

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne—Wednesday, 2 June 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Mr Mark Gepp

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Andy Meddick

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr David Davis

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

WITNESS

Mr Peter Williams, Chair, Winter Blues Festival.

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 are switched to silent and that any background noise is minimised.

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, and I 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.

My name is Enver Erdogan, and I am Chair of the committee. And I would also like to acknowledge my fellow committee members that are present here with us today: Ms Wendy Lovell, Mr Mark Gepp, Dr Catherine Cumming, Mr Tim Quilty, Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr Andy Meddick, Mrs Beverley McArthur and Mr Rod Barton.

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 comment 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 on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 7 minutes. Could you please start by stating your name for the benefit of the Hansard team and then begin your presentation. Over to you, Peter. You are the Chair of the Winter Blues Festival.

Mr WILLIAMS: Thank you very much. I am Peter Baker Williams. I am the Chairperson of the Echuca-Moama Winter Blues Festival, and I am happy to be here today talking about the impact of COVID-19 on regional events. First of all I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today. I respect their traditions, culture and elders. I further commit to supporting the wish for treaty.

If I can give a little history on the Winter Blues Festival for those who do not know about us, we began in 1999 as an annual blues music festival. In the beginning we ran one Sunday, the last Sunday in July, for half a day, and it has grown from then, to now it runs for 3½ days at the same time each year. We get between 20 000 and 25 000 patrons attending each year, so it is quite a significant event. One of the reasons that we are unusual and perhaps a little bit unique is that we are free, and that creates a lot of challenges for us in the best of times, but we are also probably the only occasion you can see the best of Australian blues artists all in one location. Most other festivals, where you pay to go, in fact get a lot of internationals in and do not have many Australians playing. What we did when we started in 1999, and I was there at the time, was turn one of the quietest weeks of the year into one of the busiest. Indeed many of our venues now report that their trade over the winter blues weekend is bigger than any other three days of the year, and that includes the peak tourism times at Christmas. Accommodation in the twin towns has gone from occupancies of around 20 per cent to a minimum stay of three days, with many patrons staying for a whole week.

In 2019 the Winter Blues Festival ran over 26 stages with over 60 different acts, both in venues and on the street. The REPLAN model of Campaspe shire showed that nearly \$10 million worth of value accrued to our community as a result of the festival. In 2018 the survey that we did of participants, patrons, at the time showed that some 67 per cent came from outside of the Campaspe and New South Wales Murray River shires, therefore they were not locals: 85 per cent of those came from Victoria, 8.5 per cent from New South Wales, 4 per cent from South Australia, 1 per cent from Queensland and 0.5 per cent were international—so clearly drawing people from a lot further away. The Winter Blues Festival is run by an incorporated body of volunteers, the majority of whom receive no financial benefit from the event at all—that is, they are not owners of venues or in any way getting any return.

What was the impact of COVID 19? The 2020 Winter Blues Festival had to be cancelled because of a lockdown in place at the time, and this knocked a significant hole I am afraid in businesses and employment across the town. It also significantly impacted on the performers' livelihoods. The festival had fully

programmed itself prior to the COVID restrictions coming into place, and as a result of that we had incurred a number of expenses at around about a loss of \$25 000. We were fortunate enough to have some reserves—not many. None of that was recoverable from government grants, as we were not a private business and so did not qualify for actually getting those sorts of funds. The 2021 event has been reduced in scope and has had to be ticketed for the first time to control crowd numbers, as the only way we can do that is issue wristbands and venues would not actually go into it this year with reduced numbers unless we were subsidising their music costs. Now, this has caused us a number of image issues for a festival that has always been free, and the expert punters, you know, who are the warriors on social media, have been letting us know about this closure. But we have sold out for this year already, and we are hoping that we might sell some more if the restrictions were relaxed, but of course it probably does not look as rosy as it did last week.

What recommendations would we make to your committee to consider for the future? One of the issues that we have had when we have tried to manage or look forward to how we plan is that there is no clear plan of what is going to happen when restrictions end and what restrictions may be in place at each stage. So not only do we not know what is happening, we cannot work out what we might plan for.

The second thing we have is a cross-border issue. Clearly being on the state border we have a real challenge. You can do some things on the other side and you cannot do them on this side. One of our questions would be: do border closures in fact have to happen at the state border? The southern Riverina of New South Wales is more Victoria than New South Wales, so maybe we could have border closures moved further north.

Our third recommendation would be not-for-profit community organisations should be eligible for government support to the extent of any expenses that they have actually incurred.

Our fourth recommendation would be that performers at major or significant regional events like ours who did not qualify for JobKeeper should have been eligible for some form of government support as well. Clearly many of our performers are not registered for all the business sorts of things. That has made it very difficult for them, and they have had a particularly tough year.

And our fifth one is a very undeveloped idea: it is some sort of survivors club. Volunteer committees typically do not belong to industry forums and do not get much encouragement outside of their own community, and having some sort of assistance, perhaps in drawing us into those networks or with other groups that are facing similar sorts of challenges, might help us on our way to try and rebuild and save ourselves.

Now, the other issue that we have, which is not necessarily COVID-related—our sixth point—is: essentially one of our concerns is our competition can jump into other places. And so this year in Tasmania at Devonport there is a festival on the same weekend as ours. We do not want that to grow and steal the market from us. In June in New South Wales in Tocumwal there is a fully funded New South Wales blues event happening. Now, it is not on our weekend. They are buying in acts that we cannot afford, but the last thing we would hate to have to deal with is in fact competition starting up in other states at the time of the year that we are doing it, that make it hard for us to sort of rebuild ourselves and get back into the market.

That is all I have to say at the moment. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Peter, thank you very much for that comprehensive overview of the issues faced by the Winter Blues Festival. I was very heartened to hear the level of volunteer involvement. I must admit I am not from northern Vic, but I have become familiar through your appearance and presentation and obviously I did do a bit of background reading before you appeared at the committee today. So it has been a pleasure to hear from you. I like the fact that you have come here with some solid proposals and recommendations for the committee to consider. We will consider them through our deliberations as we move forward.

On that point, our next witness will be appearing in the next couple of minutes, so we are not going to get an opportunity to ask you questions today but we would like to keep questions on notice, and if we could contact you in the next week or so and if you could promptly respond to our questions that will be most helpful.

Mr WILLIAMS: I would be delighted to respond, and I apologise for the technology issues that I have had. As a frequent Zoom person, it is very frustrating that the most important Zoom meeting I should have all year I cannot get into.

The CHAIR: No, that is okay. This whole inquiry we have heard about the visual connectivity issues faced by regional Victorians. So we have now experienced it also with your appearance today. Thank you again. Keep up the great work, and we look forward to making contact with you shortly. On behalf of the whole committee, I say thank you for appearing.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Peter.

Mr WILLIAMS: Thank you.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks, Pete.

Mr BARTON: Thanks, Peter.

Witness withdrew.