

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Ballarat — 8 October 2013

Members

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Mr J. Chadwick, tourism manager, Central Goldfields Shire Council.

The CHAIR — I call Joel Chadwick from the Central Goldfields Shire Council. I indicate that we are running a couple of minutes late, but we will certainly grant you your time and allow enough time for questions. All evidence taken at the meeting is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the Constitution Act 1975, and is further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded, and as a witness you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. With those few words, Mr Chadwick, thank you very much for coming here and joining us this morning.

Mr CHADWICK — Thank you very much, and thank you for the opportunity. First, I would like to acknowledge that I represent the Central Goldfields Shire Council on behalf of Mark Johnston, our CEO, who made the written submission to the inquiry. First of all I will give a small summary of our submission and also say a little bit about the Central Goldfields shire. It is obviously located in the centre of the goldfields, Maryborough being the major hub, with a population of around 8500 people. It is very much a historic shire, with other villages surrounding Maryborough with plenty of heritage assets, in Talbot, Dunolly, Carisbrook, Moliagul, Bealiba, Timor and Majorca. Moliagul is well known as being the site of the largest alluvial gold nugget ever found, at 69 kilograms, and is now very much a historic village. Those listed towns I have just given you form the Central Goldfields shire, and are surrounded by the Mount Alexander shire — for which David, my regional colleague, last presented — and the Loddon shire.

In terms of our submission, as Mark has highlighted, we played a key role in leading the project called Developing Victoria's Goldfields into Australia's Cultural Heritage Region. We played a key role in leading that project until the VGTE, the Victorian Goldfields Tourism Executive, was formed as a regional tourism body. It overarches the two bodies in Bendigo Regional Tourism and Ballarat Regional Tourism. The Victorian Goldfields Tourism Executive — or the VGTE, as it is better known; it might be easier to abbreviate it — is now leading that particular project. The report was done by Ray Tonkin and associates and was completed in February 2012, last year. I have a copy of the report, but I think it was forwarded electronically by Chris Meddows-Taylor from the Victorian Goldfields Tourism Executive, who will be presenting later on. It is an almost 300-page report. He sent a link, and we will provide more in-depth information on that particular project later today.

In terms of the project, to give you a small overview, there was an extensive scoping study that involved 13 municipalities within the goldfields region. It was sanctioned by the two RDAs, the Loddon Mallee and Central Highlands RDAs, and funded by them. It was a scoping study with major cross-regional benefits, with a collaborative approach to creating new growth based in the goldfields region with our extraordinary heritage assets.

Once the report was done — a very in-depth report — it quantified the substantial contribution that tourism makes to economic activity within the goldfields region, the Central Goldfields shire being a part of that, and it assessed the significant economic benefits. The report found that the goldfields are rich in heritage assets with authentic experiences; they possess a point of difference and uniqueness within the national and international context; the Victorian goldfields region has the potential to be a world-class tourism destination; it shares key attributes of successful cultural regions — such as uniqueness in aspiration, supporting infrastructure products and a tourism-friendly culture; and a 1 per cent increase in visitors to the region will inject an additional \$11 million into the annual regional economy, with benefits to the Victorian economy through competitiveness and performance.

It also declared the goldfields region, and particularly the Central Goldfields shire, as an employment disadvantage area. It also obviously has fire and flood issues with this particular need. The Central Goldfields shire is ranked 79 out of 79 on the SEIFA index, so it is an area of disadvantage. As Mark wrote in our submission, the areas that are rich in heritage assets tend to be the areas that are disadvantaged or challenged in that particular area.

To roll the project out, the concept will require a focus on our heritage infrastructure; obviously tourism products, such as tracks and trails throughout the goldfields region; better transport connections and better connecting regionally of tourism and events amongst our other regional partners; accommodation and facility requirements and standards within the goldfields region; and stories and signage, really telling the stories of the goldfields and what these gold rush villages were like back in the gold rush era.

In terms of ecotourism, our submission talks about Maryborough being surrounded by box ironbark forests. At council level it has been discussed for many years now that box ironbark is a quite unique and obviously beautiful asset, but Maryborough could be the home of an interpretive centre in terms of the box ironbark forests. That is generally around the Paddys Ranges State Park, the Maryborough state forests and surrounding parks as well. It would be, not only be an ecotourist attraction but also a great educative facility for schools and the like. That basically covers most things in our submission. I invite any questions on our submission.

Mr BULL — Joel, in your submission you mention, and you touched on again there, that the smaller shires often lack a lot of resources, and a more coordinated approach is required. Is the Victorian Goldfields Tourism Executive filling that void? Is it making a lot of headway in that area to bring that coordinated approach together?

Mr CHADWICK — I think in time. It is a reasonably new body; it has only been operating now since probably the beginning of the year and it is one of the last regional tourism bodies to be set up, so I guess at this stage we are yet to see those particular benefits. But there are destination management plans that I guess the Victorian Goldfields Tourism Executive is overseeing for both Ballarat Regional Tourism, which I think is to be completed by this month sometime, and Bendigo, which will also be completing one, by hopefully the end of this year. In terms of resources, it is obviously another resource there now, but up until this point, because it is a reasonably new body, I guess we are yet to see the actual benefits.

Mr BULL — Just following on from that, you mentioned the box ironbark forest as being unique and obviously within the goldfields region. As the tourism manager of your council, if you had an open cheque for one project, what would you see as the most important project for your region to promote tourism generally across the board, taking into consideration both heritage and ecotourism opportunities?

Mr CHADWICK — Relating to the box ironbark or just open projects?

Mr BULL — Either.

Mr CHADWICK — If I was to relate to our submission, a box ironbark interpretive centre or attraction as such is probably something that is required. We are well known for our heritage railway station, which actually just recently won an award in terms of international significance, which was a UNESCO award. It was one of two awards for Australian buildings. It is a heritage site in its own right and very much I guess the icon of Maryborough. It would be to develop an interpretive centre, relating to this submission.

At a regional level, looking at our priorities, further connecting with our regional partners in terms of tracks and trails and connectivity, bringing tourists out of Melbourne to disperse into regional areas.

Mr BULL — Judging by that answer, you probably see ecotourism as the growth market, perhaps, over your heritage?

Mr CHADWICK — Yes. Certainly our heritage is there and we are well known for our heritage buildings and sites within the shire and that is there, but we certainly see ecotourism and our nature assets as an opportunity to grow into the future.

Ms WREFORD — It made me think, while you answered that question. Do you currently have numbers of tourists going to your area? Are they growing over the numbers in previous years? Do you have projections, and what do you see as impediments to them growing or what can be done to increase them?

Mr CHADWICK — We do have estimated numbers regionally and the first heritage region report does give statistics. We are estimated to have about 120 000 daytrippers and close to 70 000 overnight visitors into the Central Goldfields shire alone.

Ms WREFORD — Over what period of time?

Mr CHADWICK — Each year — annually. We certainly think it is growing. I guess the Central Goldfields has been an area that has not necessarily been seen as a tourism destination in the past, but we have developed a suite of events to obviously help develop that. A couple of our major events and new events have certainly brought good numbers into the area. In terms of the key to continuing to increase, I think once again that is

about connectivity back to Melbourne. Back in 2010 Maryborough had its passenger train service reinstated. At the moment it is just one train in and out a day, which is obviously better than none, but we hope to be somewhere around what Ararat gets the moment, which I think is four services a day.

At the moment our train is not necessarily set up for a tourism purpose; it is more for locals commuting to Ballarat — we are on the Ballarat line — and on to Melbourne for work and vice versa. We have a train that leaves early in the morning out of Maryborough and then returns at night. From my point of view, we would really love to see more services to enable those daytrippers to come into the area.

The CHAIR — It is going the wrong way for you.

Mr CHADWICK — Yes. It is roughly a 2-hour train trip. You actually arrive at the beautiful railway station and you step out onto a project that was completed recently called Station Domain, which is a beautiful precinct out the front of the Maryborough railway station. It has beautiful parklands and is a great area for showcasing events and markets. It actually has a stage with seating arrangements which at the moment has just been funded for large shade sails to be installed so that we can have events on weekends, musical events and the like.

Ms WREFORD — Have you had any talks with anyone about having an extra train service for the tourists? I am sure that is what — —

Mr CHADWICK — Yes. Certainly council was lobbying with governments and the change of governments to get more services put in, that is for sure.

Ms DUNCAN — How is that going for you?

Mr CHADWICK — We are still waiting at the minute, so we will continue to keep lobbying. I will just touch on the Talbot railway station, which is about to undergo a major redevelopment, Talbot being in the Central Goldfields shire. Recent railway station upgrades have been the upgrade of the Creswick railway station on our line, and the Clunes upgrade, but Talbot's railway station is about to be reopened. Works were supposed to start in the second half of this year. Obviously it adds another stop within the Central Goldfields and is in one of our beautiful villages that has a beautiful streetscape. At the moment the streetscape is under redevelopment. It has beautiful bluestone drains and culverts. It is a winding street which hosts the Talbot Farmers Market, which is a major event each month, especially for a town the size of Talbot. It injects on average around 3000 people in on the third Sunday of each month. For a town the size of Talbot — which has around 500 to 600 people — it really injects a lot.

Ms DUNCAN — It is a big deal.

Mr CHADWICK — Yes, and it takes a lot of volunteer help. It is very much about community pride for Talbot. It is their gem, and it is actually well known as one of the better farmers markets outside Melbourne in regional Victoria.

The CHAIR — Joel, I was interested in the V/Line situation, with the train going in the morning and coming back at night. Accommodation would be a great advantage there to some degree, I should imagine. Firstly, have you had any discussions with V/Line in relation to that mode of transport, which is really important for tourism, getting away from people driving cars and changing that thought process? Secondly, from your own point of view, what are some of the key infrastructure projects that would assist in boosting tourism to the Central Goldfields region, and how would you see those necessarily being funded to make it all possible? Visitation by rail is probably something that you have done a lot of work on. If you have, we would be happy to hear about the work you have undertaken there with V/Line, but also from the point of view of those infrastructure projects that you see as taking the next step and how you resource them.

Mr CHADWICK — In terms of the train service, a couple of years ago our main point was obviously to get the train service, which was finished up back in the early 90s with the Kennett government, reinstated. The first step was to get that reinstated, mainly for I guess locals at the moment in the actual services that are running. At council level we have certainly spoken with V/Line and government agencies to get further services in place. We are obviously monitoring numbers in terms of the current service that is being used, which is being used

quite well now. Obviously the other priority was to get the second railway station opened, which is the Talbot railway station, within our shire, along that particular line.

We really want to push government to get us to somewhere close to the Ararat model that has the four services in and out a day. I mentioned that we average around 120 000 day visitors a year, so to give another mode of transport to enable those in the Melbourne market to take a short 2-hour trip either way, whether it be a day trip or by a tourist jumping on a train and coming up for a couple of nights to experience the area and our assets. That is something that we see as a priority for council, and we will continue to push with the agencies into the future.

In terms of the infrastructure projects, I guess a lot of it will relate to the first heritage region project. We see developing our streetscapes along with our heritage backdrop in terms of our buildings to make them more tourism friendly but also linking with our regional partners in terms of tracks and trails. We see cycling tourism as an advantage for our particular area. We have 15 cycling tracks, so we want to market that and also link it in with the trains so cyclists can put their bike on the train and come up, so they do not require a vehicle at all. Obviously the Sprinter trains have limits on the number of bicycles that are allowed on them, but we see marketing that as a key asset for our shire. These trails wind through the box ironbark forests and past the majority of our heritage attractions, so they are cycle tracks that are in place to give the tourist a tourism experience.

We see further linking with our regional partners in Mount Alexander shire or with our regional tourism boards and sitting on those boards and developing projects and riding on the coat-tails of Ballarat and Bendigo as the major hubs of the goldfields as a strategic advantage for us.

The CHAIR — Just rounding it off, what do you see as the main advantages of the campaign to secure UNESCO world heritage listing for the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park?

Mr CHADWICK — It puts us on a global scale straightaway. It would be a nationally and globally recognised area. Getting the listing would obviously benefit the first heritage region project and give further ammunition to push forward the project in terms of implementation.

The CHAIR — Is Central Goldfields actively working with its neighbouring municipalities to pursue that? What is the current situation?

Mr CHADWICK — Certainly. Through the first heritage region project, along with the 13 other municipalities and the government bodies in Parks Victoria, Heritage Victoria and Tourism Victoria as well, we are working actively together through this particular project to achieve that result.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Joel. You have rounded off our time very nicely for us.

Mr CHADWICK — Beautiful.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. We appreciate you giving your time to join us here today to add your contribution and speak to your submission.

Mr CHADWICK — Thank you very much for the opportunity.

The CHAIR — We appreciate your time.

Witness withdrew.