1. SUMMARY OF REPORT:

On Thursday 13 July 2017, a large fire occurred at the SKM Recycling plant at 90 – 110 Maffra Street, Coolaroo. The fire caused widespread disruption to the area. The MFB and other Emergency Services responded to the incident and were assisted by Council who provided support to the surrounding business and residential community through the emergency, relief and recovery.

2. RECOMMENDATION:

That Council:

2.1 Notes the works undertaken and the response provided to support the community as the result of the SKM Recycling plant fire that happened on 13 July 2017;

2.2 Writes to the Emergency Services to thank them for their outstanding efforts in dealing with the fire at the SKM recycling plant in Coolaroo;

2.3 Writes to the Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP, Minister for Energy, Environment & Climate Change seeking a meeting with the Minister, Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and Hume City Council to discuss ways to prevent incidents of this nature; and

2.4 Thanks Hume staff who assisted with the emergency, relief and recovery efforts.

3. LEGISLATIVE POWERS:

3.1 Planning and Environment Act 1987;

3.2 Local Government Act 1989; and

3.3 Environment Protection Act 1970.

4. DISCUSSION:

4.1 SKM Recycling Fire – 13 July 2017

4.1.1 SKM operates a materials recycling business in Coolaroo from its Maffra Street headquarters.
4.1.2 The use of the SKM site as a materials recycling business is regulated through permits issued under the Planning and Environment Act 1987, the Local Government Act 1989, and the Environment Protection Act 1970.

4.1.3 On Thursday 13 July 2017, a large fire developed on site which caused emergency services to attend the site and which required parts of the community to be evacuated and businesses in the area to be shut down with Council staff also being relocated to other work sites.

4.2 Emergency Services

Emergency Services organisations did an outstanding job in immediately attending to the issues on site and worked tirelessly to bring the fire under control. The officers and teams should be praised for their efforts and commitment. It should also be noted that Council officers were on site assisting with the emergency and their efforts should also be commended.

4.3 Incident Response Phase

4.3.1 Council was notified of the fire at 9am on Thursday 13 July 2017 and immediately activated the Municipal Emergency Management Plan with Emergency Management Liaison Officers on site (EMLOs). Since the fire began, Council has had an EMLO attend or call into every Emergency Management Team meeting whether at Incident Control on site or at MFB Burnley.

4.3.2 Council managed the traffic management and road closures on a 24/7 basis for the first 6 days, identified and used alternative parking arrangements when the depot was unavailable due to the smoke plume, constructed and removed ramped crossings to allow access for businesses along Maffra Street and supported Melbourne Water to install pumps and hose crossings at Jack Roper Reserve. Throughout the incident, Council has continued to provide physical support to the key emergency services on site e.g. wash down of trucks, garbage collection etc.

4.4 Community Relief and Recovery

4.4.1 Relief

(a) Late morning on Thursday 13 July 2017, Council received a request (from the MFB – the Incident Control agency) to set up an Emergency Relief Centre (ERC) in Broadmeadows. The purpose of an ERC is to provide immediate and temporary shelter and assistance to any person affected by the fire at SKM. The ERC was set up at the Broadmeadows Aquatic and Leisure Centre from early afternoon on Thursday 13 July 2017 and remained in place until 5pm Wednesday 19 July 2017. The relief centre was staffed and coordinated by Hume City Council staff with backup from other municipalities who provided relief teams trained in the emergency relief centre procedures. Also present at the relief centre were personnel from DHHS with an Environmental Health Officer, Ambulance Victoria (AV) who provided health checks, Red Cross who registered community members when they arrived at the ERC and the Victorian Council of Churches (VCC) who provided emotional support and assistance.
(b) A total of 33 persons (including children) presented at the relief centre whilst it was open. Persons presenting were assisted with alternative accommodation and support. Three households were provided with direct support to restore their homes to a habitable condition.

(c) Four community meetings were held at the relief centre (one on 13 July 2017, two on 14 July 2017 and one on 15 July 2017), which were called by the MFB (as the Incident Controller). A further Community Information Drop-in Session was called for by the Victorian Government (via DHHS) to be held on 24 July 2017 from 4pm-7pm at the Hume Global Learning Centre - Broadmeadows.

(d) Two door knocks were conducted on Monday 17 July 2017 and Friday 21 July 2017 to the 115 homes in the evacuated zone to check on the wellbeing of local residents, provide information pamphlets on removal of smoke and debris after a fire and offer health advice to people who were affected by smoke. Environmental Health Officers attended the first door knock and assisted households with advice on water tank cleaning, gutter cleaning and water supply, where appropriate. Masks and rubber gloves were also issued to the households to encourage safe practices. The door knocks were undertaken in partnership with DHHS and supported by the VCC.

4.4.2 Recovery

The period of recovery commences when the MFB officially hand over the incident to Hume City Council as the post event Recovery Manager. This has not yet occurred, however it is expected sometime this week. In anticipation, a recovery meeting has been called for 25 July 2017. This meeting will involve the relevant agencies and organisations (Water authorities, EPA, DHHS, MFB and local community organisations) who will work in partnership with Council to rebuild community confidence in the health and safety of the local physical and natural environment.

4.5 Business Relief and Recovery

4.5.1 The immediate impact of the emergency evacuation of affected Maffra Street businesses by Victoria Police on 13 July 2017 varied from complete shut down to restricted access.

4.5.2 Business relief and recovery timeline as follows:

(a) 14 July 2017 - 9am and 4pm: Briefings were conducted at Hume Global Learning Centre – Broadmeadows and attended by effected businesses, Council and Emergency Services. The Council Chamber was offered as a temporary business centre for affected businesses to operate from. Traffic control remained in place in Maffra Street controlling receipt of supplies and delivery of goods. Council liaison ensured some access was allowed in a carefully managed process in an effort to support business continuity. Retail customers were also restricted from access.

(b) 15 and 16 July 2017: A business briefing was conducted at 4pm at Hume Global Learning Centre - Broadmeadows on 15 July 2017 and was attended by affected businesses, Council and Emergency Services. At 6:30pm on 16 July 2017, email, SMS and phone advice updating fire control information and Maffra Street access was provided to all Maffra Street businesses for which Council had contact information. Over the weekend, fire hose crossing ramps (provided by Council under control of MFB and Victoria Police) were progressively placed along the Western
side of Maffra Street to allow businesses improved access to their premises over the laid and charged hoses. Traffic control remained in place in Maffra Street controlling receipt of supplies and delivery of goods. Ongoing Council liaison ensured some access was allowed in a carefully managed process in an effort to support business continuity.

(c) Week commencing 17 July 2017: Individual businesses contacted Council and asked a range of questions regarding the fire and access issues. In addition:

(i) On 17 and 18 July 2017 all food businesses were visited by Council’s Public Health Officers to ascertain state of impact and also provide advice on clean up and food safety issues. Additional fire hose crossing ramps were placed along Western side of Maffra Street businesses access. Maffra Street traffic control was still in place controlling access.

(ii) On 20 July 2017, Council provided a general fire information update by email and also advised businesses the road in Maffra Street was now open to two way traffic between Barry Road and Lexton Street and north of the control zone (outside SKM). One way traffic with direct business in this zone was able to enter under the direction of traffic control. Lexton Street was fully opened again. All temporary crossings along Maffra and Glenelg Streets were removed with the exception of the two SKM entrances where MFB hoses were still in place.

4.5.3 Week commencing 24 July 2017: Some businesses were still reporting issues with customer access due to traffic control measures.

4.6 Environmental Impacts

4.6.1 The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) advised late on the afternoon of Thursday 13 July 2017 that fire water could have entered the Merlynston Creek as a result of the Coolaroo fire. As such, information was communicated about the potential health risk in public areas such as Jack Roper Reserve via Council’s website and signs warning people about the water quality were erected by Melbourne Water.

4.6.2 Council was informed by Melbourne Water on Wednesday 19 July 2017 that firefighting foam and debris had runoff into the adjacent Merlynston Creek. Melbourne Water advised the runoff was depleting dissolved oxygen in the water, causing a significant number of fish to die.

4.6.3 Melbourne Water is aerating the lake to minimise the impact on fish, which may result in foam accumulating on the surface of the lake. They have also commenced removing the dead fish.

4.6.4 Melbourne Water will continue to monitor the condition of the creek to ensure impact on the community and the environment is minimised, while Council will continue ongoing management of the lake at Jack Roper Reserve. It is hoped that recent rains will assist in diluting contaminants present in the lake.

4.6.5 On Thursday 20 July, the EPA advised that high levels of E. coli had been found, which indicates the presence of microorganisms that may cause illness. Further information was put on Council’s website reminding residents that they and their pets should avoid contact with the water and avoid fishing in the creek or lake until further notice.
4.6.6 Additional signs were placed at the reserve and along the creek, and temporary fencing was installed at the lake to deter contact with the water. Sporting groups using Jack Roper Reserve, Laura Douglas Reserve and the Seabrook Reserve as well as local businesses, schools and the King Street mosque were advised of the potential health risk.

4.7 Communications

4.7.1 Council followed emergency management communication protocols in disseminating information about the incident and health and safety warnings to the community issued by Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) through email notifications and the VicEmergency website.

4.7.2 This included retweeting relevant posts from EMV, adding information to the home page of Council’s website and updating Council’s Emergency Facebook social media page. Council responded to multiple media enquiries with a briefing by the Mayor, which focused on thanking emergency crews, and issued two media statements (one thanking emergency crews and the other explaining the post-incident recovery process).

4.7.3 A special edition of Hume e-News, Council’s electronic fortnightly newsletter, was issued on Thursday 20 July 2017 about the response to the Coolaroo fire. It provided information on the community recovery effort and health and safety.

4.7.4 Council was advised on Friday 21 July 2017 that the incident manager (MFB) would hold a community information forum with relevant agencies on Monday 24 July 2017 from 4pm to 7pm at the Hume Global Learning Centre – Broadmeadows, 1093 Pascoe Vale Road, Broadmeadows.

4.7.5 The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) organised a letter drop over the weekend to provide health related information to community members and promote the community information forum. Council added it to the its website, its Twitter and Emergency Facebook social media pages, and in the regular edition of Hume e-News.

4.7.6 Council will hold the first recovery meeting on Tuesday 25 July 2017, with all relevant stakeholders invited to attend. The Broadmeadows Progress Association has also called a residents public meeting on 30 July 2017, which is understood that Councillors will be invited to attend.

4.8 Planning Matters

4.8.1 The SKM Recycling business operates via planning permits for the site.

4.8.2 The business is subject to monitoring through Council’s Industrial Sector Enhancement Program (ISEP), which seeks to work with other agencies in their areas of expertise.

4.8.3 Approximately 163 sites are monitored in Hume as part of ISEP, covering both the automotive recyclers (i.e. car wreckers) and materials recyclers (i.e. skip bins and recycling plants) industries.

4.8.4 Given the breadth of sites across the City and resource considerations, the program involves a preliminary site inspection to ensure initial permit compliance, and then ongoing monitoring as required.

4.8.5 Council has been investigating the SKM facility at Coolaroo since March 2016, following complaints about smell, dust and stockpiles of glass.
4.8.6 As a result of further investigations a Clean Up Notice was issued by the EPA on 3 March 2017.

4.8.7 The EPA, MFB and Council notified SKM that an inspection of the site would take place on Thursday 13 July 2017, allowing time for emergency works and recovery of the site following the fire in February.

4.8.8 The inspection was to ensure the site was compliant with the requirements of the Clean Up Notice, permit conditions and facilitation of any further site remediation, if needed.

4.8.9 The inspection scheduled for Thursday 13 July would have identified whether machinery was operational, following the fire in February.

4.8.10 Council welcomes the announcement of a State Government taskforce that will audit Victorian recycling facilities and identify sites that require action.

4.8.11 This fire is still being managed by emergency services. Council will need to await the completion of emergency services works and the outcome of a full investigation before it can comment any further.

5. CONCLUSION:

The fire at SKM created significant issues to a number of people and organisations. The work of the Emergency Services was vital in ensuring the safety of the Hume community.