

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Melbourne—Tuesday, 27 April 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Sarah Connolly—Chair

Mr David Morris—Deputy Chair

Mr Will Fowles

Ms Danielle Green

Mr Paul Hamer

Mr Tim McCurdy

Mr Tim Smith

WITNESSES

Ms Lorrae Wild, Managing Lead, Urban Design and Architecture, Transport Infrastructure, and

Ms Bronwen Hamilton, Manager, Victorian Design Review Panel, Office of the Victorian Government Architect.

The CHAIR: I advise that the sessions today are being live broadcast on the Parliament's website. Rebroadcasting of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with Legislative Assembly standing order 234.

Thank you very much, Bronwen, for joining us here today at this public hearing for the Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations. This is one of several hearings that the Environment and Planning Committee will be conducting to inform itself about the issues relevant to the inquiry.

Before we begin, I need to point out a couple of things to you. All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. What this means is that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. But it is really important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments that you make outside of this hearing, even if you are just simply restating what you said here today.

You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so to check and to approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you again for taking the time to talk with us today. My name is Sarah Connolly. I am the Chair of this committee, and I am the Member for Tarneit. I am going to get my colleagues to introduce themselves and then we will jump to you, Bron.

Mr FOWLES: My name is Will Fowles. I am the Member for Burwood.

Ms GREEN: I am Danielle Green. I am the state MP for Yan Yean, which is a massive growth area in the north. I am also the Parliamentary Secretary for Sport and regional Victoria, so I obviously have a big interest in the subject area of the committee. Thanks for appearing.

The CHAIR: Bronwen, I am going to hand over to you. If you can introduce yourself, and then if you want to jump into a 5-minute presentation. Some people have slides—if you do not have slides, no worries, you can just speak to your submission.

Ms HAMILTON: Great. Sounds good. I might just share the screen, which kind of includes an introduction. My name is Bronwen Hamilton, and I am the Manager of the Victorian Design Review Panel at the Office of the Victorian Government Architect. I am just going to share a PowerPoint. This will be a summary.

Visual presentation.

The Office of the Victorian Government Architect made a submission to the parliamentary inquiry into environmental infrastructure in 2020, and we welcome the opportunity to present to the Environment and Planning Committee on this important issue. My colleague Lorrae Wild, who is the lead of the OVGA's transport team, has also contributed to this presentation and was joining—may still join.

In the OVGA's submission we distilled 10 important considerations for environmental infrastructure for growing populations. Our perspective is drawn from observations, strategies, plans and projects across Victoria. The OVGA's experience working on significant government projects and the implications of these on public open space, natural systems and the broader public realm has also shaped our response. In addition to our submission we would like to offer some high-level observations about the importance of good environmental infrastructure and the timeliness of this inquiry at a critical point in Victoria's growth and to reiterate the important legacy of good strategic planning and the role of good design in delivering environmental infrastructure.

There is an important role for government in championing design-led strategic thinking and leadership that shapes the priorities for Victorian projects. Victorians are the beneficiaries of the foresight of past spatial plans. This plan from 1855 shows a significant contribution to environmental infrastructure. Good access to

waterways, natural spaces and generous parks were embedded in the ambitions of various city plans, such as this one. There are many good examples of this, particularly in the periods of rapid growth such as we are in.

The 1954 open space plan is on the screen. It set aside large tracts of land for city parks and green corridors and it introduced the concept of green wedges to act as the lungs for our city. Measures were also introduced for targets of green space per person in this plan. This early strategic planning for environmental infrastructure ensured green and natural spaces continued to define the character, attractiveness and livability of Melbourne and other regional cities as they grew.

This is a picture of an image from Sydney's green grid. Strategies such as Sydney's green grid and London's all green grid are recent examples of ambitious city-shaping plans for multilayered and multifunctional green infrastructure. This is the London all green grid. These plans reflect a deep understanding of the connection between a successful and healthy city and firmly embrace cultural and natural systems. Planning for environmental infrastructure provision is important for Victoria's continued livability, prosperity and vitality and the health and equity of our cities and regions. This needs vision, leadership and a commitment to plan and create an enduring public legacy for our cities and towns. Government has a leadership role to champion visionary strategic plans by placing a high priority on integrated, long-term spatial planning for delivery of environmental infrastructure. We need to strengthen planning for generous, equitable and well-connected environmental infrastructure and also ensure that they can be delivered.

To the issue of growth: the inquiry is timely because the planning and provision for—

The CHAIR: Bronwen, can I just get you to pause there for a minute. I just got that nudge and Lorrae has just joined us.

Ms HAMILTON: Great.

The CHAIR: I just need to read to Lorrae about the parliamentary privilege. Hi, Lorrae. Welcome. I just need to read you some information about parliamentary privilege and then we can just pick up where we left off. Lorrae, I need to point out to you today that all evidence taken here at this inquiry will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege, and this means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence that you give. However, it is really important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside this hearing, even if you are just simply restating what you said during the hearing. Hello. Welcome.

Bronwen, if you can proceed, that will be great.

Ms HAMILTON: Sounds good. Hi, Lorrae. Welcome.

So, to the issue of density, the inquiry is timely, because the planning and provision for environmental infrastructure is at a tipping point. There is a pressing need to strengthen and repair the networks given the amplified importance of public space in growing cities and regional towns. Melbourne is at a tipping point where growth and patterns are compromising its historic livability. Sprawling suburbs are eating up valuable agricultural land and replacing it with big houses on small lots, with poor private open space and disconnected public space. Densification, road infrastructure and urban sprawl mean that the environmental infrastructure is in high demand. It is disconnected and inappropriate in scale and use. Passive and active recreation facilities are in high demand and often poorly located. Provision for environmental infrastructure is not keeping pace with growth and the sprawl surrounding cities. In places like Wallan there is a sea of houses with the promise of all sorts of infrastructure to come. These development challenges are also playing out around regional cities. This risks both quality access to environmental infrastructure and the quality of life for future generations.

This diagram shows densification over a period of time, and the message here is that the centre is densifying fast. We need to address urban sprawl and promote good density alongside well-located and connected green corridors and spaces.

Growth, a changing climate and the heat island effect of denser cities means more reliance on our parks and street trees to cool streets. This thermal image of a central Melbourne street on a summer's day shows a 27-degree difference between the canopy cover and the road surface exposed to the sun. There is also a difference in green canopy cover between the east and west of Melbourne, resulting in significant heat vulnerability in the north-west that needs to be addressed through tree planting and increased permeability of surfaces.

The growth in transport infrastructure across the state creates an opportunity to catalyse environmental infrastructure improvements. The expansion of transport infrastructure is also a by-product of growth. The way that this is rolled out can have city-shaping benefits or far-reaching negative consequences that last generations, like we see in this slide. This slide of Southbank shows the potential for major intersections to sever neighbourhoods and reduce pedestrian connectivity. Similarly, the edge of the Yarra River at Cremorne is given over to road infrastructure and is a hard edge to our river that will be hard to ever get back.

There are positive examples where, through good urban design, road and rail infrastructure are catalysing new public spaces and new or reconnected green spaces, including the Cranbourne to Dandenong linear parkland created by elevating the rail corridor and having enhanced public spaces underneath. This slide of the Darebin-Yarra Trail illustrates the benefit of providing new bridges over waterways to complete the shared path network between the main Yarra and Darebin Creek trails and local shared path networks. The role of activated travel networks to seamlessly move around is equally as important as the role of major road and rail infrastructure. Providing sufficient space for well-connected, walkable, equitable active transport networks in the design of parks, waterways and streets is essential for all age groups and mobilities to move safely and easily around our cities and towns.

This is a slide of Geelong waterfront. Finally, we believe it is imperative to deliver an enduring legacy in terms of design quality. Applying a design lens is increasingly needed as part of investment in quality environmental infrastructure. More is demanded of parks and waterfronts in terms of the layering of uses, and the many functions of environmental infrastructure are increasingly needed to be curated through good design. High-quality spaces have the ability to regenerate places, repopulate under-utilised areas and create enduring places to live and play in. Places such as the redesigned Geelong waterfront demonstrate the potential of well-designed places to act as a catalyst for urban renewal. Similarly, Cranbourne and Bendigo botanic gardens demonstrate how investment in the quality design of key places and destinations will ensure that they are a civic legacy for future generations to enjoy.

On this last slide, with the very beautiful, I think, top end of the Yarra River in special surroundings, we encourage the committee to be visionary and to be generous and bold in their deliberations in planning for and creating an enduring public legacy of environmental infrastructure for future generations. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Bronwen. That was great. Sorry about that interruption there. I know it puts you off your train of thought when that happens. But thank you again. That was a really great presentation. I am going to kick off with the first question. Your submission suggests that the committee should recommend policy change really aimed at promoting multiple uses of areas like golf courses, cemeteries, schools and sporting grounds. I know in my electorate of Tarneit sporting grounds are a really big deal because we are building schools with fabulous basketball courts, sporting grounds and things like that on site, and they are very popular for use on weekends. Can you provide a little bit of the detail around the specific policy changes you think would be most effective in this area?

Ms HAMILTON: Yes. Look, the example that comes to mind is actually schools. Increasingly sports grounds and open space more generally need to be shared amongst more people, so places like schools and golf courses are a resource that is often under-utilised. I do not know much about education policy, but the policy change that I would suggest is that schools and similar places are encouraged to design their facilities in ways that can be used by the public and become a community resource, notwithstanding that they have a core function related to either schools or golf courses or another use. I might just also throw to Lorrae, who is really involved in a project at the moment around cemeteries and addressing just this issue.

Ms WILD: Yes. Thanks, Bronwen. There is quite a bold vision set at the moment for reimagining the public cemetery in Melton, called Harkness, as future open space and blue and green infrastructure. It is a very, very large tract of land, and the Greater Melbourne Cemetery Trust has taken the initiative to actually rethink it as a multilayered bit of infrastructure that becomes a regional resource destination and does not lock land away for years and years and years or for generations as a cemetery. Probably another example is what is currently underway with the Caulfield Racecourse, where that I think was envisaged as public open space partially but became a dedicated or an encumbered bit of land primarily run for horses and events. So there is a time-based dimension to how we consider a lot of our facilities and public open space, but certainly looking at that multilayered approach is something that has tremendous benefit and needs to be woven somehow into policy.

The CHAIR: When we talk about that policy—and I know, Bronwen, you said you are not an expert on education policy, but—when we are building these sorts of facilities at schools should we be ensuring that they are built in a way and able to be accessed without, say, the general public being able to get to the classrooms, if that is not the case, having toilets close by or having a gate that enables them to access the facilities they want to without the broader school, for safety reasons, I guess?

Ms HAMILTON: Look, there are some practicalities—about schools in particular—about the way that they need to function. In Canberra, where I lived for a while, the schools were routinely not fenced, so there was less of a barrier between public use of those areas and school use. There was clear demarcation and culture around the use of schools during the day, and there were not necessarily separate toilets and things, but there was a cultural understanding that those places were part of the community.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am going to throw to Will for a question.

Mr FOWLES: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Bronwen and Lorrae, for being here. I am interested to know: what innovations have you seen in a design sense in other jurisdictions that have unlocked environmental infrastructure, be it public open space or other types of environmental infrastructure?

Ms WILD: I might kick off on that, Bron. In Bronwen's presentation we talked about the whole-of-government approach that was illustrated in the likes of the London green grid and the Sydney Green Grid, and that is that multilayered approach of everyone actually working to a common ambition or a common vision, rather than different jurisdictions having to deliver elements of such. So that idea of having a broader conversation and a broader commitment to joining the dots across government to deliver on a designated vision or ambition is probably the biggest innovation, because sadly we are all talking in little silos and working in little silos, and that is suggesting that our cities are not well connected as far as landscape systems and networks go.

Mr FOWLES: Can you give us an example of where that approach has delivered a tangible outcome, something that has come about as a result of treating it in that way?

Ms HAMILTON: I think the Greening the Pipeline project is a really interesting one. That is a reimagining of a former sewerage line—you might know it—in the west, and it has been redeveloped in sections as parkland. My understanding is that the sewerage line is redundant. But there are parts also of Melbourne Water's infrastructure, who I understand is the largest landholder in Melbourne, where the green area covered over pipelines is being used by communities for community gardens—not hard infrastructure, but it is being used to be multi-use and extending the access to green space that communities have.

Mr FOWLES: So the OVGGA, as I understand it, provides expert advice when matters are referred to you. Is that the right model for the design of environmental infrastructure? Is it the right model that authorities—is that their option as to whether to obtain additional expert advice from your office?

Ms HAMILTON: Lorrae, do you want to tag at that one?

Ms WILD: That is such a big question. The OVGGA advocates for design quality across all sorts of projects. We do not actually have a certain mandate other than to lift the ambition of projects and look at how that might shape our cities and towns for future benefit. I think what you are referring to is perhaps the design review model where we review certain projects, but there is certainly a realm of projects out there that we are involved with throughout their project life cycle and working very collaboratively with other government departments to think across the broader city. Often it is within defined departments that we are working, and I think Bron and I, as landscape architects, have this idea that ideally, from a green infrastructure perspective, you work across departments, and that is probably our challenge.

Mr FOWLES: And, if I can just have another one, Chair: what innovation has there been around the design of green roofs? They seem to have been the topic of, I guess, more popular discussion going back three or four years. To what extent have design limitations limited their uptake? To what extent are they actually valuable in terms of the urban heat island effect, and what consideration ought be given by government to encouraging their rollout?

Ms WILD: We would probably have to defer to the experts on that one. There is a lot of research out there on green roofs. Certainly one of the innovations in the office at the moment is the Future Homes competition, which is looking at completely different models for doing density well in the middle ring, and that might mean

it might not be a green roof necessarily, but it might be a reduced footprint of buildings, a bit more shared space and potentially reduced parking. Green roofs as an element is probably not something we have necessarily focused on, although there are some good initiatives. I think one is actually occurring on the top of Parliament's roof at the moment.

Ms HAMILTON: There is a green roof there. Can I just add something to that, Lorrae. Through the design review panel we regularly see projects that have proposals for green walls and green roofs. It is fair to say that there are not many successful examples in the city, but there are some. If they are to be considered in the heat load and urban forest strategies across probably local governments, then they are one emerging and important way that greenery can be increased in the city. It is challenging in terms of maintenance to ensure that green roofs are successful, and they need more testing and certainly probably more innovation and technology around them, but there is a real opportunity there that has been used. Gosh, there is an amazing one in France. There are some incredible green walls in Sydney. There are a couple of buildings in Canberra at NewActon that have a green interface to the north. So they are certainly being used to cool buildings and to provide more greenery in cities.

Mr FOWLES: And can the OVGA provide input into design standards—ESD standards and the like?

Ms HAMILTON: Mostly we are more strategic than that. We do review policy. So the Better Apartments Design Standards came through the Victorian Design Review Panel, and we used our experts in housing and apartment design to provide critique on that, so a fresh pair of eyes to collaborate with DELWP and assist them in their deliberations. So there is a role there. We do not develop policy, though.

Mr FOWLES: Sure. And do you have a view about the best way to achieve environmentally sustainable design in the built form? Do you have a sense of what we could all be doing better, either within just the design piece or the way the design piece talks to the planning and planning approvals piece?

Ms HAMILTON: Yes. Again, we are probably more generalists, although there are specialists in sustainability within the OVGA. So if there is a generalist answer, it is about encouraging good density and compact cities, because the opportunity to have better access to infrastructure—so for more people to have better access to infrastructure—is enabled through a compact, polycentric city.

Mr FOWLES: Thank you. Thank you, Chair. Sorry, I realise I have run us over time.

The CHAIR: That is all right. They were great questions, Will. I am going to throw to Danielle.

Ms GREEN: Look, thank you so much. I have been really just lapping up what you have been saying. Your submission argues for the inclusion of triggers for delivery and maintenance of environmental infrastructure in major road and rail projects funding, including the compulsory acquisition of land. I was thinking, 'Aren't we doing that?', when you look at the level crossing removals and the linear parks. I am thinking we are doing that, but you think that maybe there just is not that trigger there, because I know we are doing it with lots of provision of sporting fields, the North East Link et cetera, and certainly the rail extensions in my electorate out to Mernda have included shared user paths but also have even extended to heritage inputs in that they have done heritage digs which then have formed part of the local environmental infrastructure.

Ms WILD: I completely concur. There are a lot of fantastic things that are going on with major transport infrastructure at the moment, but then there is that—I think how we put it in the submission is that in a sense some of the active transport infrastructure needs to be seen as just as vital as some of the big road and rail infrastructure, so putting priority around that. It certainly does happen around some of the railway stations as far as the level crossings, but they are just small little parts of the network. So part of what I think we were alluding to with that is if you had equitable—how would you call it?—commitment to providing walking and cycling infrastructure as you did to providing big road and rail infrastructure and looking at how you might reduce the footprint of some of that road infrastructure to better integrate those projects with urban communities. That is something that we are still working through, and we are working very actively with the Major Transport Infrastructure Authority on that. But there is very much a bit of a road and rail focus, so our idea would be that there needs to be equally that lens of looking at blue and green infrastructure and walking and cycling infrastructure.

Ms GREEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Danielle. I am just mindful of time. I know we started a little bit late. Before wrapping up and throwing to you, Bron and Lorrae, if there are any closing comments and things that you are desperate for us to hear that you have just thought of and that you wanted to leave us with, or closing comments, things that you are desperate to see state government do or recommendations come out of this inquiry, now is the time to speak up.

Ms HAMILTON: Thank you. For me I think there are two things: our point about the importance of coordinated and holistic strategic plans is such a leadership role for government, and at the moment there is a real challenge and probably a disparateness in how those plans are delivered. That is really challenging. There is a real focus on individual projects. And that just means that those historic strategic plans are much harder to deliver as a kind of holistic, citywide vision that is really for future generations. So that is the big picture.

To the detailed picture there is just that really important role of design and ambition, so increasingly places and the value of places are not just key to livability but key to the financial success of cities and their appeal. That involves expert endeavour and engagement in all parts of the process, and that needs time and probably respect that there is a really important role for planning and detailed design expertise to deliver those great places.

Ms WILD: And I might just add to that, a little bit tongue in cheek, that maybe it is time, following that last question, now for a big build for environmental infrastructure.

The CHAIR: I like that.

Ms GREEN: I like that terminology.

Ms WILD: My other throwaway comment—not a throwaway comment. I was about to say earlier to Will is that our favourite green roofs are actually trees. There is the real importance of actually getting shade on the ground when you are walking and moving around our city, and it is just as critical as what happens on roofs.

The CHAIR: I like that one too, actually, being in an electorate where there are not enough trees. Bronwen and Lorrae, on behalf of the committee I just really want to say thank you. This has been a really valuable discussion. We have really appreciated your time this afternoon.

Ms HAMILTON: Thank you.

Ms WILD: Thank you for the opportunity.

Committee adjourned.