

# CORRECTED VERSION

## RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into rural and regional tourism

Daylesford— 28 June 2007

#### Members

Ms. K. Darveniza

Mr D. Drum

Mr J. Eren

Ms W. Lovell

Mr R. Northe

Ms G. Tierney

Chair: Mr D. Drum

Deputy Chair: Ms G. Tierney

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic

Research Officer: Dr C. Hercus

#### Witness

Mr N. Beare, manager, Hepburn Spa.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Noel, for coming here this morning. This is the Rural and Regional Committee all-party parliamentary committee. We are inquiring into rural and regional tourism. All evidence given before this inquiry is covered by parliamentary privilege under the Constitution Act 1975, the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and the Defamation Act 2005. All evidence given is covered by parliamentary privilege and recorded by Hansard. We must let you know that anything that is repeated outside the building is not covered by parliamentary privilege. In two or three weeks time you will receive a copy of the evidence that will be given today. That will be available for you to peruse and fix up any typographical corrections which need to be made. It is all over to you. Can you start by stating your full name and address and the organisation which you are representing? If you can leave some room for us to ask some questions at the end of the presentation, that would be great.

**Mr BEARE** — Welcome to Daylesford. My name Noel Beare. I have been a full-time resident for 19 years. I have worked at the Hepburn Spa for 19 years. I have been a member of the Daylesford Primary School school council in the capacity of president, vice-president and just as a general council member for over 10 years. I have had some involvement with local sporting clubs, local festivals and community activities. A lot of my verbal submission today is probably based on my experience as a resident in the 20 years that I have been here.

With the terms of reference, I have focused on point 2 which is:

potential impediments to the sustained growth of regional tourism, economic activity and jobs;

I have a few points, which are not in any order of importance and are just some general considerations. One of the main impediments to growth I am experiencing at the moment with the skills shortage is public transport. I have a weekly battle with public transport issues. I have a few staff who come from Melbourne who rely on public transport. The lack of public transport choices to and from Daylesford and Hepburn from regional areas, and also within Daylesford and Hepburn is quite limiting for sourcing staff. I guess some staff have general concerns regarding the cost of private transport to and from Daylesford. I am finding it very difficult to attract staff here, if they do not have the transport, and also to keep staff in the long term. The tyranny of distance seems to take its toll on staff.

I guess it is a pity that in 1976 we had a train. You could get on a train at Spencer Street and arrive at Daylesford. The changeover of buses from Daylesford to Woodend to pick up the Melbourne line is pretty few and far between. It is difficult for staff who are finishing a Sunday night to get a train back or to get up here early on a Saturday morning to start work. There is also quite a rental accommodation shortage that staff find when they come to work in the town. It is bit of a challenge. I have another general level of concern regarding the decreasing funding for regional infrastructure in education. There has been, maybe 10 to 15 years ago, a cut in technical and mechanical facilities at Daylesford Secondary College; there was probably more of a state government education focus on IT. There is a shortage of skills trades in the area, and limited opportunity for employment for local youth outside of the hospitality industry.

General community growth is needed to sustain any increase in visitation and tourism. Over the time that I have been in Daylesford there has been a general reduction in access to public health and public services, which I feel are impediments to growth — access to Centrelink, Medicare, housing, dental services, public surgery. There has been a decline; and there is a waiting list. If you come and work in Daylesford and you need those treatments, if you are on a low income, and a lot of people are on health-care cards, to actually access public dental there is a quite a considerable waiting list. I think that is a potential impediment to growth.

On activities for youth in the area, I believe the strength of the cultural diversity of Daylesford and the community is important to sustain regional growth, whether that be from tourism or growth of other industries, but I would like to see more funded community arts with perhaps community radio, education and TAFE options for the youth. Access to varying sporting options is difficult

for a lot of the youth because of the transport issues. You have to go to other regional areas to experience different sports, and that is very much limited by access to public transport.

On general concern regarding, say, the supply of water, water supply infrastructure and water conservation strategies for the long term, I guess in Daylesford at the moment we are lucky that we are in a high rainfall area, but the unprecedented growth we have experienced was not matched 10 to 15 years ago in planning by the appropriate statutory authorities, and I think we are suffering a little bit from that. We need to project into the future so that does not inhibit growth, not only just for the community but whether we have enhanced visitation.

It has been mentioned to me by residents when I said that I was to appear here that a lot of people in regional areas outside of Daylesford do not have broadband access. A lot cite that as quite a limiting option for them for growth, not only as residences but for small businesses in the outskirts of Daylesford.

I refer to term of reference (3):

the effectiveness, at a national, state and local level, of current programs to promote and enhance tourism in regional Victoria ...

I was pleased to hear Bill praising the virtues of the mineral water. I think a while ago we had the Victorian Mineral Water Committee, and there was quite a lot of public input with that. The funding levels and the committee have dissipated, which prevented the completion of a lot of past plans that were put in place, like the Chris Dance Design and some accessed initiatives that locals have brought up. For the mineral water resources throughout the region that has been a bit of a retrograde step. The Victorian Mineral Water Committee was the advisory board to the DSE on all matters pertaining to mineral water. On a state and local level I think we need to have continuity and consistency in clarity of our state and local planning to ensure that we have a balanced, sympathetic and sustainable growth while importantly preserving the natural, rural attraction of this area.

I do have a bit of concern regarding the potential for overdevelopment of the area. The support for growth over the last 20 years that I have been here has varied from the councils. There have been some that have been very pro-development, others not so. I think it is a bit hard for a lot of businesses to operate; they need to have a sure projection and pathway for them to operate within. Some issues are raising examples of this. People say, 'We love the beauty of this area', but there is a bit of a thing at the moment with the wind farm. Do we want to have wind farms? Some will say they are a blight on the landscape, and some will say they are a saviour and an asset. I am not sure what the answer is there.

Other issues are land. Building block sizes in Daylesford and the region have changed. There is a lot of pressure on development in Daylesford. I think we need to have our planning act together. It has changed over the years.

Term of reference (4) is:

initiatives to increase both international and domestic visitor nights in regional Victoria ...

One of the things that attracted me to this area was the beauty and the natural attractions and the mineral water resource. We need to focus on that natural beauty and attraction by preserving the natural feel and features of the region and increase the quality of the visit. For me a classic example is the Hepburn Springs Mineral Reserve. It will have the redeveloped bathhouse, which will be wonderful, but when you go and visit there it is a very poor information experience, especially regarding the unique mineral water resource. It is an absolute unique resource in this country. As Bill pointed out, most of the nation's mineral waters are in this region. I think we should be doing a bit more to promote what is unique to our area.

There is poor signage, which the other gentleman has related to. There is not much mineral water information or history signage in the big, important reserves. There is poor access and deteriorating walking tracks, poor directional signage — for example, down near Lake Daylesford, the bridge near Sutton Spring. People go down there and it has been out of action for a while and should be replaced. We should focus resources to keep our area beautiful. By increasing the quality of people's visits we know that they are going to stay longer.

We have some excellent standards: a variety of local food and restaurants, and our standards of accommodation have really risen over the period that I have been in Daylesford. I do not see that the same attention has come to some of the natural reserves and parks and the things that contribute to the beauty of the area. There are lots of lovely walks. We could do more with access and information signage for the mineral water reserves. There have been some great tourism initiatives in this town. The information centre has certainly been great, because of its local content. Tourism Victoria Jigsaw programs have been great, and there have been lots of positive tourism initiatives by people like the HRTA.

**Mr NORTHE** — Just going back to public transport, and I know it is very hard to quantify, but if you had your wish and the public transport infrastructure was in place and you were able to address the needs of being able to get skilled workers and the like, how do you try to measure an increase in tourism if you had public transport infrastructure in place? Do you think you are missing out at the moment in terms of tourism numbers by not having that public transport infrastructure in place?

**Mr BEARE** — We get a lot of visitors and a lot of them are quite frustrated. If they get here by public transport, it is very difficult to visit a variety of sites within town because the bus service between Daylesford and Hepburn — although it is a short distance and we do have taxis — is only about once every four hours. If you go down to do something and you miss that bus, it is not conducive to keeping visitors once they are here to operate around.

**Mr NORTHE** — Sorry to interrupt, but is there no community bus as such, or does Hepburn Spa have its own bus?

**Mr BEARE** — We have our own bus just for shuffling clients at the moment. There is a community bus. How much it is actually used I am not sure, but it is frustrating for people to get around Daylesford. I guess one of the limitations I see on growth is that public transport was originally so that people could access areas, and their economic activity could be supported. We would get a lot more Ballarat staff, Castlemaine staff and Woodend staff if they could actually get here and guarantee that they would get home if they did not miss the last bus. I think there is just a limited number. Daylesford has grown and public transport was stripped back over the 70s and 80s et cetera, but I think it would be conducive to increasing the economic activity.

My main issue is actually getting staff. I think staff having access to public transport is a real problem. It inhibits us selling treatments because I cannot get staff. Keeping staff is difficult. The tyranny of distance wears people down. Coming up, if they are driving through winter, the frosty roads — there is black ice, et cetera. People only have to have a couple of bad experiences and they will say, 'Forget it'.

**The CHAIR** — Certainly.

**Ms LOVELL** — Noel, you and a few people this morning have mentioned that the main attraction to this region is the natural mineral waters, and that certainly was the reason for the bathhouse springing up here in the first place. There have been a number of other spa resorts that have established in the area. How many of them actually have access to natural or mineral spring water.

**Mr BEARE** — I believe there are several who actually use some mineral water. It is one of those things that I think the focus in the area has not been on the distinction between a spa bath

with mineral water and a spa bath without. Generally we have seen wonderful growth in the area of general health and wellness, which has increased the size of the pie. There are more players in the thing, which I think is great. There always has been room for a variety and room for a range of spa options for clients. I guess one of the other things in the town is it is nice to see a bit of growth in areas other than spa — for example, when the Mill Markets was set up a lot of locals said to me, ‘Isn’t it nice that there is actually another employment option for people where they do not have to be a masseur or a beauty therapist to get work’.

**Ms LOVELL** — Just to follow up, as the former manager of the bathhouse, what opportunities were there for you, or for the former operators, to have input into the planning of the new bathhouse? I notice in the plans they have given us this morning there appears to be only four spa couches, which was a significant reduction on what was there before, and very popular too.

**Mr BEARE** — I had a limited role with the previous operator prior to 2004. There was feedback taken from that and the basis of the designs were based on that input from me. I had a limited input on that. I was also involved in the shire community liaison group, where there was opportunity for members of the public and also people who are actively involved in the industry to have input.

I guess in the end, that specific thing that you have mentioned, Wendy, is probably a little bit disappointing, that previously the bathhouse had six spa couches which always had people queued up on a Saturday to use them, consistently, and now there are only four. We are getting a wonderful new facility. I just have some concerns that it may not cater for the growth in demand that will happen, probably similar to what happened in 1991 when the bathhouse was redeveloped then. It is certainly going to be an improvement and it is certainly welcomed.

**Ms DARVENIZA** — I have attended the bathhouse a number of times, back in the old days after the last renovations. I am looking forward to visiting it again in its new reincarnation. A couple of questions though: if you had to name for me, really quickly, what the three things were that made this area successful in attracting tourists, what would they be, and what have you got to say about signage?

**Mr BEARE** — Definitely the ambience and natural beauty of the area, the unspoilt sort of nature of the area, the mineral water resource and the strong community — a diverse community. I think those are the three attractions. What was the second part of the question?

**Ms LOVELL** — The signage?

**Mr BEARE** — I think the signage is a real area that should be improved basically for the quality of the visit. If you go down to the Hepburn reserve and to Lake Daylesford, where we have more mineral water than in any other part of the country, if you try to find a bit of information perhaps about the mineral analysis, perhaps any of the therapeutic benefits, and any of the history, you are a better person than me, because I have not been able to see any. Even though there has been a will to do it, it has not actually come to fruition, but I think just for the quality of the visit, when you go down to visit there you would probably be interested to know the differences in the springs and a little bit of mineral analysis. It is such a wonderful resource that I have made a bit of an effort to find out about that because I think it is such a wonderful thing.

We have so many people — because I have traditionally worked in that area — and a lot of the visitors come in asking questions, ‘How long have they been there?’, ‘Who found them?’, ‘What are they good for?’, ‘What is the difference? And I am able to tell them, but I think that information would be much better for our region because it is what is unique about this region, and that is what we should focus on.

**The CHAIR** — Early on in your presentation you painted a picture whereby whilst the valuations of the area are flying and the industry seems to be going very well, maybe people who are not in hospitality and are not in the tourism sector are not so flash.

**Mr Kirby** (*from floor*) — Certainly not!

**Mr BEARE** — Yes, that is right. It is difficult for local employment. I have some teenage sons and basically it is hospitality or nothing really. In Daylesford we are lucky it is a booming town compared to a lot of other rural areas. It is difficult to get tradesmen and the opportunities for young kids to get into a trade is very limited because there has been this vacant technical skills thing in the past. It is wonderful to see that there is a real promotion of that now. We dropped the ball for a while and now we are suffering.

Just on employment opportunities, I am quite concerned about the youth in this town and what their real options are outside of hospitality, and to access them you need to go by public transport to get to Ballarat. They could probably tell you stories about standing out in the rain for long times waiting for the bus and stuff. Not conducive to that growth.

**The CHAIR** — It is an interesting aspect for us to take on board that maybe the building of the tourism industry, as positive as it is, is not having the far-reaching effects on the town and there are some people who might be — —

**Mr Kirby** (*from floor*) — Destroying the place!

**Mr BEARE** — Yes, it has changed the nature of the options they have.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks again for your evidence, Noel. A record of your evidence will be made available to you in a few weeks, and it will be available for you to make any typographical changes and corrections that you see fit. It is great to have someone with 20 years of local experience give evidence today, so we really appreciate your time.

**Witness withdrew.**