

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Lakes Entrance — 5 December 2013

Members

Mr T. Bull
Ms J. Duncan
Mr D. Koch

Mr J. Pandazopoulos
Ms L. Wreford

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Witnesses

Ms H. Hoppner, chairperson, and
Mr A. Lewis, marketing and promotion, Gippsland Plains Rail Trail.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I welcome Helen Hoppner, chairperson, and Alan Lewis, marketing and promotion, from Gippsland Plains Rail Trail. All evidence taken at this hearing today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided under the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. You will be aware that all evidence today is being recorded. A transcript of the discussions today will be forwarded to you within the next couple of weeks. I ask you to make your presentation, and we will take the opportunity to ask some questions later on. We have a half-hour time frame.

Ms HOPPNER — Firstly, can I thank you on behalf of our volunteer committee of management who have worked on this project for 20 years for the opportunity to present our case today. I must explain to you that when we sent our submission to you an important section of our rail trail from Glengarry to Traralgon had not been connected. We are pleased to report that this section will be started next week, with a time line to finish at the end of March 2014. Strategically this connection to the regional town of Traralgon is very important as it fully connects the trail, apart from three bridges, which I will mention later, and will connect trail users to public transport.

We would like to address the three issues mentioned in our submission and talk to the first two issues together, because they relate to each other — that is, the scope of ecotourism and heritage tourism in central Gippsland. The Gippsland Plains Rail Trail fits well with both ecotourism and heritage tourism. The 67 kilometres stretches across a section of Gippsland which coincides with the track explorers McMillan and Strzelecki took in 1840. While the history of Australia is young compared with that of England and Europe, it is nonetheless just as important and the onus is on us to preserve what we can of our historic buildings and artefacts along the trail.

Gippsland settlements were established in the railway alignment built in 1883. The seven towns along the way still have significant historic buildings, both publicly and privately owned, which enhance the heritage aspect of this rail trail and will result in future visitations from trail users in small communities along the way. The historic Glengarry station is an example of this, and while it remains our management responsibility, it is not matched with funds to undertake this task. The station at Maffra has been taken out of community hands and put into the hands of private business on a long lease. This is a future issue for our committee and community to deal with as it should be retained in public ownership.

The railway history and heritage of every rail trail across the country should never be underestimated, and we have started to work on ensuring that the history of the trail is not lost as time goes by. I present to you a historic calendar we published some time ago. This depicts a little of our history from each town along the way and the importance of the transport network to industry in Gippsland. We will use this information on our rail trail website in the near future. We are also placing historic railway station signs at every railway station site along the trail, and in the future we will place historic information signage for trail users to understand the history and significance of the railway transport network.

While most of our historic railway bridges are now gone, we do have five left, which we can save, rebuild and retain. The four La Trobe River bridges are being refurbished in the next three months, and there are state government funds for that project.

The remnants of the fifth bridge, over Boggy Creek at Tinamba, are typical of how ad hoc our funding for the project has been. This bridge has been partially funded with flood recovery money from the state government: \$48 000 is sitting in Wellington shire's coffers waiting for the extra funds to complete the bridge. A further \$18 000 will be forthcoming from the Department of Environment and Primary Industries and \$2000 from the rail trail accounts, yet we cannot start the project because we are \$30 000 short of the target of \$100 000, so the project languishes while we try to find the funding shortfall. As a result we continue to open and close this section of trail to the community, because it then becomes a risk management issue, directing trail users through a crumbling creek bed, until the next water episode occurs, when we are faced with a quick fix again. We have just put \$2200 in for a quick fix.

The same applies to the Thomson River at Cowwarr. The rail trail takes users out onto public roads for 3 kilometres to bypass the river as there is no money for this bridge. This defeats the purpose of having a safe off-road experience for trail users and reflects on the ad hoc flood and fire disaster-driven funding that currently exists.

With regard to ecotourism, rail trails have the potential to fill this need adequately. The Gippsland Plains Rail Trail is quite unique because it is connected to public transport at either end. This will mean that rail trail users from Melbourne can catch a train without the need for a car, ride the trail, spend time and money in the communities along the trail and then catch public transport back to their destination.

Our trail is within distance of many tourism opportunities — whitewater rafting on the Thomson River, mountain bike riding in the foothills — and the potential to develop new tourism products is exciting. The infamous gangster Squizzy Taylor staked out from the long arm of the law in the foothills between Toongabbie and Walhalla. The marble quarry that supplied marble for the steps at Melbourne Town Hall and the commonwealth mine where gold was mined are both within distance of the trail between Toongabbie and Walhalla and yet to be capitalised upon.

The rail trail must be fully connected, appropriately signposted and funded to get the full benefit of ecotourism experiences and advertised on all local tourism websites — technology being an important tool for trail users and visitors to Gippsland. Connections to other rail trails and local community trails are also an important step to attract the full tourism potential of the region. People will stay longer and explore more of the region's attractions if connections are there and are clearly advertised.

One of the big-ticket issues for the tourism industry is employment — local employment. I mention this because more than often it is locals who know the history of the area better than a company just hiring staff to fill the position. I have participated in the Victorian Variety Bash around Australia for 21 years, and I am familiar with the tourism industry in the Top End. This year we had staff in the hospitality industry in the Top End from England, France, America, Ireland and Italy. While they were pleasant, they had no idea of local tourism destinations, little cultural knowledge and even less knowledge of handling money — the things tourists most ask about. We need to get smart about employing people with local knowledge.

Regarding obstacles, one of the complaints I hear is that we do not have a tourism icon in central Gippsland. I would argue that we have many. What we need is for all tourism bodies to work together to create established markets, including for the five rail trails in the region. We have the uniqueness of the mountains, beaches and snow, in season, within easy driving range. What we do not have on the trail is enough accommodation along the way. Here is a great economic opportunity for operators to jump on board the rail trail movement. We do not have an operator who can hire bicycles and transport them across the trail, and we do not have carrying space on some regional trains and buses to store bikes.

To attract international visitors we need to be set up to cater for them. For example, in Heyfield on the weekend, when the trail is used to capacity, you cannot get a cappuccino after noon unless the hotel makes you one. There are opportunities for established businesses lost, but opportunities are there for emerging businesses to capitalise on. In Glengarry a new business selling coffee and cake on the weekend is almost ready. In Toongabbie the local store has been renamed from the Oasis to the Rail Trail Inn.

This is all very positive for the development of the rail trail, but this committee of management still has the issue of unfinished and unfunded sections of the trail, which in time will impact on trail users. Having a finished rail trail project to attract tourism and, in turn, economic development to the region is extremely important. I urge you to make funding recommendations to government to help us complete this trail to attract vital tourism benefits to this region.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you very much for that. Alan, do you want to add anything?

Mr LEWIS — My role has been as project manager to the rail trail committee, and I have been very involved particularly in putting together proposals for various sections of the rail trail and for the refurbishment particularly of the timber bridges. These timber bridges were considered by many to be past their use-by date, and I suppose after 50 years I am past my use-by date in the industry, but I have been able to work out a method of refurbishing the timber bridges. We are doing the Traralgon to Glengarry section, a distance of about 11 kilometres, for about \$680 000, which compares to nearly \$4 million for new structures, so that is quite good.

Part of our business is marketing and the promotion of tourism. I was the founding chair of Destination Gippsland, which you may recall. I have pleasant memories of when I was there. In that regard, looking at the advantages and attributes of central Gippsland, it is really one of heritage. People do not realise that the first

road in Gippsland was a north–south transport network between Port Albert, Sale and Omeo. The rail trail is historically fascinating. In January 1840 McMillan got to the junction of the Latrobe River and the Thomson. He could not cross and went back to Omeo to bring cattle, sheep and horses back to the Stratford area. While he was away doing that, Strzelecki followed him roughly on the track to about Maffra and then went around the foothills from Maffra to Heyfield, Cowwarr, Glengarry, Toongabbie and Traralgon. He got bogged down and then cut across to Corinella and Western Port.

It is a very historic area. With the establishment of the goldfields at Crooked River and Walhalla all the equipment came to the Latrobe wharf, which was at the junction of the Thomson and the Latrobe, and from there it was overlanded by horse and dray to all those small towns. It was then put on packhorses to take to Walhalla. I have always felt there is a great opportunity.

As you see in the marketing plan, I really feel that the rail trail provides the opportunity to make this place a key element as a historic area of Gippsland. It is the most historic area in Gippsland; it is where it all started. Not only that but from an Indigenous perspective I was the project manager who set up the Bataluk Cultural Trail. The research we had to do for that showed that the Sale area was actually the centre of the Gunai Kurnai nation. Sale was called Wayput by the locals. For the Gunai Kurnai, their creation story of Borun the pelican and Tuk the musk duck was all centred very much around the Macalister, Thomson and Latrobe rivers and down to Port Albert. That north–south transport route goes right back to the 10 000-odd generations that Gunai Kurnai occupied the area.

There was significant conflict during that time. On the rail trail itself, when they were building the railway between Stratford and Maffra, a mass grave was uncovered. That mass grave goes back to the white woman affair, which is part of the story of the Bataluk Cultural Trail. When we were looking at a marketing plan, it was those key elements that we felt were very important.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Are you happy to take some questions?

Mr LEWIS — Yes.

Ms DUNCAN — How come it takes 20 years? Is it just about money?

Ms HOPNER — Initially, yes. It is about building the project, but you cannot build the project without the money. We started off 20 years ago with \$150 000 to build a \$1 million project, so that has kind of compounded as the years have gone on. It is about getting recognition for the rail trail project. I think that back 20 years ago a lot of money was put into the Murray to the Mountains. Now it is one of the premier rail trails in the state. Ours is particularly long at 67 kilometres. There were some difficult issues with bridges and waterways and it was quite an expensive thing to do. I think that now rail trails have much more community and government support. My argument is that there has been ad hoc funding delivery for this trail over that time. You get a flood, a fire or whatever — and you are on the edge of that all the time — and you get a little bit of money here and a little bit of money there, instead putting down the money for a full project and then just doing it.

Over the 20 years we have built up this trail in a very ad hoc way. Nonetheless, we are almost there. It might not be the best job in the world, but we have opened it. We will go back and fix sections as we need to. Getting those last few bridges in place, making sure that there is a continuity with the trail, that more money is going to come in — \$30 000 would fix a bridge tomorrow and \$250 000 would fix another bridge next year. That is the kind of adhocery that has gone on.

Mr LEWIS — I did an overview of the rail trail back in I think 2005 or 2006. One of the compounding issues with this rail trail — and I was fairly strong in my view — is that it reflects the way the whole thing was structured in the first place. When it was handed over to the community they were aware that it would cost in excess of \$3 million to complete. All the assets that the rail trail committee could use to fund anything were taken away.

Ms DUNCAN — Does that bring us to the Maffra railway station? I was just going to ask you about that.

Mr LEWIS — Yes. The income stream, with all the railway land, stayed with government, so there was no ongoing commercial structure put in place. When you compare it with the successful rail trails in Victoria, they generally have great support from a local government network. This rail trail has suffered because it has been in

two councils and the councils have not taken a proactive role. It has been in only the past probably five years that the councils, particularly Wellington shire, have taken an active role. It has been only very recently — in fact only a fortnight ago — that for the first time Latrobe city have made a capital contribution to help the rail trail committee.

Ms DUNCAN — Just on the Maffra section, that has now been a long-term lease to a private operator. Why is that a problem?

Mr LEWIS — It is not a problem. It is where the revenue ends up. All the revenue of nearly all the commercial properties on the line stays with Crown land.

Ms DUNCAN — So that needs to be available locally to be used?

Ms HOPPNER — That is right, back into community ownership — and that could be a long-term thing.

Ms DUNCAN — So it is not the lease per se, it is where the profit from that lease goes? It needs to come back to the local community rather than — —

Ms HOPPNER — It does, but also it is a community building. It is a historic building. It should be in community hands rather than with private enterprise, in my view.

Ms DUNCAN — How would that operate, though? Would the community run the — —

Ms HOPPNER — Yes. What I am saying is this is a long-term issue because we need to have someone situated in it. We do have a railway station at Glengarry under our management and we do hire that out. It brings in a little bit of income. Our leases and licences on the trail and our commercial leases, of which there are two, bring in about \$7000 a year, which is nothing near what is needed to maintain the whole lot of it. That is one of the dilemmas we have. The Maffra railway station is in pretty good nick, although it is not being used by that operator. It is a yard right next to him and he just uses it as an office. Over the years gone by I think the local band or another group were in there just playing around with it. It needs to come back into some kind of management responsibility to the community. That small issue aside, the biggest issue we have is actually funding this trail appropriately and finishing it.

Mr LEWIS — In capital terms, if the rail trail committee got the money. For instance, the land in Traralgon where Bunnings is located was sold only in recent times. That land was ex-rail reserve and instead of that money going towards funding the rail trail, it went into general — —

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Consolidated revenue.

Ms HOPPNER — Yes, that is right.

Ms WREFORD — I will tell you what, first of all, I am really glad that people such as yourselves are involved in the project. I cannot imagine where this project would be if you did not have local people driving it, and clearly you have a lot of passion for the project. So I take my hat off to you. What role do you think that Tourism Victoria and Destination Gippsland play in promoting rail trails in the region?

Ms HOPPNER — Well, you have to have a finished product before they will market it. We can market bits and pieces until the cows come home. You have to have a finished product so that people getting off a Qantas jet in Melbourne want to get onto public transport and come and use it — and can expect to be able to go from one into the other irrespective of all the other issues. Funding it appropriately is the only way that we will get tourism bodies to market it. Already with our marketing plan, which is still to be developed more, we are starting to do some of those things. As I said in my submission, we are starting to put the historic railway signs up. Then we will be putting up more signage about the history of that town as it goes. So there is a range of things that will happen there to actually promote it. As a package deal, as part of the rail trials in Victoria or in the country for that matter, for the tourism bodies to market it, it needs to be a full package.

Ms WREFORD — What would it take to finish the product, in terms of dollars?

Ms HOPPNER — In terms of dollars, infrastructure funding for a couple of bridges at the moment I would assume about half a million dollars, \$500 000. If you say it quickly, it does not hurt. It is not a great amount of

money for a state or federal government to find, but once it is connected and operating ready to be marketed, we have to ensure there is maintenance. Maintenance on one of those bridges between Glengarry and Traralgon alone will be about \$30 000 per annum. You cannot pluck that money of the air.

I have been saying this consistently to the state government from day one: in the budget of every government there needs to be a maintenance capital grant for every rail trail in the state every year. That is what needs to happen to every rail trail, because they are significant local attractions. I can tell you now that the locals love their rail trail. But if we want to market it as a place for international tourists to go, it has to be maintained correctly. It is a risk management issue if you do not.

Mr BULL — That was going to be the basis of my question — that is, the ongoing maintenance. We have an increasing scenario in Victoria, with a few exceptions, that the state has generally funded a lot of the infrastructure works around rail trails.

Ms HOPPNER — That is right.

Mr BULL — We have an increasing number of local government agencies that are funding maintenance as an ongoing project.

Ms HOPPNER — That is right.

Mr BULL — The discussion then falls around where the maintenance responsibility lies, if you like. We heard from the East Gippsland Rail Trail yesterday.

Ms HOPPNER — Good.

Mr BULL — We went out and had a look at one of the historic bridges in this neck of the woods. One of the issues facing our government, and I am sure all governments, is that we have some local government agencies around the state that make an allocation of varying amounts towards maintenance. You only have to have a look at Gippsland to see the great variance. Obviously to make a capital investment in an area where you know local government has an ongoing maintenance project is far more attractive than perhaps making a capital investment in an area where there is no local government maintenance allowance. There are increasing contributions from local government in relation to maintenance. They probably do not have the capacity to find \$500 000 to build bridges, and that is probably where the responsibility falls back on a budgetary process at the state level, but I put it to you that there are precedents that the ongoing maintenance is done by local government in other areas of Victoria. I note your comments that the state should do it, but that has not been the trend that we have seen to date.

Ms HOPPNER — Can I tell you this; it is Crown land. We manage it on behalf of the state government. There is a reticence by local government to put anything in. We have been very lucky and, as Alan said, for the last five years Wellington shire has put money in to build the infrastructure; they have actually committed to that. Latrobe City Council, which is the other local government area, has put some money towards projects, but for the last three years they have put in \$7000 for maintenance for the three main rail trails in the municipality. As the trail becomes more accessible and infrastructure is built a little better this year they have put in something like \$23 000, and that is ongoing provided they have it every year in the budget. As I said, they are reticent to take on Crown land; they have probably got enough work to do on council land, but they are reticent to take on another Crown land responsibility, and I absolutely understand that. But local government will get the benefit from increased tourist usage right through their municipality. That is my answer. Who wants to take it on? Not many people.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — All right. We will finish there. Thank you very much, Helen and Alan, for your presentation. Alan will stay on because we are hearing from him as part of the Port of Sale Heritage Cruises presentation. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.