

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Mildura — 31 July 2007

Members

Ms. K. Darveniza

Mr D. Drum

Ms W. Lovell

Mr R. Northe

Ms G. Tierney

Mr J. Vogels

Chair: Mr D. Drum

Deputy Chair: Ms G. Tierney

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic

Research Officer: Dr C. Hercus

Witnesses

Cr M. Eckel, tourism festivals and events portfolio, and

Ms K. Harrington, manager, tourism services and events, Mildura Rural City Council.

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

The CHAIR — Thanks Mark and Kristine, I appreciate that you have made yourselves available to come along today. This is the Rural and Regional Committee. It is an all-party parliamentary committee, and at the moment we are conducting an inquiry into rural and regional tourism. All evidence given at this hearing today will be covered by parliamentary privilege afforded to you by the Constitution Act 1975, the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and the Defamation Act 2005. Any comments made outside the hearing are not covered by parliamentary privilege.

Before you give your evidence, if you would be kind enough to state your name and address and also the name of the organisation that you are representing here today. Feel free to give your evidence, and then hopefully leave some time for the committee to ask you some questions. That would be great.

Cr ECKEL — Thank you, Mr Chairman. I am Cr Mark Eckel. My portfolio with the Mildura Rural City Council is tourism events and festivals.

Ms HARRINGTON — Kristine Harrington, a warm welcome to our fine city. I am manager of tourism services and events for Mildura Rural City Council.

Cr ECKEL — I think, Mr Chairman — and I would like to welcome everybody to our fine city too — the important issue from my perspective, being an elected member of the community, is just to give you a brief background on myself as far as tourism in the area is concerned. I have been with the industry tourism board on and off for about 20 years and have had a marketing business in town. This is my second term on council. During both terms I have had the portfolio of tourism.

Once again, thank you very much for the opportunity to brief you, because that is all it really is today. From my perspective it is a brief on a very, very important issue — that being the Chaffey experience as a marketing edge for our area. I have taken the Chaffey trail, which I will explain to you in a moment, as an issue for our particular area, because over the years I have been displeased with Tourism Victoria's regional naming for our area. Just to brief you on that, we have been known as Oasis Country, then for a brief time that changed to Murray Outback and then it changed just recently to Murray as part of the Murray campaign. My issue is that, being part of the Murray campaign, you need to have a point of difference. All the destinations that are on the Murray have the Murray River, so what is our point of difference? The other issue, before I go on to that, is that, because of those changing regional names, we have real signage issues in this area that are absolutely abominable. You come in from South Australia and you read the signage and it says 'Welcome to Oasis Country'. We come in over the George Chaffey Bridge, and it says 'Welcome to Murray Outback Country'. We come in from New South Wales, from Broken Hill — that way — and it says 'Welcome to Sultana Country', which is just a branding name from Sunbeam from years ago. That aside, it just points out some of the issues. To my knowledge — and I am not a great authority on it — the signage issue has been a handballed situation. I read back through your committee's past in regards to issues that have been raised, and I believe signage has been a major issue with VicRoads, and it still is in this area.

That brings me to the issue of the Chaffey trail and the Chaffey experience. We have been very, very fortunate that the federal government has put up the opportunity for people in drought-affected areas and in exceptional circumstances to be able to put in for an application for funding for trails and tourism opportunities of the like. The Mildura Rural City Council, in partnership with Mildura Tourism, has embarked on a funding mission to re-energise our culture and heritage that have brought us health, wealth and prosperity. It is the intention of today's presentation to brief the committee on this progress.

Today is touched with some irony. In 1886, following bitter debate in Parliament, Alfred Deakin — who, of course, was our Prime Minister on three occasions and an MLA at the time — announced to the house:

Today I had the privilege, on behalf of the government of signing an agreement with Messrs Chaffey brothers, subject to the approval of the house, the concession described in this agreement of 84 945 hectares of the Mildura Run and 16 190 hectares of Elliot Crozier's Crown leasehold.

By indenture dated 31 May 1887 the Chaffeys were authorised to create the first great irrigation colony in Australia — and I might add, not just the first in Australia but in the world at that particular time. The irony being that today, exactly 120 years and two months later, I am before a parliamentary committee detailing the efforts of this municipality to tell that Chaffey experience — there is a bit of irony there, isn't there? — so eloquently described by Ernestine Hill in her book *Water into Gold*. Might I add here that there have been some fabulous publications on the Murray, and in particular this area too. I am just taking one excerpt. This was first published in 1937. Referring to the Chaffeys, she wrote:

They paved the way in what has proved to be the most phenomenally successful colonisation of waste lands in closer settlement in the commonwealth's history, an example to Australia, and a vindication of its vast silent spaces that are all too lightly dismissed as deserts.

In the current budget the council had the process of going through for 2007 and 2008, and with Mildura Tourism and other stakeholders we will provide this year \$100 000 towards taking the next step in developing a concept that was brought up by the Sunraysia Development Corporation in 1995. It brought out a nice publication that was called 'The vision unfolding', with all the story pertaining to it. That publication was brought out and developed by Sunraysia Development Corporation to position the Sunraysia region firmly on the tourism agenda as a unique and diverse outback experience. The Chaffey experience provides the means to this end.

In addition to Mildura Rural City Council and Mildura Tourism, you will probably know Bill Fox, who was with Tourism Victoria and has just left Tourism Victoria. He was a prominent member for many years. He is out, I believe, working on his own consultancy now. Do not take that for gospel, but I believe that that is the case. He took up the challenge of putting our submission together to the commonwealth government. That was under the Australian tourism development program, round 5 for exceptional circumstances declared areas category 2 — integrated tourism development projects.

Like the submissions for \$500 000, we have got fingers crossed for that. He is very excited. He thinks it is a fabulous proposal that we have put together. I was a little bit perturbed when I saw the brief for the Chaffey experience first up, to the extent that the icons in the area took a back seat to the fabulous development that irrigation has provided and of course the food and wine experience. With the Chaffey trail, if you can just imagine that these icons around the district will be aligned with wine and food experiences and going through the old vineyards and the wonderful development that has happened, particularly over the years from our ethnic people too and the way they prepare food and all that sort of business. It will be a stand-alone package, and it will be terrific. He has also taken into account the fact that the Chaffeys moved over to Renmark and developed Renmark as well, and of course the New South Wales side. There is a real package there and a few hooks as far as getting funding is concerned and bringing on a few stakeholders.

I will just leave these with you. The submission is about that thick. That is just a brief summary on questions that we were necessitated to answer. There is a covering letter from the mayor that I will not bore you by reading out at the moment, but that sells the concept as well.

The CHAIR — No worries. Well done.

Ms LOVELL — The Chaffey story is a fascinating story. Can you tell me a little bit about how you would develop the trail? What would the experience actually be for the tourists?

Cr ECKEL — Okay, just very briefly: it will start with some familiar tourist highlights that we have at the moment, with the Old Mildura Homestead. That was the original homestead when the Chaffeys first came to Mildura. In actual fact, if I can have a bit little bit of poetic licence here, they actually met after coming from America — after Alfred Deakin went over to

America — in ‘the dusty streets of Wentworth’. That is the way it was described. They ran into somebody there who said that the Mildura station was up for lease, and they came over to have a look. That is where it starts.

The way I would like to see it planned out is to do it through the stages that the Chaffey's went about developing it. So you would go down to the Psyche Pumps, which are the main pumping stations, to make a long story short, that they developed. George Chaffey was a wonderful engineer. Then you would see the channelling and what goes on there, and then Rio Vista house, which you have all probably seen — that was the old home. Then of course you go to the different wineries that they developed through that time.

Ms LOVELL — Mark, how much funding are you getting from the federal government?

Cr ECKEL — We have applied for \$500 000. I think a major issue with that one — and this is why it has fallen over all the time — is that there has not been a real plan of attack. I think the main issue — and money has been put aside in this particular application — is for a project officer to come on for two years.

Ms LOVELL — What was council's contribution?

Cr ECKEL — As I expressed earlier, it was \$100 000 this year.

Ms DARVENIZA — I just have a couple of questions. You raised two issues: you were displeased about the naming of the area — the region not having a consistent and an appropriate name.

Cr ECKEL — That is true.

Ms DARVENIZA — And then there is the signage not being consistent. What have you done to get this changed? Who have you taken the matter up with regarding an appropriate name for the area? What have you done about the signage?

Cr ECKEL — I can handle the issue in regards to naming, because I have been part of two of the inquiries. There was the Oasis inquiry, when Tourism Victoria — was it Tourism Victoria at the time?

Ms DARVENIZA — I do not know. When are you talking about?

Cr ECKEL — It was 10 or 15 years ago. They had an inquiry up here in regard to that.

Ms DARVENIZA — What about more recently?

Cr ECKEL — They have always been notified. Tourism Victoria has been notified on numerous occasions. It has even done telephone surveys. People just cannot identify — and that has happened twice — with Oasis Country, even when Mildura is situated on the Murray. There is a real issue in regard to people knowing where Murray Outback is and that Mildura is part of that.

Ms DARVENIZA — I understand what you are talking about. What I cannot understand is what you have done to try and get it fixed. Have you got a name? Is there a name that you think you should be known by? Have you put that forward? Are you putting forward something that is just not being heard. Are you putting forward something that is just getting lost? Who are you putting it to, and who is losing it, if you have got a name?

Cr ECKEL — The issue is, when you go through those process, you are asked to forward a number of names. That has happened in both processes, and then they accept the most appropriate name. As far as the Murray is concerned, I believe that that is not a decision of ours; that is a decision of Tourism Victoria and the campaign committee, and we are a part of that. What I am saying is that, if we are going to be a part of that, let us find out a point of difference,

because Echuca has got the Murray, Albury has got the Murray, Renmark has got the Murray. Why shouldn't people come to Mildura as part of the Murray?

Ms DARVENIZA — What do you reckon you should be called?

Cr ECKEL — It is not what I reckon we should be called. I think we have got to be satisfied with the name of the region that we have got now, and that is the Murray. What I am saying is that the point of difference is the Chaffey trail — and that is why it is so important that the food and wine be linked to something from culture and heritage so that we are distinctive from not only the rest of the Murray, the rest of Australia.

Ms DARVENIZA — Okay, what about signage?

Cr ECKEL — I might have to handball that on a little bit to Kristine. I cannot tell you exact times, but I know that Mildura council has often brought this issue up. I think Kristine has got some evidence where there was an issue just recently.

Ms HARRINGTON — Certainly over a period of time we constantly have meetings with VicRoads, but there seems to be this major crisis — change of personnel, lack of funding. Certainly the concept of overall signage has improved. We have some quite strong guidelines, but the responsibility — who is doing what, the factor and the cost and all that — seems to be a problem. From our experience here at the information centre, signage of some sort is still quite a critical way of getting the visitor to explore the region. You have got GPSs and you have got all this sort of stuff, but for our region I would suggest it is still a good 10 years away before they improve that facility. The senior market particularly like to have correct signage — we all do — but continuity of signage and funding for it has always been of major concern in this area.

Ms DARVENIZA — If you could get them to take down the signs that say 'Oasis', 'Murray Country' and 'Sultana Country', what signs would you want put up? If you are not happy with 'Murray Region' as being a title that describes you and if you got them to take them down tomorrow, what would you have them put up?

Cr ECKEL — Kaye, can I emphasise something?

Ms DARVENIZA — Yes, please.

Cr ECKEL — I did not say that I am concerned. What I am really saying — and I will reiterate it — is that we have got to be happy with 'Murray', because that is the name of the area now. Let us work with that. If all those signs are taken down, it should have 'Murray Country' up on those signs — as simple as that. In this submission to the commonwealth we have allocated — this is how important it is — \$100 000 out of that \$500 000 for signage to get it right, because the signage also has to point out the Chaffey experience as well within that component.

Ms DARVENIZA — You said you were displeased with Tourism Victoria's naming of the region; so that is not quite right? You are not displeased with the naming of the region, you are just not happy that it does not distinguish between you and the other cities on the Murray?

Cr ECKEL — I think you could say that. But that is my opinion; that might not be the opinion of Mildura Tourism.

Mr VOGELS — It is a very valid one, because the Murray is, as you said, from Corryong to — —

Cr ECKEL — That is right. It is broad, isn't it? And Oasis Country — where in the heck is Oasis Country or Murray Outback?

Ms DARVENIZA — But they are not — —

Cr ECKEL — But they were.

Ms DARVENIZA — They were, but they are gone.

Cr ECKEL — Yes.

Ms DARVENIZA — If we put aside the fact that the signs are still there and we need to get those signs down and the new signs put up, I am interested to know whether or not you are happy with Murray Region. You say you are displeased with it. I am interested to know whether you are happy with that, and if you are not happy with that, what you would be happy with.

Cr ECKEL — I think Murray Region more defines where we are at than the previous regional names.

Ms DARVENIZA — Good.

Cr ECKEL — But I still believe that we need that distinction, and that is why we are pressing hard with this issue.

Ms DARVENIZA — Thank you very much for that.

Ms LOVELL — The Murray region itself is probably too large.

Cr ECKEL — As well, yes.

Ms LOVELL — It is a damn big river, isn't it? It goes a long way.

Ms TIERNEY — I am interested in your tourism week and wondering when it is actually held, what changes you have seen in it, what the role of council has been in it and how you have been able to engage the local community here to be supportive of tourism in this region.

Cr ECKEL — Gayle, that is more a question for Dani Harvey when she comes in from Mildura Tourism, because that is Mildura Tourism's marketing concept and that is its baby. As far as the council's input is concerned, we are right behind it, obviously. This year we played an important role because within Kristine's jurisdiction of events and festivals we have now got the conferencing, which we are paying a lot of attention to, and we have initiated that role within that unit. We had the opportunity to go out and promote that concept to the community through the means of Mildura Tourism Week. I do not know if Kristine has more to add to that.

Ms HARRINGTON — If I may, thank you, Mark. Certainly Mildura Rural City Council is on the organising committee, whether it be tourism services or event services, so we link in very strongly with Mildura Tourism. Indeed, with the inaugural year, like any new initiative concept, we ask 'What's it all about?', and we stay back, wait and see. But besides the bringing together of the tourism industry, it was firstly about developing networks and professionalism and clearly identifying the fact that we need to focus on our competitors outside the region as well as professionalism within this region. Certainly, most of the operators have concepts of the same problems, whether it be lack of professional staffing, their product or getting them to clearly identify the benefits of accreditation at whatever level.

Certainly through tourism week that has been most successful, and we look forward to supporting Mildura Tourism in a very superior way with that concept.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much.

Mr VOGELS — I believe in this area your ratepayers, businesses and tourist operators have spent some \$2 million over the last couple of years fighting this toxic waste dump. Are you now getting some special extra attention from the state government by saying, 'We need to highlight that this is a great area. It is a food bowl, and we need to get the profile back onto

positive things rather than a toxic dump?'. I think you should be pushing very hard while that is still on people's minds to make sure you get some extra help from Tourism Victoria and from government authorities to promote this area at the moment.

I am also interested in how far the council is involved with this solar stack, which is going to be 1 kilometre high and somewhere not far from here, and whether that is a goer or not, because that would probably be a great tourist icon. Maybe you could call this the 'Murray Solar Stack Area'. I do not know.

Ms HARRINGTON — 'Eiffel Tower gone contemporary'.

Cr ECKEL — What a leading question, John, asking about the toxic waste.

Ms HARRINGTON — No, or we are going to finish about 6 o'clock tonight, Mark!

Cr ECKEL — No, we will not get onto that. But you are dead right, we have got to think positively. Obviously council in its different submissions — particularly the urban design framework and the Murray River riverfront master plan that Andrew will talk on a bit later on — has issues within those vast projects where we need to apply for funding to the state government. We would hope that the state government would really look at the contribution that we had to make to that fight to get the toxic waste off our back doorstep — not only the money that was expended through that particular time but obviously also the marketing shifts we had to make during that time, because it certainly detracted from visitors coming here. We had to change our focus, and our decision making down the track too, because we never knew that we would not have to go on and fight further, so we were always in the mode of pre-budgeting for what might happen.

As you know — this is a bit of a ticklish area, I suppose, and it is a personal opinion — we got \$8 million from the government to move the freight gate from Mildura out to Merbein, and I think that is a pittance. It is a real pittance, \$8 million, when that development is so important and so integral to the future of tourism and to the future of this city — not just from the perspective of tourism but also from the perspective of businesses in Mildura, because the opening up of Mildura down Langtree Avenue through that ugly rail site down to the river is just vital for our future. I believe that, all right, we have to be gracious, take the \$8 million and get rid of that freight gate, because it is an important issue to get rid of that, but we need to go ahead and really move on that within my lifetime.

As far as the solar tower is concerned, John, it is over on the New South Wales side, with the Wentworth council, and — I do not know — the emphasis seems to shift all the time on whether or not this is going to be a viable proposition. It is a bit like that, I think.

Mr NORTHE — John had a couple of very good questions there, particularly on the rail line and the toxic waste dump, but I will direct one to Kristine, if I may. In terms of the visitor information centre, Kristine, through previous public hearings we have heard they are quite ad hoc across the state. Can you just give us a quick briefing on what the visitor information centre encompasses here in terms of how many employees, volunteers and the like?

Ms HARRINGTON — Certainly. Starting at the very beginning, we are very fortunate, actually, to have the Alfred Deakin Centre and a state-of-the-art information centre, so council is very supportive of tourism. We have 11 paid employees, currently we have 33 volunteers, and then we have 26 volunteers of all abilities. We do not like using the word 'disabilities', but certainly we were fortunate to get a funding grant of \$50 000 of recent times to employ a coordinator for six months to go out into our community and identify training either for events or for tourism services. Our clients are coming through. They may have mental health issues or they may have been in an accident — we have 26 — and that has been fabulously embraced by our community as well. We also have clients who come through from correctional services, and we are mindful of those, and also of indigenous people.

We are proud to say that we are the first information centre in Australia to receive Respecting Our Culture accreditation. We are proud of that, the reason being that coming through from our visitors who drive our level of service we have identified that there is huge interest in indigenous history, and this area particularly is very wealthy in that. It really has not been explored in a very respectful way linking in with the elders. Because this region is so large we have different groups, different elders, different tribes. We have Mungo, which of course is only 5 seconds away in the big picture, and we accept that Mungo is a world heritage site.

Indeed we service over half a million people through that front door, so there again the information centre is extremely busy. We manage this room, but fortunately also because of the vision of the councillors at the time with the cluster environment of this building, we encourage our community to use the centre and then upsell our events and become ambassadors. When they walk through and go to the library, they should pick up a ticket to go to whatever, including our jazz and wine events.

One area which is particularly dear to my heart is to embellish our Aboriginal cultural history here. In turn that will assist with training and jobs because our visitors particularly want to know about our history linking back into Aboriginal history, and also their products. They have got to be authentic and not made in any other country. But there is huge demand for those. It is an initiative where we have to work very closely with the Aboriginal people to assist them in getting a better product. Does that answer your question?

The CHAIR — Mark, just to wrap up, I was here last year for the world ballooning championships. Were you involved in that at all?

Cr ECKEL — Yes.

The CHAIR — Okay. Watching that unfold I saw that there was enormous outside influence. The vast majority of people who were partaking — in 300-odd balloons — were from outside. There must have been an awful lot of outside money. It was very hard to get accommodation. We have heard evidence here today that there are 47 motels, but nearly all of them were booked out. The Mildura Rural City Council was the main body that went after and won the world championship. It must have got a fair amount of money. What was your industry buying? In that experience I saw that the council did an awful lot of work to bring in a lot of outside money including from the top stream of tourism operators. The council was certainly the beneficiary, as were a whole range of other businesses. What was industry buying through the world ballooning championships?

Cr ECKEL — I think Kristine might be able to answer the main part of this in regard to the application process, because once again that came from her events department.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Cr ECKEL — It is interesting; it was not last year, it was a couple of years ago.

The CHAIR — You are right.

Cr ECKEL — A few of the statistics escape me. When it was set up over there in the TAFE area, business and industry set up stands and made quite a large contribution towards setting up that particular area.

Outside that I would say that it has been difficult, Chair, over the years to get industry per se to invest in the big events that come into the area. I believe that council plays a big part in this, and there are thought processes that I have that in future years we have got to look at that partnership situation and say, 'How much of this event should council own? Should that particular event grow in its own light, sort of thing?', because without question we are the event capital of regional

Victoria. We put on some fabulous events, and I believe our festivals underpin our visitation statistics here in Mildura.

Just to come back, I believe industry should play a stronger part. But to answer your question about that particular event, I can only answer by saying that I do not know so far as the input from the community is concerned. Can you answer, Kristine?

Ms HARRINGTON — No. It was certainly driven by a very core group within Mildura Ballooning. It was before I managed events.

The CHAIR — The second part of the question is: would you support an industry levy?

Cr ECKEL — We have an industry levy.

Ms HARRINGTON — They pay.

Cr ECKEL — We have an economic development levy that council strikes each year in its budget. That is an economic development and tourism levy — —

The CHAIR — Okay.

Cr ECKEL — Fifty per cent of the money raised goes to economic development, and 50 per cent goes to Mildura Tourism to promote the area outside from a marketing perspective.

The CHAIR — Okay. That is fine. That is good.

Ms HARRINGTON — Who pays it? Who pays the levy?

Cr ECKEL — Businesses pay the levy. Tourism operators and all businesses.

Ms HARRINGTON — There is a rate.

Ms DARVENIZA — Depending on how involved the business is with tourism?

Cr ECKEL — No, if you are a tourism operator or a business the levy is struck against you.

Ms HARRINGTON — A 10-unit motel would pay approximately \$480. There is a scale.

Ms DARVENIZA — What if I own the newsagency or the petrol station?

Cr ECKEL — Yes.

Ms HARRINGTON — You would pay the same levy. There are different boundaries. If you were in the city precinct, because you are already paying a levy — it is a little CBD precinct — then it is different.

Mr VOGELS — Just on that issue, how did you go with the special rate charges? When they were changed, that did not affect your differential rate?

Cr ECKEL — No.

Mr VOGELS — Because I noticed that legislation went through with special rates and charges out to 51 per cent — you know all the figures.

Cr ECKEL — Yes.

Mr VOGELS — That did not affect you guys?

Cr ECKEL — No, John. It is not locked in here; it has to be voted on each year.

Mr VOGELS — Good.

The CHAIR — That is great. Thanks very much Mark and Kristine. In about two weeks you will receive a copy of the transcript. You are free to make changes to any typographical errors as you see fit. Thanks again for making time available to come along and talk to us.

Cr ECKEL — Pleasure. There are some great ideas coming through. You have our submissions?

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.