



2nd Built Environment Bushfire Support Roundtable

Summary of proceedings

Friday 6 March 2009

Welcome to the 2nd Built Environment Roundtable.

Our focus today is how to best use the resources on our volunteer database to expedite the rebuilding of affected communities in a way that coordinates our efforts with the aims of the Victorian Bushfire Recovery and Reconstruction Authority and other support agencies.

Roundtable speakers

- Sarah McCann-Bartlett (Chair), Deputy Commissioner, Building and Plumbing Industry Commissions
- Chris Watson, Municipal Building Surveyor at Latrobe City Council;
- Peter Van Lint, Senior Design Manager at Equiset;
- Brian Morrison, Executive Officer at the Building Designers Association of Victoria;
- Craig Lapsley, Director of Emergency Management at the Department of Human Services;
- Daniel Grollo, CEO of Grocon; and
- Christine Nixon, Chair of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority.

Chris Watson, MBS, LaTrobe City Council

“Everyone is keen to see life returning to these areas”

On the ground challenges

- Rapid major assessment
- Co-ordinated approach needed to Building, Health, Waste, DHS and Counsellors
- Restricted access
- Wayfinding – no landmarks
- Officer safety/emotional wellbeing
- ID and badging
- Taking the time to listen to owners’ stories
- Service connection and failure

Things we have learned

- Some houses were shielded from fire front by water tanks, others by European deciduous trees.
- Some outbuildings compromised the safety of a dwelling – ie. fire travelled from the outbuilding to the house.
- All steel buildings remained intact
- Dwelling/vegetation separation theories denied

MBS processes

1. Education and Information
 - Masonry wall and stability of chimney
 - Loose roof cladding/sheeting
 - Structural steel compromised
 - Hazardous compounds
 - Trees and gas cylinders
 - Demolition and site clean-up
 - Rebuilding

2. Assessment

- Inspected c. 400 buildings
- Issuing emergency orders
- Section 29a – building permits to demolish
- Rebuilding the same house

3. Staffing

- Two volunteers being sent from Mildura to assist with building approvals

Current Challenges

- Issuing emergency orders
- Home owners anxious to commence clean-up
- Disposal of waste
- Physical and emotional burnout
- Police investigations
- Identifying missed properties/buildings
- Frustrated owners and anxious builders
- New building requirements
- Responding to Government, BC and Council requests

Future Challenges

- Re-inspecting sites
- Cancelling orders
- Reconstruction workload c. 1 year's worth
- Temporary Building removal
- Illegal shed dwellers

Q&A

Q: Do home owners need an Emergency Order or a Building Permit to demolish?

A: An Emergency Order overrides the need for a permit

Q: Does Section 10 of the Act apply to pre-Legislation designs ie. The original plans of the house that has been destroyed.

A: Section 10 does not apply for rebuilds (**IMPORTANT NOTE from the Building Commission:** *The decision to exercise the discretion under Section 10 is entirely the decision of each individual building surveyor issuing a permit.*)

Peter Van Lint & Brian Morrison, Volunteers at Kinglake and St Andrews Community Service Hubs

“The great challenge will be ‘maintaining the rage’”

On Sunday, 22 February 2009, the National Day of Mourning, Community Services Hubs were quiet as people’s attention was focussed on the televised memorial service.

People had not yet begun to think seriously about rebuilding.

As people move into the rebuilding phase, many will be looking to avoid new rules and regulations.

Councils will have a diplomacy role to play – managing the potential for neighbourly disputes.

Communications will be critical to ensure issues are being addressed.

The great challenge will be “maintaining the rage” to keep volunteers active as the months progress.

Valid questions can be asked regarding where Government draws the line in terms of bushfire overlays – bushfire has the potential to affect metropolitan areas.

Craig Lapsley, Director of Emergency Management, DHS

“If it’s not community focussed, we’re not doing it.”

Case management approach

DHS is using its case management model which normally deals with cases in the tens or hundreds. There are now thousands of cases under management.

Case management provides access to psychological support. It sets a tone of partnership - for communities to regather and rebuild.

Community Development

Working with DPCD, Local Government and MAV, we are using existing networks to connect people and to rebuild.

There are many layers at work:

- The education system has an important role as there has been significant youth loss and direct trauma
- Relief centres provided immediate accommodation, however, our focus has been on finding people more appropriate medium-term accommodation.
- Community Services Hubs are a one stop shop for services (not bureaucrats)

Challenges

Information overload – people are not yet able to fully comprehend the full spectrum of information.

Lack of knowledge – many landowners are small hobby farmers who are unable to answer basic questions about their properties eg. What type of fence they had.

Whole of state – we need to be sure our attentions are Victoria bound and not focussed on one or two high profile areas.

Managing guilt – as the days pass, the complex guilt processes for those people who have not lost everything will need to be managed.

Vertical hazards.

Three Cs

Community, Communication and Consequences

If it’s not community focussed, we’re not doing it.

Report

DHS is compiling a report which outlines the total losses (incl. building stock, nature, lives)

Homes lost (as counted to date):

Flowerdale	250 homes
Kinglake	500
Strathewen	120
Buxton/Marysville/Narbethong	260
Bendigo	70-80
Gippsland	200

Surges are expected in some communities.

Community Services Hubs

The recent decision to stop providing meals on weekends at the Kinglake West Community Services Hub and to encourage stimulation of the local economy was premature. We now recognise the importance of these hubs for communities to come together, to talk and to move toward rebuilding.

Reconnecting communities is a very delicate matter and requires us to operate very much in the grey. Things are not always black and white.

Community Division

DHS is mindful of the things with the potential to divide communities:

- Insured versus uninsured
- Legal issues
- Stay or go

Q&A

Q: There is nervousness in the community of Flowerdale because people are being asked what their salaries are. Will support be means tested?

A: Some grants are means tested, but this applies more particularly to Commonwealth Grants.

Daniel Grollo, CEO, Grocon

“We all need to take a very pragmatic approach”

Grocon has made a commitment to helping the recovery. Clean-up services will be provided at cost.

Grocon is committed to taking a pragmatic approach to the effort and to be mindful of everyone’s interests.

Some challenges:

- The scope and process for the clean-up remains undefined
- The geographic spread of the fire damage
- Community concerns and emerging frustrations at the police process
- Clean-up will require a high level of engagement with Government. Issues include safety and hazardous materials
- The biggest issue will be community liaison. This is new to Grocon and will test the organisation.

Action to date

Grocon has people out in the communities, meeting with Councils.

The clean-up has been divided into nine regions, with roughly 200 homes in each region. Each region will have an office, located near other Government service offices.

Grocon has engaged in very frank discussions with Victoria Police.

Getting involved

Where possible, Grocon will be looking to engage locals to carry out the clean-up tasks.

Contractors wanting to help in the clean-up process can register by emailing firecleanup@grocon.com.au . All contractors will be screened for OH&S standards and licensing/registrations.

Looking ahead

Grocon is trying to take a practical approach. The challenge is that this continues to be a moving feast.

Grocon may commence the clean up with some government facilities as they incur fewer hurdles.

Safety is a critical concern. Fossil fuels on sites create unsafe environments. The team is prepared for interruptions to site work.

Q&A

Q: (Civil Contractors Association) What can our people do to help?

A: Volunteers can register by emailing firecleanup@grocon.com.au

Q: (UDIA) What can be done to reduce the hurdles?

A: We all need to take a very pragmatic approach. Getting people and their communities up and running again will help heal the pain.

Christine Nixon, Chair, VBRRA

“It’s going to take some time”

Thanks to the sector for all the work that it is doing. VBRRA is new, has been put together quickly to deal with bushfire issues now and into the future.

The key concern for VBRRA is the 18-28 different communities that have been directly impacted by the bushfires. We want to give them the option to indicate how they wish to move forward.

Those who survived need to be actively involved in the recovery. It will help them deal with their guilt.

VBRRA will operate at both the local level, and a higher level. The clean-up has been funded by the Federal and State Governments.

Some issues

Entitlement: There is difficulty associated with calculating what people are entitled to.

Timing: Different communities are at different stages

- Bendigo and Gippsland are moving forward
- Horsham is ready to move and wants VBRRA to visit

Water: Short-term and long-term. Houses that were on tank supply now have no tanks, therefore no supply.

Villages: People want to stay close to their communities. Colder weather will be a challenge in the coming months.

Local Governments: There are 14 Councils directly affected. This is a particularly challenging for some of the smaller ones.

New planning procedures: Information will be needed.

VBRRA message to communities

Don’t limit your thinking to what you have lost, think about what you could have eg. Best-practice school.

This is a real opportunity for communities eg. Sustainability practices, etc.

Volunteers

There are 26,000 registered volunteers. The challenge will be matching skills to need. Case workers will be the connectors.

Funding

Bushfire fund – has raised \$211 million. \$40 million has been distributed to date. It's going to take some time.

Insurance

Victoria has a higher uninsured rate than other states. The suggestion is that in Bendigo, 40% are uninsured. VBRRRA is working with the Insurance Council Australia, encouraging them to "do the right thing".

Q&A

Q: Will there be a weekly VBRRRA newsletter?

A: That would be a good way to keep people up to date. We will be trying our best to communicate as best we can.

Q: Will community rebuilding be done to a sustainable masterplan?

A: We are encouraging communities to look for opportunities. We do not need to rebuild as it was before. We are learning who is representing communities.

Q: We need a simple package that comes to grips with fuel management and provides maintenance programs.

A: That will be a responsibility for The Royal Commission.

Sarah McCann-Bartlett, Deputy Building Commissioner

“Projects must be manageable and able to deliver immediate results.”

Three stages of recovery – Re-enter, Re-occupy, Re-build. People throughout Victoria are at different stages.

Commission response

- Help to practitioners – fast-tracked replacement of documents
- Identification of risks – produced *Guide to safe return to properties*
- Bushfire Building Advice Line – c. 200 calls per week at present
- Community Services Hubs – Commission representatives and AIBS volunteers available to answer questions. (It may be slightly too early for this, but we still believe that we should be there)
- Recovery – Temporary Housing
- New Standards – Guide and seminars
- Volunteer database

Possible projects

Commission, in discussion with industry, has identified a number of possible projects to help us maximise the volunteer services on offer. By focusing on a limited number of projects we can match skill with need and concentrate on our own patch.

Projects must be manageable and able to deliver immediate results.

Project	Actions	Volunteer skills	Partners
Resident Advice	Already under way – 1300 advice line, Community Services Hubs.	Building surveyors, architects, engineers, designers	Building Commission
Design a House	To create designs for homeowners who are planning to rebuild. The project will deliver a range of designs for a variety of site conditions, house sizes, prices and construction types.	Architects, engineers and designers	Victorian Government Architect and Australian Institute of Architects

Audits and repairs to damaged homes	<p>The idea is that a suitably qualified professional will undertake an audit of bushfire damaged homes, where an inspection has not been done.</p> <p>A standard checklist will be developed and used by building professionals to undertake the audits.</p>	All volunteer skills required	<p>BC/Archicentre</p> <p>MBAV, HIA, BDAV, Master Plumbers</p>
Community Based Projects	<p>Eg. Small projects such as sports clubs, BBQs, toilet blocks</p> <p>Projects will be decided in consultation with local communities. Project managers will be appointed within 5 weeks.</p>	Building surveyors, architects, designers, engineers, builders, plumbers, landscape architects	BC with Lions Club and MVA
Fencing	Restoration of hundreds of kilometres of fencing.	All able bodies	VFF
Land Surveying	To re-establish site boundaries.	Land surveyors	Surveyor General

Volunteer recognition

We will need to consider a program of recognising our volunteers.

Q&A

Comment on bunkers (*from the floor*)

There are opportunistic companies around who have been promoting possibly inadequate fire bunkers. There is no Australian Standard for fire bunkers.

Q: Does the new Australian Standard include requirements for non residential buildings?

A: No. The Building Commission is developing a guideline which will offer simple advice re. safety considerations

Q: Insurance issue for volunteers – professional indemnity cover of employers will not cover volunteers

A: Insurance issue has been escalated to the Victorian Managed Insurance Association and the Department of Treasury and Finance.

Q: Can work be done to develop good fire bunker design?

A: Fire bunkers are being addressed on a national basis. The Australian Building Code Board is considering fire bunker design.

Q: What information is available regarding retrofitting?

A: Archicentre has a brochure. Further work is expected to be undertaken.

Q: Can a template questionnaire be developed for the volunteer database? It has been noted that people contacting volunteers have little to no knowledge of the skills/work required.

A: Yes.

Q: After the Ash Wednesday fires, a bushfire design competition was held and demonstration houses were built. These houses have survived. We should be learning from history.

A: Government architects are collecting knowledge on what has been done before.

Q: Has any discussion occurred to reduce planning permit timeframes?

A: Planning permits have been waived for the rebuild. This exemption is only relevant to WMO overlay. Other overlays eg. Heritage will still need planning permits. Best to consult with Council.

Q: Will the new standard increase the need for site analysis?

A: Not necessarily. Some will be done as desk assessments using aerial photography and other documentation, others will require an on-site analysis.

Justin Madden MLC, Minister for Planning

“The Premier is keen to maintain the momentum within the built environment”

The new building standard will be implemented on Wednesday 11 March and will apply to all new dwellings across the State. The draft standard has been developed nationally.

A surveyor will need to assess Bushfire risk in every instance.

The Premier is keen to maintain the momentum within the built environment, in particular, using the skills of the volunteers.

Tony Arnel, Building Commissioner

“Our greatest challenge will be keeping people motivated to continue their support for months to come.”

Victoria has led the way with the new Australian Standard, which will be adopted into the Building Code.

The new standard takes a more sophisticated risk management approach than the previous standard.

There is a great deal of appreciation for the support. We are all coming to terms with the immensity of what has happened.

Our greatest challenge will be keeping people motivated to continue their support for months to come.