

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Modewarre – 9 March 2004

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Mr C. J. Lewis, Manager, Recreation and Open Space, City of Greater Geelong
(sworn).

The CHAIR — I welcome everyone to the hearing, including the members of the public who are attending today. 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 that all evidence taken by this committee, including the submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made outside the committee's hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This is an all-party parliamentary committee hearing evidence on the inquiry into country football. It is worthy of note that this is our first public hearing for the country football reference, and it is also notable that we are doing it in regional Victoria; that is important.

With no further ado I welcome our first witness, Chris Lewis. Would you mind giving us your full name and address for the benefit of Hansard?

Mr LEWIS — Christopher John Lewis, City of Greater Geelong, 30 Gheringhap Street, Geelong.

The CHAIR — Are you representing that organisation today?

Mr LEWIS — Yes, I am.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. Could you make a statement or any comments for about 5 minutes or so, and then the members of the committee will ask you some questions.

Mr LEWIS — Thank you very much. You would have received the submission that has been put in on behalf of the recreation and open space department of the City of Greater Geelong. It is a response on behalf of the administration, and it is based on the experience we have had with the 25 football clubs that we administer under the municipality of the City of Greater Geelong. As professional officers we believe some of the key issues confronting sporting clubs, particularly football clubs, is no. 1, the payment of players and the impact that has on football clubs trying to raise sufficient money to continue to operate, and importantly, having enough money left over, particularly for capital works projects, for which it is often difficult for clubs to fund.

We believe the issue of water use, particularly the water restrictions in the past, has a major impact on the sporting grounds in the City of Greater Geelong. We have had level 2 restrictions which have meant that sporting clubs have been unable to water their grounds and therefore they have deteriorated. That has presented risk problems to them. We are now in the very fortunate position that those restrictions have been lifted and the quality of our grounds is much better as a result, and so those added pressures are not on those sporting clubs. The reintroduction of those restrictions would put both the City of Greater Geelong and those sporting clubs back into that predicament. We believe as a professional administration that there should be more widespread exemptions to water restrictions for sporting clubs.

Obviously there is the issue of the increasing complexity of operating a sporting club. Now with the whole raft of issues — not the least of which is risk management — it is making it more and more difficult for volunteers to administer a club, which has become more like a business than a part-time pursuit.

The issue of facilities is another one that we find to be a heavy strain on the resources of a municipal council. There are not very many funding sources that football clubs can pursue, but there is an increasing demand for the standard of facilities — not only the grounds that I have mentioned, but also the change rooms, the provision of netball courts and the provision of quality social facilities — to be of a higher standard.

One of the sources of funding that does exist is from Sport and Recreation Victoria, both in terms of major and minor grants. For major grants the City of Greater Geelong, for example, can make only one application per annum. You would appreciate that football clubs struggle to compete with other major clubs and stadia and swimming pools because usually it is a participation issue. As you will have found in your investigations to date, most of the participation increases in football are occurring at a junior level. Therefore it is difficult for a football club to mount a case for additional facilities based on increased participation.

The other factor, in relation to the minor facilities grants, is that there is a capping on the total cost of a project at \$150 000. Whilst the state is prepared to put \$50 000 in, it is our experience that is almost impossible to do a pavilion upgrade for \$150 000. It is our experience that it is more likely to be \$300 000 to \$400 000 to introduce

women's facilities, disabled facilities and upgrade the change rooms. That capping does prevent those projects from having access to that level of funding.

Another thing that has been introduced is that there is now greater emphasis on occupancy permits for major events. Those major events are being defined as being held at places of mass public assembly. Now the interpretation is leaning towards the fact that not only finals but major games of football could in fact require an individual occupancy permit, which is another piece of paperwork and a process that volunteers have to go through.

Finally, we believe, as recreational professionals, that the issue of lifestyle changes is impacting on people being prepared to participate in formalised, regular competition. More and more people are prepared to have an occasional game of golf. In the City of Greater Geelong the greatest recreational pursuit is walking. People can obviously do that at a time that suits them best, as opposed to being restricted to a particular timeslot. That is the basis of our submission.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Chris.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Chris, how would you describe football in the Geelong region? Would you describe it as steady, increasing or declining — in a general sense?

Mr LEWIS — In a general sense I would describe football as steady. There are areas where there is significant growth. In those growth corridors, clubs are having to grapple — as we are as a council — with increasing numbers, particularly of junior teams. But in, say, the more rural areas a number of the clubs are struggling to attract senior players and are relying on attracting them from the city to travel out to play in those locations.

Dr NAPHTHINE — The City of Greater Geelong would be responsible for a large number of grounds and facilities. I know that parochialism is very important in the suburbs and with clubs. Has the City of Greater Geelong looked at trying to get some sort of better ground-sharing facilities, rather than perhaps each club having its own ground facilities, as you have outlined, in terms of attracting grants, but also meeting the modern standards with facilities? Can we afford to have every club with its own facilities, or in the City of Greater Geelong do we need to have perhaps elite or significant grounds and perhaps a greater sharing of those facilities?

Mr LEWIS — Certainly our funding and application arrangements give preference to those grounds that are used by multiple groups, not just multiple sporting groups but also the pavilion being used for after-school care or play groups, or that type of thing. We certainly encourage clubs to share and our fee structure is set up such that if you are a club and you are sharing that ground then the ground rental is halved, so there are some incentives from that point of view. We have done what we call a priority grounds review. We have actually classified our grounds into A, B, C and D standards. We are attempting to deliver different standards of facilities in an A-class facility than in a D-class facility, simply for the reason that you cannot fund them all, with the same sealed car park, kerb and channelling, irrigation and draining systems, a first-class pavilion et cetera. But the bottom line is it is very difficult to encourage clubs to share grounds.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Have you got any examples of where clubs are sharing grounds within Geelong?

Mr LEWIS — We certainly have examples where we have set up grounds for finals and the associations actually play the finals at those grounds. Off the top of my head I cannot think of two football clubs playing out of the same ground. Certainly there would often be a football and cricket section, so we are getting year-round use, but not two clubs playing out of the same venue.

Mr INGRAM — Chris, you mentioned occupancy permits. In your submission you have said that the government should review and refine legislation to ensure that it does not impact on local football and that you believe the occupancy permit legislation in the Building Act needs to be changed to clearly define that football does not come under that place of public entertainment; is that right?

Mr LEWIS — Certainly in the normal rounds of football it needs to be clarified that it does not relate. Certainly if there is a large final in a country venue getting a large number of people, then those risk mitigation strategies around large crowds should be taken, but I do not think a normal country football fixture should be subject to the same scrutiny.

Mr WALSH — What percentage of water is recycled in Geelong?

Mr LEWIS — We do not have any particular recycle initiatives that relate to sporting grounds. Certainly we are looking at the redevelopment of a swimming pool at Kardinia Park and using the backwash water from there to irrigate Kardinia Parkland, but we do not have any formal reuse programs on sporting grounds. When we did run into the problem with the drought a couple of years ago, the only way that we could get a small number of grounds up to compliance, from a risk point of view, was to truck grey water from Black Rock and spread it onto a specified number of grounds that could be used. The two leagues were very helpful in terms of scheduling games at those particular grounds, but, as you would appreciate, trucking water is a fairly expensive exercise, particularly in the long term.

Mr WALSH — Have you done any research on the new sewer mining technology?

Mr LEWIS — Yes, we have certainly done the research in terms of sewer mining, and we have done research into the possibilities of reuse of water from wool scouring and large harvesting of water off sheds. The problem is that at the moment there are no real financial incentives for council to actually implement those initiatives, but it is certainly something we are looking at more and more; to try and find a pilot project, if you like.

The CHAIR — So you have not done any work with bores, tanks or things like that to get your own water supply on those grounds?

Mr LEWIS — Certainly in that drought period a number of clubs installed tanks to assist with some watering, but, as you would appreciate, we are talking about 80 000 litres of water to irrigate a ground over a week. It is difficult in those periods of time to find that sort of water, so you are going to have to do that in terms of some sewer mining or grey reuse to be successful.

Mr INGRAM — As part of your submission you have mentioned payment of players and its potential impact, and also the salary cap. Most leagues would have salary caps imposed pretty much right across; that is the standard process. You have made a comment there, but I do not know if you have come up with some solutions. You sort of said that it was an impact, and potentially it is hard to justify spending on facilities, from the council's perspective, when the council sees a large amount of money being paid to players. Do you have further comments on that?

Mr LEWIS — It is one of the inherent things about football clubs that they do pay footballers. A number of players would play throughout the season in a cricket side, not being paid, buying their own gear and probably paying money for the umpire. Come the football season there is an expectation that the clubs will raise the money to pay them so that they are successful. I know from our experience, through the work of the leagues and the clubs themselves, that the amount of money that is paid, generally speaking, has reduced significantly, but it is still an issue in terms of a volunteer having to go and raise \$30 000 or \$40 000, which is then passed on to the players. As you say, it is also a factor in terms of sponsors making a decision about whether they are going to sponsor the club, and local government making a decision about whether it can justify sponsoring a club if there is no financial contribution from the footy club, which is obviously militated against if they are having to pay out that \$30 000 to \$40 000 per annum on player payments.

Mr WALSH — What would be the average budget of one of the clubs?

Mr LEWIS — From my experience, and anecdotally, it would be probably around \$100 000.

Mr WALSH — That includes you guys maintaining the grounds separate to that, does it?

Mr LEWIS — We charge the footy clubs an annual rental that varies according to the condition of the ground, from about \$2300 down to about \$400, and that includes the provision of water and usually the maintenance of the outside of the clubroom. So that would represent, in our view, about 2 per cent of the turnover of a larger club (certainly not a junior club).

Dr NAPHTHINE — Have you done the figures on what subsidy you are providing to clubs with the ground rental structures you apply? Do you work out that the annual cost of, say, meeting a division 1 Geelong and District Football League ground standard — for example, St Albans or South Barwon — is \$10 000 a year, but you

are prepared to rent it to them for \$4000 and prop a \$6000 community service obligation on that? Can you give us some idea of what you are looking at in terms of the council's contribution to that?

Mr LEWIS — The City of Greater Geelong's policy on fees and charges is based on the fact that we seek to recoup between 15 and 20 per cent of our costs on the maintenance of the ground, based on the fact that, no. 1, the sporting club is not there all the time, but, no. 2, the sporting grounds themselves obviously provide a valuable community asset to people, just to go down, have a kick, fly a kite or go for a walk. So the answer to your question is that we seek to recoup about 15 to 20 per cent.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I know you have some experience in football clubs, particularly in Torquay. Can you articulate one or two of the greatest disincentives for clubs either financially or, more importantly, from the volunteer side, which seems to me to have been a consistent theme? It is difficult to find people for committees and to volunteer. Can you articulate or precis, if you like, the major issues that impact on that which we can influence or the VCFL can influence?

Mr LEWIS — Yes, sure. No. 1 is the issue of funding flowing down to the grassroots. As I have said in the submission, there is no federal funding for footy clubs as such. The funding that is there from the state, through the minor facilities grant with that capping, is fairly limited, and a city the size of Geelong can only apply for three of those annually. We have 80 reserves — we are talking about the whole breadth of recreation, so there is little funding there. It does not appear to me, both from personal and professional experience, to be a lot of money that flows down from the AFL to grassroots clubs. So that is one of the things that clubs obviously struggle with, that if in terms of doing something around the club themselves, whether it is building a barbecue, putting some seats in or upgrading the standard of their change rooms, basically the only avenue they have got is local government. As I said, we have competing priorities. That is the first thing.

The second thing is, having been a volunteer, the complexity of the business. You are basically running a business with insurance issues, risk issues and Workcover issues, the responsible serving of alcohol and food-handling agencies such as local government et cetera, asking you to submit forms, applications et cetera. Even where there is professional administration of the sport, often that professional administration raises the bar and makes it more difficult for the volunteers to deliver the outcomes that they are on about.

Attraction of volunteers is the third one. It is more and more difficult with the hours that people are working to attract volunteers, and particularly to attract junior coaches, because at the end of the day the only person you can get to coach the side is someone who knocks off work at 4 o'clock and who is not necessarily the best person to coach the side. The last one is the whole issue of sponsorship and trying to get the community support for a sporting club.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Supplementary to that, on the salary cap — correct me if I am wrong and Football Geelong will be able to correct me — I think it is \$40 000 for Bellarine and for the GFL, or in that order?

Mr LEWIS — It would be in that order.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you think that is too high? There have always been rumours of non-compliance, and I think they are flying around again this year — I know, outrageous allegations. Do you think the leagues need to be more proactive in ensuring that the clubs either stick to the current salary cap or if the salary cap is lower would there be the same argument?

Mr LEWIS — I probably should not go there, but I think the leagues need to work with the clubs to establish a salary cap that they can afford, and I think it does need to be adhered to. We all know that is very difficult, but I think that they need to try to adhere to it. I think in setting the salary cap we need to take in the whole range of services that the club has to provide, not just winning the premiership.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Chris. Thank you for your time and your submission. You will receive a copy of the transcript of today's hearing. You may correct any obvious errors of fact or grammar but not any matters of substance. Thank you again for giving us your time and your expertise in this area.

Mr LEWIS — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.