Inquiry into Rural and Regional Tourism
Swan Hill Rural City Council and Swan Hill Inc Submission

Swan Hill Region
heart of the murray

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Submission to
Inquiry into Rural & Regional Tourism
By Swan Hill Rural City Council and
Swan Hill Incorporated

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Introduction

**Swan Hill Rural City**
Swan Hill Rural City with a population around 21,000 people is principally an agricultural and horticultural region deriving its income from these industries and the businesses that service them.

The municipality is bordered by the Murray River, Australia’s greatest river, for over 300 kilometres and is highly dependent on it for irrigation, domestic and industrial water supplies as well as active and passive recreational pursuits.

Swan Hill and Robinvale are the two largest service centres in the municipality, however a number of smaller towns such as Lake Boga, Manangatang, Nyah, Nyah West, Piangil, Ultima and Woorinen South offer a variety of lifestyles.

Swan Hill Rural City Council has a dedicated Economic Development Unit which is responsible for tourism development and the provision of Visitor Information Services.

**Swan Hill Incorporated**
The aim of Swan Hill Incorporated (Swan Hill Inc) is to market the Swan Hill Region as a place to:
- Invest and do business
- Live
- Work
- Shop, and
- Visit

The aim of the marketing programs is to will improve the overall wealth of local communities and provide a secure future for their people by:

i) expanding the level of new investments in the Swan Hill region and hence the number of jobs created;

ii) increasing the number of people moving into the region to take up job opportunities, to retire or to commence a business;

iii) enhancing the level of expenditure in the retail and service sectors by attracting new shoppers from the wider regional catchment or by preventing leakage to other centres from the existing population; and

iv) growing the number of visitations, length of stay and level of visitor expenditure.

Swan Hill Inc implements a co-ordinated marketing and business development programs to which every business in the industrial, commercial, retail and tourism sectors contributes through the Special Rate scheme. All Swan Hill Rural City Council rateable properties in the retail, commercial, industrial, tourism and hospitality sectors in the Swan Hill region are automatically rated.
The Swan Hill Rural City Council and Swan Hill Inc would like to bring to the attention of the committee the following issues through this submission.

The organisations would also like the opportunity to speak to the committee when the public hearing in Swan Hill is held.
Terms of Reference

(1) the economic benefits of tourism in regional areas, including tracking the flow-on benefits through other regional businesses and industry

Research & Development

- The research and development of a region in this current competitive market is imperative to its success. Relevant and thorough research can be expensive, time consuming and out of the reach of many small destinations such as the Swan Hill region. This is also an issue with small sample size regions in that a realistic picture of visitation to a region cannot be sourced through the National Visitor Survey, as is the case with many of the larger destinations.

- The Swan Hill region is a destination that is undertaking in excess of $300,000 worth of marketing per annum, and is currently finding it impossible to determine the affect this marketing has had on visitation numbers to the region. There needs to be a system/program created that is cost effective and uses data from accommodations establishments and local attractions. Operators could enter this information into a central system, and done correctly relevant and useful data can be achieved.

- There needs to be a bottom up approach to the development of regional products and markets with support and guidance from Tourism Victoria and Tourism Australia.

ACTION SUMMARY:

- Assistance is needed to make professional market research organisations accessible for smaller regions.
- Cost effective method of obtaining data from local tourism operators needs to be created.
(2) potential impediments to the sustained growth of regional tourism, economic activity and jobs;

Murray Valley Highway Upgrade

- The Murray Valley Highway is currently classified as a B road, as per VicRoads Rural Arterial Road Network Strategy. The possible classifications for roads are M, A, B and C. The classification and subsequent condition of the Murray Valley Highway does not adequately reflect the significance of the route to our communities. Thus a deputisation must be made to the State Government for the Highway to be upgraded from a B Classification to an A classification.

- In addition there is a multi-million dollar Federal funding announcement under consideration by Councils on both sides of the Murray for development of a possible new transport link between Adelaide and Sydney.

Zoning of Caravan Parks

- Rural zoned land is unable to be developed into Caravan Park and Camping accommodation. There is a greater need for Council to explain to investors the reasons the Government decided to prohibit the development of certain accommodation such as caravan parks as part of the Farming zone provisions, when previously permits could be considered under the former Rural Zone. These types of developments require large parcels of land and caravan parks are often considered as too expensive to establish on large lots in residential zoned areas in towns, which is currently the only place they are allow to be developed.

Swan Hill Bridge:

- The Swan Hill Bridge was built in 1896 and is a steel and timber truss bridge with steel girder spans and a central lift span. The lift span is opened about 20 times a year to allow navigation of riverboats. The bridge is very narrow (6.7 metres between kerbs on the approach span) and is reduced to one lane wide on the life span (4.3 metres width between kerbs). Tourism is an important industry in the Swan Hill region with about 150,000 visitors to the aquatic and recreational attractions along the river, mostly (90%) arriving by car. Many visit attractions in New South Wales, so there is constant movement across the bridge. There is a need to replace the bridge and a process with VicRoads and the community has commenced to examine feasible options for its replacement.

River Precinct Masterplan:
The community of Swan Hill has identified the precinct along the Murray River through Swan Hill as environmentally sensitive and part of the most valuable community property that we have.

Council and the community has undertaken a major review of the preferred development of the river precinct and it was clearly determined that it should be returned wherever possible to open space in order to protect the environment and for our community to enjoy our river frontage. The River Precinct also has the potential to be developed as a major drawcard to encourage tourism and visitors to the City. At present it is possible to pass through Swan Hill and not realise that Swan Hill is situated on the banks of this iconic River!

It is the ultimate vision of the community to relocate significant number of utilities from the area which currently restrict River access. It is regarded that these facilities significantly inhibit the public enjoyment of the greatest natural asset the township, being that of the Murray River.

Assistance is need with project management funding for feasibility study and capital injection.

**Victoria Signage Scheme**

Through the Tourism Victoria Signage program over eight years ago, Victorian region entrances where signed with large gateway entry signs. During this time the Swan Hill region was a part of the ‘Murray Outback’ jigsaw region. The region was renamed in 2001 (due to lobbying by Mildura Murray Outback Tourism) Mildura & Murray Outback, the sign was not updated to reflect this change in branding. Three years ago Tourism Victoria restructured the jigsaw regions that made up the Murray abolishing Mildura & Murray Outback, Goulburn Murray Waters (Echuca Moama, Yarrawonga, Cobram) and brought Albury Wodonga into the mix, which had previously been part of Legends Wine & High Country. The region (From Albury to the SA Border) today is known simply as ‘The Murray’, a positive change as far as the Swan Hill region was concerned.

The signage on the Murray Valley Highway just south of Lake Boga still however welcomes visitors to the ‘Murray Outback’ region, a region that has not existed for over eight years. Signage throughout regional Victorian must keep in pace with changes in campaign regions, messages such as this confuse the visitor and make the region look unprofessional. We have written numerous letters to Tourism Victoria on this matter, and have been advised that; they are reviewing their signage strategy. This sign need to be updated as soon as possible. We would like the opportunity to work with Tourism Victoria on re-branding the sign to welcome visitors to the Swan Hill region.

**VicRoads strict criteria**

The current procedure put in place by VicRoads in conjunction with Tourism Victoria for establishing signage throughout Victoria is very time-
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More often than not important visitor attractions are ineligible for signage because they don’t meet a small section of the criteria, or VicRoads deem the attraction to be visible enough and therefore not requiring signage. VicRoads and Tourism Victoria need to understand that every region is different. This type of criteria might be relevant to large populated attraction regions where signage clutter is an issue, but this is not often the case in our region for example. Each situation should be assessed on a case-by-case situation.

Regional Signage Audit
- As stated previously the current criteria enforced by VicRoads to tourism operators is long and stringent. Another facet of the process that requires attention is the ongoing audit of the signage once installed. The guidelines state that there is a permit period of five years granted on the installation of the signage, “after which time the appropriateness and efficacy of the sign may be reassessed.” (Tourist Signage Guidelines, p27, 200) However to date there has been little or no auditing in relation to the ongoing meeting of criteria such as attractions open hours/days. A procedure needs to be put in place to see that tourism operators are audited on whether or not their establishment is still meeting a relevant criteria.

Signage of Lakes and Rivers
- Our region offers visitors an array of natural attractions through rivers and lakes. The current infrastructure available at these locations requires improving, in particular the signage to these assets.

**ACTION SUMMARY:**
- Upgrade the Murray Valley Highway to an A classification.
- Allow the establishment of Caravan Parks on farming zoned land.
- Replace the Swan Hill Bridge.
- Assist with the development of the River Precinct.
- Remove obsolete ‘jigsaw’ signage from the Murray Valley Highway.
- Re-evaluate tourism signage criteria.
- Undertake regular signage audits of tourism premises.
- Assist with signage of natural attractions.
(3) the effectiveness, at a National, State and local level, of current programs to promote and enhance tourism in region Victoria;

Marketing Funding

- Swan Hill Inc through the provision of a Special Rate (placed on businesses in the tourism & hospitality, industrial and retail sectors) currently raises in excess of $250,000 per annum to market the Swan Hill region. The fund is collected through the Swan Hill Rural City Council rates department and passed onto Swan Hill Inc on a quarterly basis. Before the money is expended Swan Hill Inc prepare an Annual Marketing Plan and Budget that requires approval from the Council. Given the commitment from the business community to raise this money for marketing, more opportunities should be provided for regions to gain dollar for dollar funding from government for projects and therefore achieving higher results.

Travel Programs

- Programs such as Postcards and Discover, which are supported by Tourism Victoria rarely, visit and do stories on regions that are not within a two-hour trip of Melbourne.
- Another requirement seems to be that these programs will only undertake stories if there has been new tourism investment within the region. Some regions are not growing as fast as some therefore

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<td>- Provide increase opportunities for regions to apply for $ for $ funding for marketing dollars they are raising from their local business community.</td>
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<td>- Provide more opportunities for regional areas outside of the two hours radius of Melbourne to be featured on travel programs more regularly.</td>
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(4) 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 the effective measures to drive long term economic recovery;

Drought

- Due to media reports about the state of the nation’s Murray Darling Basin there is a perception in metropolitan markets that the Murray River is dry. Which has impacted on the take up rates of leisure activities such as fishing, canoeing and camping in the region. This has resulted in erratic visitation numbers inline with the media reports and needs to be responded to with a strategic marketing campaign about river levels and availability of recreation water to support the tourism industry reliant on the River for their business. Assistance is also required for businesses that may be affected by changing climate, regulations and supply of water into the future.

- Support has been given to tourism operators in other regional areas affected by instant natural disasters such as bushfires. However tourism businesses affected by drought have not been offered the same support.

- Assistance is required with perception changing on the condition of the river.

**ACTION SUMMARY:**

- Better management of the drought issues and assistance to regions affected by low-level water.
- Assistance in dealing with the media
- The state government wheels turn too slow when reacting to these issues, we need quick support and action.
opportunities to leverage private investment and commercial activity in regional tourism infrastructure, including ecotourism.

Eco Tourism
- The section of the Murray River between Torrumbarry and Swan Hill is ‘natural’, not governed locally by locks or weirs – this creates opportunities for eco-tourism with pristine riverfronts, red gum forests and other untapped ideas.
- We are working on developing a trail (bike/walking) between Lake Boga and Tooleybuc.

Tyntynder Homestead
- Tyntynder Homestead is believed to be Australia’s oldest brick veneer home. It is owned by the Indigenous Land Council and is in need of repair and restoration. There are opportunities here for this to become a first class tourism product including a diverse range of activities from indigenous culture, accommodation and much more.

Pioneer Settlement Museum redevelopment
- The Swan Hill region’s premier tourist and cultural attraction is undergoing a redevelopment with the ultimate aim of a total rejuvenation for the facility to culminate with the 50th anniversary in 2013. This also links to the River Precinct Masterplan for the Swan Hill Murray River front.

Lake Boga Flying Foreshore and Flying Boat Museum Redevelopment
- Lake Boga is an outstanding asset and services the aquatic needs of the Swan Hill region. Lake Boga is very popular for skiing, yachting and fishing.
- The redevelopment of the Lake Boga Foreshore is one that involves a number of projects including:
  - Development of Lake Boga's Turtle Lagoon wetland with the provision of boardwalks, a bird hide, walking tracks and tables/chairs;
  - Development of the intensive use zone between the Yacht and Ski Club buildings with the provision of formal parking areas, improvements to vegetation areas, construction of shade shelter and barbecue, removal of gravel vehicle tracks;
  - Linking both of the above areas with a formal walking track;
  - Provision of a large ‘hanger’ to house Catalina aircraft and Lake Boga Flying Museum display items;
- Improve irrigation infrastructure to more efficiently service the irrigation needs of the Lake foreshore and Lake Boga recreation facilities.
ACTION SUMMARY:
- Assistance with development of trail from Lake Boga to Toolebyuc
- Capital injection into Tyntynder Homestead for restoration and product development
- Capital injection into Pioneer Settlement Museum including assistance with the development of a Business Plan
- Lake Boga Foreshore and Flying Boat Museum redevelopment requires capital funds injection