes, I believe they are fully aware of the issue, and we have written and been public in the streets, getting people to sign form letters and we write our own letters, so the issue does exist in their books.

Mr TEE — I think you have done a very good job of publicising the issue, and I have got no doubt government is well aware of it. I suppose the impression that I get in terms of your organisation and its role is that it is almost in a sense overseeing the negotiations with VicRoads and council and making sure there is still in the spine of council and probably of government as well, making sure there is transparency. I do not have any questions. I suppose that is just my impression, and I think that is an important role that you play. Well done.

Mr CARDEN — Again, coming from what Anne was saying, in terms of VicRoads, it is the ministers and the departments above them that are the people who are and should be making these decisions. In the end it is not VicRoads' decision. They are following the instructions.

Ms PENNICUIK — Can you just clarify which ministers you have actually written to?

Mr CARDEN — We have basically focused on the Minister for Planning, the minister for roads and also we are writing to the minister — is it the department of environment — —

Ms PENNICUIK — Minister Jennings?

Mr CARDEN — We were, prior to that, the previous minister; we have now focused primarily on planning and roads. They are our primary focus.

Ms PENNICUIK — Yes, just bearing in mind that it is DSE that does the environmental assessments on the lands.

Mr CARDEN — Yes, which you mentioned before.

Ms PENNICUIK — Has VicRoads written back to you?

Mr CARDEN — Yes. We, funnily enough, receive letters from VicRoads when we write to the minister for roads. So we do not get answers from the minister in that regard. There may have been one or two, but in general they come back from — —

Ms PENNICUIK — We would be interested in seeing all of those letters.

Mr CARDEN — Yes, we can provide you samples.

Ms PENNICUIK — Greg, I wonder if you can tell me — you might have to take this on notice — approximately how many hours of work does the community put into the community planting?

Mr CARDEN — A year and a half's work — —

Ms PENNICUIK — You probably have planting days and that sort of thing.

Mr CARDEN — There is also the Friends of Edgars Creek, which are parallel. They get government support, action and funding. I think we are seen as more of a thorn. We are probably happy to stay that way. But in terms of hours it is hard to define; a year and a half's worth of monthly activity of a core group of 15 to 20 plus a broader involvement.

Ms PENNICUIK — It would be useful if you could perhaps provide us with a bit more detail than what you have put in your original submission on the groups that are involved and what they do.

Mr CARDEN — Yes.

Ms PENNICUIK — That is all the questions I have, thank you, Greg.

Mr KAVANAGH — Did you say that retaining the area as public open space would provide employment forever or enjoyment forever?

Mr CARDEN — Both. I probably said 'employment', but I also embellished it I think, yes — appropriately so.

Mr KAVANAGH — What employment were you thinking about?

Mr CARDEN — Just the maintenance, the gardening, the mowing, a million dollars worth of — I am sorry, I am looking at the CEO. There was a reference to a notional figure of the cost to maintain it over a period of time, and we consider that as employment.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.