

# TRANSCRIPT

## ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Ballarat — 8 October 2013

#### Members

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

Mr J. Pandazopoulos  
Ms L. Wreford

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#### Witness

Mr D. Leathem, manager, economic development and tourism, Mount Alexander Shire Council.

**The CHAIR** — David, my apologies for running a little bit behind. We did not get out of the blocks as quickly as we anticipated we would, but having said that, no time will be taken away from you.

**Mr LEATHEM** — That is fine.

**The CHAIR** — Let us move straight on to your presentation and see if we can pick up some time.

**Mr LEATHEM** — Great. It is not a problem at all. I will make a short summary of our submission to the inquiry. On looking at both heritage tourism and ecotourism, it is obvious that the Mount Alexander shire is in the Victorian goldfields. Our two major towns are Castlemaine and Maldon, and both are historic gold rush towns. Maldon was named Australia's first notable town, so its intact heritage streetscape is a key part of its tourism offering, as is also the case with Castlemaine. The built heritage in particular is a key tourism asset for both towns. Most of the towns in our shire originated as gold rush towns and villages, so they all have a gold rush heritage to some extent — Guildford, Taradale, Elphinstone, Newstead and the smaller communities as well.

**The CHAIR** — If I can just interrupt very briefly, you were not here when we started this morning. I should just indicate that all the evidence taken at the hearing this morning 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 that you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All your evidence today is being recorded and we will provide you as a witness a proof version of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. I apologise; I meant to bring that to your attention at the start. Thank you; if you would like to continue.

**Mr LEATHEM** — Certainly heritage tourism is a key part of what we see as our tourism offering. We probably see ecotourism as more of an emerging strength. Our shire is becoming more well known for its sustainability. We have a group called the Mount Alexander Sustainability Group, which has over 300 voting members and has paid staff of four. For a small town it is quite a sizeable sustainability group. We have had a couple of key projects with a couple of our major employers: the hospital, a major manufacturer in Castlemaine, a few others doing a co-gen power project. In its community plan, one of our key towns, Newstead, is looking to become carbon neutral within 10 years. We are gaining more and more of a reputation for our sustainability, and that is also having its spin-offs into tourism as well.

Recently we have been running open homes so people have been coming up to understand how to build sustainable homes, whether it is straw bale or mud brick homes or design principles. They were very popular as well. So that is a key area of ecotourism. The other key one that we are looking to develop is our mountain biking and walking tracks and trails. The goldfields is becoming even more well known for its tracks and trails — Ballarat and Bendigo with their cycling. We have worked hard to develop the Goldfields Track, which was the Great Dividing Trail running from Ballarat through to Bendigo, 210 kilometres of shared mountain biking and walking experience. We have received about \$1 million in grants over the last few years to develop that track, and we see that as a key product for our region. Ecotourism and the outdoor nature-based tourism could really take off.

From an economic development point of view our built heritage is seen as key to our economy as well. There has been a lot of research lately that from a livability point of view people like to live and work and invest in areas that they like. They like a good environment, so for us the backdrop of our towns is a key to what attracts a lot of people to our towns to invest, and our other strengths in tourism of food and wine and the arts go hand in hand with our heritage backdrop. It is key. Council sees heritage as a key part of what it needs to do with the community.

Earlier this year we created a new position of heritage officer. As you are probably aware, in a small council it is quite hard to get a brand-new position created. That position of heritage officer was placed in my unit, the economic development and tourism unit. I think every title, as is seen in other councils, is a bit different. Normally, as you know, a heritage officer will sit in the planning team. We have a heritage adviser, who is in the planning side, but our heritage officer sits in our unit because the role is more working with our community to celebrate, embrace and preserve our history as well as our heritage and looking at it from the economic development point of view. She is undertaking such projects as putting together brochures and manuals for our

business owners as to how they can develop their built heritage that house them and develop them consistent with our heritage values.

She is working with our local communities on how they can work better with their event tourism around heritage and how they can connect better. I guess in most areas most of our heritage efforts are from volunteers, through historical societies. Genealogical history is quite large. As you were saying before about genealogy particularly, a lot of Australians are now realising that a lot of their forebears came from this area, for starters, so we have a lot of that tourism starting to build, but we do not really have the resources around that. For instance, our Castlemaine Historical Society is open on Tuesday mornings. Currently we are looking at a project to get all the records of the cemetery online so that they can be accessed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. All the effort and enthusiasm is from our community. It is volunteer labour, so it is obviously a finite resource, and council tries to support that as much as we can. I guess to push heritage further to be a great attracter for visitors it needs to have that further investment and resources as well.

The other thing to talk about on the heritage side is that when we look at our shire and both our key heritage and nature assets, most of those are on Crown land and are managed by Parks Victoria and DEPI. We are looking particularly at the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park — it is great that we can show you through the park later this afternoon — which is managed by Parks Victoria. Mount Tarrengower and Mount Alexander, our two key regional parks, are managed by Parks Victoria as well. We work very closely with Parks Victoria and DEPI on developing the products there, but the reality is that we are finding the resources there are really challenged to provide us with that support for the projects that the community is starting to initiate.

Currently we are working with volunteer groups, our local mountain biking groups and our walking groups to develop them as volunteer labour and maintain the Goldfields Track. It is great to get that community involvement, but I think to see the product really go further, it is about having that state government maintenance, activity and investment to keep that going as a key priority for us. They are probably the main couple of points from our submission.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks very much, David. Are you comfortable if we ask questions in relation to Mount Alexander?

**Mr LEATHEM** — Yes.

**Ms WREFORD** — In Victoria, tourism is big business. Most of the international tourists who come to Victoria, though, appear not to go out of the city terribly much. Statistically most of them stay in the city. From that perspective, what do you see as the challenges for your area to increasing visitation to places like the goldfields area, firstly, and, secondly, how do you think heritage and nature-based attractions can best be promoted to visitors?

**Mr LEATHEM** — Just to clarify, from the international market or from the domestic and international?

**Ms WREFORD** — Anywhere, because it is about tourism. We know that tourism is a big market, but what we are asking is how do we get the tourists out to where you want them?

**Mr LEATHEM** — Dispersal, yes. A key point obviously is the fundamentals of transport connections. We are on the Bendigo line, which has a 1-hour express train from Southern Cross, so it works really well for us. It is about developing our relations with V/Line, I think, and V/Line developing its tourism arm as well. I know that in the last probably five years V/Line has gone from seeing itself as just a commuter effort to actually a tourism effort as well. I think if we can develop that so that the visitors who come to Melbourne can realise that within an hour or an hour and a half they can be somewhere easily on a good timetable and get back as well — the benefit of Castlemaine is that our train station is in the middle of town, so the connections are easy — we can develop that with our accommodation operators to easily pick up and have those logistics as well. Also, with the freeway we are an hour and a half away.

**Ms WREFORD** — How do you promote that?

**Mr LEATHEM** — I think visibly within the Melbourne market, so looking at the obvious things such as Fed Square, the information centre there, how we work with Fed Square to develop the regional presence there further, on the Visit Victoria website and on how we develop that to have a greater emphasis on the regions,

particularly the peri-urban regions or further that are easy to get to on a day trip from Melbourne. It is that balance between realising that Melbourne is the jewel in the crown and the great visitation that comes to Melbourne and understanding how close by the areas are now.

When we look at, say, the Goldfields Track, the great attraction for that is that it is 210 kilometres of shared bushwalking and mountain biking track within an hour and a half of Melbourne. When you look at the other key mountain biking experiences that we have in Victoria, most of them are 3 or 4 hours away, in north-eastern Victoria or down to the Grampians and further. We see it as a great attraction. The other part of it is that it marries heritage and ecotourism beautifully. When you are mountain biking or walking the Goldfields Track, you are going right through the diggings as well, so it is providing a cultural experience as well as an outdoor and nature experience.

Back to your question of how to market that further, I think it is through our marketing and advertising campaigns that we do push out there, how we put those together and go interstate better. Tourism Victoria along with the Villages of Victoria campaign shows the breadth and variety of villages. I guess it is always a hard thing between the benefit of showing variety and then not capturing succinctly in the consumer's mind what it is. I think we have grappled with that a bit. That is probably a key part of it.

**The CHAIR** — David, your submission notes that the tourism sector within the shire is supported largely by volunteers. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of this? I think from what you are saying it is about marketing to get the people there. The volunteers are a great asset when you actually get the patronage, but can you just outline some of the advantages and disadvantages of having such a large contribution from volunteerism?

**Mr LEATHEM** — The key advantage is definitely authenticity. In the tourism industry we talk a lot about experience and people wanting authentic experiences. When people come into information centres and they go to, say, Buda, or on our historic railway, they want to talk to people who know, love and breathe the area — and our volunteers provide that. They have the history and the stories, and it is that authentic experience that people are looking for. I guess that the disadvantage is the reliability of volunteer labour. The level and consistency of service provision is always a challenge as well. People come for our characters, which is great, but often characters can leave people with a bad taste in their mouths too. It is about a balance between those, and it is about providing a level of service and a quality of experience that is very hard to do across a volunteer base.

A couple of times I talked to our councillors a few years ago about how to run information centres. I said, 'Imagine if you're a small business owner and you have, say, two staff. How about if we take those two staff away, bring in a roster of, say, 50 staff over the month and sometimes one person might not be on for a month? How do you think you will cope with the challenge of putting across consistent customer service?'. When you are running information centres and key historic attractions, that is often the challenge that people have, to try to get a consistency of service across such a varied labour resource.

**Ms DUNCAN** — Thanks, David, for your presentation. Can you make some comments about the support you get from Tourism Victoria?

**Mr LEATHEM** — Certainly. I guess a key part of Tourism Victoria's support is through its marketing that we receive through what is now the VGTE, which comes down to Ballarat and Bendigo regional tourism. That is our major funding for marketing for our region. The challenge we had before with Goldfields Tourism was that we were limited. In our area what our operators really want is to hit the Melbourne market; that is our key market first and foremost, and through Goldfields Tourism it was a real challenge to do that because it was mainly interstate focused. Now that we have split Goldfields Tourism into Bendigo Regional Tourism and Ballarat Regional Tourism the benefit is that with the Tourism Victoria funding we can use that as a body with Bendigo — working with a hub-and-spoke approach — and then develop a market into Melbourne and also interstate as well, which benefits our operators a lot better and starts to focus us on the intrastate market.

Obviously for a lot of the time Tourism Victoria has been very focused on the interstate market, and quite logically so, but I think the balance of also looking intrastate and getting Victorians to travel within their own state more has probably been neglected a bit. I think it is now starting to change and we are realising the value of intrastate travel as well. That is a reality as most of regional Victoria's visitation is from other Victorians, so if we can work that further — and coming back to your question about how we get that visitation out there as

well as internationally and interstate — it is about what is on our doorstep, which is getting Victorians to travel within Victoria more. Certainly there is funding through Tourism Victoria, and the benefits we get through the Visit Victoria website are really good. We are working on different projects as well — working on video projects and on our PR. We are working well with them too.

Tourism Victoria was set up primarily as a marketing body, and I think the industry regionally would like to see Tourism Victoria being more than just a marketing body and looking more at industry development and investment attraction. We know they have all those arms, but the marketing focus has always been no. 1.

Sitting in my chair of economic development and tourism, when I go looking for funding it is through Regional Development Victoria and the economic development-type agencies that have the funding that we put our projects through. We see Tourism Victoria as marketing, but for key infrastructure products — and again, each area plays its role — if Tourism Victoria had a greater focus also on investment attraction and the development of the industry as well as marketing, that would benefit regional Victoria a lot more.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — Just touching on that point, don't you think that the bigger issue is other departments that also have tourism as part of their package? For example, take industry undervaluing tourism and not understanding tourism and therefore not working through how those limited resources might be able to be applied to the tourism sector.

**Mr LEATHEM** — I think that is a fair point as well. The other point is about the different departments working more closely together on the whole chain of experience. For instance, Tourism Victoria put together a trails strategy or a nature-based strategy but it is not often connected to where the investment is going to come from — say, RDV. You talk to RDV and say, 'I've got the Tourism Victoria strategy here, which says "We're looking to go this way"', and RDV says, 'Yes, we understand that, but that's probably not our priority', as you were saying. It is about aligning the different areas.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — You are saying that they are really working in silos rather than across government.

**Mr LEATHEM** — Yes. I guess RDV and others give us that infrastructure and funding to invest and create the product and then Tourism Victoria has to market it to the world. But if those two are not aligned, then we are either creating the wrong thing or marketing the wrong thing; it is not connecting together. The council is looking for funding through from creating the investment to then marketing it. It would be great to see that alignment all the way through to say, 'This is the direction we're going in. Once we put it together and we build that product then there will be funding for you to market it, and there will be no discrepancy'. So I think you are right.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — Just a couple of quick ones. Is anything happening with accredited ecotourism products in the shire, and is there any support the council is encouraging in that area?

**Mr LEATHEM** — If anyone has a AAA green rating for ecotourism, we display it on our tourism website. We looked at an accreditation system — and I cannot remember who it was through; we were going to do a pilot project — but that did not come about in the end. There is a lack of accreditation for ecotourism in the shire and probably a lack of knowledge in the industry about which programs have what accreditation — 'What value it brings for me versus the dollars I put in to hit those accreditation standards?'.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — The last one is really around heritage, and it is more around signage. For example, Ballarat and Bendigo are bigger towns. You come in and you see that there are a whole lot of heritage buildings. There are a whole lot of other smaller communities that have heritage buildings. For consumers there are lot of heritage buildings, a lot of heritage landscapes and a lot of heritage sites. Do we lack a tiered system? There are some jurisdictions around the world that focus their branding around sites that are of national heritage significance and state heritage significance in order to be able to brand them as a higher value experience and, basically, for the market to better appreciate this particular locality, building or landscape. Do you think we need to develop something like that, which helps to brand heritage in the marketing sense but also at the locality so the visitor passing by values it and says, 'Gee, this is actually of national significance or state significance' versus just being another old building?

**Mr LEATHEM** — Yes. I think from a marketing point of view it would be great to have a framework like that, to really start to put that together. As I said in my submission, the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park is in the process of gaining world heritage status. You would probably know better than I do that it is a very long process that is politically driven in the way things happen. To have a system which is national and that can start to differentiate the products without them having to be a couple of key world heritage sites and taking 10 or 20 years to get there — and then there are no measurements and there is no way to differentiate them in the market — is a real challenge. I think any system like that, which would be a challenge to bring in, that started to brand different areas in the minds of the consumers would be a lot more beneficial.

**The CHAIR** — David, in closing and in appreciation that we will be joining you this afternoon for site visits, what do you see as the main advantages for the campaign to secure UNESCO world heritage listing for the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park? What might it do to patronage in the event that you are successful? Where has your patronage gone in the last five years? Is it on the rise or is it static?

**Mr LEATHEM** — Our day visitations have increased, but it is probably fair to say that our overnight has decreased. A bit of that is around needing greater accessibility to train lines and the road network. There are pros and cons: you get greater day trip visitation and slightly less overnight visitation.

**The CHAIR** — UNESCO world heritage?

**Mr LEATHEM** — Yes. If that were to happen, I think for us it would tell the story of why we are important and it would take us to the world. The gold rush saw the greatest peacetime migration of people in the history of the world. Once you start to understand that story and the branding of world heritage — and looking at other areas such as Cornwall in the UK and what that has done for that area — to brand and develop that would be incredible. I think to go hand in hand with that there needs to be development of interpretation to really put that experience together so that if we get the world heritage status, when people come they will get a better grasp and a richer experience. It is a challenge with sites such as ours where it is about interpreting the space rather than re-creating it.

I think the challenge with heritage tourism is that it is about how you interpret it and how you use technology in the way you do it so that it brings the experience alive and tells the story and gives the visitor a great experience.

I think the world heritage status would really give us great leverage in the market, but with that has to come the resources and investment to provide that great experience so that people are enriched and we get the return visitation and we get that flow on and momentum so we can really take advantage if we get that status.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, David. I think our time has concluded. We very much appreciate your giving us your time and joining us this morning in relation to this reference.

**Mr LEATHEM** — No problem.

**The CHAIR** — Before calling our next presenter I would like to acknowledge our parliamentary colleague Geoff Howard, the member for Ballarat East. It is good to see you, Geoff, and thank you very much for making time to be here this morning for a public hearing.

**Witness withdrew.**