

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Daylesford — 28 June 2007

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Witness

Ms H. Mutimer.

The CHAIR — Heather, you have heard most of the spiel. I will quickly give you the abridged version. The Rural and Regional Committee is conducting an inquiry into rural and regional tourism. Any evidence coming from the floor today, such as yours, is afforded parliamentary privilege. If any of those comments are repeated outside the premises, then that parliamentary privilege does not exist. Prior to starting, would you give us your name and address and any organisations to which you belong. You have about 3 to 5 minutes to speak your mind.

Ms MUTIMER — My name is Heather Mutimer. I am a councillor with the Hepburn shire. I represent the Coliban ward which takes in some of the southern parts of the Hepburn shire and to the east covers the small township of Trentham. I have two young adult children who were born and educated locally, and at the other extreme I have a 91-year-old mother who also now lives in the area.

I would like to say that I do not speak here today representing the views of Hepburn Shire Council. I am here as an individual, but I can confidently say that many of my views are shared by many of my constituents, and I say that quite openly.

I had intended to write and present a formal submission, but unfortunately, due to some personal circumstances, I was not able to. Also, I must admit that I felt when I read the terms of reference that some of the important issues I did want to raise were perhaps not covered in the terms, but in hindsight I believe they are. If I could just give a little bit of constructive criticism, I think that the terms of reference perhaps should have covered some of those other areas about the negative impacts of tourism in a constructive way, because some of those things do affect the long-term sustainability of tourism. I say that in a positive way, not a negative way, but I think the terms of reference could have perhaps highlighted those a bit more.

I do not think that anyone would disagree that tourism does play an important role in this region, economically and socially, and in particular in the Daylesford–Hepburn area. It is important to have places, particularly those close to Melbourne, where people can come to rest and recreate, but I do not think that we should ignore the fact that it has come with a cost, both social and environmental. These should not be ignored, because to do so would not only cause harm to the community but also, I believe, to the sustainability of the industry, because I think some of those negative impacts are causing conflict between the tourism industry and the community. They need to be addressed.

Going back to when the Hepburn shire's planning scheme was developed, the panel that sat at that planning scheme made it one of its strong points that the conflict, perceived or real, between the local community and tourism needed to be addressed in some way. That was the strong comment, and it has been brought out in research. Once again, to ignore these issues would put at risk those very attributes that have brought people to this area for many years.

As I said, there are social impacts that come with tourism, positive and negative, but I would like to highlight some of those that are less positive because I do not think they get raised enough. Mr Kirby has highlighted some of them. I think you should realise that Hepburn shire has one of the highest percentages of people living on low incomes. You can check that with the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Also, in what I think you call the 'health and wellbeing indicators', people who live in the Hepburn shire are not very well people, and this needs to be recognised. You have been handed these lovely brochures with lovely pictures in them, but please be aware that many of the local people cannot afford many of those treatments that are provided and featured in those magazines, and that needs to be recognised. I am not trying to can that, I am just saying that you have to look at both sides of it.

Mr Noel Beare mentioned that one the great attributes of this shire is the diversity in the community. When I came here to live in 1979 it was a diverse community then, and contrary to what many people say, it was a very interesting community back then as well. On the outside it might not have looked much, but on the inside it was still a very interesting community. It was a

great place to live, and many people came to live here back in 1979 in those days because it was affordable et cetera. Many artists live in this community and contribute to what makes this place attractive, and the reality is that because of the cost of housing et cetera, many of these artists are finding it very difficult to continue living here. I know that we cannot control some of these things, but they still need to be raised.

Housing affordability has been a real issue. Many of the houses are now rented out on the holiday market, which is limiting the full-time rental market for local people and for people who want to come and work here as well. That is a real issue. I think it is dropping a little bit now, but many people are being forced to move away from this area to places like Ballarat, Castlemaine et cetera, and this causes a great deal of angst amongst people who lived here for a long time and whose children would like to stay here as well but cannot.

It is well known through research that when there is a high tourism focus, the cost of food and petrol rises, and I think a lot of people in the area would testify to the fact that if you go to the supermarket here and you go to the same supermarket chain in a neighbouring town, there is quite a vast difference in the cost of food. Public transport has been raised as an issue as well, and also the diversity of employment. It is really dangerous for any community to put all their eggs in one basket, and I do not think that tourism is the panacea for all our problems. It certainly has an important role to play, there is no doubt about it, but to put all our eggs in one basket and not focus on other types of employment is a bit dangerous.

We have talked about attracting young people to work in the industry. There are many young people who work in the industry. I have two teenage children who have gained part-time employment in the tourism industry, and I think that is terrific, but if you speak to a lot of the local youth they do not necessarily see their future as being in tourism. It is great to get some part-time work, but unless some of those jobs require a little bit more expertise and have a higher profile, they just do not want to go on washing dishes and making beds all their lives. Many people have also come to live in this area for the peace and quiet, and I think there are problems associated with tourism that have impacted on that. I am talking a lot here about Daylesford because that is where a lot of the focus is. At weekends people find it really difficult to get parking, and it causes stress. People who used to come down to Daylesford on a Saturday morning to connect with each other now rush in early in the morning, get their papers and go, so there is that tension there.

I think for the wellbeing of the tourism industry there has to be a lot more working together with the local community. I think the Destination Daylesford project may play a role in that. In fact the reason Destination Daylesford is happening is because when I was the mayor last year I spoke to Tourism Victoria about some of these issues — about how one of the downsides that the local community sees with tourism is that often it is imposed on them from the top. Often they have very little say in how their town is marketed. I am talking about not people necessarily in the tourism industry, but just people who have other jobs and just live here. They feel that it is imposed on them. I am hoping that the Destination Daylesford project will start to address some of those issues.

Some people have found some of the marketing campaigns actually quite offensive. The indulgence focus: some people find that, as I said, to be the extreme opposite to how the town is marketed to the real people who live here on a daily basis. I know there is a mixture of people from all backgrounds, but people do find how their town is marketed, without a lot of input from the community, to be difficult. So you have this growing wedge. I think we should not ignore that there are other employment areas in this community as well. The health industry employs a lot of people. If you look at the statistics, you see they show that. We heard about how it is because of tourism that the schools and hospitals have kept going. I disagree with that, because I think the hospitals have always been here and the schools have always been here. In fact the numbers of the schools are dropping.

Quickly on the environmental issues, one of the great assets of this area is the landscape and our clean, green image. I think we do have to work very hard to protect that. In local government one of the great problems we have is dollars. To afford to pay for overlays to protect our shire you are looking at hundreds of thousands of dollars sometimes, and I think we could get a bit more help from the government to fund things like that to help us put in protection of those very things that draw people here.

The water issue is a big one. It was touched on. There is concern about the sustainability of water in the Hepburn shire. We have an issue at the moment about the impact that the bores may be having on the aquifers and the impact on the mineral springs. I think mineral water is very important to the tourism industry, and we have to do everything we can to protect it. We need some type of protection zone over the mineral springs area to ensure that excessive growth and excessive boring of water is not putting pressure on our water.

I guess I have tried to say as much I can in that short time. I would like you to take some of those issues seriously and not to can the tourism industry altogether because it is important. But if you do not take seriously some of these social issues, the industry will suffer because of it.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much.

Witness withdrew.