

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

WITNESSES

Mr Dean Oberin, Owner, American Hotel Echuca; and

Mr Paul Lavars, Marketing and Sales Manager, Rich River Golf Club Resort, Moama, and Co-President, Echuca Moama Accommodation Association.

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 begin by acknowledging 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. I would like to also acknowledge my fellow committee members present with us today: Mr Rodney Barton, Mr Mark Gepp, Mrs Beverley McArthur, Mr Tim Quilty, Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr David Davis, Mr Andy Meddick and Ms Wendy Lovell. If I have missed anyone, my apologies.

To all witnesses, 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, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and put on the committee website.

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

Mr OBERIN: Okay. Paul, do you want to start?

Mr LAVARS: Yes. I am Paul Lavars. I am the Marketing and Guest Services Manager at Rich River Golf Club, which happens to be in Moama, New South Wales, but literally on the very other side of the Victorian border. I am here today also representing the Echuca Moama Accommodation Association, which I am the president of. I can give you a bit of, I guess, an idea of how we are going as a club, being connected to a border community. We derive 95 per cent of our business out of Victoria, so we have been impacted greatly in recent days and also in 2020 and January and every other lockdown or interruption that we have had during that period of time.

Just a little bit of background on the Rich River Golf Club, we were coming into the new year looking to start off really well and very optimistic about where we were heading, and then obviously we had the New Year's lockdown. We lost around 20 days of the biggest month of the year for us. What we expected to make was around \$200 000 in profit. We ended up losing \$300 000 in that month alone, so it was a \$500 000 turnaround for our company. So we started the year a long way behind. Steadily we started to pick a little bit of business up through February, March and April, but what we were always worried about as a company was the fact that June, July and August are traditionally very tough months for Echuca-Moama with visitation—it obviously gets a bit colder. Unfortunately we have started June off pretty poorly. We are running at about 2 per cent occupancy. We have gone from a weekend literally just gone when we might have turned over \$220 000 to making about \$60 000, \$70 000. Our staff bill alone is eating up all of that money with no JobKeeper anymore; we have got to hold our staff. We are having huge staff issues here already—I think about 20 per cent of the industry has probably already been absorbed into other jobs, and I am sure Dean will attest that it is very hard to hold onto your staff with the inconsistencies at the moment—and we just do not have the money to carry them. The money that we were meant to have in the bank to get us through winter has been absorbed and eaten up through 2020 and certainly the start of this year. So we are literally sitting on our hands at the moment, hoping just to be able to do business, but even business this time of year is 50 per cent of what we would normally do. Our accommodation at best runs at about 50 per cent, similar to the rest of the accommodation association,

meaning that we do it pretty tough this time of year. So without any business at all and no JobKeeper, I am going to have to have some hard conversations with staff, and if those staff find other jobs, when we do open up again, we will end up getting an influx of business out of Melbourne because they are keen to obviously travel again and we will not be able to handle it because we have got untrained staff and we are short-staffed. So that is probably a bit of a snapshot of the Rich River Golf Club.

As I said, I am the president of the accommodation association. It is an industry that is on its knees here in Echuca-Moama. Last year, 2020, in 40 weeks out of the 52 literally there was something going on at the border. If it was not New South Wales shutting it down on their side, it was Victoria doing something on their side. Of course that just impacted either side of the bridge. It also made Echuca-Moama an extremely unpopular destination to travel to because, one, if you were allowed into Moama, you were not allowed into Echuca, or you were going to be lined up on a bridge for the best part of 1½ to 2 hours. You did not want to come here because if you were in New South Wales and the government decided to call everyone in, there was every chance you were going to have to leave your holiday destination and take off into Victoria to beat the deadlines.

I know the accommodation association did it so badly last year that a lot of veterans that had been in the industry for 10 to 15 years that had built up very strong businesses are now back to where they started. They have borrowed and borrowed and borrowed just to pay their debts off. We were always talking about June, July and August being critical months for us, because we need to get through those three months to get back to tourism season again. Hence, as I speak, the entire Echuca accommodation is now empty and the Moama guys are running at about 5 per cent. There is no income. There is no JobKeeper to keep their staff. All of our cleaners are going to find something else to do, and as I said before, when we start again we are going to start again with no staff. We are also starting again completely refinanced, probably no money in the bank, and I fear that we are going to lose a lot of good people from the industry unfortunately. So that is kind of an overview of the two areas that I have something to do with here in Echuca-Moama.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Paul, for that oversight. Would you like to say a few words, Dean?

Mr OBERIN: I just concur with what Paul has very well put forward. The comments are exactly the same as what we are facing. I am the managing director of the American Hotel. We are a private business. We employ about 55 staff, of which we had quite a number of regional sponsored visa holders which were in skilled positions—head chef, sous chef, pastry and the like. They did not receive any support from any government assistance, which of course we looked after. They are unable, because of the visa conditions, to seek employment anywhere else of course because they are bound to us. What money we did not have, and we did refinance and the like, was to retain our staff and look after them. That was somewhat frustrating and disappointing in that there was not any consideration of that.

Then on the back end of that, of course you then start trading again in summer where we are very dependent on the events and also the seasonality of tourism in regional Victoria. In the New Year's Eve lockdown, for example, we lost 600 people with the conditions. Of course you get the announcement at 11 o'clock and then you wait for 3 or 4 hours for the actual government directions to actually quantify and then give you some sort of management around it. So we were just inundated with questions which we could not answer because we were waiting for the detail. So that was frustrating. That added a lot of stress.

I think of all the years that I have been doing hospitality—I am not quite sure whether I am the glass half-full man anymore. We have the boom months and all that sort of stuff, do not get me wrong, but I am concurring with what Paul said, which was that January was not what it should have been. Definitely December had the indications that it was all going in the right direction and we were thinking, 'Yeah, we can get through this', and then of course January sort of plateaued out, February was flat as well given that we normally have two major events in Echuca-Moama, being the music festival and also the Southern 80, which did not go ahead. So a normal week for us might be, say, \$100 000-plus turnover. Those big weekends and those busier weeks we were sort of getting the \$200 000 and \$300 000, which then of course enables you to pad out the quieter periods.

So again JobKeeper started off reasonably well. Again the frustrations and the anomalies with that were that a commis or a glassy at the American Hotel was getting a lot of support on his 12 hours of casual employment versus a skilled head chef that has got a family of five and is not getting any money at all. So I think some of those frustrations were there. Retaining your staff is very difficult. I just said goodbye to a very talented pastry chef who had trained under Marco Pierre White. He actually went out of the frying pan into the fire. He is now

up in the Highlands of Scotland because this country and this experience has just mentally exhausted him and busted him. So he has gone, never to be seen or heard of again. Again, just harking on the regional sponsored visas, I have been doing this, like I said, for 25 years and to get executive and well-trained staff in those key positions that were not being fulfilled by Australians—the regional sponsored visa guys filled that need, and it was a real need. They were not looked after and they have repurposed, they are gone and they are not coming back. So what does it look like under the recovery? Well, we have got kids doing positions that they are not necessarily trained to do because we have to transact to get through, so it is not where I thought I would be at this age. I am sorry, it is just how it is.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Oberin and Mr Lavars, for sharing the experiences of your businesses. I might actually go first and ask the first question, then we will go to Mr Davis and then we will go through the list of committee members. My question was actually to Mr Lavars. I noticed that your business is located in New South Wales. Did your business get any New South Wales direct government support from the state government?

Mr LAVARS: No, no. That was again the frustrations of the border. Never in my life would I have thought that I would notice a border as much as I have now. To be honest, if Victoria made the decision, because we get 95 per cent of our business from Vic, New South Wales could quite easily say, 'Well, it wasn't our decision. We didn't make it, so we're not going to pay anything there'. I know Victoria did an accommodation subsidy at one stage, but because it was Victoria that made the decision New South Wales said to the accommodation providers here, 'Sorry, we won't be doing the same thing there'. So on one side of the bridge they are getting \$100 a room for every cancellation; on the New South Wales side, in the same town, you are getting zero support. So, yes, it is extremely frustrating. We have had numerous meetings with different members of Parliament that have come down, beat their chests and told us they were going to do something for us. In all honesty, we have not seen anything yet at all. JobKeeper, 100 per cent, was a fantastic initiative that helped us get through, but now we are running our own race here. We actually do not have months ahead of us, we probably have two or three weeks before it really starts to turn into closures and job losses and that type of thing. So, unfortunately, no.

The CHAIR: Thank you for sharing that. I might pass over to Mr Davis, and I remind all committee members to please ask one question. We will go to Mr Davis and then Dr Cumming.

Mr DAVIS: Okay. Look, can I thank both Dean and Paul. I want to ask whether they have got assistance during this round of closures—this current round. Just before the hearing started I went online and the Licensed Venue Hospitality Fund 2021 says it is opening soon. The business costs assistance program round two says it is opening soon. Are people getting money through the state government programs today or have they received anything this week, is my question—this week, when it is urgent?

Mr OBERIN: No. No.

Mr LAVARS: Not at all. Nothing.

Mr DAVIS: Not a zack. No.

Mr LAVARS: And when there is any assistance, if there has been some, it can be very, very long backdated. As you said, the immediacy is now, but often it is a long way down the track before there is any support or even talk of support.

Mr DAVIS: So if people go online now, they will find that the grants are not open yet, and yet this is a crisis in Victoria for businesses, for hotels, for accommodation, and not a zack has flowed to your town?

Mr LAVARS: No.

Mr DAVIS: We asked in the Parliament on the last sitting Wednesday very directly of the small business minister; she did not have a fundamental then and clearly not a zack has flowed since. That is shocking.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Davis. You have asked the question and Mr Lavars has answered. Mr Oberin, what is your answer? Do you have an answer as well?

Mr OBERIN: No. I am not aware of any financial assistance being got.

The CHAIR: Thank you very, very much.

Mr DAVIS: That is shocking.

The CHAIR: I might pass over to Dr Cumming, then we will go to Mr Tarlamis.

Dr CUMMING: Thank you, Chair, and I thank both Dean as well as the other witness. Sorry. My question is around obviously golf. I understand that there has been obviously a lot of conflicting information out there, if you can exercise, you cannot exercise. There was a raving debate here in Melbourne around that, so I can understand some of the issues that you have actually had across the border and how it must be affecting you. There are many in my community that feel that they would just like consistent medical advice and consistent information around restrictions. My question to you is: would it help to actually have that consistent advice from New South Wales and Victoria over the border so that both your communities can actually work hand in hand?

Mr LAVARS: Look, absolutely you would like to think that before Victoria makes an announcement at 11 o'clock they may have called the New South Wales government to tell them what that announcement is going to be. It kind of feels like everyone watches TV and then tries to work it out from there. But the reality is—and I guess this is on a broader spectrum—having a 4.00 pm deadline when Victoria has got a midnight deadline and everyone from Melbourne does a mass exodus in caravans over into New South Wales just creates issues where they are not on the same page. I guess the biggest issue we have as a border town is even if golf is allowed to be used as sport in New South Wales, all our Echuca members are not allowed to visit us anyway, so it ends up a huge problem. As a border town it just does not work.

The CHAIR: Thank you for sharing that, Paul. I might pass on to Mr Tarlamis for a question, and then we will go to Mrs McArthur.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Dean and Paul, for coming along and presenting to us today. My colleague asked Paul about what support, if any, he has received from the New South Wales government. My question is to Dean. Have you received any support from the Victorian government through any of the previous rounds of funding—

Mr OBERIN: Yes. I think there was the outdoor dining package of \$5000. I think it is touted now there is a \$3500 small business support thing on its way. There was a further \$30 000 government support as well, previously. So with JobKeeper, that would be the sum total of it. It was interesting. With that live music support grant, I thought I was quite across the whole thing, but it opened and closed and I missed out. Our live entertainment for our hotel is about \$180 000 to \$200 000 a year, and then supporting employment of security staff is about the same as well. So I did not see it. I am a member of Frontier Hospitality, AHA, and our lawyers down in Melbourne are fairly savvy but just did not see it coming—did not see it and did not get it. So to answer your question: yes, some—limited. I think when you are looking at the enormity—and picking up on what Paul was saying—a \$3500 grant, given the whole that we are looking at, with all due respect, is not really going to do much to help you.

Dr CUMMING: Dean, would it help to backdate those kinds of things, when it opens and shuts?

The CHAIR: Please, Dr Cumming, one question.

Mr OBERIN: I think so. It was quite clunky, the process. You had to apply for a thing, and I thought I had actually completed the necessary registration and the like, and then I followed it up and I was told no. That was for just the registration of this, and I did not complete it correctly. I am unaware of anyone who actually got that live music thing apart from the bigger venues in Melbourne—so yes.

Mr TARLAMIS: Have you registered for the current grants that were announced—

Mr OBERIN: Yes.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Gentlemen, can you tell me: 15 months ago this pandemic started and we were told we had to have lockdowns because our hospital system would not cope. Do you think by now we should have been able to get a plan in place that would enable businesses to continue and operate in a safe way with our hospitals able to cope if there is an outbreak, given that at the moment we have only got one person in hospital?

Mr OBERIN: Paul, if I could start with that, when it first broke there were lots of providers of technology and equipment. For example, we did not know whether we had to temperature scan people on the way in, and then I was investigating, I think it was, a \$20 000 or \$30 000 piece of technology that would face recognise a client, a guest, coming in, scan their temperature—apply that to the patron—so then of course we could identify where they were with their temperature, whether they were compliant and all that sort of thing. And then all of a sudden—'No, that's not required. It's a couple of sanitisers and a bit of a QR code and an A4 with your name'. But those names—Mickey Mouse had dinner here once, so did Donald Duck and the like, so it was quite clunky and we did not know what to expect.

Now, 15 months down the track, I think that we probably understand the situation on our hands far better, but there is no consistency of the platform across all the states, as in the QR code readers and the like that you need to do, and there is no patron management plan that is a necessity that needs to occur, whether it be a small cafe or a large venue like ours. There is no rhyme or reason to the separations. My square metre rates are different to New South Wales, so here I am. To come to the American Hotel you need to have a mask and you can sit down at the table and you have to have every second EGM turned off, whereas if you go over to the Promised Land, where Paul comes from, Moama, you can do whatever you like—you do not need to have a mask, you can have a beer, you can walk around and have a great time. So I feel a bit like David and Goliath; I am allowed to be competitive, but I have got one hand tied behind my back and here we go again. So I do not know—I feel like I am having a sook, but it is frustrating, especially when we are supposedly two towns acting as one but over the states.

The bubble—yes, the bubble is fine, but there are still anomalies between Echuca and Moama. And it is very confusing for the guests. When they shut down on New Year's Eve there were thousands and thousands and thousands of people. They do not just stay in Moama; they come to Echuca as well, so the knock-on multiplier effects of economic gain that may have been done were neutralised.

The CHAIR: Thank you for sharing that with us, Dean. I might pass over to Mr Quilty and then over to Mr Meddick and Ms Lovell.

Mr QUILTY: I came in late, so I missed the presentation. So I will not ask a question.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Quilty. Mr Meddick, do you have a question?

Mr MEDDICK: I do. Thank you, Chair. I just want to ask you, Paul, at the moment. We talked about before—and we had another witness earlier who talked about this—and both of you gentlemen so articulately put it how there is this reliance on cross-border trade. I agree; the region I represent has the same with the South Australian border. Is there a feeling, Paul—and I do not know if this is actually what has come down from the New South Wales government—because you have said that you rely 95 per cent on Victorian trade, that perhaps the New South Wales government has sort of gone, 'Well, you get all your business from Victoria, mate. If you want money, ask the Victorian government for funds, not us'? Is that the kind of feeling that you get?

Mr LAVARS: Not necessarily. When it first happened we actually tried to come up with some practical solutions in regard to maybe even putting the border, so to speak, 100 kilometres past the town. We sent some maps and we showed where the access points were with the roads—just so that we could continue to do business. Because forget business in general—you have got primary school kids who live in Moama and Echuca just trying to go to school. You have got them doing sports. My family—my wife and I—live in Moama. My daughter and my grandchildren live in Echuca. So the reality is that the town is so interconnected in every single breath that we take that it is actually impossible to put police on the bridge and expect us all to function.

I guess where we get the support from—I would like to think I live in Australia and that I am an Australian and that we are not seen as separate states as much as we are now and that they might actually break this down into

an individual approach, because today I cannot see why a coffee shop is closed down in Mildura when it is nearly 800 kilometres away from the nearest case. I would like to see them have some other approaches as opposed to the one-in, all-in approach, because in reality that is going to send us all broke. I think if we were open for business today and we were able to cross our borders and the golfers could come here from Echuca and play their golf today, whether that is for exercise—the other thing that we do not talk about is the mental anguish that is happening in society. It is actually starting to get heavy on people's shoulders. I think the approach now, which is just, 'You're all being shut down because we haven't got the capacity to do this properly', is just something they are going to have to stop having. Unless they bring JobKeeper or something else in, the reality is that we cannot finance this second wave—or third wave now—and that is the reality.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Paul. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Paul. Thank you for your frank answer. I might pass on to Ms Lovell and then Mr Barton.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks very much, guys, for your presentation. Being a resident of the border communities, I understand all of your frustrations. Dean, I noticed that the number of grants that you said you had received other than JobKeeper, which was ongoing, if you added them all up together they would not probably cover a good weekend's takings at the American Hotel. But this latest lockdown has come at a time when the voucher system for travel into regional Victoria expired on Monday, and I just wondered if you could tell us about whether you think that there need to be more incentives to bring people into regional Victoria, to restore their confidence to travel to regional locations. And also, Dean, if you can tell us about the effects of this lockdown on your business and also if we were to lock down for the long weekend. I know you will be holding your breath right up until the moment you are pulling those beers and serving the meals on the long weekend in June.

Mr OBERIN: Yes. So the five-day shutdown in February and now we have had the seven-plus—I think there is more coming—it is a significant amount, given that May and June, as Paul said, are very quiet months and we are dependent on the long weekend and also we have a Winter Blues Festival in late July. These lockdowns are really tough, because we have not got any support at all. The staff are incredibly anxious, because, again, this is the period that we are looking at. It is not based on anything. We do not know. It is not dependent on a particular piece of information occurring or the like. In relation to getting people to come back out to regional Victoria, I think we suffer as a border town because of, again, that anomaly of what is going to be with the border. You come to Echuca-Moama; you do not just come to Echuca. So if there are some concerns about the border being closed or the like, then there would be a real reservation to use your voucher not necessarily in Echuca-Moama, but it might be somewhere else in regional Victoria that has not got that potential risk of not necessarily having the experience that you thought you were going to get in the border town. So I think we do suffer, both sides, Moama and Echuca, because of the border that is dividing, and the offer for the tourism on both sides is co-dependent on each other as the ultimate experience.

Ms LOVELL: So do you think it would be beneficial if the state government actually extended those vouchers for interstate—

The CHAIR: Committee members, with this number of members everyone should have the opportunity to ask questions. If we get time at the end, I am happy to ask if anyone has a supplementary, but at this stage I know Mr Barton and Mr Gepp have not even had a question to these witnesses. So if we get an opportunity, I will come back, if that is okay. Mr Barton, would you like to go, please.

Mr BARTON: Yes, I do. I feel their frustration, and I am absolutely familiar with both of your businesses because I have frequented them both.

Mr OBERIN: Come back again, mate.

Mr BARTON: Clearly I am doing my best, mate. But, look, I understand your frustrations, and this is a frustration across all small businesses. The reason I am saying this is because I have just got an email from my cousin in London. I have more family in London and New York than I do in Australia. We do not have a crystal ball, and I know the frustration about trying to plan ahead. The number that sticks in my mind is the day when we got to 750 people, so did London—and they have exploded. Now, before anybody says, 'Oh, yeah,

they've got three times the population', if we kind of average that out and work it out, they have had over 100 000 people die in the UK. That would put us up around 30 000.

I do not know how as a government—they have a sense of responsibility to keep us as safe as they can, and it is really, really tough to make that call. Do I agree with the call that coffee shops in Mildura should be shut? No, I do not. You know, surely we could prioritise this. But, you know, government has made the call, and they do so on the health advice. So what I am trying to say to you is: how can we manage these immediate lockdowns? Because, you know, that Cohuna incident could have easily turned into a case, and that then could have spread out through your entire area and absolutely devastated entire border communities. What would you like to see? Because, I do not know, my crystal ball does not tell me where this COVID is travelling. So how do we manage and try and control it when we do have to shut the areas down? How do you want to see it done?

Mr LAVARS: Well, I guess this is a bigger question. I guess, from a selfish point of view, the world has shown us what COVID does. We have had 18 months to look at just how bad it can get. I feel that Australia got itself to a very safe environment but keeps taking the risk with our borders—our Australian borders—letting people in. We do know our quarantine is not up to scratch. We have already had three or four or five warnings there. We have got ventilation systems that do not quite work. Now, look, the horse—

Mr BARTON: Around the country.

Mr LAVARS: The horse has bolted and COVID is in society. So now back, I guess, to the lesser question, which is about when it does come out. As you said before, Cohuna could have turned into two or three cases, so could have Bendigo at the hairdressers, so could this New South Wales case today and the Euroa visit and wherever else it is going. It is certainly very deadly, and we understand that. I suppose, how long do areas without COVID suffer? I just feel like it needs to be a bit of a more individualistic approach. I mean, I know as a businessperson myself if you said to me, 'You are not allowed to accept anybody with a postcode or from this area at all to your business', and there were not these 4.00 pm deadlines and all the other things that go around it—we want to keep our businesses open; we will do anything we can to keep our business open. So what we need is our laws to be a little bit stronger. The only reason people pour up here from Melbourne is they are allowed to. Bunnings can be open all day without people QR scanning in and doing everything else, and multinational stores have made mega-millions of dollars through these lockdowns and they have received JobKeeper as well. So again, I know the word 'commonsense' kicks in, but I just feel like now it cannot be a one-in, all-in approach, because we have run out of money.

Mr OBERIN: Yes, I agree with what Paul said. I think if a business has got particular compliancy levels that they are meeting and the like, well then why can't we continue to trade, albeit that there will be cases and the like? The one-in, all-in approach is just killing us—absolutely killing us. There is no motivation in an economic sense to be more compliant or to have the gold stamp so you can continue to do things. The coffee shop is going ahead in leaps and bounds and the big businesses like ours cannot do anything. We are just watching it all go by.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, guys. It is a very difficult situation.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I know Ms Lovell had a supplementary question. We have got exactly 2 minutes, so I will pass over to Ms Lovell to ask her final question.

Ms LOVELL: So it was just around the vouchers and whether it would be beneficial if they were reinstated but also if they were extended to offer New South Wales people the opportunity to apply for vouchers to be spent in Victoria—Dean?

Mr OBERIN: Yes, absolutely. I think that is a great question. There is a massive amount of regional support that we get from regional New South Wales into Victoria, and conversely southern New South Wales gets the same from Victoria. The voucher system—I do not know why it has got an expiry date on it. It should be: let us get it going and let us get people out here transacting and seeing what we have got. We are towns and we should be together.

Ms LOVELL: Absolutely, and we need it over our quiet months in the winter. That is why we run the blues festival in July, to bring people to the area. So it would be very beneficial.

Mr LAVARS: Can I add something to that if that is okay? Obviously in New South Wales we received the Dine & Discover vouchers. So they got two \$25 dine vouchers and two \$25 discovery vouchers. Two of them could be used for eateries if you registered, so we registered of course. The other two vouchers could be used for things like attractions and zoos and that type of thing. We have done okay out of those vouchers, because obviously all of Moama that went and registered for them have got two \$25 vouchers which they want to use. So they are coming in, and basically if they have a \$25 parmy it is money in our hand and it is a free feed for them as far as they are concerned. I think what you are saying with the vouchers is that absolutely something strategic around the quieter times would be fantastic, because just like I am in marketing at Rich River Golf Club, my job is to make us busier when we are quiet, and these sorts of things can do that for us. So I definitely encourage the voucher system, but in border towns it needs to cross over to both. You cannot be watching everyone in New South have a free feed while in Echuca they are not getting anything. So it would be nice if it crossed borders.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. On that note the committee is now going to take a short break. On behalf of the committee I wish to thank you both, Mr Dean Oberin and Mr Paul Lavars, and thank you to the American Hotel Echuca and the Rich River Golf Club Resort in Moama. I think it has been very insightful, and we have enjoyed your contributions. Thank you for presenting today.

Mr LAVARS: No problems.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, guys. And the rest of the committee, make sure you get to those two venues—they are excellent.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Rod, for the recommendation. Thank you, Paul. Thank you, Dean.

Witnesses withdrew.