

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Mansfield— 21 March 2014

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Ms W. Jones, chief executive officer, Goulburn River Valley Tourism.

The CHAIR — It is now our pleasure to call on and welcome Goulburn River Valley Tourism. Wendy Jones, the chief executive officer, will lead with her presentation. Wendy, thank you so much for making time available to join us.

Ms JONES — It is a pleasure, Chair, thank you very much for having us.

The CHAIR — It is an absolute pleasure.

Ms JONES — Can I just correct our name: we are now Goulburn River Valley Tourism. I noted in a couple of places we were referred to as Goulburn River Tourism but we are now Goulburn River Valley Tourism; so that would be great, thanks.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Wendy, for that update, and it has been noted by the committee. Having said that, all evidence taken at this meeting is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments made outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded and witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript within the next two weeks.

Again, thank you so much for joining us, and we look forward to your presentation for the duration of about half an hour. If we could have 10 minutes at the end for some questions, that would be appreciated.

Ms JONES — Certainly, thank you. I will probably allow little longer for questions because in the actual presentation we do not have a prepared PowerPoint for you today, but it is my pleasure to be here on behalf of Goulburn River Valley Tourism to address the inquiry, and we thank the committee for that opportunity.

The submission you received from us back in July was prepared by our executive officer, Amanda McCulloch, who is currently on maternity leave, so I have stepped into that role, and I am here today to speak to that submission.

It would probably be best if I first put in a little bit of context for you around what Goulburn River Valley Tourism is; Amanda touched on it in the submission. We are a regional tourism board, where we are not a recognised regional tourism board under the Tourism Victoria structure per se. We came together in 2009 through a report called *A United Approach to Tourism*, where our four member councils — Greater Shepparton, Murrindindi, Mitchell and Strathbogie — felt that they had a product disconnect from those regions and areas that they were associated with, such as the Murray, such as the high country, such as the Macedon Ranges and spa country. They really felt that they were missing out and that there was a disconnect. We have a lot of product similarities across the region; we have a lot of attributes, particularly in the nature-based area, that we felt had a lot of synergies; hence from there Goulburn River Valley Tourism was formed as a company limited by guarantee in March 2011. We believe we fulfil all the functions of regional tourism boards in terms of marketing — albeit on a limited scale — product development, industry development, et cetera, and certainly we work towards that charter. Having said that, putting some context around that, we do endeavour and try our hardest to work with our neighbouring tourism boards and bodies in joint activities, where and if those opportunities present themselves.

This inquiry was a great opportunity for us to sit back and do a stocktake of where we were at in terms of heritage and ecotourism. I think we have approached it in a slightly broader sense than some of the other submissions you have received in terms of ecotourism. We have really looked more in the nature-based sphere, broader perhaps than the true definition some have of ecotourism, in a more structured way. So we have really embraced more around our nature-based assets and where they fit, and also in regard to heritage tourism and where in fact that sits around the whole cultural tourism stream.

We are blessed in our region — and our region, as I said, is four shire regions which cover a large area — with an outstanding range of product. Certainly that was exhibited in the submission. But just to give you a sense, we have a lot of product around military, Indigenous heritage, agricultural heritage. We also have railway heritage. So we have a lot of heritage product, and we are also developing new product in that heritage sphere. A Vietnam Veterans Commemorative Walk in our Mitchell shire is an example of a heritage product that is already recognised as part of our military heritage and is already attracting many visitors to the region. Our latest stats, just come through in the last couple of days, have shown a significant increase in visitation to

Mitchell, and anecdotal evidence is telling us that the Vietnam veterans walk is driving a lot of that visitation, both on domestic overnight and domestic day travel.

We also have a lot of nature-based product. Again, I think Amanda did an excellent job in listing some of that. We are blessed with national parks, state forests, reserves and the massive and beautiful Goulburn River, which links our region. In fact one of our challenges when this region was formed was what should we call it, and a lot of stakeholder workshops and consultation went into establishing that the Goulburn River, which runs through each of our four shires, was the link, was the one thing that joined us together. It is really the lifeblood of our region. Lake Eildon, Nagambie Lakes, Strathbogie Ranges, Kinglake National Park — we have a range of excellent product in our region, so much so that our board has taken that whole process of establishing what is in our region, what we need and where our gaps are quite seriously.

This year we have been fortunate enough to be in the process of developing a destination management plan for the region. That plan is nearly completed. It is at the final draft stage; it has just actually gone back out to stakeholders and council members for consultation. There are a couple of themes that are coming through very clearly from that. We have looked at our strategic development opportunities, and 10 of those have been developed. Capitalising on our nature-based assets is certainly one of those, particularly unlocking some of the access issues and some of the opportunity issues around the Goulburn River. We see that as particularly important. We have also developed a list of 12 priority projects for the region. They include things such as a stand-alone Shepparton Art Museum (SAM), which is currently housing one of Australia's largest collections of ceramics but has a limited capacity. Other projects are looking at things like the Toolangi zip line, which has been stalled for a variety of reasons, and some of the other possible opportunities for development around Lake Eildon that have traditionally stalled for, again, a variety of reasons.

Importantly, one of the other issues that was identified as one of our strategic projects that needs addressing going forward is lack of access to transport to our region. We have some very poor issues around public access and transport. Over this side at Murrindindi there is no rail access, but where we do have rail access we have a lot of problems — ongoing rail works on the Seymour line and very limited services to the Shepparton area, which is very restrictive. For instance, people cannot come up to Shepparton on a train, visit a gallery for a reasonable amount of time and get a train back to Melbourne on the same day — timetabling simply does not allow that sort of thing. So we recognise that there are a lot of issues around transport that need to be addressed if people are going to access some of the attributes and some of the product that we have in our region.

Going forward, I think the important part of that is how we use the destination management plan and what we are going to do to work to develop that. We are looking to develop touring routes around some of our heritage product, such as the strength of the military product that we have across the region, taking in things such as the Tatura war camps in the Shepparton region, the Vietnam veterans walk and the other product in the Puckapunyal — Seymour area. Statues honouring our heroes are soon to be launched in the Strathbogie shire, and then we will work up the corridor, up through Benalla, et cetera.

We are also particularly interested in the development of product such as the Great Victorian Rail Trail, which sits partly in our region. That has been a great example of public infrastructure that has enabled businesses and visitation to our region to kick off. We are already seeing businesses starting to develop off the back of that — a produce store to open in Tallarook in coming months, specifically through the opportunities that the Great Victorian Rail Trail has presented. One of the key projects out of our destination management plan going forward is looking at the expansion of that rail trail. The feasibility of that, of expanding it from Alexandra to Eildon and from Tallarook to Seymour, will involve not only the feasibility in a physical sense but the feasibility around ongoing maintenance and who maintains those assets when they are complete.

Just a couple of other comments on the heritage side of things. We are conscious of the fact that we have a lot of product in our region that is sometimes not visitor-ready, if I can use that term. It is often reliant on volunteers and often those opening hours can be varied: a lot of our volunteers may be ageing, and their capacity to present some of that product is lessening as time goes on. Importantly, we need to capture some of those stories of what is out there to ensure that that is not lost.

In terms of our natural assets, I think that Goulburn River Valley Tourism's point of view would be that we absolutely recognise that that is a key strength for our region, not only because of the diversity of the product but because of the pristine nature of a lot of the product that does exist in the region. We would support any

moves for greater promotion, coordination, marketing of those assets, of that product, and certainly we will do anything that we can to assist in that way. I do not know if there is much else that I would like to add at this stage; I suggest it is probably better if I take any questions that you may have.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Wendy. John or Jo, would you like to raise a question?

Ms DUNCAN — Thanks, Wendy, for the presentation. You mentioned in your submission issues around land use planning and restrictions within the farm zone. How do you think these obstacles can be overcome? What are the changes that would need to happen in those zones?

Ms JONES — I think the particular farming zone restriction that was referred to in that submission — and I stand to be corrected — has since been addressed. As part of our destination management plan consultation process we have received very positive responses from some of our stakeholders, who have said, ‘This is great, this helps us to look at other activities on our farmland that we can do’.

Ms DUNCAN — So those changes have increased the range of allowable uses?

Ms JONES — Absolutely, allowable use. That will give them the potential, for instance, if a rail trail was running near or past their product, to look at some other activity, whether that is food and beverage provision or accommodation or whatever. I am not saying that those things were not able to be done, but perhaps it was particularly difficult to do them previously. It would be no news to any of you around the table that the comments we hear very often — and the majority of our industry, like the broader industry, is small business-based — are around the complexity, the time, the regulations. We acknowledge that a lot of those need to be there for good reasons, but it is that complexity and that red tape and not knowing who to go to that causes a lot of frustration.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Just tell us a bit about your Vietnam trail. Was that part of Puckapunyal training before going to Vietnam, the same site that was walked on by troops as part of their training, or was it just a branding exercise?

Ms JONES — The Vietnam Veterans Commemorative Walk is located in Seymour itself. It consists of 106 or 116 digi-panels, which are backlit, so it is quite a long horizontal walk which lists the names of all of those servicemen and women who served and tells the stories around Vietnam and the nation’s involvement in Vietnam. Stage 2 of that commemorative walk has been completed. There is a third stage, which will look at installing things like a tank or a fighter plane — some other activity around the walk. It is generating visitation from interstate and overseas. It is still early days. It is located in Seymour itself.

A little out of Seymour you have the Australian Light Horse Memorial Park, where the training was done for the horses that went off to war. Then at Puckapunyal base itself, on army land, you currently have the Royal Australian Armoured Corps Memorial and Army Tank Museum, so there is a rich heritage product in Mitchell. There are some issues around access, for instance, to the tank museum in Puckapunyal, because you need to have base clearance to get into it, so ultimately long-term there are some moves to move that off base and open it. This is not only to free up land for the Puckapunyal base, but it would also make access for visitation a lot easier.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — There was the Toolangi forest centre. What is the latest on that?

Ms JONES — Not a lot, as I understand it. Bob Elkington from Murrindindi shire is coming later, and I am sure he will be able to give you greater in-depth information, but through our destination management plan it was recognised as a project that could be reinvigorated or kick-started. There was the Toolangi zip line, which is an adventure, nature-based tourism activity, which we would be very keen about and which was identified again very highly through our destination management plan. It has stalled for environmental planning reasons, as I understand it. It was seen that what might happen at the Toolangi centre would depend on what might happen potentially with the zip line going forward. The Toolangi zip line is a very good example of a project that has probably got over every hurdle except the last one.

The CHAIR — Wendy, how does your organisation work to create agreement amongst industry stakeholders about key priorities for the development of tourism within your area? As a secondary question on that one, can you background us on the resourcing you work with —

Ms JONES — That will not take long.

The CHAIR — and whether industry makes a contribution? I appreciate it is very much a volunteer service and supported, but could you give us some indication, because I am aware you are not a government agency?

Ms JONES — Maybe if I take the second one first. Goulburn River Valley Tourism is predominantly funded by the four shire councils. Their contributions are based on a loose formula around their size. Greater Shepparton pays the greatest contribution followed by Mitchell, Strathbogie and Murrindindi. The formula is fairly fluid, but it essentially sees Shepparton providing the greater contribution — roughly half of the total funding. At the moment we employ one part-time tourism officer and one executive officer, although that position is only in a part-time capacity. It will return to full-time when Amanda returns from maternity leave.

In terms of industry contribution, I suppose industry contributes predominantly through cooperative marketing activities. We have a document, our holiday planner, of which this is the second run. It is a very popular document. In fact one of the themes of that is 'Nature's wonders' and another one is 'Pieces of our history', which recognises two keys of our industry strength. Cooperative marketing has been the main way that industry contributes.

Funding, though, for our board going forward is something we need to think about, because we do not get any state funding. We are working through a whole lot of processes around developing a business case to become a piece in our own right, if you like. That is complex. I understand that there will be an inquiry into the regional tourism boards at some stage. It was recommended by one of the previous inquiries. That may provide us with some opportunity, because we are very focused in our belief that we have established region and we are doing particularly well. We need to go forward with that, but we are hamstrung by our resources.

We have recently appointed a new chair. The Honourable Fran Bailey is coming on as our chair. One of the priorities Fran has identified, or reinforced, with us is the need to look at how we diversify our funding base, and how we make ourselves more viable going forward. There is no talk of any walkaway from council or its contribution, but as you would all be well aware, every time budgets come around the question is asked. We need to be able to justify what we do and what we achieve.

Since 2009, when we were established, our visitation numbers have been growing. We have some ups and downs, like everyone, but if you take a longer-term trend, we have some good growth. That is heartening. We are certainly getting a good response out there in the marketplace. That is Goulburn River Valley Tourism. It is essentially funded by council, and then industry might pay to participate in any other fee-for-service activities that we run. I am sorry; I think I have forgotten your first question.

The CHAIR — The first question was: how does your organisation work to create the agreement amongst your stakeholders for key priorities?

Ms JONES — I will preface that by saying that one thing we have had is an incredibly wonderful response to the establishment of Goulburn River Valley Tourism, because it was established not just in council on their own in isolation but from an industry willing for this to happen. We do not have these fractures saying, 'We don't want to work with you. Who are you? What are you doing?'. Generally we have really good sense of will. That healthy environment gives us an opportunity to consult.

We work regularly and closely with our key council stakeholders. For instance, with the destination management plan we ran a series of consultation sessions, both with council in their priorities and in different industries across the region. We ran sessions in Marysville, in Shepparton and in Euroa. We have just run some consultation sessions on the draft last week in Alexandra, in Yea and in Seymour — that type of thing.

We also use communication channels such as newsletters. We have been a bit slow in the social media space, but we are stepping that up now. It is also getting out and talking to people: getting involved, attending things and hosting networking events for industry to come together, and working through our regional tourism association food and culture groups, which have direct membership and often have that direct key line into the industry base.

The CHAIR — It has been repeatedly put to us in our panel hearings that those not fortunate enough to be within the 2-hour radius of the Melbourne CBD struggle for visitation and greater tourism support, more than

the ones within that 2-hour period. Do you have any comments that you would like to put forward in relation to what impact or otherwise that may be having within Goulburn River Valley Tourism?

Ms JONES — It is a really good question. When we did work prior to our DMP, when we were first set up and looked at our strategic development plan et cetera, one of our great strengths that came out was the fact that in 1½ hours or 2 hours you could get from anywhere in Melbourne to us. It is absolutely great, and an absolutely great strength. But it can also be a downside for people who say, 'I can come and visit you for the day and return home'. I was talking recently to an operator in Nagambie, for instance, who said that with the bypass it is so much easier to get up and back in a day, so people will come up and do what they want to do and return.

It is a two-edged sword. I cannot comment on the other regions. Yes, they are even further away, but for us being close is a strength. Sometimes it means that people want a return to their base, so our challenge is to try and get dispersal across the region: to develop touring routes such as the one I just mentioned around military tourism or to develop other things around nature-based tourism. We are just doing a wine tour — good drop and other treats — to spread people around the region. It is that sort of thing to give them reason to come and stay.

We are very conscious that we have the Hume running through our region, we have the Goulburn Valley Highway and we have the Maroondah Highway. Somewhere like Yea has the intersections of major roads and offers a travellers rest spot, so it is how you convert that. Getting people even further and past that, the challenge then is to give them the reason to want to stay overnight and how you do that. Transport plays a large part in that. We want a seamless product experience through transport and product. All of those things need to come together.

The CHAIR — Wendy, just before finishing, you indicated several things in relation to Seymour and rail scheduling and timetabling. Do people not require a car or a guided tour bus or something when they get to Seymour or is everything in close enough proximity that they can spend the day at that point quite well without further aid of mobility?

Ms JONES — Seymour itself is well serviced; it has regular transport. Shepparton is certainly not well serviced. There are still some issues that Seymour is working through in terms of connectivity from the railway station to, say, something like the Vietnam Veterans Commemorative Walk, which is a distance, and that has been identified in our destination development plan, so we can look at how you do that and how you make those linkages. Particularly given the age group of some of the visitors travelling, they may not have the mobility capacity to walk the distance, which I think may be 800 metres or 1 kilometre; it is half-a-dozen street blocks. There is certainly some opportunity there.

Shepparton though really is the major area, and the Greater Shepparton City Council has put a big push to government around the whole rail infrastructure. Again, there would be some connectivity issues between the station and some of the attractions or areas. Shepparton itself is not a traditionally high visitor destination, though. It does rely on a lot on its events — sporting events and event tourism — for a lot of its visitors. Given that is the case, they often have tour buses or private car capacity to get around.

The CHAIR — That you very much, Wendy. Do we have any further questions?

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Just a little bit more on Shepparton: they have focused a lot more on their cultural tourism side —

Ms JONES — Certainly.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — using the heritage of the dairy industry there.

Ms JONES — Moooving cows.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Which I find, as a former tourism minister, really appealing. Can you talk to us a bit about that strategy — maybe why they started it and how it seems to work as a branding exercise around cultural tourism?

Ms JONES — I think it has come from a couple of aspects. One is that if you look at iconic products, Shepparton does not necessarily have that; it does not have Sovereign Hill, the Great Ocean Road, Puffing Billy, the penguins or whatever else it might be. They had to look at where their space was, and they have

become particularly good at developing resources around catering for that event market and developing events, but they have also done particularly well at looking at their cultural strength and their histories.

There has been a very strong focus on the Indigenous heritage. In fact yesterday I went to a session that was looking at the creation of a food hub project in Shepparton, which would have an Indigenous food garden, which would then link in with the heritage and history of the region. They had a group of Indigenous people over from Western Australia who had done a similar thing who are advising them on what they may do. They plan to collocate that next to SPC Ardmona KidsTown, which is a very strong attraction in its own right, where for a gold coin families and kids can come and play in this great playground environment. So they really are looking at the cultural area. There are other things like the moooving cows — and it is a herd of 90-odd cows scattered not just around Shepparton, but the greater Shepparton area, including Tatura, Murchison, Dookie et cetera. You only have to walk past at any stage and you will see someone at those cows or looking at those cows. That combined with their desire now to look towards a stand-alone arts museum, a SAM, because of the ceramics and other collections that they have really shows that they are trying to pitch themselves in a cultural way.

Shepparton also has a very strong multicultural background, and a very strong multicultural population, and they are working very hard at those strengths. They run a lot of events, the SheppARTon Festival is on for the whole month of March capturing a range of events under that umbrella to work on some of those product strengths. I think the cows are great; they feature in the *Victorian Cultural Tourism Guide* this year. They pop up in all sorts of places, and they are giving Shepparton a profile. It also links back to their dairy history and heritage. For instance, you have International Dairy Week in Tatura, so there is a good strong dairy history around there, and they have taken that and developed it into a unique cultural aspect and product, which says to people that you do not have to go into galleries or necessarily inside four walls or into something to have a cultural experience. You can actually interact with culture on a very informal basis, and it encourages people to perhaps explore a little bit further.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Tell us a little bit about the idea of the Tatura POW camp, I am assuming it is.

Ms JONES — I have to say my knowledge of this came really through our consultations around the destination management plan. I live in a tiny little place called Longwood, near Euroa. I am not that far from Tatura and Murchison, where these camps were, and I was totally unaware of their existence. I was blown away by what is there, and our heritage and history of what is there. My visit to the German war cemetery and the museum at Tatura and the two people, whose names I am sorry escape me at the moment, whose history of what went on in those camps and our heritage and what they did, conveyed in the stories they tell to international visitors who come and seek out relatives from Germany from all those years ago is just amazing. I lived once in Darwin, and I can recall thinking I did not know Darwin was bombed until I went to live there. This is like this tiny piece of hidden history, and we have this on our doorstep.

We have the Italian scenario in Murchison, then we have the German camps in Tatura. So there is this wonderful piece of heritage and military history sitting there which is largely untapped. There are some issues though because of what remains of the actual campsites per se. The buildings do not exist as such. There are some remnants of the buildings, but there are some access issues for some of those because I understand the majority of them, or all of them, are on private land. Some of the camps are able to be accessed through the goodwill of the land-holders, but others potentially not. There is a sense of a really interesting product sitting there that has the potential to be further developed. Again, that is coming out through our destination management plan.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — Is the region looking at any possibilities in the next four years or five years, given there are the centenary of Anzac grants? Next year is focusing on World War I, and a little bit later it will be World War II, which is where this is relevant. Are you looking at any of those sorts of opportunities to harness some resources that may add to the heritage story?

Ms JONES — We may possibly not have really been on our game to have got in early enough for some of that Anzac grant funding in terms of what we would like to have done as a regional tourism board, but certainly, for instance, you can look at the Honouring Our Heroes project in Euroa where three statues to three Victoria Cross winners are about to be put in place. It is through community and state funding that they have put that in place, and they have just secured the remaining little piece of funding from the federal government Anzac

grants to complete that. I think individual projects have looked at that. What we want to do as a region, though, is to look at developing touring routes, from a regional tourism board point of view, to assist people to identify where those products are and to visit them. In turn we will try to get them to stay by linking in other features and aspects that might be there.

There is a wealth of product. Murrindindi in our region is probably the only one that does not have any of the iconic product, if you like. But in looking at it we are finding interesting little bits that are still there; if someone is interested in military tourism in general, they will want to go and look at a particular painting. The original now hangs in the war museum, I think it is, because they were worried that it might have been destroyed — and it would have been, come the fires. It has been replaced in the replica church. There are really interesting little niche things that if people have an interest in that area they would be interested in visiting. Hopefully then we can get them to enjoy some other assets of the region.

Mr PANDAZOPOULOS — And you have soldier settlement areas which came out of World War I — Lemnos being one of them. Are you not capitalising on that through the Anzac grant process as well?

Ms JONES — I think it is fair to say that, with the destination management plan and the material we have gone through to develop that, and where we have got to with it, we are now at a stage where we understand what is there and what the potential is. It is now really putting that into place and looking at what we develop, what we do and how we can support the activities that are going on — not just the statues in Euroa but the Mactier statue that is going up in Tatura. We want to link all these things together and make them more accessible and open to people. We want to work in conjunction with all those groups and organisations that are doing the work on the ground.

The CHAIR — Wendy, on behalf of the committee thank you very much for your presentation and for making your time available to join us today.

Ms JONES — It is has been my pleasure.

Witness withdrew.