



Warrandyte Community Association

Nillumbik Bushfire Mitigation Strategy 2019. Comments by Warwick Leeson OAM.

The draft document, although repetitive in many instances, is an extremely positive approach to a significant issue facing the Shire of Nillumbik, its residents, businesses and visitors.

Craig Lapsley PSM deserves special congratulations for the professional and independent manner in which he has undertaken his role in consulting widely with Nillumbik council, residents and interested parties.

My strong view is that the Bushfire Mitigation Strategy needs to be considered as an interactive part of Climate Change and Council's Green Wedge Management Plan.

I would cite the Mayor, Cr Karen Egan's recent references to this year's state-wide survey that found Nillumbik residents considered themselves to be the happiest municipality in Victoria, and posit that that happiness is based on the environment in which those surveyed live and the existing character and amenity of their local townships.

The importance of this Bushfire Mitigation Strategy will be determined by how the council and landowners of Nillumbik respond to its final iteration; if it seen as just another document, the effort of its preparation will be wasted.

It needs to be almost bed-time reading for those of us who care about Nillumbik, its future and its challenges; it needs to contain not just evidence-based information but, also, explanatory implementation tools

It needs to inform us, it needs to explain how we can improve our understanding and attitudes, and it needs to encourage us and explain how we can all become involved.

Comments:

Under Definitions (page 3, para 1), it is recognised that not all bushfires can be prevented, but the consequences of such events can be minimised.

I will begin my commentary with addressing the issue of mitigation of impact; both in terms of awareness/education and aftermath. I would draw attention to two seminal Reports that came out of the 2009 bushfires: 'Advice for Government' and 'Advice we offer to Communities impacted by disaster'.

Both Reports were formulated as part of the 'Lessons learned by Community Recovery Committees of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires; these Reports were welcomed by the state government of the day and were extremely useful guides, both within Australia and overseas.

Locally, both the Strathewen and St Andrews Community Recovery Committees, contributed significantly to these Reports and it is worth noting that those two Community Recovery Committees were the only ones in Victoria that were community led, as distinct from statutory body-led and both were, in hindsight, peer-reviewed to be exemplar models for any future recovery and rebuilding committees. Rather than seeking to re-invent the wheel, I suggest this Bushfire Mitigation Strategy draws on proven models and I would highlight the 'Be Ready Warrandyte' Project as a starting point.

Designed out of the lessons from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires, the 'Be Ready Warrandyte; Living with Bushfire Risk' template was adjudged by the 2013 Victorian Fire Awards Panel to be the best communication tool, the best educative tool and the overall winner of all Victorian contributions.

The template has been widely used both within Australia and overseas and is credited with assisting emergency bodies in handling

both the prelude and aftermath of bushfires; it has the added advantage in that it can readily be adapted to deal with any type of emergency.

Under **Executive Summary (page 4, para 2)**, reference is made to the 'unique challenges within Nillumbik', citing 'proximity to river frontage with high fuel loads'.

This Strategy needs to be mindful of the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong) Act 2017.

In 2017, landmark legislation passed through the Victorian Parliament to protect the Yarra River for future generations.

In an Australian first, the Yarra River Protection (Wilip-gin Birrarung murrong) Act 2017 enables the identification of the Yarra River and the many hundreds of parcels of public land it flows through as one living, integrated natural entity for protection and improvement.

Additionally, to underline the importance of the public parklands and open spaces along the Yarra River within metropolitan Melbourne, the Act allows these to be collectively declared as the Greater Yarra Urban Parklands.

Under **Introduction (page 5, para 4)**, reference is made to Nillumbik's vegetation and terrain, that allows fire to move with speed.

Landowners, especially those new to the shire, need to be made aware of this aspect and to appreciate that grass and open area fires travel at a considerably greater speed than heavily vegetated areas.

Page 6, 'Nillumbik Shire – profiles and partnerships' (para 2)

contains a premise with which I am uncomfortable. Just because people are older/retired, does not mean that that they are necessarily more vulnerable; in fact, the opposite may well be true. Older/retired people do not (usually) have to plan their days around work commitments, educational demands, etc. and can (frequently) exercise greater flexibility in reacting to any threat of bushfire.

Referring again to the Be Ready Warrandyte experiences, there was significant localised neighbourhood support for elderly/retired residents through the 'telebuddies program'.

I would suggest that the stringent state and local government planning laws ought to be ranked as a higher attribution factor for the 1% population growth in Nillumbik.

Page 6, para 4, notes the challenges of reducing fire risks through collaboration.

It may be that consideration could be given to provision of a subsidised fuel reduction cleaning/clearing program, similar to Melbourne Water's streamside management grants and council's own blackberry spraying scheme.

In its own way, such a program could be viewed as an extension of green waste collection scheme.

One factor, acknowledged (**page 7, paras 1-4**) in this document, that is, to my mind, worthy of strong consideration is that of 'cool burns', as was practiced by the first Australians from time immemorial.

I would suggest that local Landcare Groups, some of whom already engage in cool burn training programs, could be utilised and subsidised to educate local residents in this skill.

Such a collaborative approach with Landcare Groups would have the twin benefits of not only using a proven fuel reduction methodology but also educating local landowners on environmental issues and opportunities.

It is worth noting that current 'controlled burns' are clearly not meeting the targets set and this is, in no small part, due the limited window-of-opportunity available, both from weather and personnel aspects.

Equally, there are well-founded concerns that 'controlled burns' do significant environmental damage; if the fire intensity is too great, seeds in the soil can be killed and commercial beekeepers report that damage done to honey grounds from prescribed burns is having a

profound impact on the honey industry and will devastate bee populations if nothing changes.

Council's role & policy context, (page 7, para 2), highlights the importance of **'shared responsibility'** and should, I believe, besides placing strong emphasis on shared obligation, highlight the 'personal responsibility' aspect; this was glossed over in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Report, presumably on the grounds of sensitivity.

Shared responsibility is not just about what others can do for me, but equally about what I can/should/must do in discharging my obligations to my community, my environment and those who may be called upon in times of emergency.

Too often, there have been examples of individuals ignoring sage advice, placing themselves in positions of peril and expecting others to come to their aid.

'Challenges within the shire' (page 9):

The Community: Aging population:

I challenge the contained presumption that just because Nillumbik has a 35.8% population aged over 50, they are "less capable of maintaining their property and reacting to bushfire threat"; I have, earlier on, made my comments on this.

Perhaps the claim ought to be tested by establishing the demographics of Nillumbik's aged population; if they are concentrated in the major activity centres, rather than in the rural areas, I would posit that there would be less likelihood of unmaintained properties and poor reaction capacities.

The Community: Extent of privately-owned land:

Again, I stress that council support for local Landcare Groups is an ideal way to work with an agency that is informed, both about the environment and the risks and threats of living in a bushfire risk location.

Such Groups are not viewed as authoritarian and engender a more neighbourly, inclusive and welcoming feel to encourage participation.

The Community: Treechange movement:

Given Nillumbik's projected 1% growth rate, the number of people moving to 'larger properties' may not be all that great; if one accepts the implied premise, under Aging population (para 1), that the rural areas house many aged people then, presumably, the newcomers will be younger and reduce the number of 'at risk' residents.

New landowners, who can be readily identified through council's rating department, could/should receive appropriate information encouraging their active interaction with their local Landcare Group and Rural Fire Brigade.

Reminders about shared responsibility could also be forwarded to **all** landowners with their rates notices.

The Community: Changes to ... information gathering:

One of the great challenges faced by the Community Recovery Committees, in the aftermath of the 2009 Bushfires, was in accessing information from statutory bodies.

Constantly, we were fobbed off with "Privacy laws prevent us disclosing that information".

In times of emergency, the niceties of privacy considerations ought to be relegated in the interests of efficiency in responding to the immediacy of the crisis.

The Environment (page 10):

To avoid duplication, my comments will be found under page 13 Operating Principles.

The Economy:

Again, citing the Be Ready Warrandyte model, businesses in the Warrandyte shopping precincts decided that on **Code Red** days, they

would be closed; on **Extreme** days, staff numbers would be reduced and, as best as possible, customers would be advised through signage.

Visitors & Tourism (page 11):

Parking issues in Laughing Waters Rd, Eltham and Bradleys Lane, North Warrandyte have already been identified as 'hot spots' in that both roadways are narrow and often vehicles, especially oversized ones such as fire trucks and other emergency vehicles, cannot get through when tourists' vehicles have been parked in either of the roadways.

I would suggest a far stricter approach; No Parking signage, issuing of an infringement notice to any transgressors and, in extreme cases (recidivism or dangerous parking) towing the offending vehicle away. Pussyfooting around with 'please don't do this again' methods may well see emergency vehicles unable to respond to a critical incident.

Mobile phone black spots (page 11):

Liaison with federal Members of Parliament is the quickest way to solve this issue.

Likewise, landowners need to appreciate that black spots can only be eradicated by having mobile phone towers, so the issue becomes a fairly clear choice between having a tower and having communication or not having a tower and not having reliable communication.

Refer this comment also to Ensuring Strong Advocacy; page 16, Goal 4.2.

Page 12, 'Strategic Priorities'; I applaud the reduction from 7 points to 4 – these four appear to cover all the requisite aspects.

However, they should, in my view, be listed in a non-hierarchical manner, lest point 1 be interpreted as more significant than point 4; in reality, each point is interdependent on, and equal to, the others.

Page 13, 'Operating Principles' invites the reference that, in **point 2 (Balancing environmental protection with bushfire risk)** attention needs to be given to the recent Deakin University's Centre for Integrative Ecology paper 'Is Melbourne's urban sprawl creating more bushfire risk?'.

This paper observes that, according to the Australian Institute of Criminology, more bushfires are started by people, either accidentally or deliberately, than natural causes, such as lightning. The paper's author, Prof, Don Driscoll, opines "People need a dose of nature, so there is a trade-off to be made between access to nature and living in high-density housing in a concrete jungle".

Prof. Driscoll also notes, "There is compelling evidence that broad-scale fuel reduction burns in forests make no appreciable difference to the risk that houses will burn down".

Clearly, any environmental/bushfire risk assessments need to be evidence based; in other words – kill the myths.

Refer this comment also to Ensuring Strong Advocacy; page 16, Goal 4.3.

Under Objectives: Strategic Priorities (page 14, Goal 1.1):

Acknowledged above is that most bushfires are started by people, either accidentally or deliberately.

Council has an opportunity to prevail upon state government and its authorities (VicPol and CFA) to increase penalties to those who break the law in respect to lighting of fires during dangerous periods, such as during fire restrictions.

My suggestion would be that council strongly advocate:

- that there be no exemptions from prosecution for people lighting or causing fires during fire restriction periods, and
- that legislation be introduced, by the state government, that any act of arson causing, or liable to cause, a bushfire be deemed to be an act of terrorism; such a fire has the same indiscriminate and random capacity to kill, traumatise and destroy as any other act of terrorism.

(This commentary could also be considered under Ensuring Strong Advocacy; page 16, Goal 4.1)

Strategic Priorities (Goal 1.10):

The recent VicRoads' installation of continuous roadside barriers along both the Kangaroo Ground- St Andrews & Kangaroo Ground-Yarra Glen Rds, has significantly limited road access and egress, by emergency services vehicles, in that the provided passing and pull-over bays are not designed with bushfire and/or other emergency service vehicles requirements in mind.

Strategic Priorities (page 15, Goal 1.11)

While Neighbourhood Safer Places and Community Fire Refuges might have a place on more isolated areas (such as Wesburn, Warburton, etc) in areas such as Nillumbik, I would prefer to see greater emphasis on the Leave Early message.

Unless landowners fully understand the implications and commitments required by the Stay and Defend policy, it is far better, to my mind, to encourage people to be prepared to leave on the days of danger.

Having NSP & CFR can engender a belief that "I can wait until the last minute, then decide to leave"; we all know that, more often than not, ends in tears.

Creating Community Approach to Bushfires (page 15, Goal 2.3):

I would have thought that the outcomes from the recent Green Wedge Management Plan Panel would provide much of this information.

As has been noted, people who live in Nillumbik 'love where they live' and, generally, accept the risk of bushfire as one of the aspects of their choice of domicile.

Creating Community Approach...(Goal 2.8):

While there are many content tools, I would again promote the Be Ready Warrandyte Project example; it is readily available, it is readily adaptable to every township and its success is proven.

Summary:

As earlier stated, my view is that the Bushfire Mitigation Strategy needs to be considered as an interactive part of Climate Change and Council's Green Wedge Management Plan.

To support this view, I attach a document, signed by more than 23 former fire and emergency leaders, from multiple Australian states and territories, including Craig Lapsley PSM, former Emergency Management Commissioner and Fire Services Commissioner, former Deputy Chief Officer, CFA, Victoria.

These signatories, with centuries of fire and emergency services experiences between them, are unequivocal in linking climate change and increased risks from natural disasters, especially bushfires.

There exists clear scientific evidence that climate change impacts through extreme weather conditions and Nillumbik's Green Wedge Management Plan needs to address the issue of inappropriate tree clearing and land-use pressures as more likely than not to exacerbate climate change at a local level.

On the basis of 'think global, act local', we ought to, at least, be playing our part in protecting our Green Wedge and our shire's unique character and, in so doing, contributing towards addressing the issue of extreme weather conditions.

One of the attachments' 23 signatories, Greg Mullins AO, AFSM, the second longest-serving Fire & Rescue Commissioner in New South Wales, and now a councillor with the Climate Council, stated, "Australia's emergency resources were still equipped for what was happening in the 1970s to the 1990s. It's just frustrating to hear the lip service being given to 'Oh yes, we now believe in climate change

and need to do something' when every effort to do something about it is rubbished".

Another signatory, Neil Bibby AFSM, noted, "We're doing the same old things when things are getting worse. We need to find new ways to tackle this problem".

Congratulations ought to be given to those responsible for the extensive consultation and information process in preparing this Bushfire Mitigation Strategy; with community goodwill and participation, the way forward will be mapped out.

Regards,



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