

TRANSCRIPT

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Melbourne — 7 March 2014

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Witnesses

Mr R. Ponsford, executive officer, Western Melbourne Tourism Inc.; and

Mr C. Rowley, chief executive officer, LeadWest.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I welcome you to this public hearing. All evidence taken at the 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. You are aware that today all evidence is being recorded and, as witnesses, you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the next couple of weeks, with instructions. We thank you very much. We have up to half an hour allocated for the full discussion with you guys. Who is starting off, Richard?

Mr PONSFORD — I will lead off, if that is all right. Craig will follow. Thank you very much for the opportunity to make a presentation to the inquiry. As explained in our submission, Western Melbourne Tourism is an incorporated association for the purposes of promoting and developing visitation to the western metropolitan region and embraces the municipal boundaries of Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong, Melton, Moonee Valley and Wyndham, so there are six councils. When I talk about our region or our geographic area, that is the territory I will be referring to. We are overseen by an independent board, and we obviously have on our board members of the six metropolitan partner councils. I note that we also have Parks Victoria, who I think have already submitted to the inquiry. We have board members also representing Scienceworks, and, again, I think they have also submitted indirectly through Museum Victoria. We have the Substation, Newport; Zoos Victoria; Quest apartments; and two other community representatives.

I am employed as a part-time executive officer; the resources of our organisation are not substantial. We are by no means a fully fledged regional tourism body or marketing agency; we tend to just focus on a few key projects on behalf of the six councils. I am based in the office of LeadWest. LeadWest is a regional organisation for Melbourne's west focused on advocacy for the region. Its charter is much broader, obviously, than just tourism, where my focus is. Its membership also includes the six local governments. They are joined by major companies and other organisations, each with substantial operations or interests that are based in Melbourne's west. Craig will follow my presentation with some additional comments.

As a network of local councils and other stakeholders, both Western Melbourne Tourism and LeadWest have a very strong strategic interest in the profile and development of visitor attractions in Melbourne's west, including our significant heritage and ecotourism assets. Our submission is focused on this local context, but I suspect our comments are likely to be equally relevant to other local councils. Whilst not to play down the ecotourism value of the region, in which there are some very significant assets, my submission will be focussed around the heritage tourism aspect. I should say up-front that I am not an expert in the local history of the west, so please do not ask me too many technical questions.

There are five key points that we would like to present; the first being the need for improvement to the level of general promotion of heritage assets in the public realm and to increase the visibility and awareness of these assets for visits to local places. My first sense is that heritage is often represented by just a couple of iconic things, but it is when you get below that level — it is that sort of permeability that seems to be completely missing.

Certainly there is a need for greater public funding and resourcing of programs. Obviously these need to be targeted projects, allocated to improve the profile of local heritage assets. I would certainly argue that while there is clearly benefit in economic terms in growing the visitor economy, there is a lot of other benefit in thinking this through in terms of community, social and cultural development of local communities. I think it is very interesting to compare Australia with Europe in how it celebrates its own culture and has events wrapped around historic events and that sort of stuff and whether Australia and Melbourne could be much stronger with that. I feel there is a need for the development of a much more unified branding and communication strategy for the local heritage, again, as occurs in other countries.

Ms WREFORD — Sorry, can I interrupt and just ask: when you say that it occurs in other countries, do you have examples of what you mean?

Mr PONSFORD — The key one from my experience in travelling is English heritage. As you move around the UK, there is a lot more signage; you get a lot more information. There is constancy about English heritage through its own sort of branding.

Mr ROWLEY — I might add that there are small examples of it here. I am a resident of Williamstown. When I moved there to discover more about the rich history of the area, I looked around and there are the little blue plaques put there by former councils, possibly with the assistance of the state. It enriched my understanding of that region. That could be spread more widely.

Ms WREFORD — So do you think this is something that should be promoted by local government, or do you think it needs a broader regional strategy?

Mr PONSFORD — I think in the first instance it is probably almost creating the template for the sort of look and that sort of thing. It is something that needs to be implemented locally. You can pick up different tours and different brochures but they are all different; there is no consistency at all. It is almost that the identity of heritage as a segment of tourism is not as strong as it would be for, say, events or sports or food and wine, for example — the segments where there is clearly a lot more investment in the actual marketing and promotion. I think heritage is a little bit of a poor cousin in marketing.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — So do you maybe envisage it around heritage trail-type experiences around interpretation, so you have some of the —

Mr PONSFORD — Correct, or it could be — I was going to come to a few different examples, but that is it exactly. Anything we do should have some sort of overlying branding — it is a bit like the value of the ‘i’ on ‘information’ signage. People know where to look. Once they see that, it is a cue. I guess with some sort of landmark or market, which will help you find your way and which, as I will come to say, is not necessarily in a physical sense — it can also be in a digital sense, which we are now seeing much more of. Certainly, as I have just been touching on that, there is significant scope for improving visitor experiences and interpretation, particularly using new digital technology, which I am sure other submissions and many people will bring up. I also heard in the comments in the last presentation that it is about having clarification about the organisations and responsibilities within government in delivering any such initiatives. I am mindful of the great potential interest for visitors because of local historic, cultural, social and environmental heritage significance, but, generally speaking, many of these aspects of the region are not well known or understood. There are many untold stories in the west.

I set out in my submission a whole list of elements of significance, so I will not go through those, but there is a whole spectrum across the natural, maritime, Indigenous and particularly industrial heritage, as well as architecture and the built environment. I have listed a number of examples of these. There are many quirky ‘did you know’s’ about the west. There is a cinematic heritage through Footscray and Yarraville, including the Sun Theatre. There is also the equine history of the west through the Maribyrnong River and Flemington Racecourse and all those sorts of things. There are lots of layers and stories.

As I said, I have not emphasised the ecotourism assets. They will probably have been covered by Parks Victoria, but one in particular which is close to my heart is the Cheetham Wetlands, which is the most significant location for migratory birds in Victoria. I suspect many people would not have that in their mindset when they think about the west of Melbourne.

About 3.55 million people visited Melbourne’s west between October 2012 and September 2013. The greatest majority of those visitors were daytrip visits. There were 2.77 million daytrip visits, which was 78 per cent of our visitation. There were 675 000 domestic overnight visits, which was 19 per cent of visitation. There were roughly 108 000 international visitors, which was just 3 per cent of visitors.

Ms WREFORD — Are you saying it is good, bad or indifferent?

Mr PONSFORD — It is probably potential. It is interesting that the daytrip market is enormous in the west, particularly for people coming in from the regions. There is a lot of scope to develop. There is a lot of leakage in the region. The overnight stays are very poor. We are lacking some infrastructure and accommodation. Typically a lot of people coming into the region will have a visit and then go back and stay in the city or stay elsewhere. That is something we are advocating strongly for at the moment. In terms of Melbourne’s overall share, the west receives 17 per cent of metro daytrip visits, 9 per cent of domestic overnight visits and 6 per cent of international visits.

It lacks the mainstream profile that other parts of Melbourne and Victoria might have. With the strength it does have, with all this gritty heritage, there is a real opportunity to develop product for the region, and support and grow the region's local visitor economy. It is interesting that these elements are often smaller in scale and not necessarily high-cost things to do individually, but when you aggregate them you can put together things in a very engaging way which creates high-quality visitor experiences. We are not talking about large-scale investment in bricks and mortar infrastructure, commercial attractions or large marketing campaigns. The local stories and local history can be very powerful and are often the most memorable and enriching elements of a visitor experience. This is not just isolated to Melbourne's west, but this is what the inquiry is all about.

We are keen to encourage selective government investment. We are making submissions that say, 'The government should be doing this' or 'The government should be doing that', but we also recognise the need for the involvement and create partnerships to make things more realistic in a costing sense. One of the best examples of a single event that I can refer to in terms of value is the RAAF centenary, which was held last weekend at Point Cook. It was a fantastic event. They had about 35 000 visitors. People probably did not realise that Point Cook was the birthplace of the RAAF. It is the oldest continuing operating military base in the world, and its royal air force is the second-oldest air force in the world. This was a celebration of the centenary of the first military flight in Australia. They had a replica of the box kite on display. The PR story, learning and education which went around that single event was quite marked.

There are some very good examples of ecotourism and heritage tourism experiences in the west. Parks Victoria has its coastal interpretive trail, and Werribee Mansion has tours, festivals and interpretive theatre. These are quite iconic experiences. Once you get beyond those experiences, it drops away quite quickly. There are many more features and stories within the region that could be captured and the information placed in the public realm. Too many people pass through the region completely oblivious to local sites or history of significance.

A key concern is the availability of resources for promotion through key information channels. The prevailing model of tourism destination promotion is focused on marketing programs with a strong element of buy-in from commercially operated attractions. As a consequence, these attractions tend to dominate the choices offered to visitors when they plan for and experience a local destination. Free public assets like parks and heritage sites, nature-based activities and waterways et cetera are often less represented. They only get promoted when government agencies actually pay to do so. Many heritage and other cultural attractions operate with a dependency on grants and on limited revenues and cannot afford the costs of mainstream tourism marketing. That was a reason and motivation for the formation of the Cultural Tourism Industry Group, which you just heard about. If you pick up a copy of the official visitor guide and have a look at what the out-of-town visitor sees, I suspect that not a lot of small heritage and ecotourism experiences are represented.

For heritage, the National Trust does a great job, although it has a focus on hallmark, heritage sites like Como and *Polly Woodside* as a destination positioning of heritage. Beyond those big-ticket items, there is a sort of falling away in terms of government responsibility, and it becomes very muddy as to who is responsible for what and who can take some ownership of developing some of those experiences.

I think I have already covered it, but in the tourism sector heritage as a product segment it is certainly not as strong and it does not receive the marketing support. There is no dedicated staff member in Tourism Victoria who will look after that or be responsible for driving that segment. It probably suffers for its introversion, I guess, as is the nature of the sector, compared with the more out-there, extroverted event operators.

In regard to what improvements can be made, I offer just a few suggestions. The first, as I have talked about, is to develop a clear and more visible local heritage brand. I have talked about the model in the UK. I will not discuss that anymore, but then that leads into how that can be delivered and implemented. Obviously the typical interpretive panels and hard signage and infrastructure are generally expensive, but obviously now with digital technology and the increased use of mobile devices for navigation and sourcing information there is a great opportunity to include further overlay information to visitors in soft formats, overlaying maps, and certainly really improving the layers of culture and history in local places. I have been involved in working in museums and I have seen the power of a QR code: you can scan a QR code and play a bit of video footage that actually takes you back to that particular place in all different time sequences, which is quite exciting.

One example that I could refer to which I did not mention in our submission is that Melbourne Museum has prepared an app which was built around the precinct in Spotswood. It enables a walk through history. I thought

it was quite a good example of a case study of where that has been done. There are 37 stop points that you walk around. It tells you all about all the very quirky and interesting things about that precinct. Obviously the Spotswood pumping station was the first key element of the Melbourne sewerage scheme; but also at the corner of Simcock Avenue and Booker Street is the ACI factory where they created the Australian stubbies, or the glass, where it is still made.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — It should be a national icon then.

Mr PONSFORD — That is right, yes.

Mr ROWLEY — It is only the glass, not the contents, unfortunately.

Mr PONSFORD — There are examples. This is not unlike things like the Golden Mile project and those other examples. They set a benchmark.

One interesting point which I touched on in my submission is the H. V. McKay site in Sunshine because there is a lot of new development happening with the Sunshine precinct. Museum Victoria has a small online resource which was developed in the past, but there is such a powerful story attached to that which needs somehow to be brought to life.

The third suggestion I would make is the development of what I call community heritage hubs: places like visitor centres or reception areas of council offices, or places that are gateway arrival points. There are great opportunities for more interpretation. Local governments should then be encouraged to foster stronger partnerships and use local resources. There are so many academic researchers, local community associations and local community historical resources, and certainly those exist in the west. Clearly there are employment and economic development opportunities, such as providing work for students, volunteers, retirees, and other people who could be trained as destination advocates and local storytellers.

One place I wanted to touch on as an example is Melbourne's Living History Museum of the West, which is located at Pipemakers Park in Maribyrnong. It is quite a tangible example. It has become almost a piece of living history in itself. It was quite a thriving enterprise in the 1990s. Now it has fallen into a lot of decline. It is probably operating on a small grant. I think its annual budget is about \$12 000. It is very limited in what it can do. But it has an enormous number of volunteers and commitments of time from people that are still keeping this alive and running. For example, on their website they have just produced a whole series of digital exhibitions, which are like digital walking tours. They cover things like the story from Fleming's journal of Charles Grimes's journey up the Maribyrnong River, the Indigenous history of the west and stories of women in the west. There is a lot of fantastic information that I suspect very few people would be aware of. It also has an enormous collection of audio in storage and documents, and there are great issues there just in terms of how to preserve that and have that digitised for the future.

Finally, certainly other aspects of this include using tours and local knowledge and running local tours. There is a great product called Westside Discovery Tours, which is operated by the Maribyrnong City Council and the Footscray Historical Society. It is called the Lambs to the Slaughter tour, which tells the story of the whole livestock history, the Maribyrnong River, the Newmarket saleyards and how the stock went through Kensington Banks, Angliss meatworks and the Angliss estate. They have just captured these things.

Finally, in terms of events, I talked about the RAAF event, but there are things like Williamstown's tall ships festival. Having that focus is a great public education in the value of tourism and it helps us understand it ourselves a lot better and a lot more as well. With that, I might just hand over to Craig.

Mr ROWLEY — In the interests of time, I will cut short what I was going to say and keep it very simple. As mentioned, LeadWest is an advocacy organisation for the west; it is non-partisan and not for profit. It comprises all six councils joined by a whole range of other organisations, and there is a growing number of affiliates. Just in reference to the previous speakers to us, one of those associates is Volunteer West, which is an organisation that builds the capacity of organisations to manage their volunteers, so an organisation like that could help in volunteering in tourism across the region.

The main point I want to make is that ours is a region with a changing economy. That is documented in this publication. I have brought only the one copy, but it is available online at www.leadwest.com.au. This is a jobs

and industry strategy for Melbourne's west, and essentially it points to the way in which we can navigate structural change in the Australian economy and diversify the economy of the region.

Further, *A Strategic Action Plan for Melbourne's West* — and I do have a copy of this for everyone — is set out in *Western Agenda 2012–16*. This sets out seven threads, one of which is experience and enjoyment, which is our way of saying the things that enrich life in the region: tourism, visitation, arts, culture and recreation. We see this as important for improving the sense of identity and pride within the region and the perception of the region from outside, but we also see it as a valuable catalyst for job creation and change. It is a vibrant area of which people are proud, and they can bring visitors and be proud with those visitors. It is an area that is attractive to the class of working people that we want in the future: highly educated people in the knowledge economy. We see creating heritage tourism experiences as something that can strengthen the incentive to ensure that our heritage places and objects are treated with care and skill to preserve them for future generations. Creating an ecotourism experience can be a catalyst for protecting, conserving, repairing, restoring and improving the natural environment in Melbourne's west. Again, it hits some of our other threads around sustainability and community wellbeing.

As described in the submission by Western Melbourne Tourism, Melbourne's west is full of traditions. It has a wealth of heritage sites, from the Keilor archaeological site, which was among the first places to demonstrate the antiquity of Aboriginal occupation. There are places like Williamstown, Werribee Park and the rock walls on the grassy plains in Melton, where one can learn about Melbourne's foundations and early colonial history, and places like Moonee Ponds and Essendon — they are part of the gold rush story — to places like Footscray and around the lower Maribyrnong, highlighting our industrial history and military history.

Just last week, as was mentioned, we celebrated 100 years since the first military flight in Australia, which took place at Point Cook. Early naval formations took place in Williamstown, and of course the Maribyrnong area was the site of the largest armaments and munitions factories in the southern hemisphere, as I understand it. There is a rich history to share and lots of opportunity to build on the bones of things that are there to create a draw for visitation in the future. It tells Melbourne's west story, it tells Melbourne's story, it tells Victoria's story, it tells Australia's story.

As often as possible I get around, taking the opportunity to say there is so much more to Melbourne's west. We encourage others to come and visit, explore and discover the hidden gems on the bay's western shores, in the coastal wetlands, throughout the volcanic plains, down in the deep gorges carved by two of Melbourne's three great rivers, in the places that were built, where the communities were formed and amongst the great diversity of people who have come and settled here. We welcome visits by each of you to Melbourne's west. We would be happy to facilitate it too.

There is one final point I will leave you with, which is that when we are talking about heritage tourism we tend to be thinking about looking back at what was built or made in the past, bringing that to now for people to revisit, and ensuring that it is there for the future. I want to make a point about how we create heritage today. In 100 years time Victorians and visitors from around the world will look back at things that we are creating today that could be of tourism value. A great example of that is the Melton Botanic Garden, being planted today. It will not be mature for decades, but it could be a place of great visitation in 100 years time.

Other examples are doing smart things with the pieces of infrastructure that we are putting in the region, like the regional rail link. I have reported to Corey Hannett at the Regional Rail Link Authority how pleased I am to see those new stations done well. They are incorporating art elements that celebrate the past but are also now creating things that will change people's perception in the present and hopefully will stand the test of time and be things that are admired in the future — again, drawing visitors to our region for the long term.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I have just a couple of quick questions. Part of your submission — and Richard touched on it with his role at the National Sports Museum — is around new technologies that are available. This issue keeps coming up with us all the time. Heritage is about interpretation — interpreting a building, interpreting the history of a particular location, site et cetera. The question then is: who should be the driver of that? Should there be a government dedicated funding program? Should it be left to local government? Should it be left to product? Who should be the driver of some of this, noting that new technologies are changing very fast. Which is the right technology?

Mr PONSFORD — I think that probably the first thing to resolve is establishing good user-friendly technology, and that may be a role for Multimedia Victoria to come up with some demonstration projects to actually show you. It was not until someone showed me how well that works — that sort of thing. It is almost like how you get that out through councils and how they become aware of the things which are possible. That is the first thing. But I think it is potentially a marketing activity as well. We have seen in tourism promotion how technology has been introduced with things like Remote Control Tourist and those sorts of campaigns. To lift the profile of heritage there could be some demonstration projects in local regions showing you how you represent your region by maps online and how you can overlay information and have those sorts of things, which can be built into some sort of marketing campaign.

Mr ROWLEY — I would add that the implementation is obviously through collaboration. You need state and local governments, not-for-profit organisations, businesses and people in the community — and going to the wisdom of the crowd as well with these things — but the catalyst for driving it forward would be similar to what we are talking about with the signage. It is setting the template.

In this case setting the template means making some leadership decision about appropriate technologies that will have the robustness to stand the test of time when technology update is happening quicker and quicker all the time. I was contemplating, as Richard was talking, Google Glass, which is a pair of glasses you can wear and see things that are not in the real environment but are there virtually — they are online. It is augmented reality. It is in a testing phase now, and there are thousands of people around the world who have the device and are testing it out. Who knows what will come next. We need to set the template, and the stories that are collected and delivered through these means are treasures of this state, so I think the state could take a lead.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — We have to leave it there. Thanks very much, Richard and Craig, for coming along.

Witnesses withdrew.