

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Mildura — 31 July 2007

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Mr J. Bowron, manager, arts and culture, Mildura Arts Centre.

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

The CHAIR — Thanks, Julian. I appreciate the fact you have given up time to come and meet with the committee today. This is the Rural and Regional Committee, which is an all-party parliamentary committee inquiring into rural and regional tourism. All evidence that is given before this inquiry is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is provided by the Constitution Act of 1975, the Parliamentary Committees Act of 2003 and the Defamation Act of 2005. Any evidence given outside of the room is not protected by parliamentary privilege. Before you start your evidence, if you would be kind enough to give us your full name and address and the organisation which you are representing, and then we would like to hear your presentation.

Mr BOWRON — I am Julian Bowron. I am the manager of arts and culture at Mildura Arts Centre, which is a branch of Mildura Rural City Council, based at 199 Cureton Avenue, Mildura.

Thank you for the opportunity to say a few words on the subject. It is greatly appreciated. Mildura Arts Centre is comprised of a regional gallery, a theatre — Mildura's most important heritage building — and also another heritage site, which is the site of the first white settlement in the district at the Old Mildura Homestead. Mildura has a historical society but no museum, making heritage projects also a significant focus of what we try to do in our exhibitions program — for instance, the upcoming exhibition in collaboration with Museum Victoria of Blandowski's expedition to the Murray in 1857. Undoubtedly Mildura has a unique and fascinating history, of which I do not think enough is presently celebrated.

Mildura's gallery has one of the state's most significant and enviable gallery art collections, based on the foundation Elliott collection, which is particularly strong in some pretty improbable holdings of British artists, such as William Orpen and Sir Frank Brangwyn. We also have a single pastel work by French impressionist Edgar Degas, which is something of a destination picture, as you would imagine, in a regional gallery. We also have some very good Australian works in our collection, perhaps best demonstrated by the collection of Danila Vassilieff gouaches, which were painted when the artist was in the district.

Mildura is also fortunate to have the heritage of the Mildura sculpture triennials of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, which gave Mildura a national and even somewhat of an international profile as a centre for the promotion of modernist sculpture, and that is a story which is yet to be adequately told, and we are hoping to do that before too long.

Our collection is certainly not as well known as Bendigo's or Ballarat's but I think it is gradually becoming known through some catch-up curatorial work. People in small but growing numbers are beginning to come to Mildura to see our collection. We strive for better recognition as a tourist destination, an attraction, for the depth of our collection and hopefully our programs to some degree.

Tourist engagement with our theatre program is fairly minimal, and clearly a much greater range of performing arts product can be accessed in larger centres. We are, however, accessing a catchment stretching considerable distances within the region. We do also take an outreach program of performing arts and visual arts to small centres within our large municipality. On the other hand tourists make up approximately 50 per cent of our gallery visitors and also visitors to Rio Vista, and declining tourist numbers reflect directly on our attendances and are of concern. Of course issues such as perceptions of scarcity of water in the river are of equal concern to us as anyone else in the business.

I wanted to make two particular points to the committee. One is that Mildura Arts Centre is one of really only a few cultural institutions that are beyond a comfortable day trip from Melbourne. The state is dominated by an astonishing number of galleries, theatres and cultural institutions in the city, in its fringes and within striking distance of the city periphery. When we participate in statewide promotions, such as the state cultural guide initiative or even the public open day project, we can feel somewhat overwhelmed by our distance from the centre of things. With our

modest means it is not always easy to stand out in that company. We are well supported by Arts Victoria, both in terms of project and ongoing funding and certainly good advice, which has been extremely valuable.

The second point I wanted to make is that Mildura is at the centre of a distinct region, often referred to these days, certainly up here, as the Murray-Darling region. It is a region I guess broadly characterised by the semi-arid Mallee landscape, and in my mind and in the minds of many of us up here it extends north to Broken Hill, across to the South Australian Riverland, down to Swan Hill, and Mildura is more or less at the centre. It is a region of Australia that is largely unrecognised because of the artificial barriers created by state boundaries, and I think there is no doubt that these inhibit recognition and imagination and make it difficult for a cultural organisation to engage with a meaningful sense of place in many senses. These divisions fragment notions of traditional indigenous relationships and disguise a real sense of a distinct and special part of inland Australia. Certainly people come and they ask us what characterises local indigenous art in this region, and really the area is so fragmented that it is very hard to give them a clear notion of that.

Projects attempting to encompass the region are also made difficult by having to negotiate various state funding apparatuses, and they can become quite complex as a result — for instance, at one stage we put together an exhibition of indigenous artists from the region and we were seeking a venue in Melbourne for this exhibition, and we were told finally that we would not get the venue because it was not just Victorian artists. The whole point of it was that it could not just be Victorian artist because identifying the region as just the Victorian section did not make any sense.

A concept plan for redevelopment of the Mildura Arts Centre is in front of state and federal government presently seeking funding. The new Mildura Arts Centre aspires to act as a catalyst for better recognition of this wider region and to claim a role as the centre of this distinct and special region. The implications for tourism are fairly self-evident. An enhanced and more distinct sense of place must be a greater attractor, more so than various states and towns competing for a share of the passing trade. There are obvious connections between food, wine and prosperous people interested in art. Retiring, cashed-up baby boomers may want a golfing, houseboat holiday, but they are also likely to be interested in the arts, and this connection, I think, is not apparently being made often enough by the industry.

Local tourism operations are perhaps often dominated by the very real concerns of accommodation and food providers, and perhaps more thought needs to be given to a more holistic or complete tourist experience. It is that more complete picture of attractions that will attract residents, as well as tourists in the end. That, in essence, is what I have prepared to say to you.

The CHAIR — Well done! Thanks very much Julian.

Ms TIERNEY — I wonder what your working relationship is with other organisations. Earlier we had Ms Healy in to speak and a lot of her conceptual framework is quite similar to yours in terms of the indigenous arts community as well as a sense of place. I would assume that they are not necessarily in competition and in lots of ways I would see food and wine and a cultural one-day, two-day or four-day agenda that could be utilised. I wonder how far down that road you might be wandering.

Mr BOWRON — We do work closely with the festival organisation and share interests. Pretty clearly, we are also a venue for various festival activities and we try to program in a complementary way. For some time I was on that board. We are working together and we have in the past also attempted various initiatives to co-promote.

There was one that I can think of, from a few years ago, when we had a small campaign which we labelled 'Out here', where we ran regular ads in the *Saturday Age* arts section to try to generate this presence of the possibility of this being a destination.

I guess in the end those things have to run long enough to gain brand recognition and we probably failed by not having the means to sustain it, but yes, we are always looking at ways and means of working together — working together with the festival and working together with, for instance, accommodation houses such as the Grand hotel to do similar things to try to provide a package for people.

I guess too often the people that come to visit are en route from South Australia to Sydney or Melbourne, and merely passing through. Clearly our desire is to have them plan that as a longer stay, hopefully at a festival time, so that they may have a more complete experience. To that end we also try to develop product which adds value. It is not simply a performance. It might be a performance that includes food or includes some attractive outdoor location, and that seems to pay a dividend over perhaps just a simple show in the theatre. We have gone some of that way. I think there was a great deal more territory to explore.

Mr VOGELS — Down at the end of Victoria where I come, from the south-west of Victoria — and you might have heard of it — we have an area which encompasses South Australia called the Greater Green Triangle. We work across state borders on lots of issues like health, education, tourism et cetera. We were just saying how Mildura is sort of centred here, surrounded, and the geographical area covers three states. Is there any thought to getting the three states to actually work together like the Greater Green Triangle does down in our end of the world, which I think is very successful?

Mr BOWRON — We certainly work to have good working relationships with our colleagues in cultural institutions — for instance, in Broken Hill, Berry or in the Riverland, and certainly down in Swan Hill. There has been some degree of initiative to try to create, if you like, a marketing package for the area, but that has not progressed a long way, I guess, because — and this is characteristic of many regional arts organisations — we do not necessarily have the staffing numbers to go as far with those things as we would like to, and the integration of those concerns of tourism, promotion and fundraising are the ones we struggle with.

Mr VOGELS — Yes, because it would give you much more strength if you could manage to do it.

Mr BOWRON — It would be interesting to look at their model.

Mr VOGELS — Yes, it is a very good model, I believe, and especially if you are looking for federal funding, because they see that as the holistic approach rather than looking at states individually. So when looking for federal funding, which no doubt you also do, I would have thought some sort of hub like that would be very attractive.

Mr BOWRON — Certainly in our proposal to federal government for funding of the redevelopment, as you were saying, we should aspire to be the centre of that larger region and work in collaboration with our colleagues, and in fact a number of them have provided us with letters of support for our submission.

Mr NORTHE — Which leads me into the exact question I was going to ask Julian about the redevelopment of the Mildura Arts Centre. Can you just elaborate a little bit more on what that would encompass?

Mr BOWRON — Sure. The redevelopment of the centre is on the current site, where we have been for 50 years. The skeleton of the existing gallery building has been retained but some parts of it will be demolished, and the gallery will be expanded to provide twice as much gallery space as we currently have. Of particular importance is that our gallery space would be all on one

level, so we would overcome some major issues of disability access, which we currently suffer from. We would of course include facilities such as a cafe and a shop, which are absolutely essential to any decent attraction these days in the cultural area.

As I said earlier, we are unusual in that we are a combination theatre, gallery and historic building. Our historic building, Rio Vista, would be set free and given the, if you like, honour and distinction it deserves, and that will assist us with its restoration which has been an ongoing project.

We looked long and hard at the theatre because there are always arguments for small audiences, bigger audiences, bigger shows, more shows, two shows at once; and the decision was taken, particularly in light of the community's strong sense of ownership of the current theatre because of a high level of local usage, that we would renovate the existing theatre. We would work to put as many seats in it as possible and get it up from its current level of just under 400 to as close to 500 as we can possibly get. We would significantly increase our stage, backstage and wing-space areas, which have been contributing factors to significant OHS issues in the theatre and limitations for productions that we could attract.

At the same time the concept plan proposes to create a large shared foyer area between the theatre and the gallery, which will be both efficient in terms of the use of the facilities, but also provide additional space which might be used for cabaret and certainly for functions, and just provide a general area of attraction. It also proposes to add a small theatre of 100 or 120 seats — a so-called 'black box multipurpose space — which could be used for lectures, small-scale productions, even special exhibition projects using new technologies and those sorts of things.

It is an exciting project. It capitalises on the strengths of what we do currently and takes us ahead into the future, because the current facility really has not been much touched for the 50 years since it was founded and 30 years since the more modern buildings were built.

Mr NORTHE — As a consequence of that redevelopment — and obviously it will be fantastic for local residents — do you envisage an increase in visitor numbers?

Mr BOWRON — I certainly do, yes. You do not get a better opportunity to get people's interest than when you reinvent yourself. I guess the sensation and the spectacular events surrounding the opening of a new facility is that one chance to get into the door some people who may never have been there before. Also, we are very much about the business of creating a facility where we are deliberately seeking the maximum number of points of access for our community. It also includes special points such as the development of a workshop area for school classes and for local community groups. Facilities such as the black box theatre also provide us with the options to take on more products and bring people in for different purposes. We have got to exist for our own community. If we do what we do brilliantly well for our community, then I think the tourist interest will follow on. It does not have to be specially and separately developed.

Mr NORTHE — You do not have a number in mind, though?

Mr BOWRON — A number in mind?

Mr NORTHE — A number in mind in terms of the visitor number increase that you would envisage?

Mr BOWRON — It is pretty hard. New facilities always project great figures that they then often stumble over. I would see us more than doubling what we currently do. Our current theatre use is pretty heavy. We see a flow-through of about 53 000, 55 000 people per year in the theatre. That is both backstage and in the audience. Our gallery attendance, as I say, is more directly affected by factors such as visitor numbers and the capacity of schools to get themselves in to see us, and those numbers are more modest, currently running at just under 20 000. We would certainly see that doubling or tripling, I think, when we are in the new facility.

Ms DARVENIZA — I have got a couple of questions. I have been to a number of sculpture exhibitions here including — was it in the late 1970s or early 1980s that you used to have the biennial or triennial sculpture — —

Mr BOWRON — Yes, the sculpture triennials. I think the last one was in the early 1980s.

Ms DARVENIZA — They were very edgy.

Mr BOWRON — They were.

Ms DARVENIZA — And always a lot of fun. You talked about being well supported by Arts Victoria. Can you tell me a bit about how you are well supported by them and are you linked into Tourism Victoria? Do you have anything to do with Tourism Victoria? Where is the funding for the redevelopment going to come from? So three questions, Chair.

Mr BOWRON — I will start with the last one then. The federal government application is to DOTARS — the Department of Transport and Regional Services. I think that is right.

Ms DARVENIZA — Federal?

Mr BOWRON — Federal government.

Ms DARVENIZA — Federal money?

Mr BOWRON — Yes, through the local — —

The CHAIR — ACC?

Mr BOWRON — Yes, ACC. We see a bit of a different angle on an arts project, but it is certainly one is that about regional development, or has been all along. The state government application obviously is through Arts Victoria to Regional Development.

Ms DARVENIZA — An RDV grant.

Mr BOWRON — Yes. And the one is, pretty obviously, as is usually the case, dependent on the other.

Ms DARVENIZA — And the other two — the one about being well supported by Arts Victoria, can you talk briefly about how, and whether you are linked into Tourism Victoria at all and getting support from them?

Mr BOWRON — Certainly. On the tourism question, we are a member of the local tourist organisation, Mildura Tourism. Even though we are a council department, we choose to also take up membership to take advantage of some of those promotional opportunities like the local handbook, and we are engaged in discussions with the people at Mildura Tourism to try and have them engage more broadly with the concepts of cultural tourism and how that is going to work in a broader sense. We have a little way to travel there yet.

We receive information from Tourism Victoria, and we have in the past participated in the cultural tourism guide for the state, but we did not in this last instance, again for the reasons I said — we feel rather overwhelmed in that company, and we are not sure, we cannot tell really how well that material works for us. Certainly we are fortunate to have the advantage of good information from Tourism Victoria.

From Arts Victoria we have been one of the fortunate cultural organisations to have received for a number of years regular program funding for our gallery program and our theatre program, and we have recently entered into an MOU with Arts Victoria under the new funding arrangements

which sees that program funding expanded and gives us the opportunity to take our programs forward from there. In addition to that, we have been fortunate that we have had some very good project officers at Arts Victoria whose support I have certainly very much valued in being able to get advice, throw ideas around, let off steam at times, someone to talk to who understands the language you are speaking sometimes when you feel like you are going a bit crazy. So again I admire their professionalism, and I have not always found that same level of support from other state funding organisations in other positions I have been in.

Ms LOVELL — Cultural tourism is obviously becoming more important in the state. In Melbourne we now see the Winter Masterpieces promotions that go on and the Guggenheim Collection that is here right at the moment. Are you inferring that the local tourism group has not recognised the cultural tourism that can be developed through the Arts Centre? You seemed to indicate that there was a problem with them recognising that maybe you fit the demographic of the visitor that they seek to attract to their festivals and also to the slow food movement?

Mr BOWRON — I think the local tourism organisation has certainly wisely identified, if you like, that baby boomer with the disposable income, and they have been very approachable to conversations about the likely interest of that group in the arts and ways and means by which we can engage them. Perhaps together we have not yet been fully successful in accessing that audience. We are each pursuing our own angle, but, for instance, in the next tourism week we are talking about developing a session on cultural tourism and perhaps informing some of the local operators about the benefits of that, so, sure, there is plenty of work we can do together to get a better advantage, and guidance and expertise are always valuable.

Ms LOVELL — It should be available to you through Tourism Victoria.

Mr BOWRON — Yes.

Ms LOVELL — It does not seem from your answers that you have linked into Tourism Victoria.

Mr BOWRON — Not as yet, no.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Julian. I appreciate your time. It has been great of you to come along today and help us get a better understanding of your sector within the tourism industry and how we can look to improve the lot. Within a couple of weeks we will give you a copy of the evidence taken here today and you will be free to make any typographical changes to that if corrections are necessary. Once again, thanks very much for your evidence. It was great.

Mr BOWRON — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.