

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Bendigo — 27 June 2007

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Ms R. Vella, tourism manager, Loddon Shire Council.

The CHAIR — We would like to extend a warm welcome to Robyn Vella from the Loddon shire. This is an all-party parliamentary committee, so we have members from all of the respective parties. We are here today to gather evidence for an inquiry into rural and regional tourism. All evidence taken at the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as is provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subjected to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and the Defamation Act 2005. We also wish to advise that any comments made outside the hearing are not covered by parliamentary privilege; just be mindful of that. Before you give your evidence, if you would like to state your name and your address and the organisation which you are representing. Effectively all the evidence that is heard today will be taken down by Hansard and we will make a copy of that available to you in a couple of weeks, which you will be able to make any corrections to that you see fit. Apart from that, thanks for coming along, Robyn, and it is all yours.

Ms VELLA — Robyn Marylyn Vella. I represent the Loddon Shire Council.

The Loddon Shire Council is 6700 square kilometres. It brings in a population of around about 8600 people. It is a rural community which brings in larger towns such as Pyramid Hill, Boort, Inglewood, Bridgewater, Tarnagulla and Wedderburn. The Loddon shire is also a part of the goldfields region. Recently the Loddon Shire Council has adopted a new tourism strategy to increase visitation to the region, to the shire, through the development and promotion of tourism. Tourism is one of the few ways that we can bring external dollars into our local economy. Directly not all businesses benefit, but the businesses that do benefit then spend locally. Then what happens is they introduce more economic activity into our local economy by their spending their dollars there. The Loddon shire tourism manager happens to be myself. I conduct a program known as Loddon Discovery Tours. We specialise in group tours from day tours right through to four nights-five days. We attract a variety of different organisations from New South Wales, Adelaide and Melbourne into our shire and we take them on tour around the region by coach. The income from Loddon Discovery Tours is distributed amongst all the tourism operators that are participants in Loddon Discovery Tours. The Loddon Shire Council has an annual \$70 000 per year that it allocates to the tourism department. That budget is to develop and promote tourism for the shire.

Through the Loddon Shire Council's community planning process tourism has been identified through the majority of the towns as potentially assisting their sustainability. The situation is that tourism development in our shire is restricted because of the limited amount of resource and also the funds that are actually allocated to the tourism department. The greatest challenge that we have is improving tourism infrastructure. This includes accommodation, travellers rests, local tourist attractions and also main streetscape appearances. The Loddon shire has major developments, and what happens is they actually seek external funding each year for their major developments. They are all prioritised and tourism has to compete with those priorities. Sometimes it may take three years to actually get a project on the board, purely because it was not one of the major priorities that they seek external funding for.

The tourism sector in rural shires needs to be allocated funds directly from the federal government to local government specifically for tourism infrastructure. The Roads to Recovery program has been proven a success. I believe, along with other council members, that the Roads to Recovery program could be set up as a similar program but needs to be established in rural tourism. To improve infrastructure in rural centres we need these dollars. If those dollars actually come through, that will actually help encourage private investment.

Loddon shire is also a member of Bendigo Tourism. We work very closely with Bendigo Tourism. We are also a member of the Tourism Alliance and we also contribute to the Goldfields booklet in their Jigsaw campaign.

The CHAIR — Well done.

Ms VELLA — Thank you.

The CHAIR — I know you are nervous, but you got through that really well and did it in good time, so we have plenty of time for questions.

Mr EREN — Is there a benchmark over the last 10 years as to where tourism was at in the Loddon shire and where it is at now in terms of the increased number of people that have come into the region; and apart from that, has the recent drought affected that number of tourists coming into the area?

Ms VELLA — The tourism part in the Loddon shire, I am going to be honest, is still crawling, but it is developing well. I have only been with the council since 2005. When we go for visitation nights we do not actually have a VIC as such to be able to collect that data. We are connected with Bendigo Loddon where we actually get our statistics. What I can speak on is Loddon Discovery Tours. Loddon Discovery Tours is growing from strength to strength. When I started with the council it was turning an annual turnover of 40 000; that was in 2005. Today it has exceeded 150 000. That is visitation nights by coach tours to the area, and that only operates in autumn and spring, and we promote winter and summer.

What has happened in the tourism sector in the shire, because of the drought, is that farmers have diversified into the tourism sector for their sustainability. For example, an international product Simply Green Tomatoes, which is at Boort, is a product going really well; and also Aussie Wool Quilts, which is down in the Shelbourne area. Farmers are diversifying for that reason.

The CHAIR — Well done! Those figures again: 40 000 visitation nights — or dollars?

Ms VELLA — No, when you talk about income for Loddon Discovery Tours; when I started in 2005 it was around the \$40 000 mark — —

The CHAIR — Yes, \$40 000.

Ms VELLA — And that is attracting visitors too, and they actually pay a lump sum. I will give an example: it could be \$235 per person for 2 nights, 3 days, into our area. The first year was around 40 000 and we have actually now gone over 150 000 for this financial year.

Ms LOVELL — Over what period?

Ms VELLA — Autumn and spring — it operates autumn and spring.

Ms LOVELL — No, I am sorry, for what period?

Ms VELLA — We work it over 12 months, but what actually happens is the target market that we deal with are the 50-plus, the baby boomers; they only like to travel in autumn and spring, because summer is too hot and winter is too cold.

Ms LOVELL — Sorry, that is still not what I was trying to get at: what year was at 40 000?

Ms VELLA — It was 2005.

Ms LOVELL — I was interested that you seem to have absolutely no confidence in the state government or Tourism Victoria to deliver for you; that you want to go straight to the federal government, bypass state government, in the same way that Roads to Recovery does? What is it that Tourism Victoria and the state government are not doing for you and what can they do better to help you.

Ms VELLA — No, I am not going to say that the state government and Tourism Victoria are not doing anything for us. We have a limited amount of resource — for example, I am the only

one who is employed in the Loddon Shire Council in the tourism department. I look after the coach tours, signage, marketing, and everything. What we are saying is it is much easier if we could put in for some funding, like the Roads to Recovery, go directly to the federal government, put in for that and get it delivered. I can honestly say that I do not have a lot of time that I connect with Tourism Victoria or the state government because of the limited amount of resource in the tourism department.

Ms LOVELL — But tourism for Victoria is the responsibility of the state government and Tourism Victoria, and you are still saying, ‘I want to bypass them, I want to get money from the federal government’, and I am asking you what can Tourism Victoria and the state government do better for you that they are not doing now, because there is obviously something that you are not happy with?

Ms VELLA — The best way I can explain it is we are really not on Tourism Victoria’s radar, but at the same time we have to help ourselves. We have to improve, even to the extent when it comes down to grant submissions, putting in to Tourism Victoria.

Ms DARVENIZA — Are you saying that really you are not too sure exactly what Tourism Victoria has to offer you, that there might be grants and there might in fact be things that you can link into, but because you are just a one-person show you do not have the resources to be able to do that? There may in fact be things out there that you are not aware of?

Ms LOVELL — Basically you are saying that you are one of the regions failing to gain any recognition from Tourism Victoria at the moment?

Ms VELLA — Yes, and also we have a limited amount of resources to be able to be connecting into them. They offer a lot of great opportunities — they come through our emails — but, for example, when they have a seminar down in Melbourne I may be guiding a coach trip, and this is what is happening. There is only one of me, and the situation is that I have to look after the economy.

Ms LOVELL — You have got to look after a large region.

Ms VELLA — Yes, I stay back and work there.

Ms TIERNEY — You mentioned a number of things that are priority areas for you for the infrastructure area. Accommodation was one, travellers resting spots and main-street streetscapes. The type of accommodation that you currently have, what is that generally, what type of category, and where are the gaps in your view?

Ms VELLA — The accommodation that we have at this point in time is basically motels and caravan parks. With the coach tours, sometimes I have to extend them into Gannawarra or Bendigo because we do not have enough rooms to actually accommodate a large coach trip. Once we get over the 35 bracket of people we have to put them into other shires because of that. We do not have B & Bs. We have got two B & Bs within our shire. With the accommodation level a lot of them in the caravan parks are around a level 4-star rating, areas like Boort and Wedderburn, and one of Bridgwater’s, but then you are looking at some of our motels are 2.5-star, 3-stars.

Mr NORTHE — Robyn, with the discovery tours that you mentioned earlier you said the generated income has gone from 40 000 up to 150 000. What have you done there to market yourself, and where have you marketed?

Ms VELLA — I personally started Loddon Discovery Tours — so it is a very big passion of mine — and I started it to fight for survival in rural communities. What I do is to personally go and guest-speak to Probus clubs and Legacy clubs. I travel New South Wales and South Australia and to Adelaide and talk to them about survival in rural communities. We are also

a member of Trade Travel. I have just come back from the national Probus conference at the Gold Coast, promoting the Loddon shire.

Loddon shire does the coach tours extremely well and we get a lot of feedback to the extent that we have now had to employ three Loddon ambassadors who actually help me to conduct the coach tours. I organise them all, then the Loddon ambassadors become the guides for the day, and I still do the Wedderburn area. I personally go and market to the groups because if a coach company, for example, tries to put the tour on the open market, people say, 'What you going up there for? There is nothing there'. But if I personally go and talk to the groups, I attract them to come, they come and they have a really great visitor experience. That is what Loddon has got: a visitor experience.

Ms DARVENIZA — It is pretty impressive that in 12 months you can more than triple the amount of patronage on the discovery tours. I would have thought that you have obviously got something that is marketable and something that you are marketing pretty well to be able to get that sort of increase in the number of people who are coming. Given that you are only one person it would probably be worth looking at ways in which you have some other means of promoting these tours other than your being the sole person. Have you looked at it, and have you at ways in which you might be able to link into the Jigsaw puzzle and the promotions that go on there and with Tourism Victoria?

Ms VELLA — I am going to answer no, I have not completely looked into others. We have joined membership with areas like Trade Travel, which is a coach company marketing area, and Group Link in Melbourne, which is another coach company marketing area. I have not gone into the Goldfields other than what we advertise for general tourism. At the end of the day Loddon actually finds that Bendigo and Ballarat are trying to get visitors to their area. They an hour away so, let us face it, they have to look after themselves before they are going to push them our way. That is why I personally go out and do it.

Ms LOVELL — Robyn, how do you feel about sitting within the Goldfields campaign region, and does Loddon shire have a seat on the campaign committee?

Ms VELLA — No, we do not have a seat on the campaign committee. We used to have a seat on the campaign committee. I am not sure of the reason why we do not. At the same time I am going to say that the City of Greater Bendigo are great supporters. Kathryn Mackenzie always links back to myself if there is something that can really benefit Loddon. Where we sit we fit fine into the Goldfields campaign committee, but at the end of the day we are not a Ballarat or a Bendigo. We are rural centres. A lot of people do not realise what is behind Ballarat and Bendigo and the rural centres that we actually have, and that is why I chose to do the Loddon Discovery Tours site.

Ms DARVENIZA — Congratulations on it too!

Ms VELLA — The other reason that I say this is that, if any of you people travelled through the Loddon shire before the amalgamation — I have been born and raised here — Boort's shopfronts were nearly shut, Inglewood's and Wedderburn's. We were all struggling. Then the amalgamation took place, and we are going from strength to strength. Even though when you drive through some areas may still look tired — and that is where I am talking about the infrastructure side — if we could be allocated certain funds to fix major tourism infrastructure. For example, if any of you have travelled the Calder Highway, have you seen the old Blue Eucy site at Inglewood? That is a priority of council, and it is a priority through the community plan, but council has a number of major developments. It is putting in for external funding for three other major developments, so this one here has to sit on the backburner at this point in time. We probably need 300 000 to get that to a standard where it improves the appearance of our area.

The CHAIR — Thanks for making that presentation. As Kaye said, it is a credit to yourself primarily, the work you have done and the improvements that you have been able to make. Good luck in the future!

Ms VELLA — Thank you very much for your time; I appreciate it.

Witness withdrew.