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Zoom won't do for West Gate Tunnel soil talks

The COVID-19 pandemic is making it harder for Victorian communities to get information on the disposal of contaminated soil from Transurban's \$6.7 billion West Gate Tunnel because big public meetings cannot be held, local residents say.

Cleanaway Waste Management, one of several companies bidding to remove soil contaminated with per- and polyfluorinated alkyl substances (PFAS) from the West Gate Tunnel construction site, held a Zoom meeting on Thursday night with community members and representatives from Victoria's Environmental Protection Authority (EPA.)

Delays over finding suitable sites in Victoria to take the contaminated waste [have delayed tunnelling on the new tollroad](#) and pushed up costs by at least \$1 billion.



PFAS-contaminated soil from the West Gate Tunnel is being stored in west Melbourne while the government and contractors try to find permanent disposal sites. **Luis Enrique Ascui**

Cleanaway, which has a facility at Ravenhall that disposes of PFAS waste, said it planned to build a containment system to manage the receipt, reuse and disposal of spoil from the West Gate Tunnel.

"Cleanaway will continue to talk with the local community and stakeholders to understand any concerns and discuss how they can be addressed," a spokesman said.

But Marion Martin, president of [Stop the Tip](#), which represents landowners and residents in Melbourne's west, said the group was "totally against" PFAS spoil being brought to the Ravenhall region and that it was difficult to consult effectively with lots of people via Zoom. "People aren't going to be told what's going on," Ms Martin said.

Victorian shadow transport infrastructure spokesman David Davis said it was hard for "honest and meaningful" consultation to happen when social distancing was in place and when Victorian restrictions prevented big gatherings, including public meetings. Only 10 people are [currently allowed to gather together publicly](#) in Victoria.

"The government is cutting corners to cover up its earlier failure to find a solution for its PFAS problems that they should have solved before the project was advanced," Mr Davis said.

Mr Davis has called on the government to publicly release documents showing the results of scientific assessments of contaminated soil from the West Gate Tunnel by July 22, arguing that PFAS is "potentially a very lethal substance".

The Victorian government said community consultation by the operators tendering to take PFAS waste, which also include Maddingley Brown Coal (MBC), which is considering a site near Bacchus Marsh, and the Hi-Quality Group, [which wants to put the waste in Bulla](#), had been underway since the start of the year.

"We expect any operator who is tendering to take the soil from tunnelling to show they understand their communities concerns and how they will be addressed," a government spokesperson said.

MBC [consulted with communities](#) in March and says soil from the tunnel site is not expected to be any more contaminated than waste the company already receives.

But Kat Barlow, spokesperson for the Bacchus Marsh Community Coalition, said residents wanted to be personally reassured by Transurban chief executive Scott Charlton that the contaminated waste was safe because they were worried about the impact on agricultural farmland, and want health and environmental assessments released.

Moorabool Shire Council said it had reviewed an application to amend the local planning scheme to allow MBC to receive PFAS spoil but that it could not release its findings publicly.

Transurban said that no soil from the West Gate Tunnel project has been or will be stored or disposed of without stringent EPA requirements being met.

"Facilities that have put forward proposals to safely manage soil for the project have been engaging local communities to discuss their proposals," a Transurban spokeswoman said.

Individual sites bidding to take the waste also need to get planning and environmental approvals, which are under review by authorities.

Finding a suitable site for waste disposal has been complicated by Transurban's [ongoing dispute with its builders, CPB Contractors and John Holland, over who will pay.](#)

Victoria's Supreme Court has ordered the companies to try mediation on July 13 to see if the dispute can be sorted out by arbitrators before proceeding with further hearings.

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