

'Most abnormal'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Two ex senior police detectives have slammed Victoria Police dropping an alleged corruption investigation into Greater Dandenong Council's role in I Cook Food's compulsory shut-down.

On 7 April, Victoria Police announced the end of Casey CIU's nine-month investigation.

It stated that "no criminal charges are appropriate in the circumstances".

"There will be no further police investigation into the matter."

ICF says it will continue to pursue a \$50 million civil lawsuit against the council and the Department of Health in the Supreme Court of Victoria.

It alleges it was improperly closed down in February 2019 as part of a health department investigation into the death of a listeria-infected 86-year-old hospital patient.

The 30-year-old family business's closure resulted in its destruction and 41 employees losing their jobs, ICF asserts.

The police investigation was sparked by a brief of evidence prepared by ICF, which alleges Greater Dandenong Council staff's misconduct, perjury and attempting to pervert the course of justice.

Among the contested claims was a live slug being planted during a health inspection just prior to the Dandenong South factory's closure.

A former Detective Inspector, Rod Porter, said it was "most abnormal" that no Greater Dandenong Council staff were even questioned by police.

For 12 months, Mr Porter worked voluntarily for I Cook Foods as part of a team preparing a brief of more than 6000 pages.

As a police detective, he'd worked previously on corruption cases. He describes this one as "cut and dried".

Mr Porter said that ICF had laid out a "clear prima facie case" which obliged police to "bring the suspects in and question them".

"They've chosen not to do that. It's a very strange set of affairs.



I Cook Foods director Ian Cook will press on with a \$50 million civil suit against Greater Dandenong Council and the Department of Health. 202497

Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

"I would go as far as to say it's absolute rubbish."

Former Detective Sergeant Paul Brady, who was also among ICF's volunteer investigators, said police had "more than enough grounds" to arrest and question council staff 'suspects'.

"One of the main aspects of the investigation is to put the allegations to them and give them the opportunity to respond.

"We prepared a brief of evidence that was compelling. And my question is why didn't you arrest them?"

Both detectives vowed "never to give up" until "justice" is done for I Cook Foods.

"No matter how long it takes, we're in it for the long haul - because this is an attack on democracy," Mr Porter said.

"It's inexcusable what's happened here," Mr Brady said.

"It's no different to seeing a person get their head kicked in on the street - you either get involved or you walk away."

After the police case halted, ICF director Ian Cook wrote to the state's Chief Commissioner of police, Shane Patton, to "personally intervene".

"I can only conclude that the investigation into the allegedly illegal closure of I Cook Foods has been derailed by political interference," Mr Cook wrote.

"This is an incredibly serious matter, with implications not just for every Victorian, but for every Australian."

A Greater Dandenong City Council spokesperson said the council had "no view" on the police's findings that "no criminal offence has been committed by council officers".

"This has been Council's position in this matter from the start and it has always been Council's expectation that this outcome would occur.

"No Council staff were interviewed by Victoria Police during this investigation."

In August, a Parliamentary inquiry found the ICF closure was "valid" and in accordance with the Food Act, but "not fair".

It did not rule on whether the alleged food safety issues were "adequate to warrant the closure".

In 2019, Greater Dandenong Council laid 96 food-safety charges against ICF - all of which were dropped just before a hearing at Dandenong Magistrates' Court in late 2019.

The council stated it aimed to avoid a legal bill of up to \$1.2 million.