

CORRECTED VERSION

SELECT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LAND DEVELOPMENT

Subcommittee

Melbourne — 3 April 2008

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Witness

Professor R. Adams, director, design and urban environment, City of Melbourne.

The CHAIR — I welcome Rob Adams, director of city design and urban environment with the City of Melbourne.

Prof. ADAMS — I have been asked to talk to you about the city of Melbourne and why the decision was made by the council to vote to not renew the licence. I suppose to give you a long-term context — and I have been with the city now for 25 years — in the 1980s very few events were held in the parks and gardens. Over the last 10 to 15 years Melbourne, as late as yesterday, has been voted the world leader as an event venue ahead of Berlin and third was Sydney. The number of events in the city have increased dramatically and the city is now obviously operating in a completely different mode to the way it was operating back in the 1980s. The catch 22 is to balance our need to obviously run events, to actually keep a global position as a city, with the ability of our infrastructure to sustain those events. Increasingly, and particularly over the last couple of years, it is becoming more and more difficult with a changed climate situation to restore, particularly our gardens and our soft gardens, back into a form that is of the standard we have had previously.

Council had for a number of years been trying to negotiate with MIFGS a slow withdrawal from the soft areas of the gardens — not necessarily a total removal; that has only been a more recent position. Here are a number of plans and I will put them in front of you. That one shows the existing conditions. We are obviously talking about the southern area of the gardens. This plan is where MIFGS would be today, shown in red. This plan would show some of the areas which are of low amenity where we have been negotiating to try to get those upgraded so that the footprint of MIFGS could start to retreat out of the southern gardens and actually go further and further north on to the hard standing, on the common-sense assumption, I think, that there are a lot of activities that take place at MIFGS which could quite easily be accommodated on the hard standing areas between the Exhibition Buildings and the Museum.

The response from MIFGS on that has been that the areas of hard standing are not of the amenity that would suit their show and they see them as being slightly hostile. It is interesting to note, however, that this year they have put a very large tent on the hard standing, which previously they have indicated is a difficult area to operate out of. We had hoped that — and this was the position taken by the council — MIFGS were giving a very strong message that unless they started to consider the slow withdrawal from the soft area of the gardens to a new fence line that would not make the gardens look as though they are completely fenced off, the Council would consider not renewing the licence. We were in the midst of those negotiations and thought we were making progress when the government decided to take away from us the running of that part of the garden for the period of the MIFGS festival.

There is no doubt in my mind that our gardens are in a state of increased stress because of the climate change situation. Over the last two years we have gone to a strategy of looking to have zero potable water used in the gardens within the next five years, and that means a whole strategy of looking at how we maintain and look after the gardens. It is a three-pronged strategy. One is to use the water that we do put into the gardens more efficiently, and that means we have gone from overhead spraying to drip irrigation. We have run out about 400 kilometres of drip irrigation throughout the parks and gardens generally. We are looking to change the nature of some of the landscape, and particularly changing the grasses to be summer grasses like kikuyu that are more resistant to the dry conditions that we now find ourselves in. Ultimately we realise we will have to find new water to replace the potable water that is currently used.

The water used on our gardens generally was reduced by 60 per cent last year. We are required under stage 3a to in fact reduce it by at least 50 per cent. We have put our emphasis on the trees and taken it off the grass, but we are in fact still watering the heritage gardens through overhead irrigation, hence the reason the lawns are in reasonable condition. To achieve this balance between the pressure for events and the gardens that are not able to recover as quickly as they have in past years we will have to modify the way we work, and this strategy was part of that modification. We find ourselves in the situation of no longer being in control of our destiny there. Also, we see no

evidence that the state government is going to put money into improving the surrounds of the exhibition gardens, particularly on the Rathdowne Street frontage, that would have most probably encouraged the flower and garden show to move into those areas, off the soft landscape. So it is an unenviable situation to find ourselves in, but that is where we sit at the moment. I am happy to answer any questions on that.

The CHAIR — You have mentioned the change in water.

Prof. ADAMS — Yes.

The CHAIR — And the change with respect to climate change. Has any assistance been provided to the council by state government on those matters?

Prof. ADAMS — There has been assistance. We have had some small grants for stormwater collection off some of our pavilions. We have done a joint project with the state government up at the Queen Victoria Market, where we have installed a large tank. In terms of the parks, the wetlands that went into Royal Park as part of the Commonwealth Games were provided by the state government — \$5 million — and it is providing a significant amount of water back into those parks.

The CHAIR — I mean more specifically with respect to these gardens here — the gardens included on the World Heritage List. Has there been any support, financial or indeed otherwise, by state government to assist the council in protecting and looking after them in light of climate change and water restrictions?

Prof. ADAMS — No. No finances for the ongoing maintenance and retention of the values of those gardens have been given.

The CHAIR — And despite the fact that the flower and garden show is of statewide and probably national significance — —

Mr TEE — International.

The CHAIR — Perhaps ‘international’ is the correct word, I agree. And given it is of great tourism significance, has there been any offer of support by state government to maintain the gardens at the highest possible level?

Prof. ADAMS — No. The last time the state government significantly offered to maintain or provide maintenance for any of our gardens — —

The CHAIR — Or assistance.

Prof. ADAMS — Or assistance for the maintenance of our gardens — and I mention maintenance — was when two sites were given to the city some substantial time ago. They were the Southern Cross and AXA buildings. They were given to the city as a revenue source that would go back into the maintenance, and particularly the cost of water, for the gardens generally. Both those sites were affected by land tax and became negative assets, and when the city sold those buildings some years ago the moneys were taken by the state government and not returned to the city.

Mr TEE — As I understand it, about 100 000 visitors come to the flower show. Has any work been done; do we know where they come from in terms of who are Melbourne-based, who are from regional Victoria, from interstate and from overseas? What is the sort of break-up?

Prof. ADAMS — We would know that. Unfortunately, I do not actually run the event, I am only responsible for the gardens. But I am sure Scott Chapman, who is the director in charge of that, could provide those figures, and I am happy to make those available.

Mr TEE — I would appreciate that.

Prof. ADAMS — He would have a breakdown of them.

Mr TEE — I suppose it is in the context of the fact that, yes, it is on the world map as a site that is on the World Heritage List, but it is also, I think, one of the top five flower shows in the world, so it is on the world map as a tourist attraction in that sense.

The other issue relates to a number of reports that I have referred to that I do not have. One is about the soil compaction assessment. Is that something that you have access to that you can provide?

Prof. ADAMS — I think I have a copy here, and I am happy to leave with it you.

Mr TEE — That is great. I do not know whether there are one or two other reports, but I thought there was a consultants report in relation to the 2007 flower and garden show, which found that the conduct of the show:

... had no discernable impact on the health of vegetation (trees, shrubs or grass) in Carlton Gardens.

Do you have a copy of that report?

Prof. ADAMS — I think this is the *Soil Compaction Assessment of the Carlton Gardens for the City of Melbourne*. It was done in 2007 by van de Graaff and Associates. I think that will be the report you are referring to.

Mr TEE — Yes, my understanding is that there are in fact two reports. There is one about the impact on the soil — and therefore, I suspect, on the trees — but also one on the flowers. Are you aware of only one report?

Prof. ADAMS — I have only one with me here. If there are any other reports, I will have them sent up to you.

Mr TEE — I would appreciate that.

Prof. ADAMS — I am happy to table this one here. Interestingly, while that conclusion is drawn in that report, the levels of compaction are at the higher level. So we are on that border edge of, yes, it might not be affecting them directly, but the statement made there — and you can read it for yourself — is that when it gets up to 3000 you are starting to affect root growths, and some of the figures are just below 3000.

Mr TEE — And as I understand it, prior to this report, and in fact prior to this show, there was some agreement to move some of the higher impact events off some of the grass and onto the more appropriate floorings?

Prof. ADAMS — That is correct. What we have endeavoured to do is slowly put in place the practices that obviously reduce the impact on the gardens, and that means trying to move those high-impact uses off. You saw the photographs of changed foundation conditions. There has been a steady improvement in the protocols around how the different stalls have been set up.

Mr TEE — Is it your evidence that there was a sort of pre-emptive inclusion or involvement by government? As I understand it, what occurred on I think 5 June 2007 was that the environment committee of the Melbourne City Council voted to amend the guidelines to effectively exclude the show, and it was after that that the state government intervened. Is that your understanding?

Prof. ADAMS — The chronology you give is correct. Part of that strategy, from our point of view, was that we knew the licence existed for this year and that therefore there was about

an 18-month window for us to try to negotiate a changed arrangement before the licence would have to be renewed again. The strategy — which I believe the state government was aware of, because we were certainly talking with them — was that we would negotiate with MIFGS to try to move the alignment north off the soft landscape, and even try with this year's show to see if they would voluntarily move the alignment back. If there had been that show of good faith, I believe the councillors would have considered renewing the licence. Unfortunately we never got to finish the negotiations.

Mr TEE — Can you confirm that MIFGS is co-owned by the Victorian Farmers Federation? Is that your understanding?

Prof. ADAMS — I am not sure. As I say, I do not actually deal directly with the logistics of the event — and we were just really negotiating on the footprint on this — but, again Scott Chapman would be able to give that to me.

Mr TEE — Are you able to check that and get back to me?

Prof. ADAMS — I will check that for you.

Mr TEE — That is all I have for now.

Ms PENNICUIK — Mr Adams, there are two things I want to ask you. You mentioned that the gardens are under stress. Can you talk in more detail about that in terms of the health of the trees, particularly the heritage trees and the general landscape?

Prof. ADAMS — Yes. The calculation on the extent to which climate change will shorten the life of a tree is a difficult piece of science. We are not sure just exactly how long trees will last and what impacts reduce their life. But I think common sense tells us that if they get into stressful situations — be that from a reduction of water or other interference with their normal growing pattern — that is likely to reduce the length of their life. We believe that we manage the tree stock — and there are 55 000 trees in our municipality — to the highest possible calibre in terms of making sure they have got water and the pruning of the trees. Although we did lose trees yesterday, I think the evidence is that we did not suffer as badly as many. We put that down, we would argue, to a reasonable management regime of those trees.

Ms PENNICUIK — I am referring mainly to the trees on this site, though, and not around the municipality of the City of Melbourne.

Prof. ADAMS — Yes. You saw the pictures of the arms of some of the oaks. There are in all our gardens a number of the avenues reaching the end of their life and having to be replaced. We have recently had to replace them in other gardens and we are in the process of having to replace them here. So a number of trees have been removed. We would put that down to natural causes and the gardens coming up for renewal of many of those avenues. The trees that have been removed, and are referred to in a report you will see from Julianne Bell, were both those old trees, some of which you have seen photographs of, and some younger trees that we put in that were vandalised. So we do not believe that anything that has happened there is other than the normal changeover in the garden. But it is becoming harder with the current watering regime. You only have to look at many of the parks and gardens to see that they are under a certain amount of stress. I know we are talking about this garden, but I will give you one that is designed to take events: Birrarung Marr. It has taken us just about the whole summer to try to recoup the lawn after Circus Oz went in there last year, and they are just about to go back in. We have a difficulty in terms of the recuperation time with the gardens.

Ms PENNICUIK — So the confluence of the consequence of climate change, drought et cetera and major events makes maintaining the health of the gardens harder?

Prof. ADAMS — Much harder. Another large park that you would have evidence of is Yarra Park. Our ability to return the lawns there from parking for events is becoming harder and harder each year.

Ms PENNICUIK — Obviously. I am also curious to know, given that you are the director of city design and urban environment and the gardens are a World Heritage site, how much does that impact on your work in terms of your being aware that that is a World Heritage site and it should be maintained as a World Heritage site? How does that impact on your work?

Prof. ADAMS — Basically over the last few years and currently we are undertaking a number of works to try and improve and return the gardens to their original heritage. You may not be aware — I will table it — of the parterres and scroll gardens that are currently going in. That is a fact sheet on them. I will not go through a series of photographs, but I will leave these for you. The city has invested a large amount of time and money in reproducing and doing the archaeology to find out the original patterns of those gardens and put those in place. We have only just discovered — some of the most obvious things in life you do notice until they are right in your face — that the patterns in this garden are the same as the patterns on the facade of the building. It was only when we put the grass back a few weeks ago that that became patently obvious, because you could see it for the first time against the buildings. We are removing the depot from the northern gardens and locating that back in the original house, and therefore opening up the gardens for greater public use. We are negotiating with the museum for the capture of water off the Exhibition Building and museum to reuse in the garden. I suppose our mandate is slowly — over time and within the budgets we have got available — to make the gardens a better setting for the Exhibition Building.

Ms PENNICUIK — To your knowledge has the council had any dealings with the commonwealth department of environment and heritage on this site?

Prof. ADAMS — There were dealings during the heritage listing of the buildings. I was not directly involved in those, but Geoff Lawler, a fellow director, was and they had dealings with that. Since then there is contact from time to time. There was a workshop or a select committee up in Canberra, and one of our officers attended that — that must have been about five or six months ago — so there is ongoing contact.

Ms PENNICUIK — So there would be some documentation about that?

Prof. ADAMS — Yes, there would be.

Ms PENNICUIK — Perhaps you could supply the committee with that.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Rob. You have been very enlightening. Thank you very much.

Prof. ADAMS — My pleasure. It is not relevant to the Carlton Gardens, but it did come to our attention yesterday that, if the building of the tunnels were to occur, the two sites selected for the entry and major works were Royal Park and Holland Park. We thought that might be interesting in view of what you are considering, so I will leave those for you, too.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.