Presentation to Green Wedge Management Plan

Review Panel.

Green Wedges – a vision initiated by Sir Rupert Hamer in the late 1960’s for the development of Melbourne. Containing urban growth in corridors with green wedges separating them. Over time creating Melbourne as one of the most liveable cities in the world.

The continued threat by developer lobbyists to erode the green wedges by rezoning across Melbourne had devastating results, particularly in the SE. Our green wedge remained practically intact due to the actions of resident’s intent on supporting the vision and ideals of the planning scheme.

The Kennett Government’s Local Government Restructure saw the creation, after much resident input, of Nillumbik, described by the Chair, Leonie Bourke “as a conservation shire with the green wedge as its strategic focus”.

Development pressure on the urban interface continued, Nillumbik’s green wedge was not immune but maintained its integrity through strong community support. This pressure led to the introduction of the Urban Growth Boundary in 2003 by the Bracks Government.

The green wedges have now been in place for nearly fifty years. A consistent vision with generally bipartisan support. The concept has not changed, growth corridors interspersed with green wedges, ad hoc subdivision is a thing of the past, however short-sighted self-interest lives on.

History has shown that in planning a long-term, consistent, cohesive outcome is only achievable through a strong and unwavering commitment to a set of criteria that delivers the vision and the objectives.

For those of you who have travelled through Britain and Europe the results of adopting such a plan are obvious. Everywhere you can see the hard-edge of urban areas against rural backdrops, the concept of buffer areas has not stood the test of time. It is seen as “cheque book” planning, a short-sighted destruction of the vision.

Sir Rupert’s vision of the green wedges as the “lungs of Melbourne” is more relevant today than ever before. The compounding effects of population and climate change are putting huge pressure on our ecosystems, biodiversity and our rural areas. New challenges arise that reinforce the necessity to maintain our green wedges. Climate adaption strategies to drought, bushfire and flood, as well as settlement patterns, providing certainty to rural activities and agricultural pursuits is critical and food miles are all issues that you the planners for Nillumbik need to consider.

You have taken on the challenge to secure the future of this precious green wedge, not with short-sighted, self-interest but with our children and future generations in mind. We are the guardians, the custodians for this brief time, your decisions will impact on what condition this valuable asset will be handed on in.

Your predecessors have worked tirelessly to ensure that you are now deliberating on the future of the most intact and preserved green wedge around Melbourne. While you
concentrate on Nillumbik, external influences that impact our aspirations need to be considered. While the UGB is currently sacrosanct, in 2005 the Liberal Government put in place changes to the zones, they increased uses, removed the in-conjunction test, created inconsistency between the zones, reduced the minimum lot size for major developments creating a huge problem with the bulk and scale of potential applications. In effect they are allowing the cancerous destruction of the green wedges by commercialisation and overuse.

This Green Wedge Management Plan Review is your opportunity to formulate responses to these and many other issues. One issue that may be a little easier to grasp is the preservation of biodiversity. Our two major zones are the RCZ and the GWZ. Both allow farming and rural enterprise, the RCZ as its name suggests also recognises the importance of conservation. Over the last forty-five years this issue has been a constant, maintaining the balance between allowable development and the preservation of our valuable ecosystems, the flora and fauna and their habitat.

The State Planning regulations seek to provide guidance on maintaining our biodiversity, that is, our bush. The incremental loss of our bushland is a constant. Whether by feral pests, goats, pigs, rabbits and, since 2009 the rapid rise of deer numbers, or by the increasing kangaroo population made possible by our provision of food and water or the threat posed by human intervention, our biodiversity is diminishing. Destruction of large areas of bushland by grazing animals has long been recognized as a threat to biodiversity due to the complete elimination of the understorey.

Biodiversity is a complex interaction of many facets of the ecosystem. The Eltham Copper Butterfly is a well known example of this complexity, to survive and breed it requires the shrub Bursaria, ants and perfect timing that could well be impacted by climate change due to plants flowering earlier. Our native ground orchids are in jeopardy because we know very little about the life cycle of the insects that pollinate them. Each orchid, and across Nillumbik there may be around 100 species, with possibly a different pollinating vector for each and each vector having a different life cycle, requiring specific plant species and communities makes for a very fragile existence, one heavily impacted by illegal removal of habitat. Much of this clearing due to ignorance, a total lack of understanding or the belief that it’s my land it’s my right.

Did I say saving biodiversity may be simpler and easier to grasp? I look forward to your deliberations and an outcome that hopefully secures the future for our bushland, for historically we have come up short.

The nurturing of our bushland and the impacts of climate change introduce a conundrum that has in the past and will again in the future seriously affect our communities. Fire.

It is not an issue that I shy away from. As a CFA volunteer of over forty-five years with the Panton Hill Brigade there is not much that I have not seen or experienced. As a society we use fire to our advantage, but we have not tamed it. Fire must be respected, the power of the natural forces that drive it are gargantuan. Fear and emotion are not the means to an end when planning for or confronting fire. As we have done in the past we prepare and plan for any eventuality, however we must accept out limitations and act accordingly.
Once again you have the opportunity through the GWMPR to put in place policy to improve the community resilience. You have the wisdom of the Bushfire Royal Commission and the relevant State Regulations. However, there is room to recommend fire bunkers, lower the fees for their permits, keep a register of bunkers that would facilitate location and checking by emergency agencies. Organise short term accommodation for the rural elderly on TFB days within local age care facilities. Think laterally, even those with little or no fire experience can put in place positive policy, putting more urban people in fire prone bushland areas is not one of them.

There are of course, a myriad of wonderful subjects that will require your collective eye, tourism is a major area. Do we need a Disneyland or more passive agricultural and nature based tourism that will connect with the trails and our beautiful townships. The oyster is yours to prise open and add the lustre.

To sum up –

1972 Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works presents Hamer’s vision for Melbourne of Growth Corridors separated by Green Wedges.

Pressure on green wedges from developer’s constant.

1994 Formation of Nillumbik by Kennett Government as “a conservation shire with the green wedge as its strategic focus”

Land banking and developer pressure to rezone green wedge areas to urban. North East green wedge (ours) survives due to community support.

2003 Urban Growth Boundary legislated.

Community works to produce GWMP strongly supported across the shire.

Nillumbik’s green wedge protected by adherence to planning scheme and a long term vision for the Shire as Melbourne’s pre-eminent green wedge.

2009 Black Saturday, a disastrous day in the history of Nillumbik. Royal Commission leads to State regulations on building and fire management across Victoria.

To present day Nillumbik Shire and community strive to maintain the integrity of the green wedge through strong, consistent application of state planning regulations.

Lastly, the community engagement process provided great feedback on the love of residents for their Shire, the green wedge, the vibrant communities and the clear message ‘Don’t mess it up’.

Finally, I would like to thank every panel member for taking on a task that is so important to the well being of our community, the rural and agricultural areas as well as the bushland. I wish you all well in your endeavours and look forward to the eventual fruits of your collective labour.