

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

Witnesses

Ms Amy Moylan, Hotel Manager, and

Ms Ashley Wilkinson, Rooms Division Manager, the Schaller Studio, Art Series Hotel Group.

The CHAIR — I begin by declaring open the Standing Committee on the Economy and Infrastructure public hearing. Thank you for coming here today. I will begin by explaining that the committee today is hearing evidence in relation to its inquiry into ride sourcing and the evidence today is being recorded. 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 that same privilege. Thank you both for coming along and agreeing to provide some evidence to the committee. What I might get you to do is just introduce yourselves — your names and the organisation you are attached to — and then provide some introductory comments, and then we will go on to some questions from the committee from there. Over to you.

Ms MOYLAN — My name is Amy Moylan and I work for the Art Series hotels — the Schaller Studio. I have been with the Art Series Hotel Group for five years now. We have hotels nationally, and this is our only regional property, here in Bendigo. I was with the opening team when we opened in May 2014; I spent some time in Melbourne and I am back at the hotel now. I have been here for 18 months, here at the hotel. I am also on the Bendigo Tourism board as well. We at the Schaller Studio are a 120-room hotel. We also have a cafe, bar and conference area in the hotel, so it is quite a substantial property. It is on the grounds of the hospital, there on the corner of Bayne and Lucan streets. It is a very busy property in terms of occupancy and so on.

Ms WILKINSON — My name is Ashley Wilkinson. I am the rooms division manager now at the Schaller Studio. Again, I was with the opening crew just before May 2014, so I have sort of been there from go to whoa. As Amy said, it is a busy property. Obviously we have got the four properties in Melbourne, so we have a lot of our clientele coming from the city who are fans of the Art Series Hotel Group and are coming to see us regionally as well. That is a lot of our crowd.

The CHAIR — Very good. Are there any introductory comments you would like to make just in general about ride sourcing and the taxi industry and the like here in Bendigo?

Ms WILKINSON — Yes, I think going from my last point, obviously we have a lot of Melbourne-based clientele. A lot of our guests are from the city and surrounds, so I think that going by comments that we get from guests staying all throughout the week, be they corporate during the week or leisure on the weekend, I think it has become the new norm and the base for what our guests expect that they have an option other than taxis. The consensus that I have got from guests over the last year or year and a half is that they are quite surprised that a town like Bendigo does not have it yet.

The CHAIR — Are there any other introductory comments you would like to make?

Ms MOYLAN — For me, I just work a lot at the hotel, and we talk a lot on the board, when I am representing the board, about delivering the best possible guest experience for Bendigo. For me, it is really important that that goes from the moment they get off the train at the train station, and perhaps they get transport to the hotel — you know, for their whole journey, really, from end to end. It surprises me how much this town is very much a city. We call ourselves a city, and we are a regional city. Many parts of our culture are at the forefront. Our food is very much at the top of its game, and certainly, for me, our accommodation is, with the addition of our hotel; perhaps previously it was not. There is the arts community, obviously, with a state-of-the-art gallery and the thousand-seat Ulumbarra Theatre. So I suppose for me it is about having every aspect of the traveller's and guest's experience or journey being the best it can possibly be. If that factors in transport, then I feel that it would be a good thing to have more options and more of a competitive balance.

The CHAIR — Indeed. I suppose you heard earlier today from the taxi cooperative. They were saying they have 47 taxis here in Bendigo. One would imagine that when there are events on and the like that people staying at your hotel would have extreme difficulty in getting around either to where they need to go or back to the hotel.

Ms WILKINSON — Yes, definitely. I think Bendigo is great at putting on public events — the Easter festival. When we have got exhibitions on obviously there is a lot of foot traffic coming for that as well. I think the point we were discussing earlier is that in low-demand times, when there are a fair amount of taxis around, the service is fabulous — you know, taxis do not take very long; we have got an automated system set up with the taxi companies so it is quite a painless operation when there is not a huge demand. But then when we have those high-demand weekends, we have a lot of guests checking in, checking out. Public transport is encouraged so a lot of people do catch the trains, but being on the other side of town and being that little bit further out of

town, some people do not want to walk. I think that when the town is busy they are the times when you really notice that it is lacking.

Ms MOYLAN — It is not unusual for one the staff members to take someone down to the train station because they are running late. We actually bought a 12-seater bus for our hotel because the maxi taxis are a problem. I do not know what the figure is, how many maxis are in the fleet —

Ms WILKINSON — I think there are about four.

Ms MOYLAN — but when you have the wedding groups or people going to the theatre at the Ulumbarra and you have those groups, that is where we were finding problems on a Saturday night. So we have actually got a 12-seater Sprinter now that the staff use just as a complimentary service for our guests, which has been quite helpful.

Ms WILKINSON — Yes.

Ms MOYLAN — It is a good service as it is, but when this town is constrained, and we do have a really strong events calendar here, that is when the problems arise.

The CHAIR — And that is certainly something that we heard earlier today from the manager of the taxi cooperative in saying that during events on at the racecourse, whether it was the races themselves or another event, taxis were not even going out to the racecourse at that point. They were just staying in town. So I can imagine that that would cause all sorts of dramas for people who are hoping to get back into town without the use of a bus or what have you. So it is really that peak-time service that is the real challenge here in Bendigo.

Ms WILKINSON — It is, yes.

Ms MOYLAN — The other challenge is the satellite locations and the villages because we are trying to drive tourism out to the regions — to Heathcote, to Maldon, to Tooborac — Tooborac has a craft beer brewery and Heathcote is a shiraz region. We are trying to develop those regions and push our guests out to those areas, which are only a small drive away. But in many cases alcohol is involved in the tourist destination, so people are reluctant to visit those locations, you know, if they have got to drive. So that is just something that is not on the cards in terms of taking a taxi out there. They just could not really go out there.

Ms WILKINSON — I know that with events like the Heathcote Wine and Food Festival a big part of what the organiser has to do — because it is hard for people to get to and from Bendigo, which is a huge guest base, a big part of their event is organising the transport and the buses. I did notice there was quite a bit of waiting around. It is a popular event, but I feel like that could maybe tinge someone's opinion of the event and maybe affect whether they were to come back again. So I think if there was just that extra helping hand and a different option for people to get to and from, I feel like it would just relieve it a lot.

The CHAIR — Yes. So just to be very clear: you would support the advent of Uber or another ridesharing group beginning in Bendigo to provide that further option?

Ms MOYLAN — Absolutely. I think ultimately the service we have is adequate, and the people that are doing it are doing a good job, but I think the tourism industry, and that is our sector, is growing and if we want to stay at the forefront — and we have got to compete against other regions like Ballarat and what have you — we want the best we can possibly offer to the guests coming, for the guest experience happening here in town, in Bendigo. Certainly if a contributing factor is not being able to get to a location, well, then, that is why I support it.

Ms WILKINSON — Yes.

Mr LEANE — I was just wondering what sort of percentage of your guests would drive themselves, whether it be a hire car or their own car.

Ms WILKINSON — Typically the leisure guests over a weekend will have a one or two-night stay, obviously. Initially they will drive, but then I find a lot of people will utilise walking to town or utilise taxis while they are here. If they are going out for dinner or if they are going to go out for a long lunch, then they will leave their vehicle at the property.

Mr LEANE — At this time of day on a Monday if I came to you and said, ‘I’m checking out. Can you get me a cab?’, what sort of period of time would you think I would have to wait?

Ms WILKINSON — I would not think any more than 10 minutes in the middle of the day on a Monday.

Mr LEANE — Yes, but in peak times, when there might be an event on, it might vary. What is the longest you would have to wait?

Ms WILKINSON — Look, on something like a Groovin the Moo weekend it can be up to half an hour or longer.

Mr LEANE — Thanks a lot.

Ms DUNN — Just to get an idea of proximity, how far is the hotel from the train station in distance?

Ms WILKINSON — I do not know kilometre wise, but it is over a half-an-hour walk. It is about a 34-minute walk, I think.

Ms DUNN — So it is a substantial walk.

Ms WILKINSON — Yes.

Ms MOYLAN — But it would take you 10 to 15 minutes in a taxi or in a vehicle.

Ms DUNN — I am assuming the taxis do not rank there in terms of when the trains arrive, on the off-chance that they are going to pick up a ride.

Ms MOYLAN — I am not certain about that.

Ms WILKINSON — I am not sure about the station, but obviously with us being off the main road, they do just supply the hotel when we call, so there is not going to be a taxi waiting there.

Ms DUNN — One that just happens to be floating around in the area. Have you ever had a circumstance where guests have been stranded — they have arrived on a train and have not been able to get to the hotel because they cannot pick up a taxi?

Ms WILKINSON — Yes, I think that we try and do what we can. We send a pre-arrival email out the day before with our location and our proximity from the train station. I do not know of anyone that has been stranded coming from the station to the hotel, but I know of people that have scheduled to catch a train at a certain time and we have had to run them over to the station.

Ms DUNN — It is the other way around.

Ms WILKINSON — Yes, the other way.

Ms DUNN — The getting back. Are there circumstances around that in terms of: did it happen to be a busy time where there was high demand?

Ms WILKINSON — It would usually be a high-demand time, yes.

Ms DUNN — And are weekends generally a high-demand time? Just given the number of activities that go on in Bendigo, I am making an assumption that during the daytime on the weekends it is quite busy. Is that right?

Ms WILKINSON — Yes, usually after lunchtime on a Sunday, just because we do get so many guests from Melbourne, people will sort of have their late breakfast and then head back to town. So usually after lunchtime on a Sunday it quietens down, but from that Friday evening to Sunday morning it is very busy.

Ms DUNN — Okay. So I guess the support for additional services is just so your guests are never stranded and there are plenty of options for them to get around.

Ms WILKINSON — Yes.

Ms MOYLAN — And perhaps a small element of that is the guest expectation, though, and the guest experience, because our largest market is coming from Melbourne, and people know that we are an iconic Melbourne chain as well. So I suppose it is just an option that certainly our guests would value and appreciate. I think more and more tourists are seeing Bendigo as a city that is more urbanised. There are a lot of young professionals coming into the area, so I think there is an element to it that is also just that guest experience as well as the convenience and the need.

Ms DUNN — If you want to retain market share, I guess — your slice in that market, of having a regional city that can offer everything that Melbourne can but — —

Ms MOYLAN — And we can say, ‘Look, we’ve got the best restaurants that can compete with Melbourne’. We have got a chef hat restaurant and things like that. You want to have all of these facets of the tourism industry that can compete with Melbourne and certainly blow all the other regions out of the water, because we are all competing. So I just see it from that perspective, I think.

Ms WILKINSON — Yes.

Ms DUNN — Yes, it is just part of that picture — to complete the picture.

Ms MOYLAN — Yes.

Mr BOURMAN — How many of your guests would arrive by train versus their own car, just as a rough sort of — —

Ms WILKINSON — It is probably a quarter or less. It is quite a low percentage.

Mr BOURMAN — That is actually more than I was thinking, to be honest.

Ms DUNN — On the train, that is.

Mr BOURMAN — It is more than what I was thinking.

Ms MOYLAN — It is strange because I would say lower if you asked me this question pre-Marilyn. We saw an increased use of the trains over the Marilyn time, so we are coming off the back of the last kind of four or five months, where we really did see a big, big increase in train usage. I am not sure if you are aware of what the guys from tourism were doing on the trains. We had people jumping on at the Castlemaine and Kyneton stations giving out brochures and information about Bendigo and promoting the town on the last leg of the journey, so there was a lot of train use over that time. Whether the numbers have stayed high off the back of all the promotion that was happening in Melbourne to get people on trains to come and see Marilyn, there were a lot of daytrippers coming for Marilyn — that was huge — and they were all coming on trains. It was a pattern we noticed. So whether that train patronage has remained high — but you would probably say that — —

Ms WILKINSON — Still on the weekend definitely. Midweek with corporates I find that people will still drive more than train, but definitely on the weekends there are higher arrivals by train.

Ms MOYLAN — Yes, midweek. Our car park is normally at its fullest, to put it in perspective, on a corporate Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, because they are driving.

Mr BOURMAN — Okay. Do you reckon the current lack of predictable public transport is costing you guys business and also costing the general area business? You were talking about the experience before, which is quite true: if you have a great time and then you spend three quarters of an hour waiting for a taxi, you remember what sucked, generally. Do you think that is actually costing you?

Ms WILKINSON — I think it is a tricky time for Bendigo as well because if you go somewhere like the Royal Mail Hotel, you go there to stay at the hotel. The restaurant is on site. You can have a few glasses of wine. I think it is a tricky time for Bendigo because we do have so many great wineries. Chateau Dore is only a 10 or 15-minute drive away, but public transport there is nothing and it is quite a remote location. So I think it is quite tricky if you are coming and going. They have lots of weddings. It can be quite a late night. I know that transport makes it hard to get back from there. Balgownie Estate is only 10 minutes away, but it is all those places that are close but a little bit too far, and I think that really impacts on those locations around town. If you

are staying in town, it is fine, but all of those Heathcote wineries and areas like that, I think it would definitely impact them for sure.

Ms MOYLAN — Probably them more so than the restaurants in town and whatnot.

The CHAIR — Yes, that is right, and that is something that we certainly discussed earlier today as well — those places just outside of the CBD where it might be more difficult to get a taxi to attend, whether it be places that are hosting weddings or other functions and the like. It is quite difficult to get the transport there if there is not a bus that has been arranged by the organiser, or even if there is a bus, everybody is caught in having to travel at the exactly the same time. It is much easier if you have an option that would provide transport to that location 15 minutes out of town that cabs may not be willing to go to on a Friday or Saturday night due to how busy it is in town.

Mr BOURMAN — You take the low-hanging fruit.

The CHAIR — Yes, that is right.

Ms MOYLAN — And they know they can go to the rank and get an immediate pick-up, so why would they go out of town. The roads are very dark at night time. It is a challenge when you could just have an easy collection on a Saturday night rank in here.

The CHAIR — In town.

Ms MOYLAN — Even the bus route, if you are talking specifically from our property, we have a bus stop on our side but then it heads out towards Epsom area so you sort of have to do a loop if you want to go anywhere on that side of town. It really is sort of taxis or nothing at the moment if you are just wanting an easy to and from.

The CHAIR — And if it is on a Friday or Saturday night it is almost nothing then, is it not, if you cannot get a taxi?

Ms MOYLAN — Yes, and a Sunday. We are fortunate enough that we are an art hotel, so a lot of our clientele are either going to the Ulumbarra Theatre or to the art gallery and in both cases it is a walkable distance from our property. There might be other operators where that is not the case and they are stuck, but certainly we are really lucky. If a theatre show or a concert finishes at 11 o'clock and they cannot get transport, it is only about a 4 or 5-minute very easy walk to our property, so we are fortunate in that regard.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Ms Moylan and Ms Wilkinson. You will be provided with a transcript of today's evidence for proofreading and then those transcripts will be going up onto the committee's website. Once again, thank you very much for your attendance and evidence today.

Witnesses withdrew.