

Port Campbell Environment Group (PCEG) Submission to Parliamentary Enquiry into Development of Public Land

Victoria is very fortunate that 96 % of our coast is in public ownership and held by the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change for the benefit of all Victorians. However there is increasing demands on coastal land because of population growth on the coast and limited opportunities to develop land outside townships. Government policy reflected in the 'Great Ocean Road Regional Strategy' and 'Coastal Spaces' encourages the delineation of coastal townships to prevent a sprawl of development along our coast. While these policies are supported by many Victorians (including the PCEG), they also result in increased economic value and therefore further pressure on our coastal land, particularly within townships.

The PCEG appreciates that the purpose for which the land was originally reserved may change over time and the Minister needs to be able to respond to those changed uses and/or circumstances. It may also be deemed in the community's interest to lease some coastal crown land or sell land if a net community benefit can be achieved.

Community concern over some recent decisions suggests some problems in either the decision process or communication of the decision and its rationale to the community.

When a decision is to be made regarding changed use or tenure the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) will understandably be guided by the managers of the land. This may be Parks Victoria, a committee of management (CoM) or a local government council. The level of advice to the DSE - and ultimately the Minister - used to support these decisions will depend on information supplied by these bodies, community input and the expertise and interests of individual DSE staff.

To increase consistency in the type and level of advice provided and importantly to assist with the community understanding of both the value of coastal crown land and the process required to change its use or tenure, we recommend that

- 1. Principles supporting the value of public land be established**
- 2. A clear process be developed that guides decisions regarding changes in use or tenure of the land.**

The process should include:

- criteria to be used to inform the decision;**
- a minimum level of consultation required prior to that decision; and**
- access to documentation outlining assessment of the options against criteria and the results of consultation.**

The Victorian Coastal Strategy provides a hierarchy of principles to guide development on both private and public land (VCS p 20). It recommends that coastal planning

- Provide for the protection of significant environmental features
- Ensure the sustainable use of natural coastal resources
- Undertake integrated planning and provide direction for the future
- and when the above principles have been met, facilitate suitable development on the coast within existing modified and resilient environments where the demand for services is evident and requires management.

The Strategy supports the value of public land by noting, "There will be a net gain in the quality and quantity of the public land estate along the coast through land swaps, donations and purchase" (VCS p 21)

A regular audit of coastal Crown land is required to determine whether a goal of net gain in public land is being achieved.

While the Strategy provides some broad principles that guide planning, we feel some overarching principles should be established which are specific to coastal Crown land and articulate *inter alia*; the values of public land, why those values should be protected, why public land should be retained or increased, potential threats to public land (particularly cumulative impacts) and the role of the community in management. Development of such principles would inform management plans developed for individual reserves and provide some guidance when considering changes in use or tenure of the land.

To improve consistency in the decision process, specific criteria should be developed which are consistent with these principles and used by the DSE (on behalf of the Minister), to weigh up the benefits of changing the use or tenure of the land. Questions or issues to be addressed when making that decision should include; how will the use or tenure protect or enhance the environmental and/or cultural values of the land? Is the proposed use coastal dependent? Does the proposed use take into account climate change? Can the use be accommodated on private land? What are the potential risks to users? The PCEG considers 'provision of revenue from changed tenure to support other community infrastructure or activities' is not a criterion for sale or alienation of land.

The level of community engagement undertaken currently varies with each decision and also the management authority responsible. While The PCEG is not advocating a one-size-fits-all approach, for each decision the DSE should require an appropriate level of consultation. The expected level of engagement should be clear to the community and relevant CoM or Council. The management authorities should then be required to demonstrate how consultation has been undertaken and the outcomes documented prior to any decision.

Coastal public land is a valuable community asset and community involvement is integral to management of many reserves. Opportunities for community input into the decision making process and access to the decision and its rationale must be part of an open and transparent process.

On behalf of the PCEG, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to present our views to the Committee.

Your Sincerely



Helen Arundel