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Slug-gate probe

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A State Parliament inquiry has been launched into the forced closure of commercial caterer I Cook Foods by Greater Dandenong Council and the state's health department.

The Legislative Council's legal and social issues committee will investigate actions by Greater Dandenong Council, chief executive John Bennie and council officers, as well as the Department of Health and Human Services.

As part of its brief, the inquiry will report on any "breaches of law and regulation" by government officials or any "conflict of interest" by Greater Dandenong Council.

The committee will also look at the running of Community Chef, a 'rival' kitchen in which Greater Dandenong Council is a part-shareholder.

It will inquire into the council's plans to sell its share to the DHHS.

Chaired by Reason Party MP Fiona Patten, the inquiry will comprise a minority of State Government MPs.

It is expected to report back to Parliament by 30 July.

The Dandenong South-based I Cook Foods was shut down for more than a month in February 2019, effectively destroying the business that provided meals for hospitals and Meals on Wheels services.

At the time, the closure was linked to the listeria-related death of a hospital patient in late January 2019.

However, all 96 food safety charges against the business, including that a slug was allegedly found in the factory, were later dropped by Greater Dandenong Council.

The council has steadfastly defended its actions.

I Cook Foods director Ian Cook said the inquiry gave him renewed confidence in the "system".



I Cook Food's Ian Cook and Ben Cook in October, with alleged evidence of a slug being planted in their factory.

"I hope this inquiry will flush it all out and people will be held accountable," he said.

"How do you literally in a couple of days walk in and shut a 30-year-old business down?

"To annihilate a business when you've never failed an audit, and always done what we're supposed to do?

"How can they destroy 41 jobs, my family, my life and my reputation and then say there's nothing to see here?"

In the meantime, I Cook Foods has recently submitted a dossier of claims for Victoria Police to investigate the closure.

After months of fighting for access to departmental documents, Mr Cook is also set to go ahead with a \$26 million lawsuit against the DHHS and Greater Dandenong in the Victorian Supreme Court.

"We now have enough information and my barristers are writing up the paperwork for the Supreme Court (action)," Mr Cook said.

"By the time of the Parliamentary inquiry, we should be issuing this in the Supreme Court."

Health Minister Jenny Mikakos said she would "not apologise for acting to protect public health".

"If an inquiry into this matter will help to assure the community about its handling then that is a matter for Parliament."

According to the Government, I Cook Foods was closed until DHHS was satisfied that processes were in place for producing safe food.

"Separately to the investigation of City of Greater Dandenong, the Department of Health and Human Services executed a closure order for the protection of the broader community after a woman's death due to listeria was genomically linked to the facility.

"We stand by that decision and we will not apologise for acting to protect public health."

Ms Mikakos said negotiations were ongoing for a "possible transition" of Community Chef to the DHHS.

"This would be a good outcome for some of our most vulnerable community members who rely on their services, and for Community Chef staff."

Opposition health spokesperson Georgie Crozier, who recently moved a notice of motion for a Parliamentary inquiry, said: "This is an important inquiry to get to the bottom of how a decent family business was closed down.

"The Government has questions to answer on this issue.

"The Government has deliberately hidden key documents relating to this case and the time for those political games are over."

Greater Dandenong corporate services director Mick Jaensch said the council "welcomes any inquiry or investigation into the matter".