

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Mansfield — 30 August 2007

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Witnesses

Mr R. Elkington, manager, economic development and tourism, and
Mr G. Jolley, tourism services officer, Murrindindi Shire Council; and
Mr I. Geer, manager, tourism and economic development, Mansfield Shire Council.

The CHAIR — Gentlemen, just a few formalities. You are welcome to make comments from the floor, but if you keep them to 2 or 3 minutes, that would help us. We understand that you are keen to make other submissions; they will be accepted. If you could state your name and organisation, and understand that everything you say is covered by parliamentary privilege.

Mr ELKINGTON — Thank you and thanks for the time. My name is Bob Elkington, I am the manager, economic development and tourism, for the Murrindindi Shire Council.

Mr JOLLEY — Grant Jolley, tourism services officer, Murrindindi Shire Council.

Mr ELKINGTON — Thanks for receiving the submission. Just a little bit of context for us: there has been virtually nothing said today that we would disagree with, so I will try to keep it brief. We do support everything that has been said by our neighbours in Mansfield. We certainly have similar problems and issues.

Our shire is to the south of here. We have about 14 000 people on a huge area of land. Roughly 50 per cent of our land is covered in national parks, forests and reserves. We are a mix of our surrounding shires, so we do have a snow resort, Lake Mountain, and we have some mountain villages, Lake Eildon and the surrounds on the southern side, and a fair bit of farming land out towards the Yea and in the Mitchell direction. To our south we have a range of councils around the Yarra Valley. So we find ourselves between the north-east (the high country) and the Yarra Valley. For us that is a bit of a problem at times, because our operators choose to align themselves with one or the other of the two campaign committees and that is difficult for our regional tourism association.

I will make just a few quick points out of our paper and I guess then be open to questions. One of the key things that we face are infrastructure problems. They do reflect on a lot of what was mentioned by Ian Geer and others previously — road closures in particular and road quality and types of surfaces. We would support any form of increase or improvement in road touring. For example, there are three major roads that go north out of Melbourne: the Melba, the Maroondah and the Hume highways. Two of those pass through our shire towards Mansfield. If any of those roads close, you are basically totally cut off from Melbourne. For example, every year we have a number of closures on the Maroondah. As soon as the Maroondah closes, Marysville is out of business and any traffic that was going to head north from there up towards the lake or Alexandra or Mansfield is also blocked. We would like to see a fair bit of time and effort put into ensuring that our major thoroughfares are maintained and opened.

We also have a concern for the Melba if the Sugarloaf pipeline goes ahead, because inevitably that road will be closed or at least limited for substantial periods of time in that construction. So we would face the same issues on the roads heading out of Melbourne through Yea and up to Mansfield as we do already on the Maroondah, and it has a major impact on businesses. Sealing the remainder of the loop road around Lake Eildon we believe is a high priority. In terms of great touring routes, it could become an iconic touring route, to be able to come out of Melbourne and go around Lake Eildon up to Mansfield and back to Melbourne. The thing that stops that happening at the moment is about a 14-kilometre stretch of dirt road.

I support all other presenters earlier today on public transport. We suffer hugely from a lack of public transport, both in terms of getting traffic from Melbourne up into Murrindindi and beyond but also within the shire itself. Once backpacker visitors or others who do not have their own transport are in the shire, there is no way for them to get around. There are two taxis and they are both in Alexandra and do not go out of Alexandra. That is about it. So public transport is a huge issue.

On other infrastructure issues, I support everyone who spoke previously about broadband and mobile phone coverage, particularly in some of the more remote towns. In the southern end of the shire, which is around the Flowerdale-Kinglake region, there are a huge number of black spots for both mobile phone coverage and broadband access, which is holding back business growth.

In terms of the mobile phone coverage, too, it is very poor for visitor management and visitor services when you have a number of conference centres with clients coming from major corporations in Melbourne and they cannot even access mobile phone coverage. It does have a big impact on that conference centre market. We have got five key conference centres, and there is another one just up here near Mansfield, so I am sure it is affected in a similar way.

In our area we also face some strong planning and zoning issues. They are not unique and relate to changes from rural zone to farming zone. Restrictions are placed on the capacity for development and investment in the farming

zones. We do support very strongly the nature-based tourism strategy from Tourism Victoria, and we are hoping that we will be able to find some solutions to creating investment adjacent to natural attractions. We have a range of natural attractions, including Lake Mountain and Lake Eildon and two or three of the better national parks close to Melbourne, but to be able to put infrastructure close to those in the farming zone is proving quite difficult.

Just to quickly touch on the signage issue that was mentioned earlier today, we, too, would support improved access to and the type of signage, particularly on the Hume. We have got a huge market there that drives up and down that road every day. It is a massive amount of traffic. Obviously there is a tension between what VicRoads would like to see in signage, which is all around safety, and perhaps what we might love to see around signage, which is adding to safety but also bringing people off the Hume to the natural attractions that occur to the east.

With the Jigsaw campaign, as I alluded to earlier, we fall in two regions — north-east and Yarra Valley. The Jigsaw boundaries do not align with either catchment boundaries, state boundaries or shire boundaries, so when a shire like ours is in more than one of those campaign regions, it creates a lot of complexity. The towns and local tourism associations towards our southern borders — which is the Kinglake, Flowerdale and Marysville end — would tend more to align themselves with the Yarra Valley. Those at the northern end would tend to more align themselves with the north-east, and there are those in the middle that would like to align themselves with both, which creates some advantages and some disadvantages.

We would like to see time and energy put into both the touring routes and the development of those, but also iconic walks. I have a vision for a walk that would start in Healesville and finish at Mansfield. There are these types of walks in other places, like New Zealand and Tasmania, that people will travel the world to go to. We have got some of the best country in Australia right there, and we have not got a decent walking route that links those two places. Along that walking route it would be great to see some public-private investment in eco lodges. Once again, these things occur in other parts of the world and in Tasmania. You could link a small town for one part of the walk to another part which has an eco lodge and then another small town. We certainly have the capacity or the type of terrain around here where that could be very possible.

With the four-season offer, once again we fully support everything that was said by the people from Mount Buller and Mansfield. With Lake Mountain, Murrindindi shire is a bit reliant on Lake Mountain, Mount Buller and Mount Stirling. We have two corridors basically within the shire. The eastern corridor is the corridor that relies heavily on visitation to Lake Mountain and Lake Eildon, and the western corridor relies heavily on visitation to Mount Buller and Mount Stirling. Anything that we can to assist those areas — the lakes and the resorts — to develop four-season product is a positive, and it certainly is needed.

I will just finish on the EC declaration. I, too, was a bit moved by the earlier presentation from one of our local businesses. The EC declaration for non-agricultural businesses is something that really should be looked into, because they are no different. They are there trying their hardest to make a business work. They are heavily affected by various things, and they are not in the same boat as the agricultural businesses.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Bob. That is good. Is there anything you would like to add, Grant?

Mr JOLLEY — No. Bob and I worked on this together, so essentially I reckon that Bob has put it forward.

The CHAIR — Well done! Are there any questions?

Mr VOGELS — I think we have asked most of the questions. I have seen these guys here all morning and this afternoon. I agree with many of the things. Being an ex-councillor from Corangamite shire in my old days in a country area I understand very much the issues about infrastructure and roads et cetera. Just for interest, would the loop around Lake Eildon be a local road or VicRoads?

Mr ELKINGTON — Is Ian still here? It is unsealed.

Mr GEER — Is it okay if I address the question?

The CHAIR — If you come forward we can get it on the record.

Mr GEER — There are various sections of road around the lake, some of which is bitumen and some of which is dirt. Some of the dirt sections physically belong to council but are managed by VicRoads and vice versa.

Mr VOGELS — A mixture.

Mr GEER — The simple answer to the complex question is that there is a mixture of — —

Mr VOGELS — It is a complex question.

Mr GEER — Anyway, a mixture of management and ownership between both shires and VicRoads.

Mr VOGELS — Okay.

Mr GEER — You would be familiar with the fact that the state government has announced \$1.22 million funding towards the sealing of the remaining section of the Eildon–Jamieson Road which is sensational, and we are currently negotiating with the federal government for a share from them.

The CHAIR — Has the Murrindindi shire made an application to anybody, or has it developed a plan about a potential walk?

Mr ELKINGTON — We have not yet made any applications but we are in discussions with our counterparts in the Yarra Valley. We are very keen to see something similar, but we have not got to a stage where an application for funding could be made just yet. We are working towards it.

The CHAIR — It would be an outstanding addition to what we have here in Victoria. Thanks Bob and Grant. We appreciate the fact that you have waited patiently all day. We appreciate the evidence you have given.

Mr ELKINGTON — Thanks for the opportunity.

Committee adjourned.