

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE 2026 COMMONWEALTH GAMES BID

Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid

Geelong – Tuesday 13 February 2024

MEMBERS

David Limbrick – Chair

Joe McCracken – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

David Davis

Jacinta Ermacora

Michael Galea

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

WITNESS

Tracy Carter, Executive Director, Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine.

The CHAIR: We will now resume the committee's public hearings for the Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. 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.

For the Hansard record, can you please state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Tracy CARTER: Hi. I am Tracy Carter, and I am appearing for Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine.

The CHAIR: Very pleased to meet you. I am David Limbrick, a South-Eastern Metro Member, and I am also the Chair of the committee.

Michael GALEA: Hi. I am Michael Galea. I am also from the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Eastern Victoria Region.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Western Victoria Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

David DAVIS: Joe McCracken is not here for a moment. David Davis.

Melina BATH: And Melina Bath. Hello.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Hello. I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I would like to invite you to make some opening comments, and if you could please keep them to around 10 minutes, that would be wonderful. Thank you.

Tracy CARTER: Okay. Fabulous. Thank you for the invitation. Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine is an incorporated association operating as the regional tourism board for the area between Little River and Mount Duneed. It includes the You Yangs and Brisbane Ranges precincts, the Moorabool Valley and Golden Plains, the urban areas of Geelong and all of the Bellarine Peninsula. We partner with the City of Greater Geelong, Borough of Queenscliffe and Golden Plains shire on the development and delivery of a range of strategies to build a strong visitor economy.

Our strategic plan to 2025 focuses on four key areas: destination marketing, sustainable development, strategic engagement and industry capacity. We represent close to 1000 businesses across our region who are active participants in our programs, from marketing and publications through to industry conferences and learning programs. Our sustainable destination master plan, released last year, outlines a vision that the Geelong and the Bellarine is a place to do, not simply see. It is a deliberately active vision. We want Geelong and the Bellarine to be a place visitors immerse themselves in and genuinely engage with, not passively observe or simply sightsee. Our operators work collaboratively and tirelessly to promote this region. They are enormously proud of how we have evolved as a destination with a range of memorable experiences. Not too long ago we were most famous as a gateway to the Great Ocean Road. Now with the members we are building a reputation for food and drink, events, culture, nature-based adventure, family fun, coastal lifestyle and a remarkable range of experiences in, on, under and beside water, from the shimmering spans of Corio and Port Phillip bays to the pounding surf of Bass Strait. It is a diverse region, captured in our marketing campaign tagline 'Greater than the

Sum of its Parts'. From Geelong, drive half an hour in any direction and you could be anywhere from a national park to a world-class winery to one of Australia's best golf courses to snorkelling with a dolphin.

Key in the list of attributes we as tourism marketers shout about at every opportunity is events, and the Commonwealth Games presented a unique opportunity for this region to deliver the most significant international activation in its history. From our perspective the disappointment was mostly in opportunity lost – opportunity to position the region and build our destination brand on a global stage, opportunity to turbocharge our tourism sector with focus and vision, building new capacity and a sense of maturity and confidence, and opportunity to host an event that was connected with a real sense of place through collaborations with the experiences, activities and venues across the region. Positioning regional Victoria, not Melbourne, as the hero, with the focus on host cities, Geelong would have been referenced repeatedly before, during and after the games, reinforcing the city's position as a global and contemporary city and event host destination. The visual impact of a broadcast of our glorious landscapes and assets beamed around the world with supporting strong storytelling would have ensured reach and penetration. And I think we saw that just recently with the Cadel Evans Great Ocean Road Race. The region looks amazing, and on a broadcast it just comes up beautifully.

The tourism industry was united, passionate and driven, proud at having been entrusted with such a significant event. The games were providing unique opportunities for worldwide exposure and world-class service delivery that many businesses had not considered themselves part of until now. Businesses were ready to do the work and reap the rewards. Our very first seminar for accommodation operators attracted more than 50 businesses to connect with and commit to working with games organisers on the provision of official accommodation. For context – 50 businesses turning up – we have probably 10 large commercial hotels, but that is 40 much smaller operators who said 'I think I can be part of how this all works, playing with the big boys and girls.' Pre- and post-games activity would have extended the heads in beds well beyond the 12 days of the sport program, and we were already working to engage commonwealth countries in the opportunities they had here for training, acclimatisation, activation and connection. Whilst there is understanding that the ultimate projected financial cost was too high and did not represent good value for Victoria, as an industry we were disappointed at losing these transformational programs for our businesses and the global brand positioning Geelong would have benefited from.

Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine have been pleased to participate in sessions to contribute to the conversations about how regional package funding programs will be designed and have put forward our key priorities to the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions. We understand those funding programs are not far away, and we look forward to capitalising on the opportunities with our members and the region more broadly. It is critical that the host cities, who had already begun investing the time and energy, feel a return for the investments they have made. Likewise, the programs need to be able to accommodate and address evolving challenges and evolving opportunities in our sector. Our new Nyaal Banyul Geelong Convention and Event Centre is a game-changing piece of infrastructure, and it is important that that funding can provide scope for us to capitalise on that new investment. Likewise, investment in events should focus on leading with the truly transformational and not simply offering more of the same.

In closing, I will return to my earlier comment about the lost opportunity for global destination brand positioning and industry development. It is critical that the investments we make now in lieu of the games are addressing all the losses, not just the built infrastructure. We must make sure that the communities and sectors who invested time and energy still feel optimistic, engaged and excited about their future in the regional Victorian visitor economy.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Carter. When we met with Visit Victoria they stated that they had not actually engaged with any tourism operators, in their evidence. It sounds like there were a lot of people excited in the industry about it. They were getting together and discussing how they could position themselves and take advantage of those new opportunities. What is your impression of how people felt about the idea that Visit Victoria had not actually engaged with these groups, even though they were showing their own initiative and wanting to participate?

Tracy CARTER: I guess there is probably ordinarily a hierarchy in tourism, where Visit Victoria comes to us and we have those more direct relationships with tourism industry operators, so it is not very often that Visit Victoria is dealing directly with operators. There is that sort of regional tourism organisation level in between. But you are absolutely spot-on in terms of that level of excitement. Even maybe as just a flippant example, we

had our annual conference, with 150 operators in a room just like this one, and one of the icebreaker activities was that they all had a box of Lego and had to build a little mascot for the games. They are professionals, and they are all very good at their jobs, but everyone was involved – you know, ‘Put this here’ and ‘Do this and that’ – so I think there was a genuine degree of real excitement. Geelong does events well, but this was like taking it to another level. The engagement that we were looking forward to with those operators – as I said, accommodation operators who do not ordinarily deal with the kinds of distribution channels that they would have been exposed to, the way accommodation would have been contracted and all those sorts of things – really would have lifted the capacity of operators who had not ordinarily played in that space before.

The CHAIR: Thanks. We heard some evidence earlier today – I suppose I am paraphrasing – that due to the lack of concrete commitments by the government, many businesses were unwilling to invest in expansion of their abilities to apply for procurement contracts, for example. Are you aware of any operators that had made investments to increase their capacity in anticipation of the games?

Tracy CARTER: Not directly. I think it was very much talked about, and it was seen as an opportunity to pin investment to. Obviously there was the lack-of-accommodation issue and how that was going to be addressed. There were lots of ideas flying around about how people may be able to work together to address those things, but it had not got to a firmer stage than discussion.

The CHAIR: Yes. Could you characterise that as these operators being excited about potential opportunities but not seeing anything concrete enough to warrant further investment?

Tracy CARTER: I think they probably just had not got there yet, if I am being honest. It was just early days.

The CHAIR: Yes. With regard to tourism in general, it is my understanding that tourism in the area is sort of back to around prepandemic levels.

Tracy CARTER: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you think that the cancellation has had an effect on people’s image of the region, or do you think that people are still coming back here for the same reasons that they had been coming here in the first place, before the pandemic?

Tracy CARTER: Yes. I think for Geelong – we were just looking at some data yesterday – international is a really small proportion of our visitation. We are largely domestic. About 2.5 per cent of our visitor numbers are international and the rest are domestic travellers. I think Australia has moved on fairly quickly. Absolutely you are right in terms of the way regional Victoria has bounced back. Our spend and our yield numbers are really strong and far beyond what they were prepandemic, but I always like to add an asterisk that the cost of doing business is far higher as well. I do not want to rub our operators faces in it with ‘Oh, look at these great record numbers’ when I know that they are still having a pretty tough time.

The CHAIR: What sorts of things are we talking about? We know inflation has increased costs, but there have also been other things. How are things like taxes and things like that? There was the pandemic levy. Has that affected many of your members?

Tracy CARTER: I would say that when I speak to members about the challenges that they are facing, they are absolutely the economic climate that we are in and the cost of living for people. That is forcing them to make choices.

The CHAIR: So you are talking about the demand side, with customers removing discretionary spending on some things.

Tracy CARTER: Absolutely. Yes, that is right. It has particularly impacted hospitality. I think I would say, reflecting on the summer holidays that we have just had, there were still good numbers of people around, but they were eating out far less than they ordinarily would.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will pass to Mr McCracken.

Joe McCracken: Thank you so much. Thanks for your opening comments. With regard to the games, what involvement did you guys have in the lead-up to the announcement of the games, if any at all? Were you aware that the games were coming before they were announced?

Tracy Carter: No.

Joe McCracken: That is a bit disappointing, but obviously these guys do not think so. When it became apparent that Geelong was going to be a major focus of the games, I know you said publicly, and I will quote, if you like:

... there's also a massive legacy branding opportunity that comes from having Geelong broadcast in front of so many thousands of people –

on the world stage. Given that, what do you think the impact of the cancellation has been on Geelong and, probably more so, brand reputation?

Tracy Carter: Brand reputation internationally – is that the question – or generally?

Joe McCracken: More generally.

Tracy Carter: Geelong did not cancel the games, so I am not sure that Geelong has suffered any damage per se.

Joe McCracken: Do you think the state's reputation has probably diminished?

Tracy Carter: Yes, possibly, in the beginning. That is a big change to make in terms of cancelling like that. For us, and I said it before, it is the lost opportunity. As I said, our international numbers are very low. For us it was the opportunity to begin to build that brand and say, 'That's a great launch pad for us to be seen as a genuine international destination and start to really build the opportunity to grow international markets.'

Joe McCracken: I have had locals say to me that they are disappointed, shattered, distraught, conned. Is that some of the feedback you have heard?

Tracy Carter: Not direct from our industry operators – disappointed, absolutely, but perhaps not some of the harsher words. Tourism people are pretty resilient and optimistic people. You kind of have to be to work in our field. It pretty quickly shifted to 'How do we make the most of the funding pool that is going to be available?'

Joe McCracken: That is fair enough. Once the games were announced, what sort of role did you have in advice, discussions or meetings with the government?

Tracy Carter: It was via the organising committee, so we had direct contact with some of the representatives there, particularly on the services that the tourism industry would provide. That was especially around the challenges of accommodation. There was an awareness that Geelong obviously has a bigger pool of accommodation than some of the other host cities, but it still was not enough. Even what we do have are not all international-standard hotels. So how do we help lift the industry up and make sure that the experience they are delivering is good, but even prior to that, that they know how to engage in the kinds of systems and contracting arrangements that would be coming their way?

Joe McCracken: Are you able to provide a list of meetings, discussions and advice that you gave the government on what you saw the challenges were? You can take it on notice.

Tracy Carter: The number of times we met? Yes, absolutely.

Joe McCracken: The number of times you met, what it was about, whom you met with – all those sorts of things.

Tracy Carter: Yes. There would be a handful, I would say, five or six.

Joe McCracken: That is good. I guess, when the cancellation happened, how did you find out about that? Was it like everyone else did?

Tracy CARTER: Actually the nature of our structure is we have a memorandum of understanding with the City of Greater Geelong, and all of our team are employees of the City of Greater Geelong. That is the way our regional partnership is structured. So the mayor called me in the morning, just before the press conference.

Joe McCracken: So you found out via the mayor rather than anyone in government. How did you feel about that? Was it a bit of a slap in the face?

Tracy CARTER: No, I do not think so. I think that the people I had contact with from the games probably found out at about the same time I did, from what I understand. I did not have connections up higher than that. It was officer-level people that I had been dealing with.

Joe McCracken: I was thinking, if the government is trying to build relationships and partnerships with regional communities, it is not a good look. How long have I got left? Thirty-five seconds. I had better be quick. What feedback from other tourism communities did you receive about the cancellation then? Did you get much feedback from your members about the cancellation?

Tracy CARTER: Not directly. I would not have had any sorts of complaints or correspondence. It was covered at our follow-up meetings and seminars that we had, where members attended. It was routinely acknowledged, and people said, 'Oh, what a shame.' There was a lot of –

Joe McCracken: You are incredibly robust people.

Tracy CARTER: I think the point that it was cancelled at was early enough that none of them had actually made any significant investment. As I said, it was more about the opportunity lost, but no-one had really got too far down the road yet with their preparation or any of those things. So it was almost like it was far enough away that the blow was lessened.

Joe McCracken: Okay. It seems like the government was in the same boat as you guys as well – no-one had made any preparations.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr McCracken. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for joining us, Ms Carter. Just coming into Geelong for the hearings I actually noticed quite a bit of your promotional campaigns and branding, so I acknowledge that clearly your work is having some effect.

Tracy CARTER: Thank you.

Michael GALEA: We have heard, I would say, fairly unanimous feedback from our previous witnesses today about the general positive trends of the visitor and tourism economy in this area. I am sure you would have a bias towards saying that too, but would you agree with those assessments that things are on a positive trajectory?

Tracy CARTER: Yes. As I was saying, on that comparison to prior to the pandemic, we were at \$1.1 billion spend per annum and we are now at \$1.7 billion. So again, that has gone up so significantly and quickly. A lot of that is tied to some inflationary impact; there are all sorts of things. I try to be really careful with that number because I know that the industry is still recovering in many ways from the challenging times of the pandemic.

Michael GALEA: And of course other broader inflationary pressures and the like, yes.

Tracy CARTER: Yes. But that spend is the figure that we have always measured, rather than people. We are all about increasing the yield and making sure that the people who come spend more, go further, do more – all of those things.

Michael GALEA: And you mentioned in one of your previous answers or remarks Nyaal Banyul and the impact that that has had. Can you talk about what that has meant for the Geelong region?

Tracy CARTER: It is a real beacon on the horizon, I guess. What we are really conscious of is we have been working in the business event space. The tourism Geelong and Bellarine team has a convention bureau in

it. We have been working in that space for quite some time, but never with an asset like that. It is going to be state of the art, much bigger than anything else we have, so it is a real game-changing piece of infrastructure. We are now working with the team from there to build, I guess, the support structures around it to make sure, firstly, that the centre is full as much as it can be, but secondly, that it is connected really well with the destination offering, that people have those pre- and post-touring options and that it really connects nicely and seamlessly with the broader tourism industry.

Michael GALEA: Terrific. And you are no doubt aware of course that, as part of the \$2 billion regional package in lieu of the games, of which this area will no doubt be a large recipient, there is the \$170 million Regional Tourism and Events Fund. What sort of impact will that have on Geelong – projects which can be delivered – and are there any specific priorities that you are looking to pursue through that fund?

Tracy CARTER: Yes. We have completed our destination master plan, so there are some significant projects in that. We have identified our very top project, if you like: traditional owner led tourism experiences. That obviously aligns with the state plans as well. What we have done, knowing that those funds will become available really soon, is we have been in touch with the tourism operators that we know have plans on the horizon to say, ‘There’s some funding coming. Now is the time. Get ready. Whatever plans you already have, whatever data already exists – get that ready for when these funds come out in the next little while.’

Michael GALEA: And what has the buy-in been like from those operators? Has it been a good reception – they have been interested?

Tracy CARTER: Yes. People are interested. It just comes down to the design of the programs and knowing the specifics as to who is eligible and what that looks like.

Michael GALEA: Yes. And as part of the broader visitor economy in the Geelong region, obviously the *Spirit of Tasmania* now departs from North Shore rather than Port Melbourne. What sort of impact is that having on the local tourism economy?

Tracy CARTER: We did some review. In the first year of operation it was a \$20 million impact locally. When that was coming we were not quite sure how many people would hang around or come prior, but \$20 million of increased tourism spend in Geelong is associated with the *Spirit*. So that is people coming early or staying the night and those sorts of things. That opportunity gets even bigger with their bigger ships. Yes, we have done a lot of work. I think they were really clear that when they moved to Geelong they had to reposition in the hearts and minds of their audience that Geelong was part of that journey. So they have worked really closely with us. We have supported them with a lot of content, storytelling and connections with the experiences here, and so \$20 million worth of impact in the first year is a good result.

Michael GALEA: It is quite big. It shows there is quite a bit of, I guess, stickiness, if a lot of people are actually staying around and spending in the local region.

Tracy CARTER: It feels that way.

Michael GALEA: And is that being felt in the broader region or most concentrated on central Geelong?

Tracy CARTER: That was for Geelong, but I absolutely know my colleagues at the Golden Plains shire – you know, this is anecdotal, but the number of campervans that they are seeing around Inverleigh and some of their towns – are absolutely seeing an impact, and that is related to, yes, *Spirit* travellers.

Michael GALEA: Good to know. Thank you. That is my time.

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

David DAVIS: Ms Carter, thank you for your evidence. I want to just pick up something my colleague was talking about, and that is the sort of resonance that is left after the games decision – and I get you are essentially saying it is the opportunity lost. The head of Visit Victoria actually went a bit further, and he said that the cancellation had enhanced Victoria’s reputation for running events. Do you think that is right?

Tracy CARTER: I would not agree with that.

David DAVIS: Right. That is what I thought. Were you part of the 2023 stakeholder event at this hotel or this centre with Minister Shing?

Tracy CARTER: Yes.

David DAVIS: And what did you take away from that? Some people said that many invitees were left none the wiser.

Tracy CARTER: It did feel more like a listening exercise for Minister Shing and the people who were there. There were a lot of really good points raised in lots of different ways – I think I spoke a little bit about the opportunity for tourism and how we position the brand – but on a broad range of subjects. I felt like the audience was given a lot of opportunity to speak, and it felt like it was less for information towards us and more so for information going into government.

David DAVIS: Government looking for a way out of a difficult situation.

Tracy CARTER: No, no. I thought it was taking, you know, advice from people.

David DAVIS: Right. And just let me ask a simple question: if there was a single item that you were to put on the top of your list, what would that item be in terms of state government funding into the region? What would be the single item?

Tracy CARTER: Knowing that we already have Nyaal Banyul?

David DAVIS: No, no. If you are bidding in, what is the single item that will actually drive local tourism?

Tracy CARTER: Avalon Airport is a really significant piece of infrastructure that we need to invest in and support to get international flights back there. When I was saying internationals are a really low part of our overall visitor mix – we definitely saw a boost when international flights were flying there.

David DAVIS: So that would be a focus for any local tourism spend if the state government could do so.

Tracy CARTER: Yes. I think the state could definitely get behind that airport re-establishing itself in the international sense. The dividends that would pay – particularly even thinking forward to the convention centre being online and open, the easier it is for delegates to access events there, then –

David DAVIS: The better.

Tracy CARTER: Yes. It is just a more compelling proposition.

David DAVIS: Fast trains?

Tracy CARTER: Yes. We are definitely seeing more travellers using the trains. We have opened a new visitor centre in the last six months at city hall, and the foot traffic they are seeing coming from trains is –

David DAVIS: It is still slow, though. It is still old-fashioned. The Geelong Flier in the 1950s did it quicker.

Tracy CARTER: Did it?

David DAVIS: Yes. There you are. That is enough. Thank you.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you, Mr Davis. Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hi. Thanks, Tracy. We are taking it in turns, so it goes different ways. Thanks for being here, and thanks for your information and for your level of detailed knowledge that you have in your subject area, which is really helpful for us. I am particularly interested in the destination marketing campaign. At the Australian Open the government launched its new destination marketing campaign, and I just wonder whether your organisation have any thoughts and plans around how that will work for you.

Tracy CARTER: Yes. We were involved, I guess, for a long period of time in the development of a brand architecture for Victoria, which probably had not really been done since You'll Love Every Piece of Victoria.

We are quite diverse in this state – so how do we let all of those pieces kind of ‘sing’? We had been actively involved in Visit Victoria’s processes as they worked through that for all of the regions, all of the regional tourism boards. We had discussed it with them – we saw some of the campaign collateral ahead of time. It is interesting. I mentioned our campaign Greater than the Sum of Its Parts. It is not dissimilar in its sort of sentiment, but you are saying you have actually got a lot of really different things – Every Bit Different.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Every Bit Different.

Tracy CARTER: Every Bit Different. As a marketer, and that is my background, I can absolutely see how that campaign is so applicable to all different experiences, all different parts of the state. It makes complete sense. We are working with Visit Victoria now to make sure Geelong and the Bellarine assets and experiences are photographed and captured and fed out as part of that campaign, and then we also connect our industry into it. Part of what we do with our membership is we offer an ATDW listing, which is how you get involved in the digital things that Visit Victoria provides, so we encourage our operators to be part of that. We encourage them to use the taglines and participate in the campaign in the way Visit Victoria asks.

Jacinta ERMACORA: The regional sports infrastructure program is one of the funds that has been put in place in replace of the games. I know a lot of regional communities have quite significant sports tourism occur based around events. That certainly happens with various different sports in my region, in Portland, Hamilton, Warrnambool and so on. With that as a new opportunity, do you see that as offsetting the opportunity lost that you were referring to partially?

Tracy CARTER: It would not be the same, I do not think. It is not international in most cases. A lot of those you are focusing on state or national championships, with the level of infrastructure they provide. But what it does offset is the heads-in-beds component: 12 days of full accommodation. We have a rowing regatta here every year that fills up all of the accommodation. Those things are almost easier to replace than that broad international exposure.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Just with the Regional Worker Accommodation Fund, do you see that linking in with the tourism issue around availability of staff?

Tracy CARTER: I absolutely do. There are a couple of operators who have already spoken to me about that fund, and they are planning on applying. It is less of an issue in Geelong – it is the further you get away from Geelong that it becomes trickier. But I know there are things like some –

Jacinta ERMACORA: Why is that the case?

Tracy CARTER: I think just it is a bigger city, so there is just more capacity. It is still tight. Do not get me wrong, it is still a very tight rental market, but I think you do not have those same issues as trying to find a rental in Lorne, whereas Geelong is much more diverse. But there are things: some hoteliers buying motels to house their staff so that they can keep the doors open. I think that worker accommodation, particularly in regional areas, is important, and I am glad that there is a program to help address it.

Jacinta ERMACORA: It seems that that is a bit of a trend, where Airbnb is taking housing away from families, not necessarily for families, but hotels seem to be providing worker accommodation, even if it is temporary.

Tracy CARTER: Yes. I think the nature of tourism and hospitality as well is it is quite low paying. Where you need most of those people is in quite affluent areas, so that is the disconnect that we have to address.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Fantastic. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Ermacora. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. And thank you for appearing today. We heard at an earlier hearing from Visit Victoria that the strategy behind the Commonwealth Games pitch was to drive regional tourism. Now, in developing that strategy, did they engage with Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine?

Tracy CARTER: I would say it is still intended to be underway.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I guess in developing their strategy behind the original pitch, did they engage at all in developing that?

Tracy CARTER: No.

Sarah MANSFIELD: No. They told us that Visit Victoria had input with people who have knowledge about major events in the region. Are you aware of whether, again, your organisation or any entities affiliated with your organisation had input into Visit Victoria –

Tracy CARTER: Look, possibly the city, so the City of Greater Geelong major events, Geelong Major Events Committee – perhaps through there. I would have to say I have been in my role for about 12 months, but I have been in the organisation longer. We engage with Visit Victoria on a range of things often, but there was certainly no specific discussion about the Commonwealth Games. But we have discussions about broad strategy from time to time.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. Look, it might be worthwhile if perhaps you could take on notice whether you could find out if there were any discussions at that time. That would be great.

Tracy CARTER: Yes, I will. Sure.

Sarah MANSFIELD: What experience does Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine have with major events?

Tracy CARTER: Our role with major events in tourism is largely to try and maximise the impact, push those benefits out towards our tourism industry operators and really connect them with the destination. When event operators are delivering something large and amazing in the region, what we try to do is connect it with destination storytelling. That might be when people sign up for a triathlon, we try to make sure that they are getting a lot of really great content, a lot of information about where to eat and drink while they are here, all those sorts of things. It is trying to connect the event delivery with the broader destination experience.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Would you say that Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine has experience that could give insights into, for example, what challenges you might face in delivering a games and be able to provide advice on that?

Tracy CARTER: I think our advice would come in our expertise in this particular area – how the operators are, what they would need help with, the things that would need to be done in Geelong. Our expertise would be more on the side of ‘Here’s what this destination would need to meet the international standards required by an event like that.’ It is not so much in running events. We do not run events. But I think we would have insights about the operators in our region and how our region works and ticks.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. Based on what had been proposed when the games were announced and where planning was at, did you or Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine have any views on whether the steps that were being taken to prepare for the games were adequate?

Tracy CARTER: I think there was a sense that we absolutely knew things were happening very quickly. That was reiterated a lot. I think we asked a lot of questions and expressed our concerns, but I think as the team was built at the organising committee then we started to make inroads on facilitating. We had some of those team members come and speak at our forums, things like that. It felt like we were running a lot of the time to try and bring things together. It felt like it was all happening very quickly, but it felt like there was a sense that we could work together to get it done. That was how it felt at that period of time.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You mentioned that you had some concerns, though, prior to that – the organising committee coming together. What were some of those concerns?

Tracy CARTER: We knew the accommodation challenge. There was this acknowledgement that there were just not enough rooms. Probably my concern was this big promise of this huge international event was going to be great for tourism and how do we make sure that it is. How do we make sure that the people who are coming actually go out and experience other things in the region? How are we connecting them with galleries, wineries, tours – all of those sorts of things? It was concern about our ability to meet the needs a little and concern about our ability to derive the most benefit from it.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Do you think that if you had been able to provide some input at an earlier stage that might have been helpful in preparing the bid or planning?

Tracy CARTER: Planning possibly, yes. I do not think that we would have said 'Don't do it'. I think we would have said, 'What an amazing opportunity. Let's all work together.' But perhaps in that the planning may have started sooner.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Mansfield. Mr McIntosh.

Tom McINTOSH: Thanks, Tracy. You said you have only been there for 12 months, but you have obviously worked in the area for a while. Is it realistic to say that 2.5 per cent are international tourists, so 97.5 per cent are domestic?

Tracy CARTER: Are domestic, that is right in terms of visitor numbers. So the nights is a bit higher. We have a larger cohort than most of international students here. Of nights, it is about 7 per cent.

Tom McINTOSH: And where are they coming from?

Tracy CARTER: Look, at the 2019 count, which is sort of the last normal count that we refer to, it was New Zealand, China –

Tom McINTOSH: Sorry, the domestic.

Tracy CARTER: The domestic, okay.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes.

Tracy CARTER: So largely Melbourne. Of that domestic cohort, Melbourne is about 45 per cent, regional Victoria is getting up a bit over 30 per cent and then the rest is from interstate.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes, right. Do you have a feel for what the businesses that you are working with make up as a percentage of the local economy?

Tracy CARTER: I would have to take that on notice. It does exist, that stat.

Tom McINTOSH: That is okay. That is a complicated one. I note you mentioned marketing before, so perhaps you will be skewed, but out of the regional package, the \$170 million, there are the events, the infrastructure, the skills and workforce development and the marketing. Do you get a feel for which of those your members are skewed towards, or does it just depend on what their business is doing and how they are engaging people?

Tracy CARTER: Yes, it does a bit. I guess marketing, if you do that right, benefits everybody. Infrastructure benefits the business that gets to build it, and the people around it to a degree as well, and then events are good for everybody but for a short period of time. It is a bit horses for courses. What I would say about the breakdown of the funds is that I would hope that there is enough flexibility that the destinations like us who will apply for them have enough flexibility to be able to say, 'Right, our opportunities in Geelong are quite different from the opportunities in Gippsland', so is there enough flex in those programs that we can say business events are most important and they can say they just need public events and leisure events?

Tom McINTOSH: So the application process is thorough so that you can see what suits what region.

Tracy CARTER: Yes. Give it that degree of flexibility.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes. It was interesting, you noted before, the workers accommodation prices versus pay, so getting that worker accommodation in the right location where people can be in the right place for work.

Tracy CARTER: Absolutely.

Tom McINTOSH: Since the announcement that the games were not continuing, in your work life or personal life, obviously excluding this process, we have got obviously the \$2 billion package – are people raising the Comm Games? Outside of perhaps this today, can you think of the last time that someone raised the Commonwealth Games with you?

Tracy CARTER: No, not in a personal sense. In a professional sense, absolutely, but it is focused on that regional package.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes. So people are not talking about the fact that the games are not occurring – or have not talked about it for some time?

Tracy CARTER: Not for some time, I would not think. I mean, it was August, wasn't it?

David DAVIS: July.

Tracy CARTER: July, yes.

Tom McINTOSH: So in recent months it has not been coming up?

Tracy CARTER: No. But people are very keen to know when the packages are going to be available.

Tom McINTOSH: Absolutely. And I need to know: where do I do dolphin swimming?

Tracy CARTER: Queenscliff.

Tom McINTOSH: Excellent.

Tracy CARTER: See you all dolphin swimming. Amazing – best experience we have.

Tom McINTOSH: I do have a little bit more time. I just wanted to ask: the Spirit of Tassie stuff was really interesting. With the recent investments into the Searoad Ferries – because I am on the other side of the bay in Eastern Victoria – with the investment in the infrastructure and all that sort of stuff, it was interesting talking to them about more and more different parts of our community at different times of year and on different days are using the ferry year-round, perhaps more than what it traditionally was. Did you see that from your members?

Tracy CARTER: Yes. For us what was really important was Tarra – what has happened with the investment in the ferry is it has become a real destination, it is not just a throughway. You can go there just to have a meal – and you would, because it is just stunning. It is in a great spot. Coming back to the visitor experience and lifting the level, I think that is what that is delivering in spades. Yes, you can still get across the bay, but you are doing it in much better style and in a much nicer way with the improvement of the terminal.

Tom McINTOSH: Even if you do not get on the boat, it is an experience just to go to the –

Tracy CARTER: We have done it many times. Just go down for breakfast, yes.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes, yes. And I think there is a function centre there and other things.

Tracy CARTER: Yes. We have had a function there too.

Tom McINTOSH: Great. I have 4 seconds, so I am done.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you, Mr McIntosh. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. And thank you very much, Ms Carter, for your advocacy. We can see that you are clearly a passionate person and you have done your homework and are a great representative for your organisation. Just picking up a point from a previous comment in relation to the professional sense, your people, your operators, with the Commonwealth Games cancellation, are focused on that regional package.

Tracy CARTER: Yes.

Melina BATH: Can you elaborate a little bit on that? I guess the sub-question to that is: you had a meeting with Minister Shing in which your organisation and others presented a lot of commentary for her to take on board – what feedback has she given you, or what departmental feedback has come back to your organisation, Tourism Geelong and the Bellarine, from that meeting? Are there any concrete steps that you got from that meeting?

Tracy CARTER: Not so much steps – I know some parts of the program like the multicultural events fund have been released. I think we connect really well with Regional Development Victoria. My predecessor in this role is now the regional director there and so we connect a little bit.

Melina BATH: A good local –

Tracy CARTER: Good local connections, yes. I am asking him a lot, ‘Where are the programs? When are we expecting to see them?’, and he is indicating relatively soon. Formal steps – I do not think I have had any formal communication, not to my knowledge, but I am hearing bits and pieces. So it is largely around when we will see that money and what it will look like.

Melina BATH: You were really clear in your intentions and your requests, but at the moment you have not heard back formally from the state government about when that is going to flow through.

Tracy CARTER: No, not yet.

Melina BATH: If you do before our committee finishes, it would be really helpful, if you do not mind, for you to present that to us or forward it on, because we need to have that understanding that you are getting somewhere or you are not getting somewhere.

Tracy CARTER: Yes, I am happy to.

Melina BATH: You mentioned international activation – I love that word – and the lost opportunity. Can you provide a quantum or an estimate – take it on notice if you need to – about the lost opportunity in terms of economic energy or drive, we will call it, and also the social lost opportunity?

Tracy CARTER: Yes. I will need to take the economic side on notice, absolutely, as I am not sure what the figures are.

Melina BATH: Sure, if you would not mind. Thank you.

Tracy CARTER: But the lost social opportunity is that sense of pride, rising to the occasion and hosting. You know, we have got 100 volunteers at our visitor centres. People are proud of where they live and were really looking forward to the opportunity to show that off.

Melina BATH: They wanted to showcase that. Thank you. If you could drill down into the economics, that would be lovely.

Tracy CARTER: I will.

Melina BATH: Now, the Geelong council CEO today spoke about the Kardinia regional sports and events centre, and their focus is on that upgrade or the development of that centre. How important are sporting fans in this tourism sector for you?

Tracy CARTER: It is important for tourism. Even every Cats game down here is worth many millions of dollars to the visitor economy, so sport is important. Sometimes that participatory-type sport may not deliver the brand outcomes that we look for with the likes of professional media coverage-type stuff, but it is really important for filling rooms and for having people eating in restaurants and all of those things.

Melina BATH: Food, accommodation et cetera.

Tracy CARTER: Yes. And we know that when people come to a place like Geelong, it often exceeds the expectations that they had, and they become repeat visitors as well.

Melina BATH: They want to go further.

Tracy CARTER: Yes.

Melina BATH: Thank you. You mentioned about 50 accommodation venues that you were ramping up. There were 10 large ones – you know, 10 large ones give or take –

Tracy CARTER: Yes, give or take.

Melina BATH: I do not want to verbal you, but smaller accommodation venues were looking to ramp up their ability to accommodate more.

Tracy CARTER: Yes.

Melina BATH: Do you have any case studies where somebody might have purchased the block next door or something? You can take it on notice if you need to.

Tracy CARTER: I will take it on notice, but when I say ramping up it was more ramping up their capacity, so it was soft skills and ‘What’s the process for going into contractual arrangements with an organisation like the Commonwealth Games?’ You know, someone with a few cabins in a vineyard would not have done that before, so it was that sort of –

Melina BATH: How they could leverage off that.

Tracy CARTER: How they leverage and work in that space, which the big operators are absolutely used to because they are contracting their accommodation all the time to different groups and events and things.

Melina BATH: Last question. Thanks, Chair. You said you had at a conference 150 operators, and I have got this vision of them all working on Lego. What a fantastic opportunity – but it was also about stimulating that enthusiasm. Has your membership gone up or gone down post the announcement of the cancellation? Is it relatively stable? What is happening there?

Tracy CARTER: I would say it is relatively stable. It would be comparable. A few extra on and a few drop off for different reasons – they sell businesses or exit the sector. It is fairly stable. I do not think anyone joined us just for the Commonwealth Games.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bath. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. In hindsight – we will use that; it is a wonderful thing – how do you think things could have been done differently? In regard to local consultation and working with, say, tourism industries, how do you think that could have been done differently – and the involvement prior to the announcement of the games and before the cancellation – to perhaps improve the outcomes?

Tracy CARTER: Obviously there would not have been that sense of pressure and heart-in-mouth stuff – we thought, ‘Have we got enough time to bring all of these things together?’ – with more planning time. At the same time, I can understand the flipside. Word gets out really quickly, so if you need to make a splash with an announcement, it is important that not many people know about it. I think there was opportunity to have more consultation quicker with regions. For us the tourism components would have been later down the track anyway. Even if we had had a seven-year lead time, contracting accommodation would not have come until later. But the pressure around ‘How are we going to make sure we’ve got enough accommodation?’ is where there was an intense level of conversation, around ‘How will we solve this problem?’ They were the trickiest parts, I think.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Did that put unnecessary stress on your workforce?

Tracy CARTER: No, not stress. It definitely did change our focus, so from business as usual to Commonwealth Games. But as I said, there was a real sense of excitement. Part of the reason for me applying for this job a year ago was it just felt like we were on this crest of a wave, with the convention centre, the Commonwealth Games – like what a great time to be in tourism in Geelong. So I think a sense of excitement, but yes, it shifted focus.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Did you employ any more staff to help accommodate the preparation of the games?

Tracy CARTER: No, we did not.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. That is all right. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Tyrrell. I have got one final question before we close. What do you think this committee should be recommending to the government as part of its findings in order to assist tourism in the future in this area?

Tracy CARTER: I think it has been really smart with the regional package fund. We have had opportunities to input, and now I just announced a 'Wait-and-see how that comes out at the other end.' Some of those things are, like I said, the flexibility and making sure regions can adapt it to their unique opportunities. I think there is an element, and this might be unpopular with some – but the work that was already starting to be done was being done in the host cities, and I think there should be some sense of recognition. It feels like we lost the most. That sounds terrible, but the work that was already being done is where you are backpedalling it from.

The CHAIR: We did hear evidence to that effect earlier today, about how all of a sudden it has gone into a statewide market rather than a local regional market, which of course reduces the local opportunity but spreads it throughout the state.

Tracy CARTER: Yes. As I said, tourism – we were not anywhere near as far down the path with anything as some of the infrastructure projects were. For example, I know the city employed people and had gone a long way with some of those projects. But still, that sense that we were starting to build something and it has been taken away – that is what is evident for host cities.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, and thank you very much for appearing today, even though it is a bit warm.

Tracy CARTER: It is. You can go for a swim at Eastern Beach after.

The CHAIR: You will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week before it is published on our website. The committee will now take a break until quarter past 3 for our next witness.

Witness withdrew.