



Protect Our Farms Support for an Agricultural Advisory Committee

Introduction

Good evening, Mayor, Councillors, and Mitchell Shire staff. I am going to provide three examples of instances where a Mitchell Shire Agricultural Advisory Committee could have resulted in a more collaborative resolution of issues affecting the Mitchell Shire agricultural sector.

Burke and Wills Track

In May 2018, several Mitchell Shire Councillors and staff delivered a budget information presentation to Pyalong residents. Among the community members attending was a group of about twelve angry residents from the Burke and Wills Track area in the far north-west of the Shire. Their spokesperson related how their local roadside vegetation had been neglected by Mitchell Shire for so long that stock transport could not access their farms to collect stock for market. The farmers were forced to use a smaller vehicle to move stock along Burke and Wills Track to the transports parked well away from their properties. The spokesperson told how they pleaded with Mitchell Shire for the vegetation to be cleared, only to be informed that this roadway was not in Mitchell Shire, despite it being so. The spokesperson told how they had arranged an on-site meeting with a Shire representative to resolve this matter but this was delayed for two hours due to the Shire representative becoming lost.

This situation could have avoided by Mitchell Shire being informed of risks to agricultural production in the Shire by an Agricultural Advisory Committee.

Water Standpipe Issue

Mitchell Shire has thirteen water standpipes that provide bore water for stock and firefighting. Controversy around these standpipes dragged on from late 2018 to early 2021, yet could have been resolved earlier via consultation between Mitchell Shire and representatives of the Shire's rural communities.

This started in early November 2018, when a plastic sleeve A4 notice was found attached to the Whitegate Road standpipe advising of a survey on the future of these facilities with no closing date. There had been no other engagement, limiting potential responders to those who visited these facilities. The paddocks were still green, so there would have been very few users of these facilities, and hence potential minimal response. Only after this became public was this broadly publicised, with responses to be tendered by 23rd November.

Immediately, there was a pushback from the Shire's rural residents, including suspicion about the Shire's motives, since options being considered included removal of the standpipes altogether or replacement with third-party operated user-pays facilities. For example, within two weeks, a petition was raised in Pyalong requesting that Mitchell Shire retain and maintain all of the water standpipes. It accrued over 100 signatures from the Pyalong-High Camp-Glenaroua area, demonstrating the value of the facility to the community. As reported in the North Central Review (8th January 2019), 'pressure from users saw the Council extend the survey until 28th February, 2019'.

Due to the slowness of Council's resolution of this issue, rallies were held by concerned users, including two outside the Council chambers in Broadford, on March 2020, and February 2021.

This issue could have been better managed if there was an Agricultural Advisory Committee to advise the Council of how integral these water standpipes are to agriculture, allowing Council to take the lead in quickly resolving this issue

Significant Landscape Overlay

The public consultation for implementation of the new Significant Landscape Overlays (SLO) was another long process (from February 2021 to August 2024) that resulted in Mitchell Shire drawing criticism, including adverse media reporting well beyond Mitchell Shire's boundaries. This reporting ranged from the local North Central Review and Seymour Telegraph, to the Bendigo Advertiser, Benalla Ensign, Dairy News, Stock and Land, and Country News.

The Mitchell Shire Landscape Assessment Study: Consultation Summary Report of 13th June 2024, detailed the consultation process which included public meetings, mail outs, and media advertising. The only special interest groups consulted were BEAM-Mitchell Action Group, KADRRA and the Wallan Environment Group. For example, the stated mission of the Wallan Environment Group is to create a more liveable Wallan by engaging the community in restoring, enhancing & preserving the natural environment. The only official Mitchell Shire advisory group consulted was Mitchell Environmental Advisory Committee.

State Government agencies that were engaged by Mitchell Shire included Parks Victoria, Catchment Management Authorities, CFA, registered aboriginal parties and Heritage Victoria.

The majority of agriculture activity occurs in the Central and North Wards of the Shire, and at least 90 % of the proposed SLO targeted land was farming land around Tallarook, Tooborac, Trawool Valley, High Camp, and Nulla Vale in the North Ward. The remainder was the Parks Victoria managed Mt Piper Conservation Area. Yet, not one agricultural agency, nor farming entity such as the Victorian Farmers Federation, was consulted. Little wonder that farmers were concerned about their livelihood and assets.

It was not until August 2024 that, after a robust consultation process, that the original proposed SLO was modified to include a common sense approach to management of native vegetation and dimensions of farm buildings on SLO affected agricultural land. This process could have been shortened and be conducted in a more cooperative fashion if there was an Agricultural Advisory Committee in place that helped develop realistic proposals for presentation for public consultation.

Conclusion

The three examples described above created avoidable friction in Mitchell Shire. If there was a Mitchell Shire Agricultural Advisory Committee, then these issues could have been collaboratively reviewed prior to presenting to Mitchell Shire residents, shortening the duration of implementation. More importantly, Mitchell Shire and its agricultural and agribusiness sector would be working as a team.