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Residents
Against
Polluting
Stacks Inc.

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Clearing the air at last or another smokescreen?

Communities affected by the toxic fumes from the M5 East tunnel cautiously welcomed Mr Scully's announcement of plans to pilot filtration in the troubled tunnel.

RAPS president, Charles Briers was sceptical about the timing of this announcement just before tomorrow night's M4 East meeting at Ashfield Town Hall and two weeks off local elections. He said "This is great news, but we had a similar announcement by Premier Carr, just before the last March election, which came to nothing. We sure hope this is more than smoke and mirrors to appease the Inner West Communities and limit the expected Labor backlash at the local council elections.

We are certainly heartened that Mr Scully has finally accepted the need to filter the toxic fumes from these tunnels, for the sake of residents as well as drivers. It has taken FIVE long years to get to this point, with the RTA at every step stubbornly denying the health risks and the existence of proven solutions. It is a long awaited win for common sense and opens the door for safe, cost effective ventilation systems for the M5East and new tunnels.

The latest overseas systems protect people's health as well as actually reducing the overall cost of running the tunnel rather than increasing it. The challenge now is to select the technologies most suitable for Australian conditions and Mr Scully has identified the correct way to do this, through an open tendering process. His announcement mirrors the key recommendation of the 1999 Parliamentary Inquiry, which was made before the tunnel was even built, and like the two Inquiries after it in 2001 and 2002, it was ignored.

However, this tendering process must not be left in the hands of the RTA who has shown itself to be untrustworthy and/or incompetent in dealing with this issue. It must be an open and transparent process, involving other governmental departments, the community and independent experts. There must be strict community oversight of the selection and assessment process to ensure we don't end up with a second-class placebo.

For the past 6 months, the RTA has refused to discuss air quality issues at the M5 East Air Quality Community committee. To this day, despite recommendations by the Health Department in July last year, they have still not even put up warning signs for drivers who use the tunnel daily, unaware of the health risks they face. Even the Minister's press release attempts to downplay the number of filtered tunnels in Japan, saying that only 1% are filtered. What the RTA did not tell him is that over 60 % of tunnels over 2kms are currently filtered. We hope that the Minister will bring those responsible to account, and bring an end to this gross mismanagement.

As Mr Scully has correctly said, it is much easier and cheaper to install filters in tunnels rather than stacks, and before rather than after they are built. We would urge him to insist on an immediate and radical review of the designs of the Cross City and Lane Cove tunnels to protect public health and prevent more waste of taxpayer dollars.

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