

Funeral for former Casey Mayor Amanda Stapledon

A public funeral service to celebrate the life of former City of Casey Mayor Amanda Stapledon will be held in Berwick on Wednesday 2 February.

Ms Stapledon's family said she "was the artist of her own life, never handing the paintbrush to anyone else", and they "look forward to celebrating the canvas of her life with you".

The service will be held at the Berwick Church of Christ, 446 Centre Road, Berwick at 11am. It will also be livestreamed from the Selwyn Allen Funerals website, selwynallenfunerals.com.au/upcoming-services

Guests are asked to follow government requirements such as wearing a mask in the church.

The 58-year-old former councillor - who had been rocked by an IBAC inquiry into Casey councillors - was found dead in a car in Stringybark Drive about 12.30pm on Tuesday 18 January.

Her death is not being treated as suspicious, Victoria Police stated.

Ms Stapledon was widely admired as a strong, unstinting community voice, especially for disability and carer issues.

Many also paid tribute to her as a devoted sole carer for her family over decades.

Ms Stapledon's passion for disability sup-

port preceded her council terms between 2008-'20, including two stints as mayor.

She co-founded Casey Kidz Club - an after-school care program for disabled teenagers - and highlighted the lack of funding support.

Among her major legacies were two 75-kilometre Mayors Walks for Disability - in which she spread the word on service gaps for people with disabilities and their carers.

The initial feat led to her being crowned the Star News Person of the Year 2013.

Ms Stapledon was also a past president of Disability Capability and had held positions on the Blairlogie Living and Learning Board, the Casey Cardinia and ACE (Aiding Casey Education) foundations and Merinda Park Learning and Community Centre.

She was patron of the Cranbourne Football Club All Abilities Team and the YMCA Open Doors Program.

For many years, she hosted Women of Today on Casey Radio 97.7FM and penned a regular column for Star News Group.

She made two unsuccessful tilts at state politics - as an independent in 2010 and a Liberal candidate in 2014.

For crisis support, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au or beyond blue on 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au



Amanda Stapledon. 194479

Casey a capital of growth

By Eleanor Wilson

Casey is the third-fastest growing region in the country, according to new data from KPMG Australia.

The report, released last week, analysed the fastest growing regions across Australia since 2019, focusing on areas which had experienced an influx of new residents.

It showed 'Casey South' had grown at an annual rate of 4.5 per cent since 2019 - welcoming 29,400 new residents.

Placktown (North), in New South Wales, posted the second largest increase in population over the 2019-2022 period, with 30,100 new residents, while Wyndham, in Victoria's South West, came out on top with 34,500 new residents since 2019.

The analysis found Australians continue to flock to 'greenfield' suburbs, which describe former rural land areas that are being developed for housing, typically with detached houses.

Greater Melbourne's greenfield areas has seen significant growth over the past three years, although growth rates have slowed compared to the previous period, according to KPMG demographics expert Terry Rawnsley.

"The growth areas have offered new residents affordable housing compared to most established parts of Melbourne," Mr Rawnsley said.

"Affordable housing, quality amenities and access to local jobs and services has driven this level of growth," Mr Rawnsley said.

In response to the report, City of Casey chair of administrators Noelene Duff said the council is committed to taking the adequate steps to support the municipality's continuing population growth.

"Providing the supporting infrastructure and services in a growth area is crucial," Ms Duff said.



The analysis found Australians continue to flock to 'greenfield' suburbs, with the fastest growing areas being suburbs where detached housing is common. Picture: UNSPLASH

"That is why council is committed to advocating to the Federal and State Governments for the top three areas in which the community wants to see more investment: roads and public transport, local job opportunities, and health services and facilities.

"Our \$125.45 million 2022/23 budget allocation demonstrates council's own commitment to providing the community with the services and infrastructure it needs, exemplified by projects like the \$4.7 million Clyde North Family and Community Centre, and the \$2 million Cranbourne West Sports Reserve."

In the past 18 months, developers have delivered over \$50m of arterial road and inter-

section projects to service Casey's new growth areas, Ms Duff said.

"Council is also committed to engaging, facilitating and partnering with landowners and the development sector to deliver connected, sustainable and highly productive employment precincts, for example ESR's Green Link Estate in Cranbourne West, which promises to create significant local job opportunities."

The council's Shape Your City community engagement program, which identified the key community priorities for the future of the city, will also support the population growth Ms Duff said.

"These priorities are central to the Vision

and Council Plan and have informed our strategic approach in five key areas – economic development; infrastructure; the environment; health and wellbeing; and transformation - to ensure Casey remains a thriving community going forward."

Despite the strict international border closures through the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia has added more than 1 million new residents since December 2019.

The annual growth rate nationally for 2022 was 1.7 per cent, the highest since March 2017, with Australia's population exceeding 26 million people for the first time.

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the Cafe Vita deck at Springvale Botanical Cemetery.

- From 12pm-3pm on 29 January, 26 February, 26 March at Springvale Botanical Cemetery, 600 Princes Highway, Springvale. Details: 8558 8238 or info@cafevita.org.au

Men's Shed

Keysborough Men's Shed is a group based on old-fashioned mateship. It provides a place where men can feel included and safe, and is a tonic for their health and wellbeing. Activities include woodwork projects, cooking for lunches, welding, maintenance around the place and assistance to the community.

It's in the reserve outside the rear of Resurrection Primary School, 402 Corrigan Road, Keysborough (enter driveway opposite 16 Loxwood Avenue).

- Fridays 9am to 2pm. Details: Michael Howlett, 0408 545 196.

Casey plans for future

By Danielle Kutchel

The City of Casey's administrators have voted unanimously to approve a suite of planning and strategy documents designed to steer the council into the future.

At a special council meeting on Tuesday 29 June, the three administrators voted to adopt the final suite of corporate planning documents, including its annual budget and council plan 2021-25.

Chair of administrators Noelene Duff began the meeting by reflecting on the process that had taken place to deliver the documents to the council.

She said "extensive community consultation" had taken place via the Shape Your City engagement program to shape the documents before they reached the meeting floor and thanked all the staff involved.

Ms Duff said new communities and new parts of communities were being established in Casey on a daily basis, and council staff had engaged in creative means to reach them.

Moving the motion to adopt the sweeping suite of documents, administrator Miguel Belmar thanked those who had made submissions on the documents earlier this month.

"I'm mindful that tonight we're adopting motions that set up long-term strategies for the community," he said.

The council budget includes a general rates increase across the City of Casey of 1.5 per cent, in line with state government regulations.

Mr Belmar said careful analysis had shown with this increase, the council would be able to meet its commitments into the future.

He said hardship provisions – which were passed in the same council meeting after the approval of the budget and strategic documents – would assist those struggling to make their rate payments.

Fellow administrator Cameron Boardman said valid issues had been raised during public consultation on the documents and the budget.

He reiterated comments made in earlier council meetings that the council had considered a variety of options before settling on a 1.5 per cent increase in rates, noting their impact on the council's forward financial plan and "ambitious and largest ever capital works budget".

Mr Boardman said the administrators "thoroughly believe" the option was in the best interests of the municipality.

He too praised the community consultation which had shaped the documents.

"This is setting the benchmark of how community consultation in the future will be conducted. I think it's unparalleled anywhere in local government," he said.

The Shape Your City program ran over six months from 2020-21 and fed into the Casey Long-Term Community Vision 2031 and the Council Plan 2021-25.

Other strategic documents endorsed at the meeting included the:

- Draft Annual Action Plan 2021/22.

- Strategic Resource Plan 2021-2024 (which includes the Draft Budget 2021/2022, Capital Works Plan 2021/2022 and Draft 10 Year Finance Plan).

- Draft Fees and Charges for 2021/2022.

- Draft Revenue and Rating Plan 2021 to 2025.

- According to the council, insights from Shape Your City identified a series of themes that ratepayers wanted prioritised and which now form part of the Council Plan and Vision, including:

- Cleanliness and maintenance of public spaces.

- Reduced crime and improved safety.

- Community connectedness.

- Transport and improved access throughout Casey.

- Improving confidence in the council.

- In a statement, Ms Duff said she was delighted to launch the strategic documents, which would guide the way we work and drive the direction of the City of Casey over the coming years.

- "Both the Vision and Council Plan are designed to position council to take this city forward and support us to be ideally placed to continue the work we do, while managing growth, creating social connections, building sustainable infrastructure, creating local jobs and delivering services," Ms Duff said.

- "The Council Plan defines seven strategic

objectives for us to achieve over the next four years and I look forward to working with our community, staff and other levels of government to accomplish these."

- The council's \$569.7 million total budget includes a \$421.17 million operating budget and a \$148.5 million capital works program.

- Highlights include \$62.1 million to upgrade and deliver new recreational facilities, \$46.3 million to construct and upgrade roads and footpaths, and \$14.4 million towards renewing parks, leisure and recreational facilities.

- Child, youth and family services will receive \$48 million, while there's \$45 million for waste management and \$24 million for arts and culture.

- Some of the projects lined up in the 2021/22 Capital Works Program include:

- Construction of the Clyde Recreation Reserve for \$17.75 million.

- Casey Fields Soccer Stage 2 works, Cranbourne East for \$15 million.

- Construction of the Cranbourne West Sport and Recreation Reserve for \$8.12 million.

- A new family and community centre in Clyde for \$2 million.

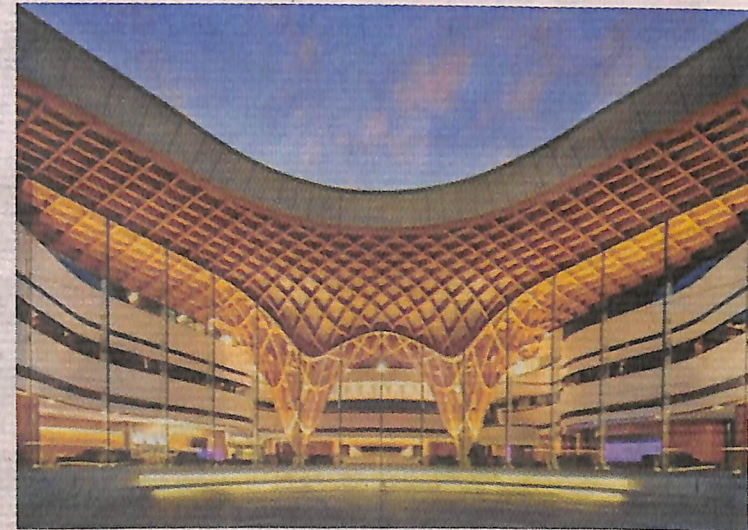
- A new football and cricket pavilion at the Pearce Dale Recreation Reserve for \$2 million.

- Upgrades to the Narre Warren North Kindergarten for \$310,660.

- Renewal of the Berwick Senior Citizens Centre for \$230,440.



Rex Flannery, pictured in late 2015, wants his name stripped from council. 148005



Pictures: STEWART CHAMBERS

Mr Flannery wants his name removed from plaques within Bunjil Place.

Rex: 'Remove my name'

By Mitchell Clarke

Almost one year since alleged corruption was exposed within the City of Casey, a former councillor is still fighting to clear his name.

Former Springfield Ward councillor Rex Flannery, who resigned as deputy mayor just days before the State Government sensationally sacked the entire council in February 2020, says the events of the past 12 months are still "eating" him up.

He has now officially requested that his name is removed from both a councillor honour board in the customer service centre and a wall plaque in Bunjil Place.

"I have never had any involvement into this alleged corruption scandal and therefore I do not wish to have my name associated with past or former councillors who may have brought our City of Casey into disrepute," he told the Star Journal.

"People look at your name and they see that you're from Casey Council and immediately they put you in that same mould, which couldn't be further than the truth.

"It's just horrible to have been a councillor in that term. It gives you a sickening feeling in your gut and now I have to live with that."

Mr Flannery argues his name should never have been placed on the plaque celebrating the \$126 million Bunjil development because at the time he didn't support the project.

"I guess I've eaten a little bit of humble pie with Bunjil Place. I've been able to see the value that place brings to the community but at the time I was against the development and I wasn't once consulted (about having my name included)," he said.

He also claims former ex-ward partner, Sam Aziz, stated to him that he "wished he never had my name added to the plaque".

"That was the only time I agreed with him," Mr Flannery said.

While Mr Flannery hasn't accused any former councillor of committing wrongdoing, he said anyone found guilty from the IBAC hearing should immediately have their honours stripped.

"They need to have their plaques removed from anywhere within the City of Casey. ... whether it's a plaque in the botanical gardens or in Bunjil Place, I want them removed so they have absolutely no recognition anymore," he said.

"They've disgraced themselves and they've disgraced the council. They've taken something away from me that I totally enjoyed. I loved serving the Casey community. I just want some clarity as to what way it's going to go."

Since his resignation, Mr Flannery has been working in an operating theatre at a local hos-

pital. He said he has every intention to run for council again in 2024.

"I want to get back into serving the community again. I want to run again and I want to get my name back on the honour board for the right reasons. At the moment it's a dishonour board," he said.

Star News understands Mr Flannery has put forward his request to be heard by the administrators at the next council meeting, slated for Tuesday 2 February.

"It's up to them now but a year later, this is still eating at me. I need closure and this is one way that I can get it," he said.

"I played no part in any downturn or sacking of the council and I feel it's my duty to say that I don't want to be a part of or in any way associated with the 2016-20 term."

The City of Casey has been contacted for comment.

Lifeline for pool

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

In what is sure to be a popular backflip, Casey Council has requested a business case to retain Doveton's historic 50-metre pool.

It came after widespread community uproar against plans to replace the 52-year-old outdoor pool with parkland.

The public had sent a "very, very clear message", Casey administrator Cameron Boardman told a 14 December council meeting.

Fellow administrator Miguel Belmar successfully moved for a business case for the retention of an outdoor pool with a "year-round accessible" park, including splash play area.

"One issue clear to me is the site is in many respects under-utilised through the year."

The business case will also explore redeveloping and fencing the outdoor pool, upgrading changerooms and removing the ageing water slides, three smaller pools, Gambetta Room and portable building.

The heritage-listed front building would be retained.

According to a council report, an indoor pool was not feasible in the next 10 years due to the \$40 million estimated cost and its proximity to Dandenong Oasis aquatic centre.

Mr Belmar said he was "in no doubt" that "the community has a strong regard and strong belief that a pool is required in Doveton".

He noted the telling feedback from Doveton College student leaders – who were profoundly in favour of improving the pool.

Administrator chair Noelene Duff said it was now "time to narrow down the options" to "something we can realise and we believe we can deliver".

The council would also seek funding from state and federal governments to support the project, she said.

In March, furious MPs, community, sports and user groups said they were "blind-sided" by a council officer's recommendation to replace the outdoor pool with "public open space".



The 52-year-old Olympic-size pool is only open on 30-plus degree days. 231126
Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

It prompted further community consultation, which emphatically endorsed keeping the pool.

Despite an allegedly "skewed" community survey and draft concept plan that omitted the outdoor pool, 94 per cent of respondents still nominated retaining the pool under 'other comments'.

There were reported concerns about low swimming competency, local drownings and young people instead using Eumemmerring Creek.

Among the public's suggestions were full or partial roofing over the pool, improved heating and changerooms and year-round opening, rather than only opening on 30-degree-plus Celsius days.

In 2019, the then-councillors approved \$24 million for upgrading Doveton Pool as a high priority.

However according to a council report in March, the outdoor pool was an "over provision of aquatic facilities and services" for a small local population.



Casey Council launched a business case to retain Doveton Pool with a year-round accessible park.

There were sufficient "accessible" facilities at Dandenong Oasis, Casey ARC and Noble Park Aquatic College.

The report rejected a proposal from Doveton College and Our Place to relocate Doveton Library to the site, with a new 25-metre 'indoor-outdoor' pool, fitness centre, kitchen, allied health offices and meeting rooms.

On 14 December, Mr Boardman said the report had in "no way" considered the "comprehensive sentiment, attachment and quite significant long-standing expectation of the community".

Armed with a "comprehensive" business case, he was confident Casey would deliver in the "community's best interest".

The Doveton Pool in the Park – the only outdoor pool in Casey – is listed as a locally significant heritage site.

It was built in 1968 after a spate of drownings in Eumemmerring Creek. Residents reportedly raised funds and lobbied Shire of Berwick for the pool.

The council raised extra funds for the project with a charge on industrial ratepayers.

The business case is expected to be presented to council administrators in early 2022.

* A win for people power, page 6

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Doveton Eumemmerring Township Association chair Sean Balfour, front, with residents soon after Casey proposed Doveton Pool's demolition in March. 231126 Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

Power of the people

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

It's hard to argue against 94 per cent.

That was the overwhelming size of community-survey opposition after Casey Council tabled the demolition of the historic 50-metre Doveton outdoor pool in March.

The "clear message" was heeded by Casey's three administrators, who voted to pursue a business case to keep the pool with a year-round accessible park on 14 December.

Doveton Eumemmerring Township Association chair Sean Balfour watched the council vote from a near-empty public gallery.

"I was elated but there was no one to celebrate with. Still, it was pretty good."

DETA organised heavily-supported petitions to save Doveton pool, with schools, sports clubs and traders joining the grassroots campaign.

"We're winning," Mr Balfour said.

"We've got to hope the business model gets us across the line."

Another vocal campaigner was Greg Pargeter, son of the late former Berwick Shire mayor Syd Pargeter who led the creation of the pool 52 years ago.

He described the council's back-flip as a "Christmas miracle".

"It's a significant win. The people have spoken."

Doveton, being among the most disadvantaged Melbourne suburbs, could not afford to lose its pool, Mr Pargeter said.

"To take away a source of community pride would have just ripped the heart out of the Doveton community.

"It's a phenomenon around the country at the moment with local governments trying to live themselves of recurrent expenses.

"But they have to look at the intangible out-

comes that you can't really put a dollar value on.

"Like community connectedness and engagement, and driving lower crime figures."

Doveton was a popular training pool for Casey Sharks swimming club and a triathlete group, Mr Pargeter said.

And increasingly vital for recreational and sporting swimmers as Casey's population reaches an expected 500,000 in the next 20 years.

Mr Pargeter called for the immediate scrapping of the pool's '30-degree rule' – in which it only opens in summer on 30-plus degree Celsius days.

"It would create certainty for when the pool would open – this would provide job certainty and greater usage of the pool.

"The pool is actually heated. They just need to dial it up a bit."

With state and federal elections in the next 12 months, it was time for Casey to secure funding for the project, he said.

"We've seen the federal support for Dandenong Oasis, and Casey has heavily invested in Casey ARC and Casey RACE – it's now the turn for Doveton pool."

Bruce MP Julian Hill had sharply criticised the council's original plan to "kill" Doveton pool "with no community consultation".

"It's thanks to the community that Council is now looking seriously at retaining the 50 metre outdoor pool," he said in response to the pool's reprieve.

"If Council decides to save the pool I will certainly fight for a federal funding contribution."

Dandenong MP Gabrielle Williams said it was "positive to see that Council listened to community feedback".

"I look forward to seeing the outcomes of Council's next stage of planning."



Brendan Browne says public opinion supports Doveton pool's retention. 174589

Picture: CAM LUCADOU-WELLS

Council has pool 'agenda'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A ratepayers' group has accused Casey Council of "pushing an agenda" to demolish Doveton's outdoor pools.

Casey Residents and Ratepayers Association (CRRA) secretary Brendan Browne told a council meeting on 8 June that the proposal to replace Doveton Pool in the Park "ignored" public opinion.

In particular, a 2019 public survey that found a swimming pool was the "most popular option".

In March, a Casey report proposed replacing the pools with parkland and water-play areas – a move that was put on hold by Casey's administrators in favour of further community consultation.

"We wonder about the worth of that (2019) engagement... It ignored that the public wanted a pool," Mr Browne said.

The online public survey in May was "particularly disappointing".

"It seems to be written in a strategic way so that the end result won't point to the public wanting a pool."

The council's proposal for 'no pool' seemed to be swayed by "finances" with "little detail", he said.

One of the justifications was the cost of repairing the historic building's roof – which would be retained as part of the council's plans anyway, Mr Browne said.

Mr Browne warned Casey not to ignore

"valuable local knowledge".

For example, that the nearest alternative pool at Casey ARC was so crowded on hot days that it created a "never again" experience for patrons.

The CRRA was "critical" of the council's proposed 1.5 per cent rates increase, but "pleased" that most other fees and charges were not rising.

Mr Browne praised the council's administrators for ending Casey's China "engagement" and halting its "substantial" funding of the racing industry.

Those "one-off interventions" didn't address the "integrity in the engagement process, particularly where the City of Casey has

an agenda", Mr Browne said.

At the meeting, administrator Miguel Emar said community engagement on the pool was "continuing". A "careful" and "considered" decision would be made.

Administrator Cameron Boardman said the future of Doveton pool was "not a foregone conclusion – far from it".

The decision would be "evidence-based", "factual" and "transparent". It would involve the "exemplar" of consultative processes, Boardman said.

"There is no decision on any of the options for the Doveton pool. That's why we're going through such an extensive and targeted process."

No final decision on pool

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Casey Council insists no final decision has been made on Doveton Pool in the Park's fate despite allocating money for a "site re-design" in its 2021-'22 draft budget.

In its planned capital works, the council proposed \$54,000 for fencing renewal and \$30,000 for site re-design at the historic Olympic-size pool site.

The "re-design" item raised suspicion among Doveton-Eumemmerring Township Association members, who are among a community chorus of supporters of retaining the 53-year-old pool.

"When I saw the word 'redesign', I thought they've already made a decision," DETA chair Sean Balfour said.

"They're going to scrap the pool."

In March, Casey faced a public outcry after a tabled council report recommended replacing the pool with parkland.

Its administrators put aside voting on the report. Instead the council launched a seven-week \$90,000 public consultation on the site's future, which included pop-up stalls at the pool.

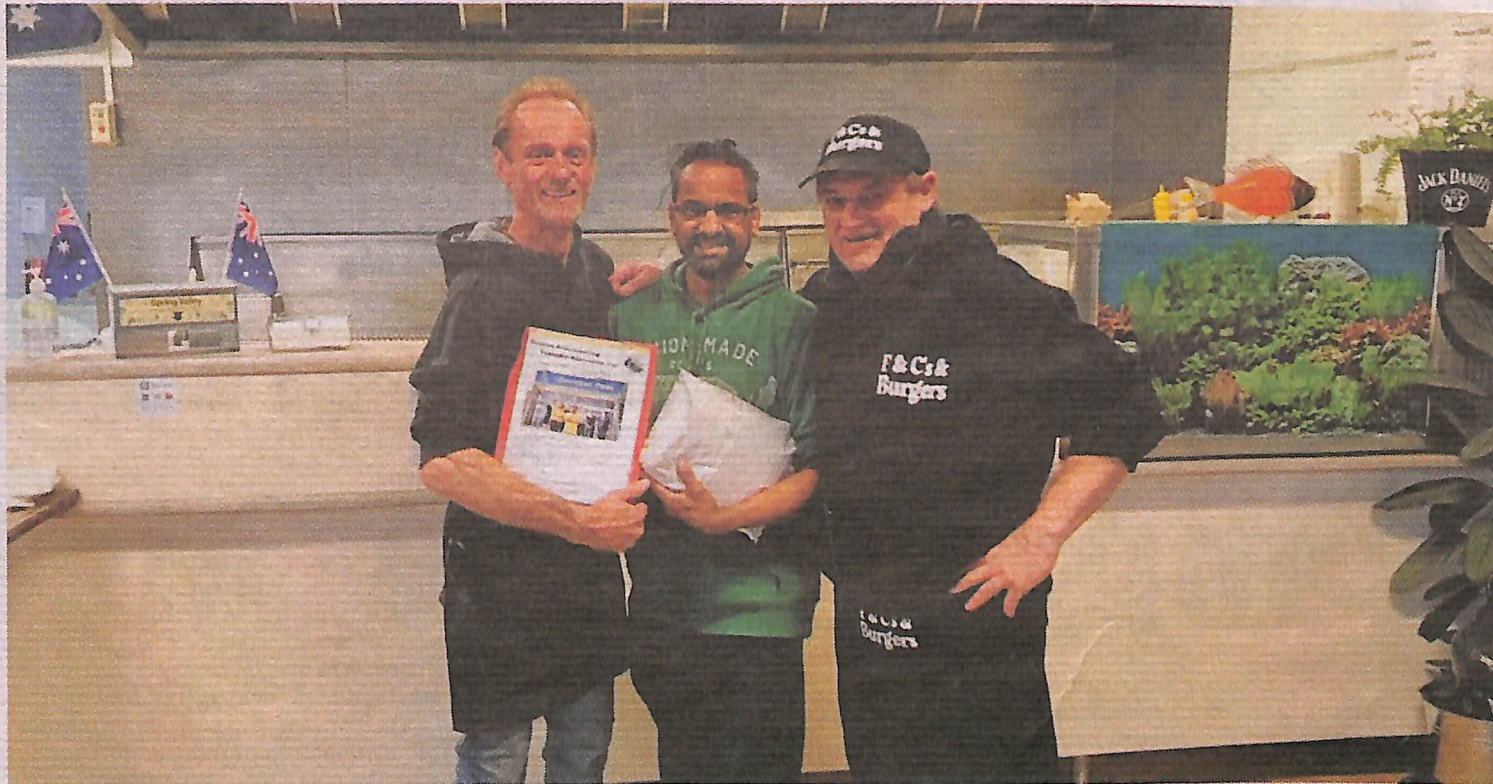
It was however labelled a "sham" by pool opponents. The survey and draft concept plan were skewed due to not including an option of retaining the pool, they said.

New features such as playgrounds, a water play, splash-pad, barbecues and a group shelter were options.

"On exit surveys, people have told me they had assumed the new features were complementing the pool, not replacing it," Mr Balfour said.

"The council has spent money to convince us we don't need a pool."

A "vast majority" of locals steadfastly wanted the pool to stay, he said.



Sean Balfour, centre, and Doveton Avenue Fish & Chips' Ross and Graham with a petition to 'save Doveton Pool in the Park'.

the Park' has been signed by more than 2200.

Other supportive petitions have been circulated at Doveton Avenue's fish-and-chip shop and Doveton Football Netball Club.

"I've spoken to hundreds while out with the petition. Only two people said they didn't care."

Casey city and asset planning manager Keri New said the council received more than 500 completed surveys during the consultation.

The surveys will be "analysed" before a fur-

ther report is prepared for the Council. Then Casey would decide on the future of the pool or the site more broadly, Ms New said.

Budget funding for a site re-design was to "further develop the findings that arise from the Draft Concept Plan consultation", she said.

The \$54,000 fencing allocation was for "general maintenance".

In March, an earlier tabled council report recommended that an aquatic facility was not a priority.

Instead the site should address a shortage of district parkland in Doveton-Eumemmerring, it stated.

The report was based on expert assessments including visitor numbers, seasonal use, the pool's age and operational and maintenance costs, the council stated at the time.

A Heritage Assessment and expert advice was commissioned to "ensure any proposed redevelopment is respectful of the site's heritage".

Why Doveton Pool matters

Doveton-Eumemmerring Township Association (DETA) is aware that Casey Council has put forward their arguments in defence of their proposal to remove all pools from the Doveton Pool In the Park precinct.

We would like to put forward our own arguments and rationale for wanting to retain some or all of the pools.

They are as follows:

- Casey only has two public indoor pools and one outdoor pool (Doveton), yet it is the largest municipality by population in Victoria and one of the fastest growing in Australia. The existing public pools are currently overcrowded. It makes sense to retain and promote an existing pool rather than close it down and potentially have to build another one, on another site, in the future when it becomes necessary.
- Doveton is the third most disadvantaged suburb in Victoria, according to the respected Dropping of the Edge Report prepared by Jesuit Social Services. The ABS SEIFA rankings of relative advantage/disadvantage also includes Doveton in the top 10 most disadvantaged suburbs in Victoria.
- Communities of high disadvantage like

Doveton require additional support and special consideration for the needs and well-being of residents, especially young people.

- If young people have a safe and affordable local meeting space, like the Doveton Pool, they are less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour and criminal activity.
- Multicultural Importance: Doveton and surrounding suburbs have very culturally and ethnically-diverse populations, with many recently-arrived families. It is vital that these groups have access to a local and affordable place for swimming, to reduce high instances of drowning and death of children. The Doveton Pool is a safer alternative to creeks and other waterways. This was the original reason for the pool being built 50 years ago and remains as important as ever.
- The Doveton Pool has had little opportunity to be economically viable in recent years, due to heavily-reduced opening hours and lack of local engagement with the community and the schools.
- The pool is used regularly by schools and swim groups from across Casey and the outer south east. Doveton Pool is uniquely suited for these types of events.
- During the 2020 COVID restrictions, DPIIP, being outdoor, was the only pool that was able

to open in the municipality and supported many residents and swimming groups during a very difficult period. Doveton residents were proud to welcome groups from across Casey and support them through this difficult time.

- Long-term need: The Doveton/Eumemmerring population is rapidly expanding due to rezoning, subdivision and the creation of three new infill estates by developers. This growth is also occurring in neighbouring suburbs and any decision to remove the pool now would be short sighted.
- The Doveton Pool in the Park site is large enough to both retain a pool and recreation facility and also meet the needs for more open space, as outlined in Casey Council's Open Space assessment. By working together, if all parties are willing, we can find a better solution.
- There are many options to help fund the upgrade of the pool that are yet to be considered, including: pool memberships, community partnerships, philanthropic contributions, developer levies and government grants.
- The pool presents a great way to build and strengthen a disadvantaged community. Together we need to look at the opportunities

that this historic and unique asset offers, rather than simply focusing on the perceived deficits identified by the council.

Joshua Oostwoud,
Vice-chair Doveton-Eumemmerring
Township Association (DETA)

War crimes must be pursued

I note that as Australia is a signatory to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), we have a moral obligation to investigate and prosecute war crimes committed in Afghanistan there are many investigations into the war crimes committed in Afghanistan.

Proud club joins pool fight

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Who said sport and politics don't mix?

As Doveton Football Netball Club unveiled two premierships flags, it also launched a banner Save The Doveton Pool.

Casey Council has proposed to demolish the 53-year-old Olympic-sized outdoor pool and replace it with parkland.

Currently the plan is under public consultation, with the council insisting no final decision has been made.

But sports club's football director Martin Stillman said it was important to the club's viability that the Doveton Pool in the Park remains a pool.

"The Doveton community doesn't get a lot of love. We want to support the community and not have all the facilities moving outside the Doveton area.

"If we keep the facilities here, we're likely to keep people here at our club and in the area.

"It effects what we try to do with our junior netball and junior football, in terms of numbers. We need a strong junior program in order to frame a future."

The club refers to itself as "poor cousins" because of its sparse and "less than desirable" facilities, Mr Stillman says.

"We see where all the money is spent at all these other clubs."

But it knows something about winning against seemingly insurmountable odds. Its football team went from winless wooden spoons in 2018 to premiers in the space of 12 months.

"The club was close to closing its doors. But rather than folding, it galvanised.

"Everyone realised we needed to contribute to the community club."

In the meantime, the club has become a foundation member of the White Ribbon movement to end male violence against women and girls. The white ribbon is part of the club's logo.

It delivers junior programs for "under cost" price so as not to exclude families from one of Melbourne's most economically disadvantaged suburbs.

The club achieved an honourable mention in the Victorian Multicultural Awards 2020 for multicultural harmony.

Its football and netball teams unveiled their two 2019 premierships flags on 24 April – belatedly due to Covid lockdowns last year.

According to a recent Casey report on the pool, Doveton had sufficient community facilities with an "over provision" of "accessible" aquatic alternatives such as Dandenong Oasis, Casey ARC and several learn-to-swim programs.

It's released a draft concept plan that would replace the pool with possible playgrounds, a water play splash-pad, barbecues and a group shelter on the site.

Casey city and asset planning manager Keri New said no decision had been made on the pool's future.

"We are seeking feedback about how the pool is currently used and the community's thoughts on potentially transforming the site.

"The proposed concept outlines potential options for the site that the community has



Doveton Football Netball Club members join the 'save the pool' campaign.

told us in previous consultations they would like to see at this location."

Ms New said the current public consultation was "widely publicised", including letters to more than 6500 residents in the area.

"More than 270 residents have also completed the survey, which will remain open until Friday 14 May."

The survey is at [conversations.casey.vic.gov.au/doveton-pool-in-the-park-concept-plan](https://www.conversations.casey.vic.gov.au/doveton-pool-in-the-park-concept-plan)



Looking inside Doveton's historic pool. 231126
Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

Pool could sink or swim

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Casey Council has announced a stay-of-execution for Doveton Pool in the Park, opting for public consultation before deciding the pool's fate.

After a wave of public outrage, Casey administrators withdrew a motion on 16 March to replace the 52-year-old Olympic-sized pool with "public open space".

In an alternate motion, they proposed a round of community engagement on the issue.

The motion noted the council's commissioned experts' findings that "an aquatic facility is not a priority" for the site and there was instead a need for more parkland in Doveton.

Administrators chair Noelene Duff told the meeting that "these decisions are difficult decisions for councils".

She said the council had to look at the infrastructure demands across the "whole of City of Casey" - considering also the "newer parts" of Casey.

Upon visiting the pool, she found "a building in decay, a pool in decay".

"It's also an incredibly constrained site physically."

To consider investing in a pool upgrade, the council had to be "quite convinced of the potential use leveraged off that particular investment".

Administrator Cameron Boardman, a former competitive swimmer, noted "fondly" a "profoundly similar" situation when an ageing, unheated outdoor pool in Frankston North was on the chopping block.

He said "strong" community feedback led to the pool's renovation and ongoing survival.

"We do want to hear from everybody.

"And we do want to assure that when we do make a decision that it will be in the longest-term best interests as possible of the community as a whole ... with all the information at hand."

In the lead-up, Doveton Eumemmerring Township Association (DETA) vigorously opposed the proposed pool closure. Local MPs Julian Hill, Luke Donnellan and Gabrielle Williams had also voiced concerns.

In a statement, DETA accused council officers of trying to "blindsided" the community and push through the demolition "unchallenged".

"At short notice the Doveton community has stood up and comprehensively sent a message to Council.

"To achieve more than 2000 petition signatures in a few days is truly an astonishing feat and testament to the importance of our pool."

It noted the council hadn't ruled out an option of replacing the pool.

"We are confident that if a genuine community consultation is undertaken it will reiterate that the 'No Pool' proposal is not something the community wants or will accept," DETA stated.

"We hope that we can move beyond this difficult last week and work with Council to find

a way forward for the site that incorporates a community pool in some form."

DETA chair Sean Balfour said support from residents in nearby suburbs showed the outdoor pool was also valued across Casey.

The group had been "overwhelmed" by offers to donate, letterbox and petition for the campaign.

DETA vice-chair Joshua Oostwoud said many schools and community groups used the pool for swim trials and tournaments.

"A well-supported Doveton pool will avoid overcrowding at other pools in the outer south-eastern region, benefit the local economy and boost our community's sense of social cohesion.

"Many people in this region rely on public transport and need amenities and facilities that are close to home; this postcode must retain its community pool."

According to a Casey Council report, the Doveton outdoor pool was an "over provision of aquatic facilities and services" which lost \$190,000 from July 2019-March 2020.

The report stated that Doveton-Eumemmerring's 12,347 population was too small to justify a \$40 million redevelopment including an indoor pool.

It instead recommended a \$4 million option for free water-play equipment in a park and social gathering space.

This would address an undersupply of "district level" parkland in Doveton, including potentially dog off-leash areas, vegetation, barbecues and play space.

The report also rejected a proposal from Doveton College and Our Place to relocate Doveton Library to the site, with a new 25-metre 'indoor-outdoor' pool, fitness centre, kitchen, allied health offices and meeting rooms.

There were sufficient council community facilities in Doveton, as well as "accessible" aquatic alternatives such as Dandenong Oasis, Casey ARC and several learn-to-swim programs, the report stated.

An outdoor pool at Noble Park Aquatic Centre was within 7 kilometres away.

The report noted that Doveton's pools were only open during days of or above 30 degrees Celsius in December-March.

It attracted 3717 casual visitors and 15,190 during swimming carnivals in the 2019-'20 season.

By 2026, a further \$1.94 million would be required to maintain the pool, let alone upgrade it, the report stated.

The Doveton Pool in the Park - the only outdoor pool in Casey - is listed as a locally significant heritage site.

It was built in 1968 after a spate of drownings in Eumemmerring Creek. Residents reportedly raised funds and lobbied Shire of Berwick for the pool.

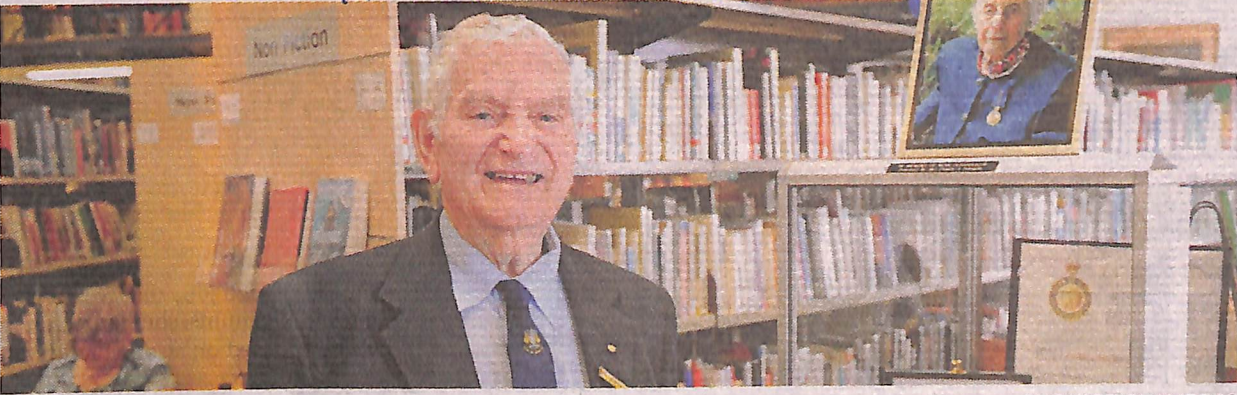
The council raised extra funds for the project with a charge on industrial ratepayers.



Doveton Pool in the Park's waterslide and water-play area. 231126 Pictures: STEWART CHAMBERS



Plans to close the 52-year-old Doveton pool were put on hold. 231126



Late ex-mayor Syd Pargeter would react with "a lot of expletives". 88891

Pictures: STEWART CHAMBERS

Doveton's disadvantaged community can ill afford to lose Doveton Pool in the Park, argues Greg Pargeter. 231126

Save 'hard fought' pool

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

The late mayor Syd Pargeter would have let fly "a lot of expletives" had he learnt of plans to demolish the 53-year-old Doveton Pool in the Park.

So says his son Greg Pargeter, who is joining a community campaign to save the pool from proposed demolition.

His father was a driving force in creating the pool, in response to a spate of drownings in nearby creeks in the 1960's.

Mr Pargeter said his dad would battle to save and further invest in a "hard-fought-for and won community facility".

"It's been paid for by the ratepayers. It's been there for 50 years and it needs investment so it can serve the community for the next 50 years.

"If you were to ever lose this facility, it would never be replaced. It needs to be saved at all costs."

Joining a community campaign to save the pool, Mr Pargeter argues it should be upgraded with a roof.

This would allow for learn-to-swim classes, training and recreational swimming all year round.

"The facility can play a key role for health and well-being," he says.

"The community is frustrated that the facility is closed in April and frustrated that it's only open on 30-degree days.

"This seems to be driving an agenda of lower patronage. They want to run it down rather than build it up."

A recent council report on Doveton pool referred to the suburb's ranking as the fourth most socioeconomically disadvantaged in Melbourne. Neighbouring suburb Dandenong ranked sixth.

"So the council's solution to that is to make them even further disadvantaged," Mr Pargeter said.

"To take away a piece of important community infrastructure."

He said it was "disappointing" that Casey Council were "dismissive" of an initiative from Doveton College and Our Place to upgrade the pool.

This involved a relocated Doveton Library with a new 25-metre 'indoor-outdoor' pool, fitness centre, kitchen, allied health offices and meeting rooms.

Mr Pargeter questioned the council's estimation of \$40 million to provide an indoor pool. "That's nearly \$1 million a metre - it must be a gold-plated Taj Mahal.

"These figures are bandied about to stifle any meaningful discussions and dialogue."

The council report stated there were sufficient council community facilities in Doveton, as well as an "over provision" of "accessible" aquatic alternatives such as Dandenong Oasis, Casey ARC and several learn-to-swim programs.

As part of a public consultation, the council has released a draft concept plan that replaces the pool with parkland.

The plan suggests playgrounds, a water play splash-pad, barbecues and a group shelter on the site.

Mr Pargeter said it appeared to be a "sham" consultation with a "pre-determined outcome". He points to the council's survey omit-

ting a pool from a list of possible features on the site.

Casey city and asset planning manager Keri New said no decision had been made on the pool's future.

"We are seeking feedback about how the pool is currently used and the community's thoughts on potentially transforming the site.

"The proposed concept outlines potential options for the site that the community has told us in previous consultations they would like to see at this location."

Ms New said the current public consultation was "widely publicised", including letters to more than 6500 residents in the area.

"More than 270 residents have also completed the survey, which will remain open until Friday 14 May."

The survey is at [conversations.casey.vic.gov.au/doveton-pool-in-the-park-concept-plan](https://www.conversations.casey.vic.gov.au/doveton-pool-in-the-park-concept-plan)

The council is also holding drop-in sessions in April and May at Autumn Place Community Hub, Doveton Pool in the Park and at the Aboriginal Gathering Place.

Pool 'sham' anger

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A community group has slammed Casey Council's "sham" public consultation about plans to demolish the historic Doveton Pool in the Park.

Doveton Eumemmerring Township Association (DETA) chair Sean Balfour said despite a large public outcry, the council appeared to have already decided to demolish the 53-year-old Olympic-sized outdoor pool.

The council's \$90,000 consultation features a draft concept plan that replaces the pool with parkland.

The plan suggests playgrounds, a water play splash-pad, barbecues and a group shelter on the site.

The council's online survey excludes a pool from a long list of possible features on the site.

"It's been a sham. The council has spent money to convince us we don't need a pool," Mr Balfour said.

"There's no mention about how to keep the pool. They're trying to skew the results."

Greg Pargeter said a public consultation staged by the council's consultants on the site on 30 March was barely promoted and so sparsely attended.

"The consultative meeting was not adequately advertised, relying solely on a posting buried within the Casey Council website.

"Alarmingly, the glossy posters of proposed development alternatives did not include the existing pools.

"The communication strategy to engage residents and interested parties in consultation is limited to a proposed restricted letter drop in the Doveton area."

Mr Pargeter, son of the late Berwick Shire mayor Syd Pargeter who was a driving force in creating the Doveton pool, said it appeared to be a "sham" consultation with a "pre-determined outcome".

Mr Balfour said the council had put aside its commitment in 2019 for a \$24 million up-



Greg Pargeter, right, and Sean Balfour, centre, were among the concerned residents at a pop-up consultation at Doveton Pool on 30 March.

grade of the pool, bolstered by possible state and federal grants.

Casey Council also dismissed its own steering committee's recommendation for an indoor pool and community hub created by Our Place and Doveton College.

Such an option would cost up to \$40 million, according to the council.

Mr Balfour says: "We're happy to have two-and-a-half pools with at least one under cover so we can have learn-to-swim lessons and lap swimming all year round."

Casey council administrators withdrew a motion on 16 March to demolish the pool after being flooded by criticism and an opposing petition of more than 2000 signatures.

They instead opted for the seven-week community consultation, emphasising no decision had yet been made.

A tabled council report recommended an aquatic facility may not be a priority at the site.

Instead there was a shortage of district parkland in Doveton-Eumemmerring, it stated.

The report was based on expert assessments including visitor numbers, seasonal use, the pool's age and operational and maintenance costs, the council stated.

Casey administrators chair Noelene Duff

said: "We acknowledge that there is a great deal of nostalgia associated with the pool.

"However we also know that a significant financial investment will be required at this site over the next few years.

"Therefore, it is important that we consider how the facility is being used today and what will bring the greatest benefit to the entire Casey community in the years to come."

A Heritage Assessment and expert advice was commissioned to "ensure any proposed redevelopment is respectful of the site's heritage".

In the lead-up to the 16 March motion, DETA vigorously opposed the proposed pool closure.

Local MPs Julian Hill, Luke Donnellan and Gabrielle Williams had also voiced concerns.

After the meeting, DETA noted the council hadn't ruled out an option of replacing the pool.

"We are confident that if a genuine community consultation is undertaken it will reiterate that the 'No Pool' proposal is not something the community wants or will accept," DETA stated.

Public feedback is invited on the council's Casey Conversations website until Friday 14 May Details: conversations.casey.vic.gov.au.

P3 6th APR 2021 TEARAWA

Pool shock

From page 1

Residents group Doveton & Eumemmering Township Association (DETA) say they discovered the plan buried within a 679-page Casey Council meeting agenda just five days ahead of the vote.

DETA has called an emergency meeting to work out a response to the bombshell move.

"Doveton and Eumemmerring residents are shocked and angered at the proposal by Casey Council.

"It is expected DETA will formally call on the unelected temporary Casey Council administrators to oppose this recommendation on Tuesday."

The group stated that the "former democratically elected" councillors adopted a strategy in 2019 to invest \$24 million into upgrading Doveton Pool as a high priority.

"DETA look forward to and expect Council to deliver on this much needed and long promised investment in the Doveton & Eumemmering Community."

Former Casey councillor Damien Rosario said he and colleague Wayne Smith had previously fought hard for a masterplan for an indoor pool and outdoor pool for all-year use.

"I'm disappointed but I'm not surprised to hear the news.

"When you look at all the different projects programmed in the (Casey Council) budget and now they're gone.

"It's just cost-saving to be honest."

According to a Casey Council report, the Doveton outdoor pool was an "over provision of aquatic facilities and services" which lost \$190,000 from July 2019-March 2020.

The report stated that Doveton-Eumemmering's 12,347 population was too small to justify a \$40 million redevelopment including an indoor pool.

It instead recommended a \$4 million option for free water-play equipment in a park and social gathering space.

This would address an undersupply of "district level" parkland in Doveton, including potentially dog off-leash areas, vegetation, barbecues and play space.

"It is expected that there will be considerable community and stakeholder interest in the project, and some may have concerns regarding the proposal to remove the pool.

"It is proposed that Council actively engage with all community members to ensure their voices are heard and seek to develop a draft Master Plan that incorporates elements that will best serve the Doveton community."

The report also rejected a proposal from Doveton College and Our Place to relocate Doveton Library to the site, with a new 25-metre 'indoor-outdoor' pool, fitness centre, kitchen, allied health offices and meeting rooms.

However, there were sufficient council community facilities in Doveton, as well as "accessible" aquatic alternatives such as Dandenong Oasis, Casey ARC and several learn-to-swim programs, the report stated.

An outdoor pool at Noble Park Aquatic Centre was within 7 kilometres away.

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The Doveton Pool in the Park - the only outdoor pool in Casey - is listed as a locally significant heritage site.

It was built in 1968 after a spate of drownings in Eumemmerring Creek. Residents reportedly raised funds and lobbied Shire of Berwick for the pool.

The council raised extra funds for the project with a charge on industrial ratepayers.



The pool's waterplay and waterslides. 231126

Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

P17 12th JANUARY 2021 JOURNAL

Casey 'corruption' probe

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

One month.

That was the original scope of IBAC's examination into alleged corruption involving Casey councillors and developers starting November 2019.

In the end, the Operation Sandon inquiry grew to 45 days of hearings over 13 months.

It delivered blow after blow of jaw-dropping accusations at state and council political figures.

The epic grilling extended to more than 20 witnesses including state MPs, council administrators and political party fundraising chiefs.

On the witness stand were a string of former Casey mayors Geoff Ablett, Sam Aziz, Amanda Stapledon and Lorraine Wreford.

Former and current Labor state MPs Judith Graley, Jude Perera and Pauline Richards were interrogated.

At issue were their ties to developer John Woodman who stood to gain from several lucrative projects and rezonings in Casey such as Brompton Lodge estate, Hall Road H3 intersection, Pavilion Estate and Amendment C219 in Cranbourne West.

Mr Woodman was a major donor to Casey Council candidates as well as to Labor and Liberal coffers, the inquiry heard.

He gave \$150,000-plus to Labor's 2018 state election tilt and \$70,000 as a top-tier member of the Liberal's corporate fundraising arm in 2019.

He also dined for lunch with Premier Daniel Andrews at the Flower Drum restaurant in 2017 - though no planning matters were discussed, according to Mr Andrews.

More than \$90,000 was said to be spent on about 20 main and support candidates in the



Cranbourne MP Pauline Richards at the IBAC inquiry on 30 November.

2016 Casey Council election.

The campaign was allegedly organised by mayor Aziz, who denies he was aware of Mr Woodman's donations.

In November 2020, Mr Aziz finally took the stand after staying in Egypt with health issues for Operation Sandon's opening rounds.

Mr Aziz was accused by IBAC of failing to disclose more than \$1 million of "private benefits" received while a councillor.

IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich indicated that he was giving "due deliberation" into whether the payments were corrupt.

"What is clear is that you have in the most profound way failed to meet your integrity obligations as a councillor in terms of your obligations to disclose the private benefits that you were receiving."

An at-times combative Mr Aziz denied many of the inquiry's allegations including of lying under oath, saying it was "trashing my reputation".

"Sure I failed to declare a conflict of interest



Sam Aziz takes the oath, 16 November.

on a few occasions.

"But my intention was not malicious nor was it intended to profit from my job."

He was accused of taking \$660,000 of "benefits" from Mr Woodman and associated entities.

Mr Aziz said about \$600,000 was his own money being returned to him, plus interest from a "legitimate" mezzanine financial arrangement.

But more side-deals were alleged, involving parties with commercial relationships with Casey Council.

They included a purported loan of \$250,000 from property group director Andrew Nehme, whose Kuwait-sheik owned company bought the Casey Lifestyle Centre site from the council.

Mr Aziz was also allegedly paid about \$45,000 from developer Vlad Kostic, and a \$150,000 discount in shares from tech company Lodex, which pitched a digital payment platform to Casey Council.



Lorraine Wreford and Sam Aziz at Higher Ground cafe, Little Bourke Street, Melbourne on 25 October 2018.

Picture: IBAC

Tech firm IPsoft allegedly paid him \$30,800 soon after it signed a contract with Casey to trial an AI robot, Amelia.

Counsel assisting IBAC, Michael Tovey added there was also about \$250,000 cash that Mr Aziz "can't explain".

IBAC also alleged former mayor and Liberal state candidate Geoff Ablett received \$330,000 from Mr Woodman, as well as a donation to his 2014 state election campaign.

The benefits included part shares in racehorses, buying part of Cr Ablett's rural property and fees for looking after Mr Woodman's racehorses.

Another mayor Amanda Stapledon conceded she was "sloppy with my paperwork" in not declaring Mr Woodman's \$25,000 donation to her 2014 state election campaign.

IBAC is due to report on its investigation this year.

It is expected to also recommend ways to prevent corruption risks in the planning system.

Thanks for the coffees

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Casey ex-mayor Sam Aziz has denied being paid by a Narre Warren North developer under the guise of wedding presents, a wedding cake, bunches of flowers and coffees, an IBAC inquiry has alleged.

In tapped calls played at the Operation Sandon hearing on 1 December, Mr Aziz and his friend and Jim's Group ex-CEO 'Tino' Grossi spoke what IBAC alleges was "code" for payments of up to \$45,000 from developer Zlatimir Kostic.

Mr Aziz denied at the hearing that he "extorted" Mr Kostic who sought to halve lot sizes in the Kostic Boulevard estate about the same time in 2018.

The amendment led to an estimated \$14 million windfall for the developer, according to Casey planners, IBAC heard.

Mr Aziz said he raised the issue with council officers and then had "no more involvement".

"I don't extort money from anyone and, no, in this instance absolutely not.

"I had no financial arrangement on any level with Mr Kostic.

"I don't believe that Mr Grossi had anything to do with any of Mr Kostic's affairs with the City of Casey."

At IBAC, Mr Aziz said Mr Grossi "always spoke in code no matter what conversation we were having".

"Sometimes we would just have banter and it would go nowhere."

On 7 October 2018, Mr Aziz tells Mr Grossi that he asked someone for their "postal address for the invitation to the wedding" but the person seemed "pissed off at taking my call".

"I don't want any surprises come February, that's all," Mr Aziz says.

"We're doing everything we can from our end. In fact, more than what we can."



Sam Aziz arrives alone at Tino Grossi's residence, 22 February 2019.

Picture: IBAC

Mr Aziz says it's unfair for the person to accuse us of "delaying the production of the cake".

"I gave him, they gave him a full list of ingredients for this to come through."

Mr Grossi says: "At the end of the day, so long as he gives us a present for the wedding and everything.

"In a couple of weeks he's said he gonna give you the first present anyway cause he's pretty excited about you getting married.

"He's committed to coming to the wedding or it'll be worse for him."

At the hearing, Mr Aziz said he received a cash loan of about \$25,000 from Mr Grossi to help finalise payment for his wedding reception.

The loan was given at Mr Grossi's house, not recorded, and had not yet been paid back, Mr Aziz said.

It was offered "as a friend because he knew my financial circumstances were a bit tight".

"But I had no discussions whatsoever at any level with Mr Kostic about any kind of payment."

Mr Kostic attended Mr Aziz's wedding with a gift of between \$300 and \$400, Mr Aziz told the hearing.

In a series of calls with Mr Grossi, Mr Aziz discuss when he'll receive his "wedding present".

On 19 October 2018, Mr Grossi asks if Mr Aziz wanted to come over that night to "choose your partner's present" or at least to "have a look at half the present anyway".

At the hearing, Mr Aziz said he may have been referring to the \$25,000 loan for wedding preparations.

Mr Grossi may have been trying to conceal the payment from Mr Grossi's spouse, who

may not have been aware of the loan, Mr Aziz said.

Three days later, Mr Aziz deposited \$17,000 cash at a bank in Broadmeadows - which Mr Aziz told IBAC could have come from "other sources".

"There was cash going everywhere at the time because ... (of the) wedding."

IBAC alleged Mr Aziz deposited \$20,000 at a Roxburgh Park ATM on 22 February 2019 - three days after Casey councillors approved Mr Kostic's proposal.

The \$20,000 had nothing to do with Mr Kostic or Mr Grossi, Mr Aziz said.

"They could have been business income. They could have been Keno winnings again."

Mr Aziz also denied supplying Mr Kostic inside information from a meeting with Casey planning staff five days earlier.

Continued page 15



Leigh appears at the IBAC Operation Sandon inquiry on 3 December.



Inga Peulich was "expected" to hand a developer's briefing notes to then-Planning Minister Matthew Guy in 2014, IBAC heard.

Emails urged rezone push

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Former ex-MP Inga Peulich was expected to "go into bat" for a developer during a push to rezone Green Wedge land in Baxter in 2014, an IBAC hearing has been told.

At the time, developer Watsons was lobbying for 42 hectares of ex-farmland at Stotts Lane to be rezoned for housing.

According to an email chain in February 2014, Watsons director Heath Woodman - son of a witness John Woodman - prepared a note on the matter.

Woodman's Liberal lobbyist Geoff Leigh was to "officially" hand-deliver the notes onto Ms Peulich, who was to pass them to then Planning Minister Matthew Guy, IBAC heard.

IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich originally asked Mr Leigh about whether it was appropriate to request Ms Peulich to pass on the notes to Frankston councillors - which he corrected to mean "taking the matter

up" with the minister.

"And she may have or may not," Mr Leigh said.

"But the point was the minister said no."

Heath Woodman writes in an email to Mr Leigh requesting for Ms Peulich to make sure "we don't have a problem with authorisation" from Mr Guy.

"If you can reiterate this to her politely that would be great," Mr Woodman wrote.

Mr Leigh agreed "perhaps" with IBAC counsel assisting, Michael Tovey's assertion that Mr Woodman expected Ms Peulich to be "going into bat for him on that issue".

Mr Tovey asserted that Ms Peulich appeared "significantly involved" in Mr Leigh's lobbying strategy for Stotts Lane.

In a 2014 email, Mr Leigh sets out a detailed strategy based on discussions with "Inga" and his business partner and ALP lobbyist Philip Staindl.

"Will discuss with Inga a bit more tomorrow night."

Mr Tovey asserted: "Was it the case that she was significantly involved in assisting you with the strategy to be used in respect of the Stotts Lane?"

"Not necessarily so at all," Mr Leigh said.

"Because Inga and I, if you check with anybody you like to know, often have serious disagreements about things."

"With great respect, Mr Tovey, you're making it out like there's some sort of sinister game going on, and it's not."

"It's just asking for someone's advice."

Mr Leigh said there was an element of "bluff" in the email.

"Mrs Peulich probably thought it was - economically it was something worth pursuing based on her own community's benefit or whatever."

Mr Leigh described Ms Peulich as a "friend"

that he'd known for a long period.

IBAC heard that Mr Leigh and his then business partner and ALP lobbyist Philip Staindl were offered a success fee by Watsons, but were ultimately unsuccessful.

Watsons paid Mr Leigh and Mr Staindl \$500,000 each as a success fee after Brompton Lodge land was rezoned in Cranbourne in 2014.

In a final statement at IBAC, Mr Leigh said he didn't know why IBAC hadn't called Heath Woodman.

"If I'm accountable for any of this then so is he - if I've done anything inappropriate. I don't think we did."

Mr Leigh added that "we're all waiting for the one person that you haven't called who had dinner with John Woodman".

"And that's the Premier (Daniel Andrews)."

Thanks for the coffees

page 14.

On the night of the council resolution, Mr Aziz texted "congratulations" to Mr Kostic's planner Tom Radisich.

Meanwhile, in a tapped phone call, Mr Aziz told Mr Grossi he's concerned that "our friend" is a "reneege".

He asks if the friend will "deliver the mail we wanted him to deliver".

Later that evening, Mr Grossi tells Mr Aziz 'Zlat' came over and "couldn't stop thanking you for everything you've done for him. To help him get it through."

Next Friday, 'Zlat' was to come and bring Mr Grossi's wife a "bunch of flowers just to say thank you" for "all the coffee she's made for me".

"I guess I have to do the same because she probably made more coffees for me," Mr Aziz replies.

"Might bring you a little cake to celebrate."

Denying he received "bribe money", Mr Aziz told IBAC that his wife joined him at the Grossi home that night and would have known about the transaction if it happened.

They brought a bunch of flowers and a cake on "an occasion" that night.

IBAC tabled surveillance photos of Mr Aziz and his wife without his wife at the Grossi home after he received a text to "come over for a coffee after 7.30".

"I said she may have been with me," Mr Aziz said during the inquiry.

He may not have been on that occasion,

Platinum access for John Woodman

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Developer John Woodman gave \$50,000 through five different companies to the ALP's corporate fundraising arm Progressive Business just prior to the 2018 state election, an IBAC inquiry heard.

Mr Woodman is under IBAC investigation over alleged corrupt land deals in City of Casey, including a land-rezoning push in Cranbourne West involving Labor MPs and Casey councillors at the time.

He was a top-tiered 'Platinum member' of Progressive Business, which gave access to Government Ministers at a range of social events.

These included cocktail events, state budget breakfasts, "ministerial speed dating" business forums and \$1000-a-head Premier and Cabinet dinners.

As a high payer, Mr Woodman was entitled to seats for himself and his guests such as his planning consultant Megan Schutz at head tables with Premier Daniel Andrews or Treasurer Tim Pallas.

According to IBAC evidence, Mr Woodman gave more than \$150,000 to Labor's 2018 state election campaign.

At the inquiry on 7 December, Fleur Morales, Progressive Business's executive director up until September, was asked about Mr Woodman's \$50,000 donation before the 2018 election.

She agreed the "invoice splitting" was designed to avoid the \$13,400 cap for not disclosing the donation.

In 2017-'18, Mr Woodman's company Watsons donated \$25,000 to Progressive



Fleur Morales at the IBAC Operation Sandon inquiry on 7 December.

Business - which exceeded the cap and was declared to the AEC.

Since the 2018 election, the cap dropped to \$1000 - which coincided in a waning of interest from State ministers.

Progressive Business donated a "bulk amount" of \$1.143 million to the ALP in 2018-'19.

In the last five weeks before the state election, Progressive Business donated about \$500,000 to the state ALP.

Since the 2018 donor reforms, the association was forced to channel its "surpluses" federally. It could no longer raise funds for state elections, Ms Morales said.

There was now "less appetite or interest" from state Ministers to take part in Progressive Business, as well as a membership decline.

"I couldn't put a substantial program together," Ms Morales told IBAC.

When asked if ministers still wanted to liaise with business, "I certainly wasn't getting that impression."

After an Age article with allegations against Mr Woodman in October 2017, Ms Morales confirmed she "made the call" that he was not able to attend Progressive Business functions.

"I'm not sure I would have been explicit about the article but there were definite sensitivities."

"Mr Woodman would have decided not to attend. But more explicitly it would have been a directive from either the event with the minister or the Premier's office."

She said Ministers or the Premier's office would run through the guest list and say who couldn't attend "at short notice".

Woodman lobbyist Philip Staindl - a member and former director of Progressive Business - advises Mr Woodman in an email in 2017 that Mr Woodman wasn't welcome at "intimate" functions.

But boardroom lunches - which comprise Ministers and up to 20 guests - were "fine".

"The more people in a room, the safer people felt," Ms Morales said.

Sam stays overseas

By Brendan Rees

A key figure in an IBAC corruption investigation and a former Casey mayor has taken aim at his fellow councillors after they reluctantly granted a request for extended paid leave.

At a public council meeting on Tuesday 4 February, councillors voted for embattled councillor Sam Aziz a leave of absence until 31 March citing medical grounds.

Cr Aziz is one of the keys players in the Casey land scandal where it's alleged he pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars from a developer in exchange for favourable planning decisions.

Cr Aziz made a dash to Egypt last November before the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) conducted its hearings.

Casey mayor Susan Serey said at the meeting the decision to grant Cr Aziz had "not been made lightly," and "the situation is less than ideal".

She said council was bound by their obligations under the Local Government Act, which fell "far short from what I know our community expects.

"Councillors around the table feel the same way," Cr Serey said.

"Having considered the medical advice provided by Cr Aziz in support of his application, as well as the legal advice which has reiterated our obligation to not unreasonably refuse leave, believe we had no alternative to do otherwise.

"I want to stress that my councillor colleagues sitting around this table wouldn't have voted for this motion unless it had potentially other serious legal implications for the city of Casey and its ratepayers," Cr Serey said.

In a Facebook message, Cr Aziz hit back at the mayor, labelling her statement as "denigrating".

"Tonight council approved a further leave of absence for me after I submitted a detailed medical report explaining why I am not able to return to duty at this stage," Cr Aziz's statement said.

"That was a report and not just a 'medical certificate'.

"I have remained deliberately silent since this ordeal started in November last year, in what has become a media circus, and a savage feeding frenzy by certain fringe groups and keyboard warriors, who have always had an axe to grind," his statement read.

"It appears that sober and fair assessment has completely gone out the window, despite the undeniable success of the City of Casey, and our obvious record in delivering world class infrastructure and excellent services for our residents, supported by a very efficient and financially lean administration".

But Cr Aziz stated he had "every intention of returning to duty, and as soon as I can," adding councillors were aware of his medical condition which he says was diagnosed in May last year.

In the statement, he said he did finish the "work I have been doing overseas" and changed a return flight home from 8 December to 19 November last year, and had "paid a significant non-refundable fare difference to do so."

"However, I was prevented from boarding the aircraft at check-in due to a very serious cardiac health condition.

"The mayor was given documentary evidence of this flight change, as well as detailed medical evidence of the progress of my health condition," Cr Aziz stated.

Minister for Local Government Adem Somyurek said he expected councillors "to turn up to meetings and do their job".

"Under the Local Government Act, the office of a councillor becomes vacant if they are absent from four ordinary meetings of the council without obtaining leave," Mr Somyurek said.

This week, the State Government announced it would extend the tenure of Casey monitor Laurinda Gardner until 11 February.

Ms Garner was originally due to provide her report on councillor governance and decision-making to the Minister by 31 January, following her appointment on 27 November last year.

IBAC examinations will restart on 2 March and are open to the public.

Council 'take over' plot

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Ex-Casey mayor Sam Aziz has revealed an attempt with Jim's Mowing founder Jim Penman to "take over" Yarra Ranges Council with a like-minded group of councillors.

The aim was to install a predominantly Liberal "working majority" - "good people" to replicate the "success" of Casey Council, he told an IBAC inquiry on 16 November.

They would be community servants with skills in business and "good governance", Mr Aziz said.

Mr Aziz said he had been in talks with Mr Penman, Jim's Group chief executive Tino Grossi as well as members of Mr Aziz's "political circle" about the "project".

Mr Penman had expressed "great frustration" about Yarra Ranges councillors, Mr Aziz said.

Counsel assisting IBAC, Michael Tovey, asked if Mr Aziz wanted to export a "model of corruption" from Casey to Yarra Ranges.

Mr Aziz, who is under investigation over allegedly corrupt land deals at the Operation Sandon inquiry, dismissed the "ridiculous question".

"There's no corruption or behaviour traits, as you describe, Mr Tovey, in relation to Casey Council."

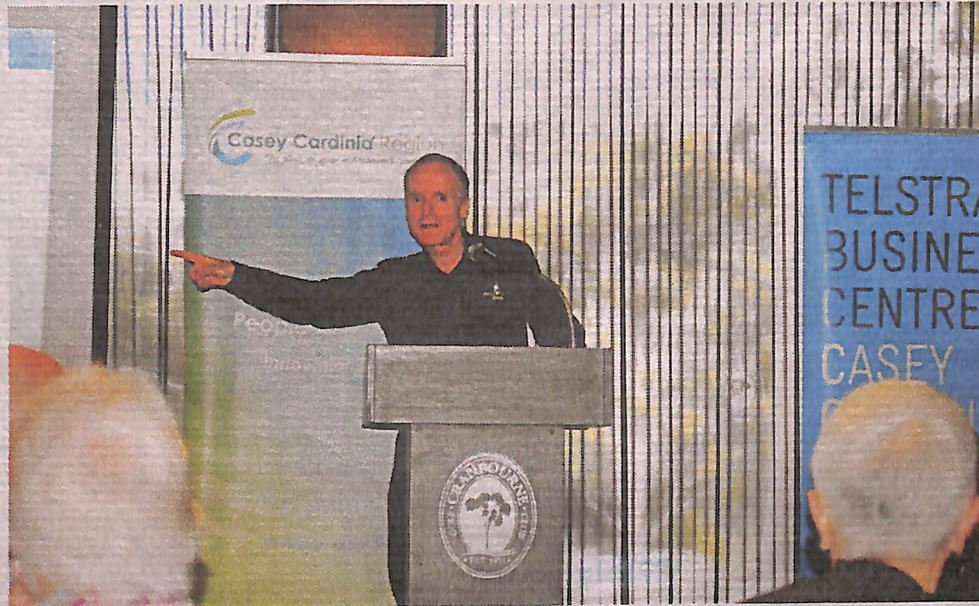
It achieved a "majority of hard-working individuals" delivering "one of the best local governments this country has ever seen", he said.

"Our financial position speaks for it in terms of the council budget.

"The achievements we've made speaks for it, and I was trying to deliver that model to another council.

"As it turned out that was a very short-lived aspiration because of the commencement of the IBAC inquiry."

Mr Aziz said he'd become an "expert" in getting candidates elected onto council. He dis-



Jim Penman, founder of Jim's Group, had consulted with Casey ex-mayor Sam Aziz on taking over Yarra Ranges Council, IBAC heard.

cussed with former Casey mayor Janet Halsall with helping the Yarra Ranges push.

In the 2016 Casey council election, Mr Aziz enlisted Ms Halsall as campaign manager for about 20 candidates that "we wanted to support".

He said he had no knowledge about developer John Woodman funding their campaigns. Substantial fundraisers had been held for candidates, including Cr Aziz himself.

The inquiry had earlier heard Mr Woodman bankrolled the effort with between \$50,000-\$98,000.

False invoices for the campaign were allegedly funnelled through Ms Halsall's mattress shop.

Mr Aziz told the inquiry that he may have

spoken to Mr Woodman and Woodman lobbyist Lorraine Wreford.

But they weren't "decision makers" in Mr Aziz's strategy.

Ms Wreford was told to "keep her nose out", Mr Aziz said.

According to Ms Wreford, Mr Aziz pitched the scheme to Mr Woodman over lunch at a Chinese restaurant in Dandenong.

Ms Wreford said her own part was to ensure "invoices got paid, nothing else".

Mr Aziz had pitched the idea on the basis of helping candidates "who don't have the means to run for council", Ms Wreford said.

"If you have a ward in the City of Casey, it's almost as big as a state electorate.



Sam Aziz at the IBAC hearing on 16 November.

"So to actually financially fund a campaign to even put one brochure out is quite expensive."

Mr Aziz's campaign may not have received any of the Woodman funding, she told the inquiry.

Mr Woodman had told the inquiry that he paid about \$50,000.

Prior to the election, candidates were rated by Mr Woodman's associates as either "friendly", opponents or unknown in their attitude towards Amendment C219.

The amendment was proposed to rezone a large tract of industrial land in Cranbourne West to residential use - a push that was being driven by Mr Woodman and developer Leighton.

Questionable conduct: IBAC's Casey inquiry resumes

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

The IBAC inquiry into alleged corruption involving Casey councillors and property developers is set to resume on Monday 9 November.

The Operation Sandon public hearings had been adjourned in March due to Covid-19 health concerns.

It is not clear whether IBAC will examine former Casey mayor Sam Aziz, who recently returned to Australia from Egypt.

The inquiry alleged that Mr Aziz and another former mayor Geoff Ablett were involved in \$1.2 million of transactions with property developer John Woodman.

So far, Casey councillors including Mr Ablett, Amanda Stapledon, Susan Serey, Gary Rowe and Rosalie Crestani have been examined at the hearings.



Former mayor and state MP Lorraine Wreford - who was a lobbyist for Mr Woodman - was also examined.

The next six weeks of hearings will feature remote participation by witnesses and be publicly streamed on IBAC's website in line with Chief Health Officer directions.

IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich said the next round of hearings will examine ways to improve the transparency and integrity of Victoria's planning system.

"These hearings will explore the ramifications of behaviours exposed in our earlier examination of the conduct of some City of Casey councillors, and assess the adequacy of Victoria's current systems and controls for safeguarding the integrity of the state's planning processes."

Commissioner Redlich said the investigation raised concerns about "the relationship between individuals involved in planning and property development" in parts of Victoria beyond Casey.

"IBAC will call a range of further witnesses to enable us to properly examine these concerns and their impact across the various levels of Victoria's planning and property development system."

The hearing's final week will call expert witnesses in planning, campaign donations, lobbying and integrity standards at state and

local government levels.

"This final phase of the public hearings will explore opportunities to strengthen policies, systems and practices to prevent future corruption risks," Commissioner Redlich said.

Operation Sandon public hearings started in November 2019 in which serious corruption allegations involving some Casey councillors and developers were aired.

It led to the installation of a Municipal Monitor Laurinda Gardner at the council.

Following a report by Ms Gardner, Casey councillors were sacked by the State Government in February.

The council will be run by administrators until councillor elections in 2024.

Anyone with relevant information can contact www.ibac.vic.gov.au/report or 1300 735 135.

IBAC HEARING

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Developer's 'puppets'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A property developer allegedly paid cash to Casey councillors and treated them as his "puppets" as part of a campaign to rezone Cranbourne West land, an anti-corruption hearing has heard.

It was alleged that the developer John Woodman paid \$80,000 in cash deposits to Cr Sam Aziz and \$17,500 to Cr Geoff Ablett in the lead-up to Amendment C219 deliberations in 2014, the IBAC Operation Sandon hearings on 19 November was told.

In response, Mr Woodman said Cr Ablett's payments were a "coincidence" and didn't know of the payments to Cr Aziz.

Mr Woodman and his associates had been lobbying councillors to rezone the land from industrial to residential - a move that would create a windfall profit of tens of millions of dollars.

On 3 February 2014, Mr Woodman sent a 'briefing note' of arguments for the rezoning in an email to Crs Aziz, Ablett and Amanda Stapledon's private email accounts.

The next day, Cr Aziz introduced an urgent motion for Amendment C219 during a closed council meeting.

"You would forgive people who have read the document we've just been looking at as thinking that you were treating councillors just like puppets," counsel assisting Michael Tovey told Mr Woodman.

Mr Woodman denied Mr Tovey's allegation that it was because "Mr Aziz was in your pocket and you considered Mr Ablett to be in your pocket and you thought Ms Stapledon would at least follow them".

"I'm attempting to outline to them the reason why the Cranbourne West land zoned industrial should be changed to residential," Mr Woodman said.



Casey councillor Geoff Ablett's arrangements with developer John Woodman are being examined by IBAC.

"Sir, this is the first time I have ever witnessed a document that I have prepared where I have suggested a motion."

He agreed that such a move was "improper".

Commissioner Robert Redlich foreshadowed that the 'briefing note' fitted the pattern of later correspondence sent to councillors by other persons on Mr Woodman's behalf.

Mr Woodman was confronted with evidence he'd deposited \$5000 cash under a false name into Cr Ablett's account in late 2013.

"I cannot recall doing that, sir," Mr Woodman said.

"No, I have no explanation for that."

Also on day two of the hearings, Mr Woodman defended \$5500 monthly payments to the



Three-time Casey mayor Sam Aziz has come under fire for his relationship with developer John Woodman.

Save Cranbourne West Residents Action Group (SCWRAG) leader Ray Walker.

SCWRAG leader Mr Walker was purportedly hired to drive around noting real estate signs on property, to provide "feedback" on real estate sales in the region.

Mr Woodman denied that the payments presented a conflict of interest for Mr Walker, whose group supported the developer Leighton's wishes.

The IBAC investigation will focus on corruption involving Casey councillors and property developers, particularly three planning issues.

They are the Amendment C219 rezoning of land in Cranbourne West, the H3 intersection in Hall Road, Cranbourne West, and the Pavilion Estate.

The hearings continue for an expected three weeks.

Aziz health scare under IBAC probing

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Casey ex-mayor Sam Aziz has had a medical scare while under heavy questioning at an IBAC inquiry over fresh claims of an alleged side-deal with a council contractor.

The inquiry's live-stream broadcast - on 15 minutes delay - was shut down suddenly early in the afternoon session on Tuesday 24 November.

On resumption shortly after 3pm, Mr Aziz's screen was blank as IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich announced that the hearings would be adjourned.

Mr Redlich said Mr Aziz had indicated that he'd suffered heartburn and wanted to resume.

But given Mr Aziz's medical history, the hearings wouldn't resume until the witness was granted medical clearance, Mr Redlich said.

Prior to the scare, Mr Aziz was coming to the end of his sixth and final day of gruelling evidence at the anti-corruption inquiry.

Mr Redlich had just taken issue with Mr Aziz's denials of a perceived conflict of interest over artificial-intelligence company IPsoft's contract negotiations with Casey Council.

Mr Aziz had introduced IPsoft to Casey officers and moved motions to support their interests. At the same time, he was allegedly negotiating a personal financial side-deal, the IBAC hearing heard.

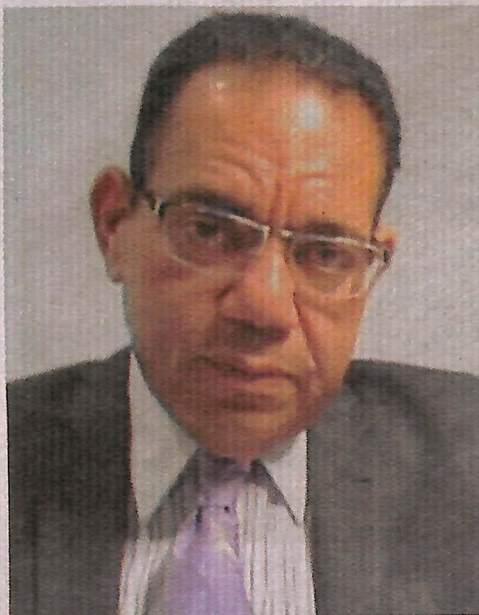
IPsoft paid Mr Aziz \$30,800 soon after Casey paid \$42,705 to trial IPsoft's AI robot, Amelia, the IBAC inquiry heard.

On covert phone recordings in November 2018, Mr Aziz was heard requesting the side-deal no longer be termed a 'referring agreement'.

He says it should be a "generic consulting agreement that talks broadly about the local government sector".

He told IPsoft senior sales executive Hany Ayad that he'd sign his contract after Casey awarded the Amelia contract.

Mr Ayad asks Mr Aziz if IPsoft was successful, "would we still contract directly with Casey,



Sam Aziz at the IBAC hearing, shortly before a medical episode on 24 November.

or with you, and you contract with Casey?"

"You contract directly with Casey," Mr Aziz says.

"I basically have nothing to do with it."

Mr Aziz says he has to inform Casey's chief executive of the deal. Otherwise it should be kept "confidential - just strictly between you and I".

At the IBAC inquiry, Mr Aziz said the agreement was designed to avoid a conflict of interest.

He denied there was a "kickback".

"The work they wanted me to do was totally unrelated to the City of Casey."

Counsel assisting IBAC, Michael Tovey accused him of wanting to amend the agreement so it wasn't so obviously linked to City of Casey's contract.

"All these other concepts you're talking about is just stuff you're making up to make

the intolerable marginally tolerable, isn't it Mr Aziz?"

"I disagree entirely," Mr Aziz said.

Mr Tovey noted at that stage Mr Aziz's fee appeared unknown.

"So you're saying to him - we can't work out how much he has to pay you until we know how much Casey Council is paying him."

Mr Aziz said they were waiting to finalise his consulting fee because the Casey pilot would be modelled in other environments. They didn't yet know the cost of the trial.

Mr Aziz said a Casey's governance director advised he didn't have a conflict of interest because the IPsoft contract decision was being made by a council officer.

"The advice I was giving them wasn't anything to do with the City of Casey."

Mr Redlich told Mr Aziz that the "flaw in your thinking" was that if there was no contract and only pre-contractual discussions, then there was no conflict of interest.

"Do you not see that by these machinations of yours you were simply playing with the rules to avoid disclosure of the fact that a significant contract that is about to be entered into with the council is being made at a time when you, a prime mover in persuading the council and the council officers to adopt this proposal, are in the course of securing for yourself a significant financial benefit?"

A second tapped phone call was about to be played when Mr Redlich asked if Mr Aziz was "feeling all right".

"No, Commissioner, I'm not. I'm not at the moment."

Mr Redlich adjourned, as he requested that Mr Aziz get assistance.

Earlier that day, Mr Aziz told the inquiry that he'd suffered heart failure while on a council-funded trip to address an IPsoft artificial intelligence summit in New York in May 2018.

He was hospitalised then for five days, and missed the summit, Mr Aziz said.

At the time, Casey was negotiating with IPsoft about the Amelia pilot.

Aziz rebutts IBAC 'ratbag con' claim

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Jim's Mowing founder Jim Penman paid more than \$12,000 to Casey ex-mayor Sam Aziz to help 'take over' Yarra Ranges Council, IBAC has heard.

Mr Aziz told the Operation Sandon inquiry on 24 November that he was on a \$1000-plus-GST-a-month retainer for more than a year to advise on installing a like-minded group of councillors in Casey in 2020.

Mr Penman was happy to spend between \$80,000-\$100,000 on the election campaign, Mr Aziz told the inquiry.

"I said to him that the best way to go ... is for good quality candidates to actually undertake their own fundraising," Mr Aziz said.

"That way they've got a stake in the campaign."

Mr Aziz restated that he wasn't aware of allegedly corrupt developer John Woodman paying about \$90,000 towards Mr Aziz's centrally-managed election campaign for about 20 candidates in Casey in 2016.

He also denied that the candidates were chosen for their perceived support of Mr Woodman's push to rezone industrial land in Cranbourne West - otherwise known as Amendment C219.

Mr Aziz couldn't recall whether he told the proposed Yarra Ranges campaign manager Janet Halsall that Mr Penman would finance the entire campaign like "we've had campaigns in Casey".

"It was different with Mr Penman because he was looking at putting wholesale funds up to support a number of candidates," he told the inquiry.

"But when it came to Casey, because the

campaigns were hotly contested, I focused on the strategy.

"So however the funds were raised was not something that I got involved in."

Mr Aziz had told the inquiry he was an "expert" in getting candidates elected to council.

He was approached by Mr Penman who was "very frustrated" with the council's administration, he said.

He was unaware at the time of Mr Penman's plans for a sporting complex reportedly being rebuffed by Yarra Ranges Council.

At the inquiry, Mr Aziz sought to correct Mr Penman's reported claims about him in an "absolutely abhorrent" media interview.

"I don't know how he could get the impression that I was a disgusting ratbag who conned him when that was never the nature of our interactions," Mr Aziz said.

"I've actually obliged with everything he asked me to do."

He denied Mr Penman's allegation that Mr Aziz was paid \$1000-a-week. The retainer was \$1000-a-month plus GST.

Mr Aziz's "assignment" was interrupted by an overseas travel break. "I stopped billing him from that point forward".

Mr Penman wanted to consult with Mr Aziz on other projects such as a "Jim's Bank", and invited him on the Jim's Group board, Mr Aziz told the inquiry.

"He was clearly happy with the work and services I was providing him."

Mr Aziz had bought a "family franchise" from Jim's Group. He later "got out" of it because the business model "wasn't working for us".

The pair were introduced by Mr Aziz's

"friend" and then Jim's Group chief executive Tino Grossi.

In 2016, Mr Aziz instigated an election campaign to elect like-minded councillors on Casey Council.

He enlisted Casey ex-mayor Janet Halsall to manage the re-election campaigns of Mr Aziz, Geoff Ablett, Damien Rosario, Wayne Smith and Amanda Stapledon, he said.

A new candidate - whose name has been suppressed by the inquiry - was also successfully elected.

Mr Woodman and Ms Wreford have told IBAC that Mr Woodman bankrolled the Casey election campaign with between \$50,000 and \$90,000.

Candidates were allegedly supported on whether they were "friendly" towards Mr Woodman's push for Amendment C219.

False invoices for the campaign were allegedly funnelled through Ms Halsall's mattress shop.

According to Ms Wreford, Mr Aziz pitched the scheme to Mr Woodman over lunch at a Chinese restaurant in Dandenong.

Mr Aziz told IBAC that Mr Woodman and Ms Wreford weren't "decision makers" on the campaign.

"I supported people that Mr Woodman didn't even know were coming forward to contest the election.

"He was not consulted about the candidates."

Mr Aziz said he organised "strategy and policy that they put forward" and oversaw pamphlet designs.

Every candidate was responsible for their own campaign expenses. All held a fundraiser, he said.

Signs of SCWRAG's funding were clear

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Ex-Cranbourne MP Jude Perera revealed he knew at an early stage that Save Cranbourne West Residents Action Group (SCWRAG) was being sponsored by developer John Woodman.

Mr Perera says he still submitted SCWRAG's purported petitions and documents to Planning Minister Richard Wynne and Casey Council, he told an IBAC hearing on 26 November.

In 2015, Mr Wynne visited industrial land which Mr Woodman and SCWRAG are lobbying to rezone for housing.

The minister made a "casual comment" that the residents group in support for rezoning Cranbourne West land had "erected such big posters", Mr Perera told IBAC.

"I can vaguely remember his making a mockery of that because ... we both hold the view that residents may not fund something like that."

Mr Perera agreed that the link between SCWRAG and Mr Woodman's company Watsons and his planning consultant Megan Schutz was known.

"In conversation we both - the minister and myself both understood it was the case."

IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich noted that Mr Wynne seemed "alive to the risk that that might have come via the developers".

Mr Perera said he had no difficulty submitting SCWRAG's documents after that realisation.

"One thing is the issue and the process is a different thing.

"The process of, you know, hyping up was the role of the developer, but the core issue



SCWRAG's president Ray Walker in 2015. 146818 Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

lies with the local residents about the air pollution.

"As a human being I would not like to live next to an industrial estate."

In an email by Ms Schutz, she relays details about Mr Wynne's private conversation with Mr Perera during the visit.

Her source is allegedly Mr Perera's electorate officer Sammy Argiriou.

"Sammy says that the Minister asked about the signs and said that clearly it had not been the community who paid for them.

"Sammy was unwilling to provide his direct view to me on whether he thought the minister supported the rezoning.

"But then pretty much said that his office would win on this matter ... It is about what the local community wants."

At the inquiry, Mr Perera said he was unaware of Mr Argiriou's disclosure. He agreed it was inappropriate.

IBAC has alleged that SCWRAG was funded \$193,000 by Mr Woodman's company Wat-

sons and Ms Schutz's firm Schutz Consulting.

Ms Schutz told IBAC in March 2020 that State Government ministers would have known the connection between SCWRAG and Mr Woodman.

"Community groups can't pay for huge signs to be erected..."

"There was such a huge amount of money that was spent resourcing the community group, the minister must have known that the community group and the developers' interests were aligned.

"I don't think that was hidden."

Ms Schutz helped set up SCWRAG.

She was financed to do so by another developer Leighton Properties, which owned the land and would gain a windfall from the rezoning.

Mr Woodman was offered a \$2 million success fee.

Ms Schutz told IBAC "we were using the community as a basis for my client's commercial interests".

IBAC was told of Ms Schutz helping Mr Walker write a letter to lobby Casey councillors as part of a "political planning strategy". It was boosted by traffic reports paid for by Watsons.

Developers had also paid for a barrister to give advice to SCWRAG on the legality of a Casey Council motion on Hall Road, as well as about \$30,000 for a lawyer to represent the group at a Planning Panels Victoria hearing.

Mr Walker - as well as his wife Valerie - was being allegedly paid monthly retainers.

The IBAC Operation Sandon hearing into alleged corrupt land deals involving developers, councillors and MPs continues.

IBAC budget 'cuts' not adding up

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A fiery political row erupted over funding for the state's Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission (IBAC).

Opposition Leader Michael O'Brien told Parliament on 25 November that IBAC's funding had been slashed by \$4.4 million in the 2020-'21 state budget.

"IBAC is currently conducting major investigations into branch-stacking by Labor Party MPs, the dealings of Labor donor John Woodman and your government's association with the United Firefighters Union.

"Premier, is it a mere coincidence that the year IBAC is investigating the Labor Party is the same year it is having its budget slashed?"

Premier Daniel Andrews said IBAC had received "\$49 million and indexation for each of the out years - exactly what IBAC sought".

The future funding included IBAC keeping

its unspent funds from previous years, Mr Andrews said.

"You are wrong," he told Mr O'Brien.

"I say to you again: you are not much good at writing budgets, and you are no better at reading them."

Mr Andrews said Mr O'Brien omitted the "members of the Liberal Party who were bribed, it would seem" investigated by IBAC.

The commission is investigating Casey councillors, state Labor MPs and developers over alleged corrupt land deals as part of Operation Sandon.

Later, shadow Special Minister of State John Wells doubled down.

"Not only has Daniel Andrews cut IBAC's funding, now he's lying about it."

A State Government spokesperson said IBAC was receiving an extra \$27.1 million - a 20 per cent rise - over four years.

It was continuing to ensure IBAC had the resources needed to "investigate corrupt conduct and fulfill its statutory obligations".

"The additional funding will allow IBAC to expand its important work - and to assist with the agency's transition to budgetary independence."

A month before the budget, IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich stated IBAC faced serious constraints due to its "current, perilous budgetary position".

Its core funding had been "largely static" since it was founded eight years ago, despite a significantly growing workload.

"IBAC cannot investigate a significant number of complaints of serious misconduct which may warrant our investigation.

"Exposing and preventing corruption cannot be adequately done on a static, inadequate budget."

Woodman sells up

By Brendan Rees

A property developer who is at the centre of an anti-corruption probe involving alleged dealings with ex-Casey councillors has sold his planning company to his son.

John Woodman's Mornington-based development consultancy Watsons Pty Ltd will close its doors after selling the business to a new company owned by Mr Woodman's son, Heath Woodman.

Mr Woodman is at the centre of an Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission (IBAC) inquiry into alleged dealings with councillors at Casey Council with former mayor Sam Aziz being a 'person of interest'.

CEO of Watsons David Newman confirmed the sale, saying the new company Marshal Pty Ltd will have "no links" to Mr Woodman, nor will he have an operational role.

"He will not be a director or any sort of owner of the new entity," Mr Newman said. "He will derive no income from the new company and he will have no control or influence over the new company. I cannot be clearer than that."

Mr Newman, who will soon be CEO of Marshal, said Watsons would cease operation from 30 September, with the change being "warmly welcomed" by clients and staff.

"This is a fresh start with a new direction and a new set of organisational values and behaviours and will place even greater emphasis on professionalism and accountability," Mr Newman said.

He said Heath Woodman was an "independent successful businessman in his own right" and it was "important to note the sale is taking place on commercial terms for fair market value after a thorough valuation process".

The new company will be based at the company's St Kilda Road office with staff working from home since the Covid-19 pandemic started, he said.

"We are embracing working from home in the future also, which is particularly good for our many staff who live on the Peninsula. The Watsons Mornington office has now closed.

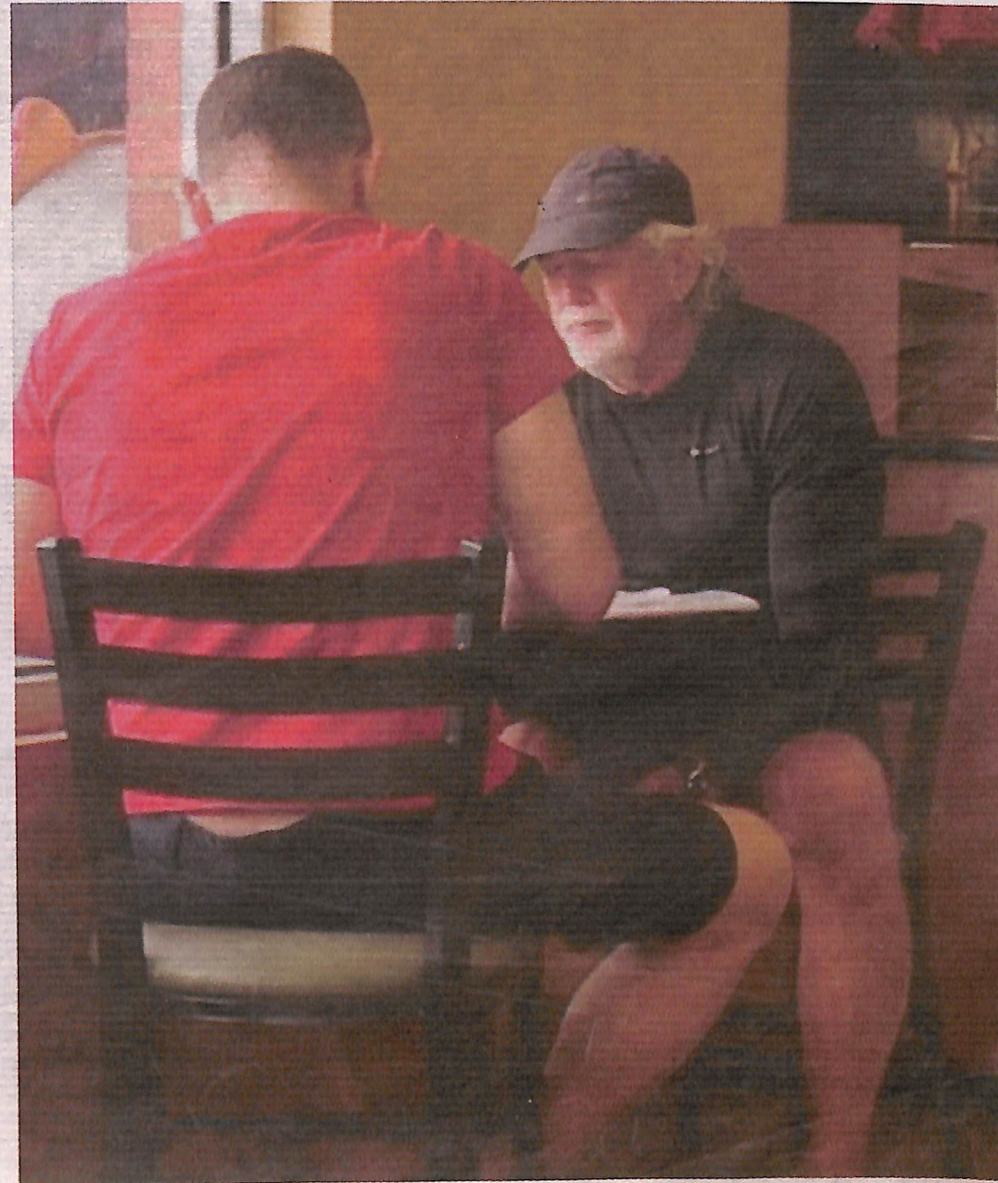
Mr Newman reassured the change was not a restructure, but a brand new business with an emphasis on greenfield sites.

"Obviously this has been a challenging time for the staff and now is the right time for a fresh start. The new business indicates we want to move forward and that means moving forward without John Woodman and with a whole new positive business plan and set of processes."

Mr Woodman bought Watsons in the 1990s and acquired several 'notches on the belt' including the \$650 million Martha Cove development at Mt Martha.

Meanwhile, a key figure in the IBAC inquiry is former Casey mayor Sam Aziz who returned to Australia in August after 10 months of being overseas. He remains in hospital in Sydney.

An IBAC spokesperson said public hearings will be resumed as soon as practical, in line with the directions of the Chief Health Officer.



Sam Aziz and John Woodman in a Subway outlet in Skye.

Donor welcome

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Premier Daniel Andrews offered to call property developer John Woodman to invite him back to Labor fundraisers after reports of alleged corruption emerged, an IBAC inquiry has heard.

The inquiry heard of his "quick chat" with Mr Woodman about a development at an ALP dinner in 2015 as well as him "waxing lyrical" about Mr Woodman's financial support for the ALP.

According to IBAC evidence, Mr Woodman gave more than \$150,000 to Labor's 2018 state election campaign.

Mr Andrews has distanced himself from Mr Woodman, who is the subject of the corruption inquiry into land deals, Casey councillors and state MPs.

The Premier has declared a Flower Drum restaurant lunch with Mr Woodman, as well as a 2002 election donation but denied talking to him about property matters.

In a phone intercept of Mr Woodman, his hired ALP lobbyist Philip Staindl told of chatting with "the boss" - Mr Andrews - at a function in March 2019.

In Mr Staindl's words, the Premier said that Mr Woodman was "more than welcome to come back" to ALP's Progressive Business events.

Mr Andrews offered to give Mr Woodman a call to say "things are OK but also to thank you for your support", Mr Staindl said.

"He started waxing lyrical about how much you've given to the party.

"He made a note to call you and got me to send your number to him via SMS so I'm sur-

prised that you haven't heard from him."

Mr Staindl describes Mr Andrews as describing an Age reporter as a "right a***hole" and the government having to shelve a proposed land rezoning C219 due to the reporter's story in the last weeks of the 2018 state election.

"He said 'And fancy trying to make the City of Casey out to be the sanctimonious organisation'."

Mr Staindl told IBAC that may be "some embellishment" in his narration.

He couldn't recall the encounter with "absolute certainty" because he'd had a "few glasses of wine" at the function.

"The general tenor was accurate," Mr Staindl replied.

"There may have been a little bit of spice put in it."

In an IBAC phone tap on October 2018, Mr Woodman referred to going to Mr Andrews if we "get pushed back".

"I know that I said I wouldn't go to the boss but if we get pushed back on this I'll go to the top," Mr Woodman said.

"He had certainly met the Premier on a few occasions," Mr Staindl told the inquiry.

"But I would not agree that there would be an expectation that he would intervene based on his financial support.

"He may do it by way of advocacy, but I don't think there's a direct correlation there."

In four consecutive months, Mr Staindl discussed a Point Cook development called Aviators Field with "various people" in the Premier's office and local MP and minister Jill Hennessey, the inquiry heard.

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Cash 'eased' MP access

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

The joke was apparently on a journalist inquiring about an ALP election fundraiser staged by property developer John Woodman.

In a secretly taped conversation played at an IBAC hearing, Mr Woodman and his hired ALP lobbyist Philip Staindl discuss an upcoming "negative" article in *The Age* on the eve of the 2018 state election.

The story was about to reveal the 2014 fundraiser at Crown Casino for MPs Martin Pakula, Judith Graley and Jude Perera, the IBAC Operation Stanton inquiry is told.

"The imputation (the journalist) is trying to create is that ... the function is to raise funds for the South East MPs, that is giving you undue access and influence to them," Mr Staindl says.

"Yeah, which is exactly right," Mr Woodman replies.

The pair laugh before Mr Woodman adds: "Well I wouldn't say undue access."

In the covert tapes heard by IBAC, Mr Staindl tells Mr Woodman of how he "claimed ignorance" to the journalist.

He mentioned Mr Woodman's company Watsons bought four tickets to the event - but didn't tell the reporter that associates Wolfdene and Schutz Consulting may have both bought four, he says.

Villawood Properties executive director Tony Johnson was also at the event, he says.

Mr Woodman struggles to recall - remembering a fundraiser that auctioned off a helicopter ride.

"Geeze we've run so many of these things," he says.

"Yeah I know, I felt like saying ... 'F***. You've only found out about one?'" Mr Staindl says.

"Ha, ha, yeah, what about the other twenty?" Mr Woodman says, laughing.



John Woodman joked that he hosted election fundraisers for MPs to gain "undue access".

Mr Staindl tells Mr Woodman that the story wouldn't have "leaked" if not for then-Cranbourne MP Mr Perera "spilling the beans".

"Jude just spilled his guts."

An ALP life member, Mr Staindl tells Mr Woodman he spoke to Mr Pakula the night before.

"The reason I spoke to (the journalist) was because Pakula had told him it wasn't a Watsons function, it was a Staindl function and I'm happy to wear that," Mr Staindl says.

"So make sure we hold to that line because that particular function was just a Watsons function."

At the IBAC hearing on 10 November, Mr Staindl said Mr Pakula was a "political acquaintance" rather than friend.

Mr Staindl agreed he misled the journalist. He was trying to "minimize the political fallout" from a "potentially damaging story", he said.

"You were talking about lying, weren't you," counsel assisting the inquiry, Michael Tovey, said.

"I was putting a particular slant on the story," Mr Staindl said.



Former Cranbourne MP Jude Perera "spilled his guts" to a reporter, an IBAC inquiry hears.

Mr Tovey said Mr Woodman was laughing at the "exactly right" line because "why am I paying all this money if I'm not getting undue access?"

Mr Staindl said he didn't "entirely" agree.

"People like Martin Pakula are smart enough and sensible enough to be able to balance different influences on them in making a decision, and as a senior minister I couldn't imagine him being persuaded or swayed in a particular direction by virtue of someone who has contributed money to candidates or MPs associated with him."

Mr Tovey said "we're talking about access, we're talking about the opportunity to persuade".

"Possibly," Mr Staindl said.

"At the end of the day, if a minister doesn't want to see someone, they won't."

The IBAC inquiry is investigating allegedly corrupt dealings involving Mr Woodman and Casey councillors.

It is also exploring Mr Woodman's links with State Government Ministers and South East MPs.



Judith Graley



Martin Pakula's 2014 election campaign received funds from a developer-staged event at Crown Casino.

The inquiry heard that Mr Woodman donated more than \$150,000 to Labor ahead of the 2018 election, including \$20,000 to the successful Cranbourne candidate Pauline Richards and \$20,380 to then-Attorney General and Keysborough MP Martin Pakula.

Mr Pakula has disputed the size of the donation.

The hearings are ongoing.

Dining probe

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Developer John Woodman spent more than \$10,000 to dine privately with Premier Daniel Andrews in in the top-end Flower Drum restaurant in 2017, an IBAC inquiry has heard.

Mr Woodman successfully bid \$8500 for the prize at an auction at a fundraising dinner for ALP Greek MPs in 2016. He then paid for a private room and lunch for seven at the Flower Drum on 13 September 2017.

At the table were Mr Andrews, Mr Andrews' adviser, South-East Metropolitan MP Lee Talarinis as well as Mr Woodman and his team including Mr Woodman's hired ALP lobbyist Philip Staindl.

Counsel assisting the Operation Sardon inquiry, Michael Tovey, asked "what was in it for Mr Woodman?" for his \$10,000-plus investment.

"I think he's put it down to relationship building and continuing on his support," Mr Staindl told the hearing.

At the time, Mr Woodman was seeking the rezoning of Cranbourne West industrial land for housing - also known as Amendment C219.

But Mr Staindl insisted that Mr Woodman's specific planning projects were not talked about over lunch.

"There was a specific recommendation by me, and one which he carried out, not to discuss any planning related matter over that lunch," Mr Staindl said. "I didn't think it was appropriate. It may have placed the Premier in an awkward position. It would have detracted from the social value of (the lunch). Because the event was purchased at a fundraising night the optics wouldn't have been good."

However, Mr Woodman's "notion of housing affordability" was one of the subjects discussed, Mr Staindl said.

About a month later, politicians felt a "sense of unease" being seen with Mr Woodman when

The Age reported he was doing planning work for the Madafferri family in Keysborough.

Mr Tovey read aloud excerpts from an email by Mr Staindl stating Mr Woodman should keep a "low profile".

"Intimate events" like the Flower Drum with "you know who" were off the schedule till the end of the year, Mr Staindl allegedly wrote.

"The nervous nellyes in the Premier's office" didn't want a close association with "anyone named Madafferri".

In 2019, Mr Andrews defended a 2002 donation from Mr Woodman as well as the lunch.

At the time, Mr Andrews said the \$2500 donation to his 2002 state election campaign was "declared as it should have been at the time - 17 years ago."

He said the lunch in 2017 was "principally" about sponsoring a charity golf day.

"He's never raised active planning matters with me otherwise I would have stood up and left."

The Sandhurst Club "Golf for Cribs" Premier's Monash Children's Hospital Golf Day on 17 November, 2017 was sponsored by Mr Woodman's company Watsons.

It raised "in the order of \$400,000" for Monash Children's, Mr Andrews said.

Mr Talarinis was at the lunch due to being the co-ordinator of the Greek MPs dinner the year before, Mr Staindl told the inquiry.

"I think Mr Woodman had established a relationship with Mr Talarinis independent of me.

"It was probably through the Greek MPs' function, because Talarinis coordinated that function."

Mr Talarinis used to be based in an electorate office with Mr Andrews and recently retired MP Gavin Jennings in Noble Park, Mr Staindl said.

Donor 'welcomed' by ALP

From page 1

In September 2015, Mr Staindl attended the "Sandbelt MPs dinner" with Mr Woodman to speak to Mr Andrews.

"I think just as the Premier was departing Mr Woodman shook his hand, said, 'Nice to see you, and I'm having ... I've got some frustrations with Aviators Field,' Mr Staindl told the inquiry.

"So it wasn't a formal meeting but, yes, it was a quick chat about it."

An email by Mr Staindl at the time suggests they handed a briefing "note" to Mr Andrews at the time.

Mr Staindl told the inquiry he was likely to have updated the Premier at a function in late 2015.

Mr Staindl agreed that if there was one person who could "do something about the impasse" it was the Premier.

"Whether or not anything is then acted upon from there is entirely a matter for the Premier."

Mr Staindl had said developers weren't supposed to raise specific development issues with ministers at functions.

But in this case, there was a level of "frustration" that the process was "stymied by bureaucracy".

According to an email by Mr Staindl, a copy of the briefing note was also to be handed to someone who would "find it interesting".

He agreed that the person could be former Labor MP Theo Theophanous who was appointed as a director of the Metropolitan Planning Authority.

At a private meeting with Mr Staindl at the time, Mr Theophanous "very, very quickly indicated that he's not there to consider individual applications", Mr Staindl told IBAC.

Mr Staindl conceded the MPA was a

"key submitter" to the independent planning panel that recommended Amendment C219.

In an email, Mr Woodman refers to an "extremely chummy" Mr Theophanous who was "very thick with Daniel (Andrews)".

"(He) gave me his card saying any time he could help."

Mr Andrews also attended a Greek MPs function in March 2016, which was attended by Mr Staindl and Mr Woodman.

No "business-related matters" were discussed, Mr Staindl said.

At the function, Mr Woodman successfully bid in a fundraising auction for a private lunch with Mr Andrews - the Flower Drum meeting in 2017.

In 2019, Mr Andrews said the lunch was "principally" about sponsoring a charity golf day for Monash Children's Hospital.

"He's never raised active planning matters with me otherwise I would have stood up and left."

In Parliament on 12 November, upper house opposition leader David Davis called for Mr Andrews to "get himself down" to IBAC.

"There is a cloud hanging over his head—a corruption cloud.

"He cannot any longer leave this cloud hanging over his and his government's heads."

Greens leader Samantha Ratnam called for a ban on developers' political donations as well as a land rezoning tax to remove the "incentive for corruption".

Under questioning in Parliament, Mr Andrews said: "It has never been my practice, nor will it ever be my practice, to essentially interfere in processes that are very important and are ongoing.

"I stand by all the comments I have made and the fact that people in this government behave appropriately."

IBAC's inquiry into Casey Council corruption resumes

The IBAC inquiry into alleged corruption involving Casey councillors and property developers resumed on Monday 9 November.

The Operation Sandon public hearings had been adjourned in March due to Covid-19 health concerns.

It is not clear whether IBAC will examine former Casey mayor Sam Aziz, who recently returned to Australia from Egypt.

The inquiry alleged that Mr Aziz and another former mayor Geoff Ablett were involved in \$1.2 million of transactions with property developer John Woodman.

So far, Casey councillors including Mr

Ablett, Amanda Stapledon, Susan Serey, Gary Rowe and Rosalie Crestani have been examined at the hearings.

The next six weeks of hearings will feature remote participation by witnesses and be publicly streamed on IBAC's website in line with Chief Health Officer directions.

IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich said the next round of hearings will examine ways to improve the transparency and integrity of Victoria's planning system.

"These hearings will explore the ramifications of behaviours exposed in our earlier examination of the conduct of some City of Casey councillors, and assess the adequacy

of Victoria's current systems and controls for safeguarding the integrity of the state's planning processes."

Commissioner Redlich said the investigation raised concerns about "the relationship between individuals involved in planning and property development" in parts of Victoria beyond Casey.

"IBAC will call a range of further witnesses to enable us to properly examine these concerns and their impact across the various levels of Victoria's planning and property development system."

The hearing's final week will call expert witnesses in planning, campaign donations,

lobbying and integrity standards at state and local government levels.

Operation Sandon public hearings started in November 2019 in which serious corruption allegations involving some Casey councillors and developers were aired.

It led to the installation of a Municipal Monitor Laurinda Gardner at the council.

Following a report by Ms Gardner, Casey councillors were sacked by the State Government in February.

The council will be run by administrators until councillor elections in 2024.

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OPINION

Journal

Tell us all

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Look no further than the 2016 council election at City of Casey to see the importance of transparency.

An IBAC inquiry Operation Sandon inquiry heard allegations that property developer John Woodman paid for a near-\$100,000 war-chest for nine candidates plus 14 "supporting" candidates.

The money covered the design, printing and delivery of 188,000 brochures, 113,000 direct leaflets as well as photo portrait shoots and nomination costs.

None of the elected councillors declared the funding, the inquiry heard.

The same inquiry accused Mr Woodman of having sway over councillors as he lobbied for developments in Casey.

Two councillors - or people of interest - Sam Aziz and Geoff Ablett allegedly received \$1.2 million from Mr Woodman and associated companies.

Despite the scandal, council election candidates in 2020 aren't compelled to declare donations and gifts until 40 days after the election. The State Government has "signalled" an intent to reform donation laws.

This is why Star Journal has offered council candidates the opportunity to be upfront in the newspaper's candidate survey. Sadly, some candidates - whatever their reasons - have been coy on their campaign budget, their donors and their attitudes to Green Wedge development.

Others have largely claimed they've run modest campaigns, either self-funded or funded by family and friends.

Pallas introduced Woodman lawyer, IBAC hears

From Page 1

gave me a little kiss on the cheek and, um, yes, he said ‘Say hi to John, Megan’.”

Ms Schutz said she had met Mr Andrews on “numerous occasions”.

Later yesterday, the government clarified that the “secretary” Ms Schutz referred to was a deputy secretary in the Earth Resources department, for which Mr Pallas had previously been responsible.

Mr Pallas was contacted for a response to Ms Schutz’s comments, but a spokesman said that the government would not be providing a running commentary on the IBAC hearings.

The state’s anti-corruption commission is probing land deals in Melbourne’s south-east, and the role of developer and planner John Woodman in potentially corrupting the planning system at Casey Council. It is also investigating the role of developer money and its interaction with state politicians via donations. Mr Woodman donated \$160,000 to Labor MPs’ campaigns in the lead-up to the 2018 state election.

Ms Schutz said that this high level



Ray Walker (left), president of the Save Cranbourne West Residents Action Group. Photo: Jason South

of donation gave Mr Woodman and her regular access to senior Labor MPs, including ministers Luke Donnellan, Jacinta Allan, Martin Pakula, Lily D’Ambrosio and Jaala Pulford.

In the same taped conversation, Mr Woodman told Ms Schutz that

he may use his connection to Mr Andrews to lobby him directly over a matter in which Planning Minister Richard Wynne was not giving him favourable treatment.

In a separate recording, Ms Schutz described approaching Mr

Wynne to demand he explain why he had not approved a rezoning in Cranbourne West. Had Mr Wynne approved that rezoning, Mr Woodman would have netted a \$2 million success fee. Told by Ms Schutz that she had approached Mr Wynne, Mr

Woodman said: “What did I f—knuckle have to say?”

Ms Schutz said after she had told Mr Wynne that he should have rezoned the land, “he got his probity auditor to intervene”.

In earlier evidence, the inquiry also heard how the planning system was able to be influenced by a developer-funded “community group”, to the point where the group’s arguments were quoted in advice to the minister making a key rezoning decision.

The \$4000-a-day barrister, Emily Porter, who was apparently representing the Save Cranbourne West Residents Action Group (SCWRAG) before a planning panel, was in fact being briefed and paid for by the developer.

The community group’s president Ray Walker gave evidence that he was directly paid \$60,000 by the developer among a total of \$193,000 it received from from Leighton and Mr Woodman’s companies over a number of years.

Mr Walker confirmed the group did not pay the barrister and he did not know who had briefed her, but said he had not.

Staff Woodman didn't like 'sacked'

Clay Lucas
Noel Towell

The chief executive of Casey Council removed "two to three" staff members from the council's planning division that controversial planning consultant John Woodman and his lawyer, Megan Schutz, also wanted sacked.

The chief executive, Glenn Patterson, also used Mr Woodman's planning firm, Watsons, for a private two-lot subdivision in Mount Eliza the year before he started at Casey Council in September 2018.

The revelations came under questioning as the state anti-corruption commission as Victorian Treasurer

Tim Pallas defended his relationship with donors - Mr Woodman's firm was a "platinum member" of Labor's Progressive Business fundraising operation - after Ms Schutz was secretly taped describing the Treasurer's actions as very "helpful".

Mr Patterson appeared before IBAC to answer questions about what, if any, role he had played in facilitating Mr Woodman's influence at Casey, where Watsons has been closely involved in thousands of planning applications over many years.

Mr Patterson confirmed he had restructured the council's planning division soon after he had arrived. Six jobs were lost, he said. Questioned on whether Mr Woodman or

*'She nominated
between six and 10
people who should
be sacked.'*

Glenn Patterson, Casey chief executive

Ms Schutz had lobbied him over who should be hired and fired by the council, Mr Patterson agreed he had discussed staffing with Ms Schutz.

"She very assertively put to me that the performance of the planning teams in her opinion needed to improve, and that was something on which we agreed," Mr Patterson

said. She nominated between six and 10 people who should be sacked, he said. "Two to three" later lost their jobs, he told IBAC.

However, he denied that he had sacked anyone because Mr Woodman and Ms Schutz demanded it.

On Tuesday, Ms Schutz told IBAC that Mr Woodman believed Mr Patterson was "willing to remove council officers who, you know, are not doing their job". She also said she and Mr Woodman believed that Mr Patterson had sacked council officers they had complained about.

Ms Schutz also said it was her understanding that Heath Woodman had a "social relationship" with Mr Patterson, after working with

him on developments at another council where he was briefly chief executive. Mr Patterson yesterday confirmed an ongoing "acquaintance" with one of Heath's business partners, Andrew Wyatt, but he was not asked about a relationship with Mr Woodman's son.

Earlier in the day, Treasurer Tim Pallas said he had done nothing wrong in "introducing" Ms Schutz to a senior public servant in 2018. He said there was no "moral equivalence" between his dealings with an associate of Mr Woodman and "receiving brown paper bags full of money" from Mr Woodman's company, as some former Casey councillors are alleged to have done.

Woodman associate met senior ministers

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Clay Lucas

The lawyer for controversial developer John Woodman has confirmed meeting Andrews government ministers including Tim Pallas and Luke Donnellan several times to lobby them over planning issues.

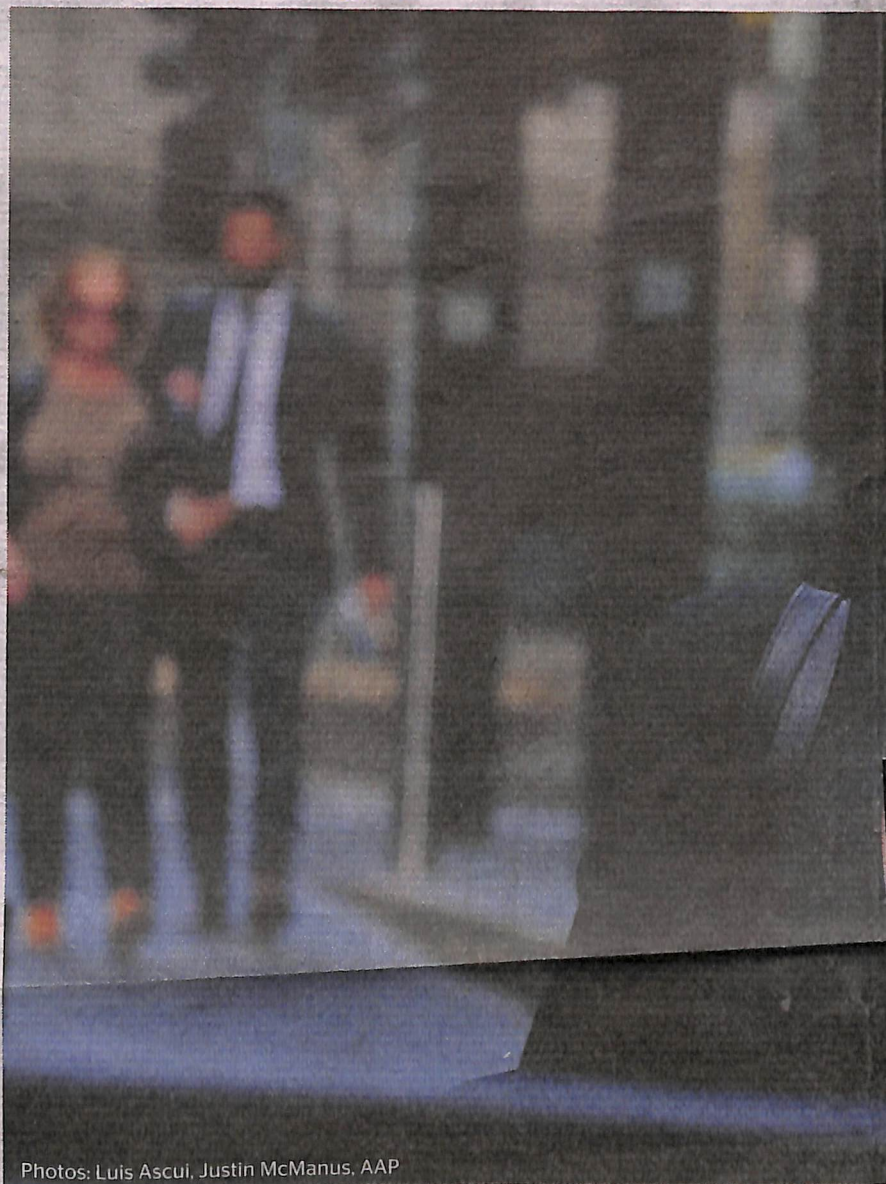
Megan Schutz gave evidence yesterday at the first day this year of corruption commission hearings into land deals at Casey Council.

Under questioning by commissioner Robert Redlich, QC, Ms

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Photos: Luis Ascul, Justin McManus, AAP

Associate of

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Schutz said she had met the treasurer, Mr Pallas, “a handful of times” at fundraisers and “boardroom lunches”.

And she said she had met Mr Donnellan, the former roads minister with decision-making power over key development issues in Casey Council, “on a number of occasions”.

Ms Schutz also confirmed she had spoken to Premier Daniel Andrews. It was not clear whether this was separate to an event Mr Woodman and the Premier attended, which Mr Andrews has acknowledged.

The Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission is investigating land deals at Casey Council. It resumed yesterday after three weeks of public examinations late last year.

The hearings have so far uncovered secret payments by Mr Woodman, a planner and developer

working in Melbourne’s south-east, to Casey councillors and community groups in return for favours.

The probe is also examining the strategic manipulation over many years of the planning system, at both the council and state government level, by Mr Woodman and his associates in order to maximise profits.

One of the key strategies Mr Woodman and Ms Schutz used to influence decisions by both the Andrews government and their predecessors, the Baillieu-Napthine government, was lobbying state ministers with influence over planning and development decisions.

Earlier yesterday, Ms Schutz told the commission that Ray Walker, spokesman for supposed community association Save Cranbourne West Resident Action Group, was paid a retainer of \$2500 a month to lobby for the interests of developers. She said that the “action group” had been set up as part of a



Megan Schutz



John Woodman



Tim Pallas



Luke Donnellan



Daniel Andrews

developer met ministers



strategy to get the Cranbourne West land rezoned.

“Without the community support of this rezoning it [was] going to go nowhere,” Ms Schutz said of the reason for establishing the group.

Mr Woodman confirmed last year he had bankrolled senior Andrews government figures and Labor candidates as part of a \$158,000 splurge on Labor in the lead-up to the 2018 state election.

The Ferrari-driving developer contributed to campaigns for MPs in Melbourne’s south-east including Mr Donnellan, former attorney-general Martin Pakula, and aspiring Cranbourne MP Pauline Richards.

Yesterday, under questioning over the role of lobbying in planning decisions, Ms Schutz said that, along with meetings with Mr Pallas and Mr Donnellan, she had once met Planning Minister Richard Wynne at a Progressive Business meeting.

Progressive Business is Labor’s fundraising arm. Ms Schutz described it at yesterday’s hearings as “an organisation which is intended to connect business with government so they can have frank discussions about their interests”.

She said she had met Mr Wynne at an event staged by the group, and had confronted him directly about a planning scheme amendment she and Mr Woodman were lobbying the government to approve.

Under that scheme, Mr Wynne would have rezoned industrial land in Cranbourne West to residential.

It would have netted Mr Woodman a success fee of \$2 million and developer Leighton Properties a windfall estimated at more than \$100 million.

“I asked Mr Wynne in the abstract whether he had a planning scheme amendment sitting on his desk,” Ms Schutz said, “[and if] his general position would be to approve it.”

The Age has previously revealed this meeting was held at the offices of accountancy firm PwC in October 2018, shortly before the November state election. Mr Wynne has still not made a decision on the rezoning.

Opposition leader Michael O’Brien said the government needed to detail precisely what meetings they’d had, and when, with Mr Woodman and his associates.

With Benjamin Preiss

Aziz resigns from Libs, not Casey

By Cam Lucadou-Wells and Brendan Rees

Former Casey mayor Sam Aziz has fired a broadside at a State shadow cabinet member while resigning from the Liberal Party.

Cr Aziz, who is facing serious corruption allegations at the state IBAC Operation Inquiry, stated opposition local government spokesperson Tim Smith was "riding the wave of media-driven crucifixion".

The Kew MP had "effectively convicted me and another councillor, even before a single charge has been laid", Cr Aziz stated on 15 February.

"He has also been recklessly calling for the entire council to be sacked."

In November, IBAC heard that Cr Aziz and Cr Geoff Ablett allegedly received hundreds of thousands of dollars from property developer John Woodman for favourable planning decisions.

Cr Aziz said "the subjects of that enquiry have not yet even begun to provide their explanations and defence".

"The latest tirade from the irrelevant Smith calls for my dismissal, along with Cr Ablett, from the Liberal Party.

"If this is the intellectual calibre of individuals that the Liberal Party selects for parliamentary roles, then it is not a party with which I want to continue membership."

Cr Aziz listed Casey's "remarkable achievements" including Bunjil Place and other community infrastructure without council debt.

Mr Smith responded on Twitter that "I've never been attacked from Cairo (before)".

"But I'm genuinely delighted that Aziz has resigned from the Liberal Party.

"Whilst he's at it he should resign from Casey Council.

"Let's hope he has the ticker to return to Melbourne to answer serious questions from the anti-corruption commission."

Cr Aziz did not follow the lead of Rex Flannery and Tim Jackson, who resigned as Casey councillors on 14 February in the wake of media reports that a State-appointed Monitor at the council recommended the council's sacking.

It throws into turmoil Casey's special planning committee that was to be headed by Mr Flannery and two appointed members. The committee was scheduled to meet on 25 February.

Mr Flannery told Star News he hoped Cr Aziz - "a loser in exile" - was found guilty and jailed.

"City of Casey is probably the best council in Australia and now it's gone down the gurgler, and the brand name is being destroyed by one man."

On 14 February, mayor Susan Serey meanwhile issued a statement decrying "unfair" media coverage on the Monitor's report that



Then-Casey mayor Sam Aziz officially opens Bunjil Place in October 2017. 174129

Picture: ROB CAREW



An IBAC-sourced image of former Casey mayors Lorraine Wreford and Sam Aziz meeting in Melbourne on 1 February 2019.

had yet to be publicly released nor viewed by Casey.

"Whilst I appreciate the need for the extra scrutiny of councillors, especially following the revelations at the IBAC at the end of last year, the ongoing speculation and backdoor briefing of journalists has continued to undermine the credibility of councillors and the commitment with which we have turned up

every day to represent our communities in extremely challenging circumstances.

"Throughout the monitor's tenure, City of Casey had no indication that the monitor would be recommending the dismissal of all councillors."

Cr Serey called for the State Government to dismiss "individual" councillors rather than the whole of council, as well as the release of the report to Casey.

A State Government spokesperson said the Government was "considering" the Monitor's final report's findings.

The report would be released "in due course".

Casey Council issued a statement that it was awaiting the Victorian Electoral Commission to start countback proceedings to replace Mr Jackson and Mr Flannery on the council.

Casey Ratepayers and Residents Association spokesman Brendan Browne welcomed the resignations saying the "writing's on the wall" for council to be dismissed.

"Assuming they will be sacked there will be some very happy ratepayers," he said. "They've lacked transparency all along".

No apologies, no remorse

By Brendan Rees

They choked back tears and patted each other on the back as they bid farewell for the final time - but there wasn't a moment of remorse or apology, drawing the ire of ratepayers.

Casey Councillors gathered with downcast faces as they sat in the council chambers for their final public meeting on Tuesday 18 February - just hours after the State Government passed laws to sacking each one of them.

Police were in attendance patrolling Bunjil Place, while outside, Casey Residents and Ratepayers Association (CRRRA) member Brendan Browne held a sign above his head which read: "They just don't get it! Please don't come back in 2024".

In front of the packed public gallery, Casey mayor Susan Serey spoke of council's achievements but maintained there was "no concrete evidence of underperformers".

"I'm the youngest mayor to serve the City of Casey and as a councillor for the past seven years I would like to thank the Edrington Ward for their continued confidence in me. I'm deeply honoured to have served our amazing community," Cr Serey said, fighting back tears.

"I wanted to thank Casey's community, organisations, businesses and volunteers for their timeless work in our community".

Casey deputy mayor Gary Rowe described the monitor's report - which found clear evidence of significant governance failures at the council - as "bland" and "none of them qualified jumping the barrier for dismissal of council".

A resident from the gallery hurled abuse as Cr Rowe finished his speech, shouting: "It's a bit late".

"Have some respect!" a woman shouted back.

Cr Amanda Stapledon reflected on her time as council "with a great sense of gratitude"



Embattled Casey councillor Geoff Ablett fronts the public at the meeting. 204924

"It is with great sadness that we are no longer going to be councillors," the former three-time Casey mayor said.

Cr Rosalie Crestani thanked her family, fellow councillors and council officers, and the community "for their unbending support and faith" before reading from the Bible.

Embattled sacked councillor Geoff Ablett, a former Hawthorn premiership player, said it had been a "very frustrating and an emotional and draining time for me" but thanked the gallery for their "good behaviour" in allowing him to speak.

"Nothing would've in my mind resulted in the actions that were taken today," Cr Ablett said, who is one of the key figures in the Inde-



Cr Wayne Smith and Cr Damien Rosario come to terms with their axing. 204924



Casey Council CEO Glenn Patterson remained silent throughout the meeting. 204924

pendent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission inquiry.

"It's not easy being in a public interviewing situation ... I've cooperated fully as other councillors who are yet to come, will as well," he said.

"Nothing deserved the outcome that we got to today".

Cr Damien Rosario addressed the crowd from a podium saying he didn't wish to resign because he wanted to stay "until the end" to "honour my oath" in serving the city.

"I choose to do that. We choose to do that. That's why these people are still here - not because we want to hold onto the title of councillor for as long as we can, that is meaningless to

us," Cr Rosario said.

"We will stay until the end to serve you," he told the gallery.

To conclude, Cr Wayne Smith listed his achievements, saying his was "very proud and honoured" to serve with council during his near 30-year term.

His speech was interrupted by a discontent resident who shouted: "You haven't done your job!"

Part of the gallery gave a standing ovation before erupting into three cheers while others shouted out the shortcomings of councillors.

Rex Flannery, who resigned as councillor days earlier, was present in the gallery, saying after the meeting "the people have spoken".

"Has council affected me? Have I been tarnished? Doesn't bother me," he said, adding he hoped to be able to put his hand up as councillor in four years.

CRRRA spokesman Brendan Browne said he was baffled as to why councillors spent "an hour of congratulations" at the meeting without a single apology.

"They just don't get that they haven't done their job. The monitor's report spells it out," Mr Browne said.

He added: "They don't hold each other to account".

Former Casey mayor Rob Wilson said the dismissal was "something that had to happen" and took aim at councillors for showing no "hint of remorse or apology".

"There were no expressions of contriteness, no sorry, no admission of guilt: 'We're sorry that we didn't notice things happen and get things cleaned up'," Mr Wilson said.

Mr Wilson did however acknowledge the achievements of councillors and Cr Stapledon who supported him in launching his two books.

Councillors Sam Aziz and Milla Gilic were absent on the night.

Sam risks 'heart failure'

By Brendan Rees

Former Casey mayor Sam Aziz says his lecturing duties at a business school in Egypt are "sporadic" as he battles a heart failure condition.

"Sometimes when I get really, really sick it's very, very hard to maintain any sort of regular teaching commitment. But anyway we'll get through this - I'm sure one day," Mr Aziz told Star News.

According to a legal document filed with the County Court, Mr Aziz, who is at the centre of an Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) inquiry, has an employment contract as a lecturer with Bloom Business School in Cairo until "at least July 2020".

It also claimed Mr Aziz has ongoing health conditions including a chronic heart condition; diabetes; and mental health concerns.

Mr Aziz said he had to "improve" his ejection fraction - a measurement of the percentage of blood leaving the heart each time it contracts - if he had any chance of returning to Melbourne and defending himself against allegations he pocketed \$900,000 from a developer and delivered favourable property decisions.

"People with my condition, which is heart failure, have a problem with blood coming out of the heart," he told Star News. "A normal ejection fraction is about 50 per cent; mine is sitting at 16 per cent".

The besieged councillor left Australia in October after IBAC investigators executed search warrants on his properties in Berwick and Roxburgh Park.

significant amount of Mr Aziz's personal documents and electronic the raids, the court his home country



Former Casey mayor Sam Aziz is under an employment contract with a business school in Cairo.

but the sale of the house was seized as proceeds of crime - with a restraining order also in place.

As part of its application for a restraining order, IBAC's principal investigator Darren Prickett alleges Mr Aziz is suspected of committing offences including misconduct in public office, bribery of a public official, and dealing with the proceeds of crime, according to a court document filed with the County Court.

In an affidavit, which was sworn by Mr Aziz's lawyer, Jeremy Peck, of Moray and Agnew Lawyers, Mr Aziz asks the County Court for an extension of time to make an application for an exclusion order which he says is in

the "interest of justice to do so".

On 17 November last year, Mr Aziz changed his return flight from Cairo to Melbourne, from 9 December to 19 November, to defend the restraining order, however on the day of his return flight, Mr Aziz was "suffering from symptoms including heart palpitations, shortness of breath and was visibly perspiring," Mr Peck stated.

"Upon presenting himself to check-in staff on the day of his flight, Aziz declared the large amount of medication he was travelling with including supporting letters from his medical specialists," the statement read.

"Check-in staff questioned Aziz about his obvious physical distress and large amount of

medication, and Aziz was eventually refused boarding due to high risk of heart failure".

Mr Peck stated Mr Aziz attended a private examination with IBAC on 3 October for the purpose of the IBAC investigation where he "cooperated in answering all of IBAC's questions which included matters directly related to this proceeding".

The affidavit added Mr Aziz will "continue his employment with Bloom Business School in order to financially support himself, his family and to cover ordinary living expenses".

Star News tried to contact Mr Aziz for comment however in a recent interview he said: "I was called to give evidence privately come seven days before I travelled. Nothing was mentioned of me not being able to travel".

"I didn't find out about the public hearings until some three weeks after I left Australia to do the work assignment that I'm in," Mr Aziz told Star News.

Star News has made efforts to contact the business school and is awaiting a request for comment. Meanwhile, a metropolitan newspaper reported the founder and chief executive Mary Louis confirmed Mr Aziz was teaching at the school and appeared "healthy".

Mr Aziz recently told Star News: "I've been teaching a little bit" but added: "It's been very sporadic because my health".

When asked when he expected to return home he said: "I honestly don't know. I hope it's sooner rather than later. I'm not joking".

While on a trip to New York for council business last year, Mr Aziz said he was hospitalised for five days and when he returned to Melbourne in July he was further hospitalised for eight days.

"I'm getting ongoing treatment but it's not something that can be magically fixed overnight," he said.

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Sam stays overseas

By Brendan Rees

A key figure in an IBAC corruption investigation and a former Casey mayor has taken aim at his fellow councillors after they reluctantly granted a request for extended paid leave.

At a public council meeting on Tuesday 4 February, councillors voted for embattled councillor Sam Aziz a leave of absence until 31 March citing medical grounds.

Cr Aziz is one of the keys players in the Casey land scandal where it's alleged he pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars from a developer in exchange for favourable planning decisions.

Cr Aziz made a dash to Egypt last November before the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) conducted its hearings.

Casey mayor Susan Serey said at the meeting the decision to grant Cr Aziz had "not been made lightly," and "the situation is less than ideal".

She said council was bound by their obligations under the Local Government Act, which fell "far short from what I know our community expects."

"Councillors around the table feel the same way," Cr Serey said.

"Having considered the medical advice provided by Cr Aziz in support of his application, as well as the legal advice which has reiterated our obligation to not unreasonably refuse leave, believe we had no alternative to do otherwise.

"I want to stress that my councillor colleagues sitting around this table wouldn't have voted for this motion unless it had potentially other serious legal implications for the city of Casey and its ratepayers," Cr Serey said.

In a Facebook message, Cr Aziz hit back at the mayor, labelling her statement as "denigrating".

"Tonight council approved a further leave of absence for me after I submitted a detailed medical report explaining why I am not able to return to duty at this stage," Cr Aziz's statement said.

"That was a report and not just a 'medical certificate'.

"I have remained deliberately silent since this ordeal started in November last year, in what has become a media circus, and a savage feeding frenzy by certain fringe groups and keyboard warriors, who have always had an axe to grind," his statement read.

"It appears that sober and fair assessment has completely gone out the window, despite the undeniable success of the City of Casey, and our obvious record in delivering world class infrastructure and excellent services for our residents, supported by a very efficient and financially lean administration".

But Cr Aziz stated he had "every intention of returning to duty, and as soon as I can," adding councillors were aware of his medical condition which he says was diagnosed in May last year.

In the statement, he said he did finish the "work I have been doing overseas" and changed a return flight home from 8 December to 19 November last year, and had "paid a significant non-refundable fare difference to do so."

"However, I was prevented from boarding the aircraft at check-in due to a very serious cardiac health condition.

"The mayor was given documentary evidence of this flight change, as well as detailed medical evidence of the progress of my health condition," Cr Aziz stated.

Minister for Local Government Adem Somyurek said he expected councillors "to turn up to meetings and do their job".

"Under the Local Government Act, the office of a councillor becomes vacant if they are absent from four ordinary meetings of the council without obtaining leave," Mr Somyurek said.

This week, the State Government announced it would extend the tenure of Casey monitor Laurinda Gardner until 11 February.

Ms Garner was originally due to provide her report on councillor governance and decision-making to the Minister by 31 January, following her appointment on 27 November last year.

IBAC examinations will restart on 2 March and are open to the public.

dandenong.starcommunity.com.au

Mayor IBAC 'shock'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Greater Dandenong mayor Jim Memeti has described revelations at an IBAC hearing into alleged corruption with Casey Council and property developer John Woodman as "unbelievable".

He said he was "shocked" by allegations that Casey councillors Sam Aziz and Geoff Ablett received \$1.2 million from the property developer, in return for support of large developments in Cranbourne West.

The IBAC hearing was also told of a \$100,000 slush fund for eight Casey councillors during the 2016 election, in which none of them allegedly declared the donation.

Cr Memeti also received a donated helicopter ride from Mr Woodman, which was auctioned off for \$3500 at a 2016 election fundraiser. By contrast, Cr Memeti declared the gift a week later.

Earlier in the same year, Cr Memeti and the council backed Mr Woodman's push to rezone a Green Wedge area in Keysborough South for housing estates.

Mr Woodman was representing Antonio Madafferri, who owned a large tract of land in question.

As an owner of several properties in Greater Dandenong, Cr Memeti said he always declared a conflict of interest if he was in doubt.

"The best bit of advice I've had was from (ex-councillor) John Kelly who said if you're ever in doubt, get out."

He told Star Journal that he hadn't met or spoken to Mr Woodman about the donation but received it via a third party.



Greater Dandenong mayor Jim Memeti is confident that the council is "above board".

200886

Picture: CAM LUCADOU-WELLS

He hadn't since been contacted by Mr Woodman with any expectations as a result of the gift, he said.

"At the time, I actually just thought he was promoting his helicopter business."

Cr Memeti said he'd been contacted by developers about planning applications to "give you their point of view, to see it through their eyes".

"I also like to hear from my colleague councillors as well. You shouldn't make up your mind without hearing both sides of the story."

Cr Memeti said he'd only ever met Mr Woodman at the Noble Park Community Art Show, where the property developer was the major sponsor.

He is the brother of Brian Woodman, the former manager of Noble Park Community Centre and host of the art show who recently resigned.

Cr Memeti said the State Government should wait for the IBAC report before looking at law changes governing property developer donations.

"I'm more than confident that Greater Dandenong is well above board due to having so many experienced councillors there to get through the (decision-making) process."

Cr Peter Brown, who also backed the Keysborough South rezoning, said he'd declined any donations from property developers.

"It seems that Casey has developed a very unsavoury culture over a number of years.

"I haven't taken money from anyone. I've got enough of my own.

"I don't want for the sake of a few thousand dollars to destroy all of my hard work.

"I might add that notwithstanding the allegations at Casey that property developers are legitimate businessmen who have the right to advocate for the interest of their clients."

Cr Brown has met with developers, including an "amicable" discussion with Mr Woodman.

He said he'd at times rejected their arguments. But he was supportive of "inequity" arguments by Green Wedge landowners not having the same development opportunities as others nearby.

"No one had to coerce me to a point of view.

"If you're being offered brown paper bags of cash to buy that decision, then common sense should tell you it's unlawful."

Cr Brown added that he is a distant relative of the Keys family that has owned large tracts of land in Keysborough South.

"There's not one red cent in it for me."

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Clear on IBAC

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Greater Dandenong Council chief executive John Bennie says his council is "well versed" in declaring conflicts of interest - in the wake of IBAC's ongoing inquiry into the neighbouring Casey Council.

During a council public question- time on 12 December, a questioner asked if Greater Dandenong residents could be assured that councillors weren't corruptly influenced by property developers' "favours".

Mr Bennie noted the IBAC hearing was yet to make findings on the accusations against Casey councillors.

The "fundamentals" of the corruption allegations focused on conflict of interest, he said.

"From my point of view (Greater Dandenong) council has always been very well versed, very well trained and very well conducted in relation to conflicts of interest.

"There have never been any allegations of conflict of interest ever made and upheld in this council.

"This is an indication that this council strives to do things the right way. It remains to be seen if that's the case elsewhere."

The IBAC's three-week Operation Sandon hearing has aired explosive allegations of Casey councillors being bribed by property developers for favourable planning decisions.

Its hearings are expected to resume in late February.



Chief executive John Bennie says Greater Dandenong councillors are "well conducted" in declaring conflicts of interest.

Lobbyist 'went too far'

A planning consultant admitted that she went too far in lobbying for developer John Woodman's interests in City of Casey, an IBAC hearing was told.

Megan Schutz, a qualified lawyer, said she shouldn't have coached Cr Sam Aziz with regular text messages during a council debate on the H3 intersection in Hall Road, Cranbourne West on 16 October 2018.

As she sat at home watching the live-stream of the meeting, she offered tactics such as "you need to read the SCWRAG letter" and "don't take Rowe's bait about Wolfdene".

Ms Schutz told IBAC that she'd helped refine the mentioned letter from the Save Cranbourne West Residents Action Group (SCWRAG), a group she'd helped to set up with interested locals.

It was a "commercial interest dressed up in a community argument", she said.

At one point during the vote, Ms Schutz texts that Cr Aziz's arguments are "muddled", and to stress that the community's lives were being put at risk.

"On reflection I wouldn't do this again," she told the IBAC hearing on 4 December.

"I wouldn't send text messages again. I'd provide my briefing note and that would be the end of it."



Sam Aziz, left, John Woodman, Lorraine Wreford and Megan Schutz at Sandhurst Golf Club.

"I think what I did was advocate too hard for a position but I did not have any influence."

Before the council meeting, Ms Schutz was tapped in a call spelling out the arguments not to defer the intersection works.

"So what - what is the recommendation that we're seeking tonight?" Cr Aziz asks Ms Schutz.

"Cause I actually haven't gone into my emails yet, I've just been flatout."

Ms Schutz replies: "OK. So your recommendation tonight is that Council does not support the grant of secondary consent to defer the intersection works."

Counsel assisting IBAC, Michael Tovey, asserted at an earlier hearing that Ms Schutz act-

ed like a "ventriloquist expressing to Mr Aziz what he has to say to council about an issue which he hasn't prepared at all".

After the council meeting, Ms Schutz is recorded in a phone tap telling Mr Woodman that Cr Aziz didn't stick to the "script".

"I think we won," Ms Schutz says - despite Cr Aziz doing a "crap job tonight".

"He didn't do what I asked him to do. Anyway, he's an absolute fool that guy."

She said: "If Aziz had just stuck to the f***ing script we wouldn't have had the f***ery we had tonight."

Under IBAC questioning, she denied that she thought of Cr Aziz as a "puppet". It was typical "blokey" and "jocular" dialogue that she had with Mr Woodman.

National media coverage of the call had "completely obliterated" her professional reputation, she said.

"I'm not proud of it today because I've lost my ability to have an income for my family."

"I didn't mean that about Cr Aziz. I thought it was a private conversation."

Ms Schutz was reluctant to call the 'script' anything but "briefing notes" and a "speech".

She didn't agree that her intervention was "coaching" or "directing" Cr Aziz. She called it

"lobbying" or "advocating".

"I'm advocating for my client's position but I can't make them say something."

Ms Schutz said she'd been instructed by her client Mr Woodman to brief councillors Aziz and Geoff Ablett between 2015 and 2019.

The pair of councillors are accused by IBAC of receiving \$1.2 million from Mr Woodman for their support on planning decisions.

Ms Schutz was aware that Cr Ablett had a conflict of interest due to a race horse link with Mr Woodman.

She said the law prohibited Cr Ablett from voting on Woodman-related matters but not from lobbying other councillors behind the scenes.

She "perhaps naively" thought that she was instructed to brief Cr Aziz because he was not conflicted, she said.

Ms Schutz said she'd sat at meetings in which Mr Woodman had allocated political donations but he'd never asked her advice on the issue.

"It seems like I'm well and truly involved in briefing councillors but I honestly have not known they have been paid money and they've been bought."

"On reflection I think it should have crossed my mind."

SCWRAG's developer link 'not secret', says key player

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

It was 'not secret' that a Cranbourne West residents action group was being funded and advised by property developers, planning consultant Megan Schutz has told an IBAC hearing.

IBAC has alleged that the Save Cranbourne West Residents Action Group (SCWRAG) was funded \$193,000 by property developer John Woodman's company Watsons and Ms Schutz's firm Schutz Consulting.

Developer dollars were used to set up the group, pay the group's leader as a consultant and to fund its legal representative.

"It was a commercial interest dressed up in a strong community safety argument," Ms Schutz told IBAC in relation to the group and the developer's "aligned" interests on the H3 intersection project.

"And yes, we were using the community as a basis for my client's commercial interests."

Ms Schutz helped set up SCWRAG. She was financed to do so by another developer Leighton Properties.

At the same time, she was a consultant for Mr Woodman's Elysian Group which owned the Alarah estate in the area.

She also engaged with another active devel-

oper in Cranbourne West - Wolfdene, in which Mr Woodman's son Heath was a partner.

Leighton also funded a barrister to represent SCWRAG at a Planning Panels Victoria hearing into the proposed Amendment C219 rezoning in Cranbourne West.

There was no requirement to disclose the arrangement to PPV, Ms Schutz told the hearing.

IBAC has heard that SCWRAG leader Ray Walker was paid \$60,000 a year by Mr Woodman's company - via Schutz Consulting as the conduit.

The consultancy job was to do "market research" in the South East.

Ms Schutz was involving in preparing a letter from SCWRAG to lobby Casey councillors ahead of a crucial planning vote on the H3 intersection in Hall Road, Cranbourne West on 16 October 2018.

She arranged for the letter to be provided to councillor Sam Aziz, who moved an alternative motion also provided by Ms Schutz that night, she told IBAC.

She said that the group's community safety arguments in the letter "aligned" with her client's commercial interest.

"Everyone knew that my client had aligned itself with the community. It wasn't a secret."

Counsel assisting IBAC, Michael Tovey, told Ms Schutz that "you didn't want anybody to know that you were pushing this motion before the council".

"I thought everyone did know," Ms Schutz replied.

"I can't recall saying to Councillor Aziz, 'This is a big secret. Don't tell anyone I'm briefing you.'"

Ms Schutz was also accused of "coaching" Sam Aziz "minute by minute" during the Hall Road debate - texting him instructions as she watched the live-streamed meeting at home.

She conceded that "people wouldn't have known about the text messages".

In one of the texts to Cr Aziz during the debate, she stated: "Nothing to do with Wolfdene. This is a request from the community only."

"Literally read, (the words) look dishonest and they appear to be a lie," Ms Schutz explained to the inquiry.

"What I actually meant, and it is in shorthand, was that the arguments in favour of the alternative recommendation were clothed in a community safety argument and there was ... no mention of Wolfdene in them."

Ms Schutz was asked about a tapped phone call with Mr Woodman, in which she says Mr

Walker "would never, ever expose any of us".

Feeling "under pressure", she asked for extra time to reflect on the question.

She said that she thought it was referring to Mr Walker not exposing his work for Schutz to rival developer Dacland.

"But on reflection today, I mean, everyone knew that - everyone knew that Ray Walker was working with me in relation to the H3 intersection issue."

She said that she'd been instructed to engage Ray and Valery Walker as lobbyists for their community.

Commissioner Robert Redlich asked if it was "unusual" for "a developer to engage the head of a community representative group and pay them to be advancing arguments which support the developer's interests?"

Ms Schutz said: "I think a lot of community groups, where the community's objectives align with a developer, you will find a developer is resourcing them."

She agreed that the law ought to require disclosure of the conflict of interest.

"But (for) incorporated associations ... and non-registered lobbyists, there's no rules around disclosure at the moment in the law."

Behind the scenes, a council of conflict

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Four of Casey Council's 11 councillors were conflicted in a crucial planning vote in October 2018 due to links to property developer John Woodman, an IBAC hearing has heard.

Mayor Geoff Ablett and councillors Susan Serey and Amanda Stapledon declared their conflicts and left the council chamber ahead of a vote on the H3 intersection in Hall Road Cranbourne West on 16 October.

In the IBAC hearing, commissioner Robert Redlich observed that if Cr Sam Aziz "recognised what Mr Woodman acknowledges was a conflict of interest" he would have withdrawn as well.

"So we would have had a council debating a motion with half the councillors not there."

"All conflicted because of an interest that the developer has - Mr Woodman."

Cr Ablett declared a direct financial interest, as he did with Woodman-related matters from 2015. IBAC alleges that he had received more than \$300,000 from the developer.

Cr Susan Serey declared an indirect interest



Amanda Stapledon, centre, after being elected mayor in October 2018, with deputies Tim Jackson and Rosalie Crestani.

Cr Amanda Stapledon also declared a conflict.

IBAC has been told that Mr Woodman donated \$40,000 to Cr Stapledon's 2014 state election tilt. He also gave funds to Blairlogie Living and Learning - a supported accommodation facility attended by Cr Stapledon's son.

A tapped phone call revealed Mr Woodman and his planning consultant Megan Schutz's intense interest in the vote - and the upcoming mayoral election.

Ms Schutz told Mr Woodman she didn't think Cr Ablett was "not a sure thing" to be re-

them, he doesn't have them.

"And he doesn't have (Cr Damien) Rosario's vote. Rosario hates him."

She speculated that Cr Stapledon may support Cr Rowe as mayor ahead of Cr Ablett.

Mr Woodman told her: "Darling, he hasn't got Amanda's vote. I'm meeting with Amanda tomorrow."

IBAC heard that Cr Stapledon later met with Mr Woodman to support her election as mayor. She was successfully elected on 29 October.

Ms Schutz said Cr Ablett was "the best person to be Mayor".

"It's just a pity he's bloody conflicted with us."

"I don't know why we ever, ever, ever declared a conflict in relation to him."

Mr Woodman said it wouldn't be a disaster if Cr Rowe was mayor.

"If Gary gets the mayoralship you can still f*** Gary up."

"Gary being mayor does not mean that people continuously vote for him for the next 12 months."

Here's to the brave few

By Andrew Cantwell

The IBAC investigation into questionable dealings between property developers and some at the Casey Council has clearly been fuelled by people 'in the know' behind the scenes - whistleblowers - who were unhappy with what they were seeing played out in the council chamber.

Articles by The Age over a number of years, and a report by the Victorian Ombudsman in 2015, have also benefitted from the efforts of whistleblowers brave enough to call out - and provide details on - what has been brought to light for the rest of us through the coercive powers of IBAC in the last three weeks.

Counsel assisting the inquiry Michael Tovey QC said he hoped the public hearings would "assist the investigation" by encouraging others with knowledge of further dodgy dealings to come forward. Simply, IBAC wants to hear

Wood staffer's IBAC link

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Federal MP Jason Wood's office has become linked to a property-developer funded Casey Council election campaign.

Developer John Woodman paid nearly \$100,000 to bank-roll nine core candidates plus support candidates in the 2016 campaign, an IBAC Operation Sandon hearing was told.

The campaign was conceived by Cr Sam Aziz, and managed by former Casey mayor Janet Halsall and her husband Bob - also an ex-Casey councillor.

Ms Halsall was also a staffer in Mr Wood's La Trobe electorate office. She reportedly has stood down after the revelations on 27 November.

In a covert operation to disguise Mr Woodman's involvement, at least one false invoice was used through Chelsea-based business The Mattress Shop to Spicer Thoroughbreds.

The mattress store was owned by Robert Halsall, son of Janet and Bob.

Woodman lobbyist Lorraine Wreford was also a former Casey mayor. She told the IBAC hearing that she ensured the campaign invoices were paid - and in a "covert" fashion.

"It was definitely designed that the candidates didn't know where the money was coming from ... apart from Cr Aziz."

The false invoice for more than \$4000 was found among election campaign materials in Ms Wreford's home during an IBAC raid.

Another invoice to Spicer Thoroughbreds detailed \$4500 of leaflet deliveries in October 2016 on behalf of candidates Wayne Smith, Damien Rosario, Amanda Stapledon, Rob Ward, Sam Aziz, Louise Berkelmans and Geoff Ablett.



Janet Halsall, whilst mayor of City of Casey. 21305

Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

Ms Wreford also identified candidates Shar Balms and Mick Morland as beneficiaries. She wasn't sure if councillor Milla Gilic was also funded.

None of the elected councillors declared the funding, the hearing was told.

"I still would have expected those council-

lors who received funding to either make enquiries or put in the register that they received funds but they are unsure who the benefactor was," Ms Wreford said.

Ms Wreford was couriering thousands of dollars of cash to Sam Aziz from Mr Woodman - which admittedly seemed illegitimate, she

told the hearing.

She was also the conduit as Cr Aziz sought Mr Woodman to pay off his \$30,000 tax bill.

Mr Tovey asserted: "Didn't you owe it to (Mr Woodman) then to say to him if you realised that this was a crooked arrangement that he really needed to think about his position?"

"I think in hindsight I should have absolutely said that to him," Ms Wreford said.

"It wasn't until 2018 that I really started feeling uncomfortable about it all.

"But everything was explained to me in a legitimate way."

Ms Wreford said she thought at the time that Cr Aziz was trying to hide assets from the Family Court as part of his divorce. Cr Aziz had told him that his ex-wife knew of the payments, she said.

"Didn't you ask yourself 'How can I involve myself in what is an attempt to pervert the course of justice?'" Mr Tovey asked her.

"I just felt myself trapped in the middle between these two people," Ms Wreford said.

"My understanding was it was just the repayment of the loan. That's what I was told. Maybe I was not told accurate information."

In the lead-up to a Casey mayoral election in 2018, Ms Wreford told Cr Aziz in a tapped phone call that Mr Woodman's payments would stop if Cr Gary Rowe was voted in by councillors.

"If Gary gets in everything is off the table I am telling you now," Ms Wreford told Cr Aziz.

Cr Amanda Stapledon - who has also been linked to Mr Woodman during the hearing - was ultimately elected.

Cr bloc election funding 'undeclared'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

None of a bloc of candidates declared their 2016 Casey Council election campaigns were funded by property developer John Woodman, an IBAC inquiry was told.

For nearly \$100,000, Mr Woodman paid for the design, printing and delivery of 188,000 brochures, 113,000 direct leaflets as well as nomination costs.

Mr Woodman implicitly expected the support of those candidates for his interests, his lobbyist Lorraine Wreford told the Operation Sandon inquiry.

"But he was very explicit in saying that he didn't want to directly fund it because he didn't want to be linked to other councillors, firstly, and, secondly, he didn't even want them to know where the funds were coming from."

According to the campaign budget tabled at IBAC, his company Watsons paid for photo portraits for nine candidates plus 14 "supporting candidates".

The document lists initials of elected councillors Sam Aziz, Amanda Stapledon, Geoff Ablett, Wayne Smith and Damien Rosario, as well as unsuccessful candidates Rob Ward, Mick Morland and Louise Berkelmans.

None of the elected councillors declared the funding, Counsel assisting IBAC, Michael Tovey, said.

"I'm disappointed," Ms Wreford replied.

Cr Sam Aziz pitched the scheme to Mr Woodman over lunch at a Chinese restaurant in Dandenong.

The councillor organised for former Casey mayor Janet Halsall to manage the "gigantic" campaign.

Ms Wreford's part was to ensure "invoices got paid, nothing else", she told the hearing.

She said she was "a little bit shocked" by the idea.

"Because I have not ever heard of a concept of a group of councillors or people running as a group, apart from in a political party, in a council election ... where they are all funded basically together."

Ms Wreford said the \$98,202 cost may have been less, believing that Cr Aziz paid for his own printing.

Cr Aziz had pitched the idea on the basis of helping candidates "who don't have the means to run for council", Ms Wreford said.

"If you have a ward in the City of Casey, it's almost as big as a state electorate.

"So to actually financially fund a campaign to even put one brochure out is quite expensive."

Ms Wreford said donations by developers or businesses were a "bit of a free-for-all" at local council elections.

Mr Woodman had told the inquiry that he paid about \$50,000.

Prior to the election, candidates were rated by Mr Woodman's associates as either "friendly", opponents or unknown in their attitude towards Amendment C219.

The amendment was proposed to rezone a large tract of industrial land in Cranbourne West to residential use - a push that was being driven by Mr Woodman and developer Leighton.

The 'friendly' elected councillors, as rated by Mr Woodman's group, were Crs Geoff Ablett, Susan Serey, Milla Gilic, Amanda Stapledon, Steve Beardon (who was later replaced in a by-election by another friendly Gary Rowe), Damien Rosario, Wayne Smith and Sam Aziz.

Those in the unknown or opponent categories were councillor Rex Flannery, Rosalie Crestani and Tim Jackson.



Sam Aziz, left, John Woodman, Lorraine Wreford and Megan Schutz at Sandhurst Golf Club.

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Aziz 'offers help' to sue

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Casey councillor Sam Aziz pledged to support property developer John Woodman's intention to sue Casey Council, according to a secret recording revealed in an IBAC hearing.

"Whatever I can do to help him," Cr Aziz told Mr Woodman's lobbyist Lorraine Wreford in a central Melbourne cafe on 1 February.

At the time, Mr Woodman was considering a defamation suit against the council over media allegations that he'd bullied council staff.

Cr Aziz appeared to offer to get hold of council documents if Mr Woodman was unable to subpoena them.

At the IBAC Operation Sandon hearing on 27 November, Ms Wreford agreed with Counsel assisting IBAC, Michael Tovey, that it was "pretty shocking in terms of ... appropriate allegiance".

"I think Mr Aziz wanted his payments from Mr Woodman," Ms Wreford said.

"So I think he was prepared to do anything."

In the same cafe sitting, Cr Aziz was recorded saying that "we have taken over Casey" and had plans to do the same at Yarra Ranges Council.

Fellow councillor Amanda Stapledon intended to meet with property John Woodman to discuss the plan, he told Ms Wreford.

"Basically, Yarra Ranges we want to take it over in the same way we've taken over Casey."

"And there's another businessman we are working with closely to make that happen."

With six out of nine councillors set to retire before the next election, "we only really need to get two elected to get a majority," Cr Aziz said.

Ms Wreford told the IBAC hearing that she thought Cr Aziz at the time was just "big-noting himself".

"He might have thought he had taken over



Sam Aziz and Lorraine Wreford at the Little Billy cafe in William Street on 1 February of 2019.

the City of Casey but I don't think other people thought that was the case."

She said that at times she thought Cr Aziz, who was going through a divorce, had been drinking during his text messages to her.

He was "mentally unstable" - at times his "normal intelligent self", at other times threatening to suicide.

"He was up and down like a yo-yo and saying all sorts of almost hysterical things to me at times."

During the meeting, Cr Aziz was being de-

livered cash by Ms Wreford, purportedly part of a monthly \$25,000 fee as a Smart Cities consultant with Mr Woodman.

Ms Wreford conceded the monthly \$2000-cash-delivered component couriered to him looked "corrupt".

"How are you going to present it to me without it looking like a drug deal?" Cr Aziz says as they sit in the cafe.

They walk outside, and the transaction is done in Cr Aziz's car.

She agreed with Counsel assisting IBAC,

Michael Tovey, that Cr Aziz seemed to see Mr Woodman as a "bottomless ATM".

Ms Wreford told the hearing that Cr Aziz had told her that he was owed \$600,000 by Mr Woodman though she said she wasn't aware of why this was so.

Cr Aziz kept coming up with "wild ideas" for Mr Woodman - who he dubbed 'Blood Donor' - to pay him the money, she said.

In a tapped Whats App message, Cr Aziz suggests that Mr Woodman buys Cr Aziz's Barak Avenue house for \$750,000, paying out the \$490,000 mortgage, allowing Cr Aziz to live in it rent free and transferring the property back to Cr Aziz in August 2020.

"He seemed very desperate for money," Ms Wreford said.

"My jaw dropped when I saw the text. I couldn't believe that he had even thought of it."

Mr Woodman stalled on the transaction, citing pressure from allegations in The Age newspaper regarding his association with Cr Aziz.

During the delays, Cr Aziz acted "irrational", "demanding" and "said things that don't make sense", Cr Wreford said.

In a text in November 2018, he threatened to reverse the Hall Road H3 intersection motion - which Mr Woodman had lobbied for.

"You have placed me in a corner where I have nothing to lose and I'll be seeing a lawyer at 3pm today."

Ms Wreford told the hearing: "I was quite convinced he had been drinking, but anyway."

Cr Aziz also received up to \$5000 a month as a consultant to source rich Chinese buyers of steeds for Spicer Thoroughbreds.

Ms Wreford - whose partner Bernard Lee worked at the business - agreed that it was "a vehicle being used to explain away funds going to Mr Aziz".

State appoints monitor to City of Casey

The State Government has appointed a monitor to examine governance at the City of Casey.

Local Government Minister Adem Somyurek on Wednesday 27 November announced the appointment of Ms Laurinda Gardner until 31 January 2020, effective immediately.

The monitor will advise the Minister:

- If councillors, individually or as a group, are behaving in a manner that does not accord with the role of Councillor.
- Of any impact on the integrity and/or functioning of council decision-making and the orderly governance of the City of Casey arising from Operation Sandon.

Ms Gardner is an experienced board director with over 20 years of experience as both a member and chair of a variety of government and not for profit boards.

She has a background in town planning, and currently sits on the Victorian Planning Authority and Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission boards.



Picture: Andrew Cantwell

She was also appointed as an administrator on the panel of administrators for Greater Geelong City Council in 2016/17 and held previous roles as a senior executive both at the Department of Treasury and Finance and Melbourne City Council.

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Former Casey mayor Amanda Stapledon was widely admired for her community work. 194479 Pictures: STEWART CHAMBERS

Nevaeh (6) with Mayor Cr Amanda Stapledon in the very safe outdoor walled playground . 193854

Amanda 'sorely missed'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Shocked friends and colleagues have hailed former City of Casey mayor Amanda Stapledon for her "incredible" and "tireless" community work.

The 58-year-old former councillor - who had been rocked by an IBAC inquiry into Casey councillors - was found dead in a car in Stringybark Drive about 12.30pm on Tuesday 18 January.

Her death is not being treated as suspicious, Victoria Police stated.

Ms Stapledon was widely admired as a strong, unflinching community voice, especially for disability and carer issues.

Many also paid tribute to her as a devoted sole carer for her family over decades.

She leaves behind a frail father who she visited daily in aged care and Pete - her adult son

who has multiple disabilities.

Blairlogie chief executive Carolyn Carr said Ms Stapledon was "one of the most incredible community leaders I've ever met".

Her staff reacted with "gasps" and "broke down" at the tragic news.

"She's been an incredible support for not only our organisation but for people with disabilities in general. And more than that, for carers with people with disabilities.

"She worked tirelessly to raise awareness about how carers and people with disabilities have to live with such a lack of access to services.

"She did all that while being the mum to Pete and Pete was her world.

"She always put him first and I don't know how she did it all."

Ms Stapledon fought for proper support for

carers so they could be part of the workforce, Ms Carr said.

"She's been fighting for that since Pete was a baby. He's now 28, and she's been carrying that banner for such a long time.

"The sad thing is, we're not going to have another voice like Amanda. She'll be hugely missed by the community."

Ms Stapledon's passion for disability support preceded her council terms between 2008-'20, including two stints as mayor.

She co-founded Casey Kidz Club - an after-school care program for disabled teenagers - and highlighted the lack of funding support.

Among her major legacies were two 75-kilometre Mayors Walks for Disability - in which she spread the word on service gaps for people with disabilities and their carers.

The initial feat led to her being crowned the

Star News Person of the Year 2013.

Ms Stapledon was also a past president of Disability Capability and had held positions on the Blairlogie Living and Learning Board, the Casey Cardinia and ACE (Aiding Casey Education) foundations and Merinda Park Learning and Community Centre.

She was patron of the Cranbourne Football Club All Abilities Team and the YMCA Open Doors Program.

For many years, she hosted Women of Today on Casey Radio 97.7FM and penned a regular column for Star News Group.

She made two unsuccessful tilts at state politics - as an independent in 2010 and a Liberal candidate in 2014.

For crisis support, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au or beyond blue on 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au



Amanda Stapledon with Cranbourne Bowls Club's Tony Collins, Ray Boskell and Shirley Venville. 197309
Pictures: ROB CAREW



Mayor Amanda Stapledon leads the Walk for Disability in 2019. 198158

Cr rocked by IBAC inquiry

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Friends of the late Casey councillor Amanda Stapledon say she had been "deeply upset" by an IBAC investigation into alleged corruption by Casey councillors.

With IBAC expected to finalise its report soon, Ms Stapledon's close friend Kerril Burns said the protracted two-year ordeal had a deep impact.

"The treatment of all people involved in all IBAC investigations needs to be thoroughly investigated.

"This has dragged on for so long and it has to affect a person's mind.

"People who are not criminals should not be treated as such."

As a councillor, Ms Stapledon was interested in "every resident's problems", Ms Burns said.

"When I first met Amanda I received the same cheerful smile to which all who know her are accustomed.

"My memories of Amanda will always be of the wonderful caring person who loved her father, mother and son so much.

"She loved Casey and Cranbourne in particular so much, and relished her time representing the residents of Casey.

"She will be sorely missed by so many of us." Former Casey councillor Colin Butler said Ms Stapledon's passing was an "absolute tragedy".

"She was fine until (IBAC) hit and she went downhill from there. We tried and tried and tried but in the end it got her.

"I didn't think she'd take it to heart that badly. It didn't matter how many times we said you did nothing wrong.

"We've lost such an important person in the community.

"I think she's the most selfless person I've met. It wasn't about her but about everyone else."

She'd help anyone regardless of politics or religious affiliation, he said.

"She found time for everybody. I don't know how - she said she just liked to keep going and going all the time.

"I don't think I've come across a more community-minded person-councillor-mayor in my life. She was way in front of everyone else."

At the IBAC Operation Sandon inquiry in 2020, Ms Stapledon conceded that she'd failed to properly declare a conflict of interest at council - namely a \$25,000 state election donation from property developer John Woodman who had a stake in rezoning industrial land in Cranbourne West.

After the 2016 council election, Ms Stapledon also omitted declaring being part of Mr Woodman's \$100,000 campaign for a group of "like-minded" candidates.

She had said she was uncertain whether Mr Woodman had funded the campaign.

She also met with Mr Woodman shortly before being elected as mayor in 2018.

"Mr Woodman has never asked me to do anything for him," Ms Stapledon told the inquiry.



Mayor Amanda Stapledon with a Christmas Tree at Bunjil Place. 188188



Mayor Amanda Stapledon celebrates with Casey Cardinia Business of the Year recipients from Gumbuya World. 199194

"Last time I spoke to her was before last Christmas, she seemed OK. I'm disappointed she didn't feel she could reach out."

Kay Morland, wife of late Casey mayor Mick Morland, said it was "impossible to recognise all that Amanda was to her family, her friends and this community".

She touched thousands with her tireless support for many community groups within and outside Casey.

"She was the most community minded and caring human being I ever met," Mrs Morland said.

"Amanda always saw the best in everyone and was more than generous in her praise, support and encouragement to all.

"We shared an ongoing joke about wearing the right shoes for the occasion and many times she would glance my way during a function, wink and hold out her foot for approval.

"The world is a lesser place now she's not here. RIP gorgeous girl. I hope you know how loved you were."

Former councillor Damien Rosario said Ms Stapledon was "truly the best of us".

"She truly did care about the community and worked very hard to improve things for the lives of her residents.

"Even after council, she was volunteering with groups and guiding them - it was a testament to who she was."

Ms Stapledon was the driver of the inclusive playground Livvi's Place in Lyndhurst, Mr Rosario said.

"Her name should have been on that plaque (at the playground)."

In a statement, City of Casey stated Ms Stapledon focussed on improving access and inclusion for all.

"As a sole carer of an adult child with a disability, she understood the pressure on families, carers, and our older persons.

"Many would describe Amanda as someone who had dedicated her life, aside from her family, to helping others."

She also advocated for tourism, roads and key infrastructure as well as waste management and longer-term sustainability.

"She is no doubt missed and mourned by many.

"Rest in peace, Amanda Stapledon."

For crisis support, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au or beyond blue on 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au

"I need to be very clear there: he has done nothing improper in that regard."

Close friend Rob Ward said Ms Stapledon may have been too naive and trusting of others. There was "not an ounce of malfeasance" in her, he said.

"She was an outstanding human being who will be greatly missed not just for what she did but for who she was.

"A kinder, more generous, gentler person you could not find. Her dedication to her son for more than 20 years is legendary.

"The pressure that IBAC brought to bear was intolerable. There are people who do the wrong thing that have no conscience but she was so tender that the thought of making a mistake was too much to bear."

Former councillor Wayne Smith said Ms Stapledon was a "genuinely good representative who cared for her community".

"Her community was number one. That was shown in the fact she supported so many organisations.

"It has come as a shock.

P5. 11th JANUARY 2022

ALP probed

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

"There are no good guys in the Labor Party", former factional powerbroker Adem Somyurek told an IBAC inquiry into ALP branch-stacking late in 2021.

Mr Somyurek is the central person-of-interest in the Operation Watts inquiry into the use of publicly-funded electorate officers for ALP factional activities.

His Dandenong office allegedly spent about \$1 million in four years on staff, yet former employees testified they had little work to do, the inquiry heard.

Instead there were spikes of intense factional activity.

Workers were paid while not showing up to the office or even logging onto computers to work at home. Some were employed as "factional patronage" or "nepotism", the inquiry heard.

Mr Somyurek told the inquiry it had been "liberating" to concede his role, in which staffers and MPs were diverted in an inter-factional "war".

He was at pains to point out that it was not just him and his 'Moderate Labor' allies, but also the party's Socialist Left who were "turning up a lot of people".

It was a culture across the party, he argued. "It reproduces itself. But the question is how you're going to fix it.

"I came in, I knew nothing about it, I observed and I was socialized into it, and I continued the practice."

IBAC is expected to hand down its report ahead of this year's state election.

Mr Somyurek, who says he's been working on a tell-all book, is unlikely to be re-elected - having been banned for life from the ALP.

IN CASEY FILE
IBAC INQUIRY
SOMYUREK

Red shirts probe reopens

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

South Eastern Metropolitan MP and ex-ALP powerbroker Adem Somyurek has won a narrow vote in State Parliament for a revived investigation of the 'red shirts' rort.

The vote was won after his former factional ally and Labor back-bencher Kaushaliya Vaghela sensationally crossed the floor in the Legislative Council on 9 February.

The red shirts affair refers to Labor's misuse of \$388,000 of taxpayer funds on electorate office staff campaigning in the 2014 state election.

The motion referred the allegations again to the Victorian Ombudsman Deborah Glass, in the hope of her referring them to IBAC's Operation Watts inquiry.

It also referred allegations of the role of Premier Daniel Andrews in 'red shirts', branch-stacking of all ALP factions, the Premier's social media unit and the stacking of "ALP activists" in the public service.

Mr Somyurek told Parliament that Mr Andrews - whose Mulgrave seat is a short drive from Mr Somyurek's former Dandenong office - "crossed the line" in "designing" the red-shirts scheme.

"At the end of the day what we had was that we were desperate to win ... he did something well beyond what he should have. He crossed the line. He designed this system.

"He told me personally, 'You've got to take part in this process whether you want to win or not', and that reflected his mentality at the time."

He and 24 other MPs were "forced by the leadership" to sign off on false time-sheets six months in advance for their electorate officers, Mr Somyurek said.

"We signed false documents saying that our staff worked in our offices. They worked for the ALP campaigning, right? That flipped an election.



Adem Somyurek appearing at the IBAC Operation Watts inquiry into ALP branch-stacking.

"I am very scared about the red shirts issue. I am very scared, so if this gets through today ... I will be going home and not being able to sleep at night.

"But there is a principle on the line."

Ms Glass in an earlier report referred to the red-shirt scheme as an "artifice" but didn't recommend charges.

Her investigation was constrained by a lack of coercive powers to compel MPs as witnesses and subpoena documents, Mr Somyurek said.

Mr Somyurek recently admitted to Operation Watts of branch-stacking by him and his Moderate Labor faction, as well as being involved in 'red shirts'.

He was gone from the party soon after the branch-stacking allegations broke on 60 Minutes in June 2020.

Mr Andrews has consistently denied knowing about the rort.

Opposition Upper House leader David Davis accused the government of "hindering" a Victoria Police investigation, which cleared more than a dozen Labor MPs of wrongdoing.

"The truth of the matter is that Daniel Andrews and many in this government should be in jail," he told Parliament.

"They took the money, they stole the money, the theft happened, the crooked stuff happened—and they should be in jail.

"If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear, and in this case you can see that Labor has a lot to fear because it is corrupt to the core."

Against the motion, Labor MP Nina Taylor said the Victorian Ombudsman and IBAC had the resources and legislation needed to investigate alleged corruption.

"It is absolutely appropriate that they determine the scope of these investigations free from attempted political interference."

Reason Party MP Fiona Patten took issue with the "lack of faith" shown in the Ombudsman, and with Mr Somyurek's "absolutely self-serving" motion.

"I am also troubled that we would say that our independent organisations are not good enough, that we have to direct them, that it is up to us as politicians to direct those independent organisations."

Greens leader Samantha Ratnam opposed "a person who is subject to a very serious investigation by IBAC and the Ombudsman bringing a motion ... seemingly to change the terms of reference".

After crossing the Upper House floor, Ms Vaghela is predicted to either resign or be kicked out of the ALP.

She and a swathe of MPs from Mr Somyurek's faction had lost ALP pre-selection ahead of the 2022 state election.

In a statement she said the Socialist Left faction and other factions must be investigated.

"Branch stacking is endemic in the ALP, and I understand it has been for decades, therefore what happened at IBAC was a grave injustice because it was discriminatory.

"I am a migrant in this country and thought that everyone was equal when it comes to the law, apparently some people are more equal than others."

Mr Andrews has pointedly refused to comment on Mr Somyurek and the motion.

Corruption reforms sought

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

IBAC and the Victorian Ombudsman have written to Victorian political party leaders for recommendations on how to stop MPs' alleged misuse of public funds.

The watchdog authorities jointly stated they will recommend law reforms to strengthen Parliamentary accountability, particularly for breaches of MPs' code of conduct.

At the recent IBAC Operation Watts hearings, it was alleged some Victorian MPs were directing taxpayer-funded electorate officers and ministerial advisers to do party-political work during work hours.

Among the people of interest were South-East based MPs and former ALP factional allies Adem Somyurek and Anthony Byrne.

State Ombudsman Deborah Glass said

despite a package of reforms by Parliament after her 'Red Shirts' report in 2018, the existing laws and rules were "not robust enough" to prevent the misuse of public resources.

The inquiry heard that Parliament deliberately omitted reference to "party specific" work during the reforms.

IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich said "much of the evidence heard at the public hearings spoke about how taxpayer funds were directed to ministerial and electorate office staff to perform party-political during work hours, rather than the job they were hired to do in performing ministerial or electorate work".

IBAC and the VO are also "seeking clarity" on the MPs' appointment process of electoral and ministerial staff, and whether the staffing allocation and electorate office budgets



IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich at the Operation Watts hearings in October.

should be reduced.

The Operation Watts joint investigation by IBAC and the VO is ongoing, though public

hearings have ended.

The report is expected to be released in 2022.

P4 21st DECEMBER 2021 JOURNAL

Landeryou brain-stormed 'Covid story'

By Cam Luçadou-Wells

Former ALP powerbroker Adem Somyurek was accused of "brainstorming" a story to explain footage of him withdrawing cash from an ATM to pay for other members' party memberships.

The IBAC Operation Watts inquiry had heard that the practice was utilised by several Labor MPs as part of a branch-stacking regime.

It played a tapped phone call between Mr Somyurek and Andrew Landeryou discussing the footage screened on 60 Minutes's expose 'The Faceless Man' two days earlier.

Mr Somyurek had been filmed withdrawing cash and handing it to staffer Nick McLennan in a car park.

On 16 June 2020, Mr Landeryou and Mr Somyurek discuss possible explanations, including that Mr Somyurek acted out of "Corona paranoia".

"There are any number of explanations around that that are quite okay but it boils down to the forms had to be lodged by a certain time and you were lodging them," Mr Landeryou says.

Mr Somyurek suggests: "Or the gentleman that received the money could not leave his house because of Coronavirus. Yeah, that's probably (a) better one.

"That's probably the best one, isn't it."

Mr Landeryou said: "You could have gone and visited to collect the cash, but during Corona you've been very paranoid about it and you thought it's much better to go to the ATM."

There was less chance that ATM money would be contaminated, Mr Landeryou mused.

At the inquiry on 12 November 2021, Mr Somyurek had said he got out the cash be-



Adem Somyurek on day three of his evidence at the IBAC inquiry.

cause a staffer was anxious about Covid.

"(The staffer) rocked up with rubber gloves and she looked all... apprehensive about touching anything.

"So I got it myself... And I did intend to get reimbursed for it."

Counsel assisting IBAC, Chris Carr asserted the conversation with Mr Landeryou was the "genesis of the Covid story".

"This is where you are brainstorming what story you are going to give to explain the facts that you apprehend will be publicly known?

"What's the best explanation we can give?"

"What's the best lie we can come up with."

Mr Somyurek responded that it was "not a story". The "critical" issue was he earlier ad-

mitted to the inquiry he paid for the memberships himself.

IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich noted Mr Somyurek had come a long way since the start of his evidence.

"It's only been in more recent times that you have been willing to acknowledge things that previously you were not prepared to do?"

Mr Somyurek said: "And yeah it's liberating."

In his evidence, he'd said he'd "lost perspective" in which taxpayer-funded staffers and MPs were diverted into an inter-factional "war".

He agreed that staffers rose to the ranks of MPs through branch-stacking and factional patronage.

And that this distorted who gets an opportunity to stand to be MPs.

There was a culture to misuse taxpayer resources for factional ends, he agreed.

"It reproduces itself. But the question is how you're going to fix it.

"I came in, I knew nothing about it, I observed and I was socialized into it, and I continued the practice."

Mr Somyurek's four days of evidence concluded on 12 November.

Somali Australian Council of Victoria secretary Dr Hussein Haraco was scheduled to front the hearing on 26 November.

But because of ongoing medical reasons, he did not appear, IBAC stated.

Dr Haraco, an electorate officer for Mr Somyurek, had previously postponed IBAC appearances in late October on medical grounds.

The Operation Watts public hearings have closed for 2021.

IBAC stated that the investigation is ongoing.

P6 JOURNAL 30 NOVEMBER 2021

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We deserve better

In her letter, in relation to the IBAC inquiry (Dandenong Star Journal, 2 November), Gaye Guest questions - "given the branch stacking inquiry surely this should disqualify those Crs ... However they seem to be wearing it as a badge of honour and believe it entitles them to the top job. Why are bad choices rewarded? It is simply abhorrent".

She goes on to say: "It shows how our Council is controlled by higher powers and how corruption has seeped into our council chamber and is not being stamped out or 'shown the door'".

Yes Gaye, we the residents of Dandenong and the South East definitely deserve better without any shadow of a doubt.

Unfortunately such are the far reaching outcomes of what branch stacking does to a community.

The unfortunate reality is that political branch stacking compromises democratic representation from the word go, as in who gets supported and who doesn't - which includes even the membership of their own political party.

Our local MPs - Adem Somyurek MLC for the South East, Luke Donnellan MP for Narre Warren North and Anthony Byrne Federal MP for Holt have all by their own admission been guilty of participating and employing this practice.

They have admitted to consciously engaging in this undemocratic, unethical practice of political branch stacking complied with knowingly or unknowingly by others who were either misled or misconceived in their belief that their support and participation would be somewhat rewarded and returned in cash or in personal in-kind favours, as we have been made aware in the reports resulting from the investigation and of course consequently many are unable to speak out being compromised via their association and engagement.

The disappointing reality is that this shameful practice has pretty much been a pandemic of political evil rotting our regional democracy in the South East from the dawn of this millennium to date.

Branch stacking is like a parasite weakening democracy and interfering with democratic governance.

It is a destructive tsunami of inequity, of gut wrenching, soul destroying selective opportunity that floods out of the political party offices of local MPs and compromised bureaucracies in return for their favoured support, robbing everyday citizens and electors of equal opportunities and fair access.

It is discriminating against all who have refused to engage with, or who are not willing participants of this unethical, political, personal power entrenching practice, permeating the lives of many ordinary good folk going about their everyday existence in unfortunate ways, derailing, demeaning and distorting genuine outcomes of the electoral process.

I sincerely hope things can change - 'root and branch' if not now, via policy and practice - then with each of our personal votes in the forthcoming elections via the pathway of true uncompromised unfettered democracy.

Geraldine Gonsalvez,
Dandenong

IBAC starts hearings

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A joint anti-corruption investigation is set to launch public hearings into branch-stacking allegations against State MPs and public officials.

IBAC and the Victorian Ombudsman have conducted a joint probe – titled Operation Watts – into “serious corrupt conduct” claims levelled at South Eastern Metropolitan MP Adem Somyurek by 60 Minutes and The Age in 2020.

The hearings will be live-streamed from 11 October.

It will examine allegations that Victorian public officers directed taxpayer-funded ministerial and electorate office staff to perform party-political work while being paid to perform their official duties.

Public funding intended for community associations was also allegedly misused for party political work.

In June 2020, Mr Somyurek was sacked from the Cabinet and ALP caucus by Premier Daniel Andrews over claims of using Parliamentary staff and thousands of fake memberships.

He has denied the allegations, resigned from the ALP and has remained in Parliament as an independent.

Two other State Cabinet ministers Robin Scott and Marlene Kairouz stood as a result of the allegations.



Adem Somyurek was sacked as a State Cabinet Minister after 60 Minutes aired allegations in June 2020. 201398

Picture: CAM LUCADOU-WELLS

Both expressed confidence that their names would be cleared by an investigation.

IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich will preside over the Operation Watts hearings.

He said the Victorian community rightly expected public funds to be used appropriately and for public officers to adhere to Parliamentary standards and process.

“As part of our focus on preventing corruption, the public hearings will also consider whether the current systems and controls are sufficient to protect the integrity of the expenditure of public funds for ministerial and electorate office staff and the making of community grants.”

It would also examine “potential systemic issues” including “governance, transparency and accountability arrangements”, Mr Redlich said.

Victorian Ombudsman Deborah Glass said it was the first time the two integrity agencies had combined resources and expertise.

✕ “This is a crucial investigation to allow for public confidence in how taxpayers’ money was being used by those in power,” Ms Glass said.

Counsel Assisting the hearings is Chris Carr SC of the Victorian Bar.

Any credible information for the investigation can be made to www.ibac.vic.gov.au/report or 1300 735 135.

MP 'lobbied' mayor vote

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

The then-Local Government Minister Adem Somyurek allegedly lobbied councillors and 'did in' a candidate at the Greater Dandenong Council mayoral election, an IBAC inquiry has heard.

Holt federal MP Anthony Byrne, in texts to a staffer, described Cr Loi Truong as being promised the mayoralty by Mr Somyurek in November 2019.

"I was in a room with him and Loi where he said (Loi) should be given an opportunity to be mayor.

"Then he did him in using the Cambodians."

The "lie" was made in a meeting at Mr Byrne's office between him, Cr Truong and Mr Somyurek, Mr Byrne told the Operation Watts inquiry on 11 October.

Mr Somyurek told Cr Truong that he'd do what he could to assist his mayoral election but was limited by his role as Local Government Minister, Mr Byrne said.

However, Mr Somyurek instead "lobbied" Greater Dandenong councillors Youhorn Chea and Sophie Tan - both of "Cambodian background" - to vote for victorious candidate Cr Jim Memeti.

Mr Byrne's staff members told him that soon after the meeting Mr Somyurek met with Cr Memeti at a McDonald's "not far from my office" for two-and-a-half hours.

"So that led me to surmise something like that happened."

Mr Byrne agreed with IBAC Counsel Assisting Chris Carr that there was a "relationship" between Mr Somyurek and Cr Memeti.

He said that with "some exceptions", Greater Dandenong mayors had been Labor-aligned for years.

His "long-term colleague" Cr Truong believed if he had been given a "clear run" that Crs Chea and Tan would have voted for him, Mr Byrne said.

"He was asking Adem not to intervene (against him)."

Later under cross-examination, Mr Somyurek's lawyer asserted Mr Byrne, while a Holt MP, got Cr Truong a job at a migrant resource centre.

Cr Truong "was able to recruit some 200 people in the Vietnamese community to do your bidding".

Mr Byrne said his purpose in getting Cr Truong the job was because he did a lot of "social work" with the Vietnamese community.

IBAC Commissioner Richard Redlich asked Mr Byrne if he'd experienced any other Local Government Ministers seeking to influence mayoral elections.

"No I don't," Mr Byrne replied.

Cr Truong believed that Mr Somyurek had "enormous power" over Crs Chea and Tan, Mr Byrne said.

"Cr Chea and Cr Tan I think through the Cambodian Association worked fairly closely with Adem Somyurek."

The then-Local Government Minister also had a "close relationship" with former Cambodian-community MP Hong Lim and Mr Lim's successor Meng Heang Tak.

Mr Somyurek had been "fairly instrumental" in ensuring Mr Tak - a former Greater Dandenong mayor - was preselected in Mr Lim's seat.

Mr Tak also shares the same Moderate Labor faction as Mr Somyurek, Mr Byrne told the inquiry.

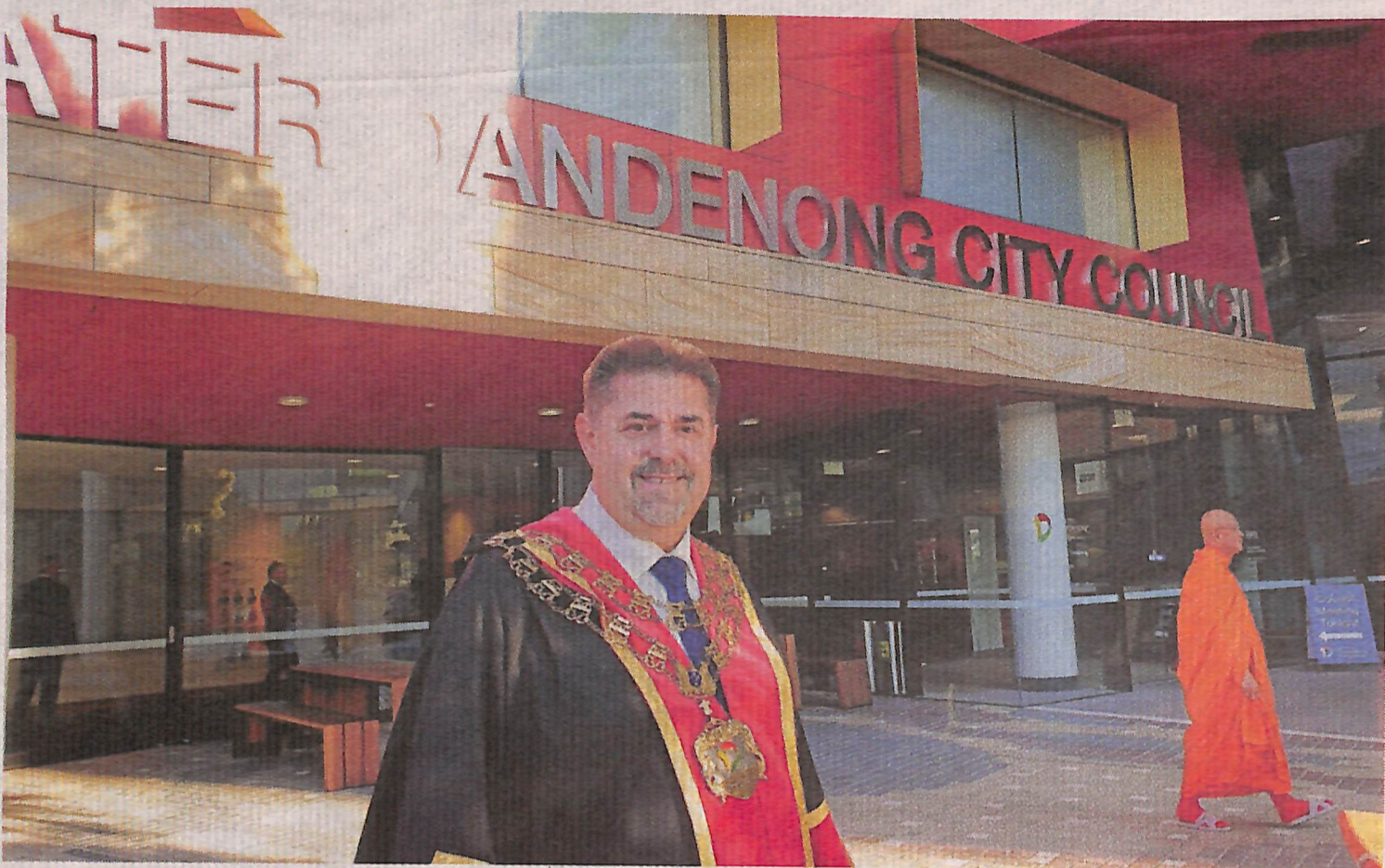
By his own admission, Mr Byrne was asked to help coordinate branch meetings for the purposes of branch-stacking with Cambodian community members. He denied that Mr Lim or Mr Chea did his bidding.

Last year, Cr Memeti told Star News he had known Mr Somyurek since 2005, when the mayor was first elected to Greater Dandenong Council.

He had found Mr Somyurek to be "pretty business-as-usual" as a Minister, he said.

After the IBAC hearing, Cr Memeti reiterated his comments last year to Star News that Mr Somyurek had no direct influence in Greater Dandenong mayoral elections.

He said "I can't recall" his alleged meeting with Mr Somyurek at McDonald's. He'd never stayed at a McDonald's for two-and-a-half hours, he said.

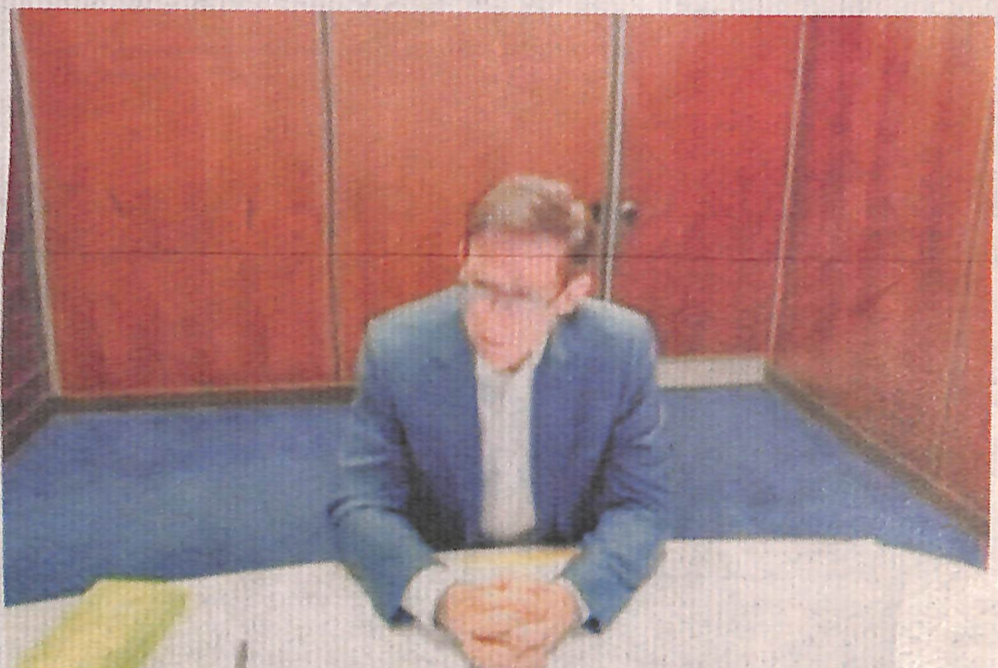


Jim Memeti soon after being narrowly voted in as Greater Dandenong mayor in 2019. 200886

Picture: CAM LUCADOU-WELLS



Cr Loi Truong allegedly requested Local Government Minister Adem Somyurek not to influence the 2019 mayoral election.



Holt MP Anthony Byrne at the Operation Watts inquiry on 11 October.

"I've never spoken to Mr Somyurek regarding elections. I've never heard of Mr Somyurek influencing the mayoral election - nor any other MPs.

"It's all done with councillors. All the councillors try to lobby their colleagues"

Cr Memeti said he had a "relationship" with "all local MPs".

"You'd catch me having a coffee and a lunch with all the MPs in the area.

"I try to work with the MPs as much as possible to advocate on things in the community."

The mayoral vote in 2019 was "hotly contested" between Crs Chea, Memeti, Truong and Maria Sampey, Cr Memeti said.

On first count, Cr Chea was eliminated.

In the next round, Crs Sampey and Truong were tied for second. The latter was eliminated when he drew the 'defeated' ball from a pink hat.

Only on the third round did a councillor gain a narrow 6-5 majority - Cr Memeti with the backing of Crs Chea, Tan, Angela Long, Zaynoun Melham and Tim Dark.

Cr Sampey was supported by Crs Truong, Peter Brown, Sean O'Reilly and Matthew Kirwan.

Nine of the 11 Greater Dandenong councillors were Labor members, except for Crs Dark (Liberal) and Kirwan (Greens).

Cr Truong, who was admitted to ICU with Covid last week, could not be contacted for comment.



Adem Somyurek, pictured, allegedly lobbied councillors to vote for mayor Jim Memeti in 2019, according to federal MP Anthony Byrne.

MP's office 'shambolic'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A former staffer for State MP Adem Somyurek has described the electorate office in Dandenong as "shambolic" and "dysfunctional".

Mr Somyurek's father was paid to clean the MP's electorate office in Dandenong, the staffer Adam Sullivan told an IBAC Operation Watts hearing on 13 October.

But he only saw the father there on "one or two occasions" - and that was primarily to ask where his pay was.

The "decrepit, rundown" office "complete with cobwebs" didn't appear to be regularly cleaned, Mr Sullivan said.

The bin liners and "once-over" of the toilet and bathroom sink occurred about once a week.

Mr Sullivan said he took it on himself to clean up the office, such as tidy up stacks of boxes of papers in one of the chambers and to use the broken vacuum cleaner.

His role was to "literally" and "figuratively" clean up the office.

"It was somewhat shambolic when I first entered it."

When Mr Somyurek offered him the job in August 2017, Mr Sullivan said he was hesitant to transfer from Holt federal MP and factional ally Anthony Byrne's office.

"By that point Mr Somyurek had some bad press in 2015. He had something of a coloured reputation even amongst our own circle there in the South East in Mr Byrne's office.



Adam Sullivan told of allegedly rorting an electorate office budget to divert stamps towards another MP's re-election.

"It was generally well known... that Mr Somyurek's electorate office was dysfunctional.

"I had a feeling of being set up to fail, that it was a lost cause. Frankly I don't think Mr Somyurek desired to have his electorate office to be functional."

He said he feared his political ambitions would be thwarted if he declined the offer from the "titular head" of the Moderate Labor faction.

Mr Sullivan said in his nine months' full-time tenure, he only saw Mr Somyurek at his electorate office once. At the time, Mr Somyurek was a back-bencher.

"Outside of business hours, I think he might have dropped in."

In a "functional" electorate office, an MP

would regularly attend to oversee things, checking on staff. There would normally be an office manager. It would normally be a "hive of activity".

But for Mr Somyurek's several employed electorate officers, there was little constituent work to do.

It was "entirely possible" that they were doing party factional work, though Mr Sullivan couldn't think of specific examples.

"There was negligible foot traffic in Mr Somyurek's case.

"There was very little to occupy oneself with in that environment.

"I know in my case I just busied myself with trying to tidy up the office."

Former Greater Dandenong mayor Pinar Yesil was employed five-days-a-week casually in early 2018. But Mr Sullivan saw her for "maybe about an hour or two here and there" several days a week.

She was doing "nothing that would approach typical electorate office work".

"She was logged into the computer. As to exactly what she was doing, though, I can't rightly say."

In early 2018, Mr Somyurek was seeking election to the ALP's national executive.

During work time, Mr Sullivan wrote a letter to be sent to members enlisting their support.

But Mr Somyurek didn't think it was required because his staff would pick up the ballot papers from members and fill them out themselves.

"Ballot harvesting" was time-consuming and done during office hours, Mr Sullivan said.

It was an all-hands on deck situation involving taxpayer-funded ministerial and electorate staff.

Mr Sullivan said the activities were run through Mr Byrne's office because of the "dysfunction" at Mr Somyurek's.

He said he also did factional work during stints at offices of former state Cabinet Minister Marlene Kairouz and Upper House staffer MP Tien Kieu.

He'd been directed to work at the offices of Mr Somyurek, he said.

Upon resigning in January 2020, Mr Sullivan referred to Mr Somyurek as "Mein Fuhrer" in private text messages to friends.

"Mr Somyurek had accumulated quite a amount of power and influence over the party."

"He could be a quite, I suppose, overbearing person at times, a volatile person at times."

"And of course anyone in that situation who has that amount of power tends to become a bit of a megalomaniac."

Mr Sullivan was disappointed in his own role.

"We chose repeatedly to do the wrong thing again, and again, and again, and again."

"And ultimately the choice was that we put our own interests and our own loyalty to factional machine and a system of patronage above the interests of the public and, speaking as a former public servant, there can be no greater failure."

Stamps election 'rort'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

More than \$10,000 of stamps were allegedly misappropriated from South East Metropolitan MP Adem Somyurek's electorate office to help another MP's re-election, an IBAC inquiry heard on 13 October.

Adam Sullivan, a former electorate officer for Mr Somyurek, said a Labor staff member suggested in early 2018 to start buying stamps to "re-route" to Mordialloc MP Tim Richardson's election campaign.

Mr Sullivan said he was advised by staffer Nick McLennan to incrementally buy between 1000 and 2000 stamps a fortnight to avoid scrutiny from the Department of Parliamentary Services.

"I think at the end of that process personally myself I would have purchased around \$11,000 to \$14,000 worth of \$1 stamps," Mr Sullivan said.

"I imagine a fair number of them were then rerouted to political purposes for the re-election of Tim Richardson in Mordialloc in 2018."

Mr Sullivan said he was told by Mr McLennan that Mr Somyurek had given "tacit approval".

"It didn't seem like something that would

be out of the ordinary to occur in Mr Somyurek's office.

"It didn't seem like it was the sort of thing that would be frowned upon or would be otherwise not permitted by the member."

The electorate office funds used to buy the stamps were supposed to be "strictly apolitical" and used for purposes like "constituent outreach", Mr Sullivan said.

They were not to be used for "partisan purposes".

Mr Sullivan had earlier worked as an electorate officer for Mr Richardson as well as for an inquiry person-of-interest Holt federal MP Anthony Byrne.

He said 100 per cent of his role at Mr Richardson's office was focused on legitimate "constituent work".

Such as liaising with community groups, drafting letters of support and walk-ins.

However at Mr Somyurek's "dysfunctional" electorate office, there was "very little to do". There was "negligible foot traffic".

Later that day, Mr Richardson issued a statement denying that he breached his electorate office communications budget requirements.

He also denied being part of branch stacking or paying for memberships after being



Adem Somyurek was said to have "tacitly approved" the alleged rort. 201398 Picture: CAM LUCADOU-WELLS

named as part of an informal ALP factional group South East Alliance.

Mr Byrne told the inquiry on 11 October that he and state MPs Luke Donnellan and Mr Somyurek formed the alliance, with Mr Richardson latterly joining.

At the inquiry, Mr Byrne said he, Mr Donnellan and Mr Somyurek paid about \$2000 each for other people's memberships as part of a branch-stacking enterprise.

He said he was "not exactly sure" if Mr Richardson paid for memberships.

In a statement, Mr Richardson said: "I have not been involved in branch stacking nor have I paid for any memberships."

"I have always complied with the requirements of my electorate office communications budget."

"My focus has always been working as hard as I can for the wonderful Mordialloc constituents, which I have the privilege and honour to represent each and every day."

"I will not be making any further comment on active inquiries."

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'Venomous' office

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A former staffer at a Labor MP's ministerial and electorate offices says about 80 per cent of her work time was consumed with party-factional politics, an IBAC hearing was told.

A self-described 'non-politicised' public servant Ellen Schreiber says she was initially reluctant to join then-Local Government and Small Business Minister Adem Somyurek's ministerial office in early 2019.

This was due to Mr Somyurek's "reputation", she told the Operation Watts inquiry on 12 October.

At the time, she couldn't tell the difference between Liberal and Labor.

But soon she was signed up as a Labor member, embroiled with the Moderate Right faction.

She was setting up meetings with ALP faction "stakeholders" such as union officials and federal MPs, as well as sitting on ALP membership and admin committees.

"When the branch stacking, I guess, had ramped up, the workload, it was almost like 80 per cent of my day was going through memberships at times, but that was not every day.

"It was just at times that's all we'd be doing."

Ms Schreiber told of Mr Somyurek "screaming down the phone" at her after she deferred memberships at an ALP membership committee meeting.

"I had a friend who's not political at all in the car next to me. I got off the phone and she said, 'How does your boss speak to you like that? How is that acceptable?'"

During her secondment as Mr Somyurek's executive assistant, she was assigned to "fix" his non-communicative electorate office in Dandenong.

"I think out of my pure frustration.

"I would send out emails, I wouldn't get anything back."



Former executive assistant Ellen Schreiber told an IBAC inquiry of being screamed at by then-Minister Adem Somyurek.

The electorate office was "for some reason" moved into the CBD in mid 2019.

When she raised the office's culture with Mr Somyurek it was "swept under the carpet".

"I was told 'I'm an Upper House member, that's not how it works, I don't need to do events.'"

She said Mr Somyurek did the "bare minimum" as Small Business Minister.

Ms Schreiber continued "Labor party activities" for Mr Somyurek after she was hired at federal MP and factional ally Anthony Byrne's office for a month.

She was then offered a role by Mr Somyurek at the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining And Energy Union (CFMEU) to sign up union members to the ALP, she said.

Her role was couched as CMFEU state secretary John Setka's "right-hand woman" because "John was going through bad media and

it was ideal to have a young female in that position".

Mr Somyurek reacted with "venom" when she refused it.

"He was mad like a cut snake.

"He spat venom at me and, 'You're a f***ing idiot. Why are you working for a backbencher? Anthony (Byrne) does nothing out there. He's lazy. You're not going to go anywhere with your career.'"

"I got off the phone, called my direct manager hysterically crying because I had just been effectively abused, verbally abused over the phone."

After turning down the role she was "put in the freezer".

"Adem didn't want to speak to me. I wasn't involved with anything."

She soon after left the ALP, she told the inquiry.

ALP 'uncooperative'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

The Labor Party's Victorian division has refused to cooperate with an IBAC branch-stacking inquiry, says the inquiry's Counsel Assisting.

Chris Carr told the Operation Watts inquiry on 1 November that solicitors for the ALP state branch had declined to provide a requested statement addressing "various issues".

These included some information discovered by former Premier Steve Bracks and ex-federal Minister Jenny Macklin during an internal report on branch-stacking in 2020.

The Bracks-Macklin report "made the point that it is clear that the problems of branch stacking go beyond a certain group of people operating in isolation from the rest of the party".

"Mr Bracks and Ms Macklin referred to this (IBAC) investigation, recognised its importance and assured members of the ALP that the branch will assist with enquiries where it is requested," Mr Carr said.

Solicitors for IBAC were pursuing the issue, he said. If necessary, more witnesses would be summonsed to the hearings to give evidence.

"It is to be hoped that the Victorian Branch

of the ALP will cooperate by providing such information voluntarily."

The ongoing hearings from 11 October have called witnesses admitting to branch-stacking activities including federal Holt MP Anthony Byrne and state MP Adem Somyurek's former electorate officer Adam Sullivan.

During the inquiry, Narre Warren North MP and factional ally Luke Donnellan resigned from State Cabinet after being outed for paying for other ALP members' renewals and membership fees.

On 1 and 3 November, the inquiry has examined electorate officers for state MP and former Minister Marlene Kairouz.

Mr Carr, in his opening statement on 11 October, said the inquiry would explore "serious corrupt conduct by Victorian public officers".

This included MPs directing their taxpayer-funded staff to perform party-political work during work hours.

It also investigates state funding to community associations being misused for party-political activity.

Among the listed groups of interest is the Springvale-based Cambodian Association.

Mr Carr described branch-stacking as "organising people to join a political party, which

they have little genuine interest in joining".

"Of course, few reluctant members would part with their money to join, so an integral aspect of branch-stacking is the payment of membership fees by politicians, aspiring politicians, their associates, or those seeking to obtain influence."

Mr Byrne confirmed the use of public-paid electorate officers and ministerial staff being used for factional activities during work time, such as filling in blank membership ballots.

Some staff were employed at Mr Byrne's office at the request of Mr Somyurek and never showed up for work for months, Mr Byrne alleged.

Mr Byrne portrayed himself as someone who tried to "de-escalate" branch-stacking in the South East. Meanwhile, Mr Somyurek was "ramping up" branch-stacking in recent years, Mr Byrne told the inquiry.

"As Adem was getting more and more power, it was almost becoming an existential threat for the Labor Party."

Mr Somyurek, through his lawyer, asserted in cross-examination that it was Mr Byrne that "ran the show".

The hearing was expected to run for five weeks.

Office 'nepotism'

IBAC INQUIRY
8 NOVEMBER
2021

MISS USE OF PUBLIC FUNDS FOR ALP PARTY POLITICAL PURPOSE

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Accused branch-stacking MP Adem Somyurek hired a female staffer in his electorate office as a favour to factional colleague and Greater Dandenong councillor Loi Truong, an IBAC inquiry heard.

The staffer, who was paid for 22 taxpayer-funded casual shifts between April-early September 2019, was hired for no reason but "for Loi".

It was one of several Somyurek hires described as 'factional patronage' or 'nepotism' at the IBAC Operation Watts inquiry, which is examining the misuse of public funds for ALP party-political purposes.

Mr Somyurek agreed that Cr Truong chose his own "friend" to work in the MP's office.

He agreed Mr Truong was recruiting or "turning up" members to Labor branch meetings.

But he denied the hiring was a "quid pro quo" in exchange for this.

"The Cambodians had an MP. I was an MP. Loi was sort of with Anthony (Byrne, who is federal Holt MP).

"There was a view amongst us all that the Vietnamese were missing out.

"They had been with the Right for a long period of time. So when they wanted employment they should at least get it."

When asked what work the staffer did, Mr

Somyurek said she did what electoral officers do - "answering the phones, emails, people coming in."

"It could be work coming in from the Vietnamese community as well, which tends to come in word of mouth and through the mobile phones.

"What I knew was that she was meant to be turning up and I got told she was turning up.

"I knew she was coming in, right, because she was a pain to the others."

IBAC Counsel Assisting, Chris Carr questioned the need given there was "negligible" activity in Mr Somyurek's electorate office - which was said to have staffing costs of more than \$1 million in the past four years.

Mr Carr grilled Mr Somyurek on whether "having people sit idle" was "value for money" to taxpayers, as required under law.

The notion was "subjective", Mr Somyurek said.

MPs also were able to discriminate based on ideology, values, political views, political activism and loyalty, he said.

"What does a Vietnamese-speaking person who provides a service to the Vietnamese community, which are about 25 per cent I think of some areas of my electorate - can you put a value on that?"

There was a "bit of grey area" whether "factional work" was part of his "public duties".

Continued page 5

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JOURNAL

OPERATION WATTS. ON 8TH NOVEMBER

'Red shirts rort' claims

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Premier Daniel Andrews has been explosively accused of prior knowledge of the ALP's \$388,000 'red shirts' rort at an IBAC inquiry.

South Eastern Metropolitan MP Adem Somyurek, in evidence on 8 November, said he expressed misgivings to then-Opposition Leader Mr Andrews prior to signing up to the "extraordinary", "gold-standard rort".

The "centralised" scheme was designed by upper house MP and former state treasurer John Lenders to use taxpayer-funded electorate officers to campaign for Labor prior to the 2014 state election.

"I went to the Premier (Mr Andrews). I said, 'Do you know what John's doing?'" Mr Somyurek said.

"He said, 'Yes.'
"Words to the effect, 'Well, you're either going to - you know, if you want to win an election or not,' basically."

Mr Somyurek nonetheless signed up to the scheme, in which MPs signed pre-filled time sheets to allow their electorate officers to "sit in a campaign office somewhere and campaign all day".

Mr Andrews has consistently denied knowing about the rort.

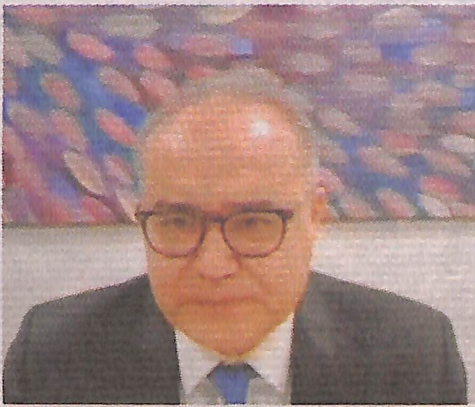
A Victoria Police investigation has cleared more than a dozen Labor MPs of wrongdoing.

At the IBAC Operation Watts hearing, Mr Somyurek said an Ombudsman report into the scandal didn't "smack it down sufficiently".

Ombudsman Deborah Glass labelled the rorting of MP's casual office staff as an "artifice" but could have used "stronger language" such as "corruption", Mr Somyurek said.

"She could have referred it for charges. She didn't.

"The Ombudsman had the gold standard report and didn't actually smack it down suffi-



Adem Somyurek told an IBAC inquiry of an alleged exchange with then-Opposition Leader Daniel Andrews about the red-shirts rort.

ciently, we all thought, 'Wow, it is carte blanche.'

Mr Somyurek was subject to "adverse comment" in the March 2018 report.

Within a month of the report, he gave directions to his electorate office staff to do "factual work", he admitted at the inquiry.

During their working time, they harvested and filled in members' ALP national conference ballot papers to benefit Mr Somyurek's Moderate Labor faction.

Text messages showed that Mr Somyurek was directing this "party-political" work.

"I was sticking to the principles of how I've always done things, right?" Mr Somyurek told the inquiry.

"That, you know, it's acceptable to do some party-political stuff as long as it wasn't silly.

"It was proportionate, not disproportionate like Red Shirts was."

Mr Somyurek said all state political parties then deliberately legislated in 2019 to continue "party-political activity" by MP's electorate officers.



Then-opposition leader Daniel Andrews on the 2014 state election hustings. 128287 Picture: GREG WANE

"There was a unity ticket in parliament - MPs protecting themselves."

"What a terrible indictment, Mr Somyurek," IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich said.

"Is not the public entitled to look to parliament as the first place to ensure that not only members of parliament but their staff confine their activities to compliance with and dis-

charging their public duties?"

Mr Somyurek said it was "entirely consistent with legislation".

"However, Commissioner, I do understand your point.

"There's got to be some limit to it, otherwise ... you can employ people to wash your car all day."

Factional feud reignited

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Former ALP powerbroker Adem Somyurek says he and Premier Daniel Andrews initiated a 2002 peace deal to end the party's branch-stacking war in the south east.

Mr Andrews and Mr Somyurek discussed ending the "toxic" war between their rival factions Left and Right respectively, Mr Somyurek told an IBAC inquiry Operation Watts on 8 November.

The genesis of the accord was that the pair "wanted to go into Parliament and pursue our career".

It was to stop a repeat of "really bad things" happening in the preselection battle for the safe federal seat of Holt in 1998.

At the time, council and government "largesse" was used to win votes and "key people" over to each side.

"People would have ended up in jail had that culture persisted," Mr Somyurek said.

He claimed Mr Andrews was "organising" the Left to get control of Holt.

Leading the Right's effort was confessed branch-stacker Anthony Byrne, who employed Mr Somyurek as an electorate officer at the time.

Mr Byrne, who ultimately won preselection, was "leading the charge ... basically invading or raiding the Left branch", Mr Somyurek said.

Mr Somyurek recalled "raiding" Left branch meetings, such as walking with a "whole bunch of Albanians" to then-Dandenong MP John Pandazopoulos's office.

About 80 "Bosnians" turned up to a Left branch at Noble Park Community Centre.

"The Left followed suit at the Albanian soccer club where they had lined up all their Sri Lankans, about 100 of them lined up, before the Albanians were able to become members.



Adem Somyurek described initiating a factional 'peace deal' with future Premier Daniel Andrews.

very toxic, tempers were frayed, and it got nasty."

The Left and the Right were divided along ethnic lines, Mr Somyurek said.

According to him, former faction overlord Stephen Conroy adopted "conservative", "anti-Communist" communities to the Right – Turkish, Bosnian, Albanian, Vietnamese and Cambodian communities.

The Left specialised in "ethnic minorities within nation states who had a grievance" – the Balkan Muslim, Balkan Christian, Serbs, Greeks, Kurds, Alawite Turks, Sri Lankan Tamils and Burghers.

Mr Andrews and Mr Somyurek's factional bosses Alan Griffin (Left) and Mr Byrne (Right)

Before the accord, there were more than 1000 members in Holt.

It dropped to 200 by 2019.

The south-east had become a "model of interfactional cooperation" with "no branch stacking" for 17 years, Mr Somyurek said.

None of his electorate office staff were "recruiting (members) for me", though they could "potentially recruit".

"I don't have a problem with them doing factional work from my office... But that's got to have limits.

"I would insist that they turn up for work."

Mr Somyurek admitted to a scheme where MPs paid for numerous others' renewed mem-

When Mr Somyurek became an MP, he was asked by Mr Byrne to contribute. He estimated paying \$2000 a year but didn't know what happened to the money.

"That's Byrne's operation.

"Even after my factional sort of star rose, Byrne was still in charge of the South East. He was still the boss."

He claimed Mr Byrne was going to a "Vietnamese gentlemen" for \$7000 for renewals.

"I'm not sure what he promised him, but I'm sure he got it under false pretences.

"I recall him trying to beg, borrow and steal to pay memberships."

The deal collapsed after the Left "unilaterally" broke it in late 2019, Mr Somyurek said.

He hadn't been interested in messages of the Left "running amok" until 24 December when learning of about 350 new recruits, he told the inquiry.

In Mr Byrne's texts in late 2019, which were earlier tabled at IBAC, he described Mr Somyurek as a "vandal" trying to "ramp up branch stacking in the south east".

At the time he believed Mr Somyurek was seeking to replace sitting Labor rival-faction MPs Gabrielle Williams (Dandenong) and Pauline Richards (Cranbourne) with Moderate Labor members.

The party was being taken over by Mr Somyurek "whose sole objective was power and power alone," Mr Byrne told IBAC on 11 October.

"I had really hoped when Adem had become a Minister in 2018 that he would stop the factional activity.

"The branch stacking wasn't stopping ... it actually started accelerating, and then started coming towards the South East.

"As Adem was getting more and more power, it was almost becoming an existential threat



Adem Somyurek at the Operation Watts inquiry on 9 November.

Staff were paid for 'doing own work'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

An electorate officer for South-Eastern Metro MP Adem Somyurek didn't even log into his computer while being paid for purportedly working at home for five days in mid-2020, an IBAC inquiry was told.

Dr Hussein Haraco – an alleged branch-stacking recruiter in Melbourne's North – was "certainly" not doing "electorate office work" during the full-day shifts in May and June 2020, Counsel Assisting IBAC, Chris Carr asserted.

"The whole notion of working from home was going to be problematic for quiet offices," Mr Somyurek responded.

"I can understand they're probably thinking there's not much work that's going to come out of this, but they should have at least logged in."

On a secret phone tap tabled at the inquiry, Mr Somyurek told his faction colleague and Banyule councillor Rick Garotti on 15 June 2020 that Dr Haraco needed to be "really careful".

It was shortly after 60 Minutes had aired branch-stacking allegations against Mr Somyurek.

"I know he comes to work all the time. He just needs to log in ... because my office is being investigated unfairly," Mr Somyurek said to Cr Garotti.

At the inquiry, Mr Carr asserted that Mr Somyurek "at least apprehended, if not knew, that there was no way Dr Haraco was actually doing any real work".

"You certainly didn't want anyone knowing

that there was no real electorate office work being done in your electorate office, did you?"

Mr Somyurek said he "can't remember what I had in my mind at that point in time".

He said he was "paranoid at that point where ... I thought I didn't do anything wrong so it was a problem for me."

He denied Dr Haraco was helping him as a "factional operative".

"No he was helping himself... They've got their own objectives in politics. I don't own him."

Dr Haraco, a Somali community leader, was an alleged branch-stacking recruiter for Mr Somyurek's Moderate Labor faction in Melbourne's North according to earlier IBAC evidence.

He had been scheduled to appear at the inquiry but was postponed due to a medical certificate.

A staffer's review of the MP's quiet office in 2019 reported staff "doing there (sic) 'own thing", which was "probably factional work".

Dr Haraco's duties were described in the review as "does his own work from the office. He answers the phone when required".

Mr Somyurek told the inquiry that "hasn't been sanctioned but it fits with someone being idle doing other things.

"Obviously he's not paid to be doing other work."

Mr Carr asserted that some bosses would treat it as a "sackable offence".

Mr Somyurek said it depended on the na-

ture of Dr Haraco's work.

"If it was his business I certainly would have spoken to him.

"I would take offence to someone just sitting there not answering telephone calls and doing their own thing.

"Your number one priority has got to be doing electoral work."

Mr Somyurek said he hadn't seen the review, which was directly emailed to him by the author.

Dr Haraco received on average less than one email a day as Mr Somyurek's electorate officer between 2017-'21, according to IBAC data.

"And he doesn't seem to be replying to them," Mr Carr asserted.

Mr Somyurek replied: "I would say that's a commentary on safe Labor seat, Upper House MPs rather than just on Mr Haraco,"

He said he was "willing to accept" that his staff did "factional work" in the office.

"But... I just fail to see what they can do factionally on a day in, day out basis."

In the review, the author Emma Walters described that "constituent enquiries are low" and "no walk ins in the last week".

"The telephone has rung once in the last three days, and I answered it."

There were just 18 incoming phone calls between April and June 2020, according to data tabled at IBAC.

"I've never claimed that it's a really busy office," Mr Somyurek told the inquiry.

'I lost all perspective' says MP

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Fomer ALP powerbroker Adem Somyurek admitted at an IBAC inquiry to losing "all perspective" during the reignition of a factional war in the South East.

During a branch-stacking operation in early 2020, Mr Somyurek was paying for members' fees from groups such as 'the Somalis' to join his Moderate Labor faction.

He conceded to the Operation Watts inquiry that he knew the practice was against ALP party rules and unethical.

"And it was in response to hostile action from the (Socialist Left faction) but that's no excuse.

"I don't have any evidence of that. They were turning up a lot of people."

During a covert recording, Mr Somyurek is told by a colleague that signatures on membership forms don't match signatures in a branch meeting attendance book.

"Do people check much?" Mr Somyurek replied to the colleague.

At the inquiry, IBAC Counsel Assisting, Chris Carr asserted: "You are entirely unperturbed by the idea that signatures have been forged in this process."

Mr Somyurek told the inquiry that forgery was a "possibility" but there were other possible explanations.

"Do you accept that you felt no compunction at signatures having been forged?" Mr Carr later asked.

"I'm willing to say, yeah, that shouldn't have been my response," Mr Somyurek said.

"I should have been more concerned.

"I concede, look, I've lost all perspective during that time, yes, absolutely.

"I'm not going to fight on this issue. There's footage of me in the 60 Minutes program.

"I had lost all perspective and you can condemn me in the strongest possible terms and I should be condemned in the strongest possible terms."

He agreed people would resort to forging signatures due to "pressures" from the "stacking war".

"But that pressure was felt on me.

"It was massive pressure on me, but not necessarily on those people that would have done it."

Mr Somyurek said operatives may have not been able to find members and "resorted to doing some, you know, shifty things".

"All without your knowledge, I assume?" Mr Carr said.

"Yeah. I mean – that's right," Mr Somyurek said.

'Charity' job for staff: 'I was told not to go to the office'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A staff member for MP Adem Somyurek has alleged he didn't have to do "electorate officer work" during up to seven casual shifts in the office.

"I was told not to go into the office," Jacob Cripps allegedly told the IBAC Operation Watts inquiry – an allegation that Mr Somyurek said was "absolutely untrue".

IBAC Counsel Assisting, Chris Carr asserted: "It was effectively just a charitable thing that he would be given what I'll characterize as free money by the taxpayer because he was going through a hard time."

Mr Somyurek, who signed Mr Cripps' time sheet, replied: "Not true. Not true... Why would I do that?"

Mr Carr said Mr Cripps was immediately afterwards engaged in "factional work on your behalf".

"I wasn't that desperate to have him, I can tell you. Like, I'm not going to do that. No way," Mr Somyurek replied.

"Because that would be the most egregious form of corruption, wouldn't it, Mr Somyurek?" "Yes."

According to Mr Cripps' time sheet, he was 'working on project'.

The official time sheet stipulated that payments couldn't be claimed for "party-political activities" – a detail that Mr Somyurek said he had not noticed.

Mr Somyurek said he didn't know what work Mr Cripps was doing "but I did not tell him not to go to my office."

"I mean, this guy had been moved on from a federal MP's office because he switched factions, so ... I felt ... honour bound to help find him a job.

"But not free money."

Another Somyurek electoral staffer was allegedly paid for working full-day shifts in two electoral offices on the same day.

According to his timesheet, Salazar Youhorn had purportedly been 'working on a project' from 9am-5.06pm on 18 June 2020.

He was working from home due to Covid-19, the timesheet signed by Mr Somyurek stated.

Mr Youhorn was also paid for working on the same day in Clarinda MP Meng Heang Tak's office for "data processing/office admin".

Mr Somyurek said Mr Youhorn regularly worked on a particular weekday in his office.

There seemed to be a "logistical problem", in that Mr Youhorn seemed to be at home "working for two offices".

"Maybe someone said something to someone in my office that he's going to be in Heang's office, so he should be doing another day for my office.

"There might have been a bit of a confusion like that. I can't see anything sinister in it."

When asked if Mr Youhorn was doing factional work, he said Mr Youhorn was part of the "Cambodian clique".

"They've got numbers in the party, so let's put it that way."

He admitted during lockdown, Mr Youhorn was doing "probably not much" work.

'Violent' language unacceptable: MP

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Dandenong MP Gabrielle Williams has spoken out against her recently-sacked Cabinet colleague Adem Somyurek's "violent, misogynistic language" against her.

In a statement, Ms Williams - the Minister for Women, for Prevention of Family Violence and for Aboriginal Affairs - said such language was "unacceptable" and "when it does occur, it must be called out" whether at home, work, the street or Parliament House.

"Words matter.

"Violent, misogynistic language perpetuates the attitudes and behaviours that enable a culture of violence against women.

"No matter who you are, no one deserves to be threatened and abused in this way."

Ms Williams thanked the community's support and Premier Daniel Andrews' actions against Mr Somyurek since Nine Network aired the ex-Minister's comments via covert surveillance on 14 June.

"Today and every day, this Government is working tirelessly to end violence against women and build a gender equal Victoria.

"Last night was another reminder of how important this work is, and how much work there is still left to do.

"Words spoken by one man will not derail this work."

Nine Network has accused Mr Somyurek of extensive branch-stacking, including the use of Parliamentary staff and paying for fake memberships.

Mr Somyurek has denied the branch-stacking claims.

He however apologized "unequivocally" for his "inappropriate" language during an allegedly tapped phone call about Dandenong MP Gabrielle Williams.

"I accept and take full responsibility for the fact that my language on a number of occasions was simply not appropriate.

"While Ms Williams and I have been at odds factionally for many years, I should not have used the language I did about her and I apologise to her unequivocally."

In the reported call, he allegedly said of Ms Williams, the Minister for Women, for Aboriginal Affairs and for Preventing Family Violence, that he'll "get that f***ing bitch Gabrielle out".

"I will force her out of the Ministry, that f***ing stupid bitch, when Andrews goes. She's a stupid, stupid moll."

Mr Somyurek said those comments as well as about Labor staffers had "quite rightly cost me my job".

Mr Andrews announced Mr Somyurek was sacked from Cabinet, and was no longer regarded as part of his Government or "team".

He was seeking for the termination of Mr Somyurek's membership.

Mr Somyurek's comments about Cabinet colleague and Dandenong MP Gabrielle Williams were "completely deplorable" and "shameful".

"On that basis there's no place in my government for him.

"Mr Somyurek was not offered an opportunity to resign. He's not worthy of an opportunity to resign - he was sacked."



Dandenong-based Minister for Preventing Family Violence Gabrielle Williams has called out former colleague Adem Somyurek's "violent, misogynistic" language against her.

205113

Picture: GARY SISSONS

Ombudsman, IBAC to probe stack claims

Victoria's Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) will join forces with the Ombudsman's Office to investigate recently-aided 'branch stacking' allegations involving Labor MPs.

Victoria's chief integrity agencies will examine "serious allegations of corrupt conduct" including "matters aired recently in media reports".

"As this is an active investigation, for legal and operational reasons IBAC will not be making further comment," an IBAC statement said.

On 14 June, Nine Network alleged an extensive branch-stacking operation led by Dandenong-based ALP factional powerbroker Adem Somyurek - allegations denied by Mr Somyurek.

Mr Somyurek was "sacked" and two colleagues Robin Scott and Marlene Kairouz departed the State Cabinet within days.

On 15 June, he resigned from the ALP after Premier Daniel Andrews sacked him from the Cabinet and the party room caucus.

The ALP national executive expelled Mr Somyurek from the party for life.

As Local Government Minister, Mr Somyurek last year appointed a Monitor to oversee Casey Council due to councillor corruption allegations aired at IBAC.

After the Monitor's report in February, Mr Somyurek sacked Casey's councillors.

The Operation Sandon inquiry into Casey councillors' alleged corrupt dealings with property developers is on hold due to Covid-19.

Any information to IBAC on www.ibac.vic.gov.au/reporting-corruption.



Marlene Kairouz has stood down as Suburban Development Minister.

Two Ministers follow Somyurek out

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Two ministers have stood down from State Cabinet following the departure of Dandenong-based ALP factional powerbroker Adem Somyurek.

Robin Scott and Marlene Kairouz were linked to Nine Network's expose of an alleged branch-stacking operation by Mr Somyurek - allegations that Mr Somyurek has denied.

Mr Somyurek, a South Eastern Metropolitan MP, is now sitting on the cross-benches as an independent.

On 15 June, he resigned from the ALP after Premier Daniel Andrews sacked him from the Cabinet and the party room caucus.

Prior to Mr Somyurek's resignation from the party, Mr Andrews said he was seeking for Mr Somyurek's expulsion as an ALP member.

Mr Andrews had declined to stand down Mr Scott and Ms Kairouz due to their "assurances" they had done no wrong.

Mr Scott later stood down from his posts as Assistant Treasurer and Veterans Minister, saying he was "very confident" that his name would be eventually cleared.

On 16 June, after new surveillance audio was released by Nine, Ms Kairouz also resigned as Consumer Affairs, Liquor and Gaming Regulation and Suburban Development Minister.

"I look forward to the opportunity to clear my name and am confident any investigative process will do so.

"I note that these matters do not relate to any allegations of criminality or corruption."

The Government has referred the allegations to Victoria Police and the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission (IBAC) for investigation.

ALP national president Wayne Swan said in a statement said Mr Somyurek's "reprehensible" conduct was "at odds with everything the ALP stands for".

"Noting that Mr Somyurek has now resigned his membership of the Victorian ALP, the National Executive Committee has taken further steps to ensure there will never be a place for Mr Somyurek in the ALP ever again.

"The ALP National Executive takes these matters incredibly seriously, and will be responding to the wider issues raised over the last 24 hours in the coming days."

The former Local Government and Small Business Minister has denied using Parliamentary staff and paying thousands for fake memberships as part of alleged branch-stacking.

He however apologized "unequivocally" for his "inappropriate" language during an allegedly tapped phone call about Dandenong MP Gabrielle Williams.



Meng Heang Tak has not responded to reported links with accused branch-stacker Adem Somyurek. 122829

Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

Meng Heang Tak goes to ground

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A state MP and former Greater Dandenong mayor has not responded to alleged links to an extensive ALP branchstacking operation.

In its recent expose, Nine Network alleges in a covertly-recorded phone call that Clarinda MP Meng Heang Tak was instructed to stack a party branch with 13 people per month by factional powerbroker Adem Somyurek.

According to party rules, a maximum of 13 members can be added to a branch at each meeting.

"From now on, it's just going to be hard, hard, hard war ... and then we're going to start big recruiting," the Dandenong-based Mr Somyurek allegedly told Mr Tak.

According to Nine, it's unclear whether Mr Tak obeyed the directive.

In another recorded call to an undisclosed person, Mr Somyurek claimed he'd secured the Clarinda state seat for Mr Tak - who was duly elected in 2018 with a safe 17.5 per cent margin.

The seat, which includes parts of Springvale, was formerly held by Hong Lim.

"Whereas Hong used to be this f***ing whingeing turd, Heang's not like that," Mr Somyurek tells the other person.

"It's like, 'I got you in [to Parliament], you gotta do as I say.'"

In the call, Mr Somyurek says how he told Heang that "we support you for preselection and you hand your votes (branch members) over."

Mr Tak has not responded to the Star Journal's enquiries.

In a statement since the allegations, Mr Somyurek has denied branch-stacking - which is the improper recruiting of party members to influence the preselection of election candidates.

"With respect to allegations made around memberships of the party, I reject those and will be providing a rigorous defence during any party process."

Mr Somyurek stated he'd seek a police investigation into the use of surveillance recordings in a "Federal electorate office without my knowledge" as part of the Nine report.

Mr Somyurek was sacked as Local Government and Small Business Minister on 15 June after the Nine Network reports accusing him of using Parliamentary staff and paying thousands for fake memberships as part of an extensive branch-stacking enterprise.

He later resigned from the ALP, which has since expelled him from its membership for life.

Labor Ministers Robin Scott and Marlene Kairouz, who were also named in Nine's report, stepped down from their Cabinet posts.

The matter is being jointly investigated by the State Ombudsman and the state's Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC).

Somyurek sacked

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Dandenong-based state MP and ALP factional powerbroker Adem Somyurek has been “sacked” as Minister for a second time while denying explosive allegations of branch-stacking.

In a stunning report by 60 Minutes and The Age, the Local Government and Small Business Minister was accused of using Parliamentary staff and paying thousands for fake memberships as part of the alleged practice.

Premier Daniel Andrews announced he'd sacked Mr Somyurek from the Cabinet, his caucus and “his team”, and expected Mr Somyurek's ALP membership to be “terminated”.

He said that the matter would be referred to Victoria Police and the anti-corruption body IBAC for investigation.

Mr Somyurek's comments about Cabinet colleague and Dandenong MP Gabrielle Williams were “completely deplorable” and “shameful”.

“On that basis there's no place in my government for him.

“Mr Somyurek was not offered an opportunity to resign. He's not worthy of an opportunity to resign - he was sacked.”

In a statement on 15 June, Mr Somyurek said he'd advised Premier Daniel Andrews of his resignation.

“With respect to allegations made around memberships of the party, I reject those and will be providing a rigorous defence during any party process.”

He however apologised “unequivocally” for his “inappropriate” language during an allegedly tapped phone call about Dandenong MP Gabrielle Williams.

“I accept and take full responsibility for the fact that my language on a number of occasions was simply not appropriate.

“While Ms Williams and I have been at odds



Adem Somyurek has been removed as a State Cabinet Minister for a second time. 201398

Picture: CAM LUCADOU-WELLS

factionally for many years, I should not have used the language I did about her and I apologise to her unequivocally.”

In the reported call, he allegedly said of Ms Williams, the Minister for Women, for Aboriginal Affairs and for Preventing Family Violence, that he'll “get that f***ing bitch Gabrielle out”.

“I will force her out of the Ministry, that f***ing stupid bitch, when Andrews goes. She's a stupid, stupid moll.”

Mr Somyurek said those comments, as well as about Labor staffers, had “quite rightly cost me my job”.

On the surveillance, he'd allegedly referred to the young staffers as “real little f***ing slimy little f***ers” and “little passive-aggressive f***ing gay kids”.

In his statement on 15 June, Mr Somyurek stated he'd seek a police investigation into the use of surveillance recordings in a “Federal electorate office without my knowledge” as part of the Nine report.

“It follows publication of numerous personal and private conversations between myself and a long time friend and factional ally of mine.

“It is clear that I was taped and surveilled in a Federal electorate office without my knowledge and that this material was published without my knowledge of its existence or my consent.”

In 2015, Mr Andrews had forced Mr Somyurek to resign from the front bench for allegedly bullying a staff member - claims that Mr Somyurek denied.

After the 2018 state election, Mr Somyurek was restored to the State Cabinet.

On covert phone taps reported by Nine, the destruction of Labor colleagues' careers was discussed, including that of Federal Bruce MP Julian Hill.

“I'm looking forward to this actually

“In between sacking councils and stuff, I'll be sacking Julian.”

Federal Holt MP Anthony Byrne was however ‘protected’.

“Anthony's got a terrible reputation, everyone thinks he's a waste of space. I don't. I protect him.

“I had to stop articles talking about Anthony Byrne going. I said he's got my protection, he's going nowhere.”

Opposition leader Michael O'Brien and Green acting leader Ellen Sandell had called for Mr Somyurek and implicated front-benchers Robin Scott and Marlene Kairouz to be stood down “immediately”.

Mr O'Brien said the reports showed Mr Andrews' “shocking failure of judgement”

“In backing Adem Somyurek, Daniel Andrews put his own political interests ahead of the interests of Victorians.

“Andrews bears full responsibility for the actions of his Ministers.”

Ms Sandell said Mr Andrews refused to stand up to Mr Somyurek “for years”.

“The toxic factions have been allowed to run Labor and Victoria for far too long, eroding our democracy.

“The fact that Andrews put this factional warlord in charge of the Ministry for Local Government, with a local election just months away, should be deeply worrying for local communities and their democracy.”

Federal Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese told ABC that he'd spoken to Mr Andrews and expected “swift action” on the matter.

State opposition multicultural affairs spokesperson Neil Angus lambasted the “dreadful” attitude that Labor has towards “multicultural Victorians”.

“The blatant use of members of Victoria's multicultural communities, including the Indian community, for the sole purpose of enabling organised Victorian Labor Party branch stacking is disgraceful.”

MP's tirade

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

South Eastern MP Adem Somyurek has rounded on former Labor colleagues with explosive claims of branch-stacking during a statement in State Parliament on 10 December.

The former factional powerbroker was giving a "personal explanation" for his six-month absence from State Parliament since he was sacked from State Cabinet and resigned from the ALP.

He denied the reports of his alleged "industrial scale" branch-stacking - which led to his sacking in June.

60 Minutes and The Age alleged that Mr Somyurek used Parliamentary staff and paid thousands for fake memberships to stack branches.

In Parliament, Mr Somyurek described the claims as a "misrepresentation" and an "absolute outrageous lie" that led to his vote being "tainted".

Mr Somyurek then accused the Labor Party of a "branch-stacking war" in Melbourne's South East from at least the mid-1990s.

One side recruited from "the Vietnamese community, the Bosnian community, the Albanian community and the Latin American community", while the other faction "would march in their Latinos, Alawite Turks, Kurds and all varieties of Sri Lankans".

"They had the Sri Lankans - Tamils, Burghers, Sinhalese; they really had the Sri Lankan market covered - and the Greeks, Lebanese, Serbs, Afghans and rival Bosnians; they seemed to have half the Balkans covered as well."

A Labor figure "constantly worked the phones, begging, promising seats, support for council, jobs, grants, anything".

"He would promise anything in order to get the numbers to rock up".

Legislative Council president Nazih Elasmr several times ordered Mr Somyurek to stick to his explanation of how he had been misrepresented.

In a point of order, Liberal MP Bruce Atkinson said Mr Somyurek's speech was arguably impinging on an ongoing IBAC investigation into the issue.

"This particular personal explanation is well beyond what we have ever seen in this house in terms of a precedent, and indeed it brings into question a whole lot of people who have been named who do not at this point in time have an opportunity to defend themselves."

In his speech, Mr Somyurek apologised for his secretly recorded comments aired in the reports - "appalling language" that was "perjorative to women and gay men".

"As a person who is from an ethnic cultural minority and from a very, very unpopular religious minority, my guiding principle or philosophy is you have either signed up to and accept Western liberal democracy and all the safeguards that are built into that Western liberal democracy which guards against discrimination, or you have not.

"You cannot have your cake and eat it too.

"In making those foolish and offensive comments, I went against my principles and philosophy."

Tributes flow for late mayor

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Greater Dandenong councillors have paid tribute to former City of Casey mayor Amanda Stapledon.

Ms Stapledon, 58, was a “formidable person” and “fierce advocate for her community”, fellow Liberal Cr Tim Dark told a Greater Dandenong council meeting on 24 January.

“She had contributed a significant amount of time, often at the bequest and expense of her own life to help Council facilities wherever she could.”

Cr Dark said she was “well regarded” by a range of sports clubs and community groups, sat on several community advisory boards and always helpful to him with advice on regional issues.

Her advocacy for upgrading Thompsons Road, Monash Freeway and other links had benefited Greater Dandenong.

Ms Stapledon – who had been rocked by an IBAC inquiry into Casey councillors – was found dead in a car in Stringybark Drive about 12.30pm on Tuesday 18 January.

Her death was being treated by police as not suspicious.

“Unfortunately, the impact that an IBAC investigation has upon one person and the pressures it brings amongst other things, which no doubt over time will come out, has put a significant amount of pressure and has put her in a position which I am sure nobody else would rather be in,” Cr Dark said.

“It is a very great tragedy.”

Mayor Jim Memeti voiced his condolences to Ms Stapledon’s family.

“A tragic loss to the community,” he said.

“I have known former Cr Stapledon for



Tributes have flowed for former Casey mayor Amanda Stapledon. Picture: GARY SISSONS

about a decade. She was always very approachable, very kind and a strong advocate for disability groups.

“She had a great passion for the community and will be sorely missed.”

Councillors and former mayors Angela Long and Sean O’Reilly also paid tribute.

Cr Long, while both she and Ms Stapledon were mayors in 2012, had regular lunch dates with five other female mayors.

“My deepest condolences to her family.”

Cr O’Reilly, in expressing his “sorrow”, said Ms Stapledon was a “very friendly, helpful and collegiate councillor”.

Ms Stapledon’s funeral service was held at Berwick Church of Christ on 2 February.

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A loyal leader farewelled

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Former Casey mayor Amanda Stapledon will be remembered as a people's councillor, loyal mother, sister and daughter, and an unflagging community servant.

At her funeral service on 2 February, family, friends, former councillor colleagues and faith leaders spoke of a tireless person who always put others first, one who was admired for her voice and work for a wide range of groups and causes, especially for disability and carer issues.

Pete – her adult son who has multiple disabilities – led the tributes with a montage of photos to the tune You've Got A Friend In Me.

To the relief of many, Pete has secured NDIS funding support, thanks to the efforts of Blairlogie chief executive Carolyn Carr in recent days, the service was told.

Ms Stapledon's brother Michael Lord said, as a child, she was a "cheeky little cherub" with "a thick mop of snowy white hair" and a huge smile.

From early on at Kallista State School, she gravitated to and focused on less fortunate classmates. It was an innate part of her that stayed with her through life.

She'd never complain, strove for excellence and led by example.

She shone brightest as a parent where she believed she could effect change against all odds, Mr Lord said.

Mr Lord thanked friends and colleagues for their kindness and support in recent days.

Former Casey councillors and friends Wayne Smith and Damien Rosario, friends Kerril Burns, Colin Butler and Jan Gilchrist also paid glowing tribute at the Berwick Church of Christ service.

Mr Smith described her immaculate presentation. Her entrance into the room was characterised by her brisk walk, her adjusting of her jacket and her scarf for every occasion.

Many at the service would have been interviewed by Ms Stapledon on her show on Casey Radio.

She made many friends, left a lasting legacy and was a respected colleague.

Mr Rosario listed her record in service of the community, including her co-founding of Casey Kidz Club – an after-school care program for disabled teenagers.

Other achievements were two 75-kilometre Mayor's Walks for Disability, her Paul Harris



Photos of Amanda Stapledon in her mayoral robes and with son Pete. 266587



Pall bearers at Amanda Stapledon's funeral service at Berwick Church of Christ on 2 February. 266587



Amanda leaving the Church. 266587

Fellowship bestowed by Rotary Club of Berwick and Star News's Person of the Year 2013.

"No matter the appointment, she was always active and committed to doing justice to her council and community responsibilities.

"She was no stranger for hard work."

People gravitated to Ms Stapledon because of her character and integrity.

"You can't fake that."

Ms Burns said she didn't know of a person so loyal to friends and such a loving daughter and mother.

"Goodbye my friend. Rest in peace and in the knowledge we'll look after your Dad and Pete."

Mr Butler told the gathering that "you are her life" and that she would have helped and influenced many of them.

The "most selfless woman I ever met" made her council decisions out of what she believed was best to the community.

Mr Butler said he warned her that, as a councillor, she had to be careful of people taking advantage of her trusting nature.

"I think we got the answer to that."

The 58-year-old former councillor – who had been rocked by an IBAC inquiry into Casey councillors – was found dead in a car in Stringybark Drive about 12.30pm on Tuesday 18 January. Her death was being treated by police as not suspicious.

Friend and former vicar David Powys told mourners of Ms Stapledon's "profound Christian faith".

There were many questions that could be asked today – such as why and what should be expected from those who conduct corruption inquiries, Mr Powys said.

"How should we respond to the decisions taken by Amanda leading up to 18 January?"

"I expect we'd say your decision was probably ill-advised but I think I would say, and possi-

bly you would say, that it was understandable."

Mr Powys said he wasn't rushing to judgement on the circumstances of Ms Stapledon's death.

"No one should judge her decision until they have stood in her shoes. And who would want that, given the developments over recent years?"

He urged others to follow Ms Stapledon's example in longing to make the world a "better place".

Merinda Park Learning Centre chief executive Anne Gilchrist, in tribute to her friend, said: "Amanda, you will never know how many people supported you and had your back.

"Our friendship was special and nothing will change that.

"I just wish I could say that one more time."

For crisis support, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au or beyond blue on 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au

Pictures: GARY SISSONS

Inquiry launched into management of witness welfare

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

An inquiry has been launched into the management of witnesses' welfare by IBAC in the wake of the sudden death of former Casey mayor Amanda Stapledon.

Victoria Parliament's Integrity and Oversight Committee announced on 10 February that it would hold public hearings on the issue.

It will examine IBAC (the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission) and other state integrity watchdogs - the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner, the Victorian Inspectorate and the Victorian Ombudsman.

Committee chair and Labor MP Jill Hennessy said the committee unanimously resolved on 9 February to make the issue its "focus" in its annual review and monitoring of the integrity agencies' performances.

Ms Stapledon, 58, was said by friends to have been rocked by an IBAC inquiry into alleged corruption by Casey councillors.

She was found dead in a car in Stringybark Drive about 12.30pm on Tuesday 18 January.

Her death is not being treated as suspicious, Victoria Police stated.

Her close friend Kerril Burns was among several who said the two-year IBAC inquiry had a deep impact on Ms Stapledon.

She called for a thorough investigation of the treatment of IBAC witnesses.

At the IBAC Operation Sandon inquiry in 2020, Ms Stapledon conceded that she'd failed to properly declare a conflict of interest at council - namely a \$25,000 state election donation from property developer John Woodman who had a stake in rezoning industrial land in Cranbourne West.

After the 2016 council election, Ms Stapledon also omitted declaring being part of Mr Woodman's \$100,000 campaign for a group of "like-minded" candidates.

She had said she was uncertain whether Mr Woodman had funded the campaign.

The inquiry also examined her meet-

ing with Mr Woodman shortly before being elected as mayor in 2018.

"Mr Woodman has never asked me to do anything for him," Ms Stapledon told the inquiry.

"I need to be very clear there: he has done nothing improper in that regard."

An IBAC spokesperson said that IBAC "welcomes the opportunity to participate in the IOC's regular annual review of integrity agency performance, and answer questions on witness welfare and other aspects of IBAC's role".

The inquiry's report is due to be tabled in Parliament by 23 June.

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Bullying claims aired as Crestani gives evidence to IBAC

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Former Casey councillor and deputy mayor Rosalie Crestani has told an IBAC hearing that she was being bullied by her ex-colleagues for “years”.

Ms Crestani accused then-mayor Amanda Stapledon of seeking her to step down as deputy mayor three times.

At issue was Ms Crestani publicly speaking out against the council’s approvals of mosques. Her stance was routinely opposed by Ms Stapledon.

According to the council’s policy, councillors were recommended to advise the council’s communications unit of their “media interactions”.

“And that’s why she asked me to step down as deputy, and I refused,” Ms Crestani said, noting the media guidelines weren’t mandatory.

Ms Crestani said her chief bullies were Ms Stapledon and another former councillor Sam Aziz.

Mr Aziz “rallied” councillors against her after she supported a councillor who complained against Mr Aziz at a code-of-conduct panel hearing in 2013, Ms Crestani said.

“There were different elements over so many years but I’m a quick forgiver.

“If I happened to disagree with certain individuals, they’d let me know about it.”



Casey mayor Amanda Stapledon with her deputies Timothy Jackson and Rosalie Crestani in 2018.

She was “intimidated” by their comments, which were often made in public. Occasionally, it was aimed at influencing her vote, Ms Crestani said.

“It was there for the public to see. It must have been acceptable for it to continue for years and years and years. It wasn’t just me, it was stacks of people,”

Other ex-councillors such as Gary Rowe and Susan Serey said they saw no signs of bullying but more along the lines of robust debate.

At the hearing, Ms Crestani was played a

secret phone tap of former colleague Geoff Ablett seeking talking points from developer John Woodman to brief Ms Crestani on the H3 intersection planning issue in late 2018.

After crunching the numbers with Mr Woodman, Mr Ablett talks of Ms Crestani being likely voted in to chair the matter.

“We were pushing for her because she was running for us and she gets a casting vote,” Mr Ablett tells Mr Woodman.

“She said, ‘I will follow what you say, Geoff.’”

Upon hearing the tape, Ms Crestani told the inquiry that: “I’m disgusted actually ... it makes people into puppets.”

She said Mr Ablett was “talking himself up” in terms of his influence on her.

At the time, Ms Crestani knew of Mr Woodman funding Mr Ablett’s state election campaign as well as the pair being investigated by the State Ombudsman in 2015.

She agreed with IBAC Commissioner Robert Redlich that Mr Ablett shouldn’t have briefed her due to his conflict of interest. But she wasn’t sure if that extended to private discussions outside of the council chamber.

“At times I wasn’t sure where the lines were.”

Commissioner Redlich said phone taps suggested that Mr Ablett was able to persuade Ms Crestani to support pro-Woodman motions.

“Well, then he would be underestimating

me because I thought he knew me as an independent mind and I made decisions always independently, even at risk of friendships,” Ms Crestani said.

Ms Crestani recalled being elected as one of the deputy mayor positions in a split vote in 2018. It was effectively decided by Susan Serey’s vote for Ms Crestani over Wayne Smith.

“It was either a conservative or a Commie,” Ms Serey later told her.

Ms Stapledon told IBAC that she didn’t vote for Ms Crestani as deputy mayor, nor did she vote for her.

In a phone tap, she told ally Mr Aziz that Ms Crestani would “listen to Geoff (Ablett) when it comes to important matters of voting”.

Commissioner Redlich noted the conflicts that Mr Aziz, Mr Ablett and Ms Stapledon had in reference to voting on matters related to Mr Woodman.

“Mr Aziz has got knowledge that you have a conflict and he’s working on you to be involved.

“Mr Ablett has got a conflict and you are telling Mr Aziz that Ablett’s got Ms Crestani’s ear when he shouldn’t.

“What’s going on?”

Ms Stapledon said: “My values were not in line with my behaviours or my behaviours were not in line with my values, sir, and I’m bitterly disappointed in myself.”

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Integrity 'high bar'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Future Casey councillors will be required to report "all interactions" with developers and objectors in the wake of recent corruption allegations aired at IBAC.

In a further big change, planning decisions with up to 20 objections will not be decided at public meetings but delegated to council officers.

At a council meeting on 8 April, Casey interim administrator Noelene Duff approved the changes as part of the council's revised protocols for land-use planning issues.

It was part of a "preliminary response" to an ongoing IBAC Operation Sandon inquiry as well as a recent State-appointed Monitor's report that recommended the council's dismissal.

Ms Duff declared the new guidelines set a "high bar for governance" with a focus on "transparency, accountability and integrity".

They would be regarded as "best practice policy in the local government sector".

For planning matters, councillors will be required to produce a record of all requests, phone calls, correspondence and interactions. It would become part of the record for each planning application, Ms Duff said.

She said the 20-objection threshold for planning matters was "based on the experience here and the number of objections that



have come through", Ms Duff said. "It wasn't an arbitrary decision".

A council report recommended the threshold so the council only considered matters of "broader community interest" not "localised matters".

It also ensured an "appropriate separation of powers to enable Council to focus on policy and direction setting".

The protocols require councillors not to provide land use planning advice and not to appear to be an "advocate" for or against any proposal.

Any meeting requests on planning matters would be held in the presence of senior council officers and planning director.

Councillors were not to "compromise themselves by having meetings, phone calls or other correspondence with parties without council officers or other parties being present", the protocols state.

At the ongoing IBAC inquiry, serious corruption allegations were levelled at chiefly Casey ex-councillors Sam Aziz and Geoff Ablett and property developer John Woodman.

The two councillors are alleged by IBAC to have received \$1.2 million from Mr Woodman.

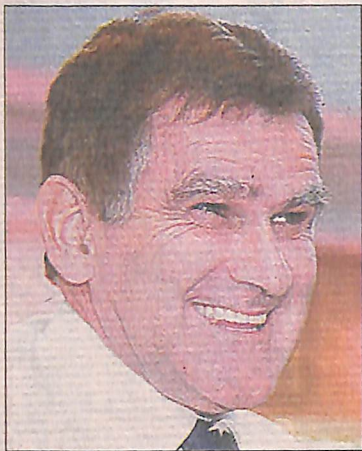
Meanwhile, they allegedly either led council motions or worked behind the scenes to promote Mr Woodman's planning interests such as the H3 intersection in Hall Road and the rezoning of industrial land in Cranbourne West, IBAC heard.

On 18 February, the State-appointed Monitor Laurinda Gardner reported on "governance failures" at Casey.

Ms Gardner reported that councillors failed to effectively and transparently manage conflicts of interest.

Her report recommended dismissing councillors and replacing them with administrators beyond the 2020 council elections.

The councillors were duly sacked by State Parliament that week.



End of term: Teacher Rob Wilson won't be seeking a second term as mayor.

Mayor to quit

THE new mayor of Casey will be decided on Monday, December 20 but the incumbent, Rob Wilson, won't be seeking a second term.

Cr Wilson has enjoyed his term, but wants to concentrate on his last five years of teaching before retiring.

"I have five more years of teaching, and if I was to be the mayor again, my teaching prospects would diminish."

Cr Wilson was sworn in in March and will serve only nine months rather than the usual 12-month term

because of changes to the Local Government Act to bring council and mayoral elections across Victoria closer together.

Cr Wilson said mayors could achieve far more than individual councillors.

"There are certain things that you can get done and achieve while you are the mayor."

He said starting the nappy recycling service was one of his greatest achievements.

Last land sold

By Danielle Kutchel

The City of Casey has lost one of its last pockets of farmland with the sale of a 131 hectare land parcel in Clyde to Stockland.

The \$180 million sale was announced on Tuesday 3 November.

The land, off Ballarto and Pattersons Roads, will "restock [the] residential pipeline" according to the property developing giant.

The site is close to Stockland's Edgebrook housing project and is within the approved Cardinia Creek South Precinct Structure Plan.

Owner John Follett said it was an emotional day for his family, which has farmed the parcel of land for nearly 60 years, running cattle and calves.

His reasons for selling were varied, he said.

"It's in the urban growth corridor, it's the last parcel of land, and there have been a number of years where we were in a position where we with council rates and so forth, which are astronomical, where we couldn't make the rates let alone anything else on the farm," Mr Follett said.

Mr Follett's father first began farming at a market garden in Noble Park, before moving as development crept in.

Now, with progress pushing his family out again, Mr Follett plans to continue farming - but somewhere further out in the country.

"We'll find somewhere else for cattle and so forth - well and truly further out than the City of Casey!" he said.

The property was sold through Alex Scott and Co at Berwick after having been opened up to expressions of interest.

While there was interest from many parties, Stockland was the "winning submission", Mr Follett said, in a process that had been going for a while.

He had been approached on many occasions previously by parties, with plans drawn up for schools and infrastructure in the area already.

Despite the sale, he has concerns about the capacity of infrastructure in the area.

"The lack of infrastructure in the area is the



John Follett, pictured in 2017, on the farm that has been sold to Stockland.

main problem, to cater for the number of people moving into the area," he said.

According to Stockland, the current masterplan for the area proposes more than 1,400 lots and townhome sites, two schools and a local town centre, a 10 hectare recreational park

and an indoor community recreation facility. It also sits opposite the future Clyde Regional Park, a planned 200 hectare parkland with sporting facilities and a water reserve.

The closure of the farm will happen in stages. Cattle will continue to graze there un-

til Stockland's purchase is completed, in five years time.

Subject to finalisation of the acquisition and planning approvals, Stockland expects pre-sales to commence in March 2021 with civil works planned to commence in mid-2021.

Bid to save old buildings

By Karen Casey

OWNERS of heritage properties could be in for a financial break after Casey Council pledged to investigate ways to ease the pressure.

The decision followed reports from several councillors that residents were struggling to restore and maintain the often debilitated properties.

Some had inherited the buildings and land, and others simply misunderstood the implications of buying something that was heritage listed.

Casey mayor Rob Wilson said it was important to preserve Casey's history but the council needed to help residents do it.

"Over the last week I have had dealings with a property owner who has about four acres with a heritage listed building and who is cash-strapped," he said.

"Heritage should be retained wherever possible."

Casey-Cardinia National Trust president Ruth Crofts welcomed the move.

She said there was little or no help available to people who owned

properties that were historically significant to the local area only.

"People have been coming to us saying it would be a good idea to get some concessions," Mrs Crofts said. "When you have an old property it takes a bit of maintenance and restoration.

"It's not like you can just rip down the house and put up a new one.

If the council helps it will be worthwhile for everyone.

"Our heritage is very important for the whole community.

"And with a bit of help, owning one of those properties can be very prestigious."

A rate reduction is among suggestions to help heritage property owners.

The council will prepare a list of costs associated with the upkeep of heritage properties in an effort to identify other kinds of assistance.

Casey Council has 145 properties on its heritage list.

As part of a heritage review, another 60 properties and precincts will soon be considered for council protection.

Director of planning and development Paul Bawden said the full report on the review would be ready in six to eight weeks.

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What a debt we owe to the likes of Norman Beaumont, James F. Curran, Herb Thomas, Neil Gunson, Dave Mickle, George Roulston, Heather Ronald, Max Thomson and Jean Uhl who have recorded some facets of the history of this area.

And that brings us to the launching of the history that is the reason for our being here this evening -- "In The Wake Of The Pack Tracks" made possible by the interest of so many local committees, who, at the instigation and initiative of the Berwick-Pakenham Historical Society, ferreted out and recorded the early history of their own particular areas.

It is very fitting that this book should be dedicated to the memory of the late Herb Thomas for he it was who had the vision to form the historical society, and who played a major role in writing and putting together, "From Bullock Tracks to Bitumen".

It was always his idea that this was to be the framework of an expanded history. That goal was something dear to his heart, and it was a tragedy that he was not spared to complete a task for which he was so well-equipped -- firstly because of his fund of local knowledge, and secondly because of his undoubted ability as a writer.

He had the project well under way when he was called, and the Berwick-Pakenham Historical Society, and the two municipalities represented here tonight, are to be commended for seeing the job through. Posterity will thank them -- and Trixie Thomas who stepped into Herb's shoes in seeing that the project was kept alive--.

The value of this particular history is that it is really a "grass roots" history, written largely by the folk who played an active part in making that history -- who saw it happen. For the sources of this history are in many cases the pioneers themselves, or first generation descendants. It is only a pity that some bits had to be excluded -- and I guess I will have to share the blame for that.

There could be no more fitting monument to Herb Thomas-- and what makes it more so is that his widow, Florrie, sister, Trixie, and son Ian, have all played a personal role in its publication.

To me it is a great delight to see Ian following so ably in the high traditions of responsible journalism practised by his father and grandfather.

The book you are launching tonight serves to emphasize what a great asset it is to have a live Historical Society in your midst. They become the custodians and the repository for much of our past -- and present- that would otherwise be lost.

In conclusion --my congratulations to the Society, the two municipalities and all who played a part in this truly community effort, and my best wishes for the success of a ver worthwhile publication.