

# Diamond Valley Leader

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NILLUMBIK EDITION

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## Brethren plan meets discontent

**Lyndal Cairns**

COMMUNITY fear and suspicion have forced Nillumbik Council to delay making a decision on the latest plans by the Exclusive Brethren to build a church in Eltham.

Emotions were running high when more than 100 people packed into the public gallery at last week's planning and building committee meeting to voice their concerns.

The committee voted to defer a decision in the hope that a meeting to be arranged between the Brethren and the community could diffuse the explosive issue.

But a previous consultation between both sides, held on February 28, achieved little and Mayor Greg Johnson revealed that one church member had been verbally abused.

The Exclusive Brethren, a conservative, closed Christian faith, wants to open a place of worship on vacant land at 136 Zig Zag Rd North, Eltham.

It is the third site the group has sought to develop for worship in the shire in recent months.

Committee chairman Warwick Leeson acknowledged there was "significant community disquiet", with the council receiving 63 objections to the latest proposal.

Residents' main concerns centred on the building's impact on the landscape and environment, noise created by 6am Sunday gatherings, and increased traffic.

Church member Adrian Mead acknow-

ledged the Brethren was not well known to most people.

"But we are regarded by the Federal Government as one of the major faiths in the country," Mr Mead said.

"The congregation in this area, of which I am one, requires a hall in which to practise our faith. We believe this application will enhance the amenity of the area."

After the meeting, Cr Johnson said he had not seen so many people at a council meeting since the commissioners were brought in at Nillumbik, such was the high level of feeling against the Brethren's plans.

Cr Johnson said the community was "fearful of the unknown", and anxious and suspicious about the exclusive group moving into their suburb.

He said some responsibility now lay with the organisation to explain its plans to the community at the meeting, a date for which was yet to be fixed.

The council has already approved an Exclusive Brethren place of worship on the Henry Arthur Estate in Diamond Creek. Residents have vowed to appeal the decision at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, but last week the council said no appeal had been lodged.

Another application, to build a worship centre at 88 Everleigh Drive, Diamond Creek, was rejected by the council on January 18, but an appeal has since been lodged by the Brethren to VCAT.

Church members could not be contacted after the meeting for comment.