

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into structural changes in Victorian economy

Lancefield – 11 September 2001

Members

Mr R. A. Best

Mrs A. Coote

Mr G. R. Craige

Ms K. Darveniza

Mr N. B. Lucas

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr T. C. Theophanous

Chairman: Mr N. B. Lucas

Deputy Chairman: Mr T. C. Theophanous

Staff

Executive Officer: Mr R. Willis

Research Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Witnesses

Cr A. Aird;

Cr J. Letchford; and

Ms A. McLennan, Acting Director, Community Services, Shire of Macedon Ranges.

The CHAIRMAN — I declare open this hearing of the Economic Development Committee, which is today investigating issues concerning structural changes in the Victorian economy. It is an all-party investigatory

committee of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of Victoria. I advise all present at this hearing that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege and is granted immunity from judicial review pursuant to the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act. I welcome Cr Alice Aird, and Ms Anne McLennan, acting director, community services, of the Macedon Ranges Shire Council. Thank you for coming along today. We have around half an hour for discussions. We invite the shire to make an opening submission to us, after which we will ask some questions. Over to you.

Ms McLENNAN — You already have a written submission from us in front of you. I will give a bit of background on our shire. Perhaps you know all this; perhaps you do not. At the moment it has a population of about 35 700 people. It is one of the fastest-growing what is called ex-urban municipalities in the state. In fact, it is ahead of Baw Baw, Moorabool and one other that I cannot remember. There is a very large commuter population in the south of the shire particularly, with up to 70 per cent of people in the south of the shire commuting to Melbourne. When I say south I mean Woodend, Gisborne and south of that, although about 20 per cent commute from as far north as Kyneton. The population base of the municipality at the moment is primarily made up of people from the ages of zero to 19 and 30 to 49. They are the biggest blocks of our population. Nonetheless we have a significant aged population, and we expect that to increase by about 26 per cent by 2011. That is obviously a trend across the state.

One of the points I particularly want to make is that we prepared our submission in consultation with our community. We had people go out there and talk to businesses, to senior citizens clubs, to youth groups, to people in shops, and to people on the street. Therefore much of what is presented in our submission is based on that feedback. One of the things that really comes out quite strongly is how closely the social and economic impacts are linked. It is not possible just to say ‘economic impacts’ without looking at the social impacts, or vice versa. As you will see, much of what we talk about through our submission is as much about social impact as about economic impact — which is probably a bit out of the scope of your terms of reference, but nonetheless I really want to stress that, because our community and our council see the two to be very difficult to separate.

With regard to banking, there have been a number of bank closures across the shire. The most hard-hit town was actually this town, Lancefield. Until last year it was for seven years without a bank. The post office provided a banking service in that period. Recently over a few years there has been a very strong community push and input into developing a community bank. The change in Lancefield since the bank has reopened has been remarkable. With the sense in the town of life and energy and more people on the street it has changed quite a bit. I think that says a lot about how the provision of services in local towns impacts on community life generally. One of the impacts — and this is probably an obvious one you have heard many times — of banks being lost from communities is that people do their banking business elsewhere, and therefore they shop elsewhere and all other businesses suffer. I need not go into that.

Another issue that came up in our consultations regarding banking was fees. There was a universal comment from everybody, and you have probably heard that a thousand and one times before, too. There is general concern in the community about the cost of banking and fees. Another issue, particularly for the older community, is accessibility of electronic banking. Older people do not feel safe using ATMs, they do not understand how to use ATMs, and they have real trouble using telephone banking, especially when they have to talk to a machine and push buttons in response to a machine. Often it fazes and frustrates them, so they tend not to use the banking service themselves but rather to rely on family or friends to do their banking. I have heard that many times; I have a lot to do with the senior citizens clubs in the shire, and that comes up consistently. There is also the issue of older people’s dexterity with using banking machines. That came up quite a lot in our consultations.

The other issue with banking is the impact of the loss of social capital in our towns. This goes further than banking. In the traditional world bank managers were very highly regarded and were often the cornerstones of local rural towns; they did football club audits and were looked up to and relied on for support. Now centralised banking decisions being made in Adelaide, Darwin or the like, the lack of bank managers where banks do not exist, and certainly the lack of the decision-making power of bank managers has had quite a detrimental effect on the social capital of smaller towns.

I will move on to the postal issue. I do not want to labour this too much.

The CHAIRMAN — We do have a time limit, so we will have to move quickly.

Ms McLENNAN — The feedback was fairly positive on postal services. People are feeling very happy about the one-stop effect of the changes in the postal services. The main issue people have is about the time delay

there sometimes is from posting a letter within the shire to the letter getting to its point of destination. Often that seems to be because they go to Melbourne and come back again; they go around the countryside before they come back into the shire. I have heard that several times. That feedback was fairly consistent. There is certainly a lot of support for postal services. There is a big recognition that they are important to our community and to our businesses.

One issue which you are probably aware of is more of a federal issue — that is, the issue concerning rural transaction centres. I understand that an inquiry into rural transaction centres has just been announced due to some concern of the opposition at the commonwealth level, I understand, about the de facto roles they are picking up as post offices and banking services. There is a concern that that is a de facto process rather than a planned and organised way of providing banking and other services to rural communities. I will leave you with that one.

Telecommunications costs is probably the biggest issue with telecommunications for businesses and community members broadly. Access to the Internet in this shire, as in most other rural areas, is an STD call. That has proved to be detrimental to businesses setting up in this area. Out of interest we have recently done a survey on how people want to be consulted in this shire. One of the statistics that came from that was that 51 per cent in the shire use the Internet. That is quite a high proportion. There are also quite a few gaps in the mobile network in this shire. In some areas, particularly in the east of the shire, the system falls out. That is a frustration to many businesspeople, especially those who are on the road, and to farming in rural communities.

Transport is an issue that comes up with just about every bit of planning work we do in this council, as it probably does with many councils. Our housing strategy, our leisure strategy plan, the regional tourism development plan, the shire's economic development strategy, the youth forum report and the Department of Human Services profile they did on Macedon Ranges Shire Council a few years ago all note that public transport is the key issue in this area.

We have a good rail system running up to Bendigo through Gisborne, Woodend, Kyneton and Malmsbury. However, the east of the shire, which you are in now, is very poorly serviced. The rail service that does operate is okay if you work normal working hours, but if you are a shiftworker or want to travel on weekends or evenings for social reasons, the rail service to Melbourne is inadequate. The rail service to Bendigo is generally poor too, with consistent reports that people, particularly students wanting to go to La Trobe University in Bendigo, often cannot get there before their first lecture starts. That seems to be a problem in both the east and west of the shire. The issue of intra-shire transport is therefore pertinent, in that people, particularly in the east but right through the shire, have real trouble accessing and getting to the train line.

Cr AIRD — Some services which pass through this side of the shire do not stop, or they stop one way and not on the way back, so they do not work out to be effective and useful to this side of the shire. There is a V/Line bus that goes through this side of the shire that stops on the way down but not on the way back, unless you ask nicely.

Ms McLENNAN — Obviously the issue of transport has significant impact on employment options, on unemployed people who need to access services like Centrelink or search for jobs and on people travelling to study. Council, though, is in the process of developing a project in partnership with Environment Victoria, with the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA), Mount Alexander shire, which is in the Castlemaine area, and the Sunbury and Hume city councils to look at applying to the Department of Infrastructure for funds to research transport need, demand and patterns in the shire, look at international and national best practice for community-based sustainable transport options and hopefully come up with a proposal for a sustainable commuter transport system in the shire. We have almost completed terms of reference for that proposal which we will be submitting to the department in the near future. Hopefully, that may become a useful model, if we get funding for it, to look at across the state, where I am sure this issue is certainly raised with you.

Finally, amalgamation of councils has had its positives and negatives. There is still quite a bit of concern in each of the four shires that were amalgamated as to the loss of community and a loss of feeling like they belong and have control over their councils. There is a sense of decentralisation of decision making, in Romsey and Lancefield, in particular. I have had a lot of reports about the loss of the Romsey shire, in that our office at amalgamation was based at Kyneton with only a very small aged and disability service based at Romsey. That has had a significant impact on Romsey, with loss of economic activity in Romsey, whether it be people buying lunches or getting their cars serviced or the shire getting its fleet serviced or accessing services in Romsey. We have now, as a council, moved three of our units back to Romsey. That has had an immediate impact on the energy and the movement in that town. So with an example like the bank, it does show how the presence of local services has a big impact on a

small-town economy. I will not go on. There is a lot more, most of which I think is in our written submission to you.

The only comment I would have would be about competitive tendering, which again has had positive and negative impacts. We certainly lost a lot of work. External contractors got contracts against local contractors. There was certainly a community perception — in some instances a reality — that service delivery was less. Certainly quality in some instances was seen as being poorer, but also just responsiveness: that you could not just stop someone in the street and say, ‘Can you help fix this thing, this particular issue?’. Because you were running to specifications, the constraints and the controls were much more and the flexibility less.

Cr AIRD — I wanted to add a couple of things, if I could. I wanted to focus on Lancefield because I am the councillor for Lancefield, and there are some particular examples there that I think are important. As to this idea that you cannot separate the economic from the social, I think we have made structural changes without realising that we are taking apart things that were important to communities and found out afterwards — a bit like a child taking a clock apart and finding out how it works. But now we have taken some of these things apart, we have learnt a lot. There is a lot of knowledge about communities.

One thing that is obvious in this community is that it has a lot of resilience, and there are signs of recovery. That is what I would like to see facilitated, because the fact that the community bank has got up, the fact that they have put in a submission for a regional transaction centre and have focused in on the things that are needed for this community, and the fact that we have a neighbourhood house that is going from strength to strength, having nearly folded recently but is really working in association with our community development officer, means there are a great many active moves being made. There is also an application in for Healthy Communities family funding for a project officer to work here. I would like to see a focus on the assets and opportunities here and a realisation there is a lot left in Lancefield and in many other similar places. We need to identify that and to facilitate it keeping going and building on it rather than thinking it has all gone and that we have to somehow start again.

This hall itself is an interesting case, because this facility is constantly used but it is also constantly in danger of collapse. There is not enough money to repaint it, which it desperately needs, or to resurface the floor of the toilets, which are in a terrible condition and need replacement. We have a management committee which has over 150 years of service between its members. They need new blood. There is one younger person who has joined recently, and that is fantastic, but we need something to help communities to keep those things going, because it is greatly valued and used by the community and is tremendously important. For instance, the toilet block in Lancefield needs replacement. It has been well and truly proven — Peter King and the sustainable local communities work shows that a good toilet block in a small town is one of the great deciders as to whether people stop. People stopping in the local region and using it is equivalent to opening a factory, if you look at the figures — 20 carloads of visitors per night for one year. If it was a factory you would have a \$1.5 million wage bill, and that equals 21 jobs. Just a toilet block can make a difference to how many people know about Lancefield. There is one town that has had a toilet-led recovery that I have heard about. It is not rocket science sometimes that is needed. Sometimes it is just making sure that the people who are really trying to recover the community are being supported.

Anne McLennan talked to us recently at the council about a shire emergency management plan, which is a very good one that Anne wrote for us. However, when you go to a community that has had some sort of crisis, it is how to facilitate the recovery that is important to the individuals in the community. I think many communities have a great deal of resilience left and are showing signs of that, so it is important for us to tune in, as you are today, coming and listening to people and then seeing where a small amount of money and resources can be put in the right places to facilitate the healing that is actually occurring when people are trying to put those things back together again.

The CHAIRMAN — We might get on to some questions now, if we may.

Cr AIRD — Can I add one more thing, because it is more structural than some of the other things, and that is in relation to this building? Insurance is likely to bring this building to its knees. It has trebled in the last three years and is continuing to go up. It is now \$2000 a year, which would paint the hall. They have to raise that.

Mr CRAIGE — What was it?

Cr AIRD — It has trebled in the last three or four years. Greg, who told me this, has left. That gives you an idea of the rate of change. They are finding it hard to keep the building operating. That is the sort of thing that I believe needs to be addressed.

Cr LETCHFORD — I am Cr John Letchford from Gisborne. Just listening to some of the submissions that we have put forward today, we should be able to do a lot more with our services where we generate our income from our rates, but we cannot, because there is the cost shifting which is coming from both federal and state governments.

The CHAIRMAN — Do you think cost shifting has accelerated and been made worse in recent times or is it something that has been going on for years and years? Has it got worse lately and that makes you draw it to our attention now?

Ms McLENNAN — In some areas it has got worse. Home and community care (HACC) is a particular area where it has got worse. With CCT, council staff wanting to tender for the continuation of the service they had been providing, often for 20 years, gave away a lot of their conditions of work. That resulted overtime in the loss in staff — in the retention of staff and the ability to recruit staff. All councils have had to look at replacing those conditions the staff have lost in that period. We have gone back to the award, which has added up to \$100 000 over two years onto the HACC budget — for example, the HACC unit price for home care is roughly \$22 an hour; the cost for us to provide that service is \$24. That is universal through all the different home and community care services.

The CHAIRMAN — You are saying that, given that circumstance, the government subsidisation is insufficient to meet the extra cost?

Ms McLENNAN — Absolutely.

The CHAIRMAN — At pages 11 and 12 of your submission you refer to the results of council amalgamations. You have listed a number of what you see as negative actions and perceptions. How would you describe the benefits? There is a list of the negatives. What are the positives? Are there any positives to council amalgamations?

Cr LETCHFORD — Is this with economic development or the social community? If you look at it — —

The CHAIRMAN — The answer to your question is either.

Cr LETCHFORD — Looking at lobbying for a better benefit through the MAV and the VLGA, our peak bodies, from 210 down to 78 councils we are far better motivated and far better organised to lobby, both state and federally. One of those was certainly the Roads to Recovery program, the federal initiative started by the MAV to get us far more visibility and prominence in that particular arena. So yes, in one way — for advocacy, yes.

The CHAIRMAN — In any other ways?

Mr McQUILTEN — What about the social impact?

Ms McLENNAN — I would say that in some instances, both ways. In some of our services we would have improved service delivery and quality — for example, initially with our Meals on Wheels service we had major issues with competitive tendering. Basically it had dreadful meals, and we went through several years of heartache trying to resolve that. But now it has a very good meal service which has very high standards of meal production, addresses safety issues, and has hazard control systems in place. That has come about because we have been forced to write specifications and not just provide meals and say, 'There you go'. We now do nutritional analyses and provide a very high standard of meal and know it is safe. That has been a positive, although it went through a difficult negative stage. That is one example.

Mr McQUILTEN — What about the loss of jobs in certain areas? Probably 15 jobs were lost in Dunolly, a little town in my area. It made an enormous difference to that town.

Ms McLENNAN — That is right. I gave the example of Romsey. When the Romsey council was lost, something in the vicinity of 50-odd jobs were lost. Because the main office was in Kyneton, that impacted on Romsey.

Cr AIRD — In the submission a good point is made that not only jobs but career paths would have been lost as well.

The CHAIRMAN — We will have to keep this tight, given the time limit.

Mr CRAIGE — Alice, you mentioned a toilet-led recovery. I am interested in that concept. Many small communities have ventured down that path. There is nothing worse for communities than to get state-of-the-art facilities and not have them maintained. If the area had a modern, solar energy-efficient toilet block to which people would be attracted, as the local council representative what would you put in place to ensure that it is clean? There is nothing worse than going to a toilet with no toilet paper. Have you ever been caught short like that?

Cr AIRD — We talk a lot about toilets in the council. It is a funny thing. We have a very good contractor and there has been a great deal of positive comment from the community about Excalibur, which does our toilets these days. So yes, the maintenance is very good, and there is a great emphasis on that, but we simply do not have the money to replace all the toilet blocks around the shire that need to be replaced. We certainly do the cleaning and maintenance, with no problem at all.

Mrs COOTE — You spoke before about the 0-to-19-year-old age group being very large. We have heard other submissions around the state that with 16-year-olds to 19-year-olds transport is an issue, certainly in the more remote areas.

Ms McLENNAN — Absolutely.

Mrs COOTE — You touched on the fact that trains do not come back on the same day as they leave. What programs does the shire have to increase the opportunities for work, particularly apprenticeships, in Lancefield and some other towns?

Ms McLENNAN — Council itself has just initiated a community jobs program. At the moment it has 14 young people employed through a community jobs program, plus there are a number of traineeships through our organisation itself.

Cr LETCHFORD — We also have the Business Incubator down at Gisborne, which I am sure you are aware of. That has been very good.

Mrs COOTE — So how would a 16-year-old get from here down to the Business Incubator?

Cr LETCHFORD — Because of our intra-transport difficulties, yes, it is difficult. There is a community bus that runs from Lancefield and Romsey into the city, and there are other community buses that run, but this is a major impediment for intra-shire travel.

Cr AIRD — We have set up a transport working group, which works in close consultation with the VLGA and Environment Victoria, and we are talking to other people in other areas of the region and looking at developing a strategy around community transport.

Cr LETCHFORD — We are still in the developmental stage.

Cr AIRD — Yes, these are very early days.

Mr BEST — At pages 9 and 10 of your submission you talk about transport problems. As you know, the government is spending something like \$750 million on creating fast links between Melbourne and Bendigo. From the figures you have provided, you are a very fast and dynamic local government area. What input are you having with the government to ensure that the train will actually stop here and that there will be a commutable service of benefit right across your shire, rather than just knocking 20 minutes off the travel time to Bendigo and making Bendigo the centre of central Victoria as far as the fast train and commutable services are concerned?

Ms McLENNAN — There has been some input through the Melbourne and metropolitan transport strategy consultation, and the chief executive officer (CEO) and other councillors are very active in that. That is the main avenue for feeding into that forum. We have not yet been directly approached for our feedback on the preferred stopping locations in the shire. Woodend, Kyneton and Gisborne would be the three main stations. We really — —

Cr AIRD — But we have had an indication that there would be at least one stopping place.

Ms McLENNAN — At least one; we have had an indication that — —

Mr CRAIGE — You have that in writing, have you?

Cr LETCHFORD — There has been an indication that there would be at least one stop in the shire; we do not know where it is.

Mr CRAIGE — So you have nothing in writing?

Cr AIRD — I am not aware of having it in writing.

Mr CRAIGE — So you really do not know at this stage whether the fast train will — —

Cr AIRD — No.

Cr LETCHFORD — The issue is then a bit of a planning vacuum for us. And in relation to an economic development strategy, how do we then plan? That is why I have indicated that in the next 10 to 20 years, with the greatest ex-urban growth, where do we fit? We have to have our infrastructure in place to feed the economic development, and then those other flows go. In the metro strategy we said we are only 1 hour and 15 minutes away from Gisborne to Bendigo but that we are also 1 hour and 15 minutes from Gisborne to Ballarat. There are both educational and economic development prospects in both major regional areas.

Mr BEST — That is the nexus of my question. You are a growing and dynamic municipality, which needs linkages to both ends.

Ms McLENNAN — That is right.

Cr AIRD — Exactly.

Mr BEST — What influence are you having to ensure that the services required by the people who live in the shire are provided? How are you getting to government? How are you knocking on the door? I am concerned that there will be only one stop in your shire. That really concerns me, because it is not how the European models work.

Mr McQUILTEN — That has not been determined; I do not know where you got that from.

Mr CRAIGE — The contracts will be let soon.

The CHAIRMAN — Mr Best, do you have another question?

Mr BEST — I do. Apart from the transport strategy, what submissions are you gathering to provide other support and funding for bus services into that point that may be identified?

Cr LETCHFORD — Apart from the transport strategy — which Alice is on, and which is at a very early stage — we have also been having dialogue with our local representative, Joanne Duncan. We are able to take the normal course of actions through normal dialogue with the state government. But once again, we have not been at a table, like we are today.

Ms McLENNAN — There has not been a formal approach — —

Cr AIRD — We have not been invited to a table yet, no.

The CHAIRMAN — Cr Aird, Cr Letchford and Ms McLennan, thank you very much for your time today. I am sorry it was so short. One of our dilemmas wherever we go is that so many people want to make submissions to us, and we want to let everybody have that opportunity.

Cr LETCHFORD — My apologies for my lateness.

Mr McQUILTEN — I would like to thank you for that submission. It was a very good one.

Witnesses withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into structural changes in Victorian economy

Lancefield – 11 September 2001

Members

Mr R. A. Best
Mrs A. Coote
Mr G. R. Craigie
Ms K. Darveniza

Mr N. B. Lucas
Mr J. M. McQuilten
Mr T. C. Theophanous

Chairman: Mr N. B. Lucas
Deputy Chairman: Mr T. C. Theophanous

Staff

Executive Officer: Mr R. Willis
Research Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Witness

Mr S. Thompson, Lancefield Post Office.

The CHAIRMAN — I advise all present at this hearing that evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege and is granted immunity from judicial review pursuant to the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act. Welcome. We have just 20 minutes. What we would like you to do if you are happy to do so is to tell us your views on this issue of structural change and then we might ask you some questions.

Mr THOMPSON — There has obviously been some state of confusion. I have no submission to make to this committee. I was asked to appear here. Up until receiving a request via Ms Ellingford, I knew nothing of your committee whatsoever, so I have absolutely nothing to tell you.

The CHAIRMAN — Are you happy if we ask some questions?

Mr THOMPSON — Sure.

The CHAIRMAN — Your position with the Lancefield post office is as postmaster, is it, and is that a franchising arrangement or are you an employee of Australia Post?

Mr THOMPSON — I am a former employee. It is now a franchised post office.

The CHAIRMAN — How long has this situation been in place?

Mr THOMPSON — We moved to franchise in 1994.

The CHAIRMAN — Have you operated it for the past seven-odd years?

Mr THOMPSON — Since 1987.

The CHAIRMAN — In terms of running the post office as a franchise, can you describe to us the level of services that are provided to this community compared with what was there before? Are you doing other things as well as Australia Post, which obviously builds your business? How do they compare?

Mr THOMPSON — To answer the second part of your question first, no. The Lancefield post office is a post office. We do not have a newsagency, general store — that sort of rubbish. The workload we do here is significant. In fact Lancefield post office was rated one of the top 100 country post offices in Victoria. From a customer's perspective, there is absolutely no difference to a customer regardless of whether it is a corporate office or a licensee office. As far as the work that we do is concerned, that has certainly increased along with every other service Australia Post offers. As I am sure the committee is aware, some 10 to 15 years ago Australia Post declared that we were going to become the premier bill-paying organisation in Australia. I am sure you are all aware of the amount of agency work we do, and that reflects also with the levels of service we offer in other areas. When I refer to banking, Giropay now has something like 72 financial institutions enrolled, and there is a possibility that that will expand later this year and take in possibly one or two more of the major banks. Does that answer your question?

The CHAIRMAN — Yes. To clarify that, if I was a customer before the franchising arrangements started, compared with now, not only would all the services that were there before still be being provided, but with developments and Giropost, et cetera, there is a lot more now under the franchising arrangement than there was before?

Mr THOMPSON — That is quite right. From a customer's perspective, you would not have been aware whether the office was a franchise office anyway.

The CHAIRMAN — To be absolutely fair, if you had not gone to a franchising arrangement, the customer would still be getting everything that the customer is getting now anyway?

Mr THOMPSON — Exactly.

The CHAIRMAN — Is it fair also to say that in your management of the franchise, although you have not done it, you have the ability, if you choose to do so, to add other things to build your business if there are any gaps in the time that you have available to you?

Mr THOMPSON — Certainly. From what I understood, this committee has travelled around Victoria, so you have seen other areas and probably other offices that are everything in conjunction with the local general store,

newsagent or whatever. Primarily those offices coexist. Australia Post has always had a policy of coexistence where the level of postal service does not demand a full-time situation. It has again been uneconomic for a national organisation to offer a level of postal service suitable to the community.

The CHAIRMAN — My last question would be, given that you provide the only banking service in Lancefield — —

Mrs COOTE — There is a community bank.

The CHAIRMAN — There is Bendigo Bank, that is right. How long has Bendigo Bank been there?

Mr THOMPSON — A very few months.

The CHAIRMAN — To rephrase my question, given that you were the only provider of a banking service for quite some time after the last bank closed in this town, which was some years ago, what would your comment be in terms of people doing most of their business, shopping, et cetera, in this town compared with going somewhere else because of that banking service provision?

Mr THOMPSON — I would like to answer your question in two parts again. First off, like any rural community, I think you look at a small town with a range of services. Certainly from a personal perspective — and that is all I can answer — the majority of my shopping is done outside the town and certainly outside the municipality, simply because of the range of services. Within this municipality there may be a couple of major supermarkets. There are certainly not the chain supermarkets in this side of the municipality that there are on the other side. A lot of people here simply leave the municipality to obtain that range of services and pricing. There are no Bi-Los, no Safeways, no Coles in this section of the municipality. I shop at Airport West, Mickleham Road and Highpoint. Friday mornings are very busy for me from the point of view that, if we are going to focus on the banking side of it for a moment, that is a cash withdrawal type situation where you see the mothers and others obtaining cash to go and shop at Bi-Lo, Coles, Safeway or whatever, and again that is economics.

The CHAIRMAN — Fair enough.

Mr BEST — Can you give me a rating out of 10 for the post office's services before franchising and after?

Mr THOMPSON — Exactly the same thing. Again, a customer would not be aware that a franchise situation had occurred. I am talking about me. I cannot talk obviously for every post office in Australia. Again, you would have seen some of those services change where we decommissioned an office. I think Pyramid Hill post office, which recently burnt down, may have been a case. A friend of mine used to be the postal manager there. What happened there some years ago when that became a licensee office — I am not sure. I need to be careful how I answer this, but I would say that when this franchise system began — and of course economically for an organisation like Australia Post that is fine — basically you had people buying themselves into a job. I suppose it is the same as McDonalds, or whatever, but again it takes time for the skill to be developed by that operator. Although Australia Post provides a training course, in certain circumstances the operator of that office may take 12 or 18 months to acclimatise to the local community and the needs of that community. I listen to the councillors talking 20 years in advance. I am working six months in advance at the moment because of the growth that occurs here. That is as far as we can look in advance.

Mr BEST — How much has your business grown since it became a franchise office?

Mr THOMPSON — I believe we are probably concentrating a bit too much on this word 'franchise'. I do not think that is applicable. I think that is a negative. The area of Lancefield itself is certainly growing. I am aware within this calendar year we have had about 50 new drops occur, which may be either houses, flats or whatever. I mean, this area is just going ahead. New estates are popping up here, there and everywhere.

Mr McQUILTEN — What percentage would that be — 50 new jobs, 50 per cent or 5 per cent?

Mr THOMPSON — An 8th or a 9th.

Mrs COOTE — We spoke with Australia Post representatives in Sydney. They told us much the same as what you have said — that is, that services are in fact improving — and that is something we have seen in our travels around Victoria. But in her submission Ms McLennan referred to some service deliveries within this area.

Aside from what you have just explained to Mr Best, what are they? She said that mail had to go out of the region and come back in again. Can this be addressed in the longer term?

Mr THOMPSON — I reject that totally, anyway. As you may or may not be aware, KPMG Peat Marwick, the independent auditor, audits Australia Post four times a year. At the last survey it was found that 96.8 per cent of mail was delivered on time. The effect of the postal service here in Lancefield is no different to you posting a letter in, say, Ringwood to go to Geelong. It is the same system. We are part of the metropolitan system. Mail here goes straight to the Melbourne mail centre and is delivered to wherever it needs to go — within Victoria the next day. For 96.8 per cent of the time it was, at the last survey.

Mr CRAIGE — Do you organise the roadside delivery (RSD)?

Mr THOMPSON — Yes.

Mr CRAIGE — According to the council report there is ongoing concern about the unpredictability of the time taken to deliver mail and parcels to RSD addresses in particular. That is what it says, but you say, 'Hey listen, this is really no different. We have a high rate of delivery', and reject that?

Mr THOMPSON — Yes, I totally reject that.

Mr CRAIGE — Where we come from, there is a difference between metropolitan Melbourne areas compared to rural areas. With RSDs there is the tyranny of distance. It seems that some of these issues will always be raised from time to time. The fact that the written note says that it is an ongoing concern worries me.

Mr THOMPSON — Okay. To answer your question, a metropolitan postie may do 20 kilometres a day, but the rural contractor here does 240 kilometres a day.

Mr CRAIGE — That is a lot of kilometres.

Mr THOMPSON — It is.

Mr CRAIGE — A lot of boxes to deliver to.

Mr THOMPSON — As of yesterday there are about 225 rural deliveries.

Mr CRAIGE — There are 225 RSDs?

Mr THOMPSON — Yes. By the time you take in 240 kilometres over all sorts of roads, five days a week 52 weeks of the year — except public holidays — any type of mechanical breakdown or anything along those lines, sure, that can affect it. The volume of mail can also affect it. If you are 200 kilometres out on that run, as the volume of mail from a Monday to a Friday can be totally different, you may get your mail 45 minutes later. In the middle of winter if there is a flooded road and a contractor has to detour — which happens quite often to the northern section of this town — yes, there may be an hour's difference in the delivery of your mail. As far as parcel delivery goes, given the climatic conditions of this town — and I am only prepared to talk about this town — we have a distinct policy here that if a postal item will not fit within a customer's mailbox we will cart it and they can come and pick it up. I do not know about you, but I would rather get my mail from the post office than have it soaking wet.

Mr CRAIGE — We heard at some other locations that a lot of people are now running businesses from their homes on farms.

Mr THOMPSON — Yes.

Mr CRAIGE — I take it that you would have first-hand experience here of people running businesses from their farms. We were told how important the mail delivery service is to them in communicating, whether it be for the patchwork quilt businesses or the heaps of other businesses people are running on farms. Do you have a relationship with those people in respect to that? Is there a dialogue from you, as you run that postal service? Because it is imperative that they get those deliveries, is it not?

Mr THOMPSON — I certainly hope I have a dialogue with every customer we service. One of the advantages of a country post office is the fact that your client base is somewhat smaller. We have less than a thousand drops out of Lancefield, and I believe I have a fairly good rapport with each one of those customers. We

try to provide each customer with the best service we possibly can. That is not political doublespeak or anything, it is quite sincere and fair dinkum. We do the best job that we humanly can.

Mrs COOTE — Can you tell me about the older people in the area? How flexible have they been in using some of the bill-paying services you offer at the post office? Have they embraced it, or have they been nervous about it?

Mr THOMPSON — I think we underrate our senior citizens severely. We tend to assume that with age intellect decreases. I certainly do not believe that. Certainly we find that the majority of seniors who come in to see us are quite amazed at the technology once we explain it to them — which is fair enough, because there are a lot of things I do not know. While with some you take a little bit of extra care and give them a bit of help, which may involve swiping their card or doing this, that or the other thing, some of them look at it as a challenge and take great delight in getting it right.

Mrs COOTE — Congratulations on giving your customers individual service. That is obviously a very real example of that.

Mr THOMPSON — But isn't that being Australian?

Mrs COOTE — I would like to think so.

Mr BEST — I am impressed. One of the things that is being removed from so many services is the word 'service'. Franchising has given you an opportunity to really have contact with your customer base, and you are growing what sounds to be a very successful and viable operation.

Mr THOMPSON — Thank you. Again, I do not think franchising for the majority of Australia Post outlets is a particular issue. In some respects it can have its positives and its negatives. Somebody spoke before about ruining career paths. I intended to be here for five years and then gone, but I have now been here since 1987 — so it has ruined my career path!

Mr BEST — Are you involved with any groups or sporting organisations?

Mr THOMPSON — Scouts Australia.

Mr BEST — Fantastic. That is valuable to a small community.

The CHAIRMAN — Thank you very much for coming along, Mr Thompson. The fact that you do not have a written submission is of no consequence, because what you have told us has been really worthwhile, and we appreciate that. We wish you well with your business. We will send you a copy of the Hansard transcript for your information. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into structural changes in Victorian economy

Lancefield – 11 September 2001

Members

Mr R. A. Best

Mrs A. Coote

Mr G. R. Craigie

Ms K. Darveniza

Mr N. B. Lucas

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr T. C. Theophanous

Chairman: Mr N. B. Lucas

Deputy Chairman: Mr T. C. Theophanous

Staff

Executive Officer: Mr R. Willis

Research Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Witness

Mr I. Alexander, Manager, Lancefield Community Bank.

The CHAIRMAN — I advise all present at this hearing that all evidence, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege and is granted immunity from judicial review pursuant to the Constitution Act

and the Parliamentary Committees Act. Mr Alexander, welcome. We understand your position is manager of the community bank here in Lancefield.

Mr ALEXANDER — That is correct.

The CHAIRMAN — Thank you for coming along. We invite witnesses to make an opening submission — tell us who they are, what they do, about their organisation in relation to our inquiry — and then we ask some questions. We have about 20 minutes to do that.

Mr ALEXANDER — Fire away. Who would like to ask a question?

The CHAIRMAN — Would you like to clarify the situation of who you are and how long the bank has been there?

Mr ALEXANDER — We opened on 28 May, so we have been open just over three months. It is fairly successful at this point in time. We are quite happy with the way things are going. We have opened over 700 accounts in the 13 or 14 weeks we have been open. I believe at this stage we have been fairly well accepted by the community. I think it has made a great deal of difference with the people in and around the Lancefield, Romsey, Kilmore, Woodend and Kyneton areas, getting that personal touch back into banking. The reports I have heard of other financial institutions in the area have not been favourable, so we are in there plugging and chipping away, hoping to build a business along those lines, dealing with customer service issues. At this stage it is going fairly well.

The CHAIRMAN — Did you find it easy to get to the point where you said, ‘Yes, we will go ahead’, or was that before you were involved?

Mr ALEXANDER — That was before I was involved. It was the Lancefield and Romsey community services and Bendigo Bank that did the feasibility study. I was not involved in that process. I was hired by Lancefield and District Community Services as the branch manager, so I did not have any other insight into the feasibility study of what Bendigo Bank and the actual management company were doing in that area.

The CHAIRMAN — In terms of the bank establishing in this town, what has the effect on the town’s economy been in terms of people working in the bank? Do they all live in the town?

Mr ALEXANDER — We have one employee who lives in the town and one not too far out. I am from Sunbury, and so is one of the other staff members. It is hard to answer that question in relation to what sort of economic growth has happened in the area. With staffing issues, two people are employed, virtually.

The CHAIRMAN — In terms of the bank’s ability to hold customers in this town, if people go to the bank, they shop after they have been at the bank, in theory. Do you think there has been any effect on the other commercial premises in the town?

Mr ALEXANDER — I think there would be. My answer to that would be that I have noticed a lot more traffic in the area. People come into the bank; they may duck next door to the hot bread shop; they may duck across the road to the hardware shop. If they are doing their banking, there is a good chance they are going to be doing something else in the town as well, but I have noticed an increase in traffic in general parked in the area. Walking to and from the post office down the corner, or whatever, sometimes there might only be half a dozen cars parked in the main street. Now you are looking at 15, 20.

The CHAIRMAN — Do you have the impression in establishing the bank here that the people who were running their bank accounts at other towns because the bank they had banked with for years had closed this branch have now transferred their accounts to Lancefield?

Mr ALEXANDER — I believe we have captured a lot of business from Romsey — from the NAB and the Commonwealth there — and quite a lot of our customers have commented on their lack of service in those particular areas, and that is why they have converted their business back to Lancefield where they have not had a bank for eight years.

The CHAIRMAN — Is there any service that is provided by any of the other banks that you cannot provide here in this town?

Mr ALEXANDER — No, there is not. We provide a full banking service.

Mr McQUILTEN — Of your 700 customers, what is the breakdown between business customers as opposed to mums and dads?

Mr ALEXANDER — The majority of it would be mums and dads. Bendigo Bank, probably historically going back to the old building society days, was really a mum-and-dad-type institution, even though they have now expanded their services in relation to business banking et cetera. I would say the larger majority would be mum and dad type banking.

Mrs COOTE — The closest other Bendigo Bank is presumably Bendigo from here?

Mr ALEXANDER — No, Kyneton. That is not a community bank, though.

Mr McQUILTEN — What bank is it?

Mr ALEXANDER — Bendigo Bank.

Mrs COOTE — I have a couple of other questions. Have you designated something that you are going to give back to the community or was that done at the outset?

Mr ALEXANDER — Once the bank reaches a profit situation a proportion of those profits comes back to the community bank, through Bendigo Bank, and in turn we would issue a proportion of that profit back into community projects.

Mrs COOTE — When you were setting up the community bank here, what were some of the prime drivers or real issues in setting it up that they were inviting you to provide with a view then to going on and putting that process back into the community?

Mr ALEXANDER — I was not involved in any of the setting up of it. I was not part of the management committee that did the feasibility study. I was employed as manager.

Mrs COOTE — Presumably you would have heard about what their prime concerns were in setting it up. One would obviously be that they wanted to bring back more economy, et cetera, into the area, but were there other issues as well as that?

Mr ALEXANDER — Not that I am aware of, no.

Mr CRAIGE — The bank here has been open since 28 May. Have you received support from the Macedon Ranges Shire Council or had dialogue with it?

Mr ALEXANDER — I have had dialogue with them.

Mr CRAIGE — What would it mean to you if the local council's elected representative in this area made a decision or announcement, as they have done in Western Australia, that councils will support their community banks in respect of arranging their business in a way that gives you a slice? As you know, a council is a pretty big business.

Mr ALEXANDER — True.

Mr CRAIGE — With a lot of money. It would make a difference to this community bank if the council transacted a share of its business through your community bank?

Mr ALEXANDER — Definitely. I would love to have some extra dialogue with the Macedon Ranges council in relation to their opening up an account and putting some of their dollars and cents in the coffers.

Mr CRAIGE — We are not saying, 'Take it out of Kyneton', what we are saying is, 'Share it around'. In Western Australia they have made that decision. I think it is a good decision, so can I encourage you and the councillors in this place today to look at that, because I think it has positive — —

Mr ALEXANDER — Was it Bayswater in Western Australia?

Mr CRAIGE — Yes.

Mr BEST — Do you think there has been a restoration of community pride because there is now a return of a bank after seven years?

Mr ALEXANDER — I believe so, yes. It is the comments you hear in the banking chamber, 'Isn't it good we have a bank now?'. Quite often now you have people meeting out the front for a chat. It is little things like that that you can see that affect the community.

Mr BEST — I know you have not been involved from the start, but do you know how long it took to get the bank established?

Mr ALEXANDER — I believe it was one of longest community banks to become established and open. Bendigo took one of the longest times.

Mr BEST — Was that because people locally were reluctant to be shareholders?

Mr ALEXANDER — I believe so. A lot of people said they would pledge money to the bank, but when it came to handing the money over I believe it was fairly slow in coming. At one stage it did not look very promising at all, but then suddenly it got a spurt on, and all of a sudden it was no holds barred.

Mr BEST — When the position was advertised as manager, why did you apply?

Mr ALEXANDER — I have been in banking and finance for a long time. I had been out of it probably 14 or 15 months. It is a bit like the game of golf, once you start playing, you do not really want to stop; the bug bites.

Mr CRAIGE — Yes, even if you are no good at it.

Mr ALEXANDER — Quite true.

Mr CRAIGE — What number of people are employed in a part-time and full-time capacity?

Mr ALEXANDER — Two full time and two part time.

Mr CRAIGE — So you have two full-time and two part-time employees who prior to 28 May were not gainfully employed in this town?

Mr ALEXANDER — They were. They were at other financial institutions.

Mr CRAIGE — Not in Lancefield?

Mr ALEXANDER — No.

Mr CRAIGE — So that is extra employment that has been generated. Quite often we forget about the employment part of it.

The CHAIRMAN — Mr Alexander, thanks for coming along today. We appreciate the time you have given us to tell us your story. We will send you a copy of the transcript for you to have a look at. Thank you for your time.

Witness withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into structural changes in Victorian economy

Lancefield – 11 September 2001

Members

Mr R. A. Best

Mrs A. Coote

Mr G. R. Craigie

Ms K. Darveniza

Mr N. B. Lucas

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr T. C. Theophanous

Chairman: Mr N. B. Lucas

Deputy Chairman: Mr T. C. Theophanous

Staff

Executive Officer: Mr R. Willis

Research Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Witness

Ms J. Casey, Coordinator, Cobaw Community Health Service.

The CHAIRMAN — We welcome Ms Joanna Casey. I advise all present at this hearing that all evidence taken by the committee, including submissions, is subject to parliamentary privilege and is granted immunity from

judicial review pursuant to the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act. If you would like to make an opening submission to us, we will then ask you some questions. We have a little over a quarter of an hour to do that.

Ms CASEY — I will be as brief and to the point as I can. My name is Joanna Casey. I am a coordinator of a supported accommodation service in Kyneton called Cobaw Community Health Service. The service runs a supported accommodation assistance program (SAAP) under joint commonwealth-state funding — the Commonwealth–State Housing Agreement.

I have been fairly creative in the way I have answered because it is not the cold, hard economic sort of approach you may require, but it is the human impact that I want to get across. I have used your headings. As to banking, I would like to suggest a more aggressive policy by the state government in terms of where grant moneys, et cetera, are deposited with positive discrimination being made in favour of the community banks. I say that because we have been denuded of access to banks. I do not know whether government policy still requires that you bank with the commonwealth or the state or whatever, but you have great collateral there, I am suggesting. I did not talk about postal communications, because most of my people are on the move and do not get caught up with the post very often.

As to municipal services, there needs to be review of the boundaries, given experience with Trentham and Taradale, which I have mentioned as two areas that are now outside our municipal boundary, but people still come to us for services. No-one is looking at the historic mapping. Maybe it needs to be revisited, given that this has an impact on resources of various agencies and implications for workers. I will give you a short anecdote. A gentleman I had been dealing with was going to commit suicide over several weeks, and he kept informing me of this. He lived in Trentham, but when I finally sought help from psych services it was found he was living on the wrong side of the road and had to be serviced from Ballarat. This shows the ridiculousness. The matter was resolved, but I am saying the stringent requirements of boundaries really have had an impact on the services. We had a local psych service that is part of the Bendigo health network. They did eventually service this gentleman, and nothing eventuated in terms of suicide, but I am saying this very rigid interpretation of boundaries and funding that stops at boundaries is crazy when people are involved.

The review of cost impact where shires have been forced to maintain a larger service centre presence — and this has happened in Romsey where the shire, as you know, has revisited the need for a two-person presence and/or personnel that would come when people required it — is not sufficient. When the shire was amalgamated approximately 50 people who resided in Romsey lost their jobs — I think as a result of the downsizing. That has had a tremendous trickle-down effect on the economy, on people taking packages, and then frankly we see them in the emergency relief scene because they can no longer sustain a lifestyle. The selling of a house in Romsey is not so difficult, because people are wanting to migrate to the area, if I can put it like that, but in Lancefield it is more difficult. There are real social costs to amalgamation, notwithstanding, of course, the fact that a lot of the shires perhaps are uneconomic or unable to sustain the numbers of people and provide the care they need. It is all social, my job.

Public transport is extremely problematic unless you live in the main towns or on the highway, and there is a strong reliance on the rail system. In Gisborne, while there is a rail service, is a distance from the main town of Gisborne — New Gisborne is where the train goes through — means a taxi is the only form of access for people without a car, again disadvantaging low-income people. As to rail transport for students needing to attend schools or tertiary institutions in Bendigo — and I checked that this morning — there is not a service early enough for them to get there. It is crazy if we are trying to use decentralisation and regional tertiary places not to have a train that gets kids there. There are kids going to school in Bendigo, and they run a private bus, which is another cost. This is a very practical one. Centrelink now requires appointments, and you cannot get people up there before 11 a.m., which means their day is stuffed if they have to do an appointment at Centrelink and then come back and get their kids at 3.30 p.m.. There are a whole lot of practicalities that could be met with a better system.

The other area of that impact is that Centrelink requires people to travel 90 minutes in each direction looking for a job. I know this is Federal, but you obviously have relationships with the Federal government in terms of social security requirements. People are required to go 90 minutes in either direction. How would you get to work if the train is not there? It is nonsense. Running a car is an impost, or you can run one that is not very good and end up in more bother financially.

One submission I would like to make to you — and I did try some time ago — is that with the reliance on personal means of transport possibly there is a need for registration to be paid in instalments. That could be done with a

Centrelink deduction. We do a lot of stuff through Centrelink now with rent when people are going into public housing or into crisis housing. We can do it that way. If insurance companies can do it, why can't the government?

Mr CRAIGE — Car registration?

Ms CASEY — Yes, because even on concession, finding the money to pay \$200 and whatever bucks for your average Ford Falcon, circa BC, probably is an enormous strain on a fairly finely- balanced budget. There is no shire system of transport that is cross-shire, apart from the school bus system. I am suggesting, therefore, the possibility of utilising school bus systems to assist people in accessing larger towns in the shire. I know there might be a bit of anxiety about that in terms of economics but, frankly, Lancefield does not have a Fosseys or a Target. There are those bigger ones available to people. In my youth, which was a long time ago, the market day in Kyneton was great fun, with the cattle sales and the whole thing. I am just saying that we are not making practical use. Those buses travel around 50 per cent empty, virtually.

I refer to employment. The two main high schools are located in Gisborne and Kyneton, to where students are being bused in from across the shire. My concern is — this is as an ex-schoolteacher — that students who run foul of the system have their future prospects for employment severely limited by virtue of a lack of alternatives. Private schools require fee-paying parents. We do have private schools. Cost factors, a lack of appropriate transport across the shire and family dislocation can be the outcomes. In other words, a family says, 'If the kid cannot get an education, we have to move'. I believe the shire has a difficult job in promoting employment opportunities, as a significant group of people has moved into the shire because of its lifestyle. Therefore they do not want any sort of industry which will impact on their expectations. This severely limits opportunities for employment. I am looking at the kids with nowhere to go, one I call VCE babies, which is one syndrome we have here — if you cannot get a job, maybe you are worthwhile if you have a young kid.

How many times can one have different views of Hanging Rock? I am really saying that the tourism thing is being exploited to the hilt. We have to have something else as well.

The CHAIRMAN — None of those relate to our reference. I will circulate your submission to all committee members. We would like to ask you some questions about the issues we are investigating, and we should do that now rather than run out of time.

Mrs COOTE — I would love to ask you a whole heap of questions about transitional housing, keeping families in their houses, and a whole lot of things, but that does not relate to this inquiry.

Ms CASEY — I think the social/economic is just as important as the economic. How can you absolutely divide them? Where are the people in all of this?

Mrs COOTE — The other point I am interested in is keeping families together before they break up and become totally dysfunctional and place a much greater economic burden on the whole community. You spoke about transport being an issue. Is that a really big issue in this shire with dislocating families? Does it have a profound social effect? Earlier today the council representatives spoke about transport issues, as have some other people who have presented submissions to us. How does that impact on people having to sell or get out of leases and ending up in trouble?

Ms CASEY — I do not think you could put that as the sole reason — number one. Number two, the people who have alternatives are the people who have cars, and cars are a cost. In other words, you can travel or get to. We have people in dormitory areas who literally, in community terms, probably do not see a lot of their families or their community until the weekend, because they leave in the dark and come home in the dark in the winter if they are working. Most people drive to get to their workplace in Melbourne. Unless you are in the inner city area or where the transport system goes — North Melbourne or wherever — on the way through, you drive. There are a whole lot of factors. Perhaps people do not understand when they do move here that they need two cars to survive. They have to look at access to services they need for their kids. That may preclude them from living out in the boondocks. They have to go for the towns.

Mrs COOTE — I have asked others about younger people aged about 16 to 19 years who are looking for work, or looking to be on the vocational education and training (VET) program and for apprenticeships et cetera, but who cannot get to the programs. Does that come back to you and impact on your work?

Ms CASEY — Yes, because the kids invariably get disheartened and end up on benefits and then get kicked out of home because the whole family gets rather tense, to put it mildly. Our biggest fall-out rates for youth

are in January, at the end of the Christmas holidays, and in June — when they are shut up together, is my theory, in the winter when things get tense and strained. There are not a lot of opportunities. There is just not a range of opportunities for kids full stop. And not everyone will go on to tertiary education.

Mrs COOTE — What are some of the better programs in this shire that have been developed for youth?

Ms CASEY — We have a very good youth network, but that is not a job network; it is a support network which can lead on for the kids. The shire is in the process of having a terrific program, where young people are being placed in a sort of working role — earning money, which I think is terribly important, and being mentored, if you like, in a whole range of occupations.

Mrs COOTE — That is being supported by whom? Is that an initiative of the council?

Ms CASEY — I think it is an initiative of local government, but there is also some funding source. I am not clear on that, but I know it is available.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you.

Mr McQUILTEN — I have one question in relation to youth. I believe the council contacted the youth groups in the area and now meets regularly with youth. I heard about that, and I must say that I found all the youth programs in the shire impressive. That is excellent.

Ms CASEY — There is lots of good stuff. There is the Freeza stuff, and we have a very good Community Support fund within the shire where you can apply for moneys. I am involved with a local community house, for example. They are actually a de facto school in some ways. It is a concern for me in Kyneton. They are running a separate literacy-numeracy program for kids who have dropped out of school. They are basically, in my view, almost an annex — unofficially — —

Mr McQUILTEN — What about my theory that the lady who runs that program in Kyneton is just so enthusiastic and perfect for the job that that made all the difference, as opposed to other areas where people have tried it and may not have been as successful? From memory she is about 26 or 27 and is a dynamo.

Ms CASEY — There are several — there are three there. There is an ex-football umpire who is kicking goals, in his own words. All us feminists fall apart and tell him to stop being sexist. But terrific programs are running, and it is very expansive and broad.

The CHAIRMAN — You referred to the fact that the cost of running service centres for the shire to maintain a presence was pretty expensive. From what you said I take it that you suggest that should be reviewed?

Ms CASEY — I am not au fait with funding. I have sort of an interest, because my husband was the economic development manager for the shire at one stage. I was particularly interested in the fact that we were dealing with clients here and how we managed to service them. We had a presence in the shire office at Romsey. I know that has been revisited and that now a very large group of its employees is located there. I think that is tremendous, because it gives a sense of being looked after, if you like, by the shire. I just wondered if there was some acknowledgment — if you reviewed the outcomes of amalgamations — of what the cost imposts have been because of the travelling for example. Notwithstanding good telecommunications and technology, you still have to have a face. It is like banks — I want a face; it is no different. Two women running the secretarial bit and taking requests and things is not the same as seeing an engineer or whoever at the end of your request.

The CHAIRMAN — If you are living in one of the various areas your organisation services and you are unemployed, what are the opportunities to visit Centrelink or whoever is providing employment services?

Ms CASEY — We are really sitting on a bonus, I have to say, because Centrelink is now coming to Cobaw two days a week, so people can come into the office and actually see someone. This has been the best thing ever.

The CHAIRMAN — Is that only a recent extension?

Ms CASEY — It has been going for about two years now. One of our other concerns is the requirement that young people have to go and negotiate their work agreements, which they are required to do when they are on the youth allowance. It is going to set up a video link for conferences so people do not have to remove bodily to Bendigo, which is another impost on kids on the youth allowance.

The CHAIRMAN — What is your overview of how employment services have developed over the past four or five years?

Ms CASEY — I think it has got far too fractured. There are too many groups. There is also criticism from our people that they never get CVs in. It takes them three months to put a CV together, which stuffs you up if you want to get a job at the abattoirs. Frankly, if you get a job it is generally because of who you know or who you are related to. Kyneton is unusual; it is a country town which has two abattoirs. There is Frews, and I gather Gary Hardwick is also coming to speak to you. It really is a problem. I would like to know just how much is being done for the unemployed in real terms.

The CHAIRMAN — Do I take it from what you have said, though, that the provision of service is now more widespread than it used to be?

Ms CASEY — Yes. But for the services that matter to me, like psych services, we go through a triage at Bendigo. We are still waiting for help. Yesterday we were told we would be rung back in 10 minutes about a young woman whom we wanted to be seen. We have not got the call back yet. It is that sort of removal, what I call Bendigocentricity; it all tended to shrink to the larger cities, or provincial cities in this case. We used to suffer from the fact that we are on the southern end — we are near to Melbourne and we are too far away, and who gives a stuff? So I think we are doing pretty well, really. As an aside, the other thing we are starting to notice is that we are getting a drift of people who come from Sunbury seeking help in Gisborne because they cannot get it in Sunbury. There is too much demand. I wish you would let me say my others.

The CHAIRMAN — Thank you very much for your time. We will send you a copy of the transcript.

Ms CASEY — The others are the best ones.

Witness withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into structural changes in Victorian economy

Lancefield – 11 September 2001

Members

Mr R. A. Best

Mrs A. Coote

Mr G. R. Craigie

Ms K. Darveniza

Mr N. B. Lucas

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Mr T. C. Theophanous

Chairman: Mr N. B. Lucas

Deputy Chairman: Mr T. C. Theophanous

Staff

Executive Officer: Mr R. Willis

Research Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Witness

Ms J. Smith, Financial Counsellor, St Luke's Anglicare.

The CHAIRMAN — Welcome. All evidence taken by this committee is subject to parliamentary privilege and is granted immunity from judicial review pursuant to the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary

Committees Act. We would like to invite you to make an opening statement to us and then we might ask you some questions. We have just under 20 minutes to do that.

Ms SMITH — I made a few notes, so if I am going off the track perhaps you could bring me back on track. My position in this shire is a financial counselling position. I work with people on low incomes who are vulnerable and who are experiencing financial difficulties. I have worked in that position for six years. I also worked in Lancefield for two years before that as the community house coordinator.

The CHAIRMAN — Your position as financial counsellor is with St Luke's Anglicare?

Ms SMITH — That is right. Having worked in this town — and I am probably going to use this town as a bit of an example — I am aware of the challenges that face small communities such as these when services are withdrawn. A high proportion of people in this area are aged and are on sole pensions or disability pensions. These are people without much spending power, who rely solely on services within their own small communities. The withdrawal of two banks in this particular town in the early 1990s, first Westpac and then the State Bank, had a huge effect on this town, with no access to banking services except limited versions through the post office. People have to go to the larger towns, and of course with them goes their spending power. Again wealth is diverted from the towns.

I work with a number of people in this town and other towns who do not have transport. They need to use services within the town, and if the business is taken elsewhere, services are closed. The load is then placed on family members and volunteers to fill the gap. There are only so many of those to go around. This does not encourage independence for elderly, disabled or disadvantaged people. They are much more likely to have to leave their homes earlier and go into care or some sort of supported accommodation.

Services that we all take for granted, such as hospitals, chemists and medical facilities, are no longer available in this town. There is no regular public transport. There is a bus that goes to Melbourne for the people who work, but it comes back late. On employment services, people have to attend for commitments for Job Search in Sunbury or Kyneton, that is 20 to 30 minutes away. I see people who do not have the money to spend on petrol, even if they have a car, to go to interviews. They have to do so many interviews in every period that it is really quite difficult for them. If they do not attend those interviews they can be breached, which means they get a reduced benefit.

For a lot of people this town is a commuter home, so you have another group who travel. One of the things that has been brought to my attention is that the post office here does not open on Saturday mornings. This means that if people need to do things at the post office they have to go to the closest town, which is Romsey or another one; again, that takes business out of the town.

Communication by fixed line phones provides a reasonable service here, but for mobile users there are many black spots. Phone calls are at the STD rate, so for some people they are a luxury. Many people that I see have incoming call services only because they cannot afford anything else. They can receive calls but can only make emergency calls out. I believe Internet services are available through the libraries at Kyneton and Woodend. There is a mobile library that comes to the smaller towns, but it does not have that service.

This might be a bit off the track, but the towns of Romsey, Lancefield, Woodend and Gisborne do not have access to natural gas. They use liquefied petroleum gas. For people I see it is around \$70 a bottle, which might last them 7 to 10 days. For someone on a reduced income, it is completely unaffordable.

The major consequence of a loss of service to a community is the social isolation it creates. The main street is a meeting place for the community. People stop to talk, exchange information, meet friends and arrange social activities, find out who is sick and who needs help — small things that can make a great difference if someone is suffering from isolation or some sort of disability. I think an example would be the Bendigo Bank opening its doors in the past three months. Residents have already commented on the difference that has made to the main street. It has given a huge boost to the morale of this community, and I hope it is the beginning of a tide of fortune of change.

The CHAIRMAN — Thank you very much. A good bit of what you have given to us to me was a gloomy picture. One of the challenges that we have is to make recommendations to the Parliament, which passes them on to the government, to do something to change any negative aspects around. If you were king or queen for the day and were able to do anything to help this town in a practical, possible sense, what would you do? What would you recommend to us that the government could do to give this town an advantage or a kick along?

Ms SMITH — I think probably one of the main complaints I would have in these smaller towns is transport; that people cannot access transport in reasonable hours. There is a limited form of transport. There is no train line, of course, but even a bus service would allow people the opportunity to work and give young people an opportunity to participate in other activities. Not everyone has parents who can drive them around, which when you have teenagers, you spend a lot of time doing. I think probably transport would be my no. 1.

Mr McQUILTEN — Where would that bus go to? It would begin here, but where would you send it to — into Melbourne or into Woodend?

Ms SMITH — If we use this town as an example, it would probably go through Romsey to Sunbury and on to Melbourne. They can access it. There is a reasonable train service in Sunbury, if they need to. There are opportunities for work around Kyneton. I think a lot of people with children need to work part time. There is no opportunity. They cannot leave at 7 in the morning and come home at 6.30 at night, so I think having transport at reasonable hours is important. I think you would need a few different directions. I have a friend whose child wanted to go to the Bendigo College for VCE for years 11 and 12. It has a good reputation for certain subjects. Try as she might, she could not get her child from Woodend to Bendigo before 9 o'clock in the morning. There is just is not a train service. So that tells me then of course that you cannot get there to work either. If you find a job in Bendigo and you have to be there by 9 in the morning, it is just not possible.

The CHAIRMAN — So if we tick that off and that is fixed, what is next on the list of priorities?

Ms SMITH — I suppose infrastructure for me would be having some sort of medical service, and giving people access to information, such as an office where you might be able to access Internet use, which is a good way of people getting information for people who are studying. A lot of people study externally. I think information is a huge challenge; trying to get that into people's homes where they do not have their own facilities or they cannot afford it is probably one of the biggest things. I am not sure how you build back a business area that has been depleted. I think that certainly has changed a bit. I have seen that there is more local business and people are using the services more. I think accessibility to me is really the main key.

Mr CRAIGE — I heard what you said about public transport. I wonder if you could explain to the committee, though, the issue of Lancefield and district and where it has its relationship, because some people go to Kilmore; they do not go this way.

Ms SMITH — That is true.

Mr CRAIGE — As you know, Kilmore has a different council. There are a lot of people in this region who drift across to the Kilmore region, which is totally outside of all the catchments for nearly every service but they still go over there, yet when asked that question about public transport it seems to me there are real issues in trying to satisfy a lot of the complexities of a town like Lancefield. It seems that as Lancefield is in between Kilmore and Woodend and Kyneton it makes it even more difficult — it would make it difficult for the previous witness, too — with accessing services and the division for where people go. Would you naturally think it would be a fifty-fifty split with people going to Kilmore or to Woodend or Kyneton?

Ms SMITH — I am really not sure. The people whom I work with mostly and other people I know certainly go more down south to Sunbury, and some go to Kyneton. It depends what they are going for. A lot of people have family in Kilmore, for instance, and that is a different thing — that is going over for family or social reasons, not work. Sometimes their children go to school there. Yes, you are absolutely right. It is one of the closer towns, but it is out of the shire and so is probably not a town I have a lot to do with. And I do not work in that community.

Mr CRAIGE — That makes it really difficult.

Ms SMITH — Yes, it does.

Mr CRAIGE — From an education point of view, do many children leave the region to go to Assumption College?

Ms SMITH — Yes, there are a number who do.

Mr CRAIGE — That adds another dynamic to the position, does it not, which makes it even more difficult?

Ms SMITH — Yes.

Mr CRAIGE — With public transport and the current good news process the government has announced of the fast rail, I would imagine that an important point you would want to make is that the bus feeder networks must feed into that absolutely?

Ms SMITH — Yes. The bus itself does not have to do a hundred different trips; it just has to make it accessible for people.

Mr CRAIGE — Thank you.

Mr BEST — Julie, Anglicare is part of St Luke's, which has an enormous presence in Bendigo, as you are probably aware.

Ms SMITH — Yes, I know that.

Mr BEST — One of the things I would like to explore with you is this, and it may take a few questions. What is the profile and make-up of the population here in Lancefield?

Ms SMITH — From earlier studies I am aware of — it was a few years back when I worked in the community house — Lancefield had an above average population of sole parents, of elderly people and of single people. This was probably five or six years ago.

Mr BEST — Would you class it as a lower socioeconomic area?

Ms SMITH — Yes, I would.

Mr BEST — What sort of presence does public housing have in the town? Does it have a significant presence or no presence?

Ms SMITH — Joanna Casey could have probably told you that better than I could. I am not aware of public housing in Lancefield, but — —

Mr BEST — One of the things that strikes me after listening to a series of witnesses today is that Lancefield is in a lot of ways like some very remote communities, yet is not remote at all. There is a dearth of infrastructure provision, but there is a real black hole as far as transportation and accessing higher education is concerned. It seems ironic that it is so close to Bendigo as a regional centre, to Kyneton, Kilmore and the metropolitan area, yet there seems to be such a lack of structure with things that are provided to the community. Just where will this town find its way in the future by the provision of transport or by the provision of services? Do you have a comment on any of that?

Ms SMITH — Yes, I think I agree with you. I consider it quite an isolated town, certainly from the time I have spent here. Its community has worked very hard. Probably a few years ago people would have said, 'Lancefield is what they call a dying town', which is not a term I like very much, but which is the way people talked about it. I think it is to the credit of the local community that they have got behind it and got the community bank going. That just shows that there is a spirit in these local communities that can raise people up a level. Getting back to your question, I think it all hinges on — and I know I am going over this — giving people access to services. You are right, you are not very far away from anything here, but a lot of people cannot get to anything.

Mr BEST — At the far end of my electorate in Mildura a small area, which has now become a suburb of Mildura, decided it would become the retirement centre of the Mildura municipality. It looked at attracting old people, because they had a surprisingly advanced amount of disposable income and were not looking for an enormous amount of infrastructure and support. They were fairly independent, but they wanted their bowls, sporting facilities, senior citizens clubs, and so forth. It has actually been successful in becoming like a retirement suburb. I do not know where Lancefield fits.

Ms SMITH — There are quite a lot of older people, and the housing here is quite cheap.

Mr BEST — I noticed that.

Ms SMITH — Considering how close you are to Melbourne. A group of people can actually afford to go into the mortgage system here, which there would be no chance of — —

Mr CRAIGE — Is that not a problem in itself, though? It seems to me that, while land and houses are cheap, people are relocating from suburban areas — which Ron has raised on many occasions — people who are highly dependent on services like yours and others about which we have previously heard. It is a difficult issue to handle. On the one hand you want to attract people, and the prices are cheap, but on the other hand you end up with people coming in who are highly dependent on public transport, social welfare and council services. So we are caught between a rock and a hard place. So often we have heard — and Ron raised this recently — about the first home buyers grant where people have instant access to an amount of money which would just about purchase a house in some small country towns, but that those people are very reliant on a lot of services.

Ms SMITH — That group of people — and a number would come into a town like this; often I do see them — would certainly fall over if they had transport problems, and it would not take much. They would only need one of their cars to die, and a lot of them have to have two cars. They do not take into account the actual cost. For a lot of them it is their first home, and many are not in their early 20s but are in their 30s, 40s or 50s, and they have seen this is an opportunity to secure a home. I think that is a problem. People have no idea of the real cost of a home. A lot of them buy older homes that need a huge amount of work. Quite often I see people in a terrible dilemma because they have overcommitted. Financial institutions will now nearly always lend almost 100 per cent of the cost of a home. An amount of \$100 000 is seen as nothing compared to Melbourne prices, but on an income of \$400 a week it is really not affordable.

Mr BEST — Has your client base expanded over the past five or six years?

Ms SMITH — Yes, it has.

Mr BEST — By what sort of percentage?

Ms SMITH — I could not tell you a percentage, but I can tell you that it has gone into a different group of people. I have been doing this sort of work for over 10 years. When I first started I would have been seeing very much people who were on pensions or dependent on Centrelink incomes. I find now that I am seeing a lot of families who have one or two incomes but who are still not able to get by. I have found that to be a huge difference in my work — probably in the past two years, I would say.

Mrs COOTE — Julie, I am interested in young people and the issues they have to face here. You said you have been in and around this area and working in this field for 10 years. What are some of the advantages today for young people compared with what there were five years ago?

Ms SMITH — In this area?

Mrs COOTE — Yes.

Ms SMITH — I heard Joanna Casey talking about the youth network, which I think has been a huge bonus in this area. There is a strong sense of that in the schools. People who work in schools are working very hard at youth not becoming isolated. I do not work with a lot of young people. They are usually not needing my services until they get a bit older.

Mrs COOTE — But are their parents concerned about what these young people are going to do and some of the social implications of not having a job or not being able to access work?

Ms SMITH — I am a parent of young people, so I am concerned about my children having to move to Melbourne because they cannot access transport to do further education.

Mrs COOTE — What about recreation? You said earlier that this would have been seen to have been a dying town. Are there football clubs and infrastructure now that was not here before?

Ms SMITH — I think sporting clubs have always been very strong in these smaller towns. For any children or young people who are into sport, they have a terrific network if they are playing football, cricket or netball. Horse riding is also a big sport in this area. But there is quite a big group that is not involved in that system maybe because of their family, or they are not interested. Sometimes it is just family issues, and sometimes there is just not enough money, because they all cost money.

Mr CRAIGE — Have you had an increase in correctional relocation families, or have you heard there is an increase?

Ms SMITH — You are talking about families moving to — —

Mr CRAIGE — People under the correctional system who relocate.

Ms SMITH — To be closer to someone in prison?

Mr CRAIGE — Yes.

Ms SMITH — Certainly in Castlemaine — not down here — because I work in Castlemaine as well. The Loddon prison is in Castlemaine, so there are a number of those families there, but it is not something I have come across in this shire.

The CHAIRMAN — Thank you very much for your time. We will send you a copy of the transcript of our discussions for you to check.

Witness withdrew.

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into structural changes in Victorian economy

Lancefield – 11 September 2001

Members

Mr R. A. Best
Mrs A. Coote
Mr G. R. Craige
Ms K. Darveniza

Mr N. B. Lucas
Mr J. M. McQuilten
Mr T. C. Theophanous

Chairman: Mr N. B. Lucas
Deputy Chairman: Mr T. C. Theophanous

Staff

Executive Officer: Mr R. Willis
Research Officer: Ms K. Ellingford

Witnesses

Ms F. Mackintosh; and
Mr K. Notman, Lancefield Business and Tourism Association.

The CHAIRMAN — I welcome Ms Fiona Mackintosh and Mr Ken Notman from the Lancefield Business and Tourism Association. This hearing is on structural changes, particularly in rural Victoria. I invite you to make an opening statement, after which we will ask some questions. We have about 20 minutes to do that.

Ms MACKINTOSH — It might be shorter than that. My opening statement is that I knew this inquiry was for the whole of Victoria, but I suppose Ken and I were really looking at within the Macedon Ranges shire, and I do not know whether that is too small an area for you to look at?

Mrs COOTE — No, that is fine.

The CHAIRMAN — Not a problem. The committee is visiting a number of areas across Victoria and are hearing the stories in the different places. There are many similarities; there are some differences. Having been to all these areas, in due course we have to report to Parliament on what we have found. We are interested in hearing the story for each area we visit. That is what you know about; that is what we are really keen to hear.

Ms MACKINTOSH — Okay. I am a relative newcomer to Lancefield; I have been here for only three years. Ken has been here for — I had better not say how long.

Mr NOTMAN — About 25 years.

Ms MACKINTOSH — Yes, a long time. Ken can give you a brief history of what it was like 10 years ago and what it is like now. That is quite important, because most of the services have left Lancefield. We have only just recently got the bank back, which has had an impact here and has made a huge difference. Ken and I were discussing what the impact is — which is what you want to know — and, more importantly, rather than dwelling on the past, what the way forward is. What is it that we could possibly use that would be a way forward, not just for Lancefield? It is probably just a microcosm of the rest of the whole shire and other parts of Victoria, like Dimboola, Ultima, and other places like them. Ken will give you a brief background.

The CHAIRMAN — That would be great. Where do you both fit into this? Do you both run a business in the town? What is the story?

Ms MACKINTOSH — Both of us are on the Lancefield Business and Tourism Association. I am also the representative for the economic development committee which meets and advises council on bits and pieces that happen on a monthly basis.

The CHAIRMAN — You are a local resident who is involved?

Ms MACKINTOSH — Yes, and I also run two businesses here. I have a retreat here, a property business, and I have an import business through which I distribute products throughout Australia. That is what I do.

Mr NOTMAN — The Lancefield Hotel, a Lancefield dairy and farming. That is me.

I will look at how we are today compared to what we were looking at 15 years ago. Fifteen years ago things were going along pretty well — until fuel prices probably slowed it down a little bit. But we seemed to be leg-roped by the then Romsey Shire Council, which stopped subdivisions — bigger subdivisions, like 5, 10 and 20 acres, so people could come to Lancefield and be in the country and their kids could have a horse or a few sheep and do whatever they wanted to do. They do not seem to want to come to town and be on housing blocks. They want to be out of the town a little bit so they can call themselves rural. We got one through just recently — 42 blocks just out of town. They all sold within six months, and about 10 houses have gone up on them. They are the sorts of things we want.

We have a couple of stagnant subdivisions in town, housing blocks, which no-one wants. The council seems to have put a bit of a hold on that. It will not let anybody do that. We think if we were allowed to get a few more subdivisions through it would help to draw people into the town and would help the little businesses which are going and would kick them along a bit further. That is the way I look at it. That is one thing that I see.

Ms MACKINTOSH — As I said, I am fairly new here; you are not old in Lancefield until you have been here 50 years. One of the things we looked at is what we have been doing with the regional transaction centre (RTC) and getting a grant. We have applied for that and the business plan has been put in. As I understand it, we used to have the hospital, we used to have a doctor, and there were many other services here. When they left the whole town basically started to die, even the football team.

Mr CRAIGE — What year did the hospital close? Someone has to know.

Ms MACKINTOSH — About 10 years ago.

Mr BEST — When did the doctor go?

Ms MACKINTOSH — The same time. So that happened. There were many other services. Basically we were left with a supermarket, as I understand it, a hotel and the post office. With the bank coming back in, it has brought an enormous number of people back into the town. It seems to be a great deal busier. A lot of work was put into the survey for the regional transaction centre, and I have an overview for you. We have one bus service which leaves here in the morning and one bus service that comes back at night. That is basically the only public transport here, apart from a taxi in Romsey. That curtails an awful lot of activity within the town, particularly for the older generation, and there are many older people here. So public transport is a major issue. I have no idea how to solve that. I do not know whether the council has. The train is not here and has not been for many years.

The lack of a doctor is a major concern. Even though there are doctors in Romsey and a hospital in Kyneton, if there is no public transport, people feel very restricted. It is very difficult for them to get there. Even wanting to have a doctor come back — I do not quite know what the problem is — but we have been advised on several occasions that we cannot have a doctor here. I do not know, and I have not delved into as yet, enough about the laws and the reasons as to why that is not possible. I do not know whether that is part of a licensing problem. I really do not know.

Mr BEST — It is. A provider number is dependent upon the number of people per head of population in each designated area. You would not fall under the heading of rural and remote.

Ms MACKINTOSH — Wouldn't we?

Mr BEST — You may not have been here earlier, but I am staggered at the lack of infrastructure in this town — the lack of opportunity for people to move east and west, and also the frequency of service. It is quite incredible.

Mr NOTMAN — It is easy for us, we can hop in the car and go, but for the older people, they just feel, 'What can I do?'.

Mrs COOTE — And the younger people.

Mr NOTMAN — And the younger people that do not have cars.

Mr BEST — An interesting thing you said before is that you are looking at approaching council about getting more subdivisions. Is that aimed at bringing in weekenders? What is the population mix, as you see it, for the town in the future?

Mr NOTMAN — I would not think weekenders, because these ones out here seem to be people who have built houses to live in and they will commute to town. Most people working around here do commute to town in the commuter bus, or they drive their own cars.

Mr BEST — I think it is a positive direction. I think that what you need, obviously, is a greater population base. If you get a greater population base, you have the potential of getting more shops in the town. I used to be with Golden City Frozen Foods, and I remember Barry Lyons being in the shop here. I can go back to what Mansfield and Romsey were like. I have seen this town as a vibrant town and as a sleepy hollow or a place of comfort, and not far to any of the services. But what I am hearing today paints a really different picture about people who are in an environment where they are struggling to get infrastructure and struggling to get services.

Mr NOTMAN — It probably was fairly easy then because most things were there. There were a couple of supermarkets or general stores which had everything. There was a chemist shop. The bakery closed down, but it is back again now. The doctor was here, the hospital was there. It was fairly good.

Mr BEST — And self-supporting.

Mr NOTMAN — But then things started to split up and things got harder and they closed things down. It is not as easy today as it was then.

Mr BEST — Has anybody done an audit on the state of the town 20 years ago compared to today to see what has come and gone and the transition that has had to occur by population shift or people coming into the town, or a profile of the person coming into town, whether they value-add to the town or whether they become reliant on services within a town?

Ms MACKINTOSH — Not specifically and not recently. That is a really good question because it leads me to something else. The amount of people that are coming from Melbourne into the Macedon Ranges as a lifestyle choice — and as the statistics show, the Romsey-Riddell area was one of the fastest-growing areas in the whole of Victoria — to me puts an enormous amount of pressure on council from the point of view that there is only so much money to go around. I know they have said this to us a lot, but I know it is a fact that there is only so much money to go around. When you have a perception here that this is a sleepy hollow, what is happening out here is, as Ken was saying, that the infrastructure does not keep up with the amount of population out here. People do want to come to this area.

I did some quick figures before I came here that we perceive — and this is probably not council's perception — but we see that in the corridor you need to service what is growing faster, which is Kyneton, Woodend and Gisborne, and we understand that. Yet out here, in the past three years since I have been here, I did a quick calculation and over \$8.5 million has been spent in this area on conference centres, wineries and equestrian centres. There are four conference centres here which between them have had over \$6.5 million spent on them in the past three years. So the people are coming out here. They come out during the week, not so much on the weekends. They come and they go. That puts an enormous strain on your infrastructure and your roads, particularly. Then on the weekends, you have commuters coming out. I was stunned. I went to the airport the other day and I came home at 5 o'clock at night. It was bumper-to-bumper traffic from the airport — and this not a word of a lie — all the way through from the airport right out to almost the turn-off to Lancefield.

Mr BEST — I will give you a reason for that: it is the bottleneck on the Calder Highway. I have used this road as a back road.

Ms MACKINTOSH — So you are one of those people?

Mr BEST — You get to Melbourne more quickly.

Ms MACKINTOSH — You use the Calder; it has been built for you.

Mrs COOTE — Just out of interest, why did you choose to come to this area, because you sound to be one of the sorts of industries that are coming in — and I do not want to be personal — but I am trying to understand why you chose this particular area, and perhaps that is a reason why others may come in the future. Could give some indication as to why that was?

Ms MACKINTOSH — There were three major reasons that I came here. Neither is more important than the other. I am a business person. I had been out and around the area for quite some time. I looked at it five years ago and saw it had amazing potential for growth and prices were very low, so economically, from a business point of view, to purchase property, renovate property here, it was good at the time. The second thing was it was closer to Melbourne and close to the airport, because my business, rather than going up the Calder towards Gisborne and Woodend, here it is exactly 35 minutes to the airport, and my business is import. So it is very easy for me to do that. The third reason was basically lifestyle. I did not mean to end up in Lancefield. That was a pure accident. I happened to come across a building here. I have the Farmers Arms Hotel, which was built in 1861. It is all pressed metal and just a magnificent building. I just happened to come across it and that is how I ended up here.

Mrs COOTE — All of those things that you suggested are obviously going to be attractive for other people such as yourself coming in. I think you gave an indication in the figures that you gave us about people coming into the area. Obviously under your business and tourism association, you are looking into these things. How can you encourage others to come here? Are you looking into that as to how they can come, just as you have?

Ms MACKINTOSH — Yes, we would like more people to come here. However, in terms of encouragement, off the cuff, two areas. One is the conference centres. Looking at the conference centres you see there is what we call a cluster out here of something like nine conference centres. Of those nine, there are six here within the Romsey and Lancefield area and going out towards the Kilmore area, and they are very large. There are two more in Woodend, and I believe there will be another one on the Konagaderra Road somewhere between Sunbury and here. There is also Rupertswood. To bring those people here we would like to see more promotion of that as a cluster, because it is coming north; it is not going up the highway. The people who come with the

conferences do not even get to go out into the Macedon Ranges. They do not get time; they are not allowed the time.

We have what we call farm-gate produce here — there are many farm-gate producers — and we also have a lot of wineries. The suggestion has been made that if they cannot get out to us we may create packages, and that if they have an hour and a half down time between 5.00 and 7.00 o'clock, we may go to them and bring them a package. It may be that they are given a free night's accommodation if they bring another couple with them, or whatever. There are lots of possibilities there for the conference centres, the wineries, and the food people to be able to do something together. It was spoken about only recently, and it needs more fleshing out.

Mrs COOTE — It sounds terrific. Good luck.

The CHAIRMAN — Any more questions? If there are no more questions, I thank you for coming along and giving an overview of where you are at with your association. It seems to me that towns like this should really appreciate people like you, who are here for the community and to build business and economic activity within a town like this. If you are successful, a town is successful. Well done; we wish you well with that.

Ms MACKINTOSH — May I say before I finish that one of the things I really wanted to talk about is the regional transaction centre (RTC) that we put in for a grant for. I think it is very important for our town of Lancefield and for other areas. We are probably like many towns. With the regional transaction centre it was identified that most of the services — medical, podiatry, physiotherapy, massage, alternative medicine, et cetera — all of those services could be brought back to the town. The town is very much behind that.

Whether the grant goes through or not, we do not know. We have not had a grant yet. But in terms of people in the town feeling more as if it is being given back some of the services that were taken away, my impression is — I cannot speak for everything; obviously there are some people who do not want it, but there are many who do — that they feel strongly about those services coming back. If that grant is not received, I do not know what will happen. Part of it is that the public toilets, which are very important here, are very bad. One of the things I would like to see is the government looking at us having more access to more of those transaction centres, if it is at all possible, and encouraging more towns to do that.

The CHAIRMAN — To give you a bit of feedback, we are of course the state Parliament, and that is a federal thing. But we certainly have the ability to make recommendations to the state Parliament suggesting that the state government, in turn, makes recommendations of support to the federal government regarding RTCs. We have received submissions about the real benefits of getting RTCs up. We have heard some good stories on that, so I hope yours gets up.

Ms MACKINTOSH — They tend to pull towns together more, from what I have seen. I did not think the number of people who came to the meetings for Lancefield was high, but for everybody else it was a huge number. I think it has really given a lot of benefit and initiative to the town.

Mrs COOTE — I think we were told that 20 are in the pipeline. That is quite a number.

The CHAIRMAN — Yes. We have spoken to the federal government department people in that area.

Ms MACKINTOSH — The other major thing I see is that because we are growing so fast in the Macedon Ranges, it is difficult for the council to keep up with the infrastructure. I do not know how you can assist a council in one of the fastest-growing areas in Australia. I do not know how you can do that. It is unique because it is growing so fast, and I really believe that some assistance is needed, particularly with respect to roads. One place has 10 000 visitors a year, and it is difficult to make the road because a lot of other areas have to be done first. I really think that is something that needs to be looked at.

Mr NOTMAN — There are 10 000 visitors and a dirty old road.

The CHAIRMAN — Thank you; we wish you well. We thank the shire for making the facilities available today, and we appreciate that three representatives have attended. We have learnt a lot by coming to Lancefield. Thank you very much. I declare the hearing closed.

Committee adjourned.