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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the supply of water to the Tharwa Community

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The Supply of Water to the Tharwa Community

For over a century the Tharwa Village has provided a focal point for a fairly wide district, and local residents mostly tell people that they are from Tharwa. I am like many others in the district who, although not a resident of the village, count myself as “from Tharwa”. It is over 65 years since I first set foot in the village. So I do feel that my views on the village are just as important as those of anyone else.

The privately owned water supply in the village has been deteriorating for probably the last fifteen or twenty years. But in 2003 it was sufficient to, with a number of other very important actions and in spite of lack of timely approval, preserve the village.

The Southern Districts Rural Fire Brigade continues to operate as the late Val Jeffery would have wished. Today, as a member, I do know those in charge of the Brigade and it would again preserve the village with little or no outside help.

So what is all this about?

Kevin Jeffery has more detail than I but, as I understand matters, the present situation originated from a request by the Tharwa Community Association (now the owners of the existing water supply) for Government assistance to repair the supply.

As an early reaction the main tank was replaced by two plastic tanks, but further interest was displayed by the planning bureaucracy and a study of the village developed the Tharwa Village Plan for the future.

The Plan was generally well received by the community because, after good consultation, it looked forward to any development remaining in sympathy with the built environment of the village.

But the water supply idea was apparently taken up by two other agencies so that a total of three ACT Government agencies are now involved in it! It finally appears to have become a project for the ESA which has imposed design criteria which, even with its many engineering faults, would be more suited to the Sydney CBD!

The complexity which has developed over this relatively simple project and the involvement of multiple agencies has angered the community because of a significant number of deliberate misstatements of truth by various officials.

So this inquiry is all about getting the project reinstated to its original requested form, ie a water supply for the residences of the village.

It is also about spending the taxpayers money wisely – the early cost estimate for the fire fighting water supply was almost one million dollars!

I can assure the Committee that if the project goes ahead in the form of a supply of water exclusively for structure fire fighting then there will be absolutely NO support from the community. It is widely believed that everyone would be better off without it.

I now set out the reasons for this and assure you that I am qualified to offer advice.

I have over forty years experience in fighting bushfires and studying the science of such fires. I was a member of the ACT Bushfire Council for most of thirty years and a Group Captain in Monaro Alpine district of NSW. I have appeared in the media on various bushfire issues over the years.

It seems to me that the single most important reason for rejecting the exclusive water supply for firefighting is that the village does not need it! There has never been any house fires in the village. Never.

In recent years there have been two houses lost in the district, well away from the village, at “Billa Springs” north of Tharwa and at “Ioma” south of Tharwa. The existence of a dedicated firefighting water supply in the village would not have had any influence on either of these fires.

So there is **no track record** of fires in the village itself. This is not to say that there never will be house fires in the village, but it is still some sort of an indicator for future occurrences.

Thus it appears that the most likely fire threat to Tharwa will come from bushfire attack.

The **second important reason** that a water supply for residences is far preferable is based on the fact that properly prepared garden surrounds of residences are the **most important factor** in the survival of houses and buildings in bushfire situations.

Thus, if bushfire threatens the village there would be no need for fire authorities to evacuate people as happens with harrowing regularity now. It seems to me that the installation of the currently planned fire water supply would embolden authorities to evacuate the village. This is the major flaw in current nationwide bushfire policy. It removes people from positions where, utilising their resilience, they can be useful to places where they are useless. One's very best asset in a bushfire situation is well managed and resilient people.

In 2003, there were no evacuations because, as Val told me, he needed all the people to assist, including people at Outward Bound. There was no attendance by ACT F&R in Tharwa because they were all occupied in Canberra. At other times, even when there is little else happening, Fire and Rescue would not be able to respond sufficiently quickly to influence a structural fire outcome.

A third important reason for rejection of the idea of an exclusive fire fighting water supply is that no evidence has been produced considering and comparing alternative approaches, eg extension of the mains water supply from Icon Water, presumably from the southern edge of the suburbs to Tharwa.

In this context it appears to me that all agency effort has been directed at the defence, at all costs, of a flawed engineering approach to a substandard idea. There has been outrageous misinformation generated as attempts to justify this silly approach.

But enough of the negative waves! We need to look at what the Tharwa village does need.

In the 21st century it would seem reasonable to expect that where possible government provides water supplies for its constituents. This was the basic tenet behind the original approach about the water supply. While constituents or users pay, government uses its power to provide the infrastructure.

So what Tharwa needs is more of this approach, water infrastructure that is suitable for the present village and allows for or can be logically expanded for the inevitable growth in the future.

