

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Swan Hill — 1 August 2007

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Witness

Mr D. O'Bryan, owner, Big 4 Swan Hill Pioneer City Tourist Park.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — Thanks, Dennis, for making yourself available to come along. This is an all-party parliamentary committee. We are taking evidence on rural and regional tourism for Victoria. Anything that is said in here is afforded parliamentary privilege, which is provided under the Constitution Act 1975, the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and the Defamation Act 2005. Anything you say in here is covered; anything you say outside the precinct is not covered by the privilege.

Before you start giving us your verbal submission, would you be able to give us your full name and address and also the organisation you are representing. Everything you say today is going to be taken down by Hansard. That Hansard transcript will be given to you in two or three weeks time for you to peruse. Without further ado, thanks very much for coming along.

Mr O'BRIAN — Thanks for the opportunity. My full name is Dennis O'Brian. I am a small business operator. My wife and I operate a caravan park in town. We have been in the business a little over three years, and that is basically it. I have had some history in retail prior to this, and I am a member of the local tourism and hospitality committee.

I basically prepared my presentation on the basis of the written submission from council, but a number of those issues have not been raised here today. One of particular interest to me, of course, in the written submission was the need for more caravan parks. I would just like to submit to this committee that it is outside the terms of reference of this committee. I can address it if you wish.

Ms DARVENIZA — The need for more caravan parks?

Mr O'BRIAN — Yes. I can address it if you wish to hear it, but my submission is that it should not be here. It does not meet the criteria for the reference.

The CHAIR — Dennis, the terms of reference are quite broad. It talks about the flow-on benefits. I think, more or less, caravan parks are very much within our scope of interest. If you are prepared to talk about that, I think it would be very pertinent for us to hear it.

Mr O'BRIAN — Okay, thank you. These are my opinions and obviously not council's. They are perhaps shared by other operators within the town. I believe that our council has a preoccupation with farming and farming enterprise, probably to the exclusion and detriment of tourism. It can be seen in the opening address of the written submission from council, in which they say:

Swan Hill Rural City is principally an agricultural and horticultural region deriving its income from these industries and the businesses that service them.

In Gary's opening address I think his opening lines were very similar to that today. They talk about the extensive managed farms, investment schemes et cetera.

The CHAIR — Do you mean Geoff?

Mr O'BRIAN — Yes, Geoff; sorry. This belief and this opinion of council ignores the impacts of tourism in the town because of that culture, if you like. Their response to the first issue in this inquiry is that the realistic visitation to our region cannot be sourced through the national visitor survey. Determining visitor numbers here is a very simple thing. It has never been asked for, but we all have electronic computer management schemes. We know who the people are, we know where they are from, how much they are going to spend, and basically where they are sourced from. If council or the information centre wants this information, virtually every accommodation provider in this town would be able to just download that stuff in an instant.

The CHAIR — There are no issues there in relation to privacy, Dennis?

Mr O'BRIAN — We are not talking names; we are talking numbers.

The CHAIR — Yes, just numbers.

Mr O'BRIAN — And obviously the source of our visitors, that knowledge would be fantastic, both for us operators and for the council — that is, where we are best likely to spend our money, which is the most effective area to market et cetera. That stuff exists, so it is naive to think that it does not.

Economic benefits: the council is fairly vague on this issue as well. The latest ABS statistics on this, released on 11 May 2007 under the heading 'Australian national accounts: tourism satellite account 2005–06' provide a breakdown of tourism consumption. I have utilised the ratios contained in that document with the assumption that the tourism spend in Swan Hill is exactly the same as it is throughout the nation. Just using my own caravan park for an example — I do not mind sharing figures — our turnover from tourist visitors is \$700 000 a year. Using the ABS table, if you like, that \$700 000 is converted into \$8.55 million, just from my customers alone, because a mere 8 per cent of the tourist dollar is spent on accommodation — 8.9 per cent is spent on the transportation getting here, which leaves 83 per cent more spent in the town. If we look at the 20 accommodation providers in the town, and we all turn over, say, \$500 000 a year, that converts to \$104 million a year just from tourism. So it is a fairly significant industry, and I think it is being ignored by council.

On a macro scale — and I am sure you people will know this — tourism contributed \$31.3 billion in 2005–06 and sits above the agricultural, fishing and forestry sectors in terms of GDP.

You say I can talk on the zoning of caravan parks. I do not know why council has put this in its submission. I can only think that it is a furtherance of their concerns for agriculture and farming, because we certainly do not need any more caravan parks in the city. We do not need any more tourist venues for tourists. Of the three caravan parks in the city, we have never been full. For four days a year perhaps, at Easter, most of the sites in the three major parks in the city might be full, but there are two just outside the town, and there are plenty in the vicinity, and they are never full. It is not clear in the document, and that is why it is disappointing that it was not raised here today. Obviously they see a need to fulfil farmers' wishes to house their itinerant workers. Okay, if there is a need for that, it is probably a public housing issue. I do not think it is for you guys to be addressing it.

The biggest event to hit Swan Hill in terms of use of caravan parks was an A'vanners conference earlier this year. Of the three parks in the city, two of us were full, but the other one still had spots. Phil from Riverside Caravan Park runs the biggest caravan park in town. His occupancy is about 11 per cent in terms of sites. Mine is something similar. The park down the road is less so. There is definitely no need for more caravan parks. If a farmer wants to develop his land on the river, it is an opportunity — he says; they say — to house itinerants. Okay, we have got another itinerant park. There are heaps of them out there. They are not pleasant places; we do not need more of them. If the farmer does get the opportunity to change the legislation to allow councils to issue permits for caravan parks, as in its submission, and the guy with his 100 acres on the river all of a sudden has a licence for a caravan park, us guys are in jeopardy because all of a sudden he opens it up to tourists, so our businesses are affected. It is for self-preservation I obviously raise those things.

It is my opinion, so it may not be evidence before this committee, that those parks that cater for the itinerant workers are lousy places. They do not comply with legislation, not to mention the social impact on rural communities. All of a sudden there is another caravan park full of pickers put in their midst.

Ms DARVENIZA — Why are they lousy places? Tell us three things about them that would make them lousy.

Mr O'BRIAN — They do not comply with legislation, and they are not part of any marketing groups that may control them. I am a BIG4 member; if I drop my standards I am out of the chain. These guys basically do what they like. They are not policed. The lower socioeconomic group that are pickers — pick fruit and do that sort of work — are generally the most represented in jails and crime. They are the facts. These people can be housed on farms without creating a caravan park and putting them all in one spot. It is an awful social environment that we do not really want.

Public transport has been raised briefly, but from my point of view we lose customers because we cannot provide economical public transport to get here, for a start. There are not a lot of trains or buses that come here. Then when we can get them here — if we can get them here — we do not have any local transport to cart them around to the various tourist attractions, to the shops and so on. A new bridge or better signage is not going to bring people here, but improving the freeway all the way between Melbourne and Bendigo will improve things. Increasing the speed limit to 110 kilometres per hour is an issue. Change those things and the people will come.

This goes away from the markets in terms of the sole parent allowance. The majority of cleaning staff in caravan parks and motels are single mums. The hours suit. There was a federal legislative change last year, and all these people who are on a sole parent pension have to work 15 hours a week. During boom times, good times of the year, 100 days a year, we can probably guarantee them 15 hours a week, but for the vast majority of the year, we cannot, but what we can guarantee is that we will give them 15 hours averaged over the whole year. There needs to be a bit of tweaking of legislation, if that is possible. Okay, you will get your 15 hours, but it might not be this week. We would look at it on a month-by-month basis or a quarter-by-quarter basis or something.

The Murray region — or is it the Murray campaign region? I am certainly confused. Tourism officers attached to the various tourist information centres within the Murray region essentially direct and lead tourism initiatives and work cooperatively in this regard. They report to committees like the one I am involved in and give us feedback. I know it is effective for them to combine their resources. They might gain additional marketing dollars out of it, but it is not all about funds. The Swan Hill involvement in Mildura's tourism may help Mildura's but it will not necessarily help Swan Hill's.

The fact is we have got Mildura, Echuca, Shepparton and Albury-Wodonga as well as Swan Hill. We all offer similar river experiences, and when you just look at those five towns you think, 'Mildura has got Stefano. It has got a great river and it is well utilised. It has old-fashioned, historical boats and power boats. It has good food and plenty of wine'. Shepparton has got KidsTown, which is fantastic for families, and that is a market I am trying to capture — and KidsTown is free.

Albury-Wodonga has got the high country in close proximity. It has good, well-established and recognised wineries, which we do not have. Echuca is in close proximity to Melbourne and is a fantastic port area. When you look at those five towns you see that we seem to come off second best. To share our resources with those other areas would be hurting us, but that is for you to answer.

The Pioneer Settlement Museum is the one point of difference that Swan Hill offers. The cultural significance of this inland maritime museum is really unique. It has got to be supported — preserved for a start. There are concerns that it may not even be preserved, and it needs to be developed. We can draw attention to the arts, to the alcohol, to crafts of that era and make that a more dynamic place; and it is a dynamic place now. I have heard your comments, but it would not have lasted 44 years if it was a dud.

Aboriginal culture of the area might also be something they could draw into Swan Hill and into the mix at Sovereign Hill. The settlement should be at the forefront of marketing, but its

advertising budget is less than mine. That creates a fairly significant negative. It will always struggle to get significant marketing with such a small budget.

Recently, Swan Hill lost a cinema, a combined hotel, a large charter boat and public access to the Murray Downs Homestead, which is now privately owned. To some extent it has also lost the Tyntynder Homestead as a result of poor management. There is talk that it is back on its feet, but time will tell. If we lose the pioneer settlement, we will lose tourism. It is as simple as that. Tourism in the town will be devastated. It is basically all that we have got at the moment.

If you look at the Tourism Victoria website and at the major events in Swan Hill, you will see we have the winter racing carnival for June, the Italian Festa for July, the Australian Inland Wine Show for October and the Swan Hill Agricultural and Pastoral Society show for October. The only one of those that is an event is the three-day cup meeting. The others are just nothing. They are inconsequential; they mean nothing to our businesses.

The Italian Festa, for example, hosts all the visitors through all the Italian families here, so there is just no money for tourism. They will spend some money in the shops, but not on accommodation. Those sorts of things need to be updated on those websites. I do not know how some of those things got in there in the first place because Tourism Victoria is a fairly new name.

One of the major problems we have in terms of developing new stuff here is that we do not have the resources. Anecdotally speaking, I was here at a meeting recently and a lady came up with a great idea. She wanted to put sculpture and wine together — put a sculpture in all of the wineries and open it up to the public as another tourist attraction, just as a one-off for a couple of weeks. Janelle advised her to contact a suitably qualified person in Mildura. We could not help her. That is not Janelle's fault, and we do not have the expertise. There needs to be funding to support someone here in Swan Hill who can say, 'This is how you do it. This is what you need', so that we are able to provide those sorts of things.

In terms of the government response to bushfires, floods et cetera, I think it has done a fantastic job in sending people back to the Grampians and the high country after their fires. The government thinks it has done its job when it provides free marketing for those areas, but the problem for those operators is that lots and lots of people who had bookings six months or 12 months ahead at these fire-devastated areas will cancel. There is no insurance. You cannot cover that sort of episode on insurance, so you lose all those customers and you are never, ever compensated for those. It does take a long time to get your customers back. If there was some sort of insurance to cover that sort of situation, it would be fantastic.

There is a level of anxiety about the river. I am not going to repeat that; you have heard it everywhere, but it exists here as well. I run a little boat business as well, but I have not been able to put the boat in the water since February, so it effects the big and the small.

Ms DARVENIZA — Because nobody wants the boat?

Mr O'BRIAN — No, because there is not enough water.

Ms DARVENIZA — There has to be enough water!

Mr O'BRIAN — It has not been deep enough.

In terms of the six points, there are untapped opportunities here for ecotourism. There is a little farm up the road called Sonre farm. If you go out there for a trip, you can see that it works. There is a rotary dairy up the road that will work. People have just got to get behind them and support them. No-one expects government or councils to do it. It has got to be up to entrepreneurs and us as locals to have a bit of a go and spend our money but we need to be supported. Where a significant tourist attraction exists, and it does here at the pioneer settlement, it must be supported. That sort of thing must be supported by governments or we will lose it, as I said. I am not asking

council to abandon the sheep's back. We just want them to embrace tourism with the same level of love.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Dennis. If it is okay with you, I might now throw to the panel for some questions.

Ms LOVELL — That was great, thanks, Dennis. You have an average occupancy of 11 per cent — —

Mr O'BRIAN — Sorry, that is on the sites. It is higher throughout the park and the cabins, but I raised that because we were talking about another caravan park coming.

Ms LOVELL — But from your data, is your occupancy mainly tourism? What is the percentage of tourists versus permanent residents?

Mr O'BRIAN — It is all tourists.

Ms LOVELL — All tourists. No permanent residents at all?

Mr O'BRIAN — There are four that live in houses.

Mr NORTHE — I am just interested obviously in the fact that local council charges the differential rate and uses some of that money to implement tourism opportunities. How did you feel about the implementation of that rate? Obviously there is some consternation there in your thoughts, so can you maybe just elaborate a little bit about what your thoughts are on that particular differential rate, as an owner-operator?

Mr O'BRIAN — Council takes the credit but obviously the money comes from us as operators. It is a wonderful thing but I agree with council that there should be some dollar-for-dollar funding to match that. But it works. We are providing our own money — —

Mr NORTHE — But are you happy with the concept?

Mr O'BRIAN — Yes.

Ms TIERNEY — You threw up a lot of issues there, Dennis, and a lot that we have not heard of before, particularly the uniqueness of caravan parks and the role that they play. You were quite adamant obviously about the need for local people to be supported and you raised the pioneer settlement, but if you were tourism minister for one day here in Swan Hill, what would you do and what would you expect from the local community in respect of tourism?

Mr O'BRIAN — I think it is your job to find the solutions; I just make the criticisms. I have got the easy part. It is an icon; we all agree on this. Everybody is agreeing but we are not spending the money. It is in jeopardy. The council employee said that it is under discussion that they spend millions but you read the local papers and there is more discussion about MIS than there is about preserving our local icon. You have just got to be real about spending the money, and if council is going to spend some money, so be it. Otherwise it will just rot down there and no-one will go there and no-one will come here.

Ms TIERNEY — Leaving aside the pioneer settlement — I understand that it is very important and quite central to tourism here — in terms of just tourism generally, what else needs to happen for tourism to really flourish here in Swan Hill?

Mr O'BRIAN — There needs to be money spent — public money, private money — to build attractions. There has been criticism locally about a new Aldi store coming. I think it is fantastic because it is just another opportunity, another place for tourists to spend their money. When they come and stay at my nice cabins they want them to be just like home, and that is what they want in all aspects of their tourism. They want to be able to shop at the shops they shop at

when they are at home because they know what is there, they know what to look for. But they also look for something different. So Swan Hill needs some attractions. But if I was a minister for one day, I would put all my money in down the road first.

Ms DARVENIZA — I agree that yours was a very interesting presentation. Obviously you are doing something right here in Swan Hill because you have got a number of caravan parks. I have stayed in a caravan park here — not recently but I stay in caravan parks quite a bit because I travel with my dog, so I only stay in the ones that will let my keep my dog with me — I do not know whether yours falls into that category? Yes, I think I have been in yours. It was a good experience. Caravan parks can be great places to stay. You have got businesses that have operated for some time and are operating well and attract tourists here so you are obviously doing something right. So how can we build on the things that you are doing? What are you doing right and how can we build on that?

Mr O'BRIAN — It is pretty much out of your hands other than in terms of money and marketing. Like I said, you cannot pick out one spot and say, 'We are going to create tourism here'. There are lots of ordinary little places that will never be tourist destinations. This is a destination because it is on the river but people are disappointed when they get here and they cannot put their power boats on the river, and it is shallow and narrow. But that is an appealing thing for a lot of people because it is a quiet stretch of the river; you cannot have the both.

That is a really difficult area, and I am not going to pretend that I have the answers but I think it is really up to us people to do those things and to do a little bit more perhaps — customer service in Swan Hill can be pretty sloppy at times. So it is up to all of us to do a little bit more and embrace tourists. But we have got to get the message from council; council has got to be sending the right messages out so the whole community does not think that that is a rotting thing down there, that it is something wonderful, like I do. Council does not help us in that regard at all.

Mr VOGELS — Basically I think most of the comments have been made that can be made and it seems to me that the icon is pioneer, and if we could get that up and running, that would obviously draw a lot of people. I think we were told at one stage that there were 300 000 people a year going there and now there are 60. That is a huge drop, and that needs to be arrested. If that was arrested and you could get back to your 300 000, obviously all those other things would take care of themselves. So I would say you have hit the nail on the head — rather than do lots of hotchy-potchy little things everywhere, stick to the one main icon which is your drawcard.

The CHAIR — Dennis, I have one question to finish off with. Yesterday we had evidence given to us in Mildura, and they seemed to have — without taking an accurate count — somewhere between 10 and 20 quality events — serious substantial events drawing in 3000 people to the actual event and obviously quite a few others. Swan Hill does not seem to have that type of event calendar. It is closer to Melbourne, closer to nearly everyone in Victoria and it might not have a big wide beautiful river but it still has the river. Have you any understanding as to why this community is not driven to create the events?

Mr O'BRIAN — We are smaller so we probably lack some of those people with those ideas, but the ideas come and go in here. They are not driven because we do not have the resources locally here to drive them. The wine trail, or whatever it is called, I have heard described as 'highbrow'. It is a wonderful thing but they set the bar right up here, rather than it be a Rutherglen, and have a winery walkabout sort of thing. They have great wines, great wine judges and a very highbrow event — it does not bring people. If you cannot work it out and you are running these things, you need people here to be able to guide you down the right trail, and that goes for all the attractions. Why does Mildura succeed? Yes, it is 2 hours further up the road — it is because they are driven and we obviously are not.

The CHAIR — Dennis, thanks for your time. We appreciate your frankness. Your evidence will be returned to you in a couple of weeks for you to check and make any alterations if there are any typographical errors.

Witness withdrew.