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What is Environmental Infrastructure?

Posted on 29 April 2022

Legislative Assembly 9 February 2022

MORRIS (Mornington) (10:07): I am very pleased to rise to make some brief comments on the report of the Environment and Planning Committee which was tabled by the member for Tarneit this morning.

That inquiry was into environmental infrastructure for growing populations. I think the term 'growing populations' in recent history has applied to growth areas, but of course we now have a situation where populations are growing right across the state.

One of the first issues that had to be dealt with by the committee was in fact determining what environmental infrastructure is because people have different views.

The committee determined that we would restrict it to public parks and open space; paths and roads where attached to parks and open space, or particularly that; road and rail reserves; sporting fields; public forests and bushland; botanic gardens; wildlife corridors; beaches and access point; and rivers and lakes.

We also were quite definite in terms of what we believed was not included. While it is detailed in the report, essentially that is private land, and that includes not only private backyards and things but green wedges as well, which are of course largely owned privately.

I also should comment briefly on the impacts of the pandemic on the inquiry. This was the committee's first inquiry where the hearings were done entirely via video link.

While I think teleconferencing works exceptionally well in terms of the delivery of meetings and the normal administrative meetings of committees and even for discussions where people are known to one another, when you are dealing with strangers, when you are trying to extract evidence, it does not work in anywhere near the same way as face-to-face hearings.

In my view, while necessary for this report and I certainly do not criticise the use of it, we should be getting back to face-to-face hearings whenever possible and teleconferencing should not become the norm; it should not be a way of saving money or speeding up time.

We need to be doing face-to-face hearings. On at least one occasion the witnesses clearly had no idea why they were there. While you can manage that in a face-to-face hearing—you can work your way around that—that particular 40 minutes was just a waste of time for

everyone concerned.

And of course there is the broader issue of the impact of the pandemic on staff as well, but that is something as members of Parliament we are only too familiar with. But I do want to acknowledge the work of the committee staff under difficult circumstances.

The report is essentially divided into two parts. The first relates to the benefits to be derived from environmental infrastructure and the impact of a lack of access to environmental infrastructure, and then geographically, so inner urban, middle-ring suburbs, outer suburbs, regional and peri-urban areas, and we tacked on the waterways on top of that. There are a host of findings and a total of 57 recommendations.

In terms of the benefits and the costs, there are recommendations around improved access to walking tracks, bike tracks and biophilic design which, just in case you do not know what 'biophilic design' is, means the practice of connecting people and nature within built environments and within communities where access is not necessarily available.

There was also quite a lot of work regarding vegetation cover. We know that there is enormous disparity in terms of vegetation cover, particularly between the west of the metropolitan area and the east. To some extent that is a by-product of natural conditions, but the contrast is stark and given that people are living in both places, it is something that the committee actually provides a serious amount of attention to.

There are a host of other issues. Interestingly, while the incidence and the impact of issues varied across the localities, there were in fact pretty much common factors right across. For example, the inner suburbs are very, very poorly served in terms of environmental infrastructure, so it is more about balance and the factors are pretty common right across.

I do want to acknowledge my colleagues on the committee, particularly the member for Tarneit as the chair of the committee, and of course the member for South Barwon before that, and certainly the members for Burwood, Yan Yean, Box Hill and Ovens Valley and the member for Eildon, who is at the table.

I think this is a genuine bipartisan report and I commend it.