ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Improving Access to Victorian Public Sector Information and Data

Melbourne — 30 September 2008

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Ms C. Dalton, Head of Public Policy and Government Affairs; and

Mr A. Noble, Engineering Site Director, Google Australia and New Zealand.

The CHAIR — Welcome, and I acknowledge the presence of Mr Alan Noble and Ms Carolyn Dalton from Google to this all-party parliamentary committee which is hearing evidence today on its Inquiry into Improving Access to Victorian Public Sector Information and Data. I would ask that you state for the Hansard record your name, your business address and the position you hold within your company. I presume you are appearing on behalf of Google.

Ms DALTON — Yes. My name is Carolyn Dalton. I am the Head of Government Affairs and Public Policy for Google Australia and New Zealand, and my business address is level 18, tower 1, which is 201 Sussex Street in Darling Harbour, Sydney.

Mr NOBLE — My name is Alan Noble. I am Engineering Director for Google Australia and New Zealand, and my business address is also level 18, 201 Sussex Street, Sydney.

The CHAIR — Thank you. It is over to you for commentary and presentation, and then we will ask questions after that.

Ms DALTON — Thank you. We are very grateful for the opportunity to appear before the committee. We think this is a very important inquiry and that a number of public benefits can flow from open access to public sector information, so we are very excited to be able to contribute to that, hopefully in a positive way.

I thought I might mention a little bit about Google Australia and the presence that we have here, and then highlight some of the key points and maybe expand a little bit on some of the points we made in our submission.

Google Australia has offices in Sydney and Melbourne, and one of the key things that sets Google Australia apart is the presence of a really strong research and development and engineering centre. We are one of a number of Google offices that has a complete cross-functional team that is engaging in engineering on the ground and employing engineers in Australia. Some of the products that hopefully we are familiar with include Google Maps, which originated in Australia. We have a number of developments such as the street view application and protocol interface and Google Stickers, which originated in Australia as well. Mr Noble obviously will be able to assist the committee with some of the things that we are capable of doing with government information and the things that we would love to be able to do given the opportunity and some of the benefits from that.

We believe there are some very valuable benefits that would flow to the Victorian Government and to the Victorian community from making non-confidential public sector information widely and freely available. We think that those benefits largely fall into two streams. One is productivity benefits leading to economic growth over a wider range of innovative commercial services that can flow through greater access to information. The other is a benefit that you might cast as more along the lines of social inclusion and participation, whether it is greater participation in democracy, engagement with government and access to government information and data in new and useful forms, and we think those two streams of benefits, both to government and the community, are incredibly important.

Our submission talks about a number of different examples of the ways in which companies like ours can create new products that result from the availability of public sector information. Some of those examples include making electoral information available to constituents and interested parties to enable greater citizen participation in the electoral process — for example, providing locations of public toilets on maps is something that we do outside of Australia and as yet have not been able to do in Australia due to the controls around public sector information that are exercised in Australia. Enabling particularly elderly people or parents of small children to find a public toilet in the most easily available way we think is something that has an enormous public benefit.

We also mention Google Transit in our submission. That is a product that enables us to combine public transport information, that comes from public sector agencies, with the Google Maps

product to enable people to plan their trips using public transport schedules combined with other directions and mapping software, and we would be absolutely thrilled to be able to offer that service in Victoria as well.

One example of the sort of innovative use of public sector data that we did not mention in our submission is illustrated by a competition that Google recently ran for university students. They had to create 3D models of universities in Australia using Google Sketchup, which is another product, so a group of University of Melbourne students are finalists in that competition and they are heading to Sydney to compete in the finals. But this model takes public sector information combined with the innovation of the students and allows people far from Melbourne to virtually walk through 3D buildings online and have a look at the university campus. We think those sorts of applications have an enormous range of potential and benefit across the community from tourism to real estate, whether it is land planning authorities right through to environmental authorities.

We also think there is a great potential for economic development and business growth through the greater availability of public sector information. One example would be a real estate business that would be able to harness maps — whether it is our product or somebody else's product — and overlay that with land zoning information, heritage listing status, electoral boundaries, population and crime statistics. The list of information is boundless, and the possibilities are endless in terms of the innovative products that people could make and create as a result of having access to that sort of information.

Again, the benefits to the tourism industry are potentially enormous. The tourism industry could combine products like Google Maps and Google Street View with information about landmarks, attractions, opening times, public transport information — any sorts of things that would allow those 3D views of the Melbourne location, Port Phillip Bay, Geelong et cetera. All of those pieces of information can be combined by agencies and, when they are open, they can be matched up to create enormous benefit for community, business and government alike.

One other example I wanted to highlight — and we were just doing some brainstorming of the types of things that would be possible through greater access to public sector information — is the ability to raise community awareness of critical issues and elevate the profile of research that is being undertaken in both government and private institutions. One example that we thought about would be to make the Department of Sustainability and Environment information available, and it would be possible to create a map that features details of marine sanctuaries in and around Port Phillip Bay together with details of marine biodiversity, such as rocky reef areas, penguin colonies et cetera, that could really educate the community in terms of environmental initiatives — the government's own initiatives, but also increased awareness of this important resource.

I just have an example of something we have done, which I hope it is okay to table with the committee.

The CHAIR — Yes. You are perfectly entitled to table it and if by some chance you want it included in the Hansard transcript, it would be handy to have it emailed to us, if it is technologically possible.

Ms DALTON — I think so. What it would be would be a hyperlink to an example of a map. But this is something that we have done through working with the — —

Mr NOBLE — Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, which is a commonwealth agency; essentially a custodian for the Great Barrier Reef. By the way, this is very, very new. This is just in the last few weeks.

Ms DALTON — Part of this is taking information about reef information which will help map our mapping technology with information about the Great Barrier Reef, which will enable scientists to track developments in coral bleaching — environmental issues. We are not

actually sure at this point of the full range of innovative uses that people will be able to put this to, but one example would be tourism officers and operators being able to have access to this mapping technology. It is just one example of the types of things that it is possible to create for a range of public benefits when we can combine private and public sector innovation.

Mr NOBLE — May I just add, this is the first time in the world marine information — barrier reef information — has been made publicly available on Google Maps and Google Earth, so we are very excited about that.

The CHAIR — And it is the geography of where it is, but you cannot, say, home in on Batt Reef and see the wildlife, the fish obviously?

Mr NOBLE — That is an excellent question. That is precisely the kind of application that we anticipate will be built on top of this. Think of this really as a spatial platform for all kinds of applications. So yes, we expect tourism applications — for example, dive operators — will be able to put photos of dives and videos. We expect there are scientific applications and who knows what.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Sorry, I interrupted you.

Ms DALTON — No, not at all. I think the other thing that we wanted to stress or just make it clear was that in our view it is not just about Google in the sense that we are here giving some examples of what we can do with information and the things that we can make available for the public benefit. We believe that open access to public sector information is good for us and for consumers, but it will also enable other organisations to come up with new and innovative products that can take open information and create their own types of things, whether it be about the Great Barrier Reef or Port Phillip Bay. We absolutely believe that we should measure success by the presence of constant innovation and advances in technology, and that openness is really something that we should be seeing as something that creates innovation rather than being something that is just for the benefit of one or two organisations.

The other thing I just wanted to note in closing, and then hopefully we can have maximum time available for questions, was just that the recommendations of the report of the national innovation review were not available to us at the time that we lodged the submission, obviously. We just wanted to highlight two of the recommendations that we think are particularly important of that review *Venturous Australia*:

> Recommendation 7.14
>
> To the maximum extent practicable, information, research and content funded by Australian governments — including national collections — should be made freely available over the internet as part of the global public commons.

I have referred to an extract from that recommendation; that was not the entirety of it but I think it is the essence. The second recommendation from that review that we would just like to highlight was recommendation 7.7, and again this is just an extract from the recommendation:

> to … maximise the flow of government generated information, research, and content for the benefit of users (including private sector resellers of information).

In the sense that there is actually great public benefit across the board in terms of innovation, even in a situation where some of the uses that are created may be considered to be uses from a private sector organisation, there is still a net increase in innovation that can happen from that.

Again, just in closing, I also want to note and endorse that our views, and we think the Review of the National Innovation System, are consistent with the Victorian 2002 innovation policy, innovation statement *Victorians Bright Ideas Brilliant Future* which stated that:

> The government will follow new intellectual property guidelines to ensure that the knowledge generated by innovation across government is developed and shared more broadly for the benefit of all Victorians.

In effect that is really what we would like to see; that for the benefit of the Victorian community, businesses and an innovative culture are being spurred through greater availability of public sector information.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear. That concludes my opening remarks. I would just really like to highlight that Mr Noble has an in-depth knowledge, much more so than me, in terms of the innovative products that are possible with these things, so hopefully Alan will be able to give you some exciting ideas.

The CHAIR — Do you want those ideas via questions, because my first goes to that very issue, or do you want to outline it?

Mr NOBLE — One more comment on that particular example that we just shared with you about the Great Barrier Reef, in order for a company or a user or a consumer to access this information today it requires very tedious, difficult negotiations with the particular agency that owns that information. In our case, Google is a large enough entity that we can actually undertake and we can resource those negotiations. For smaller entities — certainly for individuals and smaller companies — it simply requires too much of an investment to invest. Essentially the point we are really trying to make is that yes, there is information there and it is possible with sufficient resources to extract that information, but it is just very, very difficult to do so. You almost have to be a company of the size of Google with its resources to be able actually to undertake, so I really think that is worth mentioning. It is not a criticism of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority per se, but it is just the way it is today.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Your submission was really useful in giving not just a couple but quite a number of what you see as potential benefits if information were provided. You mentioned the 2007 federal election, but I would like you to give it a state perspective as that would be handy for our particular report. The Victorian Electoral Commission puts out information after each election. I do not know, Mr Noble, if you have had a look at its website; it is probably not dissimilar to the Australian Electoral Commission website. Could you run us through the kinds of things that currently are ignored, or where within government there is inadequate resourcing to do so that if the information were put in the hands of the private sector, much more useful public information would be available or the public would have much more user-friendly information? I thought that anybody could just take, for example, information from the VEC's website and use it. I just presumed that because politicians do it all the time. Maybe you could run us through that, using it as one example of what you could use and what you cannot use.

Mr NOBLE — I am happy to start with that.

The CHAIR — If you are more familiar with the Australian Electoral Commission, let us stick with the Australian Electoral Commission for your purposes.

Mr NOBLE — I am actually. I will preface my remarks with the comment that I do not know specifically what are the terms and conditions of the VEC website. However, with the AEC we were obligated to seek prior permission in order to use electoral information. It did require us getting permission. Permission was granted, but again the onus is on a user, a company or an individual, to seek permission and have that permission granted. Another example that Carolyn mentioned in her opening remarks was public toilet information. There is another commonwealth agency that owns public toilet information. We attempted to seek permission here in Australia about nine months ago, and that permission was declined. There are many examples of this. It sounds bizarre, but it is true.

Specifically, in regard to the types of benefits from making electoral information available to the population, here is another example. What we did at the last election was colour-code every single federal electorate according to incumbent. It is hard to see here, but everything there was dynamic. You could click on those electorates. You could bring up the information — sitting members and all the political parties that were contesting that seat at the election — and links to diverse information. We also had cross links to other content websites. I would hasten to add this is not just about Google supplying its view of the world and its information; it is about linking together information from, for example, the ABC's website and other political commentaries.

Other types of things you can do along those lines, for example — —

      The CHAIR — Before you get off that, can we stick with that, and then we can develop that a bit further?

      Mr NOBLE — This is part of the offering, but that is okay.

      The CHAIR — All right; perhaps you might like to finish, because my question would be: what was so much better with the Google site than other sites, from your perspective? Why would people head to Google instead of the AEC site?

      Mr NOBLE — I would probably respectfully turn that question around. Millions and millions of Australians are already using Google for Google Search and Google Maps. They are coming to our various web properties in search of information. We wanted to provide that information and make that available to users. The AEC and, dare I say, the VEC is not exactly a popular destination site for web surfers — Google is.

      Ms DALTON — Just to perhaps add two points to that, one is — and I think this was actually in the discussion paper that the committee issued — that four out of five people seeking government information do so through a search engine like Yahoo! or Google. Part of the benefit, as Alan has identified, is that if you can bring the information to where the people already are, it really does help to get that information to the community in a broader way. That has links back to the official site so that people who are interested are then directed back to the kind of core site for the information, if they wish.

      The CHAIR — Actually, as you have answered, another advantage of a private search engine doing it is links, whereas the AEC and certainly the VEC do not link to the ABC site.

      Ms DALTON — Just to follow up on the 'Why do we need permission?' point in terms of access to the information, the default position in the federal Copyright Act is that commonwealth and state agencies own copyright as a default position. Because with electoral databases, public toilet lists, transit data or whatever it might be that is owned by the commonwealth departments or state departments, the default position, unless there is an active decision taken by that particular department or agency, is that the copyright will be enforced and is owned and held by the state government and/or the commonwealth government. For somebody who wishes to seek to use the information, because of that copyright position it is actually incumbent upon them to go and seek permission, as opposed to what the Copyright Law Review Committee has recommended — that that position should be reversed and the default position should be that the ownership is open, and that if commonwealth and state agencies wish to enforce their copyright, they should do so in the same way as any other contracting party, which is that they should enforce and assert a copyright on a case-by-case basis.

      The CHAIR — To take another example, the issue of public toilets was brought up at a Canberra inquiry. Just hearing you mention it again prompts me to think whether it would be the sort of thing that Google would put out an appeal to the public saying, 'This is our next task — that is, this is our next challenge. We want to do it, and we can only do it with public input'. Is there a possibility you could do that kind of thing?

Ms DALTON — It is absolutely possible. In fact it is a great idea; thank you.

The CHAIR — My pleasure.

Ms DALTON — It partly comes back to Alan's point about needing to have a fairly large reach and a presence like ours to be able to do that. Secondly, it comes down to accuracy of information and the question: if there is the one authoritative list of public toilet databases, is it in the public interest to have that controlled and locked up? It is available at the national toilet website, which we now understand, but the decision has been that that should not be more openly available to be placed on census maps, TrueLocal maps or Google Maps or whatever it may be. It does not really matter as to where that goes. It is a nice tangible example of what, I think, in one way you could think of as being a very easy example in terms of making the case that that information should be publicly available, because there are not a lot of issues around confidence, privacy or things like that associated with that.

Mr CRISP — With the licensing of the models that are available, you are getting data in. How are you attributing it? You are obviously running competitions, so you must manage the ownership of that data in some way.

Mr NOBLE — For example, if you look at the bottom of the first exhibit, you will see there has certainly been copyright attributed to the particular data supplier. We purchase our map data through a reseller of PSMA, the commonwealth agency essentially chartered with commonwealth road data, for example. Satellite imagery is generally purchased from private satellite image vendors. If it is data coming from a specific agency, then where it is a requirement to attribute copyright, we certainly will. I do not believe it was a requirement in the case of this one.

Ms DALTON — It is actually at the bottom of that mapping there with the electoral database. It does source the information to the Australian Electoral Commission. It is the practice across maps in general.

I apologise, I have only got one copy of this one. This is another example of something in terms of disaster relief. This is what Google Maps did after the Katrina hurricane in the United States, and we were able to grab data — and it is attributed, you can see at the top there, to the Brookings Institution; top right. There is some text at the top. Sorry, we were just talking about lefts and rights and my inability to distinguish the two — it is at the top left of the page.

The CHAIR — The way you are looking at it, it is at your right; okay?

Ms DALTON — Exactly; that is why we need maps — for me. We do attribute the source of the data as a general rule. That is just another example of how you can track publicly available information with mapping data to provide community benefit. In that particular example of the post-Katrina reconstruction, people can actually go onto their parish and have a look at the progress of particular developments in a graphical way as opposed to just going to the website.

I think the key point is always to remember here that this is always about openness of information. It is not to preclude people from going to the source data. It is to try and make that information available in as many ways as possible on as many platforms as possible so that the benefits to the public of getting the information out there are fully captured.

Mr CRISP — We are still going to work on these licensing arrangements. As we go forward with the public service information, have you got a particular model of licensing that you would favour? We have got Creative Commons and we have got open source; has Google got any particular preference there, or something else?

Mr NOBLE — Do you want to start with that one?

Ms DALTON — On one level we are a big supporter of Creative Commons. One of the options in Creative Commons actually works as a technological solution to work with search engines so that search engines can respectfully comply with the Creative Commons licence terms that people condition. Obviously it is a situation that is working well and which search engines can easily accommodate. Having said that, it is by no means the only way that this can be done. Whether it is something like a copyright notice at the bottom of a web page that says, 'You may use this for free', 'This is free for education' or 'You may use this for non-commercial purposes', all of those things serve the same purpose, so we would not want to be too prescriptive in saying that one model or another is the only way to go.

Mr NOBLE — It may not be apparent, but think of this as a particular instance of how some federally available data was made available to users. There is an underlying point here — that is, the power of transforming data in ways that were not necessarily intended by the original data producer. This is one transformation of the data; it is a particularly spatial transformation. You have probably heard the term 'mash up'. Mash up is about mixing together or mashing together lots and lots of different data sources. In fact, mash ups were certainly pioneered in the spatial area by Google Maps. Google Maps is really the first mapping platform that actually openly supported third parties to basically mix in or mash in their own content, in ways that were not necessarily predicted or preordained certainly by us, Google, or the original content owners. I think that is a really important point.

To come back to your question about what forms of copyright or IP protection to choose, I would say that at a high level, in a perfect world, we would be seeking the flexibility to enable these transformative uses that may not necessarily have been predicted. This is really at the crux of innovation. Innovation is about new things that have not necessarily been predicted or preordained. Our chief evangelist, Vint Cerf, has a great quote which I would like to share with you — it is, basically, 'Ninety nine per cent of internet applications have yet to be invented'. This is the person who invented the underlying internet protocol — the father of the internet. In his view what you see up there today is only 1 per cent — it is literally the tip of the iceberg. It is those new applications that will be enabled by freeing up access to information. That is what we really care about.

Mr CRISP — I would like to move past that mapping application to where you started to look at some of those other applications. You have the Sitemap Protocol, but most of our data will be in government websites or in government silos of information. What we are looking at is: what would Google see as a method of getting into those data sources and bringing them out? We have heard some thoughts that governments will need to bring up a metadata system to then produce a platform for Google to search, but I am interested in how you see some of the mechanics of that working and unlocking the government data that is there, and whether your Sitemap Protocol will work to that area. Do we need metadata, or do you have different thoughts?

The CHAIR — Before you answer that question, for the benefit of those reading the transcript on the internet it is really important that you outline what you call Sitemap Protocol, which is referred to in your submission. Could we start with what you understand as Sitemap Protocol?

Mr NOBLE — I am happy to do so. Essentially the Sitemap Protocol is a map in a non-spatial sense. Let me explain what a site map is before I talk about what the Sitemap Protocol is. Think of a site map essentially as a table of contents to a website. It can also be a table of contents to parts of a website that may not be directly accessible. That is a very, very key point. There could be hidden parts of the website and data in hidden web pages that — absent some type of site map — would not be accessible. So the Sitemap Protocol is something we developed to make it easy to expose all of the content on a website — content that is open and hidden. That is certainly one possible answer; that is a technological answer to the question. I think there are probably other answers, too.

Mr CRISP — We have had some evidence of metadata as a cataloguing system; but is Sitemap Protocol an alternative to metadata?

Mr NOBLE — I view them as orthogonal. The protocol is essentially the way the information is exposed. It is about discoverability: how a search engine — or a human being, for that matter, because a site map can be read by a human being as well and is not just for search engines — can discover the information on a website. Metadata is really more about how you interpret the actual data: what is the format, what is the file format and what is the standard?

That probably leads into the area of open geospatial standards. Certainly standards have, I think, an important role to play. There are obviously organisations like OGC — the Open Geospatial Consortium — that have specified a number of spatial standards for representing information, such as the metadata and the data itself. So standards have a role to play; discoverability via Sitemap Protocol and other protocols has a role to play. Again, in a perfect world, it is about making information available and not being overly concerned as to the format and the absence or presence of metadata. In a perfect world it would be avoiding the temptation to be overly concerned about the form of the data. There is a trade-off between accessibility and making it available versus worrying about getting it into the right format and it being perhaps less accessible as a result of that. Again, our view would be: let's favour accessibility and openness. I am not explaining myself very clearly.

Mr CRISP — No, you have.

Mr NOBLE — Do you have any comments on that?

Ms DALTON — Was your question more to how we, as Google, would be able to access and capture information from websites in a world where they were perhaps displayed in a way that did not have all the metadata catalogues done?

Mr CRISP — Yes. I sort of put a shotgun approach out there, because I have not figured all this out yet.

Mr NOBLE — Then I have a bit more specific comment I can add to that. Google and other search engine companies deal with this problem every single day. Essentially the internet — the World Wide Web — is highly unstructured. There is enormous diversity in content.

Mr CRISP — But it works.

Mr NOBLE — And it works.

Mr CRISP — Which bothers me sometimes.

Mr NOBLE — The reason it works is that companies, such as our own, invest an enormous amount of R and D in trying to, essentially, reverse-engineer the structure of documents and understand the content that is out there in this very diverse and very ad hoc manner. I would argue that we could apply a similar search engine technology for spatial data as well — even if it were unstructured, even if it lacked metadata and even if it were not there.

Mr CRISP — That leads us to one of the things that we have to consider — that is, we have this data in silos; how much preparation do we have to do as government bodies in investing money in that to make it available? If I take it you are right, we really only have to have a minimum amount of investment there, providing we take down the barriers for you to look inside?

Mr NOBLE — Yes. A challenge for the committee is to not make it overly complicated and not dwell excessively on how we have to basically prepare this data — how we need to put this data into very standard forms. I think that is something the committee should really be very mindful of.

Mr CRISP — The other area I am interested in is how Google manages the open source software, where you have all this new software being written out there and offered, how you incorporate that into your platform as to what is good out of this and what is bad, and how you make that work without compromising the system. Because if we open this data up, people will apply their own software into the data interpretation. I am interested in the risks and the issues that surround that.

Mr NOBLE — Probably just stepping back, Google's view of open source software — and we certainly contribute to open source software as a company, we utilise open source software and we support the open source community and sponsor conferences — if I were to summarise it, is that we view this as an ecosystem and that there is a role for open source software, there is a role for service providers that specialise in open source software, and there is also a role for closed source software. However, closed source software is one thing; closed data and closed content is altogether different. So one of the things that Google prides itself on is that even if some of our products could be considered closed source — meaning, these are commercial products and we do not make the source available — the data is always available. I mean, for example, if you are using the email product Gmail, you can basically take your email out of Gmail any time you want — there is complete open access to the data. Open data — open content — is arguably more important than, or as important as, open source software, in our view.

But having said that, I think you, Mr Crisp, were referring to some of the risks, and I notice in the VicRoads report it has identified a number of risks. Our view would be that a lot of those risks could be mitigated through careful selection of vendors. There are many, many companies in Victoria and elsewhere that specialise in open source software systems integration. They can take a lot of the risk out. For example, there were comments about open source software requiring self-service. We would, respectfully, disagree with that. You can have open source software and still combine that with commercial service providers.

The CHAIR — Is that done in the non-government sector on a regular basis?

Mr NOBLE — Yes, it is.

The CHAIR — The majority of the time?

Mr NOBLE — A company such as Google will tend to use the software and mitigate the risk by virtue of its own internal R and D efforts, but smaller organisations can partner or simply engage third parties to basically mitigate that risk. There was also commentary about security risks. Again, our view would be that the security vulnerabilities of open source software are overstated. In fact it is the very transparency of open source software and the so-called wisdom of the masses, with thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of developers out there looking — you have got the collective wisdom of all these developers — that can make the quality of the software extremely high.

Mr CRISP — I guess you have led us into that area where you were asking us to consider the non-proprietary software markets. You have drifted into where we as a government would traditionally go in outsourcing — to proprietary software, which has the safety of the masses.

Ms DALTON — I think it is partly to do with that, but it is also partly to do with the way to best achieve value for money in procurement decisions. Often open source solution is just as effective and just as secure but cheaper, to put in bluntly.

The CHAIR — Let us expand on that. I am sure if we have got a recommendation that can cover all those factors, there will be excitement among those reading our report.

Mr CRISP — Yes, there are commercial savings, but they have to be managed, as you do with Google. When you are working with open source software, you then have to have your

own internal network to evaluate the vendors and the material yourself to make sure it is going to do what you want it to do.

Ms DALTON — I think that is absolutely right, but it is prudent practice to make sure that that same evaluation would be applied if you were selecting a proprietary system. I mean if you are going to select and expend effectively consolidated revenue, you need to make sure that you are getting the best value for money and that you have assessed that it is the appropriate product. Where we do think that open source software should be considered at the very least, if not adopted, it is because of not only the potential for value for money but also the ability to spur further innovation. Coming back to the theme of what this committee is looking at, if through the exercise of a government procurement decision you can spur innovation and the development of further software and the further openness and availability of information, then at the very least that should be considered as part of the procurement decisions if not given substantial weight.

The CHAIR — We are definitely interested in considering them. If you would like to further consider this point and do a supplementary page or two, we would be really appreciative of learning what your experience has been on those key benefits and one could say the challenges as well. The government and the public service are very much risk averse, so if you are able to highlight what are perceived or real challenges and how they can be solved or minimised, we would appreciate it, because this section of our report is going to be really important.

Mr CRISP — I would like to build on that a little bit, Christine. It is the maintenance obligation — whether you call it script or code is such a personal thing. If you have acquired something through open source, the maintenance warranty and the problem-solving will be such that if you have not paid very much for it, you are not going to get that degree of service with that.

The CHAIR — Could I just interrupt and say the flip side is just to look at the Auditor-General's comments on the parliamentary IT system. A lot of money was spent.

Mr CRISP — We will not go there. How does that work? If we are going to make procurement decisions here or recommendations about procurement, it is the risks again in maintenance and understanding; have I got that right in my head?

Mr NOBLE — Yes. You have made a couple of points that are intertwined. There was a comment you made about governments being risk averse. We would like to see an outcome where government procurement was a mechanism for actually facilitating and supporting innovation. Prior to Google, for example, I was involved in start-up companies for over a decade, so I am going to temporarily remove my Google hat and speak as an entrepreneur who has done business with state governments here in Australia and also elsewhere. Historically it has been quite difficult for small start-up companies to engage with government. It would be a fantastic outcome if government were to lead and use government procurement as a means to both sustain innovation and enable small companies to flourish more strongly too. Open source is part of that; it is somewhat separate. Some of those companies will be utilising open source; they may be taking an open source product, wrapping services around it and thus mitigating some of the risks you mentioned earlier. Sometimes there will be closed source systems that have merely incorporated some open source into their products. It is a very complex picture — you can appreciate that — but I think government has a strong role. If I were to summarise these remarks, I would say government procurement policy has a strong role to play.

Ms DALTON — We will put those thoughts in a more concrete way and return that to the committee.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I go back to a comment you made earlier regarding DSE and the Victorian Government bodies being custodians of special information, particularly spatial data. Is the Victorian Government's willingness to share information consistent with what you have found in the Australian Government — you may not wish to answer this — or are we more or less

likely to be forthcoming and provide rapid responses, even if we do not provide the information? You just outlined a nine-month wait at a commonwealth level.

Mr NOBLE — I guess I can start with that. I would say the Victorian State Government is no worse and no better than other states in Australia, but unfortunately the bar is probably low, regretfully. We have been attempting to acquire, for example, public transport information in Melbourne and Victoria. Negotiations have been under way for some time. Was Perth one of our exhibits? I think it was. Currently only one state in Australia has actually made public transportation information available to us. We would love to have public transportation information for Melbourne and other Victorian cities on Google Maps, for example. Bike trails — —

Ms DALTON — For the benefit of Hansard, I am giving a screen shot of the front page of Google Transit, which lists the locations around the world for which that is currently available, and also an illustrative map of a direction path and a direction query from Perth in Western Australia using Google Transit.

Mr NOBLE — It is worth noting on that first handout that Perth is the only city in Australia that currently has transit information on a Google map.

The CHAIR — Are you able to provide the Western Australian Government with access figures, or is that publicly available? I would imagine a strong case for you to get ready access to this information would be that you are able highlight to governments that the public is interested and has accessed this information.

Ms DALTON — I will have to take that on notice.

The CHAIR — It is just out of curiosity.

Ms DALTON — I am not sure about the answer to that one.

Mr NOBLE — I would also add that Google Maps can probably be viewed as another information distribution channel. Transperth has a website — it is a bit like the VCE website; not many people go there — and if Transperth is serious about getting more people out of their cars and into trains, buses and ferries, the information needs to be as widely accessible as possible. Google, among others, is a distribution channel for that information. A large part of the value proposition is in that, making the information as widely available as possible, but we will get back to you on that point.

The CHAIR — That has not only been very helpful, it has been extremely interesting. Thank you very much. Hansard will be providing you with copies of transcript within about a fortnight. You are free to correct typographical errors. Obviously the substance of your responses cannot be changed. Again, we express our appreciation, and we look forward to providing you with a copy of our final report when complete.

Ms DALTON — We look forward to reading it. Thank you very much for the opportunity to come and speak with you.

Witnesses withdrew.