

## The Climate Was Right. Whitehorse declares a Climate Emergency

Chris Trueman

Whitehorse Council took an historic decision at its meeting on Tuesday 12 September 2022 when it declared a Climate Emergency. A motion to this effect was put forward by Cr Trudy Skilbeck, and seconded by Cr Prue Cutts, Cr Ben Stennett spoke strongly for the motion.

The motion that was passed reads as follows.

That Council:

1. Publicly declares a Climate Emergency, recognising the Whitehorse community's sustained strong support for Council to lead and act on climate change, including as expressed in the 2040 Community Vision;
2. Notes that all actions that flow from this Declaration are included in the existing Whitehorse Interim Climate Response Plan 2020-2022 and any subsequent Climate Response/Action Plan adopted by Council;
3. Acknowledges that funding for actions arising as a consequence of this Climate Emergency declaration will be limited to and align with Council decisions taken as to Budget allocations for the implementation of any adopted Climate Response/Action Plan; and
4. Provides clear communication on its website that Whitehorse City Council has declared a Climate Emergency.

The motion was passed with Crs Barker Davenport and Munroe voting against it. It is to be regretted that something that was so clearly stated in the Council 2040 Vision didn't pass unanimously. Those opposing the motion argued that the declaration is only virtue signalling; Whitehorse has already done a lot and doesn't need to declare an emergency; and the motion didn't ask for funds to support it so it was not worth passing.

The original motion included a sentence at the end "*and is recognised by the global Climate Emergency Declaration and Mobilisation in Action (CEDAMIA).*" Cr Denise Massoud moved that this be deleted because she was not sure what it meant to be recognised by CEDMIA. The amended motion was passed. CEDMIA (<https://www.cedamia.org>) was set up as a website where jurisdictions worldwide can be acknowledged when they declare a Climate Emergency. Ironically, CEDMIA automatically included Whitehorse on their database soon after the Council passed the motion.

A previous motion to declare a Climate Emergency was taken to Council by Cr Cutts in February 2020 and was lost 4-5, so this new motion was welcomed by many people. Individual Councillors were sent a great many private emails from the community, and organisations like CROWAG, asking them to support the motion this time. This highlights the value of expressing your ideas and wishes to all Councillors to let them know what you and the community is thinking.

The speeches by Crs Skilbeck, Cutts and Stennett were excellent and very thought provoking. They must have had a strong influence on the vote this time. Transcripts of these speeches follow.

## **Cr Pru Cutts: Why we need to declare a Climate Emergency**

Council meeting Tuesday 12th September 2022

Councillors, climate change action is everyone's responsibility.

Some might argue that this debate is a Federal Government matter and we should be keeping out of this. I say No. Every individual and every level of Government has a part to play.

Australia's contribution to greenhouse gas emission is 1% and yet we now have higher emission targets enshrined in Law.

In 2017, the Victorian State Government introduced the Climate Change Act, and the LGA 2020 states that 'the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the municipal district including mitigation and planning for climate change risks is to be promoted'.

As a Council, Whitehorse's contribution to greenhouse gases in the municipality is approx. 1% but our role is not simply to reduce these rates, equally important is our role in **ADVOCACY** and **EDUCATION** of our community. And taking a **LEADERSHIP** role in Declaring a Climate Emergency. It is what our community wants us to do.

Councillors, we were all elected as community leaders in Oct 2020, some of us were elected in earlier terms. Our community has chosen US to represent THEM and THEIR VIEWS and their children who are not old enough to express their view or vote. We have had significant community support for the Declaration of Climate Emergency including in our Community Vision 2040, our Shaping Whitehorse forums and in numerous submissions over recent years.

Making this Declaration of Climate Emergency shows we are taking our position of leadership seriously. 40 of 79 Victorian councils have made the Declaration of Climate Emergency.

Councillors, recall the devastation caused in the storm of 28th and 29th October last year. Victoria was lashed by freak storms and wild weather. In Whitehorse alone, we had over 800 call outs to downed trees or major limbs. There were huge sections in my Ward without power for up to 5 days.

But of course, that pales into insignificance when compared to the storms that hit the Yarra Ranges on 9 June 2021, taking down over 25,000 trees and causing widespread chaos, and loss of power for months for some people.

Then of course there's the flooding, drought, heatwaves being continually recorded overseas, with tragic loss of life.

Councillors, this Declaration of Climate Emergency is not about needing millions more dollars for extra programs. These actions have already been budgeted for and are in our Interim Climate Response Plan. This Declaration is about looking at everything we do through a Climate Action lens and re-prioritising actions, so we can mitigate as much as possible against further climate change degradation.

In closing, I attended the Climate Change Strike on 20 September 2019 in Melbourne city along with 100,000 others, demanding real and immediate action to confront the climate crisis. It was part of a global strike involving 16 million people across 150 countries and in 4,500 locations. The strikes were led by young people.

Councillors, please support this Declaration of Climate Emergency, if not for yourself, then for your children, your children's children and other children of the World. Climate change action is everyone's business and Council has a critical advocacy and educative role to play. We must lead by example. Please support this motion.

### **Cr Trudy Skilbeck – Notice of Motion to Declare a Climate Emergency Council meeting Tuesday 12th September 2022**

Climate Emergency Declarations are still being made, all around the world. Just last month Liverpool Council (in a flood ravaged part of NSW) joined in. The month before our neighbour Knox deepened their resolution. In June the first Australian State government, SA, added their declaration. All are contributors to the movement that has seen over 3,000 jurisdictions across 38 countries publicly declaring a climate emergency across the past 6 years. I believe that Whitehorse needs to be equally present.

Some Councils have 'declared' early and achieved little else. Some have found it better to prove they can sustain action and then 'declare'. Some have got both the stance and the action working together at the same time. There is no single or right path. The point is that it's never been too early and it's not now too late to be in emergency mode. And we are in it in reality, regardless of how we vote tonight.

Some will continue to see an emergency declaration as not needed. Across the world, the emergency declaration debates all hear that making a declaration is just virtue signalling – this is not a unique narrative here in Australia. I say that in the face of absolutely calamitous impacts and risks, virtue can be what makes us bold and makes our communication crystal clear. Let's signal virtue, without reservation.

I personally believe that in the early years of declarations, the hesitancy was shrouded in how political the climate emergency narrative appeared to be. It was left leaning, shrouded in confusion if not fake news around evidence or lack of evidence, and was overtly politicised. I say it is now simply a movement that transcends politics. Liverpool City Council, south west of Sydney, isn't moved by political rhetoric. Their declaration is predicated on home and livelihood destroying four floods in three years and catastrophic bushfires before that. And Brisbane residents showed similar desperation in the May Federal election voting. And so we could go on.

Whitehorse might be land locked and not subject to coastal inundation or serious river flooding. We might not face storm damage or bushfire risk on the scale of Yarra Ranges. We might see heat stress or cold stress as just something to deal with. But we are participants in a global ecosystem. We affect each other's climate profoundly. And climate affects everything.

Monsoon patterns are late and shifted. Record heat waves hit the UK and France at the same time as flooding in parts of Europe. Drought ravages parts of North America that have never know dry. And our ability to sustain humanity is unrecognisably tested. It is estimated that, tonight, 811 million people will go to bed hungry, with 49 million on the edge of famine. We have never seen impacts on this scale before.

I think it's got to the point where it doesn't matter where we each sit in terms of the evidence, the science, the causation, or our political instinct. What matters is that we speak and act in recognition of absolute crisis.

And it's not enough to do our best in climate mitigating action within the bounds of our municipality, or even collaboratively across the Eastern region. We need to join the making of a bigger statement. One that tells our community, our staff, our stakeholders in all forms, that part of Whitehorse being a resilient community is climate leadership with urgency and global consciousness.

Making this emergency declaration statement is an important companion to our significant climate mitigation action already in place and in planning in Whitehorse. What I am urging tonight isn't about new policy or new cost. What follows from making this statement is already described in our Response Planning which has its own budget pathways. I'm simply asking you to join advocacy that is clear signalling that we see the importance of the global movement and we will be heard as an engaged participant in it.

There is power in making clear statements. The power of a unified statement is palpable. We have an opportunity tonight. I urge you to take it, Councillors.

### **Climate Change Emergency Motion debated at Council Statement from Cr Ben Stennett**

Tonight, I was pleased a majority of Councillors voted to declare a climate emergency. Whitehorse has been already doing a lot to increase its climate change resiliency but there is more to be done however there a number of reasons why I supported the motion. Here is the full text of my speech.

It's been said that one of the tests of leadership is the ability to recognize a problem before it becomes an emergency. I could extend that and say that a failure of leadership is not to recognize and respond to an emergency when there is one. An emergency is a serious situation that requires immediate action. When someone calls 000 because they can't breathe, that's an emergency. When someone stumbles on the footpath because their chest is pounding and their lips are turning blue, that's an emergency. Both people require help right away. Multiply those individuals by millions of people who have similar symptoms, and it constitutes the biggest global health emergency in a century: the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now consider the amazing number of extreme weather events and disasters. These are also emergencies that require immediate action. Multiply these situations worldwide, and you have the biggest environmental emergency to beset the earth in millennia: climate change.

The television program Yes Minister gave us the typical bureaucratic response.

Stage 1: We say nothing is going to happen.

Stage 2: We say something may be about to happen, but we should do nothing about it.

Stage 3: We say maybe we should do something about it, but there's nothing we can do.

Stage 4: We say maybe there was something, but it's too late now.

Which stage are we at at Whitehorse?

Here are some quotes from well-known identities about Climate Change :

*"We are the first generation to feel the effect of climate change and the last generation who can do something about it."*

*Barack Obama, Former US President*

“The world is reaching the tipping point beyond which climate change may become irreversible. If this happens, we risk denying present and future generations the right to a healthy and sustainable planet – the whole of humanity stands to lose.”

*Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General of UN*

“Twenty-five years ago people could be excused for not knowing much, or doing much, about climate change. Today we have no excuse.”

*Desmond Tutu, Former Archbishop of Cape Town*

“We have left it too late to solve this dilemma with a graduated response, emergency action akin to placing the economy on a war footing remains essential.”

*Ian Dunlop, Former Senior Executive Royal Dutch Shell 2016*

We have arrived at the moment where we must choose whether our generation will be remembered for ruining the planet or the ones that saved it. Surveys show that a large and growing majority of Australians are not only concerned about climate change, and believe Australia is being affected by climate change, but it is a serious and pressing problem.

If we do not agree to this motion, we risk falling behind our own community. Our own community has told us that is incredibly important to them in our 20 year community vision in key priority 5.1: Take a leadership role in tackling climate change.

When I was at Schwerkolt Cottage recently I saw a quote on a sign – ‘A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit’. This is about looking after the future generations, our children and children’s children, not simply selfishly look after our own generation.

These are the reasons why I support Whitehorse declaring a Climate Emergency.