CORRECTED VERSION

OUTER SUBURBAN INTERFACE/SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into growing the suburbs:
infrastructure and business development in outer suburban Melbourne

Melbourne—26 March 2012

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Mr C. Ondarchie
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Witness
Women Making it Work:
Ms A. Cross, Chair.
The CHAIR—First and foremost I would like to offer a warm welcome to Ms Annemarie Cross who is the chair of Women Making it Work. What a great title for a women's business collective. I am looking forward to hearing greater details from you. I want to thank you for coming along to this hearing today because we really value the input from people from the business community and we are very much looking to hear from you. Before that we have some formal things that need to go into the transcription for our hearing today. In extending my welcome to you what I want to do is say that I am Jan Kronberg, I am the chair of this committee which is an all party committee. It is a committee of the parliament. It is the Outer Suburban and Interface Services and Development Committee. We have been conducting inquiries in all of the interface council areas, Cardinia being one, and we very much looked forward to coming here.

In terms of your contribution today you need to know that it is being recorded. What you say while you are here in this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege which gives you a lot more freedom than the average person in the street in the average setting. But parliamentary privilege, if you were talking about any of these topics, would not apply once you are out of this room. We are basically convening an arm of the parliament here in this time and in this place. A transcription of your input will be available in about two weeks time. It will be forwarded to you. You can have a look to see that that is an accurate record of what you have had to say, but largely it is typographical or spelling errors that people find that you are able to make adjustments, not, 'I didn't say it like that,' sort of contextual changes. It is going to be as you speak to us. I want to say if you have not participated in an inquiry like this, I think you have seen that whilst it has its formalities, the actual exchanges between ourselves and those people sitting as a witness, it is fairly informal in actuality. We want to encourage you to make this an enjoyable experience while you are interfacing with us.

For the record will you please give me your name, your title and the organisation that you represent, and whether you are here in a private or professional capacity.

Ms CROSS—My name is Annemarie Cross and I am the chair of Women Making it Work network and I am here on a professional level on behalf of Women Making it Work and the committee.

The CHAIR—Thank you very much. I am going to invite you to make some opening remarks and we will then ask some questions of you. Things have a way of cascading from there.

Ms CROSS—I thought I would start by giving an overview and purpose of what Women Making it Work is. We believe we have a very unique offering to our members. We have done that on purpose. There is alignment to our purpose. We very much are a Cardinia and Casey regional business network. We try to provide a dynamic and supportive environment, new initiatives, training, professional development opportunities for our members which are women, that they can build and sustain their businesses. We encourage women across all sectors to develop their business skills. Obviously business skills help develop business and therefore employment within the local area; as well as an opportunity to network and grow collegial relationships with other like-minded business people. We aim to keep any meeting, whether it be networking or whether it be professional development, very fresh, fun and dynamic which is what we found our members, as women, like to have within their network, and Women Making it Work also likes to think of themselves as a professional voice linked to our community, taking our region forward with the aim of raising the profile of women, both locally and nationally, because a number of our women do not just work locally but also have the potential to grow their business nationally and even internationally which is very exciting.
We also believe that by maintaining strong links with both Cardinia and Casey Councils, economic development divisions and key alliances, like partners and networking bodies in and around the local area, that Women Making it Work will continue to play a role as a stimulus to business development across the region, whilst also providing a forum for increased communication and access to resources for all our members which we believe is very important. Women Making it Work celebrated its seventh year in operation this International Women's Day. That was a huge celebration for us. I do believe that Women Making it Work is the oldest network in the Casey area. I am not sure about Cardinia but certainly the Casey area.

A bit of background on how we operate. Every year we have the opportunity for members to put their names forward to step into the committee. We have a limit of two years that you can perform on the committee and then you need to step away and then fresh people come in to step into that committee. We have this evolving membership base that can contribute. What that does mean though is that it is a voluntary capacity, and many of us are also juggling our own businesses, and as women we have families and a lot of other obligations as well.

What we believe that makes us unique is the fact that we do provide professional development and networking opportunities that are very much aligned to the needs of women. We have a lot of women that have come from corporate and for some reason they hit their head on the glass ceiling and decide to use their expertise and start their own business. But when they start their own business, whilst they are extremely talented in what they do, as far as their skills and knowledge, they do not realise that running a business is not only doing accounting, or if they are a consultant, it very much requires a lot of business knowledge and that may not necessarily be what they are skilled in.

The CHAIR—When you use the term 'business knowledge', can you amplify what you mean on that point.

Ms CROSS—Define, yes. We are talking about finance, bookkeeping, accessing finance. One of our members who is a financial planner, a lot of her clients are not even aware of what is accessible there and, because of a lack of self-confidence, they are not reaching out for funding from banking, and if they do, because of their circumstances—we have members from home based businesses, very much the solopreneur; the health and wellness industry, right through to businesses who have six or more staff, and the professionals from accounting, lawyers and so forth. Some of the smaller home based businesses may not be able to access a lot of that funding, and also funding to invest in business development and be able to access that. We are talking about marketing and we are talking about general skills that we take for granted, such as public speaking. As you know in business we need to go out and network, and for a lot of women that can be quite daunting.

We found that a lot of professional development opportunities that are available are either inaccessible due to what they cost or because of their self-confidence they are not going to those courses because it is not provided in a supportive, collaborative environment in what Women Making it Work is trying to do.

The CHAIR—In terms of the courseware that you offer them, how is that provided and how is that made affordable? Are they compressed courses? Are they online courses? Tell me a little bit about the providers, the delivery and how it becomes accessible and affordable.
Ms CROSS—Sure. Some of the things we have tried to do is offer it in smaller bit-size pieces, that it is not a huge course where they would need to attend one or two days. We may do that through a networking event as well, whether it be a breakfast, lunch or dinner. We have three different timeslots, because one of the things that is also relevant to our database is because as women we are juggling family. While some courses are out there, it may not be accessible because it is in school hours, or not in school hours, or in school holidays. That is very much one thing that we need to take into consideration as well. In a networking environment, say, for a breakfast we may have opportunity to network because that is one of the things we try and encourage people to do.

By having that very experiential networking, it is helping them to build relationships with other like-minded business people. We also try within that networking and breakfast have a guest speaker that comes along and provides, say, 15 to 20 minutes of real valuable information that they can then take back in their business. That is one of the things we have done.

The CHAIR—Do you have one fixed venue for that or do you rotate through the region?

Ms CROSS—We rotate, yes, because we have people all over Cardinia, right through to Dandenong. What we try and do, we have a facility here that we use which is the Cardinia Cultural Centre in Pakenham. We have used Cranbourne, the gardens, the beautiful botanical gardens, and we have tried a few places in Berwick, so very much across the board. We try and give as much access to people no matter where they are.

The CHAIR—In general, what would be the uptake of women coming to one of those three types of events that are timed, and will have attraction to one group and not the other? What would be the typical response from people coming to a networking event?

Ms CROSS—At the moment our membership is increasing. The limited marketing that we do—obviously, the committee, we run our own businesses. But the people that hear about us are very excited, and our breakfasts tend to be our most significant impact as far as number of people that do attend, and numbers can be anywhere up to 50, 55. We do have, as I said, afternoon and evening, but what we tend to do is promote that longer than what we would do a breakfast because it takes more time to generate those kinds of numbers. What we have coming up in July is a conference, and that is where we will spend one day solely on marketing. In actual fact it is called Marketing on a Shoestring Budget. We are very much trying to cover low cost and no cost marketing strategies for our members. Again, to fit into the time frame that suits them, we have to have it outside of school holidays, but then start in the afternoon and then go into the evening so that we can cater. Again we very much look at the demands and the needs of our membership base and then develop the course.

The CHAIR—Across your membership base what would be the split of people, coming from corporate life, coming into the region with a profession, vis-a-vis those who would have a home based internet oriented business?

Ms CROSS—I would say fifty-fifty actually. If I think a couple of my colleagues, they very much come from corporate. I myself came from corporate. The reason that I started up my own business many years ago was because I left the corporate world to have a family, and after 12 months—family and children are fantastic but there is this need to contribute—I started a home based business.
The CHAIR—What was that? Do you mind telling us?

Ms CROSS—No. I came from a background of office management, bookkeeping but also HR. I developed my own HR business and I have never left the home base. I have clientele all over the world. I deal with clients in Israel, the US. The technology at our fingertips is amazing and that is one of the areas that we are trying to also provide skill development. Social media—what is beautiful about a lot of the tools now is that it is not cost prohibitive for our members. You mentioned webinars before. That is another way that we like to deliver opportunities for development. They can come in, in the comfort of their own office, whether that be a location or a home base, take in 15, 20 minutes, half an hour of professional development, then implement that straight into their business.

The CHAIR—Thank you very much for sharing that personal aspect with us. I appreciate that.

Ms CROSS—No, that is fine.

Ms GRALEY—Thank you for your presentation, and congratulations on all your hard work. When I was involved with the Mornington Peninsula Shire we established Women in the Workplace. The first speakers were the Endota Spa girls, Belinda and Melanie, and you could see from one little spa in Mount Martha, they have taken on the whole of Australia and have used the women's network to do that. I applaud your work. Two questions: what is council's involvement in all this, and do they support you, and how do they support you, and what extra supports you may require in future? The second question is, I have numerous women that are running home businesses in my electorate and they always find it difficult to take the next step out of a home business. You are suggesting they may not need to do that but some of them like to get office space, put their shingle up and get going and try and develop a bigger business. What do you see as some of the prohibitors to taking that next step from a home business to a bigger business in the local area?

Ms CROSS—To answer the first question as far as council involvement, we have had a lot of support, both from Casey Council and Cardinia Council. In fact, International Women's Day we celebrated with Casey Council, we partnered. Women Making it Work hosted the event, and the City of Casey promoted it and marketed it to their database, as did we, of course. However, they funded the entire event and we had Tammy van Wisse, the English Channel swimmer. The feedback from that was 'one of the most amazing inspirational speakers'. In that instance it was really beneficial and in fact through doing that we have established a lot of connections with women in business, as far as Dandenong and even further out, that never even realised that Women Making it Work even existed. It is great that we are now able to offer them membership.

Cardinia Council we have also worked with as well. We cross-promote professional development opportunities that we run, and vice versa too. We like to share with our members any professional development opportunities that councils are running, both Cardinia and Casey. We are also very much involved in sponsoring the awards with Cardinia here. One of the things with Women Making it Work, because we are a not-for-profit, we are not really able to afford the larger sponsorship packages. Cardinia came back and said to us, 'We really want you involved in this,' and they structured something that was able to suit our needs. We appreciated that as well because that is a great way we can network, with other local businesses.
As far as answering your question about women who perhaps want to take their home based business through to a professional office environment, that is probably something that is lacking in the area. I do know that Monash has an incubator centre. I have an office there myself because I could not find anything, because I am based in Casey. I am not too sure if there is anything here in the Cardinia area either, but I think that is certainly a need. For myself, if I do have a client who wishes to meet face to face, I would rent those offices, and I know that is available.

In response to your question, I think at the moment that would be a barrier because I know from Monash incubators centre they provide again networking opportunities but also an office space that is not cost prohibitive, from smaller offices to larger offices, but also corporate boardrooms or training rooms which are offered at a very cost effective price as well.

The CHAIR—Do you see, as a corollary to our Deputy Chair's question, that there would be an uptake if there was a local business incubator in the population areas within the Cardinia Shire then?

Ms CROSS—Yes, I would definitely think so.

The CHAIR—You could actually see them, and that would solve a need.

Ms CROSS—Absolutely, yes.

Ms GRALEY—Whereabouts is the Monash incubator?

Ms CROSS—It is located in an industrial area in Mulgrave.

The CHAIR—We will make a note for our executive officer to find some more information on that Monash business incubator model at Mulgrave.

Ms CROSS—Even opportunities to hire out a boardroom or a training room within that area, I know here I had a course with a number of members, and I could not find anything but I ended up using Link. Link is associated with an organisation that offers smaller training type areas. That was the only thing I could find available. Of course, the only other one is the huge Cardinia Cultural Centre which is inappropriate for a small number of people.
Mr ONDARCHIE—I am really impressed. We have been out to a number of municipalities in our troubles and as Annemarie said right at the start, Women Making it Work are fresh, fun and dynamic, and clearly that is something their Chair exudes as well. Thank you for your presentation this morning. We undervalue the work that women do, not only in employment but in unpaid employment as well. It is easy for us blokes, we get up and run off to work every day, and mums often still have to run the household and go to work and all that type of stuff.

The CHAIR—Yes, you do not help.

Mr ONDARCHIE—Well, as much as I can, I have to say.

The CHAIR—Every working woman needs a wife.

Mr ONDARCHIE—We do undervalue that. I am also impressed about how seven years on you are still as fresh and dynamic it seems as when you started. What could Cardinia Shire be doing, not necessarily just for Women Making it Work but to increase business investment in the shire?

Ms CROSS—Again I think a lot has to do with education. I overheard you talking before to the other participants about education. It really is everything. A knowledge base, we are only limited to it to our own awareness, and by networking and offering those opportunities of professional development, particularly if we are looking at our members in an environment in which they will feel comfortable. Their imagination is limitless, so ongoing encouragement in that area, but particularly offering those opportunities in a way that is going to encourage people to step forward. I know particularly for women, and I do speak on behalf of our members here today, that the self-awareness and lack of self-confidence is a barrier to them going out there and participating, for instance, public speaking.

We see a huge need there for women to be able to, in a very natural, comfortable environment, learn public speaking skills. If they know that one or two men are going to be there they hesitate because they are so embarrassed and that really is something that is a concern to us because we are thinking they are not getting skills development in that way; similarly too with networking, men and women network very differently. We find we are all about building relationships where men may go in and try and seal the deal first and then go in later on and build the relationship. Whilst there is no better way or wrong way or right way, I think what is really important, particularly for Women Making it Work and perhaps also council too, is offering opportunities that is going to cater for those and get rid of some of those barriers. Does that answer the question?

Mr ONDARCHIE—Yes.
The CHAIR—I think I can speak on behalf of the other committee members, Ms Cross, that we understand that, especially women who might have been out of the workforce for a while, their self-confidence could take a battering, and also lack of familiarity in new circumstances. I want to commend you for the work that Women Making it Work are doing, because I think it goes beyond networking for business. I think it is a very important community service in terms of that outreach, and the affiliation that women will get and the ideas. I have written down one of the things that you said when you are talking about issues of knowledge base. You said, 'We are limited to our own awareness.' That is the statement of the day, frankly. That resonates particularly with myself.

In a regional sense, beyond what a local authority might be able to do—perhaps a local authority might think laterally in terms of offering facilities if there is nothing that is affordable by way of providing meeting environments or even factoring those meeting environments into what type of civic infrastructure might be provided as new residential estates are developed—do you have any thoughts about the provision of meeting places for women and what you need in terms of physical and perhaps a technical infrastructure? What kind of connections to a global marketplace could be provided?

Ms CROSS—One of the things I think is very interesting, a couple of weeks ago I read a book—you asked about environments—that was marketed particularly to women, and this business was in market research. They followed a standard process where they would invite people into an environment which was very much set up in an office space and then asked various questions. However, this organisation decided, 'You know what, we're going to take this to a very friendly environment. We're going to sit at a roundtable and have coffee and share things,' and it was so amazing that when all the barriers were taken away and they were all sitting around, the information that flowed in that meeting was incredible. In fact, information was shared for this marketing research that we would never have tapped into were it not for creating that environment.

Organisations, when they are building those spaces and setting up those opportunities, if they look at it that way that would be far more inviting and therefore people would not feel they had to put up a front but could very much come as themselves, which is something that you said and I think that is one of the things we really find as important. Sometimes women come and they are having difficulties with their children or something like that, well, there are people there that lend a shoulder or something. It is not all about business but certainly building an environment that is holistic. As women that is so important.

This morning I was getting prepared and my son rang up. He was on his way to a SAC because he is in year 12, 'Mum, the car broke down.' I had to drop everything, go and take him to school, come back. As women in business we have a million things.

Mr ONDARCHIE—Women are very good at multi-tasking. Blokes are flat out walking and breathing at the same time.

The CHAIR—Thank you for those comments, Mr Ondarchie. How would you see that women in general who were not looking to start a business but—and you might have an opinion about this. How can we encourage women who have left the workforce some time ago, and they might have been skilled or semiskilled or perhaps even unskilled, did not finish secondary skill and they are a little bit tentative about whether they need any formal qualifications; that transition from encouraging women on the principles of lifelong learning, I think it is very synergistic to what opens up your eyes and gives you ideas where you might want to have a field of endeavour that is your own; that whole raising awareness of what is possible for women within a population, say, in Casey and most specifically in Cardinia, as we are here today?
Ms CROSS—I can certainly relate to that, because one of the areas that I deal in now is a business coach, but previously a careers coach. Again I think women take themselves out of the running. 'I can't do that,' or, 'That's not me,' or something like that. Once they hear success stories, such as other women and what they have done, they then picture themselves and think, 'I can do similar things like that.' I think to increase awareness by sharing other stories of other women and what they have done and the ups and downs, but also the successes at the other end and what is possible, that spark of hope and inspiration is what could be needed for them to be encouraged to attend other things. By promoting something and saying, 'Here's a course,' and such and such, they automatically take themselves out of the running and think, 'Well, that's not really for me, there's no way I can do that.' But by sharing other success stories, that is one of the things we used to do within our newsletters for women in particular, and the coaching we used to do, women would say, 'Well, I don't have this, this and this. Out of 10 things I've only got eight.' I said, 'Well, get your application in because the people who have applied only have six different areas that they can contribute.' As women we tend to discredit things.

The CHAIR—Is there a role for a TAFE or a university campus that have an outreach role, to go and speak to any cohort—we are focusing on women at the moment—to demystify the process and to see how either vocational learning or higher education opportunities can be available to people in a broader sense than people might believe and they need to focus on that as a life goal.

Ms CROSS—Absolutely.

The CHAIR—Is there a role for them in that outreach?

Ms CROSS—I think so, because the standard things that are being done, as I said, often people will read that, whether it would be through marketing material or brochures or online, people again would take that for granted and take themselves out of the running. However, if they provide more of an outreach, again keeping in mind the environment, trying to create an environment in which they know women will feel comfortable to step forward and get over those initial barriers, and through sharing success stories perhaps of women who have gone through that and with learning and ongoing development, I think that would encourage people to come out of their shells and participate. Maybe it needs to be something that is more just a coffee morning, and within that providing a little bit of information and discussing things, and then from there letting them know what is available.

Ms GRALEY—Chair, may I ask a follow-up to your question.

The CHAIR—Yes, sure.

Ms GRALEY—We heard from the council about the low education aspirations in the area. Do you think it is within your orbit, or somebody else's—maybe you plus somebody else, or you plus somebody else with additional funding—to start mentoring in schools at a younger age to say to young women, and young men as well, about the need for skilling up and the fact that you can get to a certain stage and then you can go on and have further education, trying to lift the aspiration?
Ms CROSS—Absolutely. One of the things that we would say as in professional development, sometimes it does not necessarily need to be a four-year course. When people see the skills and strengths that they do have, some people think, 'Well, I had no idea.' What we try and do then is leverage that and show them how they can use that, obviously in this case in a practical business development area, so they can grow their business. I have young children that are now looking at what opportunities there are in the workforce. They are year 11 and 12. For them, university is not an option, but to have the same opportunities at TAFE and what is available, because that very much is you learn but then you apply. For instance, some of the things we are teaching now did not exist a year ago or two years ago here—social media, for instance. Over in the US, people have been talking about this for years and we are only now starting to see the news with, 'This is my Twitter, and this is my Facebook,' and things like that. Small businesses—even a lot of these women think, 'How on earth am I going to learn all of this social media. We try and bring it in a very non-geeky term that they can appreciate that and harness that.

The CHAIR—It is interesting you have made that term 'non-geeky' because quite often the barriers to entry for people who aspire to something bigger and different and better in their lives is dominated by technocratic thinking, isn't it? Access to technology developed a whole lexicon, a whole language that people need a translator for; the same thing in terms of sometimes higher education, it looks like something that is an unassailable barrier. Do you agree with that?

Ms CROSS—Absolutely. Sometimes women, particularly our newest members that come to the group, or people even who are considering membership may look at some of our long-term members and think, 'Well, I could never do that.' But then when we are sitting across a cup of coffee and share with them, 'Actually, I am a home based business. Yes, I know I have a radio show which reaches the US, and you can do it too.' Then it gives them that spark and they think, 'Well, maybe I can do it.' You were talking about youth. Sometimes as a young child, hearing how someone went from unemployed and now running their own business, whatever that business may be, that could be the spark that inspires them to ask, 'What can I study? What do I need to study that will enable me to get to where I need to be.'

The CHAIR—Two quick questions to you. In terms of your membership base, you mentioned it is growing. In terms of keeping the membership fees as being affordable, is that one of your objectives?

Ms CROSS—Yes, it is. We try and keep our membership—it is only $100 a year. The breakfasts—and we do not make obviously any profit on that—is around $25 for members. Even for some smaller home based businesses that can sometimes be prohibitive as well.

The CHAIR—The other question I have—and hopefully you will answer this in the affirmative—is could you provide our executive officer not with the names of your membership or even the names of the businesses, but could you give us a list that describes the business in a generic sense?

Ms CROSS—Like, the demographics—so many are home based, some many are from the professional—

The CHAIR—Yes, and within the home base, if you are in a position to give us some idea of what your network is actually—the gamut of that business base. We do not want to be inquiring of people's personal details but in a generic sense. Are you comfortable with that?
Ms CROSS—Absolutely.

The CHAIR—We would welcome the input of that, and if you could direct that to our executive officer Nathan Bunt, and I am sure he will pick that up with you. Ms Cross, thank you very much for coming along today. It has been a really enjoyable interface with you and quite inspiring. I want to congratulate you on your work and I think when your turn comes to surrender the chair role, I am sure you are going to be looking for bigger and better things as you serve the community. Thank you very much.

Ms CROSS—Thank you for the opportunity.

Witness withdrew.

Hearing suspended.