

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Wangaratta – 15 April 2004

Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield
Mr B. P. Hardman
Mr C. Ingram
Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr R. G. Mitchell
Dr D. V. Naphine
Mr P. L. Walsh

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman
Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms K. Murray
Research Officer: Dr V. Koops

Witnesses

Mr L. Elder, general manager (sworn); and
Mr P. Brear, operations officer (sworn), Ovens and Murray Football League.

Mr ELDER — My name is Leigh Elder of unit 2, 421 Fallon Street, Albury. I am the general manager representing the Ovens and Murray Football League.

Mr BREAR — I am Peter Brear of 50 Coghill Street, Yarrawonga. I am the , operations officer representing the Ovens and Murray Football League.

Mr ELDER — I know you were in Shepparton yesterday, so I apologise for Eric Bott. I am the chairman of all the management committee — no doubt he gave you a bit of a railing!

Firstly, I am in principal agreement, so is our league, with the VCFL submission. We believe that they have looked after terms of reference (a) to (d) very well. We believe there is a fair bit of scope in the (e) to (f), and that is what we want to discuss today. I would like to highlight and expand on a few areas as Football Victoria has several key issues. Obviously they are administration levels at leagues, retention and recruitment of volunteers and umpires, general core facilities and very limited facilities for netballers as they are an integral part of football these days, and the football hierarchy at local, state and federal government funding.

Dealing firstly with administration levels at leagues, which I believe is the most achievable and cost-effective way to improve the majority of issues in country footy, only 10 of the 87 leagues within the VCFL have full-time administrators, and only five of those leagues have more than one person as a full-time administrator, being Ovens and Murray, Yarra Valley, Mornington, Geelong and Ballarat. I am privileged to be full-time manager at two of those leagues, being Ovens and Murray and Yarra Valley. There is no surprise that these organisations are leaders in supporting their member clubs with financial distributions, cost-cutting programs, marketing and promotional initiatives, educational programs for the clubs and the volunteers, and development programs for funding for umpires. For example, just in the last two years the Ovens and Murray League distributed \$50 000 to its member clubs, reduced annual fees by \$12 000, allocated \$12 000 to the umpires' organisations for development, recruitment and retention, conducted strategic planning workshops for member clubs, developed an operations manual for easier use by club volunteers as well as the clubs in football operations matters and also commenced a facility review and a facility development program, just to name a few things.

The leagues' turnover itself in 2003 was over \$500 000, and not one cent was received from a higher or lower football organisation or any local, state or federal governments. Fifty per cent of that turnover — we are talking \$250 000 — was evenly generated by two main things, our marketing and our revenue from finals. Of course those two things are on the whim, firstly, of management deciding whether to keep their marking with us and, secondly, a rainy day on grand final day can make a hell of a difference to our end-of-year financials. We have had a 27 per cent increase in our gate takings from 2001 to 2003, and that is general — both home-and-away matches and finals — and it has been on the back of a pretty severe drought in our area. We attribute that to quite a few things, obviously promotion for the league through all the media that is available to us and having the staff available to promote and educate our people on what is happening and working pretty well with our tourism bodies in the area to ensure that things like our grand final is a purely marketable event.

This may be a success story, but only 5 per cent of the VCFL have the staff to be able to create this, so my recommendation — this is more leaning on reference F, where we are looking at the football bodies at the higher levels — is for AFL and Football Victoria to assist, possibly with the state government being involved too, to allocate both country and metro so it is not just country in this circumstance or local level yearly administration funds. I have worked on a figure of \$20 000 for senior leagues and \$10 000 for junior leagues. That would be a total of \$1.51 million per annum. If you divide that with half coming from football and half from state, obviously taken out of the sport and rec. budget and/or revenue from gaming, for about 100 jobs throughout our regions that are working directly with the community and developing and helping to assist our clubs, that would be \$750 000. So in what would be the state government's budget or AFL, when you hear reports that you know are true and they are actually labelled through the \$4 million that goes to each AFL club because they cannot meet their own budgets when the salary cap is getting close to \$100 million, it is a bit of concern. We believe football should be getting a greater return because we do not see a cent from anywhere. As you can imagine, when Jacko or Andrew get on there and say it is great for grassroots football, unfortunately the only grassroots football that receives any funding whatsoever is Auskick, which we give AFL a big pat on the back for, but it is ages 5 to 10 and our top 2 per cent at TAC Cup level. We start with a budget of \$200 000 before they spend a cent.

We do a turnover of \$500 000 and do not receive a cent. Obviously I believe that is the key way for us to improve a lot of areas, including umpires, as I explained in our example — the money we are putting into retention and

recruitment. We are assisting our volunteers by reducing their workload and reducing the money they have to generate. Unfortunately that is not including anything that comes to players, and that why we do not like cash gifts to clubs. We would rather offset expenses because player payments is a thing that we are really not going to be in control of because the AFL, the VFL and ACTAFL just north of us basically have a lot of gaming money that goes in, so we are a force against each other. Every country league competes for players. There is revenue made out of football, and, of course, as they do at the top level, the players want a sum of money out of the money that is generated as the entertainment process goes through.

A couple of quick ones. Clubs obviously need assistance with facility development, especially for female/netball change rooms and showers. It is important that we look at rationalisation of facilities. A VCFL director has given me a great example. We had the bushfires the summer just gone, and money was spent at Chiltern town hall to put in showers so they can have a facility for people fighting the fires to get cleaned up, have a feed and move on. The Chiltern football club is just sitting there. It gets used 12 months of the year. The town hall, for showers, does not get used. Why not upgrade the Chiltern football club? That is basic rationalisation because those showers will be sitting there until the next fires happen. Hopefully that will not happen for another 5, 10, 15, 20 years, but they could be pretty well rusted up by then. It is just smarter allocation of money. We would also encourage a review on stamp duty, water and utility charges as country football and netball leagues and clubs are all non-profit organisations, and the more we can reduce costs, the more beneficial it will be for the member clubs.

I just want to make sure that everyone understands that tourism is a very important part of rural and regional Victoria. Certainly football is a key thing — for example, we had 15 000 people at our grand final last year, which was great for the tourism of the area of Albury-Wodonga. I know obviously we are split by a little bit of water that decides which is what state, but it certainly is beneficial for both areas and all the other towns we hold finals in. Just to give you an idea, the regional population for the Ovens Murray is about 120 000 to 130 000 people. With 15 000 people, you are talking about 12 per cent. If 12 per cent of metropolitan Melbourne went to the AFL grand final you would have a crowd close to 400 000, so obviously it is not just the people from the area that go. We attract tourists to come and watch our events because we go away from the AFL. We play the Sunday after the AFL preliminary final. Obviously the Ovens and Murray League welcomes the opportunity to express its concerns at the public hearing and is willing to assist in any way it possibly can.

This is Peter Brear. He is our operations officer. He started full time only two months ago, but he has had a long experience being full time at one of our clubs, so for the questions you have we can give you league and club experience. In regard to the registration program, in answer to Fred, we believe it is usually positive. The actual registration program is for a user-pays situation. Our players right through country footy are the ones putting their hands out to receive money from the income. For them to pay registration like you do in any other sport you play we think is a positive as long as the clubs do not pay on behalf of the players. That is how we are trying to educate them. The computer system — and Fred is right — is primitive at the moment. They have gone for the cheapest possible option, which we sometimes understand because the VCFL really has to look after the majority. Unfortunately, as I explained before, only 10 of the 87 leagues have the personnel to work on advanced programs, so it is very primitive. We are hoping it will improve, and hopefully long term, and hopefully in the near future, it will be a program that assists everyone in shortening the workload to volunteers.

Mr WALSH — When we had zoning in AFL or VFL clubs, as they were then, do you think country clubs were better serviced by the AFL and the relevant teams then compared to now?

Mr ELDER — That is a touchy subject because I probably differ from a lot of views, especially within our clubs. Our clubs, it would be fair to say, are against the TAC Cup system. I previously worked full time in the TAC system and understand its worth. A lot of people want to go back to zoning, but in my personal view I think it is a backward step.

Mr WALSH — One of the things that has been put to us is if you had some form of zoning with priority draft picks more so than exclusive rights to an area just to get league clubs to take an active interest in a — —

Mr ELDER — We had a situation where we shared a licence with North Melbourne, or the Kangaroos, or whatever you want to call them, for what was the Murray Kangaroos. They played four games in the region the first year, then three, then two, then nothing and went off to a better deal with Port Melbourne. Unfortunately the AFL clubs are all about generating revenue. They are all about generating memberships. I can remember quite a few people in the hierarchy of the Kangaroos banging the desk and saying to me, 'Where's our 50 grand sponsor?'

Unfortunately that is all they are after. I understand it is very hard to get players up in regions, and I would prefer to see more of them because it is good promotion, and we as a league want to see the AFL as strong as possible, because a strong AFL brings up strong supporters all the way through from a three-year-old, and we want to see the promotion of our game. I would like to see more, but I do not know what the answers are to it. Obviously they have a lot of club commitments and a fair bit of travel, and I do not know whether regionalising or giving responsibility to clubs which they have through the TAC Cup system, through their development managers, will improve them or just get them to spend more time trying to sell memberships in our area. It is a cynical view, I know.

The CHAIR — You have had a club merger in your competition with Rutherglen.

Mr ELDER — In 1979.

The CHAIR — So that was quite some time ago. At the present time are all the clubs seemingly able to maintain themselves on their own?

Mr ELDER — We certainly have long-term issues regarding probably two to four of our clubs on revenue making and keeping up to other levels. Obviously Albury-Wodonga is getting more and more expanded in population, and even the corporate sector is getting involved, so it is easy for its clubs, and certainly depth is a concern in reserves in a few of our clubs, and a couple of our clubs' turnover is lower than the others. Obviously we also have the New South Wales-Victoria situation where New South Wales registers clubs, spends money within football and sport, and Victoria does not, so the Victorian clubs, which are 60 per cent of our competition, have to try and find other means to keep up their revenue.

Mr MITCHELL — You have got Wangaratta and Wodonga both fielding two sides. How does that go for keeping the numbers up and recruitment, sponsorship? Is it a bit of a drain on those areas to be able to — —

Mr ELDER — No. Wangaratta has two sides. Wodonga has two. Obviously Wangaratta's concern is it seems to be levelling in population rather than increasing, and therefore the age of the general population is increasing. There certainly is room for two Ovens and Murray clubs in Wangaratta, but it needs to be managed extremely well. Wodonga is not an issue. Probably in the foreseeable future we would have a third side in Wodonga as we have three in Albury.

Mr INGRAM — With the TAC Cup, do you get many players from your league go into that system?

Mr ELDER — Half the list of the Murray Bushrangers, which covers obviously Shepparton as well, is from our region, Ovens and Murray. There are some from O and K, there are some from Tallangatta, but certainly half of the list is directly from our region.

Mr INGRAM — It has been put forward in a number of areas that there should be opportunities for TAC players to come back to the leagues, back to their clubs and play a greater part of the year, basically reduce the number of TAC games, still give them the opportunity to play at that elite junior level, but then come back and at least qualify for finals for their local club and play in finals. Would you say that is something you would support?

Mr BREAR — Yes, if I could take that one with the TAC Cup, it was proposed that the competition would be finished in July, and that was from the Mildura representative within the VCFL, the idea being that the TAC, which is a Victorian competition, takes in teams from Tasmania and the ACT. In our way of thinking is up to Tasmania and the ACTAFL to develop their own competition. If the competition was reduced and we had a number of reductions in teams, obviously better quality would come to the fore in more instances; you would have better competition between the Victorian clubs, it would be all wrapped up by July which is the national championships and therefore the structure of the better players being picked to go into the national championships. Talent scouts are always looking at these teams. We are basically saying at that junior level why is there a need to continue on after July and play for a premiership which means nothing after two or three years? There is no continuation, there is no juncture between the teams after a certain time. You are playing for a piece of silverware which gets celebrated for about a week; and no-one in football, if I can say it, gives a stuff about it. Basically we are saying the talent will be identified probably within a season from January through to about July, the cream of the crop will get picked for the nationals and then they should go back to their clubs where local people can see their local talent running around for their local club, which is what it is all about.

Mr ELDER — We are also lucky that with the representative football within VCFL we get a player drafted on an annual basis, so if a kid misses the TAC Cup program in the circumstances Peter described, he will have the opportunity to play representative footy if he is good enough and therefore get drafted. Five out of the last eight championships Ovens and Murray has won have produced an AFL player. The players are players Brett Kirk, Steve McKee, Guy Rigoni and Andrew Hill.

Mr WALSH — Who owns your football grounds?

Mr BREAR — Everyone.

Mr WALSH — Are they in the main local municipalities or reserves?

Mr ELDER — The majority is Crown land. We have a few different situations. Off the top of my head, we deal straight with seven different councils, so they are generally in seven different circumstances and situations. We are lucky our grounds and venues are of a reasonably high standard but especially when it comes to netball and females our facilities are very poor. I know that VCFL stats show that 54 per cent actually have netball facilities. We obviously have netball courts at every one of our venues, and we are a premier league; but we have only one club that has showers available for our netballers to use.

Mr WALSH — Have you any idea of what the councils charge and what percentage of total cost would be used on maintaining the ground?

Mr ELDER — Yes. They obviously vary. Wodonga is probably the worst case scenario where they pay large amounts for water usage and then ground rental, which gets shared with quite a few different bodies. I think the charges for just the Wodonga Football Club are starting to be around the \$25 000 to \$30 000 mark with all inclusives, and that is about 10 to 12 per cent of their turnover.

Mr WALSH — What percentage of that would be the total cost of maintaining that ground by the council, for argument's sake?

Mr ELDER — I could not tell you exactly.

Mr BREAR — It varies from club to club. You go from a situation of having council staff totally maintaining the grounds to one of where you are doing your own work, cutting your own oval and things like that, so there is a big variation depending on which shire you are talking about.

Mr McQUILTEN — What about the use of ovals in the summer time — cricket clubs and other things? What is happening there?

Mr ELDER — We have only one venue that is not used for cricket so they are used generally all year around. We also have other competitions. For example, the Wodonga Raiders play a thing called tag footy over the summer, which is a very small revenue raiser for them. Wodonga is going through a review with its local council at moment. I think it has completed its facilities development plan, and the key thing that came out of that is Martin Park, which is used by the Wodonga Bulldogs, the Wodonga Saints from the Tallangatta and District League as well as all the schools. It is well and truly overused. It is probably a beaten track by around six to about eight, depending on how much rain we have had, and unfortunately it has not been too much at the moment. So certainly there are venues that are well and truly overused rather than under used.

Mr McQUILTEN — What about lighting?

Mr ELDER — We have probably two venues that are sensational in lighting, both on the New South Wales side, being Lavington and Corowa. With regard to Victoria, I think Wodonga Raiders are probably the best; the majority of them are certainly lacking. There is certainly nothing on the Victorian side to play under; they certainly train at the moment but there are a few venues and I think Yarrowonga is one that is probably getting upgraded at the moment if I remember correctly, and certainly our two Wangaratta venues are poor in lighting.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time today. You will get a copy the transcript, and you may correct matters of grammar and fact but certainly not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.