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Submission to Legislative Council Standing Committee on Economy and Infrastructure: Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and events sectors.

Central Goldfields Shire Council submission

13 April 2021

The Central Goldfields Shire Council (CGSC) welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Legislative Council Inquiry the experiences of the local businesses and to the event sectors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Council established a number of groups both internally and externally to help understand and then address issues that impacted on the local economy. These groups internally included a senior management team under the title of "Pandemic Planning Committee" which met to discuss/action issues such as:

- State and Federal Government updated advice;
- Changes and impact on services in the Health, Social, Economy; and Finance; and
- Communication.

Decisions on the need to support local businesses were underpinned from the day to day intelligence obtained by staff to enable reports seeking direct actions such as rental relief to businesses operating in Shire owned/Leased facilities.

Externally, Council established an Economic Response and Recovery Taskforce which consisted of local leaders in various sectors (tourism, accommodation, hospitality and Industry representatives) together with senior council managers. This is now Chaired by a Councillor following the elections of November, 2020. These meetings include the opportunity for members to give an update on their sector and the impacts being experienced. These meetings added to the "local intelligence" and highlighted the impact that lockdowns and cancellations of events were having on the viability of businesses and the likely immediate future post pandemic restrictions.

Council has collaborated with other municipalities in our region through regional Economic Development/Tourism groups to help form strategic and practical information sharing forums. The CGSC is part of both the Loddon Campaspe and the Pyrenees regions and monthly meetings have been held to share and develop understandings around impacts on local businesses and actions being undertaken to support them in this situation.

State and Federal financial assistance advice became critical to giving both support and some degree of encouragement that would help both the business operators and their employees particularly in the more exposed tourism and event sectors. Grants to the Shire for the upgrade of the Central Goldfields Art Gallery (\$1.7Million) and the Maryborough

Railway Station Activation Stage 1 (\$50,000) are local examples of positive steps to support tourism. The support from Jobs for Victoria assisted in value adding to both projects with (positive) unintended consequences. An example is the hiring of a highly skilled person to “digitize the Art Gallery collection”. This person’s skills were also used to digitizes a private collection of drawings of the Maryborough Railway Station that will ensure flexible use of these images in the relocated Visitor Information Centre and the newly established Coworking space (and the potentially further enhanced VIC and Railway Station complex). The need to cancel the 2020 Energy Breakthrough Event is without doubt the most significant (negative) “Event impact” in the Shire’s offering to tourist and locals alike. The Energy Breakthrough is nationally recognized for its multiple benefits. The cancellation had an immediate impact on the local accommodation operators and the plethora of businesses that are needed to support such a complex event involving school students, teaching staff and parents and the whole underlying premise of “energy saving vehicle power” being denied as a direct result of COVID-19 pandemic.

The decision to provide some \$1.5 Million to the Shire for the 2021 Energy Breakthrough will be a significant boost to our tourism sector more broadly and to the Shire’s ability to enhance and improve the event infrastructure that will create new opportunities for further benefits to future community and commercial events.

The latest data available to the Shire shows that employment levels are starting to return to pre-pandemic levels. However the impacts of withdrawing JobKeeper, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sectors, remains unclear and is of concern. The injection of State Government funding into tourism and events related Shire projects mentioned in this submission augers well for the job retention and expansion of these sectors.

Additionally the Shire wishes to thank the Inquiry for the opportunity to highlight both the immediate and difficult circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic with its lockdowns and cancellation whilst also acknowledging the significant support provided to these sectors through State Grants approved and projects completed by the Shire over 2020/2021.

The continued support of the State Government to tourism as a recognised driver of economic development is further enhanced by opportunities to seek further Grant funding to build on these initiatives.

CGSC is happy to expand on this overview at any future hearing should that be desirable.

Yours sincerely



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