

# CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

## RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into country football

Kerang – 23 March 2004

#### Members

Mr M. P. Crutchfield	Mr R. G. Mitchell
Mr B. P. Hardman	Dr D. V. Naphine
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

#### Witness

Mr S. Matthews, Community Facilitation Manager, Swan Hill Rural City Council  
(affirmed).

**The CHAIR** — You were not here earlier on, so I need to inform you that the evidence from today will be taken down. What you say is protected by parliamentary privilege inside the hearing, but not outside. Please give us your full name and your address and state whether you are representing an organisation and give your position in that organisation. After that you can make some brief comments.

**Mr MATTHEWS** — Stephen Matthews. I am the community facilitation manager for the Swan Hill Rural City Council in Splatt Street, Swan Hill. My role within council is one where I am dealing with the community, specifically in relation to recreation matters, so I have a good knowledge of country football as it relates to my job. Also I am involved in football in my private, out-of-work hours.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you.

**Mr MATTHEWS** — I suppose I should commence by saying that the Swan Hill Rural City Council is very aware of the important role that Australian Rules football plays in country life in the effect it has on local communities. Perhaps this is not so much so in the major towns, but certainly in smaller country centres and regions country football provides a very positive social focus for the local communities. Obviously it provides recreation and fitness pursuits, and it has the ability to jell a community together and provide it with greater focus. Council does recognise that country football plays an important part in the lifestyle and in the standard of living in country communities.

Specifically as far as the cost impacts on Australian Rules football clubs are concerned, Swan Hill Rural City Council levies an insurance levy against different clubs. On average it is about \$2000 per club. We also levy a user fee on most clubs, which is around \$1000. This does not equate to the actual costs that are involved with the upkeep of grounds, which are approximately \$70 000 for water and \$200 000 for general maintenance and upkeep.

It is seen as very important by our ratepayers and by the general community that sport is a big part of our life and that council has a certain responsibility to ensure that we foster it as much as possible. But obviously there are limits to the amount of assistance that local government can provide, and it is more and more likely that in the future a greater percentage of those costs will endeavour to be recovered from the clubs themselves.

Looking at recommended actions that could be undertaken, it was seen by council that the cost of water obviously is significant. When you are looking at risk-management issues it is important that the playing surface is kept to the best possible standard. Obviously a big component of that is the provision of water. Perhaps it could be that this inquiry recommends a sportsground rate for water, or something along those lines, as further evidence of the government's support for and recognition of the importance of country football.

One of the big issues with country football and one of the strengths of country football is, as I said before, how it involves the community. One of those ways is through volunteer support for people working on committees, umpiring or whatever. Although I can see the reasons for these sorts of things, unfortunately there is a greater reliance on people becoming experts in different areas. It is not just a case of coming along to football and giving some of your time; you have to be aware of food handling, and the treasurer needs to be aware of all the GST ramifications as well as the insurance and risk-management issues. They impose a great deal of responsibility and a great deal of time on the volunteers, who really are there for the community. They are trying to help the community out, so I am suggesting that an investigation be conducted regarding the necessity and relevance of all those sorts of requirements, which are usually government-based, on not only country football but a range of community and sporting organisations to see if something can be done to minimise the effects they have on the volunteers involved.

One of the other recommendations that I would like to see taken up is a greater access to grants for capital works. Clubs are often faced with ageing infrastructure, and there is also more emphasis on providing separate shower and change facilities for netball players and umpires, including female umpires. It is very difficult for football clubs to be able to access the funds to be able do that. There are funds available through Sport and Recreation Victoria. I do not know whether you are aware of it, but they are extremely competitive; for the amount of applications that are lodged, very few are approved and successful.

I would recommend that more funds be available to local sporting communities to enable a satisfactory level of facilities to be provided. In light of the fact that I think we recognise the very important role that football plays in community life, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the positive values of playing sport, and particularly football and netball, in the schools. Years ago that is all we did, and I understand and recognise that it is important

that a wider range of sports are covered, but not to the total exclusion of football and netball, which is sometimes the case. I think there are some positive values in the education sector working more closely with football authorities to try to improve the amount of football/netball that is played in the schools.

That is about the limit of the recommendations that the council would like to make. I would just like to reiterate the importance, as you would have heard from a number of people already, that country football plays in the lives of country Victorians and how it is important that we try to foster and develop that as much as possible.

**The CHAIR** — The committee has heard quite a few times today and also in the last country hearing about the role of schools in football, and it has heard about AFL players coming up to country areas to help out with football. How do you think it would work if some relationship was developed through, say, the Victorian Country Football League or Football Victoria, where local football clubs actually went into local primary schools and ran football coaching programs if the school itself did not have the skills and abilities among the female teachers? That offer has not come about yet from anybody, but maybe that would be a way of addressing the issue. How do you feel about that?

**Mr MATTHEWS** — As a matter of principle I have no problem with it whatsoever. It is difficult to do that. A lot of people involved with football clubs are obviously employed and have their own jobs and find it difficult to allocate the time to be able to do that.

The VCFL has an initiative in place for that to occur and has developed packages for schools and is trying actively to encourage local football clubs to do that and understand that they have a responsibility to do that; I accept that. But I just underline that by saying that it is difficult to get people; you are relying perhaps on people who might be unemployed, or whatever, in the club, who are not always difficult to locate and organise. So I would recommend that some separate contingency or other arrangement be put in place for that — for example, perhaps 1 hour or 2 hours of paid time could be made available by a local club for a person for that purpose, so it would be a sort of shared situation. I think it is difficult just to expect the clubs to do that; it is difficult for them to do that as much as they would like.

**The CHAIR** — I remember during my primary school years the teachers were all nuns and females at my school and there were no male teachers. But a father who was also the coach of the footy side in the town competition would come in and teach us football skills and take us out to play games against other schools and that sort of thing.

**Mr MATTHEWS** — I am sure that happens to a greater degree in a more regional approach, in smaller towns, but then again you have the situation where a lot of the schools are actually being centralised to larger centres, so there is less and less potential for that to occur.

**Dr NAPHTHINE** — With respect to the capital grants program through sport and recreation — and you have said how competitive that is — do you believe there is a bias with respect to that program against capital grants for football and netball clubs in favour of perhaps some of the more boutique sports? In the last five years in your municipality, how many grants have you received, and how many of those have been for football and netball club facilities as compared with other sports?

**Mr MATTHEWS** — That is an interesting question, particularly with the way the guidelines are written. Generally speaking we have had football clubs and netball clubs that have been approved — probably 2 out of 10, or something along that that sort of ratio. I would not go so far as to say that they are biased against football and netball or whatever, but I think it is a case of the public servants interpreting the regulations in a certain way. I think there is a certain perception out there that football clubs are able to help themselves a lot more than other clubs. The general feeling comes into it to a degree that rather than judging every case or every application on its merits and strictly against the eligibility criteria, the smaller club which perhaps is not as prominent within the community and does not have access to facilities for fundraising is more deserving of support. It is arguable whether that is right or wrong.

**Mr CRUTCHFIELD** — Still on the capital grants, it has been raised that the AFL can have a responsibility in the area where it might allocate a capital grant to a league and then there would be some process linked with the council, I would assume, for the league to distribute those funds. Do you think the AFL should have

that role; and do you think a system like that is workable where the AFL could tap into some of the council or league priorities, particularly district league ones?

**Mr MATTHEWS** — I think certainly the country people support the AFL and country people put money into the AFL, so I think it is not only reasonable that something like that is returned via capital grants. I think it is workable. Obviously there are issues regarding the application processes, assessment, approvals and whatever else, but I do not think there is anything there that cannot be worked through. That could be done through a local council or even by the VCFL network of officers; they, I am sure, would be able to do that as well in conjunction perhaps with the council. I think the council needs to be involved because usually council-owned reserves or Crown land are involved, so I think there needs to be some sort of working together. But I think it could work; it is a good idea.

**Mr INGRAM** — Water was an issue for most of your grounds. In some other areas it was put that treated wastewater from urban areas could be an option for ground watering in regional areas. Is that an option in your area? Would it be taken up if there was availability of funds to assist with that?

**Mr MATTHEWS** — It probably is an option. It can be very expensive. What is required to actually treat the water to bring it to a standard can be expensive. In Swan Hill it is certainly not an option because of the groundwater salt, and a lot of our sewerage removes a lot of that salty groundwater out to our sewage treatment area. We have just recently looked into that exercise because of the possible relocation of a golf course in Swan Hill, and we looked into the treatment of the wastewater for that use, but it just has not proved to be viable given the amount of treatment that is required to bring that up to a standard where it can be used. In smaller towns I am just not sure of the economics of it. It really would require a bit more research so far as I am concerned. It is certainly an option, but — —

**Mr McQUILTEN** — Where does your wastewater go in Swan Hill? If you treat it, it has to go somewhere.

**Mr MATTHEWS** — It goes out to evaporation ponds — you cannot do anything with it.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your time, Mr Matthews, and for preparing your submission for the committee. You will receive a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks, in which you will be able to correct matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance. Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**