

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Swan Hill — 1 August 2007

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

The CHAIR — Thanks, Helen, for making the effort to come across and be here today. The Rural and Regional Committee is an all-party parliamentary committee and is inquiring into rural and regional tourism. Any evidence given here today will be protected by parliamentary privilege and that is provided by the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and the Constitution Act 1975. Any evidence given outside this inquiry is not covered by parliamentary privilege.

Helen, before you start with your presentation could you please give us your full name and address, and the organisation which you are representing today. Hansard staff will record all that and then make a copy of this transcript available to you in a couple of weeks.

Cr BALLENTINE — Thank you very much for the opportunity to present here today. I am representing the Hopetoun community and the Shire of Yarriambiack.

I am not here today to harp on the ways of the drought and I am not here to beg for water for our lake or our creek. I am here to discuss the new way forward for our region, and that is to promote what we already have and what we do well, and to stay out of the past. I really think that we have enough great historical projects in place. I also think that Swan Hill and Ballarat do the historical journey very well.

I want to access funding that will take our communities into the future and focus more on the here-and-now aspects of our lives, and to generate some experiential experiences. Every tourism pamphlet we have on Hopetoun begins with our creator; every website talks about our past; and no-one talks about the great job we are doing in producing food for the state. This is because we do not have any say over how we are promoted. There have been people born who have done great things and have died but who still do not get as much recognition as Edward Lascelles, the founder of Hopetoun, and of course Lord Hopetoun. We are reminded that we were the people north of the dingo fence — with a chuckle and mirth — and the fools who took on the challenges of the Mallee, thought to be a wasteland. Well, I am sorry, but it has not been a wasteland for 100 years; however, we have had our share of tough times. No-one recognises the ecotourism potential that we have, even with a dry creek and a dry lake, and yes, it would be better if there was water, but that is in the lap of the gods at the moment.

While I am being honoured with this opportunity I would like to present a couple of projects that have happened in the last 12 months in Hopetoun. There is a DVD here on *Our Fair Share*, there is a book called *The Show is Not Over*, and there are a couple of pamphlets here. I have just come from the Mallee Machinery Field Days, so there is some information there on that.

Ms DARVENIZA — Can you just pass those over and then we can hand them around while you are chatting.

Cr BALLENTINE — In answer to question 1, on the economic benefits of tourism, I have read annual reports of Rotary in Hopetoun, going back some 42 years, and talk of attracting tourism is all the way through them, and yet we are still not achieving this fully.

The closest we have got is focusing on our Lake Lascelles. We have good accommodation there; one of those pamphlets supports that. The volunteer hours spent on the lake have been colossal.

We have a clear example of the economic effects of losing water in the lake and the following impact has been talked about with the community. Two businesses which closed said they had been struggling since the lake went dry as that weekend trade was their profit. Water in the lake means more people coming to Hopetoun, for three reasons: aesthetic reasons, fishing and skiing. The direct benefits we had when we had water was that they bought take-away food, they bought fuel and they visited hotels; local people bought bathers, towels and leisure clothes; chemists sold more sunscreen; the butchers did well; and so on. The benefits were also indirect. Young people and families enjoyed social activities there instead of going elsewhere, and kept their money in town. Local fishermen preferred to fish in our lake, local people came to town to drive around the

lake on Sunday drives and then they might have bought something in town, caravanners and passing tourists decided to stay when they saw the peace and tranquilly, and local groups used the lake to hold fundraisers — for example, a country and western concert, a raft race, air sports, fireworks, barbecues and things like that.

Water in the lake for us leads to other regional businesses and industry gaining from our town. People buy speedboats at Swan Hill or Horsham, they buy skiing gear, and repairs are needed for boats — there are several interconnections between Mildura, Swan Hill and Horsham.

A potential impediment to sustained growth in regional tourism is basically that we need some funding for some key roles. We are operating on volunteerism and a lot of our volunteers simply do not have the skills to help us create more professional, business-type tourism projects — for example, if we had someone who was paid to give out information, maybe down the track in the future it could lead to tour operators, bus drivers, more hospitality staff, caretakers, gardeners, entertainers, activities coordinators and so forth. It is just like a snowball. If we develop a luxury retreat — which I know is pie in the sky at this stage, but there is no harm in dreaming about opportunities — there are jobs for hairdressers, beauticians, counsellors, masseurs and fitness trainers. Our community already has people with these skills.

The lack of a tourism information centre at Hopetoun is an impediment, but there are other impediments linked to this. As I have mentioned, we need people to be trained, and we need to remember that volunteerism is already wearing many of these small rural communities down. There is a lack of a coordinated approach in our region, a lack of employment options, not enough versatility in tourism — the lake is a typical example; the lake went dry and we had nothing else to attract tourists — and at this stage a lack of a formal tourism infrastructure, which I am sure my colleague Terry will talk about later. The shire is hoping for a new region called the Wimmera Mallee, but I will leave that for Terry to discuss further.

I refer to the effectiveness at a national, state and local level of current programs to promote and enhance tourism in regional Victoria. I have had a good look on the internet and there are things out there, but they are not reaching Hopetoun and the northern sector of the shire of Yarriambiack. I can probably speak for the other four shires in our region, which have similar concerns. One of our concerns is that we do not have matching money for some of these grants that are advertised. Another thing is that we do not really meet the criteria because we are not recognised as a region of importance at this stage. We are not the river country and we are not the Grampians; we seem to be that boring little bit in the middle — and we are not boring.

Most programs and funding for smaller communities involve well-prepared business plans, and we welcome that type of thing. We need to move our small rural communities forward. They need to be more confident in the new way of their towns. There has already been some private investment. We believe that building a focus on the grain industry and ecotourism will increase the overseas and domestic market. However, we need to also focus on making it easier for tourists to get to where we are.

Basically we are all the same as tourists. If we can book something that covers everything we want, we will do it, or we are more likely to do it. We really need packages organised that we are going to benefit from. In the northern sector of the shire we have many attractions, such as Wyperfeld National Park, Wathe Reserve, which is a flora and fauna reserve, mallee fowls, Yarriambiack Creek, Lake Corrong Reserve, Lake Lascelles, the best quality grain in the Mallee, the export hay business and Pine Plains Lodge, up towards Patchewollock. Gypsum mining is also happening in the region.

Some initiatives could be that we have more formal inter-farm overseas exchange tours, school programs for school excursions so kids learn where the food on their breakfast table comes from, scout adventures for anyone in the world, the big unwind experience to provide stress relief experiences, and experiential weekends for people who do not know the bush — the real bush.

We need to survey new immigrants to our country about what they want to see and do, and maybe we need to move away a bit from history and create more here-and-now activities and futuristic-type projects. I also think that maybe we need to provide multicultural foods using the products that we grow locally.

In response to question no. 5 around the efficacy of existing mechanisms at a national, state and local level, with regard to natural events such as droughts and so forth, I do not believe that anything happens quickly enough. I observed what happened with the Grampians and even with the drought that we have been through in the last 10 years, and people have preferred to stay away. I think that is why some of our numbers have dropped, because people get the message in Melbourne: 'There is no point going up there; there is no water' or 'They are in drought. It is probably the worst time to see them'. But it can be an interesting time to come into communities as well. We all still have to live there, and we still get on with our daily business. I guess the busload of tourists could be organised regularly to see a natural event, and it would also help economically to put a little bit of money back into our communities.

EC payments, the interest rate subsidy and the 50-per-cent shire rate subsidy have all helped many people, and they have been excellent, except for small business. One thing I would like to draw to your attention is that there is no relief for volunteers caught in a drought situation. I believe this to be true in towns where there is flood and fire. Someone still has to get up the next day and attend a meeting or provide a service.

Another dilemma in our community is a lack of skill in knowing how to gain funding to create jobs. I guess we are very fortunate in our shire that we do have a grants officer, but he is literally run off his feet teaching people how to apply to things, where to find them and how to follow through with the processes of completing their responsibilities with public money. I am finding that roles in communities are coming back to those few who have extra education. That is something I would like government to be aware of — that there is a lot of pressure on volunteerism in rural areas.

In response to no. 6, the opportunities to leverage private investment, I feel proud to say that we do have within the shire two excellent examples of private investment, and they are Pine Plains Lodge near Patchewollock and Danny's Rusty Nail restaurant in Warracknabeal. They are excellent, and they are very popular with visitors. I think we have to remember, although we are the outback, that people generally in city areas and so forth do not have the opportunity to walk on clean soil, smell gum leaves and sit around an open fire. For a long time we, ourselves, have taken all this for granted, but we really do not know how lucky we are. Our ecotourism holidays would be good value for families and would give a different experience. One idea that I can offer your committee today perhaps is, if there were some way that companies that gain income from our region could be given tax concessions and encouraged to reinvest back into our communities, perhaps in assisting with building accommodation, restaurants or entertainment in our area.

When we think of external investment, it does not have to be millions of dollars. It is amazing what a small country town can do with \$100 000. It certainly makes a big difference, especially with support from the community. One of the big benefits, we believe, of external investment is that they bring the technology with them, and the structure, and this is something that we perhaps cannot provide locally. But it certainly would help some of our rural areas to get up to date. Technology gives us that here-and-now mood, so we perhaps need to be listening to some of our young people who are saying, 'Let us move this rural area forward. Let us cut some of the volunteerism, get some more paid jobs and get something happening'. Perhaps I will finish there.

The CHAIR — Well done, Helen. That is great.

Mr VOGELS — Helen, thanks for that. I know it is not easy in a smaller municipality. By the way, how are the crops looking with the rain we have had?

Cr BALLENTINE — Pretty good at the moment.

Mr VOGELS — Looking good? That would lift the whole community to start with.

Cr BALLENTINE — It certainly does.

Mr VOGELS — We have heard a couple of councils say today that they have a differential rate for tourism. Does Yarriambiack have a differential rate, and if not, would you look at one, like Swan Hill did, for example? If you knew it was going to be matched dollar for dollar, say, by a state government, so that if you raised an extra \$100 000 through differential rates to go towards tourism and it was matched by another \$100 000 from the state, would you then be more interested in looking at it? That is if you have not got one at the moment.

Cr BALLENTINE — We do not have one, and I think it is something that I would take back to council. It is certainly worth considering, yes.

Mr VOGELS — If it was matched, yes.

Ms DARVENIZA — Thank you for your presentation, and thank you for bringing along the publication. I love the book. The photos are fantastic, aren't they. They are really good. I noticed the field day. Is it a field day? Am I correct in calling it a field day?

Cr BALLENTINE — Yes.

Ms DARVENIZA — That looks like it is a fairly significant event with a lot of people.

Cr BALLENTINE — It is.

Ms DARVENIZA — How do you cope with the influx of people that would be coming into the town for that event? I am sure it would bring a lot of people into town.

Cr BALLENTINE — It is a great boost to surrounding towns that provide some of the accommodation, but I think it would be a boost to Mildura, Swan Hill, Horsham and Sea Lake, Ouyen and Hopetoun every year. It is a fantastic event. It is very well organised. It is very professional. I cannot tell you how many are there today; I forgot to ask what the gate figures were. But it is a fantastic example of what we can do in our region, and they have been awarded in the past with a shire award for the best event of the year.

Ms DARVENIZA — They might not be on the same sort of scale, but are there other events that you would be able to attract or that you are looking at attracting that might also bring people into the area?

Cr BALLENTINE — In Hopetoun we have an annual show, and a few of the new committee members have been able to revamp the show in the last couple of years. Last year was probably the best show on record, and we were very fortunate to have been supported by Ian McNamara from *Australia All Over*, who ran his morning breakfast program from our show.

Ms TIERNEY — Yes, I heard that. It was great.

Cr BALLENTINE — It was tremendous. He has a lot of interest in the region and likes the Hopetoun community in particular and is intending to come back again this year. So our show does have the potential to grow.

Ms DARVENIZA — Are you aware of the funding that has been available through RDV for showgrounds? Is it RDV that has the showground funding? Have you applied and got any of that money?

Cr BALLENTINE — No. We did apply for money through DPI for some renovations.

Ms DARVENIZA — Yes, DPI, rather.

Cr BALLENTINE — I did read last year somewhere that there was supposed to be some money set aside for showgrounds to upgrade their electrical facilities and so forth, but I have not seen that come to fruition yet.

Ms DARVENIZA — That might be worth having a look at to see whether the money is still around and whether or not you are eligible to make an application for it. Thank you for the information.

Ms TIERNEY — All of us are interested in making sure that smaller rural townships not only survive but grow, and each town has a different story and different strategies in place. I was particularly interested in the comment you made right towards the end when you talked about the younger people in the town wanting to cut back on volunteerism and for real jobs to be there. What sort of ideas does the local community have in respect to that and to retaining their younger people in the town and surrounding area?

Cr BALLENTINE — One idea that surfaced through the community building initiative research that has been done in town is for a caretaker for the Mallee retreat which is shown on the pamphlet that I have passed around. There have been ideas around perhaps that caretaker role crossing over with the caravan park as well. Gardening, perhaps getting more young people involved in the tourism side of things such as contributing towards the preparation of how we present our community. It really depends a lot on whether the shire is successful in creating a new identity for our region. I think then some of the jobs for young people — they just see the amount of work that is done, for example, through the progress association, and they say, 'Couldn't that be a paid job? It seems a huge amount of work'.

Even putting the show together is a huge role. We have thought that perhaps there should be funding available for an event coordinator for three shows in our shire or something like that. I think it is something that I have not taken to the next step, but I am at the point of listening to the young people. They are getting a little bit frustrated about how slow things are with decision making and being patient and respectful to the older volunteers, who take a lot of ownership of different projects. Young ones are trying to feel their way in and trying to find a gap where they might be needed. Sometimes they just back away and think, 'That should be a paid job'. That is basically what I am hearing. So I have no further specific details other than that at the moment, but it is something I want to look into and listen to their ideas on, because they are our future.

Ms TIERNEY — Just picking up on what Kaye mentioned, it might be worth contacting the Department for Victorian Communities, because it has a number of programs to facilitate workshops and leadership programs so that the community itself is able to start looking forward to where it wants to be in 5 or 10 years time and to get the engagement of the young people as well.

Cr BALLENTINE — Yes, as I said we are already involved in the CBI program, which is through DVC. We are seeing the benefits of that. It is a great way of democratically prioritising projects that the whole community supports, not just one or two individuals. I agree with you; there are a lot of benefits there.

Mr NORTHE — Thanks, Helen. I have some proposals that have been put forward which say that we could do with additional funding and so forth. In your case, what human resource do you think you could utilise to move forward and progress tourism in your community? Does it need one person to come in — —

Cr BALLENTINE — Can I be out there a bit?

Mr NORTHE — Yes.

Cr BALLENTINE — I would like a person with a degree in business and tourism to be employed either in the shire or in our community and for that person to guide the development of professional tourism. I think then people would take some of what we have got to offer more seriously. Plus there is a lot of legislation and things that our rural communities need to be aware of. I have just formed a tourism committee, and I have invited people from DPI and DSE, because I am not 100 per cent sure whether I can take a walking tour through Wathe or whether I have to get their consent. I am not sure if I can put toilets out at Wyperfeld. There are lots of barriers. There are other little impediments, I guess. There are regulations around parks. There are regulations around creeks. We may want to have a horseriding expedition down Yarriambiack Creek, but at this stage I have not checked out whether DSE would approve of that or not.

Mr NORTHE — Further to that, if you ideally had that one person with the skills and qualifications to progress, is it really a local council problem, or should it be under Tourism Victoria in your opinion?

Cr BALLENTINE — I would encourage you primarily to have it under Tourism Victoria, but with a link to the local government. So you could have Tourism Victoria driving it, but in partnership with the local shires, because there are going to be a lot of crossovers.

Mr NORTHE — Absolutely.

Cr BALLENTINE — That would be a fantastic idea.

Ms LOVELL — Helen, I am, like Gayle, interested in your comments on volunteerism, because I have been saying for a long time that I do not think governments of either persuasion fully appreciate what country communities provide for themselves through volunteer tourism, and I think it is something that really needs to be acknowledged. There has been a push in recent years for people to volunteer and do more. Maybe you are right about the city, but in the country people are probably already giving the maximum they can and still being encouraged to do more.

As we have travelled around the state there have been some areas that perhaps have suffered a downturn, as you have, because there is no water in your lake or because of a downturn in the agricultural sector or whatever, and tourism has been something that the local community has taken off with, or people from outside have come in and developed tourism but the local community has not necessarily embraced it wholeheartedly. They tend to maybe resent it a little bit. I just wondered how your community would feel if, suddenly, you had a thriving tourism industry. Do you think they would embrace it wholeheartedly, or do you think there would still be some of the old people who yearn for the old days and what the area was like before?

Cr BALLENTINE — That is a very good question. I believe that a large percentage of the community at the moment would be very happy to see some form of economic development in their community, especially after the difficult times that we have been through. When we see our small businesses struggling as they are it is urgent that something like that happens. I know that there are one or two, maybe half a dozen, of the old school who would say ‘If we have too much tourism, we do not have as much privacy. We have got to look after the Mallee fowls. We cannot have just anybody tracking through there’. There would be a little bit of that, but my sense from dealing with the progress association and the other groups I am involved in is that I think they would welcome some change — a real boost to the economy.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Helen. It was great of you to come across from Hopetoun and deliver that evidence today. We will make a copy of the transcript available to you in a couple of weeks time. Again I thank you for taking the time to be here today.

Witness withdrew.