

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into country football

Lakes Entrance – 6 April 2004

#### Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr B. P. Hardman

Dr D. V. Napthine

Mr C. Ingram

Mr P. L. Walsh

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray

Research Officer: Dr V. Koops

#### Witnesses

Mr R. J. Twining, secretary (sworn); and

Mr L. J. Robinson, president (sworn), East Gippsland Football League.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, Rodney and Luke. For the purposes of the transcript, would you please give your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, your position in that organisation.

**Mr ROBINSON** — Luke James Robinson, 7 Moroney Street, Bairnsdale. I am representing the East Gippsland Football League as the president.

**Mr TWINING** — Rodney James Twining, 8 Christmas Street, Metung. I am the secretary of the East Gippsland Football League.

**The CHAIR** — If you would give us your presentation for a few minutes, after that we will ask you some questions.

**Mr ROBINSON** — The strength of country football across East Gippsland — and most likely across the state — is waning due to a number of factors, we believe, including player retention and attraction, volunteer retention and the attraction of younger club and league officials and administrators, the financial burdens placed on clubs due to increased administration and often insurance, and sponsorship attraction. Despite decreasing involvement at club and league level, football competitions in the district still form an integral part of the community. The benefits of the social interaction football provides for the broader community are enormous. However, for this social outlet to be viable into the future, the game must be made more accessible and appealing to people both on and off the field. Clubs and leagues have spoken to elderly people and senior citizens groups, left flyers at Centrelink offices and placed articles and advertisements in newspapers — all with the view of getting volunteers and players to help out. The answer from the majority of these was the same: we are too old or have no interest in football.

Football will always survive. However, our role into the future is to ensure the growth of the game, increase the playing standard, provide an opportunity for developing junior players to play at a higher standard, attract younger volunteers, further develop interaction with other sports — currently netball, but that extends to hockey and other sports played on a Saturday — and streamline administration to reduce the costs. Country football is certainly the major community event of a weekend and also during the week. Towns and communities across East Gippsland use football clubs as the social hub on a Saturday, which is more prevalent with the one-club towns. The common interest of football and netball breeds community spirit and a sense of ownership of that town. It is an outlet and a passion, whether you are a supporter, player, administrator or volunteer.

The movement of young people out of East Gippsland is one of the major causes of declining football competitions. East Gippsland shire has an ageing population due to the region's attractiveness to those retiring or intending to retire within a few years. Movement of young players to better their football at TAC Cup level or premier division football in the Latrobe Valley is encouraged by our clubs. However, the retention of these younger players moving out of the district who are not quite up to that standard is an issue for us and is impacting on our country football. Many of these players, while not being up to that standard, are vital members of the community and country football clubs. These players earn their money locally and spend it at the football club and within the community, and this is vital for the survival of not only the clubs but small rural communities.

The centralisation of departmental bodies such as the Department of Sustainability and Environment and banks and the smaller number of male teachers in local schools further inhibits football clubs from recruiting players and volunteers. Longer opening hours at many retail outlets force players and volunteers to work Saturday mornings, Sundays and even later into the evenings on training nights, placing further restrictions on their availability to make their time available at the club and on game day. Provision for tertiary education institutions in East Gippsland, incentives for younger males to enter the education department and developing industry which attracts young professional individuals to the region would return this avenue of recruiting to the clubs and leagues. In most instances, local football clubs do meet the social needs of the community. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for clubs to provide the social outlet for players and supporters. Ground maintenance, infrastructure — that being clubrooms, change rooms and lighting — maintenance and redevelopment and ongoing repairs due to vandalism are just some of the costs that place financial burdens on clubs, which vary in every town. In a town where a football club is struggling with on-field poor performance it is often the case that this will have a ripple effect throughout the community. Football becomes less of a focus, interest wanes and the club — and in turn local business — suffers. The distance to travel to away games also limits supporters from that away club pumping money into that local economy, which could be thousands of dollars on a game day. In one instance locally the amalgamation of two clubs in one town provided an increased interest and united community spirit towards

football. However, this should not be seen as the answer to country football problems. All existing clubs should be given the opportunity to survive into the future.

The cost of insurance, ground hire and maintenance, medical costs, uniforms, refreshments, administration, player payments — the list goes on and these all place clubs and leagues in difficult positions. Due to these costs, clubs are forced to increase entry prices, leagues are asking more from clubs, membership prices rise and fundraising activities are increased, continually hitting the pocket of our local community members, whether they be 18, 16 or 80. The sponsorship dollar becomes more important but is harder to secure given declining business in some of our rural communities. Competition for players forces payments to increase, which creates an unhealthy situation within clubs in our league and loyalty and club and town spirit decline.

Throwing a bucket of money at country football I believe will not solve the problems facing our leagues and clubs. Competition, however, must be tailored to suit the communities which it encompasses. The administration of leagues and clubs must be streamlined and made more available and accessible to the average individual. Presently, to be a club or league administrator you virtually have to be a professional in those fields. A system needs to be put in place so the time spent on administration is reduced, therefore reducing costs, and so that it is accessible to anyone who wishes to take on such a role. Subsidies or traineeships could be made available to clubs to pay for volunteer labour. Trainees in the past have been expensive to administer and pay for but would be an ideal solution for both football clubs and young people. Subsidies for utilities costs, as outlined before, would assist clubs in getting their facilities up to standard. Concessions on insurance and petrol would also go a long way to decreasing the burden on clubs.

The state government's grant application processes are often too detailed and require a lot of information and time to fill out. Most of the time when a decision is made on a grant, even if it is successful, these funds are too late to use for that purpose. I suppose one answer would be to develop business — I suppose the expansions here with Patties and Vegco are a good start — and enable quality tertiary education to be completed in the country to assist in retaining the region's youth, which is where our future lies, and developing them into leaders of our communities. Where funding would help is with the development of grassroots junior football to ensure Australian rules has a future. But to have a future volunteers and administrators must be encouraged to take part in football off field to support the on-field a role that football plays.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Luke. Rod, do you have anything you want to say at this stage?

**Mr TWINING** — No.

**Mr WALSH** — Luke, you talked about competitions tailored to suit the communities. Do you want to expand on that, please?

**Mr ROBINSON** — In our league we have a number of clubs struggling to make up a reserves side. There might come a time when the East Gippsland Football League goes a similar way to the Omeo Football League, and we have no seconds side, just a seniors side. Maybe we could be encouraging a super rules-style format, with an older population. One was started in Orbost last year. It takes those maybe 10 people who fill up the seconds side before the under-18s fill up the other places. It maybe takes them away from that Saturday football, plays them in their own competition that is maybe a little bit easier on the bodies — just tailoring the competitions to suit the people we have in our area.

**Mr WALSH** — One of the challenges we have is to come up with recommendations. You have raised a lot of the issues that are out there. If you were Premier for a day what would you do for country football?

**Mr ROBINSON** — I suppose it is endless. The main thing —

**Mr WALSH** — Three things! We cannot stay here all day!

**Mr ROBINSON** — The main thing — and Rod could speak to this as well — is the administration. It is so time consuming. I would say that it is a full-time job for Rod. Although everybody who goes into these roles loves them, the hours have to be reduced and obviously targeted so that the football competition — to make it accessible for everyone. With developing our younger players there is limited opportunity for them to go further at the moment. You have got the TAC Cup, which is based out of Traralgon and which is sometimes a bit of a burden on families — that is, getting people from as far away as Mallacoota. Developing them and trying to get a better

standard of football, whether it is one team out of East Gippsland going down and playing in premier-division football, could be the answer.

**Mr TWINING** — Employment and education are vital for keeping the kids here; so many of our kids move out of the area. At Orbost and up that way there are significant numbers each year who come to a football team. They also come from the Bairnsdale area and the high country. We lose our 18, 19 and 20-year-olds. They go off to tertiary education and employment. We cannot keep them, and that hurts everything: the economy, the footy and the whole social structure.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — Luke, from what you are saying about administration, if one of the recommendations were to provide a \$5 million or \$10 million fund over the next four or five years to provide training courses right throughout regional and rural Victoria to assist, at no charge, administrators or volunteers who might be interested in football or other sports to come along and learn some of the skills that would help them be successful administrators and encourage them to be involved, would that be a program that would be useful.

**Mr ROBINSON** — That is a very good start considering that a lot of people — and I suppose I can speak for this personally because I am younger in such a role — a lot of younger people think that becoming an administrator is just a little bit beyond their reach at the moment, but it should not be. You should not have to have 30 years experience in football or in business to become involved off the field in football, and that would go a long way to bridging that gap a little bit.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — You made some comments about the government grant application process. One of the things the previous government did when there was a spate of drownings in our waters was to allocate certain money out of the gambling Community Support Fund that was specifically for upgrading surf lifesaving facilities. That was managed by the surf lifesaving organisation, and there was \$6 million in it. If you again took a chunk of money out of the Community Support Fund that was then administered by football, or football and netball, that then could manage the process for grants to upgrade grounds and facilities, particularly for lighting or occupational health and safety. Would that be a similar sort of project?

**Mr ROBINSON** — It would, but we cannot get too tied down in the administration. A lot of that pool of money would go in the administration of these things. You would have to streamline that. It would definitely help, but you would have to maybe cut out a step in the process, just for the time factor.

**Dr NAPTHINE** — Or just write the cheque straight out to the East Gippsland Football League!

**The CHAIR** — We have been hearing around the state that some of the clubs are having a bit of difficulty as far as getting access to water, let alone the cost, to keep their grounds safe to play on. Do you have that issue here, or is your club all right as far as that is concerned?

**Mr ROBINSON** — It is definitely not right; a bit of rain would help of course! Some clubs have taken the approach of putting bores down and that sort of thing, while others are just using town water, given that there are no restrictions on it at the moment. Providing clubs with assistance to put a bore down and setting up sprinkler systems would benefit. We are not all as well set up as others, I suppose. Take our newer club in Paynesville, it has not been in our league for that long and it has to do a bit to establish itself as a thriving football club. Other clubs are a little bit behind the eight ball, and they could be brought up to standard a little bit quicker in areas such as ground maintenance et cetera, but water is definitely a big issue.

**Mr TWINING** — The Omeo league is not here at the moment, but I know that the Swifts Creek ground is in dire straits. Apparently they are carting water 1½ kilometres, or something like that, at the moment to try and get some water onto the ground.

**The CHAIR** — At huge cost.

**Mr TWINING** — It is a huge cost and a huge issue.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your time today, Luke and Rod. We appreciate that. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks time. You will be able to correct any errors of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance. Thank you very much.

**Witnesses withdrew.**