

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors

Melbourne—Wednesday, 14 April 2021

MEMBERS

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Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr David Davis

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

WITNESS

Ms Felicia Mariani, Chief Executive Officer, Victoria Tourism Industry Council/Business Events Victoria (*via videoconference*).

The CHAIR: The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors continues. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast. I would like to introduce my fellow committee members that are present with us here today: Mr Tarlamis, Mr Davis, Ms Lovell, Mrs McArthur and Mr Quilty, who is joining us online.

To our witness, Ms Felicia Mariani, I would like to read a short witness statement. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law; however, any comments made or repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments and ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion and questions. Could you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you.

Ms MARIANI: Thank you, Mr Chair. It is Felicia Mariani. I am the Chief Executive of the Victoria Tourism Industry Council. Can I first start by making my apologies for not being able to present in person. Given the cold that I have developed this week, I thought it was more responsible to stay home and do this via Zoom, so my apologies for not being able to be there with you. I would also like to thank you, first of all, for the opportunity to give evidence at the inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism and events industry in Victoria.

Just by way of background for the committee, VTIC is the peak industry body representing the state's visitor economy. We have nearly 2000 members across Victoria, with roughly 60 per cent of those in regional areas. We represent all sectors of the industry across accommodation, attractions, events, tour and transport operators, destination managers and educational institutions that focus on tourism and hospitality training.

The events of the past 12 months have savaged Victoria's visitor economy. Let us remember that the impacts on our sector actually started well before the global shutdown in March, with the ceasing of outbound group travel from China on 28 January, which was followed quickly by the gradual closure of borders to other nations throughout February. No other industry has been affected as hard and for such a sustained period of time as the sectors that comprise the visitor economy. Recent statistics released from Tourism Research Australia I think outline really the high-level impact that has occurred as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

This data is actually around performance for Victoria to the end of December 2020. At the end of December 2019 our visitor economy was actually worth \$32.5 billion and we employed over 250 000 people directly and indirectly in our industry; 110 000 of those were actually in regional towns and cities. At the end of December 2020 the visitor spend in Victoria fell to just \$13 billion, wiping \$19.5 billion from our spend and representing a 60 per cent year-on-year decline, and that is the lowest spend performance in Victoria for the past 15 years. Victoria's loss also reflects us being the worst impacted state in the country, with New South Wales seeing loss in visitor expenditure of 49 per cent, Queensland at 44 per cent and South Australia 42 per cent, and Victoria's impact has also well exceeded the national average for expenditure loss, which across the country is sitting at 49 per cent.

Most concerning, however, is that our capital city has shouldered the largest portion of that burden, with 72 per cent of the loss being accrued in Melbourne, wiping out \$14.1 billion from our visitor spend. For the first time

ever the spend in regional Victoria actually eclipsed the spend in the capital city, with more than half of the visitor spend for the state being recorded in regional areas. Melbourne is disproportionately reliant on international and interstate visitors, deriving 72 per cent of its visitor spend from these two sources.

Another major contributor to the pain being felt by our capital city has of course been the total shutdown of our events sector over the past year, in particular our business events industry. At the end of December 2019 our business events sector was contributing \$12.85 billion in economic benefit to the state and the sector employed 84 730 people, supporting some 3000 jobs across regional Victoria as well. Melbourne of course is world renowned for its major events calendar, creating a global profile for the destination over a specific number of days each year. These events have reinvented Melbourne's and Victoria's brand credentials around the world and have been a driving force behind the state's tourism performance over several decades. Business events, however, are less understood and recognised but contribute more significantly overall to our state's visitor economy. Importantly, they sustain a critical supply chain by keeping them in business across the whole of the year, providing much-needed consistency to the state's reputation as an events capital. Over the past year business events have been shut down since March 2020, with no ability to reactivate until very recently, and the nature of the business structures and the business events supply chain, being sole traders and partnerships that do not employ permanent staff, means they have been ineligible for most of the support programs at both the state and federal levels. This supply chain is vitally important, however, in supporting the reactivation of our events calendar, but we do run the risk that many of these businesses simply will not be there when we look to fully upscale our prestigious calendar.

This all points to a critical focus that needs to be applied to supporting Melbourne's revival and recovery as part of any Victorian recovery plan. VTIC's work with the industry over the past 12 months has approached this in three critical phases, being around survival, revival and recovery. While the green shoots of revival that we are experiencing currently are very welcome, we must keep our eye on what is needed to deliver full recovery for the industry, and by all projections that is a three- to five-year journey. In mapping out what is needed by the industry right now we undertook a comprehensive state-of-the-industry survey in early February, with nearly 600 respondents across the state replying. This has delivered the most contemporary analysis of the business implications for tourism operators as a consequence of COVID restrictions. Some of the key highlights include that at the time of the survey only 58 per cent of tourism businesses were trading at normal levels and 52 per cent were trading on reduced hours or remained closed. Post lockdown 2.0, while 27 per cent of businesses saw stronger performance for the period from November to January, nearly two-thirds experienced weaker activity over that period. And contributing to those weaker outcomes, 81 per cent indicated that snap border closures were seriously affecting their operations. Sixty-three per cent noted the lack of consumer confidence to travel, which is a consequence of course of the snap border closures, and 60 per cent indicated it was due to events being cancelled across the state.

Most concerning, however, is over the next three months nearly half of operators are expecting business activity to weaken further, and overall business confidence is poor, with only 53 per cent of respondents saying that they are fairly or extremely concerned about the outlook for their operations. When asked about accessing government support to sustain business, 88 per cent of respondents have taken advantage of some form of government support. Ninety-three per cent have accessed the federal JobKeeper, and at the time of the survey 57 per cent were still relying on that program. Forty-five per cent of respondents noted that they had accessed the Victorian state government's Business Support Fund, 22 per cent were receiving payroll tax relief and 20 per cent used the various hospitality grants that were on offer. Without further support 37 per cent of businesses will need to reduce staff—that is already happening right now—and 13 per cent have indicated that they will close altogether.

With this as a backdrop, in February VTIC reconvened its visitor economy recovery task force to consider where industry was on its recovery path and to review the issues that were addressed as part of the 2021 Victorian state budget handed down in October. The industry does recognise that there is significant investment that government made in the state's visitor economy in the October budget, which was by all accounts a record investment in our sector. Some key areas, however, remain unfunded or underfunded and have been the focus of the recovery plan that was submitted to government last month. As well we must acknowledge the impact that snap border closures and wavering consumer confidence has had on interstate travel, which was intended to provide some relief with the lack of international visitors. We have also not seen the international travel bubbles emerge to the levels anticipated back in April and May of last year, and the current challenges of our vaccine rollout in Australia produce the likelihood that any significant return of international travellers looks to

be at least two years away at a minimum. I will not go into the particular elements of the plan in these opening remarks, but I have shared that document with the committee in advance of this session, and I am happy to take your questions now. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Mariani, and I wish to thank the Victorian Tourism Industry Council for all their work. I have read your submission, and it is very helpful. I might begin by allowing Mr Tarlamis to ask the first questions on behalf of the committee. Mr Tarlamis.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair. And thank you for your submission and for presenting to us today. The challenges of the tourism industry differ across the state. Do you think there are any particular state government investments which have helped or will help support recovery in the tourism sector in regional Victoria? And in the same vein, are there any that will help in metropolitan Melbourne?

Ms MARIANI: Yes, there are a couple of things here. Early on the Business Support Fund was one of the key elements I know in all the survey work that we did with the industry that they said really many found incredibly helpful in sustaining their business, obviously in conjunction with JobKeeper. Let us be realistic: JobKeeper was the lifeline for many businesses not just in the tourism sector but right across the country. I think there has been a problem of course, and I think we have heard that from a number of the witnesses today, with the parameters around sole traders and partnerships and companies that did not employ a significant amount of permanent staff, and not being able to access a lot of those government support programs has been problematic. I think as we move forward more to the contemporary point where we are right now, certainly the travel vouchers that were announced by government late last year, of which the first tranche was available just before Christmas, have really done an enormous piece of work in doing the heavy lifting on driving demand in our regional areas. Of course in the first couple of tranches Melbourne was left out of that mix, which was really disappointing, but we were pleased to see that as part of the \$143 million support package that was announced post the snap lockdown Melbourne was included in a tranche of vouchers. But that really has probably been one of the biggest, I guess, impetuses, if you will, to driving demand, which has really had us start to see those kind of green shoots of revival that I spoke about.

I think it is important, however, for us to recognise—and I have heard this from many, many operators I am talking to the moment—that the kind of sting in the tail of the COVID restrictions over the last 12 months has been the lack of us being able to retain staff. Many operators are telling us, particularly in our regional areas, it is not a demand problem that we have at all; the problem right now is that we do not have the staff. We do not have the supply of good, qualified staff to be able to service that demand. Many operators are telling me they could fill their businesses three times over seven days a week with the demand that is there, but many are only able to open four or five days a week because they cannot find adequate staff to service that demand. So I do caution that we must consider, before we focus so much energy and effort going forward on demand, addressing some of the critical supply-side issues that are facing the industry, not the least of which is finding good staff. You will see from the report that we filed that we have very heavy reliance on supply-side issues needing to be addressed as well as the demand levers that need to be pulled.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you. I might leave my questioning there for the moment.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Tarlamis. I will go to Ms Lovell, then Mrs McArthur.

Ms LOVELL: Thank you. It is fantastic to have you present to us. It was a really good presentation. In talking with some of my operators, they have spoken about the benefits of the tourism vouchers, which you just particularly mentioned there. Many of them have mentioned the fact that they have sort of been through the summer period and the autumn period, which is a big tourism time anyway, and that now that we are heading into the quiet time over winter these vouchers are going to expire on 31 May. The tourism sector in my region are telling me that these should be extended throughout winter, so I was just wondering how you felt about the extension of those tourism vouchers. But also one of the things that was mentioned to me by someone last week was that they could be a little bit more region specific so that when people apply for them they are just not anywhere in Victoria but there are X number of vouchers for the north-east or X number of vouchers for the Surf Coast so that the benefit is spread a little bit more widely throughout the state. I was just wondering how you felt about something like that.

Ms MARIANI: Yes. There are a few things in your question there, and I will try to unpack that as best I can. I would agree: I think probably, with the first tranche of vouchers happening right before Christmas, we

knew that there was great demand already in place at that point in time. I probably would argue a little bit that over the autumn period I think those vouchers are needed. The period of now through to the end of May is what we would refer to as our shoulder season, and some areas are not necessarily those areas for peak travel that you would normally find at this point in time.

Let us also remember that we have a real challenge on our hands: the federal government's half-price airfares, which really encourage people to leave Victoria and predominantly head to Queensland and Tasmania as the two states which receive most of the value out of those half-price airfares. I think we do have challenges with encouraging visitation into our regions through to the end of May, but certainly I would agree the winter period is when we are really going to need the largest element of support. We are having conversations on that subject right now with our colleagues in government about how we can possibly look at some round of support to address that winter period, because that off-peak period is when we do need the most help.

In terms of looking at it for specific regions at certain points of time, I guess that is a bit of a challenging one, because it will always depend. Any area will always say that they need help at any point in time, so how you would go about particularly picking winners at some point would be a real challenge. I think it is something that could be looked at as we go forward if we continue that, because you cannot just do them at a blanket level. But I would think that we would want to make sure that we had had really good concentration and take-up of the vouchers in all areas before we start to basically cherrypick certain regions.

Ms LOVELL: I do not think they were referring to cherrypicking regions but just making sure, you know, if there are a thousand vouchers that there are so many for this region and so many for that region—that all regions benefited.

Ms MARIANI: Oh, I see what you are saying. In terms of the concentration of them, that is a possibility, yes.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, they would just divide them between the regions to make sure that all regions had some opportunity. But you would be supportive of the vouchers continuing throughout winter. As one of my operators said to me, 'If you're a bar, you don't have a happy hour at 8.30 on a Saturday night when your bar's full anyway, you have it during your slower period', and winter is obviously more challenging for our tourism sector.

Ms MARIANI: Yes, that is correct. And as I say, that gets into the off-peak period. It is not traditionally a period when Victoria sees a lot of travel, particularly into our regional areas. And let us remember that, with the absence of international and, to a large degree, interstate visitors, that is what usually helps provide that little bit of a fillip in that period, in the mid-week in particular over the winter period. We might actually see some of that visitation into our regional areas. Again, we are only just kickstarting our business events sector, and business events play a really critical role in our regional areas in driving business into those mid-week periods and off-peak periods.

Ms LOVELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I might pass over to Mrs McArthur, then Mr Quilty.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Felicia, for your presentation. Your submission states the impact of prolonged and erratic state border closures and the profound effect on consumer confidence that this has had. I was in Edenhope yesterday, and that happens to be 391 kilometres from Melbourne, or 4½ hours away. Yet they are 52 kilometres from Naracoorte, in other words 32 minutes away. But those Victorians have to get a written permit every fortnight to come back into Victoria if they cross over into South Australia to do their shopping, go to a doctor or whatever. All sporting teams have ended as a result of that particular border closure in that area. So really isn't the main problem here not more taxpayer subsidy along the way everywhere but an end to these nonsensical political decisions that restrict people's movements, especially in areas where they are used to having no borders? I do not think our founding fathers ever thought we would be using borders like we do today. That has been a major detriment to the tourism industry also, because they told me that nobody goes to that particular area so close to the South Australian border because their circle of travel or tourism experience is limited. So they stay closer to the centre of Victoria because they are not going to go near a border for fear that somebody at the eleventh hour is going to say, 'Right, you're stuck'. Don't we need to fix the political decisions before we ask for more taxpayer subsidy?

Ms MARIANI: I think the industry has all along been really clear that we do not want government support forever and a day. What we want is better operating models that would allow us to actually get back to business. The support measures that we have asked for up to this date are a consequence of some of the issues that you have highlighted that have really precluded the industry from reactivating and reanimating at the pace and scale we would like.

The snap border closures across the country in every single state have created an environment where we have shaken to the core consumer confidence to travel interstate. And this has been incredibly problematic, because all the way back during lockdown 1.0 in April–May last year projections always were that interstate visitation was going to be the key substitute, if you will, for the lack of international visitors. The reality is—fast-forward to today—that we have not seen that interstate visitation occurring because of exactly the things that you have mentioned. People are very concerned about being caught on the wrong side of a border closure. They are concerned about having to go home and quarantine for 14 days when they get there.

I would agree, and most people in our industry agree, that the snap border closures have been one of the biggest issues for us in trying to reactivate our industry. We have often said we know that we are not going to get every state to agree to the same practices and principles, but what we wanted them to do was to at least agree to some core, base measures that would basically be the trigger for these border closures so that consumers could book with confidence and understand what the risks were in making their travel interstate. So I think we would agree wholeheartedly with the fact that we do need to see some better management of border closures, because it has had an incredibly detrimental effect on the industry's ability to be able to reactivate.

Mrs McARTHUR: And particularly in that area, where there was not one case in the entire period.

Ms MARIANI: Yes, and that is not just here in Victoria. We have seen that in many states, where borders have been shut after one or two cases might have occurred. Look, it has been a challenge for us. And this is why we keep coming back to the fact, in the absence of us being able to reactivate at the pace and scale of so many other industries in the country, that the sectors within the visitor economy need continued support at both the state and federal level. I know federally we talk about how well our economy is doing—we are seeing tremendous increases in our national economy—but when you actually isolate what is happening within the accommodation sector, the transport sector, the hospitality sector, you can see that we are not part of that joy. We are not activating at the level of many other industries because of the continued burden of the restrictions that we have to deal with.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might go over to Mr Quilty, then me then Mr Davis. Mr Quilty.

Mr QUILTY: Bev stole my thunder on the COVID theatre border closures question, so I will go to: what steps can be taken to kickstart business events in regional Victoria? Are there any key steps that we can take?

Ms MARIANI: Yes. Look, number one, first and foremost, I think having some very consistent rules around how they manage those business events in regional areas, and I think the regional areas probably have been a little bit better off because the size of the events in regional Victoria are not what we are dealing with in Melbourne. As part of the Victorian Tourism Industry Council, Business Events Victoria sits as a division within our organisation, and the fact is that most of the events in regional Victoria, as business events, tend to be somewhere between that 150 and maybe 300 category. Those have been easier to manage, and I think the regulations and the rules around the numbers and how that could unfold has probably been a bit easier to manage than what we have seen in our capital city. And of course we had the announcement on the weekend, on Friday night, around the fact that events up to 1000 people can now happen without any regulation in terms of the one per 2 square metre rule that we were experiencing prior to that.

A couple of those things have come together, I think, to really help the business events sector. I think the difficulty that we have is not so much about the operation but gets back to this issue of confidence. A lot of what happens with business events is people coming from interstate, and what we are seeing is many companies are very reluctant to allow their employees to travel interstate, because they are concerned about border closures. You have individuals who are also concerned about coming to a business event in another state and then not being able to get back to their family. So I think there are a couple of levers here. One is making sure that we are really clear on the operating model and give our business events infrastructure very clear instruction on how that can occur. The second side of that, however, is consistency to allow us to rebuild that confidence, because a really important part of the mix for business events is people coming from interstate.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Quilty, do you have any other questions? No. I actually found it interesting in your presentation how you discussed how Melbourne was disproportionately affected out of the whole Victorian tourism industry. Melbourne had the largest drop, a 72 per cent decline, in tourism business. How would you marry that with the fact that your sector long-term is not looking for government support but the current federal government aviation network support program is discouraging people from travelling to Melbourne? How is that going to disadvantage the recovery of our great city?

Ms MARIANI: Well, I have to say we found it quite fascinating that supposedly the algorithm for determining what destinations got the guernsey in terms of the half-price airfares was based on reliance on international visitation. The two cities that are most reliant on international visitation in the country are Sydney and Melbourne, and both of them were left out of the mix. It was great to see that we did get Avalon included, but as a state that was the only destination that we had included in the half-price airfares.

We talked about using the vouchers at places and times when they are most needed. I do not think necessarily Queensland needs a whole lot of help through winter, because that is the migration period when people from southern states go north anyway. So it was all quite astounding, I think for all of us, to see both Melbourne and Sydney left out of the mix in that regard.

Over many, many years Melbourne has enjoyed such an incredible and vibrant tourism and events industry, and it has really taken care of itself. The reality is because of our international visitation, because of our remarkable event calendar, our business events, the whole mix of all of these things have come together to really let Melbourne look after itself. We have focused a lot historically on our regional areas because they have needed the support. Throughout this pandemic, and from the very, very beginning, we have always said that the capital cities were going to be the most impacted by COVID restrictions because of their reliance on international and interstate visitation, business events and major events, all of which we knew were going to be off the boil for at least 12 months, and indeed longer now. I think because we have not necessarily had to focus on the capital city in reviving its vibrancy, we sort of failed to address enough of what is needed in the capital city. We saw that initially with the vouchers and Melbourne being excluded. Now that has been remedied, but we do really need to put an enormous amount of emphasis on what is needed to reactivate our city.

We need to do as much as we can to build confidence with people to travel back to the city, and I am not just talking about interstate either here. We spend a lot of demand-driving activity on encouraging people from greater Melbourne to travel to regional Victoria. We need to do more to encourage our cousins in regional Victoria to travel into the city, to take a staycation and spend a couple of days in our hotels. Our operators in greater Melbourne are absolutely on their knees. If you take a look at hotel occupancies at the moment in Melbourne, sitting at around 43 per cent, if you net out the quarantine occupancy levels, we are probably sitting at around 15 per cent, maybe 20 per cent if we are lucky, occupancy levels in our capital city—and we are a city that has enjoyed 80 to 90 per cent occupancy levels consistently for many years. So we are going to have to work very, very hard to really encourage people back to the capital city at a time when the confidence is pretty shaken right now.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Mariani. I have got a very short question and then I will hand over to Mr Davis. It has been great hearing from you. Are there any other people or organisations you think the committee should hear from?

Ms MARIANI: I do actually. I know I had a number of conversations with my colleagues that are indeed making a submission to this committee. The good thing is that as an industry the visitor economy has a lot of different voices, but the reality is we are all coming together to try and make sure that we are all on message and we are all on song. So I have talked to many of them about our submission to ensure that everyone is presenting a sort of united front on what we believe is needed. But certainly I know that the Accommodation Association of Australia and the Committee for Melbourne—I have spoken to both of those organisations—are very keen to present to this committee. Yesterday I spoke to my colleague in Melbourne's west, which is an industry association focusing on western Melbourne; I know that Richard Ponsford there is very keen to obviously also make a presentation to this committee. I think the contributions that these groups could make would be invaluable to the recommendations that the committee might ultimately make to government.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will pass over to my committee colleague Mr Davis.

Mr DAVIS: I want to, first of all, Felicia, thank you for your submission and your advocacy on behalf of your sector. It is magnificent and incredibly important.

Ms MARIANI: Thank you.

Mr DAVIS: I also want to agree with you on the federal government's blunders and anti-Victorian decision with the airfares. I am happy to put that squarely on record and say they got it wrong. I also want to ask you two other questions, very quickly. The first is: with the Department of Health have your association or key members been able to get to meet with and talk to the Department of Health about a lot of the restrictions that people are encountering?

Ms MARIANI: Thanks, David, and thank you for your comments. That is very lovely; I appreciate that. We have not had direct engagement with the health department. We have had a lot of government engagement through various government departments, in particular of course through the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, which is the main department with responsibility for tourism. There is an industry liaison or a connection point, if you will, between that department and the health department, and we have met with those individuals as well. But we have not directly, in our own right, been able to meet with the health department. I do know that some of our members in the major event category, so in particular, for instance—

Mr DAVIS: The grand prix.

Ms MARIANI: of course the grand prix and the tennis and Spring Racing Carnival, I know that they have had direct engagement and direct dialogue, if you will, with people within the Department of Health. That has been good from a major events perspective, but more broadly across the industry I believe most of our engagement has been through the interdepartmental coordination units, if you will, and that has been how we have delivered those messages to the health department.

Mr DAVIS: Let me just put on record my view that it is outrageous that the Department of Health has not met with many key people in your sector and other sectors to have that engagement, to actually understand how events and activities can happen across these sectors.

The final point is I wanted just to reinforce and to accept your point that Melbourne is actually the key. You may agree with this statement, but I think Melbourne has been smashed. The tourism movements, events too but particularly tourism, have been absolutely smashed in our capital city, and until that is fixed, the whole state will suffer.

Ms MARIANI: That is very true. Again, we kind of look at December 2019 as our benchmark, because that was the last point in time before the bottom fell out. Of the \$32.5 billion that sort of comprised our visitor spend, \$20 billion of that actually came from Melbourne and \$12 billion of that obviously came from our regional areas. And as I said, fast forward 12 months and we now see that just over 50 per cent of the total visitor spend of the \$13 billion currently is actually coming from our regional areas and a very small proportion of that now is coming from within Melbourne. So we have a huge, huge void to fill and an enormous piece of work to really invest in revitalising.

And when we talk about Melbourne, we do talk about greater Melbourne, so I want to be really careful. You know, the boundaries of all this go beyond the Melbourne CBD. That is a crucial part of the mix, but Melbourne is, you know, the whole of greater Melbourne that really contributes to the vibrancy that we enjoyed prior to this pandemic.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Mariani. It has been a very informative and engaging discussion with the committee. If we have got further questions, are you happy for us to send them through to you through the secretariat?

Ms MARIANI: Yes, by all means. Please do. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. It has been a great contribution. Now the committee will be entering a lunch break, and I will see everyone back in an hour. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.