

## **Is Easter Sunday shops closure the thin edge of the wedge?**

The Bracks Government must provide an assurance that its decision to close retail stores on Easter Sunday is not the first step in winding back shopping hours

Liberal spokesperson on Small Business Bruce Atkinson has urged the Bracks Government to provide an extension of time for food businesses to lodge food safety plans.

Under State legislation, all Victorian food businesses were required to lodge food safety plans with local municipal councils covering the handling, storage and processing of food by December 31<sup>st</sup> 2002.

Less than half of the businesses required to prepare and submit plans met the deadline set by the State Government.

Food businesses that have not lodged food safety plans face fines and could be deregistered and closed.

Mr Atkinson said the December 31<sup>st</sup> deadline had been promoted well in advance by the Government and most municipal councils had provided information to businesses about the new legislative requirements but he said the end of year deadline was always impractical.

“This is a new requirement for businesses, many of them small businesses where management and administration time is stretched to the limit.

“While it is always inadvisable to leave any administrative task to the last minute, many businesses will have been caught out with the December 31<sup>st</sup> deadline because of busy pre-Christmas trading.

“Many food businesses closed between Christmas and the New Year and many small business owners often take holidays through to mid-January.

“The lodgement problem was raised with the Bracks Government last year and they should have acted to move the deadline for food safety plans to February 28<sup>th</sup> this year or even the end of March,” Mr Atkinson said.

“I am advised the Bracks Government has not even provided advice to municipal councils on how such a massive shortfall on the lodgement of the food safety plans should be addressed.”

Mr Atkinson said most Councils had handled the process satisfactorily in terms of notifications to businesses, information forums and individual meetings but many small businesses lacked the time or expertise to sit down and produce plans, particularly ethnic business owners with limited English proficiency.

Mr Atkinson said most municipal councils appear to have adopted a default notification process for businesses that have not lodged food safety plans.

“It seems most Councils are advising businesses to lodge their plans within 28 days of the notice to avoid penalties, including the possible closure of their business.

“While I understand the logic behind the 28 days notice, many businesses won’t even be open when the council notice arrives under their door.

“Councils do not have the authority to provide an extension of time for the lodgement of the food plans and there are potential legal liability issues associated with this issue.

“The Bracks Government must act on the food safety plan issue immediately and, in future, must plan deadlines more carefully to ensure they are not impractical or unduly onerous for business compliance,” Mr Atkinson said.

**Media Inquiries: Bruce Atkinson 0403 057 722**