

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Lakes Entrance – 6 April 2004

Members

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Witness

Mr G. J. Squires, president, Orbost Snowy Rovers Football Club (affirmed).

The CHAIR — Welcome, Garry. I have to let you know, because you were not here when we started, that under the powers conferred on the committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act we are empowered to take evidence on oath or affirmation. Any evidence taken by the committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review, but any comments made by you outside the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. Would you give us your full name and address and, if you are representing an organisation, the name of the organisation and your role within that organisation?

Mr SQUIRES — Garry James Squires, 17 Perry Street, Orbost. I am president of the Orbost Snowy Rovers Football Club.

The CHAIR — If you would provide us with a few minutes of submission and then we will ask some questions.

Mr SQUIRES — I have put my submission into three parts. The first page is basically about an amalgamation process which occurred in the last couple of years; the second page has some general issues; and towards the bottom of the third page I have a couple of ideas. I will get into trouble from the women around our club because I completely left the word ‘netball’ out of the whole submission, but virtually anything that can be said about the football club applies to the netball club that is associated with the club.

As I have said in that first section, the two former clubs in the Orbost township amalgamated in January 2003 to form the Orbost Snowy Rovers Football Club. As part of that process we restructured football in Orbost completely to also enter an under-13 and under-15 football team in the Bairnsdale Junior Football League, as well as having our Auskick program on Sundays, so it was a total look at the whole structure of football. I have attached to the back of this some notes which will give you a lot more detail on some of the reasons for the amalgamation and how it happened. They are some notes I prepared for another talk I gave. You may want to look at them at your leisure; I will not go into them now.

The issues that contributed to the need for amalgamation are very similar to the sorts of issues that have been talked about by other speakers. There was the gradual removal of services from our town. Fifteen years ago we had the shire, the State Electricity Commission, VicRoads, Telecom, the Department of Sustainability and Environment with a much bigger structure, and bank managers in several banks in the town. All these sorts of things gave you a regular flow of people into the town. All these have been either completely removed or, in the case of DSE, downsized considerably. That has had a major impact on us.

Changing community employment trends: about that same time, 15 years ago, they actually let females in to become foresters in the department. That meant we were getting a lot fewer males coming in. That impacted on us because we always got players out of DSE. There were teachers and other people. There is an increasing pressure for young people to go to higher education, firstly, because it is a community thing to do that, and secondly, because of less employment, it has meant that a lot more people leave the district. In the last 12 months or two years the big issue was the major cutback in timber availability. That is what really finally got the two teams together. We could see the major impacts of this. To give you an idea of how that has impacted, when we came together last year and the impacts had not been fully felt at that stage, we had 68 players on our senior playing list. The other night we went through that list and we crossed off 25 who have now left the district — young people and older people have left the district to go for work. So there has been a major decline in the number of young people in the district. That is the background to the amalgamation process.

The important roles of football clubs in rural towns — and this would apply in most other towns — is that they are the focus for the community. We have already heard that from Luke and others. I think there is also a very important role for the football clubs in our towns to give some of the kids particularly some different role models. We reckon there are a few younger guys in our club for whom being involved in our football club might make the difference between whether they become solid citizens or finish up in jail because they have very few role models at home and they come down to the footy club and see the coaches and other players in the club, they mix with committee people, and they actually get some different role models. They get to be part of a team structure and start to rely on each other and understand some of those things. We think it is a very important role — particularly coaches of the younger teams have a very, very important role.

The issues impacting on football at a club level include the demographics, which have been talked about. I think the changing attitudes of youth, also. They are much more casual, much more laid back, much less committed. That is a real challenge for us. Right at the back of this document, which you might want to look at later, you can see that at our last committee meeting we sat down and actually set some goals for our club. They involve trying to get inside the kids and see just what they do want out of a football club. That is one of the goals we set ourselves. There are other things for kids to do. Football used to be the only thing you would get in a town. When I and many of the other people were young, if you did not play football you did not do anything in the town. That is certainly not the case any more.

An issue that I think is also quite relevant is the last dot point there about coaches. It is actually becoming increasingly difficult to find people to coach teams because they have to be accredited to be coaches. They find themselves the subject of abuse from parents and that they could be subject to litigation because they make a decision with kids that is found to be wanting in some way. So there is actually an impending issue in getting coaches over the long term.

At a club level, administration has been mentioned a number of times before. It is increasingly difficult to get volunteers in football clubs. I guess that is in most clubs in our communities. We find volunteers are tired. You get fewer volunteers and the ones who are left have to take on more roles. So you see people waving the flags in one game, running the boundary in the next and doing the secretary's paperwork in the next — they are just working all day because there are just not the people around. There is an increasingly complex role for the executive of a committee. The treasurer is handling over \$100 000 in every club these days. It is a lot of money for a volunteer to administer. They have to do business activity statements, annual reports and all those sorts of things. People taking on the role of club president are told of all sorts of things that they have to do — risk management, litigation and making sure that all the players are exposed to courses on sexual harassment, bullying and racial vilification — so that the club is not exposed if any of those things happen. You have to be seen to have done some of the sorts of things, and so on. The club secretary is finding that there is more and more work. I partly agree with what Ron said before about the VCFL officers. I think the VCFL is managing football much, much better and putting us in a stronger position to face insurance and litigation issues and all those sorts of things, but because they have all those paid officers in Melbourne, they all have to get information from clubs and provide things for us to read and so on. It does create a tremendous extra workload on club secretaries, club presidents and so on.

Grant applications have been talked about. We have recently put in for a grant at our club, and it is a really complex process. You have got to have planning documents, and you have to put the thing in the context of all the other facilities in the town. We finished up with an 8 or 10-page document to try and justify a grant for new change room facilities, because ours is one of those that is in a pretty bad state. At the end of the day we were told that it probably would not be successful because we did not have enough detail in the costings for it. You need to spend a couple of thousand dollars getting very accurate costings so that you can get your grant. We put in for \$125 000. It should be easier than that to try and build an asset. We were going to match that \$125 000. It should be easier than that to get assets into communities. Taking up the point that was asked before, our umpires room is probably big enough for two umpires and we have got six trying to change in there for a senior game. We have got no facilities whatsoever for our netballers. They go and change in the toilets, and there are no showers or anything for them. The new facility we are asking for would have catered for all those sorts of things.

In terms of some ideas, first off I am saying that it should be easier to get a grant, particularly for those who are trying to help themselves. If there is matching dollar for dollar, not in kind but actual dollars, it should be a lot easier to access some funds to upgrade community infrastructure.

The second point I will make is about the attitudes of youth. It is very important that we have very good people as our role models in the clubs, particularly at the coaching level. There may be some opportunity to have some sort of reimbursement, grants or whatever to help junior coaches. In most clubs senior coaches are paid and junior coaches are not. It is a big commitment that people make, and perhaps there is some scope there.

The issue of litigation is on everyone's minds in clubs. It is rammed down our throats by the insurance companies and so on. It must be possible to make volunteers in these organisations a little less liable, if that is the right word, so that people do not feel scared about taking on positions in clubs.

The last point I have written concerns some of the small things that could be helped with subsidies — power, gas, water and those sorts of things. Just as pensioners get subsidies, perhaps non-profit organisations could get subsidies.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Garry, for your well-thought-out submission.

Mr WALSH — When you spoke about your facility upgrade and you talked about the rest of the community, has Orbost had any Pride of Place funding to do a community plan of the community facilities in the town?

Mr SQUIRES — I do not believe so. We did a master plan for our recreation reserve as part of this process, but the funding source you talk about I am not aware of.

Mr INGRAM — There was a bit of Pride of Place money for other bits of the town.

Mr SQUIRES — Has it?

Dr NAPTHINE — You talked about the importance of role models for young people and the benefits, and I think that is a good social benefit that football clubs can play. Can you advise me about two issues? Firstly, what percentage of young Kooris or Aboriginal people do you have in your junior and senior footy teams? I realise there is a reasonable Aboriginal population in the area.

Mr SQUIRES — In our senior team we have probably only got one or two. In our under-16s there are a couple. In our under-14s there are a couple. I do not know; it is 5 per cent, or something like that.

Dr NAPTHINE — We have had it raised before with another club that one of the issues with liquor licensing is that under the liquor licensing laws when it comes to 8 o'clock at night people under 18 have to be thrown out. Their comment was that the young people in that town would be better off staying in a supportive club environment, even within the liquor licensing rules, rather than being turfed out onto the streets where they probably get into more mischief than if they were in a healthy sporting club environment. They were suggesting that should be changed. What would your comment be on that?

Mr SQUIRES — I agree entirely. We have a pretty good arrangement with our local police, pretty much along those lines. They would much rather see those young people in our environment on Saturday night rather than wandering the streets. As a club we take pride in not serving under-age kids and making sure that under-age kids do not drink on our premises. We cannot see what happens outside. The police are very comfortable with that outcome, but technically speaking it is not right.

The CHAIR — With grant applications obviously government departments have to be very careful about accountability and make sure the money is spent well. Do you think it would help if people who were trained could come in and work for the club as far as submission writing is concerned and making sure that you were doing everything and helped you to gather the information more easily rather than leaving it up to you to do it? Do you think it would be helpful if the government or the AFL came out and helped you?

Mr SQUIRES — The quick answer is yes. It seems to me that there should be some process to shortlist, if you like, the people who can get whatever grants are available in a year, and then there is some assistance given to write the detailed submissions for. We were told we should spend a couple of thousand dollars on getting our whole building costed out accurately and so on, but we have not got that sort of money to throw around on the hope that we might get a go with a grant this year.

Mr INGRAM — You mentioned one of the biggest challenges is the drift away from country areas. When you look at the Orbost district, one of the big impacts more recently was the reduction in sawlog logging. I know that is something you feel passionate about, trying to get economic development going in that region and trying to replace industries, education and things like that. Two things: how well do you think the government has done in what is a forced restructure; and how well has government handled some of those things in the past? What can be done? We have a town which has some pretty good attractions. What can be done to fix some of those problems?

Mr SQUIRES — How long have you got? There were certainly some issues with the way the timber industry cutbacks were carried out. That is history, but it caused some of our young people to leave. Some other people have come in to do some of that work, but they do not live here. They do not bring their families into East Gippsland; they travel up for the week and then go home. But that is history; that has happened now, so we cannot fix that. Tourism has always been touted as one of the things to fill the gap, and in part it certainly has got some potential, but there is a tremendous lack of infrastructure in East Gippsland. The private sector is happy to develop certain things, but because 85 per cent or thereabouts of the land is public land, anything the private sector develops in terms of tours and that sort of thing is going to be on public land, and there needs to be infrastructure on the public land to allow those things to happen. That has got to be a government investment. In a tourism sense that is where governments have to fill that void.

Mr WALSH — What infrastructure specifically?

Mr SQUIRES — You are talking about basic signposting, basic walks, basic toilet blocks and those sorts of things. You have a situation in Orbost where out the back, about 4 or 5 kilometres, there is a set of waterfalls. It is quite a nice little place, but there are not even any signs on the road to show how you get there. People come into the town and they are looking for things to do. If there are a few things around they can get to easily they will stay overnight, that is what tourism is all about, but you cannot even direct them to these things because the signs have been broken down. They were there once. I could give you 20 or 30 examples of exactly the same sorts of things. It is not big costs. It is obviously millions of dollars, but it is not tens of millions or hundreds of millions we are talking to get some really good basic infrastructure in place.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Garry. You will get a copy of the transcript. You will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.