
The Executive Officer
Rural and Regional Committee
Parliament House
MELBOURNE VIC 3002
rrc@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

Parliamentary Inquiry into Rural and Regional Tourism

The Bendigo Trust was glad to learn of Parliament’s interest in studying rural and regional tourism and pleased to have this opportunity to make a submission to the committee.

The Bendigo Trust was established in 1970, by a public call to community action, in order to operate the Central Deborah Gold Mine on behalf of the then Bendigo City Council. The Central Deborah was, with the North Deborah mine, the last to close on the Bendigo Goldfield in 1954. Initially, visitors could only tour the mine surface but in the 1980s Bendigo Mining de-watered in order to excavate well below the old workings. Level 2 of the Central Deborah mine was then redeveloped for visitors and tours commenced in 1986.

The Bendigo Trust was instrumental in preserving Bendigo’s tramway upon closure by the SECV in 1972. Nearly 5km of tramline—from the Central Deborah in the south, through the CBD to Lake Weeroona and terminating at the Chinese Joss House—was retained along with the depot and the entire Bendigo fleet. “Talking” tram tours have operated since December 1972.

Both the Central Deborah and Bendigo Tram Depot are on the Victorian Heritage Register.

The Trust also:

- Operates the Discovery Science & Technology Centre and Bendigo Planetarium, for Bendigo Science & Technology Museum Inc.
- Oversees the Victorian Heritage-listed diggings at Victoria Hill.
- Oversees the former Bendigo Gasworks (not yet open to the public), which are also heritage listed.
- Operates (from July 2007) Bendigo’s Chinese Joss House, also heritage listed.
- Operates, together with Bungaree Catering, the Bendigo 976 restaurant tram.
- Established Bendigo’s first Tourist Information Centre, a forerunner of today’s TIC operated by the City of Greater Bendigo.
- Established Dai Gum San, Bendigo’s first museum of Chinese history on the Goldfields, whose collection is today on display at the Golden Dragon Museum operated by the Bendigo Chinese Association.
The Trust was incorporated in 1973 and is endorsed as both a Tax Concession Charity and Deductible Gift Recipient by the tax office. Bendigo Science & Technology Museum Inc, an incorporated association formed in 1995, is also a Tax Concession Charity and Deductible Gift Recipient.

The Trust as an institution, or members of the board or senior staff are involved in a range of tourism bodies and initiatives:

- The Trust is a member of Bendigo Tourism, Tourism Alliance Victoria, VECCI/Victorian Tourism Industry Council, Bendigo Attractions Group, Council of Tramway Museums of Australia, Australian Tourist & Heritage Rail Assn, and the Heritage Parks Assn.
- Trust Board member Rod Thomson is chair of Tourism Victoria’s Goldfields Campaign Committee, Managing Director of Bendigo Pottery, and chairs the Bendigo Attractions Group.
- Trust President Lloyd Cameron is a retired chair of the Central Victorian Area Consultative Committee.
- Trust Board member Dr Garry Price is Course Coordinator for Tourism & Hospitality at La Trobe University.
- Trust Vice-President David Wright also is a member of the board of the Bendigo Chinese Assn, operators of the Golden Dragon Museum.
- Trust Secretary Helen Yorston manages the Bendigo Volunteer Resource Centre and serves on the board of the Bendigo Easter Fair.
- Trust CEO Tom Seddon is a past member of the Tourism & Transport Forum (TTF), a board member of or consultant to several international scientific conferences, and serves as Treasurer of Bendigo Tourism.
- Trust Marketing Manager Lana Epshteyn serves as Secretary of the Heritage Parks Assn and of the Bendigo Attractions Group and has past experience as marketing coordinator for Melbourne’s Victoria Markets.

The Bendigo Trust has thus a broad exposure to—and demonstrates a longstanding and active interest in—tourism matters.

In response to the Committee’s terms of reference:

*The economic benefits of tourism in regional areas, including tracking the flow-on benefits through other regional businesses and industry*

The enthusiastic response of the Bendigo community during the 2007 Australian Scouting Jamboree certainly demonstrates that local traders are prepared to embrace the benefits of tourism when something as large as the Jamboree (8500 scouts, plus 3000 leaders and others, plus many families) comes to town.

There doesn’t seem to be an understanding of more subtle, everyday tourism impacts. This reflects itself, for instance, in the limited engagement with Bendigo Tourism of all manner of traders who are not accommodation providers, attractions or restaurants.

Leaving this anecdotal material aside, there doesn’t seem to be much in the way of good statistical work on primary and secondary tourism impacts in local communities.
Potential impediments to the sustained growth of regional tourism, economic activity and jobs

Access is the chief impediment. There has, of course, long been a road from Melbourne to Bendigo, however the completion of a Melbourne to Bendigo freeway will appear (in an arena where appearances of this sort do matter) to open up this part of the state.

Road traffic cannot be “it”, however, and the state government’s re-opening and upgrading of regional trunk railways is important to the region. However, to be an important part of the tourism mix, the means for train passengers to get around must exist here in Bendigo. While the train station is quite central, the city is far too large to expect most visitors to get around entirely on foot! That means not just easy access to rental cars, but a real public transportation system able to take people from the train station to places they wish to visit, things they would like to see and places to stay. And visitor information (in the way of virtually any comparable European train station) right at the station. The removal of the tramway connection to the train station in Bendigo in 1972 has long been recognised to have been shortsighted at the very best and, if the committee were to engage in specific recommendations for specific localities, I would hope that it would join in the call for a return of trams to the Bendigo train station on both aesthetic and practical grounds.

Duplicating all or part of this effort at a new regional airport will also be necessary, unless the need for that airport is alleviated by diverting the Melbourne to Bendigo railway via Tullamarine Airport.

Another issue is how best to broaden the range of things that are promoted nationally and internationally without reducing the overall effectiveness of these campaigns. It’s been a long time since “The Man From Snowy River” put that part of the country (on either side of the Murray) on the international map and since then the Queensland beaches or descendants of “another shrimp on the barbie” (such as the current “bloody hell” campaign) seem to predominate. Neither of these (or their logical extensions) are liable to do much for inland tourism in Victoria.

The effectiveness, at a National, State and local level, of current programs to promote and enhance tourism in regional Victoria

Are there current programs at a national level to promote and enhance tourism in regional Victoria? If so, then, with respect, you have our answer about their effectiveness in north and central Victoria.

As to state programs, the Regional Campaign Committee structure of Tourism Victoria lumps together Bendigo and Ballarat, the state’s two largest inland cities (and which aren’t connected by rail or by a major road). This is perhaps not the best approach to take forward; what has Creswick or Clunes got to do with Bendigo, and what has Castlemaine or Maldon got to do with Ballarat? Gold? Well, yes, 150 years ago. For that matter, what has Shepparton got to do with touring along the Murray?

An approach which associates each region with a “hero” (for example: the Yarra Valley owns “wine”) engages the State government in actively disadvantaging operators (in this case, the many first-rate winemakers) elsewhere in Victoria. Most businesses are small businesses, and they find the power of the State being lined up against them a difficult obstacle to overcome!

The original concept of the “you’ll love every piece” approach of Tourism Victoria allowed for lots of regional and local diversity in promotional strategies and this excellent base proposition should be the starting point for a fresh look at marketing the whole range of Victoria’s destinations.
Locally, campaigns tend to concentrate on Melbourne as the starting point of most local visitation, and with Sovereign Hill for gold and Yarra Valley for wine both closer and much better known, the annual campaign in recent years has focussed on the (excellent) Bendigo Art Gallery and its annual and often exclusive summer exhibition.

Initiatives to increase both international and domestic visitor nights in regional Victoria

Facilities – While Bendigo and several other regional centres have small scale/B&B accommodation of high standard, that counts for little in terms of attracting scientific conferences or association and corporate conventions—which (save for the very largest) could in all other respects be well catered for in Bendigo. A high standard, reasonable size hotel which is attached to one of the large frequent hotel guest programs is a practical necessity and any assistance the government can give to this end would be welcome.

Focus – Either the specific mandate of the Melbourne Convention & Visitors Bureau should include (and be actively engaged with) conferences and conventions in the regions, or the Regional Victoria Conference Group should be materially assisted to allow them to be more than a phantom operation.

Education – Build up the Bendigo Campus of La Trobe University (and the same would apply in Ballarat to Ballarat University). While any chance may have long passed to establish Bendigo and Ballarat as the nation’s Oxford and Cambridge, these two regional tertiary institutions could still be much more than they are today. The role that substantial and vibrant universities would play in all aspects of life in these two towns (tourism and visitation not least) is not open for serious dispute, the question is how this can be achieved, in particular in Bendigo where many decisions are not made locally or—it can appear—even with much consideration of Bendigo’s interests.

Infrastructure – None of Bendigo, Ballarat or the La Trobe Valley have a meaningful regional airport, yet they well exceed in would-be catchment population many other regional centres throughout the country (admittedly some—but only some—are a good deal more remote). Further, public transport connections to Tullamarine (and also to Avalon), are well surpassed in many cities in the public transport-phobic United States! The decision by the current government not to complete a rail link to Tullamarine was a significant setback, and sooner or later the State’s major airport will need to be meaningfully linked to the State rail grid (that is, not just to Connex but to the Melbourne to Bendigo railway).

The efficacy of existing mechanisms at a National, State and local level to address the impact on regional tourism of natural events such as bushfires, floods and drought, and effective measures to drive long term economic recovery

Bushfires and floods attract high media exposure and appear to draw more government assistance for tourism than prolonged drought. Bendigo has been in drought for nine years, during which time good statistical evidence shows a fall off in tourism, and it does appear that drought with its slow strangulation effect is just something we’re meant to live with.

The announcements of lump sum funding in response to recent fires seemed to be driven more by news cycles (neither the good intentions of those announcing government support nor the appropriateness of a willingness to provide assistance is questioned) than any sturdy needs analysis.
Opportunities to leverage private investment and commercial activity in regional tourism infrastructure, including ecotourism

We encourage the Committee to recommend a “full steam ahead” approach to obtaining UNESCO endorsement of the Castlemaine Diggings as a World Heritage site.

We wish the Committee success with its enquiries and look forward to your scheduled hearings in Bendigo and, in due course, your report.

Yours sincerely,

Lloyd Cameron Geoff Michell Thomas Seddon  
President Chair CEO  
The Bendigo Trust Bendigo Science & Technology Museum Inc