

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Country Football

Melbourne – 10 May 2004

Members

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Mr B. P. Hardman

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Witnesses

Ms Julie Sarll, CEO, VicSport (sworn).

Mr John Howie, Chair, VicSport (sworn).

The CHAIR—Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence of these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing, are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We're an all-party parliamentary committee, with one Independent representative.

The CHAIR—Thanks very much, Julie and John. Please give us your submission, and we will have some questions for you afterwards.

Mr HOWIE—I will make a couple of preliminary remarks. We, of course, at VicSport act for sport as a whole, and in a sense we've come today to talk about sport in general, in particular the way it relates to country football. None of the things we say will be of a specific nature. With this issue, we felt that's the way we should approach it, and with that little bit of background I'll hand over to Julie for the presentation. Thanks.

Presentation

Ms SARLL—Just a little bit about VicSport: We are the key umbrella body for sport in Victoria. As John said, we represent all sport in Victoria. We have about 125 affiliated members and about 90 of those are state sporting associations, including Football Victoria, the VCFL, Netball Victoria, Swimming Victoria to name a few. We have all the regional sports assemblies as members. We have professional organisations such as the Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER). And we estimate that with the membership of our affiliated members we cover over 1.5 million Victorians. In addition to affiliated members, there are individual members and industry associates. In the industry associate category we have 30 local governments. So we cover just about all of the larger local governments in Victoria. We also cover education institutions like Deakin University, Ballarat University, Gordon TAFE, Southwest TAFE, and so on.

We are trying to broaden our membership to really bring all the people who provide a service in sport to the table, so that we can really discuss the issues, and rather than work in silos as we have in the past, take a much more coordinated and broader approach to solving the issues.

Our vision is VicSport leading and representing a socially responsible, economically viable and health promoting sport industry in Victoria. Our mission is to advance sport in Victoria by enabling members to provide service at a high standard. That's what we're on about. We advocate; we're on a number of policy advisory steering committees; we deal with a number of projects; we run events; we have professional development workshops, industry training and forums, and we run some small consultancies as well for our members.

Some of the committees that we're on – and the list of committees is as long as your arm. We're on the Commonwealth Games Steering Committee – there are three of those. We've been on the Child Care Amendments Committee for DHS, the Child Protection Committee for the police. We're on the VicHealth board, and participate in other subcommittees. We're on a number of Sport and Recreation Victoria steering committees – the Victorian Olympic Council, Sport and Recreation Training Australia, Arts and Recreation Training Victoria, and the local government Lease Agreements Working Group. They're just some of the projects we are working on, or have worked on over the past few years. We're currently working on the Commonwealth Games legacy, and we're currently working on risk management, developing programs that would be suitable for implementation in clubs around Victoria. Cost of delivering sport and recreation is something we finished not long ago. I will talk about that in detail.

We've looked at administrative hubs where we bring sporting organisations in regions together, and we are trying to do that at state and regional levels, to bring all the players together and get them talking to each other. We have had some success in the Barwon region; their regional hub is really up and running, and it's doing a terrific job. In the past two years we have been working on community clubs, and we see those as being a really good way of providing support to the volunteer administrators who are finding it tough out there – especially in rural Victoria. Our vision for community clubs is that a variety of sports come together – not dissimilar to football and netball – but include cricket and tennis, and whatever else to provide them with a substantial facility – one that becomes the social centre of the country town or the region. And that is not dissimilar to the types of clubs that exist in the ACT.

We have worked on leadership and we are still working with parents, and the impact of water restrictions, child-care and member protection, website and club development, and we're starting to commit our vision for 2010.

In terms of promotions and events, we have at least three member forums a year where we bring all our members together and discuss a range of issues. We also put out a monthly magazine called *Sports View*. We have our annual boards, professional development workshops, sport development officer workshops, calendar of events and website – a bit of a promotion for our next awards on 3 June. As you can see, we get key players along. The Governor normally comes along to present his award. Matt Welsh came along to accept his award and Kirsty Marshall presented the awards last year. So we get about 500 people along – have a fantastic night where people who make a contribution to sport in Victoria receive due recognition. We really try to focus on not just the elite athletes, but certainly the volunteer administrators, the coaches, the older athletes and the younger athletes as well. So it's a terrific night.

Current and future issues – Commonwealth Games legacy is a big issue. Industry training is a big issue. Regional development, club administration and development and the Australian Sports Commission's continuing push for the unitary model are also important issues.

In terms of linking with this inquiry, we see that some of the work we're doing really could be of benefit to the issues that have been raised in this inquiry – especially the first one, support for volunteer club administrators. We see that the web-based club administration packages that we're developing at the moment will really make life easier for club administrators. We're trying to make them as simple and as user-friendly as we possibly can. However, an interactive series of policy and planning templates for club administrators needs to be supported. Using the concept of the community sports club we seek to include a full-time administrator to service the various sports that come to the club. We also see the need for training for volunteers in club administration as a big issue.

Local governments: We believe that local governments need to be more aware of best practice in terms of lease agreements and pricing of policies, and we're working with them at the moment on that very issue. We think that facilities across the state are funded without enough consideration being given to the strategic plan of the State Sporting Association. We would like to see more coordinated effort that links the State Sporting Associations into funding for facility development. That is it. We have produced a response to your terms of reference, if you want to look at that.

The CHAIR – Yes, that would be great, thank you.

Mr INGRAM – Julie, you stated in the presentation that you are working with local government on them being more aware of best practice lease agreements and pricing policies. What level of take-up and acceptance of that is there, and is there a difference between metro and rural councils?

Ms SARLL – In terms of the lease agreements, we've just spent the last six months discussing this with the local governments, their indemnity clauses and the impossible position that places clubs in – even if local government had been negligent and the clubs obviously couldn't find insurance to cover that type of clause. Most of the clubs didn't even read the lease well enough to know that exists. We've had about six or eight meetings with a range of local governments, and I just received a paper today that takes a much more reasonable approach to those types of clauses in lease agreements. So we've got somewhere there.

But in terms of pricing policies, no, we haven't got anywhere at all with them. It's something that came out of the *Cost of Delivering Sport Report*. It was seen as a big issue, both within one LGA in terms of what the outdoor facilities get compared with what the indoor facilities have to pay for, and then across boundaries between one LGA and the next. There might be a cricket club or two cricket clubs playing in the same district in different local government areas that just have vast differences in what they have to pay for.

Mr INGRAM – That's the evidence that we've got, like the difference between local government areas.

Ms SARLL – It's huge.

Mr INGRAM – And you'll have a league that will cross a couple of different local government areas that have different pricing policies; so how are you dealing with that? Is that something that we need to take up? Is that something that you're taking up independently?

Ms SARLL – It would help if you took it up as well. We put together a series of principles for consideration by local government in terms of best practice for pricing polices.

Mr INGRAM – Can you provide us with a copy of those?

Ms SARLL – It's in the *Cost of Delivering Sport Report*, which I believe you have a copy of. So certainly some follow-up on that would be fabulous.

The CHAIR – Do you think we're making the case to local government about the benefits to the local areas; provided by the sport that is going on within them, are provided to their communities and the strength of their communities? Are we making the case to local government? Do they understand the benefits to their communities, of the local sport?

Ms SARLL – It depends who you talk to in local government. I think the people who work in sport and recreation and parks, and whatever, understand. But I think the CEO or the higher-level administrators can't see the importance of sport and recreation for the community and what sorts of community service obligations they have. I think they've been so hounded with CCT that they've lost sight of what the other avenues might be.

The CHAIR – And training for volunteers. What kind of assistance would you be looking at from government for that? And how would you see that actually being delivered to rural clubs in particular, clubs that are out in the country areas?

Ms SARLL – We work very closely with regional sports assemblies and with Sport Education Victoria. We run professional development workshops, largely within the metropolitan area, but this year we have been reaching out into the regions at the invitation of the regional sports assemblies. We've received some funding from the government for our web site, and we see this as being a state-of-the-art, fully interactive repository for information. One of the key factors associated with poor club governance and administration is loss of corporate history or loss of club history. The treasurer heads off to Queensland to retire, or whatever, and all the papers, annual reports and other papers disappear. So we see our website as being a place where people can store and retrieve their information.

The CHAIR – What about people's different learning styles, and probably the web sites –?

Ms SARLL – Certainly we have to back it up with on the ground face-to-face workshops, and we're looking to government to provide us with funding for training in the areas of risk management and general club administration and leadership. We're working on a proposal at the moment that is part of the Commonwealth Games legacy – how to get the Commonwealth Games volunteers back into clubs after the Commonwealth Games.

Dr NAPTHINE – Julie, one of the things that many administrators say when they're talking to potential volunteers, or asking people to join the committee – people are concerned about the legal liabilities and the ramifications. Do you have any views about whether the government's legislation to provide volunteer protection – for want of a better word – is adequate; or are there other things that we as a committee should be recommending to government in terms of providing legislative reassurance to volunteers in terms of encouraging more involvement?

Ms SARLL – I think you've probably done as much as you can by way of legislation. The rest of the change is going to be a slow cultural change from where you sue first and talk later. It is an attitude we need to really try and, if you like, turn around. I think that's going to be hard work. The federal government's ambulance chasing legislation would certainly assist. But while we still have certain sections in the community who have that mentality and push people down that path, it's going to be difficult for us.

The CHAIR – If I were, for instance, the better planning co-ordinator for development of community sports facilities, the first thing I would do is conduct a statewide audit of all community sports facilities, including schools. We've heard a little bit from people about the wasted resource of the school oval especially – and the many other facilities they have – over weekends and after-school hours. Can you tell us where you're coming from there, and how you see that being done?

Ms SARLL – I think over the years we've seen advances of where it can be done. I was talking to the principal of Warrnambool on Friday, and he said his new indoor facility has extensive community use. And I think that's the sort of thing we should be trying to aim for. In these, if you like, regional hubs or community sporting

clubs, you need to get the schools involved, and the people who are principals and whatever in schools involved, so that these facilities can be opened up to the community.

The CHAIR – Any further questions? Thank you very much, Julie and John, and thank you very much to everybody who has stayed with us throughout the day. We are now closing the hearings.

Witnesses withdrew.

Committee adjourned.