

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Ballarat – 27 April 2004

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Mr B. Anderson, area manager south-west, Victorian Country Football League
(sworn).

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for attending. Would you mind giving your full name address, and state whether you are representing an organisation, and if so, your position within that organisation.

Mr ANDERSON — Sure. I am working for the WorkSafe Victorian Country Football League. I am area manager for south-west Victoria. I will address each of the terms of reference one at a time. Firstly, assessing the current strength and long-term viability, as can be seen from the map on the back of the submission there have been many clubs that have disbanded, amalgamated or gone into recess between 1981 and 2001, especially in the western half of the state. Many of the smaller rural communities continue to struggle to put two senior football teams onto the field each Saturday. However, the current state of football within the south-west area is quite good. I am hopeful the clubs that have disappeared have left the clubs remaining with greater opportunities to survive due to the players in each community travelling to neighbouring towns to play. This year we had one club go into recess from the south-west — Ararat United — and a couple of other rural clubs have just managed to hang on as a result of dwindling numbers and the inability to recruit the required players.

Springbank Football Club in the Central Highlands Football League held crisis talks just recently but has managed to get the required number for this season. Being a very small community with several other small towns in close proximity they were all competing for the same limited number of players. The Caramut Football Club in the Mininera League has also just managed to survive the 2004 season, which was due mainly to the cooperation of other clubs in the league that have agreed to allow them to have no reserves for this season and the better reserves players from opposing clubs on match day are given day permits to play for Caramut seniors for the year. This was seen as a possible solution as the club had quite good numbers of juniors coming through, so hopefully that will not be a problem in the future. It is important that clubs and leagues are receptive to the ideas of restructure in order to get clubs playing in competitions that are suitable for them for the following reasons: towns of similar size and population should make up the league; travel time should be limited as much as possible; and financial considerations should also be taken into account. Just because a club has played in a particular league for many years is not reason enough alone to say it should stay in that particular league indefinitely. With continued cooperation and support club viability in the region should be quite high.

The second point was to assess the role Australian football plays in building community identity, social interaction and so on. The loss of a football club to a small rural community is an enormous emotional wrench and could be likened to a death in the family. The football club is the hub of activity, and is the main reason that people come together on a regular basis in many districts and small communities. These people range in age from the very young junior players, supporters, siblings, the elderly, administrators, supporters, and volunteers. This provides the people within a town with a sense of connectedness and pride in their town.

When the football club disappears, the reverse is also true. Regular social events are lost, social interaction diminishes, health and wellbeing verses sedentary lifestyle, and increased feelings of loneliness. Often netballers and junior footballers are able to exist due to the lower numbers required and the high participation rates of juniors; however, if the senior football team goes out of existence then inevitably the netballers and junior footballers are forced to look elsewhere for their activity as well.

Many clubs are happy to continue to finish their season outside of the finals, and see that they are providing a very important service for their young citizens due to the fact that they are providing the community with intangible benefits such as social skills, interaction and pride in the town. Football has always been the vehicle for providing rural communities with much of their social life. This is not done through cricket clubs and other more individual sports, and this is one of the most important reasons why clubs strive so hard to maintain football as an integral part of their town or district.

Paragraph (c) refers to investigating how demographic shifts and changes in sport and entertainment preferences and other social changes are impacting. Obviously population loss has a huge impact on participation rates, and this can be clearly seen in the western half of the state where population loss is widespread and was greater than 0.5 per cent annually between 1991 and 2000. Population loss is often the reason given for the loss of a football club and is probably the no. 1 contributor to the large number of clubs that have disappeared or amalgamated in the western half of the state. If the young people from these communities had favourable job prospects in rural areas this would go a long way towards solving the problem. However, this is not an easy task. Maybe decentralisation is something that the government should try to continue. The reverse is also true where population increase around the coastal regions in the west of the state has seen football flourish with large numbers of juniors coming through the ranks, especially in the Geelong area. Ballarat is also experiencing a growth in junior numbers. However, the problem

faced by football administrators is how to best cater for the growth and how to keep these people interested in the game when they leave the juniors.

Other sporting preferences do not appear to be a major contributing factor to loss of teams, as very few clubs have been lost in the larger regional centres, and Auskick numbers are constantly increasing. It is in the larger regional centres, where other sporting and entertainment preferences are readily available, and this is borne out by the fact that participation rates in Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong are towards the lower end of the scale in the 19 to 39-year age bracket. The areas with high participation rates such as Hampden, Western and Central Murray/North tend to be the areas with most club losses. This once again points to demographic shift as being the biggest concern.

Paragraph (d) is to identify the effect that the decline in the number of rural Australian football clubs is having on country towns. There are many effects that the loss of the major sporting organisations has on a community. Firstly, the financial effect on the town can be quite dramatic. An example of this can be seen with the closure of the Ararat United Football Club this year which participated in the Mininera league over a number of years. The resultant loss of this club means that none of the other nine clubs in the league now travel to Ararat for their away games. When we multiply the effect through the number of teams each club brings to the town for both football and netball, plus the supporters, volunteers, administrators and family that travel with them, we see that the financial and economic impact can be quite dramatic. Secondly, as previously mentioned, the football club is generally the social hub of the town in a rural community and as such the loss of the club is a very emotive subject. Clubs will fight tooth and nail to survive as they realise that if the club folds the social fabric and pride of the town is adversely affected. Thirdly, ovals and facilities are becoming wastelands and towns that once thrived, especially on a Saturday morning, are becoming more like ghost towns, and you can see that with many of the clubs in the district — and Moonambel immediately springs to mind.

Paragraph (e) includes identifying the impact that specific costs are having on rural Australian football associations and clubs. As mentioned previously, medical insurance, public liability insurance, associations liability and loss of income insurance are some of the major costs associated with the running of a football club, although it should be noted that the player registration program should fund much of this if it is collected by the club as recommended by the VCFL. Water costs are generally a huge cost to clubs. However, yesterday's announcement is much appreciated and should alleviate this problem greatly. This may be down a little bit this year, however, due to the severe restrictions faced by many areas in the state, but I guess those clubs that are able to access water will have some big costs associated with that. An added cost for many teams has been that associated with putting in bores for underground water in 2004. The ongoing maintenance of these bores is also something that needs consideration. With yesterday's announcement the challenge for us now is to get that money into the right areas and make sure it goes to the right people.

Affiliation fees faced by clubs and leagues should be part of an association or the VCFL. Utility costs such as phone, gas, electricity and rates can also be a huge impost on clubs. Umpiring facilities such as training venues, upgrade of change rooms and lighting is also something that is worrying many umpiring groups. Local councils are often the body that looks after a ground; the ongoing maintenance of the ground is paid for by the user. In some cases that is a huge cost. Player payments is obviously a major cost and something, if not managed correctly by the volunteers of clubs, which can be a major contributing factor to the demise of a club. Clubs need to realise that it is necessary to manage payments to allow continued operation of the club. It is no good being in the grand final one year and out of existence the next. Umpiring fees and facilities are a huge expense for football. Associated with umpiring costs are the effect of WorkCare payments as well. Also the cost of providing adequate facilities for the club and the maintenance of these buildings and the provision of adequate lighting for training as well as training and education of volunteers.

Paragraph (f) is to recommend actions that the football organisations might consider. The continued support of activities involving AFL players such as community camps, clinics and AFL practice matches that we currently have running in country Victoria is something that we should try to maintain. This can create enormous interest and can only help increase participation levels, particularly for juniors. Clubs need to have an equal opportunity to gain access to funding through government grants. The VCFL and Football Victoria need to be provided with the funding opportunities available, which can be distributed directly to all clubs so that everyone has a chance of obtaining some of this funding. At present it seems that the clubs with the skilled personnel in these areas are at a distinct advantage.

Encouragement and inducements to retiring or delisted place to move to country clubs as coaches and players, as can be seen from a couple of announcements in the Central Highlands league over the last couple of weeks, has created enormous interest in the districts that those guys have gone to. Financial support for leagues that are trying to centralise administration with neighbouring leagues could be useful. There should be support for clubs to conform to government rules and regulations, as mentioned previously. Rules and policies should be designed to make it easier for administrators of football clubs rather than making it harder for them, as has also been mentioned by previous speakers.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. One of your recommendations was the centralised administration of neighbouring leagues and that has risen before. Have you any idea of whether there is support for that in the community and within the leagues, and how would you see it working differently to what is occurring at the moment?

Mr ANDERSON — This was brought up at our seminar at Ballarat University at the end of the year. I must admit that it did not get a lot of support, especially from the district leagues. They viewed it with lots of scepticism. However, where it has been put into place it seems to have worked quite well. In my area, Football Geelong has the Bellarine Football League, the Geelong Football League and all the juniors are encompassed in that as well as the Falcons, and they are very happy with the way it is working down there.

The CHAIR — What benefits have been provided to those particularly clubs and leagues?

Mr ANDERSON — I think it takes out a lot of the parochialism with leagues. It also provides economies of scale for stationery and that sort of stuff. Volunteers are hard to get and therefore you can use the same volunteers in different leagues. You can also have tribunals that come together, so rather than duplicating four tribunals in one small area you have them all together. There are advantages, but obviously the leagues view it with a bit of scepticism. Maybe to overcome that the executives of the various leagues could still have their meetings, but the things that you can run together can be run together.

The CHAIR — That is a good idea, especially if you can compromise on some issues.

Dr NAPHTHINE — You talked about the need for a greater involvement of AFL players. There have been mixed views about reintroducing zoning in some way or another and whether that might provide a greater incentive for the AFL clubs to nurture an area. One suggestion has come up a number of times, which is that there ought to be the reintroduction of zoning, but the benefits to the AFL clubs should be that they could take a second or third-round draft pick as a priority. It would not affect the top 10 or 15 drafts — like the father and son rule — but they could take a second or third round draft pick as a priority out of their zone, so they have an incentive to get actively involved in that zone and work in that zone.

Mr ANDERSON — I think that is a great idea myself. I was involved in the Essendon community camp this year down at Warrnambool, and the interest that that created in Warrnambool was unbelievable. We made a lot of money out of it, but next year you will have someone else and they may not do anywhere near as good a job, whereas if that particular club had that all the time it would be ongoing throughout the year rather than a one-off thing, and you would have access to players, administration and all of those things. Clubs are a bit reticent to put all their funding into an area and then get nothing back out of it so you can see the AFL's point of view as well, but if they were to get a priority pick from the second round draft I am sure they would be a little bit keener. If, say, Geelong had had a chance to get Jonathon Brown, I am sure they would have had a bit more of a dip at that area!

Dr NAPHTHINE — One more question: there has been a reduction in the number of people in your position, as I understand it.

Mr ANDERSON — In terms of?

Dr NAPHTHINE — The area you cover.

Mr ANDERSON — Can you explain that further?

Dr NAPHTHINE — I thought there was a restructure — —

Mr ANDERSON — The VCFL?

Dr NAPHTHINE — Yes.

Mr ANDERSON — No, it has probably increased. Rod Ward had my job, but he went from south-west right up to the north-west as well, so we have put on a new guy that covers the north-west of the state, and I only go straight across now to Hamilton and down around this corner of the state, so we have put on one extra person. I am talking about area managers. We have had an increase in the area managers, but the regional structure has decreased slightly. The regional structure — there were 14 regions and it has now come back to 10 regions. With full-time staff, area managers have increased but we have reduced by four the number of regional managers.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time today and for staying and listening to the leagues as well, which I am sure was good information for you as well. You will receive a copy of the transcript and you may make minor corrections but not to matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.