

Why we need to fund an independent community voice at VCAT

Stopping the Bunnings Warehouse on Glenlyon Road is one of the biggest issues our community has faced in years (or decades!). If the Bunnings developer succeeds, it would set a terrible precedent across Australia. Tens of thousands of residents who use our local streets will be plagued by the huge increase in traffic including heavy vehicles, making our streets unsafe and terribly congested.

The community and Moreland Council have recognised this and said NO! The developer has now taken the Council to VCAT, trying to overturn this rejection.

Some residents have asked us why we are fundraising for a community challenge at VCAT. Can't we just depend on Moreland Council to fight the proposal at VCAT?

No, we can't. There is too much at stake to take that risk. We need to pull out all stops to ensure that the residents' case is strongly argued at VCAT. Together we can win!

Council is not collaborating with residents on the VCAT hearing

So far, the community has done a fantastic job. We submitted 538 objections, highlighting the huge problems. The community's outcry has brought us to the point where in December, Council planners recommended against this development and the Councillors unanimously voted against it. This will certainly help at VCAT.

But it is not enough. And we no longer have any influence.

In regard to the VCAT hearing, Council officers have told residents that Council needs to be impartial, and will not collaborate or be influenced by residents. Their interactions with us are only to provide advice on the process.

We need to ensure the community's concerns are properly addressed.

The community has raised a range of concerns about this proposal, including not only the adverse impacts of traffic congestion, but also the horrendous safety impacts on vulnerable road users and the consequent social impacts. Our elected Councillors have supported us by voting unanimously to reject this proposal on these and other concerns.

But our Councillors do not determine how this case will be fought at VCAT. The day-by-day strategy is decided by Council officers. We need to ensure that all of our concerns are strongly argued at VCAT. Part of our funds are being used for a planning advocate, who will mount the strongest arguments to defeat this proposal. We are also funding expert witnesses.

Traffic safety

The overwhelming concerns of residents were about the horrendous impacts of traffic congestion, and safety concerns with the huge increase in cars, trucks and trade vehicles in a residential area used for walking and cycling.

The Council is engaging its own traffic expert. But we believe their main focus will be the impact of the additional traffic on the road network.

We are raising funds for our own traffic expert. His analysis will also include the impacts of cycling and walking safety, and the impacts of directing so much traffic down small residential streets.

Social impacts

VCAT are required to consider “significant social effects” of planning decisions. Residents know that this development would have terrible social impacts. Yet in the Council officers’ original report, the planners said they would not fight it on these grounds.

So we are also engaging a social planner, who will organise and conduct research and local interviews to obtain evidence of the social impacts.

The Community has much more at stake than the Council

If the Bunnings developer convinces VCAT to overturn the Council and community’s opposition to the development, what are the consequences?

For the Council, losing would affect their “Service Performance Outcome Indicators” for the coming year. Indeed, the Council’s annual budget for fighting such cases at VCAT is relatively small.

For the local community, losing would have terrible, ongoing consequences. The traffic congestion would be a nightmare, and many people would no longer feel safe walking and cycling in our residential area. Local businesses may shut down, and many residents who work from home may no longer be able to.

Of course, all residents would wear the economic cost of delays caused by traffic congestion. And Moreland ratepayers will eventually have to pay for traffic calming, street closures, etc to reduce the inevitable impacts.

A recent similar example is where Moreland Council approved the Coburg North Coles development. It created a traffic nightmare, which will end up costing Victoria around \$12 million to deal with the traffic impacts.