



## HOMELESSNESS IN FRANKSTON: THE SEAFORD BEACH CABIN PARK

St Anne's Parish and Seaford Community Committee Joint Working Group on Homelessness

**Position Paper: 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014**

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Seaford Beach Cabin Park appears to be well managed, and currently fills an important need in Frankston for transitional low-cost housing, especially for lone persons. It also provides emergency crisis accommodation.

We can see no need at this time to resume the Crown land on which the park is partly built. This course would lead to removal of 21 to 40 units (depending on present title boundary negotiations with DEPI), and the eviction of up to 60 residents. This would affect everyone at the park, and likely jeopardise its ongoing viability.

The Cabin Park is an asset to the community, not a liability. Rather than taking action to close units, we submit that Council should (in accordance with its Housing Strategy) be doing all it can to work with the owner, especially as he states that he wishes to continue this operation.

For Council to persist with its proposed course would in our view be very harmful to the cause of addressing homelessness in Frankston. There appears to be a stark contrast between the provisions of the Frankston Planning Scheme and the present proposals of the Council in relation to the Seaford Beach Cabin Park.

We appreciate that Council has a desire to increase beachside car parking, but there are alternative well-located potential foreshore car-parking sites. There appears to be little (if any) demonstrated need for a car-park in this location, and whatever need there is does not compare with the clear and urgent demand for low-income accommodation. To prioritise a car park at the expense of vulnerable peoples' homes, in our view, would be incomprehensible and harsh.

We want Seaford to be a diverse and inclusive community. We do not see Seaford as a community where all property should be developed for the top end of the real estate market. For communities to be viable they need a diversity of housing options to suit the diversity of needs of people and their families. We do not see gentrification as a priority of the Seaford community. Our first priority is the residents of the community, or the words of the Seaford Local Area Plan, to: 'build community connectedness'.

We appeal to Council to take a fresh look at this issue.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

We strongly recommend:

1. That Frankston Council recognises the valuable contribution of the Seaford beach Cabin Park, and support its ongoing contribution to affordable housing in the municipality:

- 1.1 Council should support the retention of the Cabin Park ownership and operation in its present form;
  - 1.2 Even if the land-swap goes ahead, the arrangement in which the Frankston Council leases the public land to the Cabin Park should continue, so that the current operation is maintained;
  - 1.3 the Council should take up the offer by the owner to legally commit to the site being a cabin park for a minimum 10 years;
  - 1.4 Council should not consider resuming the Crown land for any other purpose at least until such time as it undertakes its Lone Persons Households Strategy and other substantial measures to address the affordability and homelessness issues identified in the Frankston Planning Scheme and the Frankston Housing Strategy.
2. If Council determines to proceed with the land swap and build a car-park, it should strongly support the owner in his representations to the DEPI regarding use (lease or purchase) of the small slice of land that would be required to save approximately 20 units;
  3. If the Council determines to build a car-park then it should (as it proposes) engage professionals to undertake a 'closure protocol' to find appropriate alternative local accommodation for residents, particularly for families with children at local schools, people who work locally, and long term residents who identify Seaford as their home. Accommodation options at caravan parks down the Peninsula should not be seen as an adequate solution to the housing needs of residents. It should also set aside any deadline for eviction to ensure that residents are given the best possible opportunity to find appropriate alternative accommodation.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Why We Are Interested**

Our two groups became aware of local housing problems in Seaford around the same time, through: newspaper reports on conditions in rooming houses; through the work of the St Anne's parish St Vincent de Paul Society in giving relief vouchers to residents of rooming houses; through meeting people sleeping on the beach; and through local newspaper reports on a homeless man sleeping in the local bush. As soon as we discovered our mutual concern we joined together to form the St Anne's Parish and Seaford Community Committee Joint Working Group on Homelessness.

When visiting Frankston's City Life mission we found that nearly every person we met who had been sleeping 'rough' – on the foreshore, on Kananook Creek, or in their car – had been assaulted and robbed at some stage. We believe that this should be unacceptable in our society. We believe that social housing is essential for maintaining the diverse and inclusive community in which we want to live.

This Position Paper has been prepared to address the present proposal by the City of Frankston to resume Crown land upon which the Seaford Beach Cabin Park is partly situated. It comprises three parts: Executive Summary (including Recommendations to Frankston City Council); Background (on homelessness and housing affordability in Frankston); and the Seaford Beach Cabin Park (discussion of issues).

### **Housing Affordability and Homelessness in Frankston**

Homelessness and affordable housing are a significant problem in Frankston. The scope of the issue is only beginning to be understood. Frankston Council's recently formed Frankston Housing Reference Group, comprising providers of social housing and services to the homeless, has commenced a research program to develop 'homelessness profiles', identify gaps in services, social and political contexts etc.

Anecdotally however we are all aware that the prices of both houses and rental accommodation have soared. When it is difficult even for many employed people to find independent accommodation, those on the edges fare very badly. The decreasing affordability of Frankston's housing is intensified by the relative

vulnerability of the municipality's population, which has a high proportion of low-income earners, and approximately 25% of people dependent on pensions and benefits:

- Housing in the City of Frankston has become increasingly less affordable. For example, in 2010 mortgage repayments for houses were 49% of the average annual household income in the municipality, and 40% for rental accommodation.<sup>1</sup>
- In the ten years between 2001 and 2010 the percentage of 'affordable' rental housing in the City of Frankston plummeted from approximately 70% to approximately 20%.<sup>2</sup>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census figures disclose a 35% increase in 'homelessness' in the Frankston electorate between 2006 and 2011.
- We understand that Dunkley is currently the sixth highest Centrelink district in Victoria for issuing extension payments for homelessness.
- Among the growing 'cohorts' of Frankston homeless are mothers with children, and older people.
- At the 2011 census there were 360 people 'homeless' in Frankston. (While most of these did have a roof of some sort over their head, they were without a home.)
- ABS analysis shows that 31% of Frankston tenants are experiencing 'rent stress', wherein a high percentage of their income is consumed by rent. The Council to Homeless Persons describes this situation as 'causing stress, anxiety and contributing to family breakdown'.<sup>3</sup>
- Some of those evicted as a consequence of being unable to meet rental payments will seek public housing. Yet despite steadily increasing population and a growing public housing waiting list in the Frankston area (already 1979 people in 2011), the number of public housing units in the area is stagnant (perhaps even in decline).
- There are now approximately 30 registered Rooming Houses in Frankston, and an estimated 30 more operating without registration.
- The 2013 annual report of local welfare agency Community Support Frankston tells that there were 6000 calls on its emergency relief program in 2013, which included a 35% increase from people living in caravans, and a 55% increase from people living in shared accommodation (rooming houses).
- The range of affordable housing types in the municipality – public housing, social housing, rooming houses and caravan parks – 'are generally operating at capacity'.<sup>4</sup>
- The large tracts of land occupied by caravan parks in urban areas are valuable, and presently under pressure nationally for redevelopment as aged-care and higher value accommodation. In Frankston 'many' caravan parks have recently been purchased for residential development. In 2013 it was reported that between 619-743 persons were permanently housed in Frankston caravan parks.<sup>5</sup> But we are aware of at least three large parks that have recently been or will soon be closed in the Frankston area:- Gladeswood Caravan Park, 200 Nepean Highway Seaford; South East Holiday Village, 29 Wells Road Chelsea Heights; and Discovery Holiday Park, 1325 Frankston-Dandenong Road.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to these losses, Frankston Council is now proposing to resume Crown land that would remove 21- 40 units, and threaten the ongoing viability, of the Seaford Beach Cabin Park.

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<sup>1</sup> City of Frankston Housing Strategy, Final Report, 2013, p.74

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, pp.29-30

<sup>3</sup> Council to Homeless Persons, 'Low income families crushed by rent in outer suburbs', 8<sup>th</sup> October 2014

<sup>4</sup> Frankston Housing Strategy, *op cit*, p.74

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p.82

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.82; Karren Walker, Southern Housing & Support Services Network, 5/12/2013;

- As a consequence of the increased demand and decreased number of places available, Peninsula Youth and Family Services ('PYFS', Frankston's principal housing referral agency) reports that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find emergency accommodation for those seeking help. The only crisis housing options in Frankston now appear to be the Beach Motor Inn, rooming houses (some of which are unsuitable), and the Log Cabin caravan park at Langwarrin. Otherwise the nearest 'supported' crisis accommodation is run by the Hanover Centre at Dandenong. Also further afield are caravan parks at Dandenong (Shawlands) and Rosebud (Sundowner Willows).

Frankston needs more, not less, emergency and transitional housing.

### **The City of Frankston's Housing Objectives**

The Frankston Planning Scheme, and the 2013 Frankston Housing Strategy (Final Report), articulate the needs and goals of the municipality regarding affordable housing and homelessness. These are generally to provide housing that is 'affordable, well-located and appropriate to household needs, across a range of household types, tenures and locations.'<sup>7</sup>

#### *The Frankston Planning Scheme*

A selection of the specific objectives and obligations contained within the Planning Scheme include:

- 'Facilitate the supply of social housing' (Section 11.04-2)
- 'Facilitate the supply of affordable housing' (Section 11.04-2)
- 'Facilitate the delivery of high quality social housing to meet the needs of Victorians' (Section 16.01-1)
- 'To encourage the establishment of crisis accommodation and community care units in residential areas ...' (Section 16.02-2)
- 'Provide affordable housing options.' (Section 21.07-2)
- 'Identify the range of mechanisms that Council could apply to achieve improved housing outcomes for high needs groups.' (Section 21.07-2)
- 'Undertake further research into housing affordability issues and actions within the City.' (Section 21.07-2)
- 'Identify specific housing needs through undertaking a housing needs analysis identifying: demand for crisis accommodation and waiting lists for public housing; trends regarding homelessness within the city; housing affordability for particular groups by local areas; and the possible role of Council in relation to special housing needs.' (Section 21.07-2)
- 'Facilitate discussion between different sectors of the housing industry (developers, business housing providers, state government and non-government agencies) to identify ways in which the different sectors can co-operate to respond to housing needs.' (Section 21.07-2)
- 'Define Council's role in responding to high priority and special housing needs within the City.'

#### *The Frankston Housing Strategy 2013*

- 'Objective: Increase the supply and distribution of public and social housing across the municipality.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.9

<sup>8</sup> City of Frankston Housing Strategy, 2013, p.81

- ‘Develop relationships with those social housing providers most likely to house vulnerable populations within the Frankston community. This includes those currently in rooming houses, caravan parks, sleeping rough, ‘couch surfing’ or currently homeless.’<sup>9</sup>
- ‘Objective: Improve the quality and distribution of rooming houses across the municipality.’<sup>10</sup>
- ‘There are also a large proportion of single persons who are unable to secure affordable and appropriate housing.’
- Caravan Parks provide permanent accommodate to an estimated 619-743 such people, some of whom choose this option. ‘They also house persons for whom a caravan [is] an accessible form of housing or as a result of referral to a caravan park in the absence of any other appropriate housing option.’<sup>11</sup>

The report states (without explanation) that a ‘proportion’ of the municipality’s caravan park residents ‘are currently inadequately housed’. This statement appears to be the basis of the following ‘objective’, which is to ‘decrease the number of residents permanently housed in caravan parks.’<sup>12</sup>

Clearly caravan parks and cabins are not ideal long-term housing. But this sweeping objective appears to be at-odds with the evidence that precedes it: firstly, that caravan parks provide accommodation to many for whom nothing else is available; and secondly that it is only a ‘proportion’ who are inadequately accommodated in caravan parks. Given that this type of affordable accommodation in Frankston is currently ‘at capacity’<sup>13</sup>, this objective would certainly leave a large number of people, many of whom are adequately accommodated in caravan parks, without any accommodation at all. It is possible that, if prosecuted ahead of the preparatory work proposed in Section 21.07-2 of the Planning Scheme, an unintended affect of this objective might be to push these residents out of Frankston.

Many people who unexpectedly find themselves in critical need of somewhere to sleep look to caravan and cabin parks as an accessible and quick emergency accommodation option.

- ‘Objective: increase supply of housing for single person households.’
- ‘Develop a Lone Person Households Strategy, which addresses the current and predicted needs of lone person households across socio-economic groups and the lifestages. The Strategy should be developed in consultation with the providers of singles housing as well as local residents, in order to better inform the development of singles housing stock, and develop appropriate support for local residents.’<sup>14</sup>
- ‘It is important that Council ... continues to engage with the private sector and community to understand housing needs and development trends in the municipality, to encourage responsive policy and development outcomes.’<sup>15</sup>

## **THE SEAFORD BEACH CABIN PARK**

- The Seaford Beach Cabin Park was occupying its present site on the north-east corner of Nepean Highway and McCulloch Avenue by the mid 1950s. It has 71 units, which presently house approximately 110 permanent residents (plus children who stay with parents on weekends). It retains attractive mature trees, and is attractively located between Kananook Creek and the beach.

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<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> ibid, p.82

<sup>11</sup> ibid

<sup>12</sup> ibid, p.83

<sup>13</sup> ibid, p.74

<sup>14</sup> ibid, p.69

<sup>15</sup> ibid, p.67

- About one third of the cabin park was constructed partly across a Crown reserve along Kananook Creek, which has in recent years been leased from the Council (the Committee of Management) for \$40,000 per annum. As adjoining titles extend all the way to the creek, this Crown reserve is an anomaly that is unlikely ever to be part of a larger creek reserve or trail.
- The Council wants to resume this land. It proposes to use the land for a car park for beachgoers. It has offered the owner a land-swap. The owner alleges that Council's original offer of a land-swap was conditional on Cabin Park use of the site ceasing, with the intention that the freehold land be developed as apartments. The Council subsequently decided to simply resume the Crown land along the creek, possibly with a view to revegetation and passive recreation, although no proposal or budget had been prepared. This would have required the removal of around 40 units. The Council subsequently extended the deadline for this proposal (vacation of affected units) until March 2015. The Council has once again proposed a land-swap, now without the requirement that Cabin Park use cease, with a view to developing the McCulloch Avenue end of the site as a car-park.
- Depending on whether the Department of Environment and Primary Industries allows the owner to lease or purchase an additional slice of Crown land (upon which part of a row of units is situated), the proposed land-swap would result in the loss of a minimum of 21 units, and possibly in excess of 40 units. If the Cabin Park is not allowed to lease or buy the few metres of land required, it will result in eviction of about 60 people (including the children who visit parents on weekends).
- One Councillor and two Council staff have generously attended our meetings to speak about housing issues, including the Seaford Beach Cabin Park. We have also spoken to the owner, manager and some of the residents of the Cabin Park. Three of our members each made a short presentation to Council requesting that it reconsider its position on this issue.
- We understand that years ago behaviour by Cabin Park residents was a cause of nuisance to neighbours. At that stage there was a view in Council that the Cabin Park should be closed down. But the present owner and management is understood to have remedied this some years ago, and by all accounts the Cabin Park is now secure, well-run, neighbourly, and a highly valued 'little community' for its residents.
- The units are very small and not modern, but clean and keenly sought after; the manager reports one woman with children saying 'its here or the beach.'
- The owner says that he would upgrade the units and Cabin Park if the tenure issue were resolved.
- The owner advises that the demand for this type of accommodation is so great that he was recently negotiating to purchase the nearby Gladeswood Caravan Park, but an aged-care facility offered an additional \$500,000 to purchase the site.
- If agreement can be reached with Council, the owner is offering to place a caveat or covenant on title to the effect that the land will continue to be used as a Cabin Park for ten years.
- We have been gratified to learn of Council's donation of numerous parcels of land for low-income housing over the years, primarily to clients of the Department of Housing. At this stage however we are not aware of any direct Council initiatives (in partnership with social housing providers) for affordable housing.
- Council advises that informal resident surveys in Frankston some years ago revealed a strong desire in the municipality for increased foreshore parking.
- Sometime around 2000 Council prepared a 'McCulloch Avenue' Masterplan for the area that apparently proposed a car park and other works in this vicinity.

This plan would appear to be in need of substantial updating, to take into account changed circumstances and planning priorities. These new priorities would include the clear views of the Seaford community, expressed in a 2012 community consultation, which identified the value of the

low-key seaside residential character of the neighbourhood: to 'limit development to maintain the village atmosphere, the slower pace, and close-knit community of Seaford.'<sup>16</sup>

The McCulloch Avenue report was also prepared by a landscape consultant, and thus completely ignored the values of the Cabin Park in relation to social housing. If a report on this area were prepared today, it would take into consideration the requirements of the Planning Scheme and the 2013 Frankston Housing Strategy regarding affordable housing.

- The Council advises that it would engage welfare professionals to find appropriate alternative accommodation for each resident prior to eviction. Some residents are distressed at the prospect of being removed from the community into which they are linked (e.g. with schools), especially when places as far afield as Hastings and Somers have been mentioned.

There is also a concern as to whether all residents could be appropriately relocated within the current deadline (March 2015).

- The unanimous conclusion of our Working Group is that the Council's case for proceeding with the land-swap and evicting the residents is not justified at this stage. This is essentially on the following grounds:
  - The extreme demand for low-cost housing accommodation in Frankston; residents being evicted from Seaford Beach Cabin Park would need to be placed in accommodation for which there is already a high demand by others.
  - The great need for emergency and transitional accommodation in Frankston, which the Cabin Park has in the past been able to supply when requested from time to time by PYFS.
- In our view local recreational and car-parking objectives raised by Council cannot be compared with the housing impact of the proposed resumption of land.

There are no provisions in the Planning Scheme regarding car-parking equivalent to the provision for affordable and well-located housing.

We are unaware of all Council strategies regarding car parking, tourism and recreation. We do note the high value Frankston residents place on the foreshore. However, the reports we have seen do not appear to support the proposed car park.

There appear to be no strategic proposals for a car park in this location, or significant tourism upgrades in the area that one report calls the 'secluded beach experience and ... opportunity to enjoy the natural foreshore environment' of the Seaford Foreshore Reserve. Tourism initiatives are essentially around precincts, or nodes, along the foreshore: Frankston, Seaford, and Keast Park. Reports also note that planning is 'recognising the importance of the links between public spaces and commercial opportunities'<sup>17</sup>; there are no businesses anywhere near the corner of McCulloch Avenue.

The major priority of the Frankston Integrated Transport Strategy is not for car parking, but for 'accessibility' for 'those with mobility challenges and those without ready access to a motor vehicle'; i.e. 'non-car access' to major trip attractors including tourist and recreation facilities such as the Seaford foreshore.<sup>18</sup>

- Our own observations are that the present verge car park on McCulloch Avenue is mostly empty. And that parking on the east side of Nepean Highway is only full on the hottest summer days.

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<sup>16</sup> Seaford 'Local Area Plan, 2012, 'Community Priority 6: Don't Mess with Seaford1'.

<sup>17</sup> Frankston City Recreation Strategy, 2009-2014 (2009), p.95

<sup>18</sup> Aurecon Australia Pty Ltd, 'Frankston Integrated Transport Strategy', 2013, pp.19, 48.

- Neither does there appear to be provision in the Council budget for the proposed car park. Our understanding is that it has not yet been costed. There seems to be no urgency for the proposed car park.
- The budget required by the McCulloch Avenue masterplan – for a car park and new public facilities (including a toilet block, a new beach-access boardwalk, and consideration apparently of a new footbridge) – would likely be substantial. We think this would be a misguided, or at least questionable, expenditure of Council funds. Additional expenditure, such as modifying and relocating the Nepean Highway traffic lights, may also be necessary. This money could be saved, and \$40,000 per year rental earned by retaining the status quo.
- We are at a loss to understand the reasons for Council’s position, which we believe threatens the viability of the cabin park.

We appreciate that Council should not ignore its interest in the Crown site that it manages, or neglect its potential for new future uses.

But the Council has had a very long interest in this issue, and the present proposal appears to us to emerge from that long history. Council’s involvement with this dispute predates by nearly 20 years the release of the 2013 Frankston Housing Strategy. We suggest that it is time for parties to set aside entrenched attitudes and grievances, some of which are no longer relevant, and have a fresh look at this issue on the grounds of current planning statutes, reports and policies.

- In view of recent planning objectives and reports, and the further data that is still being collected with regard to housing, we believe that in determining this matter it would be premature, and contrary to the spirit of the Planning Scheme, if Council were simply to continue on its way without having due regard for the issue of affordable housing and homelessness.

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