



New South Wales Government
Independent Planning Commission

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

RE: MOUNT PLEASANT OPTIMISATION PROJECT (SSD-10418)

UPPER HUNTER SHIRE COUNCIL MEETING

COMMISSION PANEL: PROFESSOR ALICE CLARK (Chair)
PROFESSOR CHRIS FELL AO
TERRY BAILEY

OFFICE OF THE IPC: BRAD JAMES
PHOEBE JARVIS

UPPER HUNTER
SHIRE COUNCIL GREG McDONALD
MATTHEW PRINGLE
CR LEE WATTS
CR ADAM WILLIAMSON

LOCATION: VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE

DATE: 11.00AM, THURSDAY, 16 JUNE 2022

TRANSCRIBED AND RECORDED BY APT TRANSCRIPTIONS

PROF. CLARK: So good morning and welcome. Before we begin I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land from which we virtually meet today and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. Welcome to the meeting today to discuss the Mount Pleasant Optimisation Project SSD-10418 which is currently before the Commission for determination. My name is Professor Alice Clark, I'm the Chair of the Commission panel. I'm joined by my fellow Commissioners, Professor Chris Fell and Terry Bailey. We are also joined by Brad James and Phoebe Jarvis from the Office of the Independent Planning Commission.

10 In the interests of openness and transparency and to ensure the full capture of
information today's meeting is being recorded and a complete transcript will be made
available on the Commission's website. I request that all members today introduce
themselves before speaking for the first time please and ensure that you do not speak
over the top of each other to ensure the accuracy of the transcript. We note that the
Upper Hunter Shire Council raised a number of concerns in its submissions to the
department. This meeting is for the panel to hear the council's views on the project
including whether the department's assessment report and recommended conditions
have addressed any of these concerns or if there are any residual concerns which you
may like to raise today. We'll now begin and I would like to hand over to the council.
20 If I could remind people before speaking for the first time to introduce yourselves
please.

MR PRINGLE: Good morning, Commissioners, Brad and Phoebe. It's Matt Pringle here, I'm the Director of Environmental and Community Services at Upper Hunter Shire Council. I just would like to pass on an apology from our General Manager Greg McDonald, he's tied up with another meeting at the moment and we'd like to introduce our other councillors here first.

30 PROF. CLARK: Thank you, yes.

COUNCILLOR CLOUT: Tayah Clout.

PROF. CLARK: Welcome, Tayah. Rowan?

40 COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: Sorry, I hope you can hear me there. My child Rowan has been using this iPad just before I have and I've just realised that he's changed all my settings. My name is Adam Williamson, I'm a Councillor with Upper Hunter Shire Council, resident - previous resident of Dartbrook so just down the road from the Mount Pleasant worksite.

PROF. CLARK: Thanks, Adam. Thanks, Tayah. So, Matt, will you start off?

MR PRINGLE: I will, Madam Chair. So as you're aware we made a submission to the Department of Planning in March of last year raising some concerns with the project and those concerns were in relation to greenhouse gas emissions, air quality impacts, visual impacts and a request for the proponent to enter into a voluntary planning agreement with council. Look, I've reviewed the department's report and the recommended conditions of consent and I'm fairly comfortable with the report, the

findings of the assessment and the recommendation. I think the fact that this proposal is - you know, it's dealing with an existing mine site, they're talking about relinquishing an existing - an approved disturbance area as well, I think that's a big part of this. So I think, as I've said, we've read through the report and I'm fairly comfortable with that.

10 Our original submission, I guess, noted was based on our position statement on coal mining and coal seam gas in the Upper Hunter Shire and a copy of that position statement was provided with our submission. So obviously that position statement basically saying that council objects to coal mining and coal seam gas exploration in the Upper Hunter. The position statement was adopted in March of 2015 so it's probably due for a review and an update, that will be happening soon but, I guess, that was the basis of our submission that it was inconsistent with Council's position statement. We also had concerns about the impacts of the mine on the nearby community of Aberdeen, in particular, so the visual impacts on the community, concerns about noise - potential noise impacts and also air pollution and all of those issues were identified in our submission.

20 We welcomed the offer from MACH Energy to enter into a voluntary planning agreement with council. Last year council accepted the offer and April this year council resolved to enter into that voluntary planning agreement with MACH Energy and we felt that was relevant to us. I guess it's unusual that this particular mine is not inside our local government area, it's in an adjoining LGA and it's probably unusual for a proponent to enter into a VPA with an adjoining council but in this case the mine is very close to the local government boundary and it's quite - it was quite clear at the time that this project would have impacts on our shire. So we felt that, you know, it was reasonable to request a voluntary planning agreement. I think that's probably about all I have to say from my end.

30 PROF. CLARK: Thank you, Matt. Tayah, I see you're off mute, have you got any comments that you would like to add?

40 COUNCILLOR CLOUT: Yes, I would. I don't think that this mine should go ahead. That might be the position of the council, some of it, it's certainly not unanimous and it wasn't unanimous when we voted for the VPA. I understand that this expansion would create 876 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent into the atmosphere over the lifespan of it. I understand that this is potentially one of the most carbon-polluting projects that IPC has assessed. So it's more than just a matter of us gaining a bit of money from the VPA, this is a project that's going to affect generations for a long time.

We all recognise that climate change is a significant threat facing us not in the future, right now and this mine also even just in a socio-economic sense is going to drain - it's going to put a lot of people out of work for lower - you know, working for lower-paid job, putting them into very high paid jobs with very low skills. So when the mine does end they won't have exactly upskilled but they'll be used to higher pay. I think there are many, many reasons that this mine is not a good idea. For starters, it's a wholly Indonesian-owned company, it's not even Australian. There's numerous amounts of

threatened flora and fauna in the area, striped legless lizard, swift parrot, region honeyeater, the koalas which are already on the endangered list. There may not be many but that probably says a lot anyway.

10 I understand there will be approximately 475 hectares of native vegetation including some critically endangered box gum woodland and grey box ironbark woodland that will be affected by it. It's not just going to affect mines sites that have already being used, it's going to affect new land. We've already got a huge proportion of the Hunter Valley mined and we really need to be transitioning. I understand that there's a lot of pressure right now to create more energy with the crisis but this is clearly not an issue that's just started right now and I would just like to say that I hope the Commission will look at all the reasons to not allow this mine to expand and not just look at purely short term monetary impacts. Thank you.

PROF. CLARK: Thank you, Tayah. Thank you for your submission there. Adam, do you have any comment?

20 COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: Sorry. Like I find Tayah's point of view on there very relevant to current day proceedings. It is a very large project expansion and the mine site itself I lived in direct line of the impacts of noise and dust from this mine site. So outside of the existential climate issues the impacts on our residents here in the Upper Hunter have already been - have been experienced. One of the impacts - when - and I'm backtracking a little bit here - one of the impacts of his mine site was when they first stripped that mine site it affected the noise from Bengalla so they actually introduced noise from Bengalla mine. At the time that affected my family's lifestyle because we suddenly had 24 hours of mining noise.

30 I understand now that I've moved away there that the mine's got deeper and some of the noise has reduced because of barriers which is positive thing but, yeah, it's an interesting project to look forward and see what the business case is going to be. I know it's a very productive mine site, an awfully productive mine site so I can see why they want to try to stretch as much as they can but my interest here are mainly for Upper Hunter Shire Council residents and the impacts especially because we get a predominantly westerly or southerly wind and those impacts blow up the valley. So, yeah, I'd be quite interested to hear your findings and follow on with the project. So thank you.

40 PROF. CLARK: Thanks, Adam. Thank you. Chris, I see your microphone is off. Have you got any questions for the council issue from the Upper Hunter?

PROF. FELL: Well, I'd ask the question about what's the prevailing wind from up there? It comes from the north-west in summer and autumn, spring tends to be from the south-east, is that not right or - - -

PROF. CLARK: Adam, would you like to comment on that? And then Tayah.

COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: Yeah, sorry. No, my long term experience here - we get a predominant westerly wind. Some of the - I have seen the data from the

BOM and they have some strange data here. Most of our wind is predominantly westerly or southerly. Very rarely would we see an easterly wind here. A northerly wind will happen in very hot times when we have a big weather change but certainly our predominant winds are from the west and from the south.

PROF. FELL: Right. Thank you.

PROF. CLARK: Thank you. Matt or Tayah, any other commentary on the wind direction?

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COUNCILLOR CLOUT: Yeah, I tend to agree with what Adam said but, yeah, we definitely a lot of pollution up the valley. Only questionably we have very air - poor air quality, it's not just Aberdeen or Muswellbrook. All over this area does, you can often see it. If I look up the hills now today there's a bit of a haze. So unless there's a northerly, which as Adam said, is not really that frequent you definitely get a lot of air pollution up this way.

PROF. FELL: Sorry, just to follow up on that. Do you get a lot of deposition of particles, you know, on flat surfaces?

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COUNCILLOR CLOUT: Yeah, I could wipe the side of my house and you can wipe black coal dust off.

PROF. CLARK: Matt, you're very distant in the Zoom thing there so if you could make a verbal when you want to interject that will help me.

MR PRINGLE: Yeah, sorry. I just wanted to say, look, I agree with what Councillor Williamson and Councillor Clout were just saying about the prevailing wind patterns so, yes, I would support those comments.

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PROF. CLARK: Thank you, Matt. Okay. In terms of questions that I had in mind, I'd be interested to know what the councillors think of the potential impacts on housing through social development like this? Should it be approved? Have you got any comments around housing supply, et cetera? I'm happy to chair that. Tayah?

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COUNCILLOR CLOUT: Yeah, well, we've already got quite a housing crisis in this area. There's not much affordable housing at the best of times but even away from affordable housing, even with people, like I said, earning very high income what happens when they further down the track. Say, I know the expansion's till 2048 but it may not go that long because the world's ever changing so, say, 10 years from now it does crash and these people have got 600, \$700,000 mortgages on a good income but they're then very unskilled, you know, to change jobs. So I think that could be a potential impact to housing and I think we're probably starting to see that already because I understand there's quite a few mines that will be closing in the next little while. So, yeah, we don't have enough housing in this area as it is.

PROF. CLARK: Thanks, Tayah. Any other comments there, Councillors? Adam?

COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: Sure. I concur with Tayah. I think a large portion of Australia at the moment is having housing issues. I haven't got the demographics on it but Scone itself is reliant on - we have 40 per cent of our residents tied with the coal industry. That is a future burden as Tayah was alluding to if we have changes in those dynamics. What that has done to the area is both positive and potentially negative as well. We've obviously got very high - we've got very high housing crisis and the quality - the size of the houses because of the - and I'm going slightly sideways here but the size of the houses that are being developed in Scone are such that it's brought affordable housing out of the reach of many. Because we have 40 per cent of our workforce in the coal industry and positively pay very well they've invested in quite large substantial sized houses which, you know, to Councillor Clout's discussion there, does see a lot of mortgage stress issue within the local council area.

So it will be - and I'm verbalising this as an observation more than anything else. It will be interesting to see how this works on the dynamics of the Scone Council. We have a lot of the coal workers live in Scone because they actually want to try to distance themselves from the mines and you would suggest that maybe impacts from mines is going to make them want to distance themselves further. Whether that has any far-fetching housing issues in the future, time will tell.

PROF. CLARK: Chris, I noticed your mic's off there. Did you have a question or a comment?

PROF. FELL: Sorry. I was really wanting to follow up on the noise question that you raised at the start, Mr Williamson, that they claim in the Environmental Impact Statement that, in fact, although the production will be higher the noise will be much less, one, because they're moving west and secondly, because they're using better equipment but you found it quite noisy when they were doing the initial stripping, you said, and has it settled down now or - - -

COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: Certainly I can't comment on current - on the current conditions. I moved from Dartbrook two years ago now. A lot of my experience was in the initial stripping of the site and one of the large impacts I had was actually - was a bit of an interesting situation that came from Bengalla mine. Bengalla mine purchased two large Hitachi dump trucks and when they were delivered to site they discovered that they were outside of the noise parameters and so they had to then bury these trucks deep in the pits and not let them come out onto the top of the overburden as to not spur the noise sensors but over time we stretch our limits on what we can achieve with the resources that we have even if they might not be so compliant and so these particular trucks, and I know because I was speaking to the person who was in charge of assessing the noise out of Bengalla, they were causing undue noise right into my bedroom in the Dartbrook region there throughout the night and that was the start of it and then from then on, I mean, this is in the - I'm speaking of the stripping process. So the stripping process meant that I could then hear the dozers throughout the night and I could hear a lot of earth-working equipment on a 24-hour basis which I previously had it from the Bengalla mine who had been pretty - I had no impacts from the Bengalla mine until such time as Mount Pleasant was stripped.

PROF. FELL: Okay. Was it worse under certain wind conditions?

COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: I think - certainly if I had a gentle southerly there would be an issue or we had - obviously we had a quiet and still humid night the noise would carry, probably more so when there was less wind than more.

PROF. FELL: Right.

COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: I hope that answers your question there.

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PROF. FELL: I believe the operating condition - say that if they have a high level of noise transmission due to atmospheric effect actually have to stop operating or stop doing noisy operations.

COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: yes.

PROF. FELL: I think you're telling me that didn't happen.

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COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: I'm saying my observations at the time was that it was quite noisy at my place.

PROF. FELL: Thanks.

COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: Yep.

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PROF. CLARK: Okay. You certainly covered off the issues there that were in your submission and also in the additional questions that I had. I'm just going to go around the Commissioners now and loop around to see if you've got any final comments, Councillors. Terry, any issues from your end that you'd like to tease out with the Councillors?

MR BAILEY: Thanks, Alice, but, no, nothing additional to what's been covered and obviously reviewed the position statement and also reviewed the submission. So there's nothing further from me, thanks, Chair.

PROF. CLARK: Thank you, Terry. Chris, anything further from yourself?

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PROF. FELL: Well, yes, I'd just like to ask a question about the social amenity and also things like health, ambulance, local hospitals, et cetera, with more people in the area.

PROF. CLARK: Traffic.

PROF. FELL: What's the situation on that? I mean, are you stressed out in terms of hospital services, et cetera?

PROF. CLARK: Tayah?

COUNCILLOR CLOUT: Yeah. Yes, we currently are. We very rarely have enough doctors in this area. I think on average Scone doctors surgery if you want an appointment you're looking at four to six weeks minimum to see any GP, not necessarily one you may want to see. Hospital - Scone Hospital most women choose to have babies elsewhere because - well, there's just not a lot of doctors. I mean, over Christmas there is no doctor which is an issue. So I don't know that we have the ambulance wait times over in the city but I suppose that's due to having less residents but, yeah, clearly if we had more people in this area we would have further stress on it. I know the Aberdeen doctors surgery itself is fairly booked out most of the time, not quite the level of Scone but pretty close to. So, yeah, from a medical perspective I understand that we definitely don't have enough doctors.

PROF. FELL: So where is the nearest hospital if problems occur in that part of - - -

COUNCILLOR CLOUT: Scone.

PROF. FELL: Scone.

COUNCILLOR CLOUT: Scone. So that's, what, 11ks up the road from Aberdeen and Aberdeen, from what I understand, is three kilometres from where this proposed expansion will be. So quite close. And then I suppose the next hospital would be Muswellbrook Hospital from Aberdeen which is obviously not in our shire.

PROF. FELL: Thank you.

PROF. CLARK: Thanks, Chris. Any final comments, Councillors? Adam, any final comments there?

COUNCILLOR WILLIAMSON: Nothing that comes to mind. I hope I've been helpful for the panel there to some degree. The noise and amenity of the sites is sometimes overlooked even though it's - they have operating conditions to suggest that that's the case. I myself am full-on - I'm big for business, I like to see business go forward. Do we look at the long term outcomes of some of these business cases as effectively as we probably should in the past? I'd suggest maybe it's been challenging because of the size of these projects. I really hope that we sort of look at this project and many others and really question what we, as Australians and those in the Upper Hunter, really want for the future of our kids. I think I'll just finish at that if that's all right and thank you all for your time, much appreciated.

PROF. CLARK: Thanks, Adam. Councillor Tayah, any final closing comments from yourself?

COUNCILLOR CLOUT: I'd just like to say that while there might be a business case for this currently, the climate is changing, both economically and environmentally and that, like I said, the short term gains of money for this from an Indonesian company, I'm not sure apart from wages back to Australia, I'm not sure how much of the money will come back in, like given it's not an Australian company and the impacts on, well, everyone's health and just the future of the shire. Like once it's been destroyed, yes,

it's rehabilitated to a level but not like it was and at some point we have to really make a stand, like we can't just keep mining everywhere for some short term money. I know the council has its reason for wanting to enter into a VPA and, of course, Aberdeen residents may benefit to some extent from that money but their children probably won't, not with a mine that close,. So I really hope that this Commission looks at the whole impact not just from a business perspective because it can't just be business as usual, I think we all can accept that. Thank you, that's about all I've got to say.

10 PROF. CLARK: Thanks, Tayah. Matt, any final comments from yourself?

MR PRINGLE: I think all I would say is that obviously based on the comments from the Councillors today obviously council's position hasn't changed, the council continues to object to the project and I think the fact that council's agreed to enter into a VPA doesn't necessarily mean that we support the project as we've stated previously. Thank you.

PROF. CLARK: Thank you. I'll take the opportunity to thank everybody for coming online for this meeting and we'll draw the meeting to a close. Thank you very much.
20 Thanks, Brad.

MEETING CONCLUDED