North East Link Project (NELP) Environment Effects Statement Inquiry and Advisory Committee
(Speaking notes Mariella Di Fabio, 12 September 2019)

Introduction
Mr Chairman and panel thank you for the opportunity to speak at this hearing.

My name is Mariella Di Fabio. I live in Borlase Street Yallambie. I’ve lived in Yallambie for just over 18 months so I’m relatively new to the area. I have no engineering or technical expertise, in fact I have no particular expertise, I’m a lay person and the best I can do today is tell my story.

I live in one of the nine new townhouses at 6 Borlase Street, across the road from the Borlase Reserve, which as you know, will be replaced by the Lower Plenty Road (LPR) interchange. I am devastated at what’s in store for me for the next seven years with the construction of the North East Link unless the project’s reference design in the EES is significantly modified.

There are better designs and better ways to build this project, as you’ve heard at these proceedings.

My background
I grew up in Melbourne’s northern suburbs. In 1987 I moved to Warrnambool where I lived and worked until 2018. My W’bool house was in a court that opened onto a walking track along Russells Creek. In October 2017, my employment situation changed quite suddenly and within weeks my family’s circumstances in Melbourne changed too. I had to retire early and return to Melbourne. I now care for my elderly mother who lives in Heidelberg. To buy a unit in Banyule I had to withdraw a substantial lump sum from my superannuation savings as my Warrnambool unit sold for a third of the price I paid for my Yallambie unit. I bought the new unit in December 2017 and was really happy with it because:

• of its proximity to my mother’s home in Heidelberg
• the Borlase Reserve across the road reminded me of what I had in Warrnambool
• there’s native vegetation and wildlife close by at the Simpson Army Barracks, and
• there are great walking tracks such as the River Gum Walk, the Plenty River trail and the Yarra trail close by and I walk almost every day.

Had I known in December 2017 what I know now and had the NEL authority provided me with accurate information in December 2017, I would not have purchased my lovely little house that I was hoping to enjoy in my retirement.

NELP’s artwork
NELP has misled the community and has underplayed the project’s impacts. I’ve seen many pages of glossy maps, photos and artists’ impressions that show idyllic road settings surrounded by trees. I was told I wouldn’t be severely impacted by the NEL construction. The glossy 2018 map I received in my letterbox shows a continuous tunnel from the proposed Blamey Road ramps to the Eastern Freeway and even the map in the April 2019 EES Summary Report does not distinguish between a “cut and cover tunnel” and a TBM tunnel. I thought a tunnel was an underground passageway. I had no idea about different
types of tunnelling methods and techniques and the impacts a cut and cover method has on surface areas. I’m a lay person; a tunnel is a tunnel and is built underground.
NELP’s ‘consultation’ and ‘communication’

In June 2018 after receiving a NELA invitation pamphlet in my letterbox I attended a social impact assessment workshop. NELA stated:

... we’re seeking to understand the community values in your area and how these could potentially change with the North East Link, this will help protect community values and find opportunities to include things that meet community aspirations

(‘What do we mean by community values’, pdf received via email 28 June 2018)

In good faith I, and other attendees, earnestly and actively participated in the workshop and responded to questions such as what do we value in our area, how do we use the roads,
what’s important to us in our neighbourhood. I emphasised that although I was a new resident, the Borlase Reserve was already giving me, my neighbours and their children, great enjoyment. In hindsight, during the two-hour workshop, the most practical thing I did was write lots of words on colour-coded sticky notes and place them on butcher’s paper. None of our community aspirations has been met.

In effect the community engagement workshops and social impact assessment workshops have been a NELP PR exercise, all designed so NELP can tick the ‘we have engaged and consulted with the community’ box.

You’ve heard what Mr Fred Buono said about NELP’s consultations with the Community Liaison Group. I quote from his submission no. 646:

*My experience with the consultation process is that it seems to have been more of a carefully choreographed marketing exercise with one-way communication and no interactive consultation’*

You’ve also heard from Ms Michelle Giovas; she is still waiting for a response from NELP to her questions about homes and residences impacted by NELP.

And you’ve heard from many private submitters and community groups that NELP has not genuinely consulted with, or actively listened to, them.

On 17 April this year, NELP’s CEO Duncan Elliot speaking on ABC radio (Jon Faine’s morning program) stated: (and I quote)

... *we have always maintained contact with all those people throughout that journey and in fact anyone else who lives close to that corridor, we’re not dealing with this through individual letters and so forth, we’re doing it through individual conversations and case management so it’s important for us to recognise that yes there are those directly impacted and they’ll be compensated for that...*

I was really angry and upset when I heard that from Mr Elliot because I live ‘close to that corridor’ and my house is ‘directly impacted’, though will not be acquired. I would like NELP to tell me why hasn’t my house, and all houses along Borlase Street, been considered for acquisition? How was the project boundary assessed? My house and my street are adjacent to the construction boundary, the footpath opposite my driveway is part of the surface works project boundary, potential construction compound boundary, and a few metres from the proposed four-metre high noise wall (see EES Map Book, pp. 356). Neither I, nor my neighbours, had an ‘individual conversation’ or any direct personal communication with anyone from the NELP. All I received from NELP were glossy flyers and pamphlets in my letterbox and generic emails inviting me to visit the drop-in centres and visit the NELP website for further information.

**Personal involvement with EES process**

As well as attending NELA’s social impact assessment workshop last year, and since the release of the EES in April this year, I’ve spent many hours on the NELP, including visiting the Watsonia hub several times, helping Katie George organise neighbourhood and community meetings, speaking at Banyule Council meetings, writing umpteen letters to NELP, local
MPs, the Premier, several ministers and shadow ministers and, these past eight weeks, quite a few hours at these proceedings.

At one of the neighbourhood meetings held at my house, (organised by Katie George), NELP representatives presented the project’s reference design. Our neighbours had no idea about the proximity of the project’s boundary to our driveways, the loss of the Borlase Reserve, the size of the LPR interchange, or of the project’s overall impacts on our street.

How many residents in streets like ours, all along the corridor, have no idea about the size and scope of the project?

Another neighbours meeting at my house was with Mr Fred Buono, in his capacity as a member of the northern Community Liaison Group. After listening to Fred Buono’s presentation of the SMART Taxpayer Design, one neighbour remarked, ‘this is a no brainer, Fred’s longer TBM tunnel design makes sense on so many levels’. Everyone supported the design.

At that meeting, Mr Buono listened to our concerns about the reference project and further revised the SMART Taxpayer Design.

That’s what ‘consultation’ looks like.

At two community meetings, in May and August 2019 (again organised by Katie George), the 120+ residents from Viewbank, Macleod, Yallambie, Rosanna, Watsonia and Eaglemont who attended had no idea about the 25 metres deep and 100 metres wide cut and cover trench. They were surprised at the size and complexity of the LPR interchange. Most thought NEL was an underground tunnel from the end of the M80 to the Eastern Freeway with entry and exit ramps along the corridor. And I’ll hazard a guess; tens of thousands of residents from Greensborough to Bulleen still think that’s what it’s going to be. They believed what they’d seen in NELP’s glossy promotional literature; just as I did.

Mr Buono presented the SMART Taxpayer Design at both meetings and, again, there was unanimous support for it.

I, too, wholeheartedly support and endorse the SMART Taxpayer Design and Fred Buono’s submission.
NELP’s misinformation
During one of my visits to the Watsonia hub on 27 April (2019) I had a discussion with a NELP representative about the LPR interchange. He said there were many ways the project could be built and there were potentially many designs for the interchange. In a subsequent email to NELP, I asked if the LPR design options could be made public. I received a reply on 20 May from one of NELP’s community engagement officers stating (and I quote):

... From the start of the project we have examined dozens of ideas for the project corridor and each interchange. However, there isn’t an alternative design for the Lower Plenty Rd interchange.

(Excerpt from personal email, can provide original if required)

In one of the piles of technical notes released by NELP these past eight weeks we now, magically, have an alternative LPR interchange design – tabled document 101, technical note R33, 29 July 2019.

Number 12 of technical note R33 states:
‘The alternative design provides a number of environmental effect benefits compared with the reference project as it is less complex to build, requires less materials and **could have reduced truck volumes and construction program.** It also provides possible opportunities to reinstate more open space at Borlase Reserve’

NELP arranged an information session for us (Borlase and Drysdale Sts neighbours) on Thursday 8 August ‘regarding the additional work which has taken place to further minimise project impacts around Lwr Plenty Rd and Greensborough Rd’ (personal email 31 July)

How can project impacts be further minimised, and have reduced truck volumes if the Borlase Reserve at LPR and land extending north to Blamey road is likely to be the launch site for the tunnel boring machine and the cut and cover and TBM equipment and materials storage sheds, described in the technical note? (NELP technical note 44, document 166, Attachment C, Borlase Reserve Indicative TBM Support Construction Compound Layout’, tabled 6 August).

Mr Chairman and panel you have visited the West Gate tunnel project’s launch site in Yarraville and have seen how much land is required to accommodate and store the TBM, cranes, smoke ducts, acoustic sheds, water treatment plants, compounds etc. The West Gate tunnel TBM launch site is contained within industrial land and road reserves well away from houses as Ms Michelle Giovas showed us in her presentation.

![Yallambie and Yarraville](image)

(Figure 4: NearMAPs comparison, prepared by Michelle Giovas and presented to the IAC on 2nd September 2019, used with permission)
At the Borlase Reserve, the launch site is 30 metres away from our homes. There’ll be non-stop construction from 2020 to 2026 with an estimated 600 spoil trucks per hour on Greensborough Road. For at least six years we’ll have to endure noise, dust, potential air contaminants from trench excavations, fumes and poor air quality from the volume of trucks’ emissions and restricted access to our homes. During the Rosanna level crossing removal, part of the Borlase Reserve was used as a temporary storage compound and landfill site. On windy days I couldn’t open my windows due to swirling dust clouds. I couldn’t go walking because the dust caused breathing difficulties.

As my neighbour said, a launch site and an extended construction site means the impacts will be 100 times worse than the six months of level crossing removal works. How are we expected to live through this? We can’t, our homes will be unliveable.

If we had a longer tunnel option such as the SMART Taxpayer Design we would not be so drastically affected. You’ve seen the design and heard Mr Buono’s submission and you’ve heard how much support there is for this design in the Banyule community.

Since the 7th of June this year you have received, read and listened to over a thousand submissions. In all those written and verbal submissions has anyone said: this reference project has a lot going for it and is a stellar example of how the NEL could be built? Rhetorical question!

I actually support the completion of the missing North East Link and I understand the project is essentially an enormous construction in an urban area but I cannot support the reference design in the EES. At the beginning of this EES process, for me, it was all about saving the Borlase Reserve and removing the LPR interchange. But having followed these proceedings it’s much more than that. It’s about the impacts on homes, schools, businesses, community facilities, natural reserves, waterways, and flora and fauna habitats all along the north east corridor.

What is the actual cost of this project? How do you cost the uncertainty of not knowing if you’ll be able to live in your home; not knowing what is actually going to be built; the stress the EES process and proposed project has already caused, and will continue to cause, due to so many uncertainties; the concern of loved ones seeing their family members so terribly distressed and upset; and the long-term effects of physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing. How do you put a price on those intangibles?

**Conclusion**

- the SMART Taxpayer Design should receive equal consideration to the reference design and should be placed prominently in information provided to project bidders
- the LPR interchange should be removed or at least drastically modified and its size reduced
- the eventual design should include a continuous bored/mined tunnel
- there should be a complete re-assessment of home acquisitions
- NELP should provide relocation options for residents for the duration of heavy construction phases and provide appropriate compensation.

Whatever project is built:
- it should not divide communities
- it should not destroy so much vegetation and natural open spaces, and
- it should not include a cut and cover tunnel, anywhere along the entire north-east corridor.
I know I’m just a dot on the massive North East Link Project map but it’s my home, my health and wellbeing that’s at stake and I deserve the best possible outcome, as does everyone in the community.

Mr Chairman and Panel, we’re in your hands and everything hinges on your recommendations to the Planning Minister.

Figure 5: the Borlase Reserve, what I see every time I drive or walk out of my driveway (photo taken Sunday 7 September 2019)

Figure 6: What I can expect to see at end of my driveway a cut and cover trench (from Ms Michelle Giovas’s submission, document 292, p. 15)