

I would like to begin our RPCV 2021 - 2022 Annual Meeting by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands which we are meeting from today.

I pay my respects to their Elders past and present for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and the hopes of all First Nations people .

We express our gratitude that we share these lands today, our sorrow for the personal, spiritual and cultural cost of that sharing and our hope that we may walk forward together in the spirit of healing to a place of justice and partnership.

In welcoming RPCV Board members, our wonderful RPCV staff, members of our Community Advisory Committee, stakeholders and community members to the 2021 -2022 Annual Meeting, our third Annual Meeting as an online meeting, I would also like to acknowledge Wendy Lovell, one of the MPs for Northern Victoria. It is pleasing to see Wendy following the precedent set by the former member for Shepparton Suzanna Sheed, who joined us at our last online Annual Meeting at 4.00 pm on 23 February 2022.

I would also like to welcome Annie De Jong, the president of the Cemeteries and Crematoria Association of Victoria, to our meeting.

I note we have apologies from Jacinta Allan, Member for Bendigo East and Maree Edwards Member for Bendigo West.

I would like to take a couple of minutes to explain the purpose and technical details of our online meeting.

This meeting is to report on the operations of Remembrance Parks Central Victoria for the financial year 2021 - 2022 in accordance with the Cemeteries and Crematoria Act.

As a Class A Cemetery Trust our Annual Report is tabled each year in the Victorian Parliament and our Annual Meeting is held following that tabling.

After tabling in Parliament our Annual Report is also available on our RPCV website.

As you can see on the agenda provided, I will report on the 2021 - 2022 year, this will be followed by a brief report on operations by our Acting CEO Maureen O'Keefe and then I will speak briefly on the current 2022 - 2023 year.

As we are meeting online we ask that people write their questions into the Q & A and I will answer as many questions as possible before I close the meeting at 5.00 pm. Please note that questions relating to the 2021 - 2022 reporting year will be given priority.

We commenced the 2021 - 2022 year with welcomes and farewells.

We farewelled Lauren Bean after almost 9 years of service to RPCV and Deborah Hambleton resigned at the end of July 2021 due to changes in her commitments.

We also fare-welled Kate Scarce, the independent member of our Audit and Risk committee who had been with us since February 2012. We greatly appreciate the contribution made by Kate over so many years.

Our new independent member of the Audit and Risk Committee is David Gunn. We welcome David and look forward to a long and productive relationship with him.

We welcomed two new members to the RPCV Trust, Dr Dean Shirley and Graeme Robertson, while Natalie Stanway, who had been filling a casual vacancy was appointed for a full term and Mark Gibson was reappointed.

Dean took up the role of Chair of our Community Advisory Committee, and the task of restarting the committee post-COVID, while Graeme has taken on the role of Chair of our newly formed Infrastructure Committee.

With the pandemic continuing through 2021 into 2022 RPCV was limited in its ability to host community events or re-engage with volunteers as we had hoped to do.

We were however able to engage with the Bendigo Chinese Association to undertake some works at the Chinese section of the Bendigo Cemetery and in conjunction with the Job Ready program, to undertake restoration of the two historical rotundas at the Bendigo Cemetery.

With support through State Government grants we have been able to expand our recycled water program and install solar panels at Eaglehawk.

In early 2022 we commenced planning for our new Strategic Plan for 2023 to 2025.

We used some of this planning time to reflect on the history and previous developments across our cemeteries and the impacts of past decisions on our current situation and the future of our cemeteries.

The oldest of our cemeteries date back to the gold-rush era of the 1850s and two, the Bendigo Cemetery and the White Hills Cemetery both have significant historical listings and overlays. Looking back at the history of our cemeteries, how they have developed and how they have been maintained provides an important perspective as we consider the future needs of these cemeteries.

Under the Cemeteries and Crematoria Act the Trust has an obligation to provide for perpetual maintenance of the cemeteries, including after a cemetery has limited or no further burial spaces available. This means

we need to plan and prepare now to ensure that our cemeteries are sustainable in perpetuity.

As part of the planning process we circulated a proposal for changes to our services for consultation in April last year. Feedback from the community was varied and demonstrated to the Trust that we needed to undertake significant engagement with the communities we serve to develop mutual understanding of the needs of the community and the needs and responsibilities of the organisation.

Against this background we developed our new Strategic Plan.

I am not going to go into the details of our new strategic plan as it is available on our website, but I will comment on the next steps of implementing it. Our first step was to commence a governance review to ensure that our governance practices and procedures met the needs of our new plan, this was to be followed by developing or reviewing a series of implementation strategies. We are currently part way through our governance review and have established an Infrastructure Committee to oversee the master planning that is required to ensure the long term sustainability of our cemeteries.

Our new strategic plan has two key directions, the first is developing our cemeteries as remembrance parks, as places for our community members to visit for quiet reflection and passive recreation such as walking and historical research.

The strategic plan also has a strong focus on community engagement and the participation of volunteers across a range of activities from gardening to historical research. We look forward to establishing these programs and activities under our in-coming CEO.

The day to day operations of the cemeteries would not be possible without a highly skilled, respectful CEO supported by a hard working staff team.

Like many of us who reflected on our life's journey during the covid period our CEO Dean McElroy decided to retire in May 2022 after four years in the role at RPCV. We would like to thank Dean for the work he put into RPCV and his service to our communities.

With Dean's retirement four out of the five Class A Cemetery Trusts were recruiting a new CEO, as the smallest of the four RPCV sought approval from the Department to appoint an Interim CEO for 12 months so that we could undertake our recruitment process in 2023, a process that we are currently undertaking. Emma Flukes was appointed to the Interim CEO position.

We also express our thanks to our RPCV staff team for their commitment to the work of RPCV. In January 2022 we took the important step of in-sourcing all of our grounds staff and this has enabled us to employ two apprentices as part of our grounds staff. We welcome our apprentices and look forward to working with them as they develop their skills and knowledge and become an integral part of our staff team.

In May 2022 RPCV was saddened to learn of the death of former Trust Chair Elaine McNamara. Elaine was the inaugural chair of the Bendigo Cemeteries Trust in 1988 and remained on the Trust until 2013, a truly remarkable contribution to our communities which is acknowledged with the Elaine McNamara Chapel named after her.

In closing I would remind you that our Annual Reports for 2021 -2022 is available on our RPCV website.

I will now ask our Acting CEO Maureen O'Keefe, to provided an overview of the operations of RPCV in the 2021 - 2022 year.

I would now invite the Chair of our Community Advisory Committee, Dr Dean Shirley to provide a brief report on the CAC.

I will now turn briefly to the current year, 2022 -2023. We commenced the year with Interim CEO Emma Flukes filling our CEO role for a 12 month period.

At a practical level RPCV partnered with Coliban Water and the City of Greater Bendigo to carry out major maintenance work on the small lake near the main entrance to our Eaglehawk Cemetery and a review of safety and security at our Administration building and the Chapel and Crematorium was undertaken. This resulted in an upgrade of our security system and CCTV on these buildings and the installation of refrigerated storage at the crematorium as well as refurbishment of the Elaine McNamara Chapel, which will be renamed the Elaine McNamara Memorial Centre.

In the latter half of 2022 the Trust was able to complete the new Strategic Plan and commence planning for its implementation. This included commencing a governance review in November, to be followed by the development of various strategies to implement different aspects of the Strategic Plan.

In January 2023 the distressing removal of adornments from graves took place at the Eaglehawk Cemetery and the Pine Lodge Cemetery.

The Trust became aware of the actions in late January and Interim CEO Emma Flukes was stood down at the end of January.

Our Acting CEO Maureen O’Keefe was appointed in mid February 2023 to fill the CEO role until a permanent appointment could be made.

The Trust is currently in the final stages of the recruitment process with a final round of interviews scheduled shortly.

The Trust undertook several actions following the removal of adornments, including stopping the removal of adornments from any cemetery unless it provided a specific safety concern, such as alcohol, steel spikes or glass items, offering grief Counseling to community members who were effected by the removal and a series of community engagement meetings to hear from those effected what the impacts had been on their lives.

The Trust also established an independent investigation into the removal of adornments to determine how the situation had occurred. The report from the community engagement meetings was provided to this investigation for consideration in the findings and recommendations.

The investigation provided findings and recommendations, which along with the Trusts response to the recommendations, were delivered at a community information meeting in late April.

Our Acting CEO Maureen O’Keefe has been tasked with implementing some of the recommendations while others will be actioned when the permanent CEO is appointed.

When the removal of adornments occurred in January our staff struggled with responding to queries and complaints while providing our usual services to the community. Important first steps by Maureen have included reviewing staff roles, reviewing our internal processes for working with stakeholders and community members and providing training for staff on providing customer feedback.

A review of communications including social media and our website is being undertaken with an external consultant. Maureen has also implemented a staff newsletter which is currently being trialled and will provide a template for a community newsletter which will be developed by the permanent CEO.

Internal discussions have commenced on restarting our volunteer programs and we will shortly be seeking input from former volunteers to assist us with their knowledge of our cemeteries and former volunteering programs.

As we move into the 2023 - 2024 year we look forward to the appointment of our permanent CEO and commencing the very important community consultation work that will include a review of the Adornment Policy.

I will now respond to questions in the Q & A, and as this is the Annual Meeting for the 2021 - 2022 year the priority is questions about the 2021 - 2022 year. If there are no further questions relating to the 2021 - 2022 reporting year I will take questions on the 2022 - 2023 year however the meeting will close at 5.00 pm. If there are unanswered questions at 5.00 pm I ask that people leave their contact details for a response after the meeting.

Questions can also be emailed to enquiries@rpcv.org.au

Five minute reminder at 4.55 pm

It is now 5.00 pm and I am closing the meeting.

I would like to thank everyone for participating in this meeting and again remind you that our 2021 - 2022 Annual Report is available on our website.

Thank you and I wish you a good evening.