

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Warrnambool – 10 March 2004

Members

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Witness

Mr P. F. O'Brien, Director, Resident Services, City of Warrnambool (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Paul. I will just go through a spiel that you were not here for before. 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, 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.

Would you give us your full name and address for the purposes of the transcript, and also indicate whether you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation and if you are representing an organisation which organisation?

Mr O'BRIEN — Paul Francis O'Brien, 6 Foster Street, Warrnambool. I am here representing Warrnambool City Council. My position is director, resident services, with the council. Council has made a submission in writing previously. I would like to speak to that briefly and if anyone wishes to ask any questions or make any comments they can do so from there.

The municipality of Warrnambool is represented by two football leagues, as you are probably aware: the Hampden Football Netball League and the Warrnambool and District Football Netball League. Council views football as a very important recreational pursuit. In particular we have watched the growth of football clubs siding with the netball clubs and the growth of football-netball. Council views that as a very good activity, because it has seen the introduction of husband and wife teams to the same venue, family pursuits, et cetera. Council has worked very closely with some of the clubs to get the facilities up to standard so that they can pursue both football and netball in the same area.

Council is also aware of the social and demographic changes that have taken place around the hinterland of Warrnambool city. We have observed the demise of some of the smaller rural clubs and also we are acutely aware of the impact that then has on the social infrastructure of the small rural communities. The council's submission is in the main around the operational and infrastructure costs. Basically we have taken a position of being landlord. Council has observed that the operating costs of football-netball clubs is escalating at an alarming rate. There are insurance costs, water rates and maintenance costs. Just recently it has been brought to council's attention that there is need for ground lighting for training because of occupational health and safety. So council is receiving a number of requests from clubs to light the grounds so that footballers can train at night.

Also the council is the guarantor for a number of local football clubs that have borrowed substantially for things such as social clubrooms. So council is aware that football-netball clubs do need to be viable. They need to stay in place for the long term, otherwise council would be forced to — and it has in one case — act as guarantor to settle up.

The council is also aware that there is a great demand on volunteers. Council runs a strong volunteer program here in the city. The demands on the volunteers are getting greater and there are fewer, it would appear. There are more statutory controls placed on volunteers and there are more responsibilities, so the volunteers would appear to be taking on a much more onerous responsibility than they were, say, a decade ago.

In the area of infrastructure development and maintenance — and this is council's concern with football, I suppose — council has commissioned some feasibility studies just recently. We have three reports that have been received by council in the last six months saying that on two grounds there are infrastructure needs of approximately \$8 million.

Dr NAPHTHINE — How much?

Mr O'BRIEN — Eight million. There is another report that says that infrastructure maintenance and redevelopment is in the order of another \$2 million, so there is approximately \$10 million in upgrades to three of council's recreation reserves — that is, 3 out of 13. So in time to come council has to come to grips with a fairly demanding infrastructure upgrade of its reserves and ovals.

We have spoken to clubs in the past about amalgamations et cetera, but it appears that that is not the way football clubs would prefer to go. They would rather run their own race, and good luck to them. Council is putting forward that in the very near future there will be a cash crisis, especially with occupational health and safety, insurance, et cetera, so it is a council recommendation to this inquiry that there does need to be an increase in government

grants in two areas: one in the support for volunteers and volunteer programs if the clubs are going to survive in the long term, and there would need to be an increase in Sport and Recreation Victoria grants for infrastructure upgrades of recreation reserves, in particular for football ovals. That is where I draw to a close.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — What role does the AFL have in those last two requests?

Mr O'BRIEN — If the AFL is going to invest in its own future it has to invest in the infrastructure where sportspeople play. If they are fair dinkum about the long-term success of the AFL as a structure — and this would be a personal point of view rather than a council point of view — they should be investing in grants. Just recently council has had a league team down here training, Essendon. Two years ago we had St Kilda down, and they are starting to make all sorts of demands on council about standards of ovals; otherwise they will not come out to what is effectively in Warrnambool good regional infrastructure. If they go somewhere else and we let the standards go down, then they will not come out. If they have got demands on their elite sportsmen through insurance et cetera, I believe they should be investing in the infrastructure.

Dr NAPHTHINE — You talked about the \$8 million and the \$2 million, so there is \$10 million worth of infrastructure works. What sorts of things are you talking about?

Mr O'BRIEN — The upgrade to social clubroom facilities, change facilities, watering systems, scoreboard facilities, netball facilities, the road infrastructure in and around the reserves and lighting — there is a large demand for the upgrade of lighting towers.

Dr NAPHTHINE — On your grounds what do you actually charge the clubs that use the ground that you own? What does the council put in, what does a club put in and what is the percentage of each?

Mr O'BRIEN — It would be nice if I could give you a simple answer, but the nature of local government is that we have a lot of historical agreements in place. We have tenancy agreements in place — for example, at the Reid Oval, our main oval, we have football for six months and cricket for six months, and we try to have an equitable charge to the clubs so that we can recoup some of the cost. But in the main with sporting ovals I would imagine that the maintenance costs of reserves, the maintenance of the grass and line marking et cetera would be in the order of \$30 000, and we would probably recoup \$5000 of that.

The CHAIR — So the council does the maintenance, keeps the grass up to standard and does the line marking for the club?

Mr O'BRIEN — In some cases. In other cases the clubs do it themselves, and council does not charge them a ground rental, but provides infrastructure such as gang mowers et cetera, and maintains that equipment for the clubs.

Dr NAPHTHINE — When you provide equipment and the club does it themselves, how do you go with Workcover, occupational health and safety issues and insurance issues?

Mr O'BRIEN — One club has just given it back to us for that very reason. It is a complex issue. If they are incorporated clubs they will accept their own responsibilities, and when we give equipment out we have to make sure that we do pass it across and council is not still the owner of the equipment. But where council is the owner of the equipment we pick up all occupational health and safety costs.

Mr McQUILTEN — It seems that council is not very happy with football. In this report of yours you seem to be putting it down and you would be quite happy to see all the footy clubs just go.

Mr O'BRIEN — No.

Mr McQUILTEN — It would save you a lot of money, would it not?

Mr O'BRIEN — No, because we still would be maintaining the reserves and the ovals with our revenue stream coming in.

Mr McQUILTEN — I think that is a part of the problem. On the one hand you are saying it is good that a number of clubs have gone under because other cheaper sporting groups have come up and taken their place.

Mr O'BRIEN — I do not think the report is saying that. I do not think we have mentioned any specifics.

Mr McQUILTEN — I think I read it somewhere. Page 3 of your submission states:

Sporting capital, a report commissioned by six municipalities — —

Mr O'BRIEN — That is outside Warrnambool; that is a regional report.

Mr McQUILTEN — You are quoted in this report. It states:

The report presented examples of communities in the region that have not only survived, but prospered after the local football club had departed.

You seem pretty proud about that.

Mr O'BRIEN — No, that is — —

Mr McQUILTEN — It is a good report, is it?

Mr O'BRIEN — Sorry? That is not a report of a facility in Warrnambool. You need to read the report to reference the particular reserves you are talking about. It is not a Warrnambool report.

Mr McQUILTEN — Right, so that is not the council's view then?

Mr O'BRIEN — No. It is referenced in the sporting capital report, but it is not a Warrnambool City Council-specific reserve or reference.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Does the Warrnambool City Council treat football clubs differently to other sporting clubs, or does it divide them according to whether they have other sources of revenue, either social club facilities or poker machines?

Mr O'BRIEN — No, there is no difference in treatment of clubs. We would like to do so, but it is the way clubs are structured. If you take the Warrnambool Football Netball Club and the social club, they are structured in such a way that their gaming facility has a separate identity to the football club. So when we deal with the club we are only dealing with the football netball club, not the entire complex.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — That is interesting, because the City of Greater Geelong does exactly what Denis is referring to. It treats clubs with poker machines totally differently to other clubs, and we support that.

Mr O'BRIEN — That may be something to consider in the future.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for that, Paul, and thanks for putting in the effort and getting this report together. You will get a copy of the transcript so you can correct any mistakes in matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Committee adjourned.