

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Geelong West — 18 March 2014

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Coastwatch Radio and Marine Rescue Squad, Ocean Grove

Mr Barry Joyce, President

Mr Neale Walker, Past President

Mr Bruce Pollerd, Treasurer

Mr Rob Uebergang, Secretary

The CHAIR — Welcome. The Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee is an all-party parliamentary committee, which is hearing evidence today on the Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria. All evidence taken today will have parliamentary privilege. Anything you say will be protected, but anything you say outside this meeting will not have the same protection. I ask you all to state your full names, your addresses and whether you are appearing today on behalf of an organisation.

Mr WALKER — My name is Neale Walker. My address is [REDACTED]. I am one of the skippers of the Coastwatch rescue boat.

The CHAIR — Are you here on behalf of that organisation?

Mr WALKER — I am here on behalf of that organisation.

Mr JOYCE — My name is Barry Joyce, and I am president of Coastwatch Radio and Marine Rescue, Ocean Grove. I live at [REDACTED], and I am here to represent Coastwatch Ocean Grove.

Mr POLLERD — My name is Bruce Pollerd. I live at [REDACTED]. I am treasurer of the same organisation. I am here to represent Ocean Grove Coastwatch.

Mr UEBERGANG — My name is Rob Uebergang. I live at [REDACTED], and I am the secretary of Coastwatch.

The CHAIR — Excellent, and you are appearing on behalf of Coastwatch?

Mr UEBERGANG — I am indeed.

The CHAIR — Any evidence you give today will become part of the public record. I now invite you to make a submission. We might ask questions during the submission, but also at the end, if that is okay? Go ahead.

Mr JOYCE — We only received a phone call last Thursday about this happening. We have not actually got a submission, but we would like to tell you a little bit about Coastwatch, if that is okay?

The CHAIR — Of course, Barry.

Mr JOYCE — Coastwatch first happened in 1978 with a group of concerned people in Ocean Grove who were fishermen and boaties. We have been around for quite some time. We are responsible for boaters' safety from Port Phillip heads almost to Torquay. We have a rescue boat, a 7.4 metre RIB, housed at a shed in Guthridge Street, Ocean Grove, which is only about a minute from the boat ramp. We are able to get onto the water very quickly. However, the shed we have is very sparse. All of it was built by volunteers, and it could certainly do with a bit of an upgrade. It is sufficient to house the boat in, but what we really need is somewhere for us to have our meetings and proper security for all our safety gear. That is really all I have got to say.

The CHAIR — Is anyone else wanting to give evidence?

Mr POLLERD — Just going along with what Barry said about having somewhere secure, we would like somewhere to have a comfortable meeting instead of in the shed with the boat. It is freezing cold during winter and very hot during summer. We would just like to have some sort of set-up where we could come in off the boat, have a shower, get warm again — because it is bloody cold when you come in and you are soaking wet — and have our meetings in a bit of comfort, instead of doing it pretty rough. I think we provide a very essential service on that part of the coast, as Barry said, from Port Lonsdale through to nearly Torquay. That is a big expanse of water and a lot of boats go out of the Barwon Heads river to go fishing. We take great pride in knowing that we can help those people if they get into trouble.

The CHAIR — How many members do you have?

Mr POLLERD — Active members, about 15. What we do to raise a little bit of money is sell memberships. It is a miniscule amount. It is only \$20, but all their details get put onto a record, so we know what sort of car

you drive, the rego, the trailer, what sort of boat you have got, the colour of the boat, the motor and so forth. It helps in an emergency.

The CHAIR — So you know what your resources are?

Mr POLLERD — Yes, exactly, what we have got to tow back in. We do not know how many people are on board, but it is probably something we can look at in the future.

The CHAIR — So people register with you so that they are registered for an emergency as well?

Mr POLLERD — Yes. They should ring 000. The water police will put them onto us.

The CHAIR — Sure.

Mr POLLERD — Dockets were given out with the receipts. They have a couple of our phone numbers on them. The numbers that are on there are very close to the shed. Barry is straight opposite. I am just around the corner. Neale is just up the road a little bit. We can be there within 2 minutes, but otherwise we get the phone calls from the water police.

The CHAIR — Excellent. Any other evidence?

Mr JOYCE — Neale has been with Coastwatch since day one.

The CHAIR — You must have been only five, were you, Neale?

Mr WALKER — I beg your pardon?

The CHAIR — You must have only been five when you started?

Mr WALKER — No, not quite! I have been with Coastwatch for 25 years, and I developed my skills. I got my coxswain ticket through Coastwatch. I have been skipper in the boat not quite since then, but for the best part of 12 years.

The CHAIR — When did you get your coxswain skill?

Mr WALKER — It was 1999.

The CHAIR — What did you have to do to get it then?

Mr WALKER — I went to Vic Gore and did a course for two weeks with Vic and had to have boat time. I accumulated some of my boat time with the rescue club and off my — —

The CHAIR — Did it cost you at that stage?

Mr WALKER — The government was doing a drive to get more coxswains because there was a shortage of them. The course only cost \$145 and the government paid for the rest of the course.

The CHAIR — I understand it is \$1700 now.

Mr WALKER — Yes, I do.

Mr POLLERD — I am just about to do mine in the next month or so.

The CHAIR — Are you?

Mr POLLERD — Yes.

Mr JOYCE — I think mine was \$1400. That was four years ago.

Mr WALKER — Consequently since then I also run a scuba diving charter at Queenscliff, and I have a lot of knowledge of the waterways between Queenscliff, right down to Breamlea and also down to Point Addis, because I run trips to Point Addis for the marine research group as well. I spend a lot of time on the water.

Mr POLLERD — I think the people that we have got involved in our organisation probably know those waters better than anyone else on the coast. Yes, there is a lot of experience.

Mr JOYCE — Incidentally we have seven people involved with us that have got their coxswain tickets, and two that are registered to do it within the next two or three months.

The CHAIR — That is a big sacrifice.

Mr POLLERD — It is.

The CHAIR — Two weeks out of your life and \$1700, and an enormous amount of work. Congratulations to all of you.

Mr POLLERD — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Is there any other evidence?

Mr POLLERD — Being a volunteer organisation, we do not get paid to do these things. If we can, we get a donation from people that we rescue. Most of them say, ‘How much do you want?’ because they are so happy to be back on land.

The CHAIR — Absolutely. Do you get them to pay on the way back?

Mr POLLERD — We got a phone call at half past 10 one night from the water police. They said, ‘Can you help us out? Where is your boat?’. I said, ‘Being serviced in Melbourne?’. I got a crew together, we went out and down to Point Impossible, which is just near Torquay, 3 kilometres or 4 kilometres offshore. It was half past one before we got them back to shore. They cuddled us, kissed us, whatever. They said, ‘How much do you want?’. They were just so happy to get back on shore.

The CHAIR — I can understand that.

Mr POLLERD — That was the reward I wanted. I will remember that for my life. That is really good.

The CHAIR — It is wonderful — the work you do.

Mr McGUIRE — Congratulations for your efforts, particularly over such a long period of time. Volunteer people are incredibly important to the system. Just for the record, so we have it on the Hansard transcript, can you give us a bit of a description of how the system works? You are saying that someone dials 000, it goes to the water police and then it is an emergency, as you have just said. If the boat is not an operational, you get called in. Can you give us a feel of how many times you would get a call each summer? Do you have records that explain that sort of detail?

Mr POLLERD — We do keep records, which is a good thing in my opinion. We do not get called out a lot. That is great because it means people are safe.

Mr WALKER — I would like to comment on the fact that we have an SMS message system. If we get a call, any of us can put the message on the system and all the committee members receive that message. Then they can respond back to say whether they are able to come down to the shed or whether they cannot. That is the sort of system we have set in place. If people ring 000, the water police contact us. One of us then makes a call and makes a message on the system and then people respond to say whether — yes or no — they can do it.

Mr POLLERD — Yes, that is probably the way it works, but late at night and with quick call-outs, the three of us can be there within 2 minutes and have the boat in the water in 8 minutes.

The CHAIR — That is impressive.

Mr POLLERD — Yes. We have a really good ramp down there. We know the river back to front, which not a lot of people do. There are a lot of rocks in it, and there are a lot of turns and so forth getting out of the river. The bar is very dangerous. But the experience amongst these two especially is sensational, so we are able to take those calls quite confidently.

The CHAIR — The community is very lucky to have you.

Mr JOYCE — In the 20 years that I have been involved we have been called out once when we could not attend because of the weather conditions. In the 20 years there was only once I can recall where we did not attend. There have not been a lot of calls in those 20 years, but, as I say, there was only ever once when because of the conditions of the sea we could not get out the river mouth.

The CHAIR — When was that?

Mr JOYCE — That was two years ago when there was a guy missing off Torquay. I got the call at 11:30 a.m. at night, and the surf conditions were such that we could not see. We could not attend. We could not get the boat out, so we had to refuse. The skipper at that stage, who is not here today, made the call and said, 'No, the conditions are too rough. We are not going to take the boat out'. We have to be mindful of what we do as well.

The CHAIR — Absolutely.

Mr POLLERD — At night time you cannot see the waves coming. When there is surf breaking it is just too dangerous to get out of the bar.

The CHAIR — Absolutely.

Mr McGUIRE — Just so we understand, you are saying that was once in 20 years.

Mr JOYCE — Once to my knowledge. I have been involved with Coastwatch for 20 years. A couple of times we have been on the river going out and we have been called back. Sometimes we have been out there and the situation has changed and we have been called off. But to my knowledge it is only once that we have actually not turned out.

The CHAIR — A sensational record.

Mr McGUIRE — On average, how many would you get over the summer period, just so that I have an understanding?

Mr POLLERD — Like I said before, there are not a lot. This Christmas period I think we have only been called out once.

Mr JOYCE — Three to five maybe.

Mr POLLERD — Three to five a year.

Mr JOYCE — Yes.

Mr McGUIRE — How do you define your role? Do you see yourselves as the backup there, just in case the water police are not available?

Mr JOYCE — The water police are the boss. They can tell us what to do and we obey what they tell us to do. If they tell us to leave the boat there, just take the people on board, we will do that and leave the boat there.

Mr McGUIRE — One of the issues we will have to look at is should we have a rationalisation of the small organisations, or do you think you work well with the water police as the main force and then your value-add proposition is what you are describing as 20 years of local knowledge and that sort of thing? We are going to have to weigh this up, so what is your view?

Mr POLLERD — In my personal opinion, the people we have in the club know that area better than the water police. I will say that very confidently. They probably need us if there is a rescue out of the river.

Mr McGUIRE — You run off a grant of, what, \$5000 to \$10 000 or something? What funding do you get?

Mr WALKER — The boat we have now we have had for five years. We got a grant from the government for that for \$102 000 and we put in \$37 000, so the boat is valued at roughly \$140 000. The only other grant we

have got off the government is from Transport Safety Victoria just recently, which put two of our members through coxswains. In the last five years we have been fully self-sufficient. We have funded the running of our own organisation. Something you just brought up then when you said, 'Would we be able to work with somebody else', is that what this inquiry is about?

Mr McGuire — No, we are just trying to establish the facts and get a view.

The Chair — If I can just step in, as the Chair, I cannot conceive of a circumstance where this committee would make any recommendation that would negatively affect your organisation. I cannot conceive of that. I think what the Deputy Chair was saying was that there are a whole range of things that would come up for us to answer, as you can see, through the reference that we have been given. Very clearly, though, many of these things have already been answered, and your organisation is one that the state values very highly and all of the members of this committee do. I have spoken to Frank about this, and I know Frank feels exactly the same way. We value it very highly, so I cannot conceive of any way that we would make a recommendation that would negatively affect your organisation, if that was the question.

Mr McGuire — Just so you hear directly from me, that is what we are looking at: what is the best system, how do we get people to work together and how do we maximise the position? What you are saying is that you are there as the backup, and it has been a long and distinguished service you have provided for 20 years.

Mr Pollerd — I think the water police know us pretty well and they call us, as they did just before Christmas with that run-down off Point Impossible. We always talk to them when they are down the ramp; they know our facility is there. If we can get a bit of a grant to get another building put on our property, we will be able to shift our office and so forth into that building. The police might even be able to install jet skis or something in our shed. We do not want it all to ourselves. We want to share it and do the right thing. It is all about helping one another.

Mr Joyce — One other comment I would make is that we have a good relationship with the Port Master at Barwon Heads, Warren Chapman, and Barwon Coast. We do things to help them out as well, and it helps with our training programs for Coastwatch and the boys coming on the boat as well.

The Chair — As I say, all of us and the state value your organisation very highly.

Mr Ronalds — I was wondering about funding. You obviously have to go back to the police to get funding for rescues. You do not?

Mr Pollerd — If I may say, they are supposed to give us money for helping them out.

The Chair — Reimbursement?

Mr Pollerd — We put in our claim forms. We have not seen any money.

The Chair — How long has that been going on?

Mr Joyce — I was talking to someone just recently, and I think it is all done online now. We have never been notified that you do it online. The last MIR form that we put in was faxed through to the water police, and I got a phone call from them stating, 'How come you are doing it by fax?'. I said, 'We have never ever been notified. This is the way we have always done it'.

Mr Ronalds — So you have not been reimbursed?

Mr Joyce — We have not been reimbursed for that last MIR.

The Chair — You are being told that your reimbursements should be done online and they are asking you why it is by fax?

Mr Joyce — Yes.

Mr Ronalds — But they still have not paid you?

Mr Joyce — We still have not received any money from them for that.

The CHAIR — We have received evidence that they are being forced to do it by fax.

Mr RONALDS — Not online.

The CHAIR — Not online.

Mr JOYCE — I was one who sent the MIR off by fax. I have not got a fax, so I went up the street to fax it at the post office. Before I had even gotten home I had a phone call from the water police to say, ‘How come you are sending this by fax? It should be done online’. I said, ‘Well, we have not got the link. I am going to have to find out’, and we never received any paperwork to say that it should be any different.

Mr McGUIRE — Have you received funding for prior rescues?

Mr JOYCE — We have not really put in for any.

The CHAIR — Whether you have put it in or not, you have never been reimbursed for rescues?

Mr JOYCE — Yes, never been.

The CHAIR — You guys are an absolute disgrace!

Mr JOYCE — The only other one we put in for, we had to go way down past Torquay one day with the water police and the fisheries. There was a big shark sighted; they were worried about it annoying the surfers. We put in for an MIR for that and we never got paid for that as well. As I say, we do not put in a lot.

Mr WALKER — That was a long day too.

The CHAIR — How much would the reimbursement be for?

Mr JOYCE — Four hours, two motors. We would hope it would be in the vicinity of \$200 or \$250.

The CHAIR — And you have never received that?

Mr JOYCE — No, we have never received it.

The CHAIR — No correspondence?

Mr JOYCE — Look, I am the one who should have followed it up and I have not.

The CHAIR — Once you put your request for reimbursement in I would have expected that the result would be up to them.

Mr JOYCE — I would have expected it too. But I was talking to somebody from the Coast Guard, actually, and they said that they put theirs in as a group thing. They do not put those in individually. I think they only do them once a month, and sometimes it can take a couple of months for them to get — —

The CHAIR — Since 1978. That is a long time to wait for reimbursement.

Mr JOYCE — No, this last one has only been since Christmas. We have got our money in the past.

The CHAIR — You have?

Mr JOYCE — Yes, we have. There are only two that I have put in that we have not received money for.

The CHAIR — Okay. So you have received reimbursement prior to that?

Mr JOYCE — Yes, we have received reimbursement in the past.

The CHAIR — Up till when?

Mr JOYCE — As I say, the last one was the one we did right on Christmas, and the one prior — I cannot remember the date; it may have been nine months.

The CHAIR — Were those reimbursements done by fax?

Mr JOYCE — Yes. I have got copies of them.

The CHAIR — This sounds like there has been a recent change to their procedure.

Mr JOYCE — I would say so, because the first one I did not get a phone call.

The CHAIR — How would that normally be communicated? Do you get communication from them at all?

Mr JOYCE — Not really.

Mr POLLERD — No.

The CHAIR — Nothing?

Mr JOYCE — The only time we hear from them is if there is a problem and if we can help them. If we cannot help them — —

The CHAIR — Or if you fax your reimbursement.

Mr JOYCE — Yes.

The CHAIR — Okay. I do not have anything further. Thank you very much. We greatly appreciate the evidence that you have given today and the fact that you have given up your time to be here, and you have waited for us for ages. Within the next two weeks you will get a transcript of today's proceedings. If you could just look through it and if any of the form is wrong, any of the punctuation, anything like that, please let us know; but no changes to the substance of the document. On behalf of the committee I thank you very sincerely for being here today.

Witnesses withdrew.