

29 May 2007

The Executive Officer
Rural and Regional Committee
Parliament House
MELBOURNE VIC 3002

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Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Inquiry into Rural and Regional Tourism

On behalf of the Shire of Campaspe, I would like to present the following submission for the Inquiry into Rural and Regional Tourism.

Economic benefits of tourism

The Shire of Campaspe, in particular its main township of Echuca, relies heavily on tourism to drive its economy. The tourism industry delivers \$280 million annually into the Shire's economy and directly employs approximately 1300 people.

Together with its cross-border neighbour, Moama, the region has over 4,000 visitor beds and attracts 1.8 million day-trippers and overnight visitors annually.

The Tourism Impact Model created by the Federal Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources estimates that without tourism the Shire of Campaspe would lose 15% of its population and reduce its income by \$19 million.

Potential impediments to sustained growth

Understandably, across many regional areas of Victoria there are similar impediments to the growth of tourism. The Shire of Campaspe has identified the following as its key restrictions:

- The variety of bodies controlling land and dictating land-use, particularly in relation to planning requirements. For example, along the banks of the Murray River, which is the northern part of much of the Shire of Campaspe, land is controlled by Federal Government, State Government and Local Government. The Murray River, its southern banks and some areas extending past the current river line, also have the interesting complication of being controlled by interstate government officials. The Shire feels there is a need for a strategic approach in simplifying the planning process for operators using such areas along the River Precinct.
- Difficulty in attracting private investment, particularly to areas of the Shire with an emerging or yet to be established tourism industry.
- A skills shortage of hospitality and qualified tourism staff.
- A lack of understanding by many local residents of the importance of tourism to the local economy and their role in tourism.

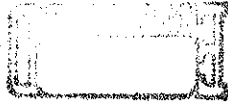
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Effectiveness of different levels of Government

The Shire of Campaspe borders to the north with the NSW Murray Shire. Both Shire's have an excellent working relationship with regards to tourism and use a collaborative approach to enhance the local tourism industry.

However, there are complexities to this relationship – generally at a State Government or state-wide body level. While the Shire appreciates that state bodies represent their Victorian constituents, it is important that they consider the benefit to all those involved.

For example, in a recent meeting with the Melbourne Convention and Visitor Bureau (MCVB) regarding membership, the Shire of Campaspe was informed that preference would be given to Victorian locations that did not utilise interstate facilities. While it is understandable that MCVB favour Victorian locations, in the Shire of Campaspe's situation it is important to utilise high quality conference facilities available in Moama to bring large-scale conference events to the region. While the conference facility may be located interstate, visitor nights associated with conferences and day activities could and would be provided within the Shire of Campaspe.

The Shire of Campaspe feels it is important that a body such as MCVB focus on its target area, but also take a holistic approach to the wider benefits to extending beyond this area.

Initiatives to increase visitor nights

The Shire's main township of Echuca has recently been in the favourable position of increased direct V/Line services to and from Melbourne. While quantifiable evaluation of its impact on increasing visitor nights to the destination is not available, it is certainly believed that this service will assist in delivering more people to the destination and encourage Echuca over other destinations.

The Shire also supports the work of both Tourism Victoria and Tourism Australia in assisting Regional Tourism Associations and local operators to market and develop their tourism experiences.

It is important to note the role of events in delivering visitor nights to regional and rural Victoria. While some funding for such events is available from a variety of sources, consideration needs to be given to providing seed funding for events over a number of years, decreasing annually until the event becomes fully established.

Reactions to natural events

Following the recent Gippsland and High Country bushfires, Tourism Victoria played a very public and important role in encouraging visitors to return to the area. While those actions must be applauded, there are increasing concerns from tourism operators affected by drought that are not receiving such assistance.

Many of the Shire's local operators rely heavily on the Murray River as a key element of their business. Over the past months, the metropolitan media's dramatic coverage of the drought's effect has damaged potential visitors' perceptions of the Murray River. Following recent coverage of images in the Herald Sun depicting the Murray River as a "puddle", many operators received calls from concerned clients asking how to apply for refunds. This type of coverage was both incorrect and damaging.

While media outlets have a responsibility to report truthfully, there may be a role for a body such as Tourism Victoria to proactively profile destinations.

Opportunities to leverage private investment

As mentioned, there are certainly difficulties in developing non-traditional tourist precincts or destinations, particularly in relation to attracting private investment. While there is no simple answer, opportunities to network and provision of professional development for Local Government officers with regards to attracting investment would be an advantage.

The Shire of Campaspe would like to thank the Rural and Regional Committee of Parliament for the opportunity to make this submission and would be happy to provide further assistance to the inquiry, where appropriate.

Yours faithfully



CARLIE BELL
TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

