

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Swan Hill — 1 August 2007

#### Members

Ms. K. Darveniza

Mr D. Drum

Ms W. Lovell

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Mr J. Vogels

Chair: Mr D. Drum

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#### Witness

Ms R. Till, museum director, Pioneer Settlement Museum, Swan Hill.

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

**The CHAIR** — Robyn, thank you for making time available to come before the committee today. This is an all-party parliamentary committee. The evidence you give today will be covered by parliamentary privilege which is afforded by the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Constitution Act 1975 and also the Defamation Act 2005. Any evidence given outside the building is not covered by that parliamentary privilege.

Before we start, would you be good enough to give us your full name and address, and also the organisation that you are representing today? All evidence is being recorded and you will get a copy of the transcript in a few weeks so you can check for any typographical errors.

**Ms TILL** — My name is Robyn Till. I am the director of the Pioneer Settlement Museum. My work address is Monash Drive, Swan Hill. Having not appeared before a parliamentary committee before, I was not quite sure how you wanted to go through the process. I have written a bit of an overview and then responded to the questions. Is that the way you would like to go, because some of you may not be aware of who we are and what we do?

**The CHAIR** — The most important thing, Robyn, is for you to leave us a good deal of time at the end so we can ask some questions.

**Ms TILL** — I will try to talk fast then. The overview is that the museum redevelopment has now been listed as the highest priority for the Swan Hill Rural City Council. The museum works on many levels; not only in tourism as a product but as part of a vibrant cultural program for the local market, making Swan Hill an attractive place to live, work and visit.

The museum currently attracts around 60 000 visitors per annum, which includes all the options we have. Out of that, 11 per cent are locals, 8 per cent are bus groups, 16 per cent are school groups, 15 per cent are families and 37 per cent are free, independent travellers. So you can see that for us the education program is an integral part of our ongoing survival.

Our strategy over the last few years has been to re-establish the museum in the local community, and as such re-establish ourselves in tourism, and this process is ongoing. The corrections exhibition and corresponding stories are the attraction. That is why we need to manage and care for the collection and the interpretation of those stories within industry standards. In short the museum needs to present itself as a professional organisation with quality exhibits and information. We also need to communicate to our local community that the museum is relevant to them, and we have achieved this by working alongside volunteers, being involved in community groups, clubs and gaining their support.

The biggest growing market in tourism is visiting friends and relatives, so we thought we needed to establish ourselves within our community which would then encourage visiting friends and relatives to visit us. We also provide discounted entry for local accommodation houses that are termed visitor passports and this works quite well. They then on-sell with their own packaging in the tourism sector, and that accounts for 8 per cent of our admissions.

We are very keen to increase our education program content because at the museum we have 1.6 education officers. We have accommodation, and we run fantastic hands-on programs that get great feedback. The teachers are funded by the Department of Education through its strategic partnerships program and that is the only funding assistance we get outside of the Swan Hill Rural City Council. That is triennial funding. There are no guarantees of continuity or timing with those funding programs so it is very difficult for us to do any planning beyond the three years that we know we are getting the funding.

It was a model where the education department basically funded education officers and we provided the space, but it was changed across to a grants model a number of years ago. Our fear is that that funding will be reduced and we will have to pick up more and more of the tab. We are funding our own Aboriginal education officer, who you met this morning, but we could not do without that grant model for the other two education officers.

The museum provides a regular program of special events for visitors around the core themes of the collection. In the first instance these activities target the local community using special interest topics such as popular culture themes. Our key target tourism markets are younger, low-income families, retirees and education groups. However, we are seeking to extend this to insert the high-yield markets. Those of you who visited this morning will have seen that we are redeveloping front-of-house which is also a food centre, but it is in need of infrastructure spending so we need to bring ourselves up to that next level.

We are working towards a professional program of events and activities that reinforce the region's identity. We also collaborate with other natural partners such as the Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery — which is directly opposite the museum; it is one of 16 regional galleries in Victoria — the regional library and our performing arts program here which are all programs of council. We work very closely together to provide an integrated cultural program, but there are many other opportunities that we take up to link in with other community groups and individuals.

The aim of the museum is to make it a central part of a dynamic cultural precinct located in Swan Hill that attracts tourists wanting to join in on the activities that reflect this region. That is the end of my little lead-in.

My response to the terms of reference. In response to point 1, the museum has the resources to collect information but it does not have the resources to implement any computer tracking system. We collect data such as postcodes, and we have a basic system where we can find out the zones where people are coming from, but we do not have the ability to drill down further to find out what suburbs in Melbourne they might be coming from or specific areas within large regions. That would be very helpful in our marketing.

Regional businesses do not realise that their income is derived from a diverse range of opportunities including tourism. I think the government needs to lead the charge in educating them on the benefits of tourism. It is not the panacea or the be-all or end-all but it is an integral part of local communities. I do not think people recognise themselves within that industry and perhaps that needs to come from somewhere other than from us.

In response to point 2, from where I am standing the concentration on key icons has not led to a dissemination of tourism dollars to neighbouring regions. There are key icons within the tourism programs and somehow that is not feeding down to other regions such as this one compared to Mildura, say. You have one high profile place and then it is whether or not it is disseminating down. There needs to be some research on all target groups and their needs. Smaller regions need to ensure that their tourism product is diverse to ensure against variables, becoming a community asset as well as a tourism destination, sustaining product status within the market, opportunities to buy into major campaigns, and creating linkages and partnerships to maintain regional audiences.

There is a huge catchment for us as a social history museum that starts from perhaps Mildura right down to Echuca and Bendigo and across the border. We do not necessarily need to be targeting all metropolitan areas, but it is difficult, and I am suggesting that perhaps there need to be some government incentives for business to get involved in cultural tourism.

In response to question 3, federal campaigns are about major icons recognisable to international visitors that do not include the Murray River. At the moment 3 per cent of our visitation is internationals, which is higher than a few years ago, which was less than 1 per cent. So for us the internationals are beginning to become a bit of a factor where it was not before. We did not have them on the radar.

State television campaigns focus on metro products. The Jigsaw campaign for the Murray unwind is a print-based campaign. I cannot answer how successful that will be into the future, but I do believe that the TV campaign for the Great Ocean Road was a very successful campaign, although

once it finished on the TV, I wonder whether or not that they had to kind of pick it up and run from there.

Point 4 is 'provide incentives for business'. I have listed a huge number of possibilities here — anything from pure companies, transport providers, supermarkets, agricultural machinery companies, football clubs, and it goes on — to link up with cultural tourism and assist in the promotion of local products; to increase regional economic growth in tourism; assist communities to investigate their own region's identity to provide a strong product that sits under the current Jigsaw icon regions to provide business openings in a local context, extending the local product and another good reason to stay over; provide assistance for bottom-up research on product development related to local identity and matching those products to audiences; provide funding programs to enable local communities to seek a professional and residence related to specific needs, so one may need someone on stats, and another one may need someone in marketing or developing a marketing plan. There are a whole lot of opportunities there, so a kind of one-size-fits-all will not work, but you should get a professional specific to your needs.

Government departments need to work collaboratively to assist regional tourism products. From our perspective, we work with Arts Victoria, the Department of Education, Heritage Victoria, Tourism Victoria, VicHealth, the employment and training department, the telecommunications department in that we seek support from ABC radio and TV, and the Department for Victorian Communities. We do not sit under any one banner, so the museum's future relies on continuous, timely and secure funding from DOE grants for our education program.

I note that there is no regional museum or attraction that has education officers or supplies an education program that enjoys the same free travel component that the Scienceworks in Melbourne currently enjoys, so there are a whole lot of roads leading into Rome; there is not a lot assisting them to come back out again. The museum provides cultural activities that could be funded through Arts Victoria and the events supported by ABC radio and TV. The museum works towards community building and capacity through its collaborative projects that could be supported by the DVC. The museum is a major tourist icon in the region and Tourism Victoria and Tourism Australia are obvious partners. The museum collects and interprets the region's cultural heritage, and therefore it is Heritage Victoria, so I am trying to say that there is a multifaceted element to all the things that we do.

The museum employs 30 staff and would employ and train further staff in the industry if there were long-term funded employment programs. Our budgets are tight. We want to train people. We want to bring more people on board, but we cannot afford to do that. Perhaps there could be some programs that are funded for a set number of months that actually provide the opportunity for us to take staff on board.

Funding programs in general need to recognise the complexities and acknowledge the diverse role the museum plays in a small community, contributing both socially and economically. Funding programs need to collaborate for regional projects. They also need to stop creating their own labels for the museum that effectively block constructive support. I think a lot of government departments really grapple with what our role is. Are we a theme park? Are we a tourist icon? Are we a cultural organisation? I am suggesting we are every one of those.

I did hear yesterday in a meeting that for community museums development, which is being run by DVC and Arts Victoria, Mojo Enterprises has just completed its research on what people are looking for in tourism. It has come back, I believe, but I have not seen the report, that people are looking for an educational experience, and we are very well placed to do that.

In response to question 5: there are no apparent long-term measures to assist regional communities in the economic recovery of drought in tourism at a state level. There are highly competitive funding programs that assist business recovery at the federal level, however, it requires capital input and, as everyone here is fairly tight, it is kind of chasing itself. Local government provides

more individual assistance in collaboration with other levels of government. Higher levels of government need to take a lead role to ensure that these are achieved without cost shifting back onto what is our local government here, which is picking up a huge tab for my organisation at least.

In response to question 6: I see there are a host of opportunities. However, there needs to be assistance in working up projects presentable for discussion with business investors and funding bodies. There is currently a huge infrastructure at the museum that already serves its community. However, the pioneer settlement museum needs to redevelop to better serve the local community and meet future expectations of tourists. I do not know how my time is going. I have a few other dot points to go.

**The CHAIR** — Get them out, Robyn. You are going well.

**Ms TILL** — The pioneer settlement museum has identified the need to change display to maintain visitor interest. It needs to create in-house exhibitions about the local region to both enhance the tourism product and connect to the community. This includes being able to house exhibitions from state and federal agencies to draw visitors from the north-west region and other regional centres to the museum as well as your FITs. This requires major infrastructure expenditure on an exhibition space compliant to the requirements of travelling shows.

We cannot access travelling shows at the moment because of the requirements for environmental conditions. To create in-house shows and export those stories to other regions about who we are here, the museum needs to use professional cataloguing research and conservation methods. There is currently no ability to take the museum to this next level without major infrastructure.

Just to give you an idea, a vibrant cultural precinct at the museum might provide professional care for the collection; a high profile exhibition program and dynamic annual calendar of events in conjunction with other cultural organisations and the community with the largest Aboriginal population of any municipality in the state, in partnership there will be a keeping place for local Koori stories, educating students on the history of the local environment from white settlement to the old and new farming practices, leading the change in community behaviours through didactic and hands-on activities about the environment in collaboration.

It could provide night visits to the museum with different content options, provide eco accommodation on the river in a private partnership–public partnership format, bike riding and walking tracks along the riverbank and in local forests, local food and wine eatery and function centre, information centre about the Murray River, and cruising along the Murray on our boat, visual art exhibitions and activities at the Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery, and native gardens all along the river precinct. These are just things I am throwing at you, and that is really what I have written to present to you.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks very much, Robyn. You have just touched on my very point of interest, and that is: are there practical additions that the city needs as a matter of course that could be located at the pioneer settlement to actually create an increased patronage in a practical sense and therefore build on it — as you say, another restaurant or a wine experience?

**Ms TILL** — Are you saying council services that could be relocated to that site?

**The CHAIR** — For example, if we needed a new library, could you build one there?

**Ms TILL** — We have the art gallery there, we have the library there, we have a great food outlet location, although it needs upgrading, and we have a library. The perfect model of a cultural precinct would be Adelaide, where you have the whole cultural precinct. You go to education and you go to your visual arts and your performing arts — everything is in one location.

That is perhaps not quite possible here, but, yes, you could do that. You could also involve public investment. It would create opportunities for them to invest. I think we spoke this morning about how the museum was a vibrant centre in the 1970s and 1980s, with huge visitor numbers each year, and around that museum were a whole lot of other organisations such as the Pheasant Farm, the Clock World and the Military Museum, and the homesteads were open to the public. There was a whole tourism product package to come to. In the downturn as the museum lost its status, those other organisations all fell off, so they relied on that key icon to feed into or feed out of.

**Ms TIERNEY** — I have two questions. There has been a slight increase in your international visitor numbers that you mentioned; do you have a sense of how they actually arrived here in Swan Hill and what motivated them to come to your museum?

**Ms TILL** — We do not collect a lot of data. Anecdotally they are free independent travellers; they are not hooked into anything specific. I assume they are doing a Murray tour more than anything else, and I also assume that they would be heading to Mungo, because international tourists are keen to know about Aboriginal heritage.

**Ms TIERNEY** — The second question: you made mention of an area where you see a need for support, and that was staff training; in particular, what specific training is required?

**Ms TILL** — We do an absolute gamut of programs. I am saying that we can actually employ people to work in visitor programs — people who are dealing with people, people who are at the front of house greeting people, and people who are talking to visitors when they are there, imparting knowledge and giving that intimate experience, which I think current visitors are actually seeking. They want to learn, and they want it on a fairly intimate basis, so it is difficult. We rely heavily on our volunteers. We have about 40 active volunteers and 30 staff varying from full time to part time, we do catering — we do the gamut.

**Mr NORTHE** — Robyn, it has been interesting to hear about statistics and data over a number of public hearings now. The collating and collecting of that data seems quite ad hoc throughout the whole of the state at the moment, and it would obviously make a huge difference in terms of where we market, how we market and the like. In your opinion, who should collect that data, how would they do it and what role should the state government play in assisting that?

**Ms TILL** — I can only talk from my perspective. We can collect the data, but we do not have the technology or the finance to buy the systems to analyse the data as well as we would like.

**Mr NORTHE** — That is what we are hearing across the state. Is it Tourism Victoria's responsibility, do you believe? Do you need more assistance out in the field? More specifically, say, for Swan Hill, does it need somebody to come here and accurately collect the data to assist?

**Ms TILL** — I talked about professionals in residence. That is one of the things I had in mind. Someone could come in and assist with working out what data we should be collecting. We are collecting quite a bit, but maybe there are things that we are not thinking of. It needs someone to come in with fresh eyes and to say, 'What about this?', or, 'What about that?', and then we can collect it. For instance, the postcode data that we analyse at the moment was something that one of our staff downloaded off the Tourism Victoria site, but it is too broad for us.

**Mr NORTHE** — That is right.

**Ms TILL** — They are doing that to a point now, but we need to drill down to get deeper.

**Mr NORTHE** — It needs to be more specific.

**Ms TILL** — Yes.

**Mr NORTHE** — Out of that, do you feel you need additional resources to assist Swan Hill, as an example, to come in and make recommendations to you?

**Ms TILL** — Yes, and I would have thought Tourism Victoria would be the perfect candidate.

**Ms DARVENIZA** — If I were to play the devil's advocate and say to you, 'Really, these sorts of pioneer settlements are a thing of the past. They were really big in the 1970s, and that is when they had their peak. We have a number of them around the state — there are a couple of them down in Gippsland — that are experiencing a similar downturn in patronage', what would you say to me about why you think so much money should be spent on revitalising yours by council and maybe federal and state governments, if you were asking them for money? What would you say to them about how you could be sure that it would attract tourists back again and that you would get bang for your buck if you have a big investment and injection of funds?

**Ms TILL** — Firstly, I would agree with that you the days of outdoor museums are over. That is really what has led this charge to change the whole focus to set ourselves up for future visitors. We need to set ourselves up for a very diverse community. The museum began in 1963, and it was the first of its type. It set the standards, and it really dealt with people who were of mainly Anglo-Saxon background and who had a familiarity with the objects that we were collecting. That is not the case now. I think that the whole concept of hands-on history is still a very good tool, but I think that the format we are in at the moment is way below current expectations of visitors.

Will it work or will it not? I have been researching this over the last six years and I have spoken to many people in the industry, and it has been my experience from the activities that we have had that if you have the right product there, people will come. We need to integrate that single icon product along with the integrated approach of this region and the integrated approach of the Murray unwind campaign so that they all sit one under the other.

I think that creating a strong local identity is paramount to regional tourism. People need to look at Swan Hill and this region and relate it to a particular identity, and that is what will draw them to discover it. I have talked extensively to the CEO of Museum Victoria and the director of the Migration Museum in Adelaide about products and drawing people in. The director of the Migration Museum said what I just said before, that if you have got the product there, if it is a professional product, if it is presenting something relevant, if it is responding to the needs of the community — and that is where you go back to doing your research on what the needs of visitors are — and if it has got complete community support, which the museum currently has, then although I cannot say 100 per cent it will not fail, I cannot see that it would, once you had all of that mix.

**Mr VOGELS** — What I have picked up here is that water continuing to flow in the Murray River is one of the major issues, whether it is for agriculture or tourism. People come to the Murray River and they expect water in the Murray River. Do you guys get involved at all in the debate with the Murray–Darling Basin issue that is happening at the moment, or piping water from this region across to Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo, or do you just leave that alone and think it is all too hard?

At the end of the day, I would have thought that water is one of the most important issues here; fixing up the Darling so that less water has to come down the Murray to Mildura, because there is more coming from the other end to go to Adelaide. But saving and conserving water at this end of world, is that part of the debate?

**Ms TILL** — I guess my first response would be that we are so busy doing what we do, that is very difficult to buy into the debate, but I would suggest that settlement, which is what we talk about, is always about water. Settlements are around water and we had hoped, in our

redevelopment, to create an information and educational tool about the Murray River and the environment. You have Echuca which provides information about the river trade and you have the Murray River Interpretative Centre at Goolwa which talks about that end of the river.

We were pretty keen to set up in collaboration with the Murray-Darling Basin Commission and a few others with whom we have had preliminary discussions, talking about issues of how the river created in the beginning the Cadell fault, how it has changed its path, the river flows, the birdlife, and all of those issues. We are actually very keen. We have the infamous Mallee roller in our collection. We are very keen to talk about farming practice as it was and farming practice as it is now. Yes, we do see the collection as a tool to create public debate. I am not sure that we would take any issues either way.

**Mr VOGELS** — And I am not, I am just inquiring about education.

**Ms TILL** — Absolutely — that is part of the future dream, that we can spark a bit of discussion and educate people.

**Ms LOVELL** — Firstly, Robyn, thank you for the tour this morning, I really enjoyed it. I never fail to go there, but it brings back lots of wonderful memories. I think I told you this morning that I have a memory of being the governor at the Swan Hill pioneer village.

**Ms TILL** — I hope John now knows how to spear a kangaroo.

**Mr VOGELS** — I do!

**Ms LOVELL** — Yes, John was a guineapig for the Aboriginal education class this morning, which was good.

You talked about the Murray campaign and it being just a print campaign. Do you feel that has best serviced the needs of this region, or that it needed to be a bigger campaign that maybe included TV advertising?

**Ms TILL** — I am working on a gut feeling because the people I am speaking to within the museum industry and other sectors are unaware of the campaign and it has been going for a while now, so I am just not sure if it is hitting the mark. I can see some benefits in not going for advertising on TV, but I can also see a lot of benefits in it. It is a high-profile marketing tool and I am not sure if people are taking the time to read the newspaper and the ads, whereas TV is possibly more confronting.

I think, as a neighbour, looking over to the Great Ocean Road campaign, that worked exceptionally well. Again, I think that some of the metro campaigns have also worked exceptionally well. I would suggest that it may be missing out a bit, but then I am not quite sure what target they are seeking, and if that target market actually would prefer reading its papers than watching TV. That is difficult, but for our target market, which is young families, I know that they consume a lot TV.

**The CHAIR** — I think Tourism Victoria probably has acknowledged that an awful lot of money is spent in the Great Ocean Road and the Yarra Valley region. They have had some great successes with that money. It is just a matter of trying to place those priorities, but it is a good point that you have made, that the Murray may not be getting that slice of priority.

Thank you very much for your time, Robyn. I appreciate the evidence you have given. Within two or three weeks there will be a copy of the Hansard report available for you to check over to make sure there are not too many typographical errors.

**Witness withdrew.**