

CORRECTED VERSION

SELECT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LAND DEVELOPMENT

Geelong — 18 March 2008

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Witness

Ms G. Walker, Friends of Bellarine Hills.

Ms WALKER — Thank you for the opportunity to speak to my submission on the safe harbour development at Portarlington, which includes the foreshore land around the pier. I have just passed along some maps of this area, along with some copies of my statement.

It was not actually until last year that I became aware, through developments at Queenscliff and Portarlington, of the fragility of Crown land. Before that I had thought that such public open space was safe and available permanently for the free use of the general public. In the past infrastructure like piers has been paid for by the taxpayer and maintained by the relevant government authorities. Now it seems that the government requires private money for these purposes. I am here to say that I find these changes in public policy deleterious, both for local residents and the travelling public. It is my belief as well that these processes are not necessarily economically advantageous to either governments or the general public. Businesses and businessmen may go broke or move their assets elsewhere, leaving behind a spoiled and fragmented environment.

It is my strong belief that the state government does not have a mandate for the disposal of Crown lands which, conventionally, have been regarded as the prerogative of all citizens, both adults and children. The Portarlington foreshore, for instance, is widely used by family groups for gatherings involving picnics and communal activities. The needs of its tourists are low level rather than sophisticated. One of the mistakes the government is making in its current policy is to regard all areas as having the same needs. This is far from the case, and with regard to Portarlington every inch of its foreshore land is used during holiday times when the population may go from 3000 to 15 000. As well, during the winter months people go elsewhere, which would lead, if overdevelopment takes place on the foreshore, to a sort of ghost town whose buildings would be subject to the weather and to vandalism. It is regrettable, too, with regard to Portarlington that the government's processes so far have not been of a fact-finding or objective nature but rather conducted as a sort of sales pitch which has denigrated community concerns and has not allowed a balanced discussion of economic, social or environmental issues connected with this development

Since 2001, when the proposal concerned a marina around the pier only, to the current proposal for development along and around the foreshore of Portarlington as well as the marina, the state government has put out consultants' reports, feasibility studies and the like to such an extent that the money so far spent must be considerable indeed. The firm of Meinhardt infrastructure is the latest in this long line, and it was understood that its report would be available this month. So far it has not been sighted.

Apart from the issue of the preservation of public open space, there is the management of the Portarlington foreshore involving DSE, functioning as Bellarine Bayside, and Parks Victoria. Portarlington, Indented Head and St Leonards, which are the constituent foreshore areas of Bellarine Bayside, amalgamated in the Kennett years, are all part, municipally, of the City of Greater Geelong. This means that the recreational areas of these towns along the beachfronts are under the control of Bellarine Bayside — a part of DSE — while the streetscapes and all the rest come under COGG.

In Geelong's planning scheme Portarlington, Indented Head and St Leonards are designated as low-growth areas, while further along the coast to Clifton Springs the towns of Clifton Springs and Drysdale are designated as high-growth areas. In addition COGG has stated that the shopping strip of Portarlington — Newcombe Street — should not be fragmented. Parks Victoria, in its plans for marinas at Portarlington's pier with the faint promise of a ferry across to Melbourne and its retail shops on the foreshore as well as 'houses of accommodation', seems to be setting up another planning scheme contrary to that of Geelong. Parks Victoria has also foreshadowed closing Pier Street and reopening Stewart Grove and Franzel Avenue. It is my belief that Parks Victoria should not be entering town planning, and that if the 'safe harbour' is considered mandatory to state government policy it would be better situated at Clifton Springs where the residents are already pointing to traffic jams in their endeavours to reach Geelong and Melbourne.

I am grateful for the opportunity to air these issues, which go beyond party politics to the importance of the retention of public open space for the future and the appropriate development of our foreshore at a time of climate change and sea level rise.

The CHAIR — Gillian, thank you for that. I have just one question about the Portarlington proposals. Do you have any documentation on that is the first part of it, or is it some mooted thing?

Ms WALKER — It is a mooted thing. The proposals were spoken of at a public meeting at which Mr Stuart Ord from Parks Victoria — I believe the Albert Park area — foreshadowed these sorts of developments. He foreshadowed accommodation houses. He told us not to blench at that proposal; many people did. He proposed wine and food trails; tourist outlets, presumably selling retail goods of various sorts — tea towels and so forth and the like; a tourism centre; a maritime service centre with fuel sales; marinas, both commercial and recreational; a mussel processing plant; and, as I said, an outline for tourism products. As you see from the map, that is a lot to fit into that area. When I asked him at another meeting about the specific proposal of accommodation provision — I had pointed out at the previous meeting that there were two good hotels in the place, there is a good motel, endless bed and breakfasts, holiday houses for let, and I have never heard of anyone being unable to find accommodation in Portarlington — he said, and I quote:

There is a window of opportunity for ecolodges.

Now, I did not know what an ecolodge was, so I asked somebody what it was, and they said it was a hut with a solar panel on the roof. That seemed to me to indicate that they wanted the caravan park to come out onto the foreshore, so that may be another scenario too, but so far there has been nothing actually in writing. The Meinhardt document, which was supposed to be out in March — perhaps still will be — was going to give some definite proposals. You hear all sorts of things going on behind the scenes, but so far there is nothing actually in writing. What Friends of the Bellarine Hills, which is the group I belong to, is doing is trying to highlight what the town does and what it has got to the government so that mistakes are not made.

The CHAIR — Is it your opinion that Parks Victoria is well placed to conduct these sorts of proposals given the statements by the Ombudsman last week about the chairman?

Ms WALKER — No, I do not. I have been a volunteer worker for Parks Victoria and DSE over the years, and the idea there was conservation and growing plants, growing trees, environmental services along the foreshore and of course in the marine national park. I do not think they are qualified and unfortunately, as far as our area goes, due to the quasi privatisation of the Queenscliff harbour, they actually have to move out, and they are moving out next month, from their premises at the Queenscliff harbour up to an office space in Gheringhap Street in Geelong, so that will take them kind of off the scene of the marine national park, the St Leonard's salty lagoon, the Edwards Point, Ocean Grove and Point Richards reserves, and I think that is a great pity. I really do not think from my observation over the years that they are qualified in this area.

Mr TEE — I am just having a look at the attachment that you have given us to your statement which appears to be a Parks Victoria document.

Ms WALKER — Yes, it is.

Mr TEE — And it suggests that the proposal is subject to community consultation, an economic feasibility study and a master plan and that these — being the master plan and the feasibility study — will need to be endorsed by the state government, so it appears from your submissions and from this that at the moment there is discussion, there is talk, there is consultation, but you are awaiting a more definitive proposal which may well be in this report you referred to which is yet to be released and which is then subject to a number of other processes; is that the sense of what is happening here?

Ms WALKER — You would hope so, but it has been my experience so far in the attendance of all the meetings, and I have been involved in the business since 2000 and 2001 when it first came up and it was first projected as just a marina around the pier. That was an odd sort of business because at that stage the meetings were not public. They were held over at the Indented Head yacht club. You could only go if you were invited. There were two people who were invited from Portarlington. One was the head of the Bellarine Bayside organisation and the other one was Ann Nichol, a well-known local woman. It was Ann Nichol's view that proposals to develop the marina would be very bad for the main beach, which is very good for children. As it is now, Parks Victoria dredges every four years and they just dump the spoil on the beach. I think they should take it away, but they dump it on the beach. If they are going to thoroughly redevelop the harbour, they are going to have to dredge much more often.

Mr TEE — Where would you have them take it away to? You say Parks Victoria should take it away. I am just wondering where.

Ms WALKER — Yes, I think they should, rather than just dump it on the beach. I do not know, but that has not been gone into, and I brought up this issue as well with the new development, and the planning still is just to dump it on the beach where it forms a very hideous black smelling heap, and Parks Victoria put a notice there, ‘Don’t worry about the smell. It will soon go and wash away’, and so forth. But it does not seem to me to be good practice at all. The dredging of the proposed harbour is very important. As of now it is used by mussel boats or mussel trucks as they are called, and they do not really have a bother with shallow water. They are flat bottomed. They can berth in 2 feet of water, but if they are going to put in lots of larger boats, then they will need to dredge and dredge a lot.

But getting back to your original point about processes, we just seem to get spin every time. The last document that was released by Elaine Carbines, who is running this project, talked about key stakeholders and targeted workshops and focus groups and comprehensive community consultation. I am here to tell you that that is pretty meaningless, I regret.

Mr KAVANAGH — Just on your suggestion about Clifton Springs, they have already got quite a big marina there?

Ms WALKER — Yes, they have got quite a big marina there. I just wonder why it was never posited as a destination. If you were going to run a ferry, that is where the people are, to go across to Melbourne. It has not got the attractive foreshore that Portarlington has, and I think that this was perhaps a factor. I do not think it suffers from the same silting problem that Portarlington does either. Portarlington has a big bar across the water and that allows the foreshore drift to come in, the long shore drift to come in, and drop sand, but it does not allow sand to get out. So it does periodically sand up. But I just wonder why that was never considered, Mr Kavanagh.

Mr HALL — Thanks for coming in this morning. To me it is not clear why Parks Victoria is seeking to redevelop the foreshore area at Portarlington. Has it made it clear to the community at all as to why?

Ms WALKER — No, I do not know either because, as I said, Portarlington is very well set up now and it is very popular. I was on the pier yesterday late in the afternoon at 5 o’clock, a stinking hot day. The teenagers were all there enjoying the pier and mixing with their friends. They were not on the streets. They were not at home on the computers. They were out in the open. The kids were swimming along under the pier and around it. The little kids were on the sand banks. People were fishing. I was walking my dog. You are allowed to walk your dog on the pier, but not on the foreshore. Everyone was having a sociable, enjoyable time and getting the breeze. Now we have got plenty of infrastructure in the town for tourists, as I have indicated, and there are plenty of restaurants around and we have plenty of people coming, so I think it will be overdevelopment. What needs to be done, in my opinion, is to maintain the foreshore in rather better heart, like planting trees, providing shade cloth over picnic tables, perhaps some more playgrounds for little kids, more barbecue areas perhaps for families, accepting that it is a good thing as it is and trying to make it better.

Mr HALL — Are you aware whether there are any organisations like the City of Greater Geelong or boating users that are pushing for redevelopment?

Ms WALKER — Not really. We have got a good yacht club in Portarlington just past the caravan park. There is a good yacht club at Indented Head and St Leonards. There seems to me to be plenty of even-handed attention. We have got a good bowling club on the foreshore with a very modest clubhouse. It is open space; visitors can come and have a game of bowls. It was mentioned at one of these meetings that Parks Victoria wanted to get rid of the bowling club. The bowling club sits under the cliff; it is inconspicuous. You do not really want a three-storey building taking its place. Back from there is a little scout hall that was made out of the old watering tank that went for the bowling club years ago. It is a small, whitewashed, inconspicuous building that has a second-hand bookshop. The Meinhardt people seem to think that should go. There is Parkes Hall on the top of the cliffs that has the monthly market. There seems to be plenty of good things going now without shoving in other things.

Mr HALL — Finally, as part of the process you mentioned that Stuart Ord, who I know is from Parks Victoria, has been down to address meetings and say what is being proposed, et cetera. You also mentioned Elaine Carbines playing a role in that. Is that since she has been a member of Parliament?

Ms WALKER — Yes, she used to be our Legislative Council member of Parliament. When she did not get elected at the last election she got this job with Parks Victoria with a special mandate to push this particular project.

Mr HALL — So she is with Parks Victoria now?

Ms WALKER — Yes. This is a bit of a grey area because people are unsure. We are not a very sophisticated community. People are unsure whether she is still a member of Parliament or not, whether she is a consultant, whether she is a public servant. That is a somewhat grey area.

Mr HALL — Has her involvement been a public one in terms of addressing public meetings on this?

Ms WALKER — Yes, she comes along to all the meetings.

Mr O'DONOHUE — Just to take Peter's point a little bit further, we have heard now from several groups in relation to proposals for either refurbishment or expansion of harbours or piers or a combination of both, and what we cannot seem to get to the bottom of is who is pushing this — whether it is Parks Victoria, whether Parks Victoria are being pushed to do this to generate revenue, or whether it is coming from higher up from the government.

Ms WALKER — That is a dashed good question, yes, all of that.

Mr O'DONOHUE — I suppose it is only the committee that is looking into it. If they are from a range of — —

Ms WALKER — Airing the issue may bring these matters to light, exactly.

Mr O'DONOHUE — Yes. We have heard from concerned residents such as yourself and from a range of different towns, and whenever the question is asked, 'Who is behind this?', no-one knows.

Ms WALKER — No. This is supposedly government policy, and it has been, I think, since 2000 or 2001. But it sort of lapsed and, as I said, it was only about the marinas. I remember that we were given a choice. On the first paper there was A, B or C. One of them had a restaurant at the end of the pier, which if you looked at it was actually more the size of an ice-cream kiosk. That went away, and then other little things came along. Then last year this biggie — not only the pier but the foreshore. I do not know. I do not know why. The only reason I can say is that the pier has needed some maintenance, and the government is recently spending about \$847 000 on it. They may want to recoup that; that is the only thing I can suggest. As I said in my statement previous to this, you would expect to pay your taxes and I would certainly prefer to do that because that is a finite business, and the pier obviously should be maintained.

Mr O'DONOHUE — As a public piece of infrastructure. The number of piers has been reduced. I am aware of a couple in my electorate which have unfortunately been closed.

Ms WALKER — Yes, they are certainly a public asset, and as far as we are concerned in the summer it is the public meeting space, and on the weekends it is thronged.

Ms PENNICUIK — I am looking at the Parks map and it seems to me that the area in red which you have outlined is basically the only open space on the foreshore in Portarlington.

Ms WALKER — Yes, it is. It is the only public space for Portarlington people. As I said, we are in a strange position in that our recreational space is under state government control and our municipality does not provide anything much except a little pocket park here and there. Excuse me for correcting myself; they also provide a very good footy ground and recreation area around the footy ground. There is a footy ground and there is a cricket ground and basketball courts and tennis courts. That is fine. The COGG does provide that, but as far as the beach goes, it is state government controlled.

Ms PENNICUIK — So this development would result in a net loss of public land open space on the foreshore.

Ms WALKER — A very considerable net loss. While the recreational reserve is a good one for sporting people and you can walk your dog in there too, it is not as good a general meeting place as the beach and the pier.

Ms PENNICUIK — I was interested in your comment about a good beach for children. I know that along the Bellarine surf coast there are lots of beaches that are not good for children, because they are obviously surf beaches and have rips et cetera. Could you tell me a little bit more about that? I am not familiar with that beach.

Ms WALKER — Yes. It is a very safe beach for children. It is not a surf beach and there are a number of sand bars as well, so it is extremely safe. You would be very hard put to drown there, and it is an area where parents can sit and watch the kids and they will be okay. Not being a fashionable surf beach there are no —

Ms PENNICUIK — Bigger kids.

Ms WALKER — Yes, and the fact that the social problems are not there either.

The CHAIR — Gillian, thank you very much for your evidence today and the background material you have provided. It has been quite illuminating.

Ms WALKER — Thank you very much indeed for the opportunity.

Witness withdrew.