

# 2009 VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES ROYAL COMMISSION

*"Warrandyte - Be Better Prepared!"*

A submission by the  
Warrandyte Community Association Inc.



Based on a Community Forum  
5th MAY 2009



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## 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

### *Warrandyte – “Be Better Prepared”*

A Submission by the

**Warrandyte Community Association Inc. ( A0042350W)**

based on a Community Forum

**Tuesday 5 May 2009**

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## “Fires: having our say”

*WCA forum probes local anxieties*  
By KARLY HICKMAN

An overflow gathering of locals pledged their commitment to ensuring Warrandyte is better prepared for future bushfire seasons.

More than 280 residents attended the WCA Bushfire Forum on May 5 where significant issues around bushfires were discussed. Results will be collated and submitted to the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission.

“This is a forum for the people of Warrandyte to make their own feelings known,” president Dick Davies said.

Key issues identified included community education, policy and land management, evacuation, bunkers, construction codes and assessment, access and egress to Warrandyte, fire fighting resource allocation, personal responsibility, early warning systems and community refuges.

Residents also raised issues concerning the interpretation of the fire index ratings, fuel reduction and clearing guidelines, what is defensible and what is not, where residents can go on total fire ban days, a recovery plan including counselling and support, bushfire education in schools, insurance questions and providing new residents to Warrandyte with information about the dangers of living in the bush.

Bruce Turner facilitated the forum, aiming to debrief from the last fire season, generate recommendations to be submitted to the Royal Commission, and produce plans of what people can do on an individual level.

Mr Turner said he wanted to encourage “simple, honest human conversation, not finger pointing, mediation, negotiation or debate”.

Warrandyte residents were fortunate enough to be provided with valuable insight by people from some of the fire-affected areas such as Marysville, St Andrews and Kinglake.

A Marysville man who lost his home in the Black Saturday fires suggested that surviving buildings should be thoroughly examined, and that building codes and bushfire assessments should include vegetation proximity to structures.

Long term suggestions to be included in the submission include rate rebates for those included in fireguard groups, specifications to be available for the construction of bunkers and a financial incentive to those who have bunkers constructed on their property.

Further, it is recommended the commission consider education campaigns targeting fire index understanding, a centralised website that can provide real-time fire information for communities, proper assessment of fire risk to whole properties, a second river crossing or a third lane across the bridge and a feasibility study for wholesale community evacuation.

Dick Davies told the *Diary* that emergency service representatives present at the forum recognised a gap that exists between perception and reality. “Evacuation did not come up early in the conversation; what people think is a concern is perhaps different to reality.

” Many people voiced their concerns that relatively few young people were at the forum. It was suggested that everyone in our community needs to be targeted to improve bushfire awareness and preparedness, using appropriate language and methods. “We need to find ways to capture younger people,” Mr Davies said.

Mr Davies thanked the Warrandyte Community Church for the “magnificent premises” that were donated for use on the night.

WCA’s submission to the Royal Commission will be prepared by Dick Davies—with wide community input thanks to the forum—and will be considered as part of the commission’s interim report.

**Submission to the  
2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission  
by the  
Warrandyte Community Association Incorporated**

**TERMS OF REFERENCE**

This submission particularly addresses Royal Commission Terms of Reference 2, 3 and 5.

2. *The preparation and planning by Governments Emergency Services, other entities, the community and households for bushfires in Victoria, including current laws, policies, practices, resources and strategies for the prevention, identification, evaluation, management and communication of bushfire threats and risks.*
  
3. *All aspects of the response to the 2009 bushfires, particularly measures taken to control the spread of the fires and measures taken to protect life and private and public property included but not limited to:*
  - a. *Immediate management response and recovery;*
  - b. *Resourcing overall coordination and deployment; and*
  - c. *Equipment and communication systems.*
  
5. *Any other matters that they deem appropriate in relation to the 2009 bushfires.*

## SUMMARY AND OVERVIEW

Warrandyte is severely fire-prone area with a sad history of bushfire disaster. The Warrandyte Community Association convened a Bushfire Forum open to all members of the public in the Warrandyte area to hear Warrandyte residents' views and feelings on the issues arising from the fires. There were no formal speeches or presentations. About 280 residents participated in small groups to raise matters of concern. Twelve topics emerged with recommendations for short and longer term actions and supporting comment. These views are residents' views: they are not necessarily the views of the WCA or the local Emergency Services, neither are they always consistent. They do however accurately reflect community concerns.

There was an emphasis on the need for better 'Education and Communication' with people taking 'Personal Responsibility' for their safety, particularly by supporting 'Community Fireguard Groups'.

Better 'Resource Allocation' is advocated, training local citizens to defend as well as providing better back-up.

There was enthusiasm for designated, safe 'Community Refuges' and 'Individual Bunkers', with more specialist information required.

'Early Warning Systems' must be improved with clarity as to what they mean.

'Building Codes' should be tightened in fire-prone areas.

The most contentious area is perhaps 'Land Management Policy' with some passionate advocacy in favour of maintaining Warrandyte's rich bush environment and conversely for fuel reduction and tree clearing. There is no doubt that this area of policy needs revision, but based on evidence and consistency between Councils.

Warrandyte has severe 'Access and Egress' problems which have been raised in other public forums hosted by WCA before but yet to be resolved.

The potential for and questions arising from 'Evacuation of Whole Community' are considered. There was much support for publicising and utilizing the Forest Fire Danger Index.

Finally, 'Insurance' issues were raised: compulsory fire insurance and potential rebates for fire protected properties.

The forum was well received as evidenced by the feedback notes and correspondence which is also included. Finally this submission contains archival material from the local community newspaper, The Warrandyte Diary, on local experiences of the 7 February fire and earlier fires.

The WCA will work with the local community, Emergency Services, Local Councils and State Government to implement the actions called for in this submission.

## **WCA MANDATE AND ORGANISATION**

This submission is made on behalf of the Warrandyte Community Association Inc. (WCA).

The WCA is an active resident group of the Warrandyte community and has a mandate from its membership of 250 residents of Warrandyte and North Warrandyte to:

- Promote all aspects of community life in Warrandyte
- Defend the character and heritage of the township
- Protect the environment and encourage restoration and regeneration of native flora and fauna
- Protect the Green Wedge (non-urban areas)
- Promote sporting, recreational and educational activities
- Defend and enhance community assets.

## **WCA BUSHFIRE FORUM**

The recent bushfires raised significant issues which resonated within the Warrandyte community. Warrandyte is extremely fire prone. Bushfires have burned through the area in 1851, 1939, 1962, 1965, 1969 and 1991 causing property loss, habitat destruction and death. The WCA is aware that the immediate focus of the Commission has been on the areas tragically affected by the recent fires. As the focus of the Commission is on adversely impacted communities, it is understandable that The Commissioners did not hold any meetings in Warrandyte. However, our community feels vulnerable. Consequently, the Warrandyte Community Association convened an 'Open Forum' or 'Workshop' to hear Warrandyte residents' views and feelings on the issues arising from the fires.

The purpose was to explore possible ways forward, to focus on issues and actions and to better prepare Warrandyte for the next fire season which could be upon us in October 2009.

There were no speeches or formal presentations. The format of the workshop was to enable residents to raise matters of interest and concern which were then prioritized for submission to this Royal Commission. There were matters raised which undoubtedly require further expert technical, local and political input. The WCA will host subsequent meeting or activities with the appropriate authorities.



### ***Better communication!***

*Warrandyte is a potential fire disaster zone. To better prepare for the next fire season it is essential to improve communication with residents to adequately prepare in the short time available.*

*It was with some disappointment the WCA learned that the administration of the CFA Region 13 were unwilling to publicize this forum through the CFA Community Fireguard networks in Warrandyte or indeed to advertise or communicate any other meeting prepared by local communities in threatened areas unless they were organized by the CFA. This is an occasion of bureaucracy overriding common sense.*

*Volunteers in the CFA are heroes in our community: they deserve more professional support, improved communication networks and all the help they can get to connect with the local community.*

## **FORUM ORGANISATION**

Under the theme “***Warrandyte- Be Better Prepared***”, participants were invited to gain a better understanding of community issues and concerns relating to the threat of bushfires in and around Warrandyte and the diversity of views. It also provided an opportunity for community members to identify practical ways to improve their own safety before the next fire season, to make connections and to support and follow through with appropriate action.

The forum was facilitated by Bruce Turner, a Professional Facilitator acting in a voluntary capacity, assisted by twelve (12) voluntary helpers as group leaders, some of whom had professional counselling and facilitation skills. Over 280 people attended the forum. They were spread into small groups to encourage conversations, shared stories, thoughts and feelings “after the fires”. The groups were then asked to prioritise a list of topics that they would want to talk more about. Twelve (12) major topics emerged. The second part of the Workshop was for topic focused discussions convened by a volunteer helper. At the end of the evening each of the groups reported back to the meeting. The substance of this report to the Royal Commission is the thoughts, feelings and concerns expressed by Warrandyte residents around each of these major topics.

***These views do not necessarily represent the policy of the WCA nor the priorities of the Emergency Services based in Warrandyte.***

Nevertheless, some members of the Emergency Services participated in the forum in a private capacity as Warrandyte residents.

The topics, not listed in any particular priority order, were:

- Education and Communication;
- Personal Responsibility;
- Fireguard Risks,
- Resource Allocation;
- Community Refuges;
- Individual Bunkers;
- Early Warning Systems;
- Building Codes;
- Land Management Policy;
- Access and Egress;
- Evacuation of Whole Community, and
- Insurance.

In addition to the discussion and topics that emerged from small groups, some individuals have written comments which are attached as appendices to these report. Appendices include several articles from the local community newspaper, 'The Warrandyte Diary', on reaction to the 7 February fire and previous fires.

## **EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION**

### **Short term actions:**

- Ensure Residents have a detailed Checklist:
  - Have you assessed the risk and understood how fire impacts?
  - Have you educated younger people on fire risks, particularly through school education programs with a syllabus for Warrandyte and surrounding areas?
  - Have you developed individual bushfire plans?

### **Longer term actions:**

- There should be a Community Education Officer to interface between State Departments, Councils and the Warrandyte Community. Communications should use appropriate language. Communicators should recognise and identify the different constituencies within the community and tailor the message accordingly.
- There should be a Warrandyte Area Bushfire Plan.

### **Comment:**

The community education group identified a lack of local fire information in Warrandyte. They questioned: Do Warrandyte residents really understand about fires? Are Fireguard groups well supported and are they really working? Does the CFA hold fire training meetings for residents? In writing fire plans for their house and using appropriate technology (pumps, sprinklers, building materials etc), do the residents understand the risks and how to be better be prepared? There is a need for a Warrandyte Area Bushfire Plan because residents must be aware of the following issues.

#### *Planning and preparation:*

- websites and information;
- appropriate exit roads
- the need for and training of volunteers

*Implementation:*

- refuges
- resource allocation (*see section below*)
- sirens
- emergency signage

*Recovery:*

- recovery procedures

## **PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

### **Short term actions:**

- Build community awareness. Every family is responsible.
- Each householder should take practical steps to prepare for fire (Plan; Prepare; Document; Practice!)
- Promote the Community Fireguard Program.
- Fire education should have a visible presence at the Warrandyte Community Market, Festival and other like occasions in order to engage people in conversation, give out brochures, information etc.
- List website addresses and community radio signs in appropriate locations, ('Warrandyte Diary'; various roads etc.).

### **Longer term actions:**

- Develop an education program to change the culture. Promote a culture that ensures that all the required things are done to prepare.
- Shift focus of education from being on 'factual' to include 'issues of personal responsibility' and 'community responsibility'.
- The Bendigo Bank 3113 website could be used to disseminate more bushfire information.
- Need for a central agency to coordinate education, information and community groups.

### **Comment:**

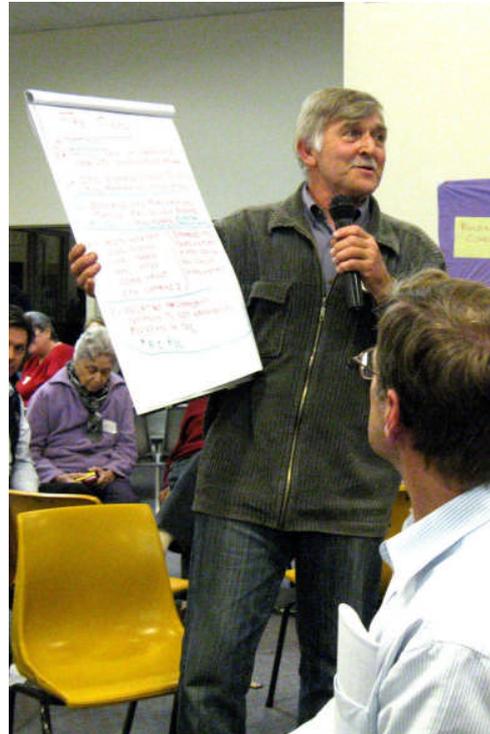
The group identified a mismatch between real responsibility and actual responsibility; there is a need to check expectations against reality. The terminology used by authorities can be confusing; there are different levels of understanding in the community as to what actual advice really means. People do not necessarily take information in even when it is given to them. There is a cultural issue of people not liking to be told what to do. However there is a real need to foster 'Fire Awareness'; that it is integral to living in the bush.

## **COMMUNITY FIREGUARD GROUPS:**

### **(RISKS, PARTICIPATION AND COORDINATION)**

#### **Short term actions:**

- An immediate goal of this Group was to convene an annual forum of the Warrandyte area CFA Community Fireguard leaders to encourage networking, exchange of information and encourage membership.
- Experienced CFA leaders in the area could assist and mentor new Community Fireguard Group leaders.
- Warrandyte needs an assertive community campaign to get residents to join or start Community Fireguard Groups.



#### **Longer term actions:**

- The CFA should endorse or accredit residents' individual fire preparation action plans.
- Participation in the Community Fireguard Groups could be encouraged through a rebate on fire insurance levy or a rate rebate for those adequately prepared. Rebates could be provided to those Community Fireguard Group members who can produce proof that their individual fire preparation action plans have been endorsed by the CFA.

#### **Comment:**

There is a great advantage in being a member of a Community Fireguard Group (CFG). To join an existing group or to start a new one people should call Helen Wositzky of the CFA on 8739 1315. Members of a CFG learn more about the detail of being fire ready. There should be an annual meeting of CFG Leaders. There are 80 in Warrandyte including 26 in North Warrandyte, the largest number in Victoria.

It would be useful to find out how many residents were not home on 7 February. This one question provides a lot of useful information on:

- the effect of the warning messages
- the number leaving early
- the potential of a disastrous outcome of late departures
- the number of people who need to make themselves safe at their home.

## **RESOURCE ALLOCATION**

### **Short term actions:**

- Citizens should be trained in firefighting for strictly localized firefighting.
- There is a need for greatly improved green waste collection and dispersal ( e.g. skips in the street, local woodchipper and truck teams, weekly clearance of larger green waste bins, possible easing of burn-off restrictions?)

### **Longer term actions:**

- Emergency Services need to develop better systems for the anticipation and communication of fire front activity and accessing back-up support from the MFB.
- Council resources should be allocated for inspection of all private properties for fire preparedness.
- Employment of more spotter aircraft to give more accurate and rapid reporting of fire location/s.
- Adoption of the NSW Community Fire Unit Model.

## **COMMUNITY REFUGES**

### **Short term actions:**

- Be more vigilant about clean up before fires.
- Support Community Fireguard Groups
- Prepare bunkers
- Plan to leave – ‘Forest Fire Danger Index’ driven

### **Longer term actions:**

- Is there potential for an underground car park/fire refuge under the new football ground?
- Modification of existing mines and refuges for human safety?
- Where is the best place to build community refuges - in Warrandyte or outside Warrandyte?
- Financial incentives for people in communities to build fire bunkers.

### **Comment:**

Refuges and bunkers are not an end in themselves. Individuals have a responsibility to be better prepared, not just with ‘Plan A’, but also Plans B..C..D etc. There is also a responsibility to friends, neighbours and others in the community. The Powelltown Community Bunker (*built following the 1939 bushfires*) was successful in the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires. Should there be a planning zone for refuge bunkers? Research and regulation would be required.

## **INDIVIDUAL BUNKERS**

### **Short term actions:**

- Need for an informal bunker information group.
- Research before acting Accurate information is urgently required  
(*Google fire bunkers-systems available*)
- Specifications for bunkers are urgently required
- Subsidy and support systems and support information should be provided
- Existing products promoted

### **Longer term actions (for building a bunker):**

- Must be a safe room
- Must have method to filter or ability to deal with toxic gases
- Use of compressed air cylinders?
- Employ materials such as corrugated iron, wet hessian in a dug-out
- Location – inside or outside a house?
- Accessibility and exit - a major factor
- Survival kit required
- Ability to look out from inside via a window or periscope?
- Provision for communication to the outside world (required).
- Planning requirements?

### **Comment:**

Specifications are required now for building individual bunkers. Information is required on subsidy and support systems and on existing products. (*See CSIRO, CFA, IB Systems.net.au*). A list of participants in this group is available for advice. (*However, who is to determine if a proposed bunker is safe? Many have died in bunkers.*)

## **EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS**

### **Short term actions:**

- Telephone trees
- CFA Radio scanner use
- Up to date websites (*See BOM/CFA and other*)
- Personal observations relayed to authorities
- Recognition by authorities that residents are able to interpret the Forest Fire Danger Index for staging of their individual fire plans.

### **Longer term actions:**

- There is a need for a locally organized early warning system.
- A clearer explanation and application of the Forest Fire Danger Index.
- Radio, SMS text, television and phone warnings. Regional updates overriding television and radio stations with continual updates.
- A warning siren that is different from the CFA management siren
- A central warning authority. (*Are residents aware of what is in place?*)
- Legal ability for residents and/or responsible authorities to clear land surrounding homes

**Comment:**

Should there be a legal obligation for real estate agents and other vendors to inform of bushfire risk? We also need access to reliable and informed data and research. Experiential education for young people in the community is needed. The 'Stay or Go System' needs refinement and a clear and detailed explanation. The extreme limitations of the 'bottleneck' bridge at Warrandyte do not enable safe and complete evacuation. Should evacuation be enforced?

Could [www.warrandytechat.com](http://www.warrandytechat.com) be used as source of FFDI information?

**BUILDING CODES****Short term actions:**

- More information is needed about fire protections systems

**Longer term actions:**

- Give consideration to regulating mandatory fire protection and installation services for homes in high risk fire zones
- Inaugurate insurance discounts for protected homes and/or those who have had a formal fire assessment done
- Regulation of vegetation proximity to housing is required.

**Comment:**

A study of buildings which have survived the fires is needed with an emphasis on sealing against ember attack. Also sprinklers, tanks and pumps should be protected against heat or installed underground. Residents should be aware of 'Up to date knowledge' on their current Bushfire Attack Level (BAL). See 'A guide to assessing your property's BAL' by the Building Commission (*Google it*)

**LAND MANAGEMENT POLICY****Short term actions:**

- WCA should establish a consultation group to work with the Councils on land management policy
- Clear ground fuel levels and reduce fuel loads particularly on roadside verges (*Whilst this was a minority voice within the group, subsequent letters and feedback support this viewpoint – a contentious issue*)
- Education and training for fire safe gardening in Warrandyte and bush management in Warrandyte
- Need for consistency between Nillumbik and Manningham in Council by-laws

**Longer term actions:**

- Future policy and planning should be evidence based and take into account more extreme weather and fire risks.
- Further research is needed on fire safe plantings.
- Forum Group participants were divided on the issue of allowing Councils to empower individual residents to clear their property as they see fit versus the view that native vegetation needs to be protected.
- Higher maintenance of electrical infrastructure to avoid ignition.

**Comment:**

There is 'No simple answer' to this very contentious area. Views ranged from the extreme of clearing all vegetation within 20 metres of housing, widening roads and connecting with the freeway to maintaining the essential character of Warrandyte without destroying the bush environment. There was however a general view that policy on land management and fuel reduction needs **urgent** assessment. It was noted that there are differing responses between the two local Councils (Manningham and Nillumbik). There are conflicting by-laws and policies. Local mapping of the fire risk areas is needed. Higher water density vegetation reduces the fuel load. Planning should be evidence based. A multi disciplinary approach is required by the CFA and the Council in providing fire assessments; such assessments to cover fire risk to the whole property and not just buildings.

Reference: "*Fire proofing the Australian landscape - Fire retardant species list*"

For an introduction to fire retardant species visit [www.ilda.com.au/page/fire\\_retardant.html](http://www.ilda.com.au/page/fire_retardant.html)

**ACCESS AND EGRESS****Short term actions:**

- Timing of introduction of road blocks and communication with the local population
- Communication with the community – access/egress issues
- Clarification of the types and intensity of fires, the impact on access and egress, and road closure decisions (should be clarified)
- On total fire ban days close access to river and swimming? Signage? – short term
- 774 ABC warning of local road closures
- Consideration of a concrete ford across the Yarra River between Pound Bend and the Boulevard
- Management of through traffic at road blocks – limited to local traffic

**Longer term actions:**

- Infrastructure improvement needed to improve access and egress
- Add a third lane to ease gridlock on the Warrandyte bridge,.
- Triggers for the 'Stay or Go' policy should be clearer to avoid congestion
- Burning off, better land management will reduce road hazards ,
- Councils need clear policy and actions to improve access and egress
- Bunkers (*see previous sections*)
- Security issues for unattended properties
- Designated community refuges, many people need somewhere to go!
- Better access to affected properties is an issue for some residents.

## **EVACUATION OF WHOLE COMMUNITY**

### **Short term actions:**

Identify places for people and animals to go to for those who choose leave early. This applies to Total Fire Ban days, which can be frequent, as well as on extreme emergency days such as 7 February 2009.

### **Longer term actions:**

Investigate the feasibility of evacuating Warrandyte.

### **Comment:**

The majority of the group had previously planned to stay and actively defend their properties, and were by and large well prepared with pumps, sprinklers, ember protection, clothing etc. Prior to Black Saturday they believed that adequate preparation would virtually ensure not just their own safety in the event of a bushfire, but also offer a fair chance of saving their homes, businesses etc. That confidence has now been seriously undermined, with feelings of vulnerability and helplessness in the face of what may become a firestorm compared to what is traditionally thought of as a bushfire with predictable patterns of behaviour.

Grave concerns were expressed in relation to how close the St Andrews fire came to Warrandyte. Many residents were largely unaware. It was felt that there is a need for an effective warning system to be established that can communicate with residents in 'real time' about a clear and present danger in their immediate vicinity. This may involve a specific siren, text message, phone call, overhead alarm plane or similar. It was felt that although radio and the CFA website were useful in this process, the time lag in informing residents was too long.



Bunkers were a hot topic for discussion, and the observation made that much of the Community Fire Guard planning and preparation relates to activity prior to the fire front and after it has passed and the property is subject to 'ember attack'. Less emphasis relates to how to increase the chances of survival while the 'fire-front' passes. The need was identified for information being made available about what works and does not work in bunker design and strategies to make them cost effective for all residents need to be explored. Although 'Community Bunkers' were discussed it was not felt that this was either a viable or realistic option.

Warnings about the extreme fire risk were well communicated and available well in advance of the terrible day, however the view was expressed that the media's language was ineffective in communicating the severity of the risk. The use of "Total Fire Ban" days as a trigger to implement the 'Leave Early' option are too frequent resulting in some complacency about the potential severity of the risk. A need for a more articulate language (and education) to enable residents to more effectively gauge the potential for 'firestorm' compared to 'bushfire' is needed.

This may include use of the 'Forest Fire Danger Index' or some other graded scale that is communicated in addition to Total Fire Ban.

Some discussion occurred around the feasibility of evacuating Warrandyte in the event of a fire, in particular North Warrandyte. This conversation recognised that many people who plan to leave do not leave early and may need to exit at relatively short notice. Although the potential flow of traffic across the bridge is a popular issue, the group largely felt that the bridge issue is a 'red herring' as any road could be easily blocked by accident or tree fall. Smoke visibility will be zero virtually guaranteeing that accidents and blockages will occur. Perhaps communicating that our area does not really offer a late evacuation option, highlighting the specific local issues may both encourage more people to leave early and others to better prepare in the event that they must stay.

Mandatory evacuations were discussed and most people felt that it would be inappropriate to expect residents to leave, particularly if they felt well prepared.

A need was identified for some people who felt that they didn't really have a viable evacuation destination to go to as they did not have friends, or family who lived in a 'safe' area. A short term priority was discussed to identify a number of locations where people could go with their pets until the threat had passed.

#### ***Elderly, Disabled: Where to go?***

Frail, elderly and chronically disabled residents, particularly those living alone with pets experience particular difficulty in finding somewhere to go on a day when evacuation is recommended. If a person does not have a relative in the surrounding suburbs, there is little shelter available.

Clearly, authorities are unwilling to designate safe refuges in the area in case these too become vulnerable. However, there is no provision for people who have no friends or relatives in other suburbs.

Chronically disabled people in Warrandyte have particular difficulty. They need to evacuate to places that are able to cater fully for their needs, for example with lifting equipment and other specialized facilities. Those who do not have their own disabled transport rely on 'disabled equipped' taxis which are hard to find at the best of times.

The WCA has members in all these categories who have particular concerns over evacuation.

## INSURANCE

### Comment:

Compulsory fire insurance for houses was raised during some discussions. They raised the issue of insurance discounts for protected homes and/or those who have had a formal fire assessment done. There are obvious difficulties with this however in terms of preventing fraudulent assessment claims and ensuring that fire plans are actually enacted.

## FEEDBACK AND REFLECTIONS

Participants were invited to write “post-it notes” on their thoughts when leaving the forum. Some were signed, some not. The following is a selection:

*The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. Tonight we took that step.  
Thank you*

*Many fires are started by arsonists. Community awareness of the need to be observant of possible arsonists needs to be considered.*

*There is a need to keep a regular dialogue about fire safety so that interest and commitment does not wax and wane whether topical or not?  
A well organized, well run forum! Great to be able to share our community concerns and to hear many useful suggestions for short and long term actions.*

*There is a need to get the young ones at risk alone at home involved in fire safety education and planning.*

*Standards are urgently required for external spray protection from bushfires.*

*Congratulations. Very well run.  
(Name and contact details supplied)*

*The naming of fires on the day was very confusing and misleading e.g. Kilmore East fire – once it had spread it needed a more sophisticated nomenclature.*

*Congratulations. Well organized. A very large group can be hard to hear all that is going on but I look forward to the submission. Many thanks for the opportunity.  
(Name and contact details supplied)*

*It was a great start and I thank you all for your foresight, leadership and community spirit.  
(Name and contact details supplied)  
Well done! Impressed with articulate and logical discussion by all.*

*Thank you. Helpful. Good to get the community together.*

*I also meant to congratulate the publicity dept on a magnificent job - no-one in Warrandyte can have missed it!  
(Name and contact details supplied)*

*Young people in Warrandyte “TWITTER”*

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

#### Individual Comments by Residents

*Early warning is most important on fires and high risk days. Part of this is to use the existing sirens?*

*Leave or stay is a decision we must make but if it is made late for whatever reason, then roads should be marked one way or controlled one-way to assist fast exits to include more river crossings*

*Shire must upgrade reduction burns and support residents who wish to clear sites and not enforce more planting close to properties.*

*(name and address supplied)*

*It was with some skepticism I viewed the proposed forum and Royal Commission on recent bushfires. When I recall some of the recommendations made by the Royal Commission on 1962 fires and in a very short time became forgotten or not acted upon, it makes me wonder if it is worthwhile. Some recommendations that came from the 1962 Royal Commission that I recall which are being ignored at present are as follows:*

- 1. There should be no buildings with open sub-floor levels*
- 2. No wooded constructions attached to the outside walls*
- 3. No further subdivisions with dead-end roads*

*No doubt there were other recommendations made at that Commission and met with approval at the time but being ignored at the present time. So why bother?*

*Present climate change the emphasis should be to take more determined steps to reduce the fire hazard of vegetation close to buildings. For instance, increasing deciduous plants and increasing the space between plants thus reducing the heat and rapidity of the fire's progress and a better opportunity to control the fire outbursts. I am aware these proposals may be against the wishes of some environmentalists but if we want to live in countryside with increasing temperatures we have to develop a life style compatible with future climate, not one that was compatible with the past climate.*

*(name and address supplied)*

*I felt it was a very good outcome given the large number of residents who attended. At the very least a well run forum allowing people to express and share views and well facilitated. It is a very difficult job to take inputs like this, acquired in some haste and consolidated into real policies/strategies but it helps to communicate the need for and the desire for a locally based approach and plan for the next time. Education at all levels – primary and secondary schools, local community groups is a key to maintaining a right attitude and preparedness. Every local group should have a fire plan advocate – Scouts, Tennis Club, each school etc. Perhaps we could get hold of a grant to fund a staff researcher to develop a best practice model for a community bushfire plan.*

*(name and address supplied)*

*Congratulations on an excellent Forum last night and I hope your Submission goes well.*

*Would you please cast your eye over the following extract of what I intend to incorporate into my Submission.*

*“The Warrandyte Community Association held a Forum on Tuesday evening (May 5) to discuss and debate all aspects of the February bushfire emergency. Details for this workshop were provided in the Warrandyte Diary of April 2009, and it was explained that the views expressed and points raised at the Forum would be used by WCA for a submission to the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.*

*Over 300 people attended that Forum, and a list of some ... 15 ... broadly based Issues was generated by those present sitting in groups of about 10 people. The Forum then distilled the Issues into about 12 categories, of which the following is a representative sample*

- ▶ *Land Management Issue (~45 people participating)*
- ▶ *Building Codes & Bunkers (~20 people participating)*
- ▶ *Early Warning & Communications (~15 people participating)*

*In his Preliminary Statement on April 20, the Royal Commission Chairman said....*

*Our focus will be primarily on issues that will address how a better and safer environment can be created for Victorian communities. Our focus will be generally on how to limit the devastation of any future intense bushfires and specifically on how to save human lives.”*

*The Warrandyte Forum was similarly focused.*

*(name and address supplied)*

*“Action not Analysis”*

*On total fire ban days, find options where people can go especially with pets.*

*Problem: Many people stay in un-defendable houses on fire ban days as they have no place to go where children and animals are welcome.*

*They don't have options of staying with other family and friends were they would be “allowed and welcome to go”*

*There are no options available for them*

*Pollution: Prove an option were people in this predicament can go and allow them to plan to go early in the day as per recommendations by the authorities.*

***Ideas:***

*Reserves made available as a camping refuge on total fire ban days. These reserves need:*

- ▶ *Already established toilet facilities and shire preferably*
- ▶ *Room to accommodate certain types of animals (i.e. dogs and cats and other small animals; provision for horse floats etc)*
- ▶ *In an area that is “reasonably” fire safe i.e. residential area, grassland etc.*
- ▶ *To be known as areas where people can be accommodated for periods longer than one(1) day.*

***Costs/Expense Challenge:***

- ▶ *User paid system/gold coin donation*  
*\*NB the cost must make it a viable proposition to encourage people to use it, i.e. costs need to be contained. Consider allowing provision suitable for certain animals-cages paid for by donations or private enterprise for timed hire of cages for pets.*

***Potential Reserves to evaluate:***

- ▶ *Whittlesea Reserve*
- ▶ *Yarrambat Park (Melways 104E4)*
- ▶ *Eastfields Park (Melways 58 7)*

***Advantage:***

*If there is somewhere for people to go it will significantly reduce the chaos and potential death toll for the community and greatly reduce the problems for authorities*

*(name and address supplied)*

*Regarding better management of extreme bushfires in the future, I believe tha the CFA needs to have an alternative policy of operations.*

*Currently the siren is only used to call the fireman. If a bushfire is presenting an imminent thread to our township I believe the siren should ring out continually or at designated intervals (e.g 1 2 3 – 1 2 3) to warn residents who could also ring other residents who are out of town.*

*The other policy change relates to the role of the CFA which is to assist fire fighting at the front. As we saw with the Black Saturday conditions, this was not an average bushfire so I think that the CFA unit should be directed to stay and defend in the designated refuge area (e.g. a school) to protect residents in townships. This is especially important if the front is only half an hour away as occurred on Black Saturday.*

*Sincerely*

*(name and address supplied)*

## *Appendix 2*

### **Bushfire articles from the Warrandyte Diary**

*Story in the Warrandyte Diary February 2009*

#### **“The day our street caught fire”**

January 8 this year marked the 40th anniversary of Black Wednesday, when devastating fires swept across Victoria. Warrandyte was not spared. VALL POLLEY remembers....

AT that time we had lived in Hutchinson Avenue overlooking the Yarra River downstream from the tunnel exit for just two years.

For the families living in our street, the friendly neighbourhood, the river at the foot of the slope and the expanse of open space and bushland at the rear of the gardens provided an idyllic place in which to live. Husband Austin and I had a little girl of 18 months and we were on holiday but at home that day, a factor for which we were to be very grateful.

The summer of 1968-9 had been comparatively mild but the morning of the January 8 was one of those overcast yet nasty hot, gusty north wind days when locals find themselves constantly scanning the horizons for smoke.

I remember standing at the windows overlooking the river valley towards the ridge above Alexander Road. There was a particularly ferocious gust of wind and I saw what appeared to be a plume of dust rising above the ridge. At my call Austin came and we watched. But then a thicker plume of unmistakable smoke rose into the air. I phoned the fire station and can recall my voice shaking as I reported the fire, but the reassuring voice at the other end told me they had already been informed and a unit was on its way.

As we watched from our garden however, joined by anxious neighbours, the smoke grew thicker and thicker and suddenly a line of fire topped the ridge and then, fanned by the increasing wind, began to head towards our area. Action was definitely required.

This was to be our first encounter with a bushfire and yet we felt relatively well prepared. We had been given the relevant information—our memories say via a community fire meeting given by the CFA where we were told how to prepare for bushfires—but the recollection is hazy and may not be correct.

One neighbour decided to leave as she was pregnant and felt she would be a hindrance. Our other neighbours insisted we would be safe in their brick house if the fire front reached us. While our timber house suddenly looked very vulnerable I decided to stay, feeling I would be more use making preparations.

Rapidly we filled the bath with water and several containers which we located at strategic points, blocked the downpipes and filled the gutters, laid out hoses, got out beaters, dampened some towels to wrap round ourselves and changed from shorts and tops into more protective clothes.

All this while we kept anxious eyes on the fire front that, propelled by strong winds, was approaching. Though at that stage it was hidden behind the hills and only evidenced by clouds of smoke.

There were quick conferences with neighbours during this time. Fortunately many husbands were on holiday. A friend in Pound Road came to suggest we leave our car in his driveway as our street was a narrow single lane unmade track at the time and he was worried we could get blocked in. We loaded our little mini with items and did as he suggested (though we were apprehensive that we would keep the house but lose the car). Then we waited for the fire to arrive.

I recall standing with my young daughter, wrapped in a wet towel on my hip, with Austin and neighbours, watching as the fire front swept into Naughton Avenue high above the river. We watched fearfully as house after house was engulfed in smoke and flames and then held our breath until the front moved on and the houses reappeared one by one. Then one house went up in flames as we watched—which was terrible—but the fire was moving so fast there was not really a chance to be very frightened.

Although unseen by us one arm of the fire then burnt the Speers house on Pound Road before sweeping across the Croxford property and into the Melbourne Hill Road area. Many of these residents went to the Recreation Reserve to wait until the fire had passed. Our neighbour who had left home earlier found herself diverted and held up at a road block amidst smoke, falling branches and confusion when she tried to leave the township. Meantime as we watched, the second arm of the fire was swept by the wind round the river bend towards our houses.

In his book *Fire*, local author and resident Bruce Bence described this particular fire thus:

"Driven by gale force winds the fire from Alexander Road spread quickly, burning two houses in its path. A tongue of flame shot through a window in Merv Naughton's factory, out of the window opposite which was 10 metres away and set alight the bank on the east side of his factory, just missing Merv on the way. The fire swept across the Croxford estate. Wally Riddle, captain of South Warrandyte brigade was coming down Melbourne Hill when the fire, in one continuous sheet of flame—3 metres high and about 30 metres across—crossed the road in front of him. The fire crossed Old Melbourne Road and was stopped in Leber Street."

By this time fire units, some from as far away as the Dandenongs, had arrived in our street and were spraying some of the houses with water. However as the front approached they were pulled out because of the fear of becoming trapped in narrow, unmade, oneway roads and steep driveways. It was at this point the fire reached Merv Naughton's property and appeared ferocious and unstoppable. To our amazement a man appeared out of the smoke carrying a sack over his shoulder. "It's a fierce one" he said as he came past.

By now it was apparent that the time had come to take shelter which we duly did because there is a period of chaos when a fire front hits. The noise is incredible, the winds unbelievable, the smoke makes the eyes water (we now have eye protection goggles), it's hard to breathe (we now have masks), the flames are frightening and embers and burning debris whirl through the air (we now have hard hats). We sheltered with the children in the neighbour's solid house until the front moved past through the open space along the river bank, flames petering out on the green grass of the gardens. The fire was eventually stopped at the tunnel area before it could get into Pound Bend and cause more havoc.

The residents then were busy, along with the returned fire units, damping down and putting out spot fires. Our rockery shrubs caught fire long after the front had passed. Other neighbours were alerted to a fire under their house. caused by embers blowing in; again hours after the actual bushfire was out, when we were altogether enjoying a well earned drink.

This fire lasted several hours, burnt 161.9ha and two houses. We counted ourselves fortunate that council had cut the grass along the River Reserve only the day before, which slowed the progress of the flames, and the young gardens that meant reduced fuel close to the houses.

But we were not to be the only Warrandyte residents to feel the fury of bushfires that day. Before this fire was fully controlled another fire came roaring in from the Eltham direction on the northern side of

the river. This developed into a major fire that burnt over 5000 hectares and destroyed some 70 homes in the Diamond Creek, Eltham, North Warrandyte, Research and Kangaroo Ground areas. More Warrandyte houses were lost but I have no record of these. While this fire was considered controlled by nightfall, the glow in the sky made for an uneasy night with constant checks and every wind gust caused the smouldering logs and tree trunks along the river and surrounding areas to spark and glow again.

Bruce Bence described in his book how this second fire was travelling so quickly that the North Warrandyte Fire Brigade nearly lost its fire unit and only swift action saved it. He related how the fire raced through the area and over Kangaroo Ground Road where the brigades were powerless to stop it and how fighting the fire was an impossible task with the wind breaking up the streams of water from the hoses. He stated that the situation could have been worse but for the greening of some of the area due to the mild weather.

Despite the anxieties and the losses perhaps Warrandyte was fortunate when compared to other parts of Victoria where fires resulted in loss of life. As the DSE website records: on January 8, 1969, 280 fires broke out across Victoria. Of these, 12 grass fires reached major proportions and burnt 250,000 hectares. Areas seriously affected included Lara, Daylesford, Yea, Kangaroo Flat and Korongvale. Twenty-three people died, including 17 motorists at Lara, trapped on the Geelong to Melbourne freeway. The fires destroyed 230 houses, 21 other buildings and more than 12,000 stock..

**Fire** by *Bruce Bence* is available from Warrandyte Historical Society for \$5 a copy.

*Story in the Warrandyte Diary March 2009*

## **“CFA warned of risk”**

By KARLY HICKMAN

The realisation that fire was on Warrandyte's doorstep on Black Saturday inspired more than 450 residents to pack a CFA Fire Ready meeting at the Warrandyte Community Centre exactly a week later.

Lisa Keedle from Fire Ready Victoria led the discussion, encompassing stay-and-go plans, bushfire behaviour, Community Fireguard programs and preparations necessary for survival in a bushfire.

She said fire risk can be high not just on days of total fire ban. Local weather patterns are key to determining fire risk. "Hot, dry, windy days with low humidity are days with high fire risk,"

Ms Keedle said. "You don't need us to tell you it is a day of total fire ban. Step outside and make that assessment for yourself."

Much has changed since the original stay-or-go policy was introduced eight years ago. Now the stay component is promoted as "stay and actively defend" and the go component as "leave early". It is suggested that residents in high risk areas have a plan for both scenarios. "Stay committed and focused to your decision. Your coping mechanism is far greater," Ms Keedle said.

Ms Keedle stressed the need for residents to be familiar with bushfire behaviour. "The three aspects of fire are oxygen, heat or ignition source, and fuel. The latter is what we have the most impact on." Fire travels via flame contact, radiant heat, ember attack and wind. "It can travel fast in grassed areas, or slow in highly vegetated areas." Fire also burns faster uphill, "For every 10 degrees in slope of the land, the fire doubles in speed.

"Since the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983, we have investigated how houses tend to burn down," Ms Keedle said. "The number one cause is ember attack, followed by radiant heat then flame contact." Residents are urged to reduce leaf litter around their homes, in gutters and doorways so as to reduce fire risk from embers landing and starting a fire.

There are not nearly enough fire trucks to come to every house. Therefore, residents need to be prepared to defend their property or leave early. "The trucks will be at the fire front, not at the ember attacks, so you need to be emotionally and physically prepared to save your house, or to leave," Ms Keedle said. She stressed that if residents plan on staying, they need an adequate water supply. "A static, separate water supply. It must be an alternative to mains water." This could include water-filled garbage bins that you can tip onto fire, or pumps to draw water from pools, dams or ponds.

"If you stay, be well prepared and understand what the risk is to you." The two main causes of death in fires are radiant heat or dehydration. Residents intent on staying to defend need to wear adequate clothing made of natural materials that cover the full length of their arms and legs, gloves, a hat, goggles, mask and boots with a non-slip sole. "Drink plenty of water. Firefighters are required to drink at least two litres an hour," Ms Keedle said.

Residents should continue extinguishing embers and flames until it gets too hot, then retreat inside their house. "Inside it will be smoky, loud, with the fire alarms going off and the sound of the wind. Wait 10 to 15 minutes for the fire to pass, then go back outside to extinguish any flames."

Residents who decide to leave should do so early. "Think about the right time, Leave when you're cool and calm; try not to be hurried." Ms Keedle stressed that ideally, residents should leave before a fire incident occurs, in other words, on all days of high risk.

She suggested that as part of fire season preparations, households should nominate a friend or family member living outside the area to keep all-important documents and treasured items for the summer. She also suggested you tell this central contact what you are doing and where you are going.

"When you leave you may be out of the area for some time, so take your phone, its charger and a change of clothes." As part of their fire plan, residents should have three or four access routes--in and out of the township--mapped out and rehearsed.

Ms Keedle stressed that while useful, the ABC's bushfire coverage is not an entirely-up-to-date source of information. "The minimum it usually takes for a message to travel from the fire ground to broadcast on the radio is half an hour." On an extreme fire danger day like Black Saturday, there were 570 separate fire incidents to report. "This means in most cases you will be experiencing the fire before we give you notice," Ms Keedle warned.

A useful tool in the fight against bushfires is the Community Fireguard program, which encourages residents to work together to improve bushfire safety. Neighbours living in an area of shared bushfire risk can work together with the CFA to develop strategies to best protect themselves against bushfire.

"The CFA joins with the Fireguard groups to look at the local area, do a street walk and come up with a written plan that all are comfortable with," Ms Keedle said. "These small groups are best equipped to make informed decisions on the best way to protect themselves based on their lifestyle, environment, physical capabilities, finances and experience."

When asked who knew of the extreme fire risk and evacuated Warrandyte before Black Saturday, only a couple of dozen people in the audience raised their hands.

A second well-attended Fire Ready meeting was held at the Warrandyte Recreation Reserve a week later.

Residents can join an existing Fireguard group or form their own by contacting their local CFA brigade: Warrandyte 9844 3375, North Warrandyte 9844 0847, South Warrandyte 9844 2861, Wonga Park 9722 1463.

## **“New system aides instant fire alert”**

By KARLY HICKMAN

Warrandyte resident Jason McClintock is leading the development of a unified communication system that will assist local fireguard groups during fire emergencies.

The communications breakthrough will make it faster to let neighbours know of advancing fire threats via automated phone calls and text messages, as well as allowing people to watch the development of fire activity via the internet.

"After the Black Saturday fires I realised that people were simply not getting enough warning that they were in danger," said Mr McClintock, a unified communications implementation expert.

The system will mean that one person who detects fire danger would need to call just one number. From there, the system, located in a secure central location would call all other members in the fireguard group simultaneously, playing a pre-recorded message and alerting them to the potential danger and urging them to implement their fire plans.

This is far more timely and effective than the current chain or "phone tree" model, where one person is responsible for calling a group.

"From all the trials completed to date, the process of notifying residents through the new system now takes approximately 40 per cent of the time taken by the manual system, and this includes all phones, including mobiles, in the group rather than a single contact number as was the case with the manual system," Mr McClintock told the Diary.

The caller would have to enter a pin code to activate the system, thus avoiding hoax calls. There is also a pre-recorded false alarm message if needed.

"As well as being faster to arrive, the message is known to be accurate and is conveyed clearly," Mr McClintock said. This eliminates the possibility of garbled transmissions.

Mr McClintock agrees that this is a modern day version of the old fire bell. "Three quarters of the fire bells around the state have either been ripped out or are in a state of disrepair," he said.

In conjunction with the notification system, Mr McClintock's business is also developing a website that will allow adjoining fireguard groups to receive notification of warnings sent out by others. "On Black Saturday, Hurstbridge was on red alert, but at North Warrandyte, we had no idea what was happening" Mr McClintock said.

The website would utilise Google Earth to show the status of fireguard groups in different areas, as well as real time weather patterns. This could play a vital role in notifying residents of approaching danger.

Mr McClintock explained that while the CFA website was useful, it took time for events to be uploaded. This new website could be much more up-to-date as it would immediately log fire danger areas as fireguard groups call to register alerts.

Jason and colleague Max Garner are working diligently to get relevant bodies like the CFA on board. "The system has currently been deployed for two fireguard groups free of charge, but we hope additional sponsors can be attracted, particularly in the business of telecommunications, to allow the system to be deployed on a much wider basis," Mr McClintock said.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank You!

**Dick Davies**

*President*

Warrandyte Community Association Inc.

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