

# 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

Mr E. Thornley

Chair: Mr D. Davis

Deputy Chair: Mr B. Tee

### Staff

Secretary: Mr R. Willis

Research Officer: Mr A. Walsh

### Witness

Ms A. Sgrò.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you again, Anne, for this morning, and would you like to make a brief statement.

**Ms SGRÒ** — I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and to be in your company to give you a idea of what the parkland looks like. I have lived in the area for over 40 years so I have seen huge changes. The land has always been open space. In the past it was very swampy, poorly maintained paddocks. There were cows, that is quite true, until the land was bought by VicRoads, but it was not a farmland with fences as such; it was a farmer who checked out his cows down there. It was very off-putting open space, but it was very open space.

In the last 30 years, I suppose, with council maintenance, it has been turned into what we saw this morning, which is parkland that is well looked after and trees are planted. There was a considerable input from the community also, I might say, in terms of tree planting, not just the council. As a result we have got back a huge number of native birds and native creatures.

The land is very widely used by a whole range of people who come at it from all sorts of areas. It seems to me that at a time when we are losing public open space — and there was an article in *Sunday Age* a week and a half ago that actually pointed to the land in Melbourne that had been set aside by our forefathers, if you like, the early planners, and it concentrated on Royal Park, Albert Park and I think the area down the Yarra — huge areas that were once designated open space have gone. They have not been nibbled, they have been munched up. It seems to me that we have got an area here that has always been open space, it is appreciated and much used by the public and the community, and it would be quite tragic if it was even nibbled at around the edges.

You have seen for yourselves this morning the two real present and future developments mooted for Pentridge and Kodak. Pentridge has not just resulted from the sale of Pentridge, the prison. To the east — if my direction is right — of the Pentridge wall was other public land that had Newlands High School on it which had a lot of open space; tennis courts that were used by the public and an ECA centre — I am not sure why it was called that, but it was a big public hall-gymnasium that was also constructed with considerable community input and was used by the community. We have lost that, it has gone and you might say that is fitting in, in a sense, with Melbourne 2030, to bring more people into greater density. But my concern is that we do not balance that by maintaining what we have already got.

Just flipping through this little government booklet, *A Vision for Victoria for 2010 and Beyond*, it is very basic, as it would be because it is giving an overview, but it quite clearly states that it is government policy to maintain the lungs of the community. Now, here we have got some lungs that are going pretty well. I would hate to lose them.

You can say, I suppose in a sense, that in negotiation I would hate to see part of that land going for residential development. We have got thousands more coming into that very area; we need all that open space. We do not want to nibble at the edges to pay for a few measly million dollars here or there in the long term. We are not looking at just now. I know VicRoads has got the brief to sell land, but I think you have got to go beyond and look at the community as a whole. As a person living in the community for such a long time and being active in it, I think we have got to have a bit of vision here.

You can say, I suppose, that life is full of compromises. On the whole I would go along with that, but I think there are some things that you cannot compromise on, and I think the future open space, not just for my generation but for the kids, if we lose it and part of it is built on, it is gone. Once you have got concrete on green open space, you do not ever get it back again, it has gone for good. We have got to be thinking of the future as well.

If you look at the housing development at Pentridge, which personally is not my cup of tea for housing, but they are big houses or apartments taking up all the block. Where do the kids play? We are concerned about the fact that we have become much more protective of our children and there is an epidemic of obesity, but if we keep cutting down the space where kids actually can run, can fly kites, can just get out and mooch along with the dog or whatever, then we are also partly to blame in our planning for this. I would not compromise. I think we have to say, 'No, we cannot do that; we have got to look at another way around it'.

I suppose as a taxpayer I feel in a sense that I own that land anyway. I have bought it. Okay, it might get a bit convoluted, and maybe I am a bit simplistic in my view of the world, but I think there has got to be some mechanism by which governments at that level can say, 'This is public good; it fits in with our planning strategies; let us see how we can get around it'. To gift it to Moreland council is my first priority, but we can go from there. I am worried about what the compromises and the negotiations might bring, because to eat part of that parkland

would diminish it to the point where it just becomes a little strip rather than the fairly glorious piece of land that it is at the moment.

I have found it has been difficult to get any real response from government level. I am a letter writer and when things annoy me I tend to do something about it on the basis that there is no point moaning if you do not actually do something. But the responses that come back are always in the terms of, 'This is what the situation is' — which I know, that is why I am writing the letter — 'Negotiations are going on between VicRoads and Moreland City Council'. I know that too and I am also concerned about it. There seems to be a kind of glass barrier of communication, or comprehension or a willingness to actually treat with the community in a real sense.

I am very grateful to be able to put my point of view to you today, thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Anne, I thank you for your passion and your clear exposition of the situation, and also for your contribution this morning — and I tend to agree with you. I am moved by what you have said. I guess what I have got to say, or what I should ask you is: what possible recompense could there be for the loss of some of that land?

**Ms SGRÒ** — I do not think in an area like Moreland there can be recompense, to be quite honest. If you look at the land that was set aside — that land that has been nibbled — it was also in a different area. Brunswick and Coburg have been working class areas in the past. The streets in Coburg are slightly bigger than most of the streets in Brunswick. They were established for working people, so there was not land set aside on the whole. It may be that that sort of mentality did not extend further. If a big area, or even a big chunk of that land that we saw this morning, was taken, I cannot see that there is recompense, because where else are you going to get land from to say, 'We will take this, but we will give you that'. It could possibly be — I cannot think where — a small area of land somewhere else. But why would you want to diminish such a terrific piece of parkland? Why would you in the beginning? I find that incomprehensible, I must say, and unthinkable that it could be put in jeopardy. I do not see how it can be recompensed in an area that is already short of open space.

**The CHAIR** — Do you have in a sense a message for the boffins at VicRoads?

**Ms SGRÒ** — I do not actually see it as being up to VicRoads. Maybe I have got the way the authority comes down a bit skewed.

**The CHAIR** — You think it is the ministry and the government?

**Ms SGRÒ** — I think it is a higher level than that. I suppose VicRoads' job is to sell surplus land at market value, and I am not sure how well they can negotiate, whether it could be a peppercorn rent; I do not know. It seems to me that within the boundaries of Melbourne 2030 and a stated commitment to keep areas of the city green, it has to come from further up than that.

**The CHAIR** — So you have got to have vision from the top of the government on this?

**Ms SGRÒ** — I would say so; yes.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. I agree.

**Mr TEE** — I do not have any questions, but thank you very much for your vision, and particularly the broader vision for the community as a whole, and thanks for your time this morning.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — Anne, I do not have questions. I thank you for your passionate presentation and just state that I have a great deal of sympathy for your position. I understand that parcels of land like that are few and far between, and yet we are seeing too many of them being nibbled at — or munched at, as you say — around the state. Thank you.

**Mr KAVANAGH** — Thank you. Can I just you about the Newlands High School site you mentioned? What is going on there now?

**Ms SGRÒ** — There are houses on there, so it is seen now as part of the Pentridge Estate, but I think a lot of people have forgotten that in fact it was Newlands High School. It was a state secondary school that was there, which went right down to the banks of the Merri Creek, and now it is housing that goes directly to that fence line.

**Mr KAVANAGH** — So that must have been owned by the education department in the past?

**Ms SGRÒ** — Yes.

**Mr TEE** — Sorry, when was that sold off? What was the timing of that?

**Ms SGRÒ** — I cannot remember exact years, but it was one of the many secondary schools in Moreland that were closed during the Kennett government period. There was Newlands High School, Coburg tech, Moreland Secondary College, Hadfield High School and there might have been another. I cannot remember. That was then and it would have been late 80s. Would that be it? Peter might know better than me. When Pentridge was sold, then it was sort of included into the whole Pentridge thing, so we have forgotten there was a school there.

**Mr KAVANAGH** — Moreland high, I think, closed in 93, because I used to teach there.

**Ms SGRÒ** — It would have been about the same time.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Anne.

**Witness withdrew.**