

# CORRECTED VERSION

## SELECT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LAND DEVELOPMENT

Melbourne — 27 June 2008

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### Witness

Ms C. Dennis, president, Friends of the Zoos.

**The CHAIR** — I welcome Christina Dennis to the hearing. Christina, you are the president of the Friends of the Zoos?

**Ms DENNIS** — Yes, that is correct.

**The CHAIR** — And you have a submission. Do you want to read that or what do you —

**Ms DENNIS** — I was just going to go through it and just highlight the points and give you time to read it later, if you so wish, or ask any questions, if that is okay?

**The CHAIR** — That would be fine, thank you.

**Ms DENNIS** — Thank you. I guess just to say that Friends of the Zoos is a not-for-profit organisation. We have approximately 67 000 members, and we support Zoos Victoria, so we have a vested interest in this particular proposal about the theme park and the site of Werribee Open Range Zoo, not only for our members but also for the local community and for the general Victorian public.

Just to give you a bit of background — Werribee zoo is on a portion of land that was purchased by the government back in the mid-1970s. That was the result of a public campaign when the land was up for sale. The intent of purchasing the land was to make it public land for use for various facilities for the public. Eventually it was broken up into four precincts: the Werribee Park Mansion and its grounds, the National Equestrian Centre, the Werribee Park golf course, and the Werribee Open Range Zoo.

The Werribee mansion historical precinct is historic, and it is a living museum. It is open; it is free to enter the grounds, but you have to pay to get into the mansion and wander through the mansion. But it gives an understanding of what life was like, not just for the gentry of that era but for the servants as well. In fact there is a hologram there that talks about the life of a laundry maid who came out from England.

The precinct also now includes the Victorian State Rose Garden, which is a garden of world significance, and it is maintained by 100-plus volunteers. They tend to the plants twice a week.

The mansion is also used for cultural and other events, such as the harvest festival. They hold opera and concerts there, as well as Shakespearean plays. The most recent concerts that I can recall down there were the Dame Kiri Te Kanawa concert and the Elton John concert last year.

One of the other areas there is the National Equestrian Centre. This holds state, national and international events and is used for major equestrian events. It is also used for selection trials for the Olympic equestrian team. Of course equestrian is something that requires a lot of concentration and quiet.

The golf club was given to the local community, and that is run by a committee of management. Again, it is something that requires a reasonable amount of quiet. The zoo itself is a public zoo and it is run by Zoos Victoria. Of the three zoos that we have in Victoria, it is probably the one that is closest to the people's heart because there has been such a lot of community involvement in it. Not only did many of our volunteers embark on a large planting and landscaping operation but in later times a lot of community groups have come down and helped with the horticultural work that is restoring the ecological setting to the Werribee River.

Although it is fairly new in its current form, it has gained a reputation for excellence and has won design awards as well as educational awards for its programs. It has many focuses, three of which I will highlight today. The first is recreation. The zoo itself is the only large recreational area in the western metropolitan area where families can have a peaceful and relaxed activity for an extended period of time without a great deal of cost, and without the noise of things like the sporting

complexes around. In education the zoo not only strives for education of the general visitor that they can pick up if they so wish but they have educational programs for the children ranging from prep through to VCE. It is a major part of their work. Their programs have won awards; one in particular which involves children in both in situ and ex situ conservation work, and that really is the best way to teach the children about conservation and respecting our planet.

The zoo has many conservation programs and is involved in many others, not all necessarily for breeding but we also house animals that are part of the breeding program. Among the ones that Werribee zoo holds are rhino, addax, scimitar-horned oryx, cheetah, the Mongolian horse, giraffe and the eastern-barred bandicoot, which of course is an Australian animal. In most cases these animals are difficult to breed and are very aware of sudden and sharp noises.

We think the proposed theme park would diminish the amenity for the people and for the animals. I understand the proposed theme park is intending to have approximately 10 rides, some of them amongst the exhibits. Some of the rides in fact will take two of the existing enclosures that house endangered animals and one critically-endangered animal. The rides themselves will be situated fairly close to the freeway and there are a couple of large housing estates on the other side of the freeway. The noise that would come from those rides would certainly impact on the people living across the road. Also the cost of entry to a facility like a theme park, if you judge it by what is done in other theme parks that are owned by the proponent, would be nearly three times the cost of entry to the zoo, and it would certainly impact on a lot of families.

One of the other things the proposal is putting forward is to convert the Volcanic Plains Walk exhibit into a car park. That particular exhibit is a work in progress and it has been going on for 12 years. What it aims to do is to recreate a portion of the western plains of Victoria, which has just been upgraded in its conservation status to critically endangered. Recreating a grassland ecosystem is one of the most difficult things to do, more so than even breeding the animals. As I said, it has taken 12 years to get to the point it is now, and they are only now just starting to put in the last understorey of plants to make it work properly.

I have included in my points there some photos and maps. One is an aerial photo — attachment 2 — which gives a fairly good look at the whole precinct. It does not take in all of the golf course but that is about the only part that it does not take in. You can see from that photo the location of the equestrian centre and the mansion and the rose garden. The white outline is the approximate boundary of the zoo as at 2008.

Attachment 3 is the zoning overlay, and that quite clearly shows that it is zoned as special use zone 4. In particular you can see very easily where the residential areas are.

Attachment 4 shows the heritage overlay, and you can see that most of the zoo is in the heritage overlay area. One thing of significance there is that the original drive into the mansion cuts right through the zoo, and in fact it cuts through the two areas that will be going for rides. They have 100 year-plus pine trees which would obviously go if the rides went in. In the heritage area there is also the Chirnside woolshed and dining hut, which are also part of the zoo and are now open to the public as part of the Water Smart garden.

Finally, attachment 5 shows that both sides of the Werribee River are of environmental significance. Those two areas are areas that the zoo has been spending quite a bit of time restoring back to native vegetation and encouraging the wildlife back in as a corridor along the Werribee River.

**The CHAIR** — Christina, I thank you for that contribution and for this comprehensive submission. I have a couple of factual questions in a sense just to understand the background.

**Ms DENNIS** — Sure.

**The CHAIR** — The land is owned by who?

**Ms DENNIS** — The government.

**The CHAIR** — By the government. Do we know the structure that that is done through? Is it owned by the Department of Sustainability and Environment and there is some committee of management, or you don't know that?

**Ms DENNIS** — I do not know that. All I know is that the zoological board was given —

**The CHAIR** — Zoos Victoria has effective control?

**Ms DENNIS** — Yes, it was given charge to be responsible for the land and its use.

**The CHAIR** — Right. We will have to just try and understand that a little bit. In terms of consultation about this theme park proposal, I have not seen it. I have seen press reports about it. Has Friends of the Zoos been formally consulted? Is there a document that can be looked at?

**Ms DENNIS** — I have not been formally consulted but I have met with some representatives of Village Roadshow. I do have some documentation from them which I am more than willing to share with you. I have brought that along today.

**The CHAIR** — Sure. We would certainly appreciate that.

**Ms DENNIS** — But the meeting was more to sell their point of view rather than consultation.

**The CHAIR** — It was sort of a spruiking visit?

**Ms DENNIS** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — What I am trying to understand here is that there does not seem to be a formal proposal anywhere that the government has put forward for the community to look at?

**Ms DENNIS** — No.

**The CHAIR** — Has there been, as far as you are aware, any expression of interest process or formal tender process on this idea of letting a private developer build a theme park?

**Ms DENNIS** — No. I have not seen or heard of anything.

**The CHAIR** — Just to pick up your point on the animals, it is your view from what I see there that it may not be in the interests of the animals to have these rides counterposed in with their habitation?

**Ms DENNIS** — Definitely. Most animals are spooked by sudden noises, and particularly if they are high-pitched, which is usually what comes from the people on those sorts of rides. If you look at the promotional video that they put out, one of the things that they sort of highlight in that is that it is a near-death experience and you have people screaming, and that seems to be what they expect to be part of the experience. Those sorts of noises — even domestic animals are spooked by those. If you got very highly strung animals like cheetah and the Mongolian horse in particular, it would not do anything for them at all.

**Mr TEE** — I am not sure what the upside of a near-death experience is, I have got to say, but that is just me.

**The CHAIR** — The other point, I guess, is that on Monday at a hearing here I asked the minister some questions about the proposal by Village Roadshow, and as I understand it there is an interdepartmental committee meeting, and it may have even completed its meetings — —

**Ms DENNIS** — I understand that they have completed whatever they were doing and have passed it on to the next level in government, or whatever. I am not sure exactly where it went, but I understand it has gone to the Premier and somebody else.

**The CHAIR** — I asked him for copies of the minutes and discussions of that committee, and he refused to release those. Do you think those documents should be public?

**Ms DENNIS** — Yes, I think they should be.

**Mr TEE** — I am the father of two young children and a big fan of the Werribee Open Range Zoo. I have been there many a time.

**The CHAIR** — They nearly kept you in as an exhibit, didn't they?

**Mr TEE** — I will move straight on. As I understand it, the government is considering the proposal, or its response, I suppose. Have you submitted this and other material to the government? Obviously the matter is being considered; I just want to make sure that you have expressed your views as clearly as you can.

**Ms DENNIS** — We were not invited to make any submission. The organisation did have a petition going around basically expressing what was in the first part of the letter to you — the first part of my submission, I beg your pardon. That was presented to government towards the end of May, and we had over — —

**The CHAIR** — Has that been tabled?

**Ms DENNIS** — Yes, it was tabled on 27 May, I believe. We had over 8000 signatures on that — basically setting out those points in the beginning.

**Mr TEE** — That is good. I want to thank you for your submission too, but as long as those materials have been afforded to the government as they consider these issues. Thank you.

**Ms DENNIS** — I did write to all the ministers and the Premier as well, again outlining those points. So they are aware that we are — —

**The CHAIR** — Have they responded?

**Ms DENNIS** — I have had some responses. I have had one from the Minister for Tourism and Major Events and the Minister for Environment and Climate Change — the main ones. That is all.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — What was the nature of their responses?

**Ms DENNIS** — I did meet with the Minister for Environment and Climate Change. The one from the minister for tourism was just saying that the matter was being considered and that it was a good thing, but they were looking into it — a very standard letter. I believe many got the same reply.

**Mr TEE** — 'The matter is being considered'?

**Ms PENNICUIK** — Thank you for coming today, Ms Dennis. Probably for the record I should declare that I think on the day after the announcement I made a public statement completely opposed to this proposal. I do not even know why the government has an interdepartmental committee looking at it. I do not know why it did not just dismiss it straightaway as an inappropriate — —

**Mr TEE** — They want to get it right.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — They cannot get it right. It is completely inappropriate.

**Mr TEE** — They want to make the right decision, surely.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — I just wanted to know, do you have any idea where it came from and how long it has been in the pipeline, how long Village Roadshow — did they say to you when you met with them how long they had been thinking about this or where the idea actually came from, because it is a fairly harebrained scheme, I would have thought.

**Ms DENNIS** — I do not know where it came from originally. From memory, what they said in the meeting was that they had been planning it for at least six months.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — Village Roadshow had?

**Ms DENNIS** — Yes.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — Do you know whether they had had preliminary discussions with the government; did they say that?

**Ms DENNIS** — I do not know. They did not mention that at all.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — You mentioned the people of Victoria et cetera and you mentioned the animals of course. From my point of view that is the most important consideration in that if we establish zoos, in particular if we establish zoos to, as is the case with this zoo, help with conservation of endangered animals, and again I declare for the record that I had in the 1990s some dealings with Werribee zoo and in particular Dubbo zoo in terms of rhino conservation and was involved in the program of bringing rhinos out, particularly to Dubbo zoo, to — the captive — —

**Ms DENNIS** — Yes, I remember when there were about nine brought out from South Africa to the Australasian region.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — Yes, I think there were nine that arrived; one died on the way. I am very aware of the difficulty in particular with rhino breeding, that they are very difficult to breed — they are very sensitive animals and they are particularly sensitive in terms of hearing, because they cannot see very far. They can only see a few feet in front of them. They are virtually blind.

**Ms DENNIS** — They would be lucky if they could see you if they were sitting here.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — That is right. But they can hear very well. I just wondered whether there are any studies et cetera on the effect of noise on animals that Friends of the Zoos has or Zoos Victoria has that we could see.

**Ms DENNIS** — As far as I am aware, Zoos Victoria does not have any. I have been trying to get do some research to see if I can find that out, because I have a feeling that I read somewhere years ago that there was a study done, perhaps in the States, about the effect of noise on animals at theme parks, but I have not been able to come up with anything, unfortunately.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — Okay. I will certainly keep looking myself. I think you have answered my other question as to whether the government had made any approach to you to see Friends of the Zoos' official point of view.

**Ms DENNIS** — No, they did not. We made the first — —

**Mr TEE** — But you have met with the minister.

**Ms DENNIS** — I met with the minister, yes.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — At her request, not at his.

**Mr KAVANAGH** — Thank you, Ms Dennis. I wanted to ask you about the \$100 million you have got as a contribution from Victorian taxpayers that is proposed for the zoo. What is the \$100 million for?

**Ms DENNIS** — To help build the rides. I assume — —

**Mr KAVANAGH** — An up-front amount?

**Ms DENNIS** — That is what I was given to understand. It is what was reported in numerous newspapers, and it was never contradicted. I believe that Village was asking for \$100 million and they would put up another \$120 million themselves.

**The CHAIR** — Christina, thank you. We appreciate you making this submission and your time today. Certainly I must say, in a personal sense, I think this has been a process that has been mishandled by the government.

**Ms DENNIS** — Thank you, and thank you for the time and for hearing me.

**Ms PENNICUIK** — I am glad you were able to get here just before we closed down the time for submissions.

**Witness withdrew.**