

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Bendigo — 27 June 2007

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#### Witness

Mr T. Seddon, chief executive officer, Bendigo Trust.

**The CHAIR** — Mr Seddon, thanks very much for being here. This is an all-party parliamentary committee taking evidence for the Rural and Regional Committee inquiry into tourism. All evidence that is taken at this hearing today is subject to parliamentary privilege under the Constitution Act of 1975, the Parliamentary Committees Act of 2003 and the Defamation Act of 2005. We also need to advise witnesses that any comments they make outside the hearing may not be afforded parliamentary privilege.

Prior to starting, Tom, if you would be kind enough to just give us your full name and address and the organisation which you are representing, then I will hand it over to you. If you could leave some time at the end for us to get some questions in, that would be great. Thank you.

**Mr SEDDON** — My name is Tom Seddon. I am with the Bendigo Trust. As I have not heard anything this morning that I have really disagreed with, I thought the thing to do perhaps would be to spend a couple of minutes just explaining the trust. It is a slightly different organisation to what you have heard from this morning. Then I will see whether you have any questions for me.

The trust operates a total of 10 different units. They are, by no stretch of the imagination, equal. The primary ones the Central Deborah Gold Mine, the Bendigo Tramways and the Discovery Centre. We also operate a food and beverage unit, a tramway restaurant, a planetarium, a park, the old Victoria Hill diggings, and we have just taken over the Bendigo Chinese Joss House. So we cover tours, museums, parklands and food and beverage outlets. We have also have the Bendigo Tram Heritage Rail Workshop, which is one of only two places in the world where you can get paid to work on restoring heritage trams. That is one of the things that probably has a real future in Bendigo in terms of tourism. Activity trumps static displays.

At the moment we rebuild tramparts for Savannah, Georgia and Dallas, Texas, but nobody can see it because it is in a building that is 110 years old and was built for that purpose. How do you open that up safely for people to look at without falling into pits or putting their hands on 600-volt lines and the like, yet also keep it as a workplace? That is one of my main challenges for the next couple of years, to build both halves of that — the visitation and the actual functionality of the depot.

We are a not-for-profit operator of primarily public heritage assets. Our principal relationship is with the City of Greater Bendigo, which is the owner of most of those assets. Between council direct spend and the trust's own budget we turn over around \$4 million a year. Of that the marketing budget is around \$160 000 to \$170 000, so I am sure that makes us the largest marketing operation of any private, semi-private operator in the area, but by no means big enough to really influence visitation to Bendigo on our own. We have to work with other organisations.

You mentioned the other large aspects of our operation. The tramway tour has been running for 35 years. Originally you got on at the Central Deborah Gold Mine, you went for a tour for an hour and listened to a tape, got off and went on your way. The future of the tramways is also the future of Bendigo in the sense that Bendigo needs to be the attraction; Bendigo needs to be the museum.

You mentioned earlier a question about whether Bendigo lacks a Disney sort of thing. Yes, it does, but we do not so much need to build it as realise it is already here, and that is Bendigo, and the conveyance of it needs to be the tram. We need some stops so that you can get off and go into the Chinese museum and then get back on the tram and go somewhere else. You can see the city that way. Obviously it does not cover everything, but it will cover quite a bit of what Bendigo has to offer.

The mine started out as surface tours. There is nothing particularly grand about the Central Deborah Gold Mine, except for the fact that it was completely intact and right near down town and on the tramline, so it was the one that got preserved and opened for tours. Until 1986 the mine was full of water, and it probably will be some day again when today's mining underneath

Bendigo stops and it fills up again. In the meantime we have been running tours underground since 1986 and opened an adventure tour some years ago. A super adventure tour is something that we are open to tackle. We have got 15½ kilometres of tunnels underneath the central goldmine, and there is more to do with them than just showing people gold. So it is about thinking a little bit beyond this as a goldmine and instead asking what we can do with this asset, whilst being kind to the fact that it is a goldmine and that is why it is there.

There was some discussion earlier today about visitation. I echo the same sorts of figures that others have. Through 2002 visitations and revenue steadily grew. From 2002 to 2006 it tanked almost month on month, and through 2006 and 2007 we have been fairly level. I have been here for two years now, so I am not so much speaking from personal experience as from having looked at the figures. I do not know what else I really have to add to what has been said before, so you could just run right to questions.

**Ms DARVENIZA** — Can you tell me about the tram and how it works? Is it a bit like the Melbourne tram that does the city circle?

**Mr SEDDON** — I would like it to be. We would absolutely love to be regarded as the city circle and get subsidised by the state government so that we were free, but in the meantime it is a paying operation. The trams run a 4½ kilometre run from the Central Deborah Gold Mine through the city, past the lake and Chinese museum, which we cannot stop at, to PepperGreen Farm and the Chinese Joss House at the northern end. There is a stop at the tram depot which we are yet to really make much of because we cannot get people into the depot, so it is a there-and-back trip. The tape commentary — because it is not really very safe to have the drivers do it — has everything out the left-hand side, so you see everything up one way and then back on the other side.

**Ms DARVENIZA** — So it is a bit like the tram in South Australia?

**Mr SEDDON** — Yes.

**Ms DARVENIZA** — I do not know whether you have seen that one.

**Mr SEDDON** — Yes.

**Ms DARVENIZA** — Are you saying that you think there is a lot more potential for that tram?

**Mr SEDDON** — Absolutely. I originally conceived it as a ride, and it was a ride that talked to you, but I think its future is as the way to get around and see everything else that Bendigo has to offer, at least within that 4½ kilometre stretch.

**Ms DARVENIZA** — What do you think is working well to attract visitors to Bendigo and what do you think we can do more of that will work to attract more visitors to Bendigo? Give me just a couple of things — what is working and what is not?

**Mr SEDDON** — I will leave the science museum aside, because it sits differently from all the other industrial sort of heritage stuff that we do. I think that is Bendigo's strong card, and it should not run away from it. It is a Victorian industrial age city, and that is where you need to sell on other things. Other things that it does have, including a planetarium which I run, are good but they should not take away from what and why Bendigo is here. So we need to play to our strengths, and the strengths are the architecture, the strengths are the gold history and the industrial history, and we need to open them up.

**Mr NORTHE** — I have just a couple of questions. Statistics show in Bendigo, I guess, that visitation has probably stabilised — that is what I am hearing — and obviously I see, as an outsider, that you have some wonderful assets and the like that you say should be promoted more

or could be promoted more. How are you marketing those at the moment, or proposing to change the marketing, and what is your core business in terms of conducting promotions?

**Mr SEDDON** — Our primary relationship is with council and with Bendigo Tourism, but we are also members of the heritage parks association and the Tourism Alliance and the like. With a budget of \$160 000, we cannot get into Melbourne. We have certainly improved our presence on the web and the visitation to the websites has certainly shown it. I think Bendigo similarly has done the same thing over the last couple of years. It is the future. It is very much the cost-effective way to go. We have partnered very frequently with the city of Bendigo. My marketing manager last week was up on the Gold Coast representing both of Council and Trust at the trade travel exhibition and the like. That is the future.

**Ms TIERNEY** — Do you package all of your attractions in the one brochure as such, because I think a lot of people do know about the tram route and stopping and starting and the attractions on that route, but I was not familiar with the other attractions that the trust has got carriage of? Indeed, I am just wondering whether you have thought about heritage walks that might connect some of your attractions.

**Mr SEDDON** — The historical society has definitely developed a walking path around the city, which we are keen to do. We have talked to the Bendigo Tourism Board, for instance, about creating a touring guide of Bendigo that starts at the Central Deborah and shows how you use the tram to visit everything else along the way. It is going to be tied into a system of pedestrian signage around the city that is still a bit of a time off. So, yes, it is in our hands, but no, it is not on the ground

**Ms LOVELL** — I guess my question is the same as those asked by Russell and Gayle about the marketing of your products. You have some great historic products there, and I was just wondering if you target particular groups like Probus groups or even school groups because of the history involved. I visited the discovery and science centre a couple of years ago with Denis Napthine, and I think it is one of the best hidden secrets in northern Victoria. It is sensational. I have been back twice with my nephews since then. We used to go all the way down to Melbourne to Scienceworks. I would much rather come over here and go to the discovery science centre. I was wondering whether you have targeted any particular groups that might be interested in, as a package, all the history of Bendigo?

**Mr SEDDON** — Discovery definitely is education first and tourism second. Our marketing as far as the trust is concerned is definitely aimed at Probus and Trade Travel, where we can get a busload for our ad rather than a single person. Obviously you cannot just aim it at that, but, yes, we are aware of that. In a previous life I was in charge of the 18th world health promotion conference and the 6th Asia Pacific AIDS congress, and between them that is 10 000 people coming to Melbourne from 100-odd different companies, and I know that I sent busload after busload to the penguins or to Sovereign Hill. I did not even know at the time that there was a Central Deborah Gold Mine, so that certainly is something that, with that knowledge in mind, I have gone back to and we have tried to pitch to the tour promoters in Melbourne.

**Mr EREN** — Just to follow up from that question, how do you benchmark whether your marketing and promotion is actually successful?

**Mr SEDDON** — With school groups and Probus groups and things like that, you have a nice defined universe, so that is relatively easy to do. We have got 10 years of history of schools that have come to the discovery centre. Have they come every year or not? Have they responded to our newsletter or not? As far as the general public is concerned, that is a little harder. We do not have the means to track. We do ask people where they have come from and why they are here. The response rates are not bad. What we have learnt is that they are overwhelmingly from either Bendigo and district or from Melbourne, except in school holiday time where we tend to pull New South Wales and South Australia as well.

**The CHAIR** — Picking up on the theme that you do not need a Disney factor because Bendigo is the Disneyland factor — it is a bit like, I suppose, when they say Rome is a living museum — and the ability to use the trams to see it, is there an opportunity to extend the tram system?

**Mr SEDDON** — Absolutely. I think it has been recognised for a long time that pulling the trams out of Mitchell Street and View Street was short-sighted. Putting them back obviously is a whole lot more expensive than not having taken them out in the first place, but yes, I think that a city circle or something like that, given that we have the heritage fleet, presents disabled access issues that we have to deal with anyway. A lot of the trams that we have just do not handle wheelchairs no matter what height the platform is. But we are tackling that with other ways in terms of how we mix which trams run out and the like. So in terms of our capacity to handle an extended system, definitely. Would we serve the idea of Bendigo as a museum better if we had a couple more kilometres of track? Absolutely.

**The CHAIR** — Could you link the tram with the train?

**Mr SEDDON** — At the moment the train station is a bit of a bleak prospect if you do not know Bendigo. You get out and all of a sudden there is this expanse of car park. You cannot hire a car. The buses are not what they probably need to be yet. A friendly way to get from the train station into where you want to go — whether that is some place to stay or something to see — is fairly important. The tram is a romantic way to do it.

**The CHAIR** — Are there other infrastructure improvements that you think, without looking for that factor, are paramount for this region?

**Mr SEDDON** — There is an awful lot of argument about whether or not Bendigo needs a museum, and I am at risk of offending Jim Evans here, by coming down in favour of Bendigo being the museum. But I am favour of what it is proposing to do with the federation exhibit at the town hall and at the old post office, to turn that into a gallery space and rotate several times a year. That picks up one theme or another of architectural or other heritage, historical heritage.

**The CHAIR** — Just a commercial question, Tom: are you surprised that Bendigo in effect has one conference facility — at the All Seasons Bendigo? You want to have a large venue, where you can have your conference, have accommodation, and have social functions at the end. A city the size of Bendigo is limited to one venue; does that surprise you?

**Mr SEDDON** — It is one venue and it is 4 kilometres out of the centre of the city. I am on the organising committee of the Fifth World Mental Health Conference, which will be in Melbourne in a year and a half. I tried very hard to get them to think of coming up to Bendigo, but was not successful.

**The CHAIR** — because of those types of things?

**Mr SEDDON** — Yes. In terms of the size of the venue, it could have accommodated it, and in terms of the size of the city, it definitely could have accommodated it.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for your evidence today. We will give you a copy of that evidence in a few weeks, which will enable you to make any typographical corrections that you may wish to make. Thank you very much for making yourself available and good luck with your work in the future.

**Mr SEDDON** — Thank you all.

**Witness withdrew.**