

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Melbourne — 29 May 2006

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Witnesses

Ms F. M. Medina, chairperson (sworn); and

Ms N. Sweeney, committee member (sworn), Young Professionals Network.

The CHAIR — I welcome Fran and Nicole. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities. Before we begin, could you provide us with your full name and address, the name of the organisation you are representing today and your position within the organisation.

Ms MEDINA — I am Frances Margaret Medina, Young Professionals Network chairperson, lawyer with Arnold Dallas McPherson in Bendigo. My business address is 337 Hargreaves Street, Bendigo.

Ms SWEENEY — I am Nicole Sweeney and I am a committee member for the Young Professionals Network. My business address is 21 Short Street, Bendigo.

The CHAIR — If you do not mind giving us your evidence for about 10 minutes, and then we will have some time for questions after that.

Ms MEDINA — I would like to thank you for the invitation to address the committee. The Young Professionals Network represents approximately 450 young professionals in the Bendigo region aged 20 to 40 — often degree-qualified or career-orientated individuals. It is a relatively young organisation; it was born only 18 months ago. We had our launch event in March 2005 attended by approximately 220 young professionals in the region. We were auspiced by the Central Victorian Business Network and the City of Greater Bendigo, and at the moment we sit as a subcommittee of the Central Victorian Business Network.

The mission of the Young Professionals Network was to attract and retain young professionals in the area. Bendigo faces many of the issues that many regional and rural communities do in terms of retaining its talented young people within the community and, having attracted young people into the community, retaining them beyond a few years experience. We have a monthly e-newsletter that we send out to our database. We have monthly after-work drinks. We have our social and networking functions. We have an annual cocktail party each year. We aim to connect our database to the community through our newsletter and our activities. Fortunately for the parliamentary committee, we actually surveyed our database to gain an insight into what they wanted the Young Professionals Network to do for them, and those results have formed the basis of our submission here today.

Ms SWEENEY — Which I will now go through. I just wanted to skim over some of the main points; of course all the results are there for you to go through in detail. Thank you also for the opportunity to come here today. This is a personal challenge as well to speak in front of the committee, so it is great to be here. I think for us it is fantastic to come in straight after dynamos like James from Lead On in Bendigo. Our mechanism as a support network, I guess, for young professionals in Bendigo is a fantastic next step on from Lead On for people like James, so hopefully that is a natural progression in its own way.

As Fran said, we did survey our members earlier this year. Really we wanted to get an understanding for ourselves about where we needed to head with the network and what was it that we could really add to our business community within Bendigo. We had 77 responses, which I guess is not a huge number, but nonetheless we had some interest from the community, which was great; 56.2 per cent of our respondents had lived in Bendigo for more than two years, so it is not people just coming straight in. Almost 50 per cent of those had relocated from Melbourne, so we have got a fair bit of traffic into Bendigo which is fantastic; and 62.5 per cent of our respondents had completed tertiary studies outside of Bendigo, but also 36 per cent had done tertiary studies in Bendigo; so that was a great mix for us.

In terms of responses about what is great about living in Bendigo — and that was really important for us to understand — there were a couple of main things that stood out for us. Lifestyle made us a great place to be; also the cost of living, affordable housing and commuting to and from work, and they are really strong points for us in terms of regional living. It is great to see that young professionals are seeing that as well; it is not just people in older categories. I guess that those qualities are things that are quite transferable to consider in terms of other communities. That is by no means unique to Bendigo and it is a great thing to understand.

Some of the negatives or responses that were impartial were quite surprising to us and it was good learning for us. Respondents indicated professional groups, sporting groups, and public and private hospitals as only impartial or negative, which took us a bit by surprise. Also, only 38 per cent of people ranked the issue of access to doctors negatively. Lack of access to medical care and doctors in Bendigo is a huge issue right across our community so we were quite surprised to see such a low response there.

Given the challenges that face communities far less substantial than Bendigo, the committee will no doubt be interested in these observations by young professionals within our region and their applicability to communities less resourced and with less diversity on many levels than Bendigo has, I guess is a good statement to summarise that.

Just some of our brief observations on from those results also, if I can read this to you: our experience at a grassroots level of those falling within the YPN demographic is that these individuals live fast-paced lives, are very active socially, are very involved with family and friends, are in phases of their careers where professional advancement is emphasised in terms of time and commitment, and are often balancing young families. Cost of living, affordable housing, work-family-life balance and ease of commuting to and from work are very strong motivating factors for the YPN demographic.

Career opportunities perception within the region is only partially positively ranked and partially impartially ranked, despite the growth of major employers such as Bendigo Bank. We have some significant employers in Bendigo and certainly Bendigo Bank is one of those. Some people within the demographic who move to Melbourne from Bendigo state they do so for diversity of culture and diversity of experiences, and I guess that is a real learning for us — how we can contribute to that in some way. Finally then, access to quality education and health, including access to GPs, is strongly weighted and often commented upon within the demographic, as I said, within the community as well.

Just briefly then in summary of all of that, at YPN we have a multifaceted approach and looking at strategies of how we can contribute to this community, and that really relates to providing social and networking opportunities for young professionals, providing non-industry specific professional development and connecting people to their community. That is what we are about.

Ms MEDINA— Whist I have been leading the Young Professionals Network I have been approached by a number of people in other communities, which has been really interesting in terms of setting up a similar organisation. We were cloned by Mildura YPN. They searched the web for the most probably well-developed format for something like that and decided that we were it. I have liaised briefly at this point in time. Given that YPN is a completely volunteer-driven organisation and all of us have full-time jobs balancing families and careers, that is an enormous role, but I think there is enormous potential for YPN not just in Bendigo but statewide, from what I have seen.

Echuca YPN is just getting off the ground. I understand it has just had some preliminary and social networking functions. I believe there are fledgling — and I have not had time to investigate to be honest — organisations in Wangaratta and Wodonga, and if we integrate all of these efforts I believe that a vehicle like YPN could serve an enormously valuable role in retaining young people within the region. YPN I think can also play a key lobbying role within the regional communities and form strategic alliances with business and community and the schools. A program that we are in the development phase of is getting our YPNers — as I refer to them — into the schools and exposing people to people who are established within their careers.

Again, it is a similar concept to the Lead On in terms of accessibility of people and their opportunities and experience, and encouraging young people to see that you can develop a career regionally and the opportunities are available to you.

One key role that we think the Young Professionals Network could fulfil would be providing connectivity between business in terms of linking to local schools and educational institutions and linking people to the Young Professionals Network in terms of making sure that people become aware at both levels, in terms of the young people coming through the educational institutions and people coming into the region, wherever the opportunities are available within a region, so developing those opportunities. As I said, there is a huge groundswell of support for the Young Professionals Network, but again, we are tightly controlled by our resources and the limitations on them.

The CHAIR — You talked about the Bendigo region as the Young Professionals Network. How far afield do people come from to be part of that network?

Ms MEDINA — At the moment we really draw quite locally, I think. We have not run any statistics on it, but I think probably 90 per cent of the people attending functions or involved with the Young Professionals Network would be Bendigo-based. We also draw some people from Castlemaine, which we are aware of, and we have certainly been drawing down a little from Echuca, and the groundswell of support has really been a factor in Echuca getting off the ground in its own right.

The CHAIR — What do people say they actually join the organisation for? What is the strong motivator for them?

Ms MEDINA — I like to think of myself as a guinea pig, really, for the YPN concept, because I relocated from Melbourne. I am Melbourne born and bred and I relocated to Bendigo two years ago not knowing anyone in Bendigo. I found it fulfilling to pursue my career in Bendigo for all of the reasons that came across in our survey, but then finding like-minded people — we have got a strong social scene in Bendigo because of the university, so we have lots of clubs and all that sort of thing, but to sit down and have a chat with people about their experiences and just think outside the box a little, that was more difficult to find for me, at least in a regional centre. Many of the people within our demographic coming into the network have similar stories to tell. They are looking for like-minded people to connect with and to grow with.

Ms SWEENEY — I think there are a lot of people like Fran and me. We have young families ourselves, so we are not into the nightclub scene or the pub scene, but it is still nice to have opportunities to meet people socially. There is also a professional development spin in there as well, so it is a great environment to meet new people and learn about the local community as you are first entering that community. Knowing that people have similar backgrounds is great.

Ms MEDINA — There is a real absence of non-industry-specific professional development. I know as a lawyer I receive a lot of professional development, but in terms of other skills, non-industry-specific skills there is a real dearth of that sort of activity going on. So we have started to provide that. There is a real interest across the demographic for that too, so it has become enormous as a concept, what you could potentially do with a vehicle like YPN.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Nicole, from your survey, did the people who came from Melbourne or from outside Bendigo generally come for work and then looked at the positives and negatives of living in Bendigo, or did they often choose that they wanted to live in a regional centre like Bendigo and then look for work?

Ms SWEENEY — I think it is mainly about the catalyst of career pathways, so you go out and get some regional experience, for example, and along the way they may discover the attractiveness of the lifestyle and are happier, I guess, to settle and stay, hopefully. That is our plan.

Dr NAPHTHINE — I probably know the answer to this question, but I would be interested in your views — For example, I grew up in the country but went off to university and went back to a different part of the country, but traditionally you join things like Apex or Young Farmers or the footy club to get yourself involved. Why do people prefer to be involved in YPN rather than Apex or Rotary or even other organisations in town?

Ms SWEENEY — I am happy to share in this — it is probably more my personal view on this — if I may. I guess we have not really stretched out on that with the database yet, and if I may say from my experience as a young woman, as well there is often a lot of old-fashioned hierarchy associated with some of those associations that I have not necessarily felt aligned to, so I guess that makes it more challenging to enter them and to feel supported in those environments. I guess there is a general trend away from that now. This environment is probably more empowering in a lot of ways. We work really well together as a committee. We have lots of flexibility, and we are all of a similar ilk, I guess, in a lot of ways, and it makes it easy to work within those parameters.

Ms MEDINA — Young Professionals Network as an organisation breaks the mould. We do not work within a mind-set of what people expect. Some of the more established social and networking institutions have struggled to reach our demographic. Most of our demographic, generation X and generation Y, do not operate and respond to a lot of the more established organisations that, once we launched, started approaching us asking, 'Can we tap in to your demographic?'. They really wanted to attract those people and were unable to attract them.

Mr INGRAM — I would like some clarification on your survey. It came across clearly in some of the evidence to the committee that these young people who go through a tertiary course either have come from a country area and gone to a metropolitan university and then come back to a regional area, whether it be their own or another one, or are Melbourne based and go to a regional university, whether it be Bendigo or one of the others, and then ended up working in a country area. Did you break down that ‘Tertiary studies outside of Bendigo’ for metropolitan-based?

Ms MEDINA — No, we did not break it down. In fact, originally the survey was really born of the idea that we wanted to know what the demographic was that we were wanting and tailoring our activities to them. Then we were approached by the Bendigo Bank for some demographics about what we were attracting people to. The fact is that we were attracting people to the area for work. If we had known at the time we could easily have surveyed some more detail on the statistics, which would have been highly relevant for the committee.

Dr NAPHTHINE — To follow that up, from your own knowledge of your group, what percentage of people in the group have had no previous regional and rural experience and now find themselves in Bendigo versus those who have had some, whether it be university or their growing up in Castlemaine, Portland or wherever?

Ms MEDINA — I would say it is a pretty good mix between the two.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Say about fifty-fifty?

Ms MEDINA — That would be my impression. It is a fairly even split. There are people moving to the regional centres now for work-life balance, which is becoming much more important in people’s minds, and then we have people who grow up in a regional or rural community and move for study or travel and then return to a community that is familiar to them, and some are returning to Bendigo to their established networks.

Mr MITCHELL — Do you find, because there is such a big population base in Bendigo, that the cultural organisation grows a lot better and works a lot better because you have such a large number of people to work with as opposed to being in Quambatook or something?

Ms MEDINA — Yes and no. I think it is a double-edged sword, really, to be honest, because there is a lot going on within our community. We compete, say, for space in the local paper or whatever. We are not novel in our level of activity within our communities. There are a lot of other things people are involved in.

A lot of the young men falling within our demographic are involved heavily in sport, for example, so we compete against that. I guess that would be the same in many rural and regional communities. It is a large demographic to pull from, but I think it is a model that would work regardless of the size of the community.

Ms SWEENEY — If I could add to that, I agree with what Fran is saying and even though we have the advantage of size, we also therefore have diversity in terms of the professions and disciplines that people are coming from when they meet. But when you apply that same thinking in a smaller community it provides a different platform that is not sports oriented or arts oriented. Your starting point is your profession, and perhaps it is safer or more neutral for some people and a different mechanism to connect with people within the community. So I think that would also work in a small community as it does in a large one like Bendigo.

The CHAIR — Fran and Nicole, thank you very much for coming today and giving your evidence and taking the time to collect it for us as well. You will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time, and you may correct any errors but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.