

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Ballarat — 8 October 2013

Members

Mr T. Bull

Mr J. Pandazopoulos

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Mr D. Koch

Chair: Mr D. Koch

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Witnesses

Ms F. Barkla, Maryborough, tourism operator;

Ms M. Kau, Talbot, tourism operator;

Mr M. Kau, Talbot, tourism operator; and

Mr A. Stoneman, Carisbrook, tourism operator.

The CHAIR — I welcome Faye Barkla, Marie Kau, Max Kau and Alex Stoneman, representing goldfields tourism operators. We thank you very much for sparing your time to come to join us today. We very much appreciate that. All evidence taken at this hearing 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 witnesses you will be provided with proof versions of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. We look forward to your joint contributions. I suggest that we have 5 minutes from each participant, and then we will field some questions. That would be of great benefit to us in our reporting process. I will leave it to you to determine who starts and who finishes.

Ms BARKLA — I will start.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Faye.

Ms BARKLA — First of all, you referred to us like we were a committee for goldfields tourism. Goldfields tourism does not have a committee and does not have a membership — for what reason, I do not know — so there is no joint body that represents the goldfields area in tourism. We have been asked to come here today by Chris Meddows-Taylor. That is why I am here, anyway. I do not represent anybody at all. Kelly suggested that I point out to you how the arrangements are made with the Central Goldfields Shire Council and VicTrack, where we lease the station building. I do not know if you are aware of the Maryborough station and its heritage, but it is a wonderful building and it is, to me, the premier tourist spot in the town, although it is not promoted. I do not understand why it is not promoted. There is no signage for it. As you come into the town you cannot even find the station; you have to go looking for it.

I think the greatest problem in the Maryborough area with tourism is the fact that it does not have a tourist body, it does not have council backing on any tourism plans and it just seems to stumble along. Therefore you do not get truly professional operators, and if they do come, they will not last in the town, because there is no support. You cannot just work it all on your own.

My son and I have bought the lease on this building — part of the building, not all of it. We were assured by the Central Goldfields council that we would have their full support in everything we did, and that just has not happened. It has been a great disappointment to us. We lease through the shire, and they lease through VicTrack. It is not a good situation to be in. It should be that we lease directly from VicTrack, because you have another department in the way; you have V/Line and VicTrack, and then you have the shire and then you come down to us. By the time you come down to the operators you have very little power. You have so many people interrupting your business, and everybody has a different view on what is correct and what is not correct, and you are dealing with shire people who might be very good at running a shire, but they are not very good tourism operators, and they are definitely not good businesspeople.

I think you need to cut out the third party, and it should be just somebody dealing direct — or it should be just run as a railway station, because in the, I think, 18 years it has operated there have been constant fights with the council. We have been there for two years, and as an experienced tourism operator I really disregarded all the bad things I had heard and thought, 'If you are a professional person and you are dealing with a professional operation, it would all go smoothly'. That has not been the case. That is the history on how the leasing works; in short, it does not work.

I think that heritage tourism really should be promoted in the Maryborough area because there are very few work opportunities up there. You may be aware that it has one of the highest unemployment percentages in Victoria, and it really needs a tourism kick to keep it going. There are so many good things up there, but without a proper tourism body coming in and running it professionally I do not think it is worthy of putting millions of dollars into if it continues in the same way. There is no point giving the money to the shire, because nothing will be done with it. You need a professional body coming in and highlighting the good points of the town, and then it should run on, but in its current state of affairs I do not think it will work. You have too many little committees that do not coordinate, and you need somebody to come in and coordinate the whole thing. Is that my 5 minutes? I do not want to talk too long.

The CHAIR — That is okay. Thanks, Faye, and we appreciate you operating the Maryborough Station Antiques and Cafe as a viable business. As you will appreciate, this morning we did have Joel Chadwick, the

tourism manager, with us, so we take your points on board at this stage. I assume that from where you sit discussions do take place with Joel in his capacity.

Ms BARKLA — Joel is a very nice young man, but I feel he does not have the experience necessary to run a big tourism organisation — but saying that, he could be easily guided by the right person. He does not have that guidance at the moment. He takes direction from an office worker in the shire office.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Marie might make her presentation in her role as secretary of the Talbot Arts and Historical Museum and also as a member of the Central Goldfields shire heritage advisory committee. Thanks, Marie.

Ms KAU — Thank you. As Mr Koch has just said, I am the secretary of the Talbot Arts and Historical Museum. I have also been an office-bearer of the Central Highlands Historical Association, which is an umbrella group for — I am not sure now — about 30 groups belonging to that. Although I am from Talbot and I am going to really relate most of the remarks I make to Talbot, I do have a bit of a broader perspective, and, as you have noted also, I am also on the heritage advisory committee. I must say, unfortunately — and I think Alex will say a little more about this — that the heritage advisory committee meets very irregularly. I could say a lot more about that, but I will not, because I think Alex will say a little more about it. Being from Talbot, I suppose I am being a little presumptuous in thinking that — but I suspect it to be true — some of the comments I am going to make about my experience, particularly in the museum area and the tourism area, probably can be extrapolated to numerous other small towns in the Central Goldfields area. I have tried to structure it so that it addresses the various terms of reference fairly briefly.

The current state of heritage tourism in Victoria is enormous, in my opinion, with current arrangements lagging behind demand. One extremely high-demand area which the regional community museum and historical society sector is aware of is for genealogical and local history services and information. Victoria has about 700 community museums, of which about two-thirds are regional. They hold approximately 1.5 million cultural heritage items of local, state and national significance, so we are the custodians, as you can see, of quite an important chunk of history. Much of this relates to people; however, much of it is in a real way locked away. In other words, accessibility is the big challenge and one which has not really been met in a consistent or comprehensive manner. I will explain a little more about that.

The public is now accustomed to gaining excellent access online to genealogical information via such internet programs as Ancestry. However, community museums and historical societies hold many unique and equally informative items. For example, the Talbot museum has in its care — and this is just one of many similar — the original minute books of the municipal governments of the area from 1858, carefully stored in probably not prime museum standards, but we do the best we can. Leaving aside the matter of the jeopardy these historical documents are in, because in most cases there are no copies, their existence is not generally known about by the public, so a valuable resource for family and local history research remains largely untapped.

Best practice in dealing with this particular matter would be to digitise and index such historical documents and to compile a directory of community museums and their holdings for wide distribution to provide the public with access to information about where valuable family and local historical information is located. Second next best would be to compile the directory only, and the expertise to do this actually does reside within the community museums and historical societies. I think, again, Alex will probably say a little more about that.

This would be a valuable resource, particularly for accommodation operators, who are often the first port of call for visitors seeking family and local information. From the point of view of the Talbot museum — and I feel quite sure from speaking to other people through my larger connection that most people who visit regional museums walk through the door ostensibly to look at the museum, but I would say about 98 per cent of them sidle up and then say, 'Oh, great granny came from here', and, 'Do you have anything about' — blah. The great demand is just there; it is a sleeping giant.

The next best would be to research and compile a map only of the Victorian goldfields. This is a very simple thing, really. I suppose I am speaking quite small picture here, but nevertheless it would be a useful thing. It could have brief information, including a contact person, telephone, email, opening times and a summary of the museum or historical society's focus. This has been done in the Hunter Valley, where there is such a thing, and I have a copy of it here. Again, this would be a valuable resource for accommodation operators, as previously

mentioned. Often we are asked, 'Do you have a history of Talbot?', or, 'Do you have this or that', so we know that there is huge unmet demand for all that we have.

Another related matter is that overwhelmingly community museums are staffed by volunteers who have minimal relevant training. To realise the potential for developing heritage tourism, including the study of family and local history, support needs to be provided for these volunteers who, it has been estimated, return at least sevenfold in their output in relation to input to their activities. If for only this reason, providing support to volunteers is well worth the investment.

As a result of state government initiatives commenced in 2003, leading to the key directions framework arising from the consultations and resultant report, *Revitalising Victoria's Community Museums*, a community museums strategy was developed which recognised the need to support, encourage and strengthen the capacity and resources of community-based organisations. This work is well documented. However, for the Victorian goldfields it resulted in a community museum pilot project which ran from 2007 and concluded only last year, during which time it provided locally delivered training for volunteers among other support roles. That training, particularly the local delivery, was extremely well received by a lot of people connected with societies and museums, because often people find it quite difficult to get to workshops and so on in Melbourne.

On the environmental and heritage issues associated with large-scale tourism, one of the challenges facing us in the goldfields region is that of remote and scattered sites of interest — that is, things that are not in the towns and that are currently unprotected. An example of this would be Aboriginal sites such as rock wells, which are unmarked, uncared for and occasionally vandalised. Another is the souveniring of such items as Chinese headstones, which of course are to be found in most goldfields cemeteries.

There is no immediately obvious solution to this, apart from not publicising precise locations and escorting visitors to them. That is what we have tended to do in Talbot. We tend not to give very precise instructions about where some of these things can be seen, and we say to people, 'We'll take you there'. Also they are hard to find. This requires people power and training in guiding visitors to heritage sites. I think I heard that mentioned before. I cannot emphasise enough how much we need assistance with training of volunteers.

On whether the local industry is sufficiently advanced to manage increased tourism and any obstacles to this, I have already mentioned the issue of training. It is a quite specialised area, dealing with visitors with an interest in cultural heritage, both local and others. I undertake guided walking tours in Talbot and I have done so for a number of years, and over that time I have also trained other volunteers to take groups on the walk. It is not really something that just anyone can do well.

The CHAIR — Marie, I am not wishing to cut your contribution short, but we have now gone for 10 minutes. So that the others can make a contribution, if we could just curtail it, we might be able to pick something up in a question.

Ms KAU — I will try to just summarise the rest.

The CHAIR — I think we will have a couple of other speakers, if that is okay.

Ms KAU — Yes.

The CHAIR — Max, in your role as the Talbot Tourism committee member — and I understand that you are also the initiator of the Talbot Farmers Market* — we would like to hear your presentation, too.

Mr KAU — Yes. I wrote the successful submission for that project. That is what put Talbot basically back on the map and led us to look at more active involvement in preserving, looking after and promoting our heritage. Without going into a great deal of detail, we have done that on the smell of an oily rag virtually, because there are only 350 people in Talbot and of those only half a dozen seem to be willing to volunteer their services to these kinds of endeavours. However, a few years ago we did attempt to run a heritage weekend which would fill a gap on a weekend when there was not the farmers market, so that we had two weekends covered. We hoped that that would spin or roll over in terms of customers coming into Talbot and looking at what we had to offer. As Marie said, a lot of our things are hidden and therefore they have to be escorted tours.

I took the initiative of applying for a small grant of \$6500 of local history grant money to try to get some sort of heritage weekend running in Talbot on a regular basis that complemented the Talbot Farmers Market and gave those 40 000 people who came every year an opportunity to see our town and to learn a little bit more about the gold rush. We put together what we call heritage weekends, and with that \$6500 we tried to publicise them and to print some material that would be useful to visitors and tourists coming into the town. At the same time we put on a number of tours, both motorised tours in terms of minibuses and walking tours which included the cemetery walk and the town walk. We tried to take people into the treasured places where we knew there were a lot of hidden tourist attractions that needed to be publicised.

To give you just a very brief idea of one of these treasures that we discovered, we found that there was a school not far from Talbot which is now what we would say is nonexistent. Basers have actually reduced the school to dust and left very little evidence that there was in fact a school there. However, a very enterprising primary school teacher has actually used the schoolyard as an outdoor education centre. It is one of the first of its kind, I think, in the education system in our state. What she has done basically is set up a geography lesson for her students by, with white stones, marking the boundaries of the country called Australia and also the states that occupy that particular area. I can imagine her sitting there with her little handful of students drawn from the local community and running an Australian geography lesson in the open air in the vicinity of this particular school. It is a unique feature which I think we should be preserving, and we should be saying that this is something that Talbot developed very early in the piece and it continued until early in the 21st century.

There are things like that that draw people's attention to the town and give them an opportunity to look at how difficult life was for the mining population of that time and how remote some of those facilities were for students who really wanted to learn. There is also a right-angled triangle, and you can ask me why she did a right-angled triangle. I suppose it was because of the square on the hypotenuse. She was able to give her students a geometry lesson as well, and maybe some of those students found out how to actually create a square in a building project. There is another example of something unique.

When the area was reviewed recently by a group of volunteers, we came up with a long list of possible tourist attractions or destinations in Talbot. Many of these are in a terrible state of disrepair after 150 years, as you can imagine. There are Chinese relics near Talbot, including a Chinese bathhouse and Joss house. There are shafts that have been dug by Chinese people. They do round shafts, by the way, rather than square ones, and they seem to avoid the need for shoring up the mine so it does not collapse. As Marie said, we also have a lot of Aboriginal sites hidden in the bush, which are being vandalised and not being protected. Every one of those tourist sites has a dollar sign alongside it for me, because we need to fix up the roads, we need to fix up the signs and we need to fix up the sites. The place is derelict in many ways, as far as tourism is concerned, because we are not able to show off the benefits that we have there to other people, whether they come from interstate or overseas.

Something I wanted to say today is that one of the things we have managed to achieve in Talbot is to save a lot of old buildings. Buildings that were built in the 1860s have now been preserved as a result of grants that have been sought. In fact nearly \$1.2 million has been poured into saving two particular buildings. One is the two-storey commercial hotel, which obviously was the first port of call for a lot of miners who came to the area and a lot of salesmen who wanted to sell the miners lots of stuff. That building is still standing today and is being re-used as a cafe and meeting point for the people of the town. Similarly, we have been able to rescue a shop, which was for mining equipment, mining tools and clothing suitable for miners, and that building is now a cafe open to the general public and visitors. We have tried to keep as many of our old buildings as possible, rescue as much of them as we could and put them into modern usage today, and I think that is an important part of heritage tourism — that is, to use buildings rather than have to recreate buildings, as has been the case with a lot of other tourist attractions.

I think I have nearly run out of time. What I would like to say in closing is that a lot of this may sound as though it is all right, but tourism is the only real industry that we have at our disposal in this particular small, shall we call it, village of the goldfields. Tourism is all we have left and we should be preserving it, looking after it and making it work for us. We are about to have a passenger train stop at our Talbot station, which will enable us to attract a lot more city dwellers and tourists from overseas who come to Melbourne to come up and look at what we have in our area. That train timetable, after it has been doctored a little bit and made to suit our needs, will also help us with the farmers market, so the growth potential of the farmers market is there as well.

We have had a go at doing tourism and there is the evidence of it. I hope I can leave some of these things with the committee for you to look at in your leisure time. We did DL flyers and we did a souvenir booklet that lists a lot of the very important tourist locations and tourist attractions that we have. We are a town struggling to grow and develop population wise and house wise, and we hope that tourism will be the means for us to achieve some of these objectives.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Max. Alex, we look forward to your presentation. I do not wish to cut anyone short, but we have to conclude by 12.15 p.m. We are travelling on to Castlemaine and through there this afternoon, so we have that scheduled. Alex, by all means, we would like to hear your presentation.

Mr STONEMAN — Anything I say will not hold you up from that venture. I will mention a bit about my background and then address three issues: firstly, a bit about the volunteer's role in heritage, which you are keen to hear about — —

The CHAIR — My apologies, Alex. I did not introduce you as being a member of the Carisbrook Historical Society.

Mr STONEMAN — Thank you. Secondly, how the expertise that we have in the localities, particularly in historical societies, may be made better use of and, thirdly, just a few comments about an ecotourism venture proposal that is at the genesis stage.

Firstly, I was a history teacher in a former life. I counted back and found it is 42 years since I joined a historical society. I have toured around the countryside, as you do as a teacher, and joined lots of historical societies in that time. I have been a former president of the Central Highlands Historical Association centred in Ballarat. I have organised a number of heritage and history activities, workshops, forums and so on, but I will not go into that. I am a member of the Central Goldfields heritage advisory committee and a member of Carisbrook Historical Society.

The first issue is volunteers in heritage tourism. Just about every centre in rural Victoria has key volunteer organisations, which have a focus on history and heritage. These are the local societies devoted to the preservation of and making accessible community records and heritage items. These societies include historical societies, family history and genealogical groups, vintage heritage groups and museums. All these societies have a number of roles in common. They collect items, which they catalogue and index; they conserve and store them; they put on displays; they publish books, booklets, journals, newsletters and guides; they conduct workshops and arrange speakers for the society and members of the public. They maintain mainly heritage buildings and carry considerable insurance costs.

Almost without exception local societies do all these things through their volunteer members. They are, by and large, self-funding, relying on research fees, donations and fundraising activities, but they are getting better at making applications for funding from other sources, including the state government. Most are recognised places of deposit by the Public Record Office Victoria, so they can hold documents of local significance. Within the goldfields region there are over 50 such organisations.

How can this expertise be made more effective use of? Firstly, by strengthening historical and heritage-based societies. Societies are experiencing more call on their services. More people are exploring their roots through society visits, cemetery strolls, document and photograph research, and on the web. Most societies need help with computer-based activities and to maintain an up-to-date website, because most of their members have no hair or have hair my colour. We are keeping up with the computer age, but it is going to overwhelm us.

Secondly, their expertise can be made use of more effectively by their getting published. My most recent count of publications by goldfields-based societies was over 300, and that was in 2008! Thirdly, this can happen through displays and exhibitions. The material costs to arrange exhibitions to a curatorial standard are expensive, but more of these need to be done.

Fourthly, there are LGA heritage advisory committees. Many local historical societies nominate representatives for their LGA heritage advisory committees. While nearly all local LGAs have such committees, their histories are very chequered. We have reports from each of the groups at our quarterly CHHA meetings. A few appear to be functioning really well and are very productive; most are not. They meet irregularly or rarely, they lack sufficient support from the council or council officers, or they are mystified as to their purpose. The government

might be well served to spell out some guidelines for these committees and make heritage grants contingent on the LGA complying with them and subject to annual reporting to the state government.

Fifthly, by LGA tourism bodies; if the tourism organisation is dealing with heritage issues — events, publications and exhibitions, for instance — it would be useful to liaise with the local district historical society. This is especially productive with the design and wording of tourist heritage signage or of mobile phone apps, for which there is significant potential.

Sixthly, by society/funding body agreements; as local historical societies become more professional — that is, meeting the criteria for Museums Victoria accreditation — increased funding should be forthcoming in return for binding agreements to get to this professional level of operation and maintain agreed standards. This could apply to agreements between tourism bodies and historical societies on such matters as deadlines for completion of agreed tasks. These are critical things, and I think they would be a big plus.

Lastly, I will report on the genesis of a local ecotourism project. This is based in Central Goldfields shire, centred on Maryborough. A heritage tourism project centred on bird habitats in Central Goldfields shire is an innovation just under way, with an application to part fund a consultant to test its viability. We envisage a series of artworks placed at significant sites, with accompanying apps for descriptors, bird sounds and locations. Locally over 200 species of bird have been identified in our shire. Mr Chair and committee members, thank you very much for listening to me.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee I thank all four of you for your presentation to us today. There is certainly no lack of enthusiasm in Talbot, Carisbrook and Maryborough in trying to put together tourism ventures for not only your own communities but also the broader community, be it statewide or nationally. I think you express the frustration of small communities in endeavouring to achieve some of these outcomes. I pick up on Alex's comments that consideration might be given to putting in place some guidelines and funding opportunities for smaller community activities, especially in tourism, be it heritage or ecotourism. I appreciate you bringing your concerns and thoughts to the table today. Obviously they will contribute to our report, which will be tabled in Parliament in the middle of 2014.

Mr BULL — Max, I am interested in the heritage weekends that you have organised in your little township. It sounds like a wonderful initiative. How many of these do you run a year, and do you have any data or figures around increased visitation to the town perhaps as a result of the initiative you have introduced?

Mr KAU — We were a bit disappointed in the roll-up to the heritage weekends, even though we had done a lot of preparation and spent a lot of money from that grant of \$6500 on advertising, marketing and promotion of the events. There is something wrong there somewhere, and it could well be that we do not have the expertise to market these kinds of events.

Mr BULL — Where were you looking to draw visitors from?

Mr KAU — We hoped we would touch Melbourne, but I do not know whether we did. We probably drew people from Ballarat, Bendigo and Maryborough, the larger towns in the district, and a few locals showed an interest. Part of the problem was that there were no locals prepared to work on the project, so our shortage is also in the volunteer area. With such a small population, because we tell stories in the market square which are old stories from the gold rush days, we virtually need a staff of people to make it more like a street theatre event than just somebody standing up and telling a story. We raise flags, we play music and we have interjections. We try to make it a very entertaining event.

Mr BULL — It sounds like Parliament.

Mr KAU — Yes. We are short of resources, and that is basically because we do not have anyone who is taking responsibility for recruiting those helpers and training them up so that they can do their job in a much more professional and interesting way.

Mr BULL — Just out of interest, do you have a traders association or business and tourism association?

Mr KAU — We have a Talbot Tourism committee, which is part of Talbot Action Inc., which I am the president of. It is not functioning very well at the moment. It needs to function better so that we can take on

these kinds of projects and also recruit more people who stand back from getting involved in things in a small town like that. Put your hand up and you are in trouble, in Talbot. I did back when I first came at the turn of the century, and look at what has happened to me: I am just swallowed up by the tasks and the journey that we had to take to try to make Talbot work. A lot of people are wary of that kind of involvement. They come to Talbot basically to enjoy the beautiful fresh air, the beautiful ambience and the country living style which we offer. They do not necessarily come to work as volunteers.

Mr BULL — No, and I think that that scenario that you outline typifies the challenges of a lot of country communities of a similar size, it is probably fair to say.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Faye, obviously there are a lot of government-owned heritage buildings, and having a commercial use for them is a very good way of being able to preserve them and make them available for more community use. You said that your big concern is around having to deal with four layers of bureaucracy. I would not mind hearing a little bit more about that, particularly how it affects your business and your ability to make decisions about the business. Secondly, although there is only one V/Line service, I understand your views, and we heard from council about trying to expand that. Are you seeing that there might be potential with V/Line promoting the destination rather than just selling rail tickets?

Ms BARKLA — Definitely. I think that that is the whole point, that V/Line sells rail tickets for 20 minutes in the morning and that is it. There are people coming in all the time wanting to know the history of this station, what services are available, how they can buy tickets et cetera. There is nobody manning the station, so there is no encouragement for people when they want to do tours or whatever. It definitely needs a service that comes up in the daytime and goes back. At the moment you can leave at 7.30 and come back at 6.30, which is great compared to what they had, which was nothing. It is a very good service when it all runs smoothly. But people cannot hop on the train and come up from Melbourne for the day, like they do to Geelong, Bendigo or a place like that, so you are losing out on the tourist people. Now it is just used by locals going to appointments or whatever they have to do and people going to Ballarat to work. It is an excellent service, but you are not bringing in any heritage people.

I have had inquiries from people who want come up. They have to stay overnight, so then you have to find them accommodation. If they do not have a car, it is not as if you can just walk out and walk to each thing. Some people are not able to do that; they are not able bodied. It does not work for tourism the way it is. You really need more from V/Line there. As I said, V/Line is open for 20 minutes in the morning and they sell tickets and that is it. We handle inquiries every single day, on the phone and by people coming in. We are not equipped with V/Line information for them. We do the best we can, but that is not our job; that is V/Line's job. So there is a problem there in how the station operates.

On your other question of dealing with the layers, it simply does not work.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — What are some examples of how it has affected your ability to run your business and make decisions?

Ms BARKLA — One example is that the local private school wanted to have a ball, which they did have. We leased the interior of the building through the local shire office. The actual use of the platform and the track is a separate lease that we have with V/Line. We also have only part of the foyer and part of the area outside to put tables and chairs in. So each one is covered by a different authority that tells us where we can place tables and chairs, where in the foyer we can use and how much of the platform we can use for people to go to the toilet. There used to be a market for antiques held on the platform four times a year. V/Line said, 'No, you can't have that anymore'. That used to bring thousands of people, and I mean thousands, to that market, but that has been stopped. It is fine that has been stopped.

With this ball that we were having, at the very last minute one of the council officers in the office got hold of V/Line and said, 'It has to be stopped. What they are doing is illegal because you are going to have thousands of people on the platform'. It was petty, and it was stupid. It is what you get in country areas with little people in little positions in little offices in little towns. We then had to submit a whole lot of paperwork to V/Line just to allow people to go to the toilet. That took over a week, and until the last 24 hours we did not know whether we could operate it or not. That is the sort of interruption we have to our business.

There are other things. The heating does not work. Council say that it is our responsibility; V/Line say that we cannot touch it. In the meantime we run expensive electric heaters. It does not work. Council want us to be open every night or at least four nights a week. We have tried it. It does not pay. We are actually losing money by opening the doors at night, yet council have bagged us for not opening. Council have no idea of running a small business. When you have the local shire office involved, this is what you are coming up against.

We need to be really just running with VicTrack: this is what you have, these are your hours and these are your areas — end of story. You do not need another government body involved in it.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Just one quick one to the heritage groups: on applications for funding, I think the maximum for heritage grants is \$5000, and it has been that for a very long time. Do you see that as a barrier to being able to access some funding to do some reasonable amount of work? With technology nowadays, you will spend \$5000 pretty quickly. You think we need to look at the types of grants that are available — the volume and size of the grants — in order to get more projects done to a suitable stage?

Mr KAU — I can say that our little grant of \$6500 was adequate for us to do the job. I imagine that if we wanted to be more extensive in our expenditure, we would not have the room to do that. When we put in the application we were free to go up to a certain amount, and we fell short of the \$10 000 which I think was recommended as the highest you could apply for by saying that we only wanted \$6500. The \$6500 was very useful to us, and we got the best possible program for that money up and running. That did include the cost of getting free buses from the shire to cart people around from site to site.

That is the problem with these hidden, out-of-the-way places. The roads are very bad, and the drivers do not like to bring their minibuses on the roads, for starters. There is no signage, so someone has to go with them to say, 'Turn right, turn left, go here, miss that tree, avoid that puddle'. There is a lot of expenditure associated with the upkeep of these particular sites. Because they are hidden, they are not usually inspected. They are out of sight, and therefore they are not seen as important assets for tourism. They are seen as out-of-the-way, hidden treasures, as they are called. We have to find the treasures, sign them or man the bus and make sure that it gets there.

Most people are appreciative of the fact that in our area there are really precious and important things to see that are associated with the gold rushes, and they want to see them. Basically the bus driver always complains about the scratches on his bus as he goes underneath a tree, or he is always worried about the mud splatters on the bus after and asks, 'Who's going to clean it?'. We have a few minor problems like that, which are easily overcome.

Mr STONEMAN — Could I add just one comment?

The CHAIR — Very quickly, Alex. We have to wind up.

Mr STONEMAN — One problem for our shire, and we find this through the heritage advisory committee, is that the grants for heritage are so limited that throughout our shire at least there is demolition by neglect on a huge scale. Max has referred to that, I guess, but that is an observation that I make about heritage grants.

The CHAIR — Thank you all very much for your attendance today. We have really appreciated the time you have given us and also your presentation. We took the opportunity of running a little bit longer. In fact, very rarely do we have contributions from four presenters, but the committee and I thought it was important that we catered for your needs here today to hear about the small community concerns that are raised and the frustration that comes out. We appreciate the contribution of your thoughts, which will be considered as we prepare our report for tabling in Parliament in mid-2014. Again, on behalf of the committee I thank you all very much for participating.

Witnesses withdrew.