

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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Witnesses

Torquay Marine Rescue Service

Mr Greg Baeck, Past Chairman and Boat Captain

Mr Peter Campbell, Treasurer

The CHAIR — Welcome to this hearing of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee, which is an all-party parliamentary committee inquiring into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege but any comments you make outside this hearing will not be afforded the same protection. Could you both please state your full name and address and whether you are appearing on behalf of an organisation.

Mr BAECK — My name is Greg Baeck and I live at [REDACTED]. I am the past chairman and boat captain of the Torquay Marine Rescue Service.

Mr CAMPBELL — I am Peter Campbell of [REDACTED]. I am treasurer of the Torquay Marine Rescue Service and have been a member since the 1980s.

The CHAIR — Thank you both for appearing on behalf of that organisation. Your comments will be taken down as evidence and will become part of a public document. I now invite you to make an oral submission.

Mr BAECK — Torquay Marine Rescue Service was formed in 1984. It was originally formed due to numerous rescues of boats and windsurfers off the Torquay area which were undertaken by myself or other fishermen at the time. Eventually we structured a committee and formed the Torquay Marine Rescue Service. A boat was eventually purchased through local funding and a bit of government assistance. Torquay Marine Rescue Service now has a 6.5 metre Stabicraft, which is quite capable of going out in the open ocean under extreme conditions. It has two jet skis and a jet boat. We have also taken delivery of our newest arrival, Sealegs, which is an amphibian-style vessel, again of 6.5 metres. It is able to drive forward into the water and drive out of the water as well.

The CHAIR — That is pretty impressive.

Mr BAECK — Because we are an ocean entry area, we have extreme conditions and generally when a rescue is on it is always in extreme conditions. The area we look after generally goes from the Ocean Grove or Queenscliff area right through to the Lorne area. We have been down as far as Apollo Bay. Our larger boat is under a CII survey, so we have coxswains who take that vessel out and are controlled by those rules and regulations. Our jet skis, of course, do not have any of those sorts of regulations surrounding them. We generally take them out two at a time so that each can make sure of the safety of the other. Our training for those units was based on Surf Life Saving Australia's style and then we had our training officer revamp that style to suit our conditions.

Our training is basically set up to look after ocean entry and exit because that is the most dangerous point for our rescues. We have rescued vessels from yachts to fishing trawlers to hovercraft; we have had 18-odd children on canoes blown 2 miles out to sea. We have all sorts of rescues.

One of our prolific rescues is of windsurfers and kite surfers. They are still under the definition of a boat. They have breakage in material or whatever and they end up getting blown out to sea. Probably one of our most prolific rescues is of that style of unit. Back in the period around 1984 we had a lot of boats which broke down from disrepair or improper maintenance, but due to the marine safety program that has changed a lot in the last few years. Most of the fishing club members have made sure their boats are up to scratch. They make sure they do not have old batteries or improper ways of getting in and out of the ocean. That has all changed a lot. Our rescues went down from that period to not as many now in later years. That may be due to the marine safety program. It may also be due to the fact that a lot of windsurfer and kite surfer products are now better than they were in that period. The training of that style of person has also improved a lot.

Our training is based on ocean rescues: going out and looking after yourself. Once we get out there our training pretty much takes over and it works out quite well. Our dangerous point, it is always said, is entering and exiting the ocean. That is why the new boat we have been training on this morning over at Blairgowrie will hopefully take out a lot of that danger. We will then take back our training manual and train our own gentlemen. I do not know if there is anything else I can assist you with.

Mr CAMPBELL — I suppose one of our major problems is that there is no safe haven between Lonsdale and Apollo Bay for any vessel that is in trouble to come in and seek shelter. Consequently, as Greg was saying, we have to launch off the beach in various conditions. We can go out when it is quite calm but later in the day when we come in we have a very sweeping tide, changeable wind conditions and what have you. That makes it

rather difficult if you are launching with a tractor or retrieving with a tractor. At times we have had to come up on the beach. You just drive straight up on the beach as far as you can, and the next thing you know the tide has gone right back out and you are high and dry. You have to hook on quickly, get another trailer and get it ashore. We have very good surf beaches and that is the area we basically operate in, but we also have a lot of cliffs and that is where our jet skis come in handy when we have to get in closer to retrieve people out to our bigger boat where we can hook up a tow and get them in safely from there.

We had a 33-foot yacht one evening. We had been out most of the day in our boat doing exercises and we got a call at about 5 o'clock in the evening for a boat off Anglesea. It had to be retrieved and towed into Queenscliff. With the assistance of the Coast Guard we were able to get through the Heads safely. We do not go through the Heads, but with the cooperation of the Queenscliff–Point Lonsdale lighthouse and the Coast Guard that were monitoring us we got in safely at 12 o'clock in the evening. It was a 6½ to 7-hour tow with our boat, so we were fortunate that the conditions were good. Generally, off the beach it can be pretty hair raising. Now we have this new boat, as Greg mentioned, we are just waiting to get into it and really give it a good try. We can drive in and drive out.

The CHAIR — Very exciting

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes. That is what it is all about.

Mr McGuire — Thank you both for the presentation. Your area is between Lonsdale and Apollo Bay?

Mr CAMPBELL — Lorne.

Mr McGuire — That is a huge — —

Mr CAMPBELL — There is no protected breakwater.

Mr McGuire — There is no safe haven in there is what you are saying.

Mr CAMPBELL — There is no safe haven where they can come in and shelter due to the high cliffs all the way around. We face certain directions, obviously, with our protective area as much as we can, but we are still open to the open ocean and breaking seas.

Mr McGuire — Just for the record, could you give us an indication of how often you are called on to complete rescues?

Mr CAMPBELL — We have been fairly fortunate this year compared to previous years, although there was one the other day — I was not involved — in quite big seas. Some of our guys were called out and they had trouble communicating on the jet skis due to the swell. I believe they had to call the lighthouse at Point Lonsdale because of its height. The jet skis have hand-held radios. Our big boat, our Stabcraft, has good communications. But due to the swell the guys were losing line of sight and they were involved in a search. That was not all that long back, but I certainly was not involved in that one.

Mr McGuire — Just roughly, over each summer how many call-outs do you get?

Mr CAMPBELL — We get some that are just false call-outs as well, don't we?

Mr BAECK — You might get sometimes 14 or 15 calls. You might only get three or four. If we are down to three or four, we are happy. But then we can get a call, like yesterday, from the police saying there is a shark off one of the surf clubs. There are always sharks off the surf clubs, but somebody gets worried about it, so they want you to stand down there and get ready for it, just in case you need to push one out or do something along those lines. Generally it is a dolphin anyway. They do not seem to know the difference.

Mr McGuire — We are just trying to get an idea of frequency here. You were saying in your earlier testimony that there were windsurfers and kite surfers, so I presume in the early days when they first came on that that increased your number of calls. Has that now levelled off? Am I reading you correctly?

Mr BAECK — That has dropped right off, yes.

Mr McGuire — It has dropped right off?

Mr Baeck — Yes.

Mr McGuire — That is because of people being smarter about them and being better trained and having better equipment; is that right?

Mr Campbell — You do get people going out. They will go up on what we call Point Danger, which is very open to the breezes and what-have-you, and they will be up there with their wind gauges. Yes, it is great to go out, but some go out when the wind is blowing totally the wrong way, and you can virtually be blown right across to Portsea if you have problems. But when the wind drops out, that is when they get into trouble, and they can be quite a way offshore. They do have the ability up to a point to steer themselves into shore while just floating in, but we get a lot of call-outs in that respect to go out and assist as well. They can be a few kilometres offshore when that happens.

Mr McGuire — So far as equipment, maintenance and everything are concerned, are you okay? How do you describe your situation?

Mr Baeck — With our equipment we try to keep right up to date with the latest material. We do run a radar off the roof of our clubrooms and a radio system which goes through a computer so that we can record all their conversations on the radios, so that if we have to front the coroner at least we can have it all exact.

Mr Campbell — A log. We are limited in one respect, in that we have a hill that is in the way that stops us going around down towards Lorne with communication. We would be very pleased to have something so that we could open up that line to increase our coverage.

Mr Baeck — Everybody, the police and the whole lot, has the same problem with radios in underneath the cliff face. If we have a unit that has to go in under the cliff face area or into those areas, we hopefully have one standing out so they can relay. You would love to have a relay out, but with our equipment nowadays, unless we put one up somewhere in Anglesea's scout camp, it is very hard to be able to monitor radio calls that are in close to the cliff faces.

Mr Ronalds — Where do your sources of funding come from?

Mr Baeck — It generally comes from, of course, making application to the government for two-for-one grants from the justice department or the department of transport. The rest of it comes through shaking cans and asking the lovely little business people whether they can donate.

Mr Campbell — Yes.

Mr Ronalds — And has it been well funded?

Mr Baeck — We are stretched at the moment, but we will make it back again.

Mr Campbell — We have the Lions Club, which tries to look after us as well as it can, and other local industries are also prepared to assist at times, but in that case you tend to get product — wet-weather gear and that type of stuff — rather than the funding. But it all comes in handy for us.

Mr Eideh — I just want to ask you about your proposal to build a rock wall or marina at Fishermans Beach. How did you go with that?

Mr Baeck — Our proposal?

Mr Eideh — That proposal, yes.

Mr Baeck — That was one which was put through the Western Coastal Board as a proposition some five years ago. They reviewed it and decided it was improper and it would destroy the area. They of course reviewed that and they made Torquay a regional boating facility. Under the original definition of a 'regional boating facility' it is supposed to have a protected area to launch and retrieve, and I do not think they will ever be able to

do that. They would have too much trouble from every other body that is out there, surfing or whatever, which would be against having any sort of rock wall built out there.

The CHAIR — What are the implications of that?

Mr BAECK — For us it meant that we had to look after it ourselves in regard to safe entering and exiting of the water. Hence we went looking for something different — built in New Zealand — but trying to maintain a tractor to go in and out of that water when you have surf coming up over it all the time is extremely expensive. We cannot afford to do that, so we lease our time off the Torquay fishing club's tractor. Again, they get extremely upset if we take it into any sort of depth.

The CHAIR — You think?

Mr BAECK — Yes. Hopefully the Sealegs vessel will not be the full answer, because again it has limitations. It is 49 knots and that is it; it is suggested by the manual not to go out in conditions that are more than that. The other larger vessel we have can survive quite easily out in those sorts of conditions, but you need to have a master behind the wheel, and the only way to do that is by getting as much experience behind the wheel. You cannot learn that in a coxswains course. You cannot learn it at a course provided by Surf Life Saving or anything else. You have to get behind the wheel and get as much time out there as you can.

The CHAIR — What would it mean to you to be able to put a rock wall in? What difference would that make?

Mr BAECK — For our occupational health and safety it would be brilliant because it would give us a much better and safer way of entering and exiting. Of course it would bring up the number of people who would use that area too; you would increase it. If they are not used to going in an ocean area, that will be a difficulty. For example, if they are going out fishing and they come out of a safe harbour and turn right into an open ocean they can suddenly get swamped because they are not used to the breaking wave or whatever. If you have a break wall there you will obviously get a lot more traffic.

The CHAIR — Was it a funding issue at all, or was it just an approval issue?

Mr CAMPBELL — It was to do with the green movement, I guess. When I say the 'green movement', I mean it is a very good surfing beach in one respect. We get a nice little swell coming through, and we do not want to upset that in any way because we all use that as a surfing spot — —

The CHAIR — Would the rock wall — —

Mr CAMPBELL — Depending on where it was positioned. There is a reef and what-have-you. I would say there would be a way of overcoming that, but it is probably to do with the environment or the local movements that would fight us and not want us doing it.

The CHAIR — What about funding? Is that an issue with it?

Mr BAECK — I do not think it would become an issue until you worked out all the other problems with ocean movement. If you build a rock wall there, the water will come around and destroy some area of the sand beach further down and create all the environmental problems down in that area. Until you get over all those problems of working out how to put a rock wall in without wrecking the environment, funding is not even a question to be brought up.

Mr RONALDS — In terms of a rescue in your immediate area, are there any other facilities or rescue services?

Mr BAECK — Ocean Grove has a smaller unit.

Mr BAECK — One of the guys that was at Ocean Grove was a member of Torquay rescue many years ago and a good operator. Lorne tried very hard to get a rescue boat. One of the policemen down there did all the paperwork and copied all our stuff, but I do not think he got the backing or funding that would allow them to get a boat there. If they do a rescue out of there, the reliance has been on local fishermen to go out and do it for

them. Apollo Bay did it with Sergeant Hand down there. He copied our equipment. He got the better model of Stabicraft that we had, and we went down to the launching of that. They did very well down there.

Mr RONALDS — So there are other people in the immediate vicinity?

Mr CAMPBELL — Yes. They are a fair way down the coast, of course. We have Jan Juc and Torquay surf clubs which are limited in the distances that they can go out to sea. They are called on for a different reason perhaps — more patrolling their beaches and what-have-you.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee, thank you very much for being here and for the dissertation that you have given us and the answers to our questions, because they have been very informative. Within the next couple of weeks you will receive a transcript of today's proceedings. Please feel free to let us know if you think there are any alterations that need to be made other than anything to do with the substance of the document. Thank you very much; we have really appreciated your time.

Mr CAMPBELL — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.