

'Call in the cops'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A Greater Dandenong councillor says police should investigate claims that a slug was planted by council inspectors prior to a commercial caterer I Cook Foods being shut down in February 2019.

The council has steadfastly denied the claim, even after dropping all 96 food-safety charges against the Dandenong South company and its director Ian Cook in October.

The charges had linked I Cook Foods to the listeria-related death of a hospital patient.

The factory was shut down for more than a month in the meantime - a move that destroyed the 33-year-old business and cost 41 workers their job.

But Cr Peter Brown, who was returned to council after the incident, says the council claim that a slug crawled into the factory "makes no sense".

"It's incomprehensible that that slug got from where it was alleged to have come from.

"That slug is supposed to have crawled across external concrete in the middle of the day in summertime - when the ambient temperature was 27 degrees - and crawled under a door that was sealed.

"They washed the floor down with sterilising agent so anything that crawls on it would die.

"It doesn't make sense."

Cr Brown also cast doubt on the council's assertion that it dropped the case against I Cook Foods to save ratepayers up to \$500,000.

The cost of running the case in Dandenong Magistrates' Court would have been "\$120,000 - tops".

If the council won the case, it could have received about \$500,000 in fines, Cr Brown argued.

"The council should have followed through - win, lose or draw - so we could get a third



Peter Brown says police should investigate claims that a slug was planted by food safety officers. 200559

Picture: CAM LUCADOU-WELLS

party ruling on it either way.

"I found it incomprehensible that a council would engage solicitors to the extent we did, to get a brief that was thick enough to choke a horse and then it's dropped.

"It just doesn't happen."

He said if the slug evidence was fabricated, there was a "real risk" that the whole case would be thrown out.

"My real concern is the fabrication of evidence. I just want to know what the truth is.

"I'd welcome a third party to investigate. My view is all the evidence should be handed to the police."

Cr Brown discussed the matter "at length" with Mr Cook, after the director wrote to councillors on 1 April alleging the council had acted illegally "in their name".

Mr Cook referred to Greater Dandenong re-

jecting a freedom-of-information request for video footage and photographs taken by council officers while inspecting his factory.

"I have consulted the law through my criminal legal team and I have found that the City of Greater Dandenong has broken it and I have now made you and others aware of it," Mr Cook wrote to councillors.

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"I certainly hope that other officers within the City of Dandenong don't become accessories after the fact."

Mr Cook has announced he'd pursue a \$26 million lawsuit against Greater Dandenong and the Department of Health and Human Services for the loss of his business.

Cr Tim Dark agreed that the police should investigate the claims.

"We're at a stage where we need a full and frank investigation, whether it's Victoria Police or what not.

"There's a lot of hearsay ... I think there's more to each side of the story - that's why it has to be tested in the court."

Mayor Jim Memeti declined to comment.

Greater Dandenong corporate services director Mick Jaensch said in regard to the FOI matter, applicants had the right to lodge complaints or appeals with the Information Commissioner.

"Both the applicant and their solicitor have been advised that this option is available to them."

Last year, the council accused I Cook Foods of using media to "beat up" its claims.

"If, as it frequently says to media outlets, it has evidence of some wrongdoing it should make that evidence available to council," the council stated last year.

"The evidence to date confirms no wrongdoing of any kind by Greater Dandenong City Council."