

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors

Camperdown—Thursday, 13 May 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr David Davis

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

WITNESS

Mr Barry Wurlod, Owner, Keayang Maar Vineyard.

The CHAIR: The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors continues. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

My name is Enver Erdogan. I am Chair of the committee. I would like to introduce my fellow committee members: Mr Rod Barton, Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mrs Bev McArthur, Mr Andy Meddick and Mr David Davis.

All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments, but I ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. Could you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of the Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you, Barry.

Mr WURLOD: Thank you. My name is Barry Wurlod. I am the owner and manager of Keayang Maar Vineyard.

The CHAIR: Excellent.

Mr WURLOD: Thank you, everyone, for allowing me to come and give this presentation. So a quick run-down on our small business: in 2018 my wife and I decided that our great wine production hobby was becoming larger than we anticipated. We found we were in a situation where we had to either pull out vines or continue to expand and turn it into a business. Basically we were making more wine than we could drink, so we decided to—

Mr BARTON: I see that as a challenge!

Mr WURLOD: Yes. So we decided to increase production and build a small cellar door. Early in 2019 we discussed our proposal with our family and set out a plan to progress that idea. We formed a formal business proposal which we presented to our accountant and also to our bank. Both parties responded very positively to our proposal, and we continued to plan and develop. As our planning continued, interest from some of our family became more increased, and our youngest son and his wife expressed interest in coming on board and working with us. After that we then met again formally with the bank and were supported in securing a loan to build a wine production area, a cellar door and an open storage area. Through 2019 we secured contractors, with the idea of always trying to employ local people—so all our contractors were local, within probably 15 kilometres of our business. We also at the same time purchased another 2000 vines and commenced planting them in an expanded vineyard. Construction continued through 2019 and was progressing very well through the usual issues and problems that I do not need to explain to anyone about building and constructing.

Then early 2020 obviously things changed as we never expected or planned to happen. At that stage we had to start making decisions, and we felt that there was such an amount spent on the build that we had to continue on. So we continued to work through that, early into mid-2020, and continued the construction—a very trying time. We had tradesmen working in masks. We did not know from one day to the next what was going to happen and whether we would be able to continue on, as I am sure everyone is aware. Through this time we decided that we had to do everything to push on and get the build finished, so we kept working, we kept pushing

tradesmen—they were all supportive and wanting to keep going. So the build continued, and finally we got it close to completion.

At this stage we really needed to start getting some cash flow going. We were not at a stage where we could open a cellar door, but we moved into online sales and also farmgate sales. We were given permission by the local Corangamite council to run farmgate sales. That worked very well for about six weeks, and then everything quietened down. So the initial flush of our publicity and support from people—certainly right across the state and interstate with online—went well until obviously they had done what they felt they had to do, which was very similar to what we did through the pandemic. We supported local businesses by buying meals off the local pubs and that sort of thing, but it is the sort of thing that you cannot do forever and ever. All through this time we were employing two people, our son and his wife. They were both being paid. They were definitely working a lot longer hours than they were getting paid for. As the pandemic continued, we felt that we were very positive about the support that was coming through the federal government, and we felt this would be of great benefit to us. But as time went on and we applied for the support, we found that we were unable to get it. Because we were a new start-up, we had no—

Mr DAVIS: This was the state support?

Mr WURLOD: No, this was federal.

The CHAIR: JobKeeper—12 months continuity.

Mr WURLOD: Yes, that sort of thing. We had no previous income or expenditure, so we got no support federally. From there, through the three tiers of government—if I can just move on now—we got very good support from local government. They were willing to support us in any way they could.

Mr DAVIS: Corangamite.

Mr WURLOD: Corangamite shire. We got good state government support through our liquor licence fees being waived—firstly for our initial application and then for our renewal—so we were very happy with that. We also got support through the online marketing scheme that was run. But we have had a lot of issues with trying to get publicity through road signage to our cellar door, and that is working with VicRoads. We have found that very difficult and frustrating. VicRoads have an online form to apply for road signage, which we filled in. I think there were probably six pages of form to fill in. We filled all that in. We added photographic evidence of where we felt we would like signage, and then went to send that to VicRoads and there was nowhere to send it—no email, no address. After frustratingly wondering what to do, we spoke to the council and they said, ‘Look, you can’t contact VicRoads. Send through what you’ve got to us. We know someone that knows someone that may be able to get this application through’. We sent that to the council. We were told, I think through the VicRoads site, that they respond to every application within a week. That was seven months ago.

Mr DAVIS: They didn’t say which week.

Mr WURLOD: That, at this stage, has been our major hold-up at the moment. The local council has put signage up for us on their roads—the roads that they are responsible for—but we have not been able to get support from VicRoads at this stage. The problem is that, as you know, tourism is supposed to have reduced by 70 per cent through this area, so if pre COVID we had a hundred people interested in coming to our cellar door and only 50 per cent of them could find their way to us because of a lack of signage, we would still have 50 people turn up. But now we are down to perhaps 30 people wanting to come. If 50 per cent of them come, we have got 15 people at the cellar door instead of 50.

Mr DAVIS: They might drive around in circles, not able to find the wayfinding signs.

Mr WURLOD: Yes, and we have actually been told by other people at tourist areas that they have told the tourists, ‘Look, we have got a cellar door in our area’, and the people have driven around and gone back to that venue and said, ‘Oh, we can’t find it’. I know we can talk about sat nav and how everyone uses that, but not enough people do unfortunately. Even people that do turn up at our cellar door do say, ‘Look, we couldn’t find you. We’ve been up this road and that road. Can you get some more signs up so we know where to go?’. So I think that people tend to still want road signs to get to places. So those would be our two major problems, the

signage and also that we have had no government support. I will say I have worked as a business through farming all my life, and we have never asked for or needed or got any government support. Everything we have done to build our businesses has come from the work we put in, but it has not been like this ever before, obviously, and when there was support there, we hoped we would have got it. So that is basically, I think, what I have got to present at the moment.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Barry. We will open up the discussion. If something else comes to mind through that discussion, feel free to add it. First of all I just want to say it is great to hear your story, and I want to thank you and your family for endeavouring to create more cellar doors in the region. I know it is very popular. Obviously I live in Melbourne, but when I travel I do like seeing the different cellar doors, and sometimes I will pre-plan to visit one. You just see the signage, and yes, I am very concerned to hear that story and your story of I guess state, federal and local authorities' response times. We have heard at previous hearings, whether it be in relation to planning issues with roads et cetera, the kinds of response times from different agencies at different levels of government. It is disappointing to hear that—very, very disappointing to hear that—and we will follow that up. I just want to ask: obviously you were not eligible for JobKeeper, you said, because you did not qualify because you did not have 12 months of trading history. You said you received some liquor licence fees being waived effectively for two financial years. Did you apply for any other small business grants?

Mr WURLOD: We have. We did get one through the local council, yes. We got a \$5000 local government grant, yes.

The CHAIR: I have got one more question: are you doing online orders now? And where can we find your pinot noir? Because I and Mrs McArthur—

Mr WURLOD: Yes, we still have pinot noir for sale. I could suggest you visit the cellar door and you can buy some directly from us.

Mr DAVIS: But you might drive around for a while.

Mr WURLOD: If you can find us! Yes, we still do online, so if you were to look up 'Keayang Maar Vineyard', you would find an online option there to buy, yes.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you. That is my question. I might pass it over. Who wants to go next? Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Thanks, Chair. And thank you, Barry. I spent a bit of time while you were speaking there looking you up on your Facebook page, and I can tell you all they are situated at 182 Maguires Road. So put that in your sat nav on the way out, and away we will all go. We should all get there.

Mr DAVIS: I just looked up Dixie.

Mr MEDDICK: I was looking at the different things on your Facebook page, and I note that you have done a lot of value-adding as well. This is not just a cellar door operation that you have got here; you are selling through. You have got your restaurant-type scenario, you are holding functions, you have had Twelve Apostles tourism there and you have live music as well. This seems indicative of cellar doors across the state—it is a tried and true path, and it speaks to your resilience, I think, and your willingness to value-add and really make sure. It is disappointing to hear about the VicRoads scenario with the lack of signage, and as I think the Chair said, we will follow up on that for you; I hope the committee does. I want to just touch on a couple of things. Because you did not get really any support from government, the travel voucher scenario—I brought it up with another witness earlier today that it should not necessarily just be for, say, accommodation. If a scenario was available where vouchers could be issued for things like cellar door purchases or to dine where you are, would that be of assistance? But I also note that you were not originally involved in ecommerce. It was not something that you had originally thought of—

Mr WURLOD: No.

Mr MEDDICK: but you are doing it now?

Mr WURLOD: Yes.

Mr MEDDICK: Let us say that we have a perfect world and everything returns to normal and you are going great guns, will you continue with that?

Mr WURLOD: Oh, yes. Yes, I think so. I am not the generation that understands a lot of that, but we have got the—

Mr MEDDICK: Me either. That is why we have children.

Mr WURLOD: Our son and his wife promoted and developed all that. From what I understand, once it has started there is no real reason not to continue it on. Everything is set up and it is going. It would seem a negative move to stop going that way. So, yes.

Mr MEDDICK: Fantastic. Thanks so much.

The CHAIR: Mrs MacArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, look, thank you, Barry. It is great to hear of great entrepreneurs out here in country Victoria, and I am pleased that the council that I used to be a member of is helping you out—

Mr BARTON: I am not sure that you can take credit for that, Mrs McArthur.

Mr DAVIS: It was the systems she put in place that paved the way.

Mrs McARTHUR: Exactly. But I am certainly disappointed to hear about VicRoads, but I am not surprised, because they are very good at putting signs up. We have got a lot of 'Reduce speed' signs happening everywhere. So they can put signs up if they really want to—

Mr DAVIS: It depends on what they point to.

Mrs McARTHUR: Exactly. So it is usually to avoid a pothole that they do not fix. But we will follow that up. I mean, it is an extraordinary situation—

Mr DAVIS: Who is the minister? It is Ben Carroll, is it?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: that you cannot get a response. Nobody is on the end of a phone or online or whatever. As Mr Barton says, there is nobody at home in this department. That is not good enough. We need to fix that. What you also need, I think, is to be able to direct people to get to your venue, but you need more people—

Mr WURLOD: More people.

Mrs McARTHUR: More people, and we need to make sure that everybody in Victoria is moving out here to your vineyard, but we need those people from interstate. They cannot be afraid of moving across a border.

Mr WURLOD: That is right.

Mrs McARTHUR: Nobody ever thought we would have Australians divided by borders, but they are. Would you say that border closures intrastate are not helpful to your industry?

Mr WURLOD: Definitely. No, that is right. And to be honest, we are the same. I would not like to cross a border at the moment, because I—

Mrs McARTHUR: Terrifying.

Mr WURLOD: It is too risky, that suddenly you are going to end up having to stay in a hotel for two weeks—

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes.

Mr WURLOD: to get back home again, and I think a lot of people would feel the same way.

Mrs McARTHUR: So do you think if we have got cases somewhere, we should just restrict them to a lockdown to that particular area?

Mr WURLOD: Yes, I think so. Look, we have got a daughter living in Ireland, and it is not going too badly. They are talking about 500 cases a day, but they seem to have a lot more freedom than we have here.

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. As I think Mr Meddick said, or somebody said, we have got to learn to live with this virus.

Mr WURLOD: Yes. I think so, yes. I understand that, and I understand restrictions and I really am supportive of everything that every government has done up to now, because we—

Mrs McARTHUR: Has it cost you a lot to put all the protocols in place—you know, sanitiser and distancing and all those things?

Mr WURLOD: Yes, we have not even bothered to cost it. We have just followed the guidelines.

Mrs McARTHUR: Followed the rules of the North Face jacket and the CHO. Well done, anyway. Fantastic.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. I might pass to Mr Tarlamis, Mr Davis and then we will finish off with Mr Barton.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thanks, Barry, and thanks for coming along and talking to us today and thank you for your perseverance and telling us about your story today. It is fantastic to hear how you have innovated and developed your business. It is good to hear that it is going well. I just wanted to follow up on some of the questions that Mr Meddick was asking around the ecommerce. Some of the businesses have been talking to us about how during some of the period they saw a big spike in their online orders, but now that has sort of tapered off. Have you seen the same pattern in yours?

Mr WURLOD: Yes, exactly. Yes, we started and it went really well for a month or maybe a little over a month, but then it just settled right back down. We have had a number of innovations similar to that, with a wine delivery set-up and that sort of thing. They started well and then quietened down. I think being a new set-up and not being in a traditional winegrowing area it makes it more difficult. And no matter how much work is put into the social media side of things it is hard to keep the name out there and keep people remembering it. Because—obviously I do not need to tell you—there is a lot of competition out there.

Mr TARLAMIS: Yes, absolutely. And that is where you need that signage to attract people in addition to the word of mouth and all those sorts of things—repeat customers and things like that as well.

Mr WURLOD: That is right, yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Tarlamis. Mr Davis.

Mr DAVIS: I should say if you wish, I am happy to deliver a letter to 60 Denmark Street, Kew, just around the corner from my house, and get it through. We are happy to help in any way.

Mr WURLOD: Thank you.

Mr DAVIS: Can I just ask, Barry: what would you say to the transport minister in this respect about the signage?

Mr WURLOD: I would say to him, with the little I understand with the problems we are having, that firstly we need to be able to talk to someone. Secondly, I think too many departments tend to fall back on precedent, and they will say, 'Look, we can't do this, because if we do this for you we've got to do it for the guy down the road and the people doing other business 10 kilometres away; we're going to have signs everywhere'. But I think they need to take every application on its merits.

Mr DAVIS: You would like a bit of action.

Mr WURLOD: Yes. The little I have worked out from VicRoads is that there is a lot of precedent involved and they are—

Mrs McARTHUR: Not much action.

Mr WURLOD: Yes, and they are falling back on that as an excuse not to do anything.

Mr DAVIS: So have they actually corresponded back to you as yet?

Mr WURLOD: No.

Mr DAVIS: No. So it is radio silence.

Mr WURLOD: Well, it has been up until now, yes.

The CHAIR: Mr Meddick.

Mr MEDDICK: Are there other tourist or tourism-driven businesses surrounding you?

Mr WURLOD: We are part of the Twelve Apostles artisan trail.

Mr MEDDICK: I am just wondering about the signage because sometimes we often see a combination of businesses erected on a single sign at a prominent point, and I am just wondering if that might be a solution. I take VicRoads' point of having 50 signs in all different places, but quite often we see a brown-coloured sign and they—

Mr DAVIS: There are solutions to the problem with a bit of creative thinking.

Mr WURLOD: There are.

Mr MEDDICK: Yes. There would be half a dozen businesses listed on that.

Mr WURLOD: The problem with our business is—if you look at the map that we are on—we are at the corner of the artisans trail. So it is hard. We are looking for three signs on three roads just to zero people into the basic area so then they can start following local government signage.

Mr MEDDICK: Okay, thanks. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Barry. Do you have another question, Mr Davis? Last one.

Mr DAVIS: I was just going to ask: is there a local business group that you are part of? You are part of the trail group.

Mr WURLOD: Yes, the trail group. We are involved with the—

Mr DAVIS: Or a wine industry group?

Mr WURLOD: No, not really. We are not in a winegrowing area, so we struggle. We tend to align with the Geelong region, and we liaise with them.

Mr DAVIS: And there is no sort of traders group nearby that you could scoop up and get some help or assistance from.

Mr WURLOD: No. We work with the Cobden business group. We are a member with them, but once again, because we are in the country we tend to be still isolated from local business groups.

The CHAIR: Well, you have come to the right place. You have got two of your local members here: Andy Meddick and Mrs McArthur as well. So thank you for raising those issues. I will ask Mr Barton if he has a final question.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. No, I do not have a question, Barry, but I just love family businesses. My kids have taken over my business, and all that sort of stuff I love hearing about.

Mrs McARTHUR: It is going much better now.

Mr BARTON: Clearly.

Mr WURLOD: Well, obviously we do too. I am the son of a farmer and I have been a farmer. We had no family that were going to be farmers, and my wife and I were preparing for a quiet time—not a retirement but a quiet time—of enjoying what we have done in our life and enjoying the rest of our lives, but that has changed, and we are really happy that that has changed because we have the new generation coming in. We have got grandchildren a kilometre away, and I think that is pretty good.

Mr BARTON: Good on you, Barry. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton. Thank you, Barry. On behalf of the committee we thank you for your appearance and presentation to us. We have taken on board quite a bit of feedback around a number of issues, and we will go away and try to get a response for you.

Mr WURLOD: Okay. Thanks very much. I appreciate it.

Witness withdrew.