

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into country football

Sea Lake – 24 March 2004

Members

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Mr G. Martin, Secretary, Sea Lake-Nandaly Football-Netball Club (sworn).

The CHAIR — For the purpose of the transcript could you provide your full name and address? If you are representing an organisation, please state the name of the organisation and your role within it.

Mr MARTIN — My name is Gregory Kenneth Martin. I live in Tempy Road, Nandaly. I represent the Sea Lake-Nandaly Tigers Football-Netball Club, and I am the secretary of the club.

The CHAIR — Could you please make some brief comments and we will ask some questions afterwards.

Mr MARTIN — Our club is a classic example of the current situation in country football. Our club is made up of four towns: Sea Lake, Nandaly, Berriwillock and Culgoa. The teams at Berriwillock and Culgoa merged in 1975, and those at Sea Lake and Nandaly merged in 1994. As a result of the diminishing numbers of people, those two clubs merged last year to form the Sea Lake-Nandaly Football-Netball Club. Our games are played at three home grounds, which can be a burden. We feel it is important to keep the football and netball going in as many towns as possible. We are providing four football teams, an Auskick program for juniors, five netball games as well as FunNet junior development.

All the towns that make up the club have businesses that rely heavily on trade from our club. The main problem we face is declining population. Although we have embraced merging with other clubs as a survival option, we have also identified that this has many adverse flow-on problems.

Firstly, families on the geographical edges of the merger drop off due to the extra travel commitments. We face a short-term excess of players, who are quite often juniors, which means that kids can be missing out on games or are being forced to rotate. This ultimately leads to players and families leaving the new club and looking for more opportunity. We cleared 23 players in the first year of our merger last year. The obvious effect of this is that within a few years members have dropped back and the whole dilemma starts again.

Our club feels that one of the most important areas that needs to be maintained is our towns. The loss of services from country areas over the last 10 to 15 years has had a major impact on our club. We acknowledge that it has been impossible to keep all services going, but we also want to stress how important we think it is to maintain those that are left. Our hospitals and schools are crucial because they provide many opportunities and are major employers in our towns.

When we were approached to submit our ideas to this inquiry we were encouraged to identify solutions and recommend actions. With this in mind we cannot stress enough how important successful and profitable hospitals and schools are to the sustainability of our towns and ultimately our sporting clubs.

Tyrrell College, a P-12 school, currently employs 40 staff and has 223 students. The Sea Lake and District Health Service operates our hospital. It is one of the nine remaining bush nursing hospitals in regional and rural Victoria. It is unique in being the only private hospital in Victoria that has both private and publicly funded acute and emergency stabilisation beds. The Sea Lake and District Health Service employs 55 staff, of which 53 are women. The employment and quality of life that these organisations bring to our community are essential to our towns, and ultimately our football and netball clubs. The flow-on effects of a decline or loss of health services would be dramatic — for example, we would lose our ambulance service, leaving the sportspeople and the community in general at risk. Our nearest major hospitals are at 75 kilometres away at Swan Hill, 195 kilometres away at Mildura,; 210 kilometres distant at Bendigo ; and 350 kilometres away at Melbourne.

We would also find that many other businesses would no longer be viable and the decline in population would continue, with an obvious detrimental effect on our club. We would also like to acknowledge the work that the VCFL has done in the last three years in relation to public liability and insurance. As a club we feel secure with regard to these matters as a direct result of the programs they have put in place. The problems we face are typical throughout country Victoria — a lack of employment opportunities and an ageing population. These contribute to player shortages, which often mean that clubs must find the money to import players from bigger regional centres or subsidise local teenagers to come home from university each weekend to play football. Since the money raised by clubs is drawn from a relatively small membership, fundraising is a crucial part of our club's business.

The fact that our young people have to leave the area to pursue further education also has a direct impact on our club. Parents who are subsidising their kids' education have less money to contribute to the community, and our young people often do not return to their home towns because they find work in the city or in major centres.

Our isolation also creates problems for our existing junior players and reduces the opportunities for those who have the desire and ability to continue their football at the next level. The fact that our kids have to travel so far to take part in events, such as schoolboys competition and training, means many miss out on this important opportunity.

In summary our club remains viable due to the relative strength of district businesses and the fact that we have been able to maintain schools and health services. Strong community support also helps. The merging of clubs has had other benefits in building cooperative relationships between our towns and encouraging unity and community pride. Members and supporters give up their time and money to keep the club going because they recognise the important social, economic and sporting benefits to local families.

This said, we would like to emphasise the need for ongoing recognition of the role of country football in the overall sustainability and wellbeing of communities. It is probably more important in rural Victoria than any other area of the state because of its unique role as a community linchpin. For this reason there has been a genuine focus on junior football development opportunities, and a real appreciation of the obstacles that country clubs face.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Greg.

Mr WALSH — If you were Premier for a day and had the power, what would be the one or two things the state government could do for country football?

Mr MARTIN — I should have been ready for this. My daughter was in a debating contest for youth of the year. She was asked what she would do if she were Prime Minister — you have only made me Premier!

Dr NAPTHINE — You have been demoted!

Mr WALSH — Sorry to downgrade you!

Mr MARTIN — Reiterating what I have already laid out in my speech, it would be to maintain what we already have in country areas, with schools and the hospitals especially.

I think if you talk to the other presidents and secretaries in our league — and we meet with them regularly throughout the year — you will find that the towns where there is a P-12 school and a hospital are the ones that will survive. The little tiny ones like Berriwillock, Culgoa and Nandaly have already dropped off, and we have to maintain the centres that we have remaining, so I would be concentrating on that.

Dr NAPTHINE — You said that potentially you have four home grounds. How long can you continue to operate out of four grounds? If you are looking at state government assistance to upgrade lighting and watering systems, it will not do it for a ground that will be used only a couple of times a year. I understand the benefits to the local communities, shops and pubs of having a home game, but when does decision time come in terms of saying, 'The central and best location for our football club is perhaps this ground here at Sea Lake, and let us invest in having proper facilities for footballers, netballers, lights, watering and so on'?

Mr MARTIN — There is no doubt about that. We have already identified that. The reason we play in the three towns — we do not play any games in Nandaly, because when Sea Lake and Nandaly merged we decided to come here straight away to the one ground. I believe one ground will make a better club anyway, because there will not be that split loyalty.

But in order to get the merger to go through you have to give and take. That is what we had to give: we had to give away three home games in the first few year. The people from that community know that is a short-term thing. They will not be able to find that money; they will have to decide whether they want their pool or their ground in the end. For me as a Sea Lake–Nandaly person, I cannot tell them when that time will come. But from a club point of view we have already identified that that will come to an end; it is just a matter of how long it will take. You are right, and we see that we have to have one ground and put our resources into the one area, and that is what we are ultimately aiming to do.

Mr WALSH — Does the shire maintain your grounds, or do you have to do it?

Mr MARTIN — No, we do it ourselves.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — For the whole three?

Mr MARTIN — Yes. A lot of it is done mainly by volunteers.

Mr INGRAM — You raised the point regarding the cost of sending young people to university, particularly young families and so on. In a recent forum in East Gippsland that cost was estimated to be excess of \$12 000 a year per student just in the incidental costs — that is, above what it costs for a metropolitan person to send their child to university. Can you explain more what that impact is on a rural community, how much money that takes out and how much pressure that puts on families? Do you have any examples or anything like that?

Mr MARTIN — We do have a bit of a policy with the club that if any of our locals want to come home, we will try our best to help that happen, with some fuel money and so on. It might be only a token gesture really — and most of the time it is only a token gesture — but the real impact is on the parents. If you have good, strong parents that are behind their kids, they are the ones who are footing the bill; they are the ones who are paying for the car, the tyres, the registration and all the rest of it. They will come home for the first couple of years, maybe three, and after that they will drop off. We have an unwritten rule here that we will do everything we can to help them come home, but at the end of the day if they want to stay in Ballarat, Bendigo or wherever, we are not going to force them to come home because that would be irresponsible.

But the cost is quite significant. All the kids who get to go on to university education cannot do it here, so they all have to go. There are very few people coming back on the land. When I was a young bloke playing football we were all footballers, the whole club; now you might have five in the senior team who are playing, whereas we virtually had 20.

Mr INGRAM — You have covered some of the issues.

Mr MARTIN — I cannot really identify actual cost, but I am about to face that next year; so next year I will have a better idea when my own daughter goes away. You can see that it is a big responsibility for families. It is much easier for the parents to tell the kids, ‘No, you stay down in Ballarat’ — or Bendigo or wherever — ‘and just play footy there and go out socially there rather than travel 3 hours from Ballarat’.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I think you were here when I asked the two questions of Peter Doig from Swan Hill. I would like your quick views on the salary cap, its enforcement and its effects on your league, or your club in particular; and your views on the Australian Football League (AFL) and whether some improvements in its service delivery are needed.

Mr MARTIN — I guess what Peter said about the salary cap is probably right: it is not reinforced; it is just left to the clubs to do the right thing. It is not always done that way. I do not think anyone actually has any proof, but there is always a fair bit of hearsay: if a team comes from nowhere and starts winning premierships, everyone says it is paying everyone a fortune. I guess at the end of the day the only ones that really know are the club involved, so it is very hard to know what other clubs are doing. We are under pressure all the time so far as that goes, but you just have to do the best you can. At the end of the day we have to raise everything we spend, and that is usually a fairly good way of limiting what you spend, because you have to raise the money. It is all very well to offer it out, but you have to raise it. That is the first thing that dictates how that goes.

In regard to the AFL, I agree with having the Auskick program; I think it is very well done. The value the kids get out of that for the money that parents put in is tremendous. I just have an example of where it could be spending its money. We have kids who go through the schoolboy squad. I have a nephew who is in it; and I have a son who was trying out for it. The kids who do get through then have to come home. We are paying \$100 for each kid that our club puts through. They get a fistful of stickers that they have to sell to subsidise their trip to Melbourne for their four days. That to me would be an area where the AFL could be putting its money: it could be putting it into those sorts of squads because at the end of the day, they are the kids who are identified as having talent. Kids should not really have to be raising money to go to a talent identification thing.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Here is one from left field. The committee heard from a representative from the Hayward footy club who suggested that Tipstar should be given to the Victorian Country Football League (VCFL) to run. Does your club have a football tipping competition as part of a fundraising activity, or do the local pubs; and would your club see that running a branch of a football tipping competition with all the revenue going back to the club, would be a useful addition or whether it would be just more of a problem than it is worth?

Mr MARTIN — I like the idea of the revenue coming to the club; that sounds good. It depends on how structured it is and how involved it is to get it running, I suppose. I guess if it was a simple thing to administer it would be a great idea, but I would have to see; I would not know just from that. But anything is welcome.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Mr Martin. You will receive a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks, in which you may correct matters of fact or grammar, but not alter matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.