

# **T R A N S C R I P T**

## **SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE 2026 COMMONWEALTH GAMES BID**

### **Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid**

Ballarat – Wednesday 14 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**

Tim Matthews, Chair, Central Highlands Regional Partnership.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for appearing today. 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, and 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 that you are appearing on behalf of.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Sure. My name is Timothy Matthews; you can call me Tim. I am the Chair of the Central Highlands Regional Partnership, and I am also a small business operator in the hospitality space in Ballarat.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much, Tim. I will briefly introduce the committee. I am David Limbrick, the Chair.

**Michael GALEA:** G'day. Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Hi, Tim. Jacinta Ermacora, Western Victoria Region.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Morning. Tom McIntosh, Eastern Victoria Region.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

**Joe McCracken:** Joe McCracken, Western Victoria Region.

**Melina BATH:** Hello, Tim. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** And Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I invite you to make some opening comments and ask that they be kept to a maximum of around 10 minutes. Please proceed.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Excellent. Thank you very much, David. I do not have a huge amount to say today, but I think that sometimes when your role is to represent the community it is worthwhile speaking personally. Just for reference, the Central Highlands Regional Partnership take in a number of local government areas, all differently affected by the Commonwealth Games and then obviously the subsequent decision to cancel them. They are the City of Ballarat, the Hepburn shire, the Golden Plains shire, the Moorabool shire, the Ararat rural city and the Pyrenees shire.

I would perhaps like to acknowledge that also the games would have been on the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung and Wathaurong people. I would like to say that throughout the process we have respected our First Nations, and I will continue to do that by sharing my respect for them today.

I guess it is worthwhile saying that I do not speak for the City of Ballarat or Hepburn, which obviously had specific games events and were doing a lot of planning behind the scenes, so I did not have any access to privileged information or any information that – there were a lot of things that we were not allowed to know. But we did what we could with the Central Highlands Regional Partnership at heart, recognising that there was going to be varied impact across the region and also respecting that the City of Ballarat and the other rural councils have provided some sort of submission, I believe, to you. I cannot speak on their behalf – but more of

a collective of the pros and cons of the games. I think it has been discussed in our meetings a lot over time that there would be some winners and maybe not necessarily losers but those that would not benefit as much from the games. Then you can almost flip that as well to say because the games did not proceed, there might have been some areas where those pros and cons have switched the other way. I have to really leave it up to those LGAs to speak on the pros and cons on their behalf, but I acknowledge that there is some difference.

The tourism impact of the games, and I guess subsequently the cancellation of those, was huge. We would not believe that we will be able to replicate that opportunity for international exposure through media that we would have had for our region. We like to think we would have been able to take opportunities to leverage some of the visitation to those main areas or training areas or whatever the Commonwealth Games committee had in mind as a tourism offering – and looking at that in one of our jobs priorities for the Central Highlands Regional Partnership. We would suggest that that was a huge opportunity missed. We acknowledge that there is \$150 million of the regional tourism events fund – we acknowledge that. The reality for us in the tourism space would be that that is not as significant as what we would have seen had the games proceeded. Also, it might have been closer to what the tourism infrastructure legacy left behind may have been, but in terms of exposure it does not quite match up.

In terms of the housing legacy, housing remains a priority for the Central Highlands Regional Partnership. We have had that as a priority for a considerable amount of time, albeit at varying degrees over time, from homelessness through to social housing, affordable housing. We were hoping and tried to position to get our plans ready and facilitate that as best we could so that if there was an opportunity to have some legacy from the games, then we would be able to benefit from that in a long-lasting sense.

We are really happy that the funds are still being touted as available. In terms of how that rolls out, that is something we are continuing to have conversations about. As I am sure you would be aware, housing is such a complex issue and it varies across our different LGAs and even parts of those LGAs. It is very complex and we have been forward in putting forward some housing principles that we would like to apply. We decided to take that approach rather than specific projects early on because we were aware that there was only so much influence that the Central Highlands Regional Partnership would have over the Commonwealth Games and what they were requiring for the games themselves and then also how the government sought to tackle a complex housing problem.

The time lines probably help us in that the funds are still available and we are not rushed into a specific deadline to have something built and finished but rather we can continue to work with implementing what is the best scenario. I think there are a number of benefits to the time line. I come from the private sector, and we have spent lots of time on projects that have not got up. We have been excited about things that have happened before, but there is a reality of resetting that and getting back going again.

So the priorities of the region have not changed. They were not necessarily influenced by the games. We perhaps were always looking for opportunity to drive those principles and priorities forward, which were and still are housing, jobs and connectivity, including the transport element and digital. There is no question in my mind that the Commonwealth Games would have been able to fast-track some of those outcomes. What they would be I am not completely sure. There was a lot of planning and a lot of action still to happen. I suspect that most of that work is still going to be ongoing, but we are not having to put that through the lens of the Commonwealth Games. We can continue to do that. Obviously, the funding may be affected in some way, but we respect that those priorities for our partnership, and our region and our community are still there and need to be taken forward, whether there are Commonwealth Games or not.

From the perspective of the community members, we have spent considerable hours and put energy into, I guess you would say, the investigations, discussions and information gathering on behalf of lots of people throughout that. Again, I do not speak government extremely well, but through all layers of government, sporting bodies and the committee for the games and so on, we have spent energy talking to them. Again, putting my business hat on, I have been involved in many pitches, opportunities and promises made that we have had to adapt to.

There is a huge amount of disappointment that the games were cancelled. It is disappointing, the time line that they were cancelled. It is disappointing that they are not happening. But conversely there are lots of opportunities that have appeared to me. There is funding available. It is my current feeling that all people

managing those funds at the moment have an open dialogue, and they are talking us through what those funds mean and the opportunities from each fund and how they might benefit the community. It is no different to any of the government funding that might be getting announced through local, state or federal in that we, as the Central Highlands Regional Partnership, would look to housing, jobs and connectivity and work out how we can best improve those for our region. We have a focus on opportunity now. From the regional partnership's perspective it is about what we can do with the funds moving forward. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Tim. With regard to tourism, from what you just said, it sounds like the major opportunity that was seen by tourism operators was not necessarily the games itself but the international media exposure that would come from that, which would presumably have longer term effects. Is that correct?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** It is probably balanced. The majority of the media time, if you like, is similar to watching the Tour de France, where you see lots of the area on TV which you would not otherwise see. There is a huge amount in that space. Putting my business hat on but also talking to other business owners throughout my role in the partnership, we would not build specific private infrastructure for, potentially, a two-week games. But we would look to leverage that, and hopefully, if there are bus routes and different changes to buses, we could start to do that. Parking is an issue everywhere. Maybe there were things that we could have done that could start to influence what decisions were made there. So there would be some significant benefits to spending on infrastructure like, say, station upgrades or work for larger institutions that perhaps could be funded appropriately – the likes of Sovereign Hill comes to mind – where they might have an existing project that they might want to push forward. We would support that, regardless of the games or the fund, if it aligned with our priorities. In this case tourism would fit under the jobs predominately.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Are you aware of any tourism operators actually investing in increasing capacity after the games was announced? Because I have heard stories of some operators planning upgrades or renovations or whatever in anticipation of larger tourism numbers. Is that something that you have heard from your group?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes. I would have thought the planning and the thoughts have entered the business owners' – I have not specifically heard of any costs incurred with that. But I would have thought there would be ideas, conversations – I have certainly had them myself with operators – about what impact the games were going to have: 'What would you do?' But the realities of perhaps then and now – when I say 'then', we had skill shortages. We were concerned about staffing. That was the priority. Now we are concerned about cost of living; that has priority. It was unlikely that we would be focused too long, having come out of COVID. A lot of our businesses and tourism were not thinking that far ahead. I am not saying – it is not a bad thing to be planning ahead. I think there were discussions there. I am unaware of any expenses incurred, but I am sure businesses keep those facts close to themselves. But I am not aware of any soil being turned or anything like that.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. And with regard to actual, concrete things from the government, we have heard evidence of – you know, before the games there were things promised to upgrade infrastructure and this sort of thing, and yesterday we heard from another group that expressed scepticism as to whether any of that would actually go ahead. And then post the cancellation the government said they are going to still be doing these – they have got these funds available. Is there anything concrete that you are aware of that was either on the table and planned to happen either before the announcement of the cancellation or indeed currently available on the table now?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** I think a lot of the space that the regional partnership places is not in concrete delivery; it is about putting forward what the priorities are of the region. Once we start getting into concrete plans the regional partnership is not resourced to continue to keep up with what has been done and what has not been done. As an example, the regional partnership commissioned a Central Highlands regional tourism infrastructure piece. That was not done previous to the games being announced; I think that was a previous problem that our particular region had. But we were able to get that plan developed. That was funded through the regional partnership, and we were comfortable from a planning perspective that we then had something to work through now. We are still working through that and trying to hand that off to appropriate tourism boards to implement – to get the concrete plans that you are referring to. We do not get too involved once we have put forward our ideas to government, be it state, federal or local. We just keep continuing to advocate for those, but we are not in the implementation side of that.

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

**Joe McCracken:** Thanks very much, Tim, for your work and your time today. Being through the partnership models run out of RDV, have you had anyone from the department or any government people talk to you about your appearance today?

**Tim Matthews:** No. I have been provided with a general view of what today would be about, but –

**Joe McCracken:** From?

**Tim Matthews:** I think it is an official paper that says ‘These are the logistics and the terms of reference.’

**Joe McCracken:** Is that from us – the committee?

**Tim Matthews:** I received it through RDV.

**Joe McCracken:** Okay.

**Tim Matthews:** In terms of what to say, I reckon I have had maybe 5 minutes of saying, ‘What’s all this about?’ That would be my general – I did not really know what to expect today. I have just come –

**Joe McCracken:** Well, are you able to provide us with a copy of that, if that is okay?

**Tim Matthews:** Yes, sure.

**Joe McCracken:** Thank you so much for that. That would be very, very handy. One of the big issues that there has been in Ballarat obviously – and it was one of the projects that was promised – is the \$50 million for the railway station. Now, we know last year the Member for Wendouree apologised publicly because of the lack of progress on that, and there has been discussion as well about the platform that has been proposed locally at Mars Stadium. Do you think the Mars Stadium platform should go ahead?

**Tim Matthews:** I am unaware of the funding side of that. If you were to ask me to put my regional partnership hat on and answer if it will impact our housing, jobs and connectivity, I think that if there is housing planned out in that direction –

**Joe McCracken:** Which there is, yes.

**Tim Matthews:** then that will be useful in terms of jobs. It is great to move staff in and out on game day, and connectivity – we would be welcoming that Melbourne traffic into the CBD via the main Ballarat station. So if you were to ask me if it aligns with our region’s priorities, I would say absolutely, but in terms of feasibility and costs and so on, that is outside my wheelhouse.

**Joe McCracken:** No, that is fair enough. I know the Committee for Ballarat have been supportive of it, and Commerce Ballarat and a whole string of others. So by the sounds of it, it sort of aligns, but you obviously want to get a sense of the costings and that as well, which makes sense.

**Tim Matthews:** We would not normally get too involved in costings. That tends to be a state government role – in this case department of transport or tourism and so on. We would advocate that that would be a good outcome. But in terms of if it is or not, I would leave that –

**Joe McCracken:** I know the state are not interested in it, which is a great shame. How did you learn of the cancellation of the Commonwealth Games?

**Tim Matthews:** I think through, like most people, probably listening to the radio, to be honest. It was probably on ABC radio that there was going to be an announcement. I think it came pretty much –

**Joe McCracken:** How everyone else got it.

**Tim Matthews:** Yes. So no, I had no prior awareness, just to clarify.

**Joe McCracken:** Okay, that is fair enough. I was the same as you. We all found out like that. Given you are the Chair of a regional partnership, would you have liked to have had a phone call or a heads-up or something?

**Tim Matthews:** Not particularly. I think it would be nice for every bit of news to get a phone call, but at the same time – it was a big part, and there is no question about that. I did not have a lot invested as such or have energy in doing that. Things change. It has been happening all through the COVID times, in my experience of being Chair through that. We were going this way and we were going that way. This was almost no different to that. It was a news announcement that we had to adapt our behaviour to.

**Joe McCracken:** We have heard a lot of evidence from other people that they were not notified earlier as well – just a big slap in the face – so I thought, ‘I wonder if you had experienced that sort of thing as well.’ Obviously you were not notified. That is fair enough; I understand that. What sort of impact do you think the cancellation has had on the reputation of particularly Ballarat hosting major events but also more broadly?

**Tim Matthews:** I probably do not have enough experience in what that means for bringing events to town. I like to think that it showed our region that big thinking is possible – that perhaps some of our smaller ideas could be transformed into big ideas. The size of our stadium, as an example – what other alternatives could we have? I do not know specifically, but I think that that was empowering and also disappointing.

**Joe McCracken:** Thank you. I think my time is up, but I appreciate your responses.

**Tim Matthews:** Appreciate it.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr McCracken. Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta Ermacora:** Thank you. And thank you, Tim, for attending today. I am a former board member of the Great South Coast Regional Partnership, so I want to thank you for the work you do on behalf of your community. I know that the membership includes businesses like you and then also government – all of the local governments in the region – and then also community representatives. I just wanted a description from your perspective of the detail of the role of the gatherings that those partnerships have.

**Tim Matthews:** Sorry, maybe I have misunderstood –

**Jacinta Ermacora:** You said priority setting, but in terms of meeting with those groups – you know, local government, business and community – how do you go about that?

**Tim Matthews:** We have formal quarterly meetings, and the agenda topics in that are put forward by the 12 members – six LGA CEOs and the community members. We also have a work program signed off which includes the housing, jobs and connectivity work plans, and then from that the ways that we interact vary. It might be through sitting on a working steering committee, other working groups and literally firsthand conversations. Locally, there are various groups. As an example, we meet up, I think it is, monthly with business groups, but also outside of that – for example, with Commerce Ballarat, RDV, Tourism Midwest, the City of Ballarat and appropriate directors from that and also the Committee for Ballarat. That was formed in COVID. It was a great way to share ideas, and we have continued that on. Then we literally just talk to people in the communities at various networking-related events.

**Jacinta Ermacora:** That is fantastic. So with your priorities, which look familiar to me too – housing, jobs and connectivity – do you have a list of priorities under each of those headings? Are there specific projects that might be at the top of the jobs list or the connectivity list or the housing list?

**Tim Matthews:** Yes. Primarily we put forward principles, and our particular partnership has been driven by that. We try and bring people together. The partnership itself does not have specific funding. It used to have, but my understanding is that it does not have specific project seed funding available anymore. I mentioned the tourism infrastructure piece – that was the last of what we had. In terms of specific projects, we will often get asked by various stakeholders if they align to our priorities and if they would like a letter of support. Provided that the two LGAs are not in direct competition or one is not negatively affected, we will generally support that as long as it is in line with our priorities.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Fantastic. The City of Ballarat are getting their legacy projects, which we have had mentioned earlier. Yesterday Surf Coast said that for the projects that they have got they are more able now to focus on the needs of their community rather than compliance with Comm Games requirements. So you have got, for instance, the City of Ballarat in your partnership. You have also got the smaller local government areas. Would you say the same might apply to those smaller local government areas in relation to the funds?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes. Our conversations that we have had with whoever has been administering those funds, depending on where they are sitting, have been positive. There appears to be more in that for the rural than there may have been before.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** That is certainly the feedback we are receiving.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes. It seems that way, and that is a positive conversation. In terms of anything concrete, I am not specifically aware of anything concrete, but I feel that on the complex issues, particularly around housing, there is enough flexibility in the fund to allow for the different types of barriers that are holding housing back in certain areas, be it planning, infrastructure or land. There is an element of 'I'm happy we don't have the pressure of the games attached to that' because we want our legacy in this to be – we have seen in Ballarat specifically that there are a number of precincts that, if we had our time again, we would not design in the same way, and we would like that to happen. These funds are really significant; they are generational in our opinion. We would like to see them built in a very sustainable way that is good for our communities.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** It is the communities, yes. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Ermacora. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Hello, and thank you for your role. You mentioned in your opening brief – I scribbled down your words in my notes – 'There were lots of things we weren't allowed to know.'

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** Could you expand on that and tease that out? I want to understand what were the things you wanted to know that you could not, and who said to you, 'No, I'm sorry, that's not your purview. You're not allowed to know those things.'

**Tim MATTHEWS:** As an example, there were conversations around what sites might be appropriate for a games village and what the requirements were of that village. We would have liked to have had some understanding around that so we could suggest some creative ways, if you like, that we might be able to engage in that conversation and bring the community's voice through that. In terms of why some of it was inappropriate, we could see that some of the land – or even our thoughts around what land might be available – was privately owned, and obviously that can create a problem when purchasing.

**Melina BATH:** So just to tease that out, you willingly put your shingle out and said, 'Hi. We're the Central Highlands Regional Partnership' – in fact you were set up by the government eight years ago and you are embedded in your communities, you have got business acumen, you were a chair of Ballarat Business Centre et cetera – 'I've got some local knowledge. I want to give you my opinion,' and basically the door was shut.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes. I do not know specifically that you would say it was shut. They would certainly be willing to hear our opinion, but normally in a consultative way we would have liked to have some back and forth on that rather than just having our opinion shared. We would like to understand a little bit more about what some of the Commonwealth Games people, committee –

**Melina BATH:** The government people, I guess.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes. I do not know if they were all government people, but certainly the committee of the games or the office of the games. I cannot quite recall who sits where.

**Melina BATH:** Correct, yes. Government departments.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** I would say in my layman's terms it would be people involved with managing the Commonwealth Games.

**Melina BATH:** Of course.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** As always is the case from my perspective, we would like to increase our place-based knowledge and input into –

**Melina BATH:** Sure. You wanted to feel that your input had value and you were not just there for listening to but actually to be involved in that decision-making process. But a decision, for example, on the site of the Commonwealth Games village was already made. Is that your feeling?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** We felt like we were able to input into that, but there was not really an opportunity to discuss the pros and –

**Melina BATH:** To have collaboration or co-contribution on the sites.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes. But we were told that there were confidential discussions taking place and that we had to wait for feedback on where they might be.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. So information was a one-way street in effect.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** A lot of times, yes.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. It is interesting. We have heard from Mr King before. And this is about legacy projects. Now, the cancellation occurred seven months ago. We have heard from Mr King just now that he felt that the specific projects that Ballarat has on its list were progressing at an appropriate pace. And then when we questioned him and said, ‘Well, what are the time frames for those projects?’ he said he did not know, we would have to speak to state government. So I just want to know, from your Central Highlands Regional Partnership perspective, are there any legacy projects that you know of that have been outlined, that are progressing and where planning is being undertaken? Are there some specific examples that you can cite that have a time line? I beg your pardon, but local people like to see a time line for fruition.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** I am not aware of any that have a time line attached to them, but there have been conversations. As an example – and I think it is worthwhile providing this as an example – we know that at the Commonwealth Games we would have liked to have a Wathaurong First Nations learning centre in our region. We also know that there were no plans already established for that at that time –

**Melina BATH:** No plans?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** As in working with the local groups. They did not have a specific place in mind, venue in mind, and going with the idea of self-determination, we would really like that to be led by our First Nations groups in our region. So that is from my perspective, where there were no time lines, but the conversation has started to say, ‘What does that look like? Is there more that can be done in that space?’ So in some regard I am happy that the time lines are not there, but in another regard I want to see action as well, and commitment too.

**Melina BATH:** For things like the station and the Eureka stadium and other infrastructure, time lines are helpful.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes, I think so. Putting my partnership hat on, we can only advocate for that. The private sector tends to move faster than government, as I am sure you would acknowledge.

**Joe McCracken:** We all know that.

**Melina BATH:** For Hansard, I am nodding.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Bath. Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. I am curious to understand when you were first consulted regarding any part of the Commonwealth Games.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** We were consulted reasonably early. Now, I cannot quite recall. I am pretty sure it would have been post the announcement that they were going to happen. There were lots of questions then: what are we doing? What is going to happen? They were funnelled through our regular channels of RDV, and

then we brought in any appropriate people at the time. I think it did change a couple of times. But we certainly had conversations with people involved in the games. Referencing the first question, there were a lot of things we did not know at that point that we were keen to know, and we kept asking questions. We were comfortable that we were getting somewhere, but there was a lot that was not known or locked in.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** To the best of your knowledge, were you involved in any discussions in terms of the preparation of the business case or the bid prior to the announcement of the games?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** No, that is not something that I was involved in. I do not believe I even had any conversations around what the impact would be of a big international event or anything like that. But certainly from a local perspective, we discussed what could happen at some of the stadiums and so on, what the opportunities were there.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** But not as part of that bid preparation.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Not specifically with the Commonwealth Games.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** And any discussions prior to the announcement of the locations of the games – were you involved in any of those discussions?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** No, the locations were outside our knowledge. There were lots of scenarios talked about, I guess no different from anyone in the community saying where they might be. We perhaps had a nice lens on that because we had people who knew about transport or that the Committee for Ballarat said this would be a great spot for sport and so on. But no, nothing specific. They could have been anywhere for all we knew until we heard.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Until you heard, okay. During the planning stages following the announcement and prior to the cancellation, did you have any concerns at all about how things were progressing?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** It seemed to be quite challenging. I mentioned before the private sector moving at a different speed to government. I think it would be challenging in that sense from a private sector point of view to implement some of these large-scale projects, so I suspect that people in government were having similar thoughts. I was not involved in any of the implementing of any of those things. It seemed like we did not have enough time in some cases to get the ideal – with reference to what an ideal First Nations learning centre might look like, as an example. But we knew we would have needed to deliver on that. So there were some concerns there.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. I guess in terms of your core focus around, for example, jobs, you said you were at the time already experiencing a skills shortage. I guess I am interested to understand – you know, did you have any concerns about how this region would be able to deliver the Commonwealth Games, given you were already experiencing a skills shortage? Did you raise any of those concerns?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Throughout that time and throughout the conversations when we were thinking about the planning for the Commonwealth Games, we were quite concerned around the skills shortages. From a hospitality perspective it was less of a concern because it was realistically a short time frame for the most part, and it would have been just all hands on deck during that time. We probably would not have made specific appointments around that. Through conversations with people more experienced than me in the, say, housing sector, we were concerned that the number of trades that would be required to do that would deplete our current resources. I actually do not have any firsthand experience of that, but there were certainly conversations around that at the time.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** What about transport and that focus that you have got on connectivity? Did you have any concerns about the planning with respect to transport?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Probably the thing that was limiting us the most with transport was that we did not know what requirements there would be in relation to athletes and security. That was something that understandably was being dealt with by I think the police and the organising committee of the games. So we were waiting for what they would like. Firstly, we had to wait for where the locations would be, and then we

had to wait for what requirements there may have been around that. There were lots of discussions around how to move people around. We certainly had ideas; we were just waiting to share those.

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

**Tom McINTOSH:** Thanks, Tim. Thanks for being here today and sharing your priorities and the work you are doing. As Ms Ermacora said, we really appreciate what you are doing and making the time. You mentioned community meets – meeting people out in the community and hearing from them and talking to them. I am just interested in perhaps the initial week or two after the announcement or whatnot. We have heard there has been a lot of focus on the \$2 billion regional fund and everything that is in that. You know, whether it is business, tourism or those that are looking at the housing aspect – all the things that make the regional fund – there is a lot of interest in that. Have you heard much from community about the cancellation of the Commonwealth Games in, say, the last three or four months or post that happening? Is it something that gets brought up with you regularly in that community consultation, or in your personal life even?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** No. I think from a community perspective those priorities of housing, jobs and connectivity are first and foremost. They are front of mind. If anything, the cost-of-living crisis and associated problems with that are just top of mind for people at the moment. The Commonwealth Games was probably seen to be long-term thinking, and it probably has not entered the heads of a lot of people, particularly now that other things have got priority now: more real – I should not say ‘more real’ –

**Tom McINTOSH:** Immediate, yes.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** but day-to-day living concerns. We certainly need to put that first and foremost. It feels like we have moved on pretty quickly. There was a degree of disappointment, I think, particularly with the tourism sector. We had not invested a lot of money in that. I think if we had invested a lot of money, it would be probably different. The conversations I am hearing are that it was a lost opportunity but it was not a cost spent. So there is not as much resentment – probably more so towards COVID, to be honest.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Yes. I mean, it is interesting you raise that. If we had sat here five years ago and said, ‘Let’s predict the next five years,’ we would not have predicted a one-in-100-year global pandemic. We would not have predicted inflation. You mentioned earlier the skills shortages – am I right in saying that? – particularly a couple of years ago.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes. It is probably less so now. I think our jobs priority has shifted from the skills shortage. I think there may well be skills shortages in a number of areas, so it is not to discount that. But we are much more in a position, in the business side of things, about business survival and restructuring. Our businesses have changed quite significantly in the last five years. From a revenue base, profit base, our costs have shifted quite significantly. I would confidently say that in the business sector we have moved on from the Commonwealth Games, but there is still a degree of what might have been.

**Tom McINTOSH:** I suppose it is making sure that we use that \$2 billion fund for what could have been. I mean, one thing that came up yesterday was different regions having different needs. I think that is why there is a diversity of applications. Just to come to that, there were some questions before about speed and the implementation of the \$2 billion package, whether it is workers accommodation or housing or investment in tourism and food and fibre – all the different components. You mentioned earlier – I made a note – the new time line. I do not want to misquote you, but it was something like: there are a number of benefits from the new time line. I think you talked about the skills shortages that were there at that time, about being able to line up the right opportunities for the right regions and the right people or businesses. Would that sort of fit right: that you would see the application process as being a thorough one, as being fit and proper – that, let us say, the money just does not get put into projects without due consideration, that it might take a little bit longer? For example, at the moment the Regional Worker Accommodation Fund is open and the Tiny Towns Fund is open, so they are being assessed. There is a bit of time, but there is a process we are going through.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** I think the partnership would look at the pros and cons of that. There is an element of: ‘What is the point of looking at what might have been? Here we are. We need to move on.’ We had to do that quite considerably through our COVID planning. That is still first and foremost our time line. Look, to be honest, I would love to see government move with the speed that they did when COVID was around. It was reassuring that the conversations we were having were: ‘Things are going to get done. They’re going to get

done faster. We've worked out ways to remove red tape to implement things faster.' That is really appealing to us. There are situations we know in hospitality where liquor licensing during COVID took this time. We were told that it would be temporary.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Yes, you could get things done. I will just ask one more question; I have only got 20 seconds left. On the consultation question that Mr McCracken asked earlier, obviously there are times when you have big announcements. Two or three times a year you get a big announcement where there are so many stakeholders. You would not expect everyone to come to Melbourne in a room or be on a thousand-person phone link-up before an announcement is made. Comparatively, say a party or a government made a big change – for example, on First Nations – a change on a policy that directly implements that. Talking to, say, 20 people, like the First Peoples' Assembly, you could do that. But you would not have expected a phone call around something this big, which is sort of once in a blue moon.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Look, I guess you need to look at my role in this. I represent the partnership. We take a longer term view of what is required. I have been to budget lock-ups. I do not particularly like to – that takes a long time. If I have to wait until a specific announcement, that is not in my interests. I want the announcement to happen quickly and in the most effective way possible. I need to say I do not specifically talk for other LGAs, who may have had different amounts invested. Collectively we had energy invested. I sort of feel like, from my perspective and that of the partnership, we received enough consultation in that, but I respect that some people might have wanted to know earlier.

**Tom McINTOSH:** You wanted to hear the news as quickly as possible.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes – just roll it out.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Yes. Thanks.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr McIntosh. Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks for joining us today, Tim. We spoke earlier with the CEO of Ballarat City Council around the general trends with the visitor economy and tourism in Ballarat specifically. Obviously Ballarat is the heart of the Central Highlands region, but I understand you also extend out to those other shires that you mentioned, including hotspots like Daylesford and Creswick. Could you give a brief outline of the general trends that we are seeing? Are we seeing positive growth trends in these areas when it comes to tourism and the tourism economy?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** It is really quite a tale, the data you are looking at. It is problematic in that what we are seeing for October, November and December is very different to the 12 months preceding that.

**Michael GALEA:** Is that due to the inflation pressure or cost of living generally?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** I think it is to do with cost of living. Just for clarification, I was on the board of Ballarat Regional Tourism, and we went through a period of transition when we moved to the new tourism board, which is Tourism Midwest Victoria. That was happening at the same time as these Commonwealth Games announcements were happening, so we perhaps were not as ready as other regions may have been, just simply because of the timing of that transition.

**Michael GALEA:** I understand you were one of the first regions to go through that transition. Is that right?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** Yes. The trends in the industry are what we are seeing regionally – very similar across the regions – but Ballarat has probably got a lower starting point, and we would like to see continued investment. We would have thought it was just a huge opportunity, particularly with the marathon, to show off our region. There is a big gap for Ballarat in tourism. I personally think the product is amazing. I think we have got some great product. It is just a question of how we gain our share of the tourism funds that are out there.

**Michael GALEA:** And on that, I understand that you have been involved with the goldfields gateway project. Is that something that your group has been involved with?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** It aligns with our priorities, and perhaps there are others as well, but certainly that is one of the reasons why tourists are likely to come here.

**Michael GALEA:** Yes. And is it too early to see any benefit from that? Is it showing any outcomes yet?

**Tim MATTHEWS:** We know that a strong goldfields product helps us, like Sovereign Hill – a lot of people come to Ballarat for Sovereign Hill. That is obviously hugely embedded into the goldfields. We would like to see that added to, to get whatever we can do to get maybe a one-day visit to an overnight stay. There is definitely, again, product there. I think we just need to continue to work on that.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. I know you spoke to Mr McIntosh about housing and touched on that \$1 billion regional housing package as part of the broader \$2 billion legacy package. We do not have long left, I am sorry, but just a brief view from you on the current challenges with accommodation, short-term rentals, and the impact that is having on the local housing market in the Central Highlands.

**Tim MATTHEWS:** We have numerous issues, I am pretty sure like most regional partnerships, in our region. We have got complex problems that need place-based solutions. Some of them are infrastructure related, base infrastructure. Some of them, we cannot get the skilled workforce there. Some of it is about workforce accommodation. Some of it is about emergency accommodation, in fact even just the stock and any of the planning around what stocks are valuable, be it a one-bedroom or single dwelling versus a multiple dwelling. It is a complex issue, and we would like to see a more localised place-based solution rather than more money into the same processes that we have had in the past.

**Michael GALEA:** Things such as the regional worker issue in particular, which has definitely been part of that package. Thank you, and I think the time is up.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Galea. Thank you, Tim, for appearing today – very much appreciated. 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 adjourn and will reconvene at 1 pm.

**Witness withdrew.**