

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Inquiry into ride sourcing services

Bendigo — 5 September 2016

Members

Mr Joshua Morris — Chair

Mr Khalil Eideh — Deputy Chair

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr Nazih Elasmr

Mr Bernie Finn

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr Shaun Leane

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Participating member

Ms Samantha Dunn

Staff

Secretary: Ms Lilian Topic

Witness

Ms Kathie Bolitho, Treasurer, Bendigo Tourism Board, and Director, Tough Cookie Marketing.

The CHAIR — I will begin by declaring open the Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing, and I welcome all who are present here this morning. I will explain that the committee is today hearing evidence in relation to the ride-sourcing inquiry we are undertaking. Evidence today is being recorded, and all evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected for what you say in here today, but if you go outside and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this same privilege.

Welcome. Thanks for agreeing to come along and provide some testimony to our committee. If you would not mind, please state your name and the organisation you are representing and then go into some introductory comments, and then the committee will have some questions to follow.

Ms BOLITHO — Sure. My name is Kathie Bolitho. I am today representing the Bendigo Tourism Board; I am a committee member of that board. I also have a marketing business in Bendigo called Tough Cookie Marketing, and a lot of my clients are hospitality and tourism-based clients. That is my connection there.

Basically today I would like to speak on behalf of the local tourism and hospitality industry. The current taxi environment in Bendigo has a reputation for inconsistent service at peak times. Whilst generally the service, once you get in the front door of a cab, is polite and helpful, and we do have clean and tidy cars and it is quite an enjoyable service once you are there, we do experience long delays when we have peak times, unreliability and also, at times, a refusal to collect from locations that are further out of the central area in the CBD.

As the tourism dollar is a key economic driver for our city, the service experience must be complete from start to finish. Eliminating transport issues must be addressed to ensure growth in specific areas; particularly, connecting visitors from one form of transport to another, such as our trains, when arriving for major events has been an issue. Additionally, the development of Bendigo's night-life experience, which encompasses evening events, restaurants and hospitality, late night clubs and bars, has been known to suffer at different times with these issues.

The current issues include Bendigo being poorly serviced at peak times, including morning and evening arrival from V/Line. Many visitors to major exhibitions, such as the Grace Kelly exhibition we had a few years ago, have waited for up to 40 minutes for collection, as taxi services were booked due to other commitments by the industry.

Groovin The Moo is another good example. It is a music festival that comes to Bendigo, and at times attendees have had to line up for nearly 2 hours at the Bendigo train station waiting for transport. Local restaurants have experienced frustrated clients on a regular basis who are waiting for taxis to arrive for long periods of time in the evening and have, at times, been required to actually transport some of their guests to their different accommodations so that they could close up for the night. Obviously, again, it is at peak time and everyone is transporting as many people as they are capable of at the time.

This issue is also particularly difficult on very busy weekends and special dates such as New Year's Eve, Easter and festivals, where waits can be longer than an hour. At times we see a level of desperation and a little bit of aggression if a taxi does pull up at a restaurant, when it finally arrives, and there are a couple of people waiting; everyone is so desperate to get into it, and people can get quite angry with each other. It is not uncommon to hear the term, 'Oh, there are people out the front fighting over the cab again'. Bars and nightclubs struggle to get their clients home, and increasing safety risks are apparent as patrons often end up walking home because they cannot wait any longer.

It is not just evenings; we have some issues with large race days and festivals at the Bendigo racecourse. The experience there can be an inconsistent level of service. Smaller race days are pretty good; however, larger race days such as Bendigo Cup and the music festivals that they sometimes host out there see a deterioration in service quality. A refusal to drive into the front gates and collect from the main gate area is one complaint, and also at times there is a refusal by drivers to service the White Hills location at all. It is about 10 minutes out of the CBD here.

The key points in support for a change to the current model would be, first, to remove the barriers to entry. Changes to the current transport industry model would provide a greater opportunity for transport services to respond to the demand. This would allow an increase in services at the peak times that we actually really need them. Another would be supporting the city, as in the city of Bendigo, and the tourism growth. As both the

Bendigo population and the tourism sector continue to grow across the Bendigo region, better transport to service a growing city and a tourism destination are desired. Bendigo is attractive to tourism business investment, as a modern, cultural destination leader, and therefore we should be providing a greater choice and better services to those who both choose to reside in it and to actually visit it.

Bendigo recently published a destination management plan, which was put together by Bendigo Tourism. That destination management plan identified night-life as a key economic growth opportunity for our city. To be able to secure new investment in this area and to develop a greater utilised and more attractive night-life offering, we must provide easy access for our guests — and for our residents — to our region to be able to utilise these night-life services. So for those who enjoy a wine with dinner, dancing and socialising in bars and clubs, fast and reliable access to transport services post evening is obviously essential.

Finally, we believe that competition produces better services for the general public. Currently our service is insufficient at these peak times. Deregulation of the industry will not only provide better services but it will also open up new thinking and new opportunities for products. The recent trial by Uber for a wine touring service in the Barossa Valley is something that is very interesting for a tourism industry, particularly because it will also encourage inventiveness around new opportunities and new tours or experiences that we can actually create for our tourists, and it will benefit our region, obviously. These new possibilities can only be positive for our guests and for our business providers. That is it.

The CHAIR — Fabulous. Thank you very much. Thanks, Ms Bolitho, for that. I think one of the reasons that we came here — I think Mr Leane might have suggested coming to Bendigo when we were talking about getting out into regional Victoria — is just to get a bit of an understanding of the fact that these issues that are faced in regional Victoria are not necessarily the same as those faced in metropolitan Melbourne. So it was a good opportunity to come out. Thank you very much for your presentation. It has certainly raised a number of issues that came to my mind. In terms of events and the like, obviously you mentioned race days and those types of things, but I am assuming there are probably wedding venues and the like that are on the outskirts of Bendigo that people may find it difficult to receive transport to and from?

Ms BOLITHO — Yes, absolutely. There a few different vineyards, for example, that have a strong wedding trade. We actually have a couple that are becoming destination wedding venues now, attracting couples with up to 100, 150 guests to come with them. None of them have a connection to Bendigo. So the tourism, I guess, investment from those sorts of things is incredible. But it is very, very difficult for them to actually have that level of service, and to be able to get everybody out of there.

The CHAIR — I would imagine, outside of booking your own minibuses and that type of thing, it would be rather difficult to get taxis and the like out there to be servicing them.

Ms BOLITHO — Yes, that is right. So really you are then addressing the issues of how far in advance you start to tell guests to leave. It becomes a service issue there too, because otherwise you want to finish up at midnight, at 1 o'clock your liquor licence is then finished and you have guests who are waiting for long periods of time to actually then depart the venue.

The CHAIR — It makes it rather difficult.

Ms BOLITHO — Yes.

The CHAIR — One other thing I was hoping to ask about is that I believe there is a Facebook group or there have been a variety of different Facebook groups in Bendigo that have come about offering lifts — —

Ms BOLITHO — Rides for cash?

The CHAIR — Yes, rides for cash. So, basically, you say, 'I'd like to be picked up from here and dropped off here'.

Ms BOLITHO — I will be honest. I do not spend much time on that site — —

The CHAIR — No, of course.

Ms BOLITHO — However, I am aware that it exists. The bits and pieces I have seen of it are often people posting, ‘I’m driving tonight. Who needs a lift?’. I am sure it does go both ways but I am not aware of it. The main ones I have seen are people offering the ride and then having the taker as opposed to someone posting, ‘I’d like a lift’, but I cannot tell you whether that does or does not happen. It does exist.

The CHAIR — There are Facebook groups of that ilk. One of the issues that has been discussed is whether or not ride-sourcing organisations and the like are going to be taking business from taxis or whether or not they are going to be new rides that, effectively, are going to be made as a result of taxis already being at peak capacity during those periods of time on Friday, Saturday nights and the like. Do you have a view on whether or not these ride-sourcing organisations are going to be taking business from taxi organisations or do you think it is going to be a complementary service that is going to add more options?

Ms BOLITHO — My opinion on that is that at peak times we do not have enough so we are not servicing the people who need it. I am a Bendigo local and have been for a long time. I also owned a restaurant in Bendigo for a long period of time as well. It is almost a local’s given that on New Year’s Eve you take a flat pair of shoes because you have got to walk home. I do understand that in slower times people who need the service are well looked after; there are enough there. The peak times are the issues. There are just not enough.

The CHAIR — Not enough to meet the need.

Ms BOLITHO — Yes, absolutely.

Mr BOURMAN — If I may ask a question directly related to that. In Melbourne we have peak service taxis. Is there such a thing out here in Bendigo?

Ms BOLITHO — I do not know.

Mr BOURMAN — Do you have any idea roughly how many taxis service the Bendigo area?

Ms BOLITHO — I do not know the answer to that, no.

Mr LEANE — You are not sure if there is an organisation like Uber operating in Bendigo, did you say?

Ms BOLITHO — I do not believe there is.

Mr LEANE — You do not believe there is. Your submission was pretty comprehensive so I do not have a lot to ask you. Your submission was around those peak times — Bendigo races, when there is a big tourism opportunity in town and your concern, which is a fair concern, around people waiting a long time to get to those events.

Ms BOLITHO — Yes, to and from. You are waiting a long time to get there and a long time to get home.

Mr LEANE — I suppose you would advocate that if people do get a service outside the taxi service, there is a service where the drivers have actually been checked for safety reasons —

Ms BOLITHO — Absolutely.

Mr LEANE — and that they are actually insured in case there is an incident or an accident to cover the passengers. So that is where Bendigo Tourism would become involved.

Ms BOLITHO — Absolutely. Safety and security would be one of the most prevalent things that we would be advocating for. Again, because we are coming down to creating a holistic guest experience. So not only do we want them to come and have access to all the different things we have to offer, but they need to be safe and secure and feel as if they are being well looked after.

Mr BOURMAN — Just one last question and I think it is going to be fairly obvious. Do you think Bendigo is losing tourism opportunities and things like that because of the fact that public transport, for want of a better term, needs help?

Ms BOLITHO — I think we have some night-life economy issues and that is from a range of different things, not just transport. I think that is a key part of it, but we also have some other things that are happening

there too. We have a growing tourism industry, a thriving tourism industry, where we have a lot of people actually coming to Bendigo or coming back to Bendigo and opening new tourism-based businesses. The length of stay, however — and tourism's greatest goal is to get people to stay more nights — is creating different issues because we need them to stay longer, we want them to stay longer, and that is changing. People are not necessarily staying at night because access to what you need to do is varied. But that is not the only thing. There are a range of things there.

Mr BOURMAN — It is part of the issue.

Ms BOLITHO — Yes, exactly. In a holistic picture that is one box to fix, with a few other ones to get around as well.

Mr BOURMAN — Thank you.

Ms BOLITHO — You are welcome.

The CHAIR — I would just like to acknowledge Maree Edwards, the member for Bendigo West, who is in the gallery today.

Thank you very much, Ms Bolitho, for your presentation this morning and for answering our questions. I certainly wish Bendigo Tourism all the very best.

Witness withdrew.