

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

Association of Geelong and District Angling Clubs

Mr John Hotchin, Secretary

Mr Richard Lasslett

The CHAIR — Welcome to the hearing of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee for the inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments you make outside the hearing, though, are not afforded such privilege. Could you please state your full names, addresses and whether you are appearing on behalf of an organisation or personally?

Mr HOTCHIN — John Hotchin, [REDACTED]. I am the secretary of the Association of Geelong and District Angling Clubs, also a board member of the Victorian Recreational Fishing Peak Body, the chair of the infrastructure committee of VRFish and anything else I can do with fishing. I have sort of got fingers in every pie.

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

Mr HOTCHIN — I am, on behalf of the Association of Geelong and District Angling Clubs.

Mr LASSLETT — My name is Richard Lasslett. I live at [REDACTED]. I am appearing as an individual today. I am a member of the Queenscliff Coast Guard and also have previously had 21 years' experience with the State Emergency Service as a volunteer. I state that these are my opinions and my opinions only. I do not represent either of those organisations.

The CHAIR — That is fine. On the basis that you were not scheduled to come today, I ask you to make just a brief oral presentation, if that is okay.

Mr HOTCHIN — I did not know anything about this meeting until about 1 o'clock today, so this will be straight off the cuff.

Mr McGUIRE — You can follow up with a written submission, if there is a need for it.

Mr HOTCHIN — Yes. That is no problem. Marine safety is a big priority as far as I am concerned. There are a lot of people on the water, a lot of boats and all the rest of it. One of the projects that I got up probably three or four years ago now was safety or web cameras. We have put nine of them along the coast: at Apollo Bay, Torquay, Barwon Heads, St Leonards, Clifton Springs, Geelong, St Helens and then around to Altona and down to Sorrento. That was a major project worth around \$200 000. They were put there mainly to assist search and rescue plus recreational fishermen. They could go onto the website and see what the weather conditions were before they even got the boat out of the shed.

One of the main things we did was at Barwon Heads because of the fact that over the years we have had quite a few people lose their lives going out through Barwon Heads. They would get out, turn around and over they would go — and we have lost lives. Neale would probably be able to tell you exactly when the last lot was, but there have been a few of them involved. What we did with that one was put in an infra-red camera so that if that did ever happen again, the rescue services could take control of that camera and then direct the search and rescue guys as to where the heat spots were in the water. In other words, pick up the bodies quicker and hopefully while they are still alive.

The CHAIR — Hopefully.

Mr HOTCHIN — Hopefully. One of the main problems we have had with this is the City of Greater Geelong. When I was doing the application for the federal and state grants they signed off to say that they would pick up the ongoing costs. Whoop-de-do! I put all the cameras in and they said, 'Who are you?', as per normal. Since then I have been trying to get funding to continue this program to keep them up and happening, because I honestly believe they are a necessary item. Hopefully we never have to use them for the purpose they were put there. But if they are there and they are working, even if we save one life it is a bonus. This is what I am trying to get up and happening, because once we get the system up and happening, it is quite easy to put more cameras in in certain spots where there is a likelihood of accidents happening. That is basically what I am here about.

Torquay has one, and one of the things that I honestly believe should be happening at Torquay is a safe harbour. It is as simple as that. Where is there a safe harbour after Barwon Heads? The next one is Apollo Bay. We have to have one somewhere down the coast in case boats out there do get into trouble. They have to have

somewhere they can head for and get behind a wall to get out of the rough conditions and hopefully save lives. I do not want to see lives lost.

One of the other things is that with all these projects I am finding — and I was just talking to Neale before about this — is that for smaller organisations, like the association, to find the 20 per cent that is required to be put in on top of the grant, if you are lucky enough to get one from marine safety, can be a big problem. Some of the projects I have been looking at are not exactly \$2 each. They are \$500 000 to \$600 000-plus. So for a small organisation like the association to find that 10 per cent is a big ask. The work is there. The necessity for the work is there. All we have to do is get off our hands and get things done, and cut red tape, because the red tape is what is killing a lot of projects.

Mr McGuire — Just so that we understand, you are saying that with your camera concept the City of Greater Geelong said they would fund it and then they did not?

Mr Hotchin — Yes. I have paperwork to say that.

The Chair — You have it in writing?

Mr Hotchin — In writing.

Mr McGuire — Why did they back off? Why did they refuse to fund it?

Mr Hotchin — The fellow who signed off on it left the council and went to another one.

Mr McGuire — Was he the CEO?

Mr Hotchin — He was a senior member.

Mr McGuire — Was he the CEO?

Mr Hotchin — No, he was not the CEO. He was the head of the department and evidently he had spoken to the CEO and got the okay.

Mr McGuire — But was there a formal contract signed off?

Mr Hotchin — There was not a formal contract as such. The letter they wrote said, ‘We fully support the association in their endeavour to get these cameras up, and we are prepared to take on the ongoing cost’ — the running costs and maintenance costs — ‘of these cameras, once installed’.

Mr McGuire — It was a letter of intent rather than a contract?

Mr Hotchin — It was a letter of intent, and that went to the federal government and also the state government.

Mr McGuire — Yet you did not get the funding. What was the cost?

Mr Hotchin — We got the funding. We put the cameras in — \$198 000.

Mr McGuire — So it was the operating costs that the council was going to pick up; is that right?

Mr Hotchin — Yes, they were.

Mr McGuire — Are you saying that these cameras are in place now?

Mr Hotchin — They are in place now.

Mr McGuire — But they are not operational.

Mr Hotchin — They are not operational.

Mr McGuire — Because the City of Greater Geelong will not — —

Mr HOTCHIN — They will not pick up the ongoing costs.

Mr McGUIRE — Which are about \$200 000 a year?

Mr HOTCHIN — Hell, no. Cut that right back to about \$20 000.

Mr McGUIRE — Okay. Initially it was \$198 000, I think was your figure.

Mr HOTCHIN — To put them in — to build them and install them.

Mr McGUIRE — So that has been done?

Mr HOTCHIN — Yes, that has been done.

Mr McGUIRE — The initial capital investment of \$198 000 to install the cameras has been made.

Mr HOTCHIN — Yes.

Mr McGUIRE — The \$20 000 investment for the —

Mr HOTCHIN — Ongoing maintenance — the running costs.

Mr McGUIRE — Ongoing maintenance and running costs, which was given to you as a letter of intent —

Mr HOTCHIN — Intent.

Mr McGUIRE — But not finally signed off with contractual close has not gone ahead?

Mr HOTCHIN — It has not.

Mr McGUIRE — So we have this investment and it is not working. What difference would it make?

Mr HOTCHIN — It would make an enormous amount of difference. The association picked up the running costs for two years off their own bat.

Mr McGUIRE — Which association?

Mr HOTCHIN — The Association of Geelong and District Angling Clubs.

Mr McGUIRE — Your association. Right.

Mr HOTCHIN — It took me a lot of talking to get them to do it too.

Mr McGUIRE — But they did it.

Mr HOTCHIN — They did it.

Mr McGUIRE — So it has operated for two years?

Mr HOTCHIN — Two years, yes, and then when I put it back to council to say, ‘Right, it’s your turn to pick it up’, they said, ‘No, we haven’t got any money’. I said, ‘But what about this?’, and they refused.

Mr McGUIRE — Was it for purely financial reasons, or did they say it did not work or that it was not as good as expected or — —

Mr HOTCHIN — No, it was for purely financial reasons, I think. There were a few projects that council did that to — they would have been better doing them a different way, shall we say.

The CHAIR — When did all this happen, John?

Mr HOTCHIN — Three years ago? Four years ago? I do not have the exact dates. I have all the paperwork at home, so that is not a problem.

Mr McGuire — How many years did it run for?

Mr Hotchin — It ran for about two years.

Mr McGuire — Do you have a proof of concept now after those two years? How many rescues did it make? How well did it go?

Mr Hotchin — I do not have those exact figures, but Coast Guard Geelong, would probably have those figures. They would be able to supply some because one of the cameras is at their facility.

Mr McGuire — I guess I am trying to establish: was it provably an evidence-based success?

The Chair — Has it worked?

Mr Hotchin — I would say yes.

Mr McGuire — But I am saying: was there an independent assessment of that?

Mr Hotchin — No, there was not an independent assessment.

Mr McGuire — How many people were saved, or how many rescues did it alert people to?

Mr Hotchin — I do not know. I honestly do not know that, and the thing is, I hope the figure is zero, because these were put in there as a safety measure, not as a measure to actually go ahead and — —

Mr McGuire — You are saying that it is a preventive measure.

Mr Hotchin — Preventive measure.

Mr McGuire — Okay. So just so we understand it, did it do what it said it would do?

Mr Hotchin — Yes.

Mr McGuire — Did you have good vision, and — —

Mr Hotchin — Good vision, yes.

Mr McGuire — And it worked out. So if somebody was at risk, you would have been able to find them if need be?

Mr Hotchin — Yes, find them. The one at Barwon Heads went from the Barwon Heads bluff at the river through to the rip — Point Lonsdale. The camera was able to zoom into that whole area. The one from Torquay went from the bluff at Barwon Heads through to Point Impossible.

The Chair — Who uses it?

Mr Hotchin — Anybody could use them when they were going, because all they had to do was hook back on — —

The Chair — They are not going now?

Mr Hotchin — No, because I do not have the money to keep them running, it is as simple as that. That is what they were shut down for. Anybody who logged onto fishinggeelong.com could have hooked onto the website and then gone to 'Cameras' and then picked up whichever camera you wanted to view for whatever water. If you were up at Ballarat or wherever and you were coming down for the weekend's fishing, you could see what the weather conditions were like as well. You could see what the boat ramp facilities were like and all the rest of it, and you could make an informed decision before you left home. 'I'm not going to go to Torquay. I'm going to go to Apollo Bay', or vice versa or whatever.

Mr McGuire — So you could put this up on the web. You could make it available to anybody?

Mr Hotchin — Yes. It was up on the web for everybody.

Mr McGuire — Accessible by everybody?

Mr Hotchin — Yes.

Mr McGuire — Is it done anywhere else?

Mr Hotchin — There is one there. Coastwatch have one for surf conditions, and they go Australia wide. Coastwatch actually installed the cameras for us because they had all the knowledge of how to do it and all the rest of it. They were the ones who were managing the site, even to the point that these cameras were set in such a way that there was a tape on each camera so that if anything happened —

The Chair — They could go back and look at it.

Mr Hotchin — They could go back and look at it. That was held for seven days, I think, and then the tapes were erased and reused.

Mr McGuire — So it was digital?

Mr Hotchin — Digital, yes.

The Chair — Did they include these cameras in Coastwatch?

Mr Hotchin — They did for a while, yes, until we ran out of money to — —

The Chair — Are the cameras still there?

Mr Hotchin — The cameras are still there.

Mr McGuire — So this could be operated. Your evidence to us today is that this could be implemented for \$20 000 a year. Is that correct?

Mr Hotchin — I am pretty sure of it, yes.

Mr McGuire — Why did the Greater Geelong Council — what reasons specifically did they give you for — —

Mr Hotchin — ‘We do not have any money’.

Mr McGuire — They just said it was purely financial.

Mr Hotchin — Financial.

Mr McGuire — Not, ‘We don’t think it’s as good as you promised’?

Mr Hotchin — No, because they have some themselves, but theirs do not do boat ramps; theirs do streets and all that sort of thing.

Mr McGuire — Sorry, are you saying that they introduced a different — —

Mr Hotchin — No, they had a system. They have cameras all around town, same as Melbourne has.

Mr McGuire — But that is for safety.

Mr Hotchin — That is for safety, yes.

Mr McGuire — That is street safety, not water safety.

Mr Hotchin — That is not water safety, but the thing is — —

Mr McGuire — They transferred the resources from water to street safety. Is that what you are saying?

Mr HOTCHIN — No, that is not what I am not saying. All I am saying is that they told me there is no money for the marine cameras that are there; we cannot run them, after them signing the documentation to say they would. It is as simple as that. That is it in a nutshell, so they were shut down. If they can get the money from somewhere, I can have them up and running within two weeks. It is just a matter of basically turning the switch on at one end and checking to make sure all the cameras are all right.

Mr McGuire — Have you tried Google?

Mr HOTCHIN — To get the money?

The CHAIR — Everyone else is doing it.

Mr McGuire — Google Earth, Google Water. It is just a lateral thought.

Mr HOTCHIN — It is.

Mr McGuire — On a serious note, we hear your frustration. What you are saying is there is \$200 000 worth of capital investment. It is ready to go. It was trialled for two years according to what you are saying to us.

Mr HOTCHIN — Yes. It was doing its job.

Mr McGuire — It did its job.

Mr HOTCHIN — Yes.

Mr McGuire — And then just for cost-cutting measures they would not pay \$20 000 annually to make it work.

Mr HOTCHIN — Yes, they would not pick up the ongoing costs as they agreed to do. If they had not signed that piece of paper to say they would pick up the ongoing costs, there is no way known the federal government, nor the state government through fisheries, would have funded the project.

Mr McGuire — What was the split between the state and the feds?

Mr HOTCHIN — 50–50.

Mr McGuire — So \$100 000 each from the state — —

Mr HOTCHIN — Or \$99 000 each.

Mr McGuire — Have you had any response? Do the state and the feds feel duded?

Mr HOTCHIN — Yes.

Mr McGuire — Do you have any correspondence or anything?

Mr HOTCHIN — I had verbal conversations with people within fisheries and they are frustrated. They know my frustration when I tell them that they have refused to pay. They said, ‘Yes, we had a few councils pull out and do that sort of thing’.

The CHAIR — Could you possibly forward us the written agreement?

Mr HOTCHIN — Yes, that is no drama.

The CHAIR — We might go on to our other gentleman, who has been waiting very patiently.

Mr LASSLETT — No, that is fine Neale. I will be brief. As I said earlier, whilst I am a member of the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard, this is my opinion and very much my opinion — I do not represent that organisation. My background was with the State Emergency Service for some 21 years. I am a member of the Australian Institute of Emergency Services and I have put a submission in with regard to marine rescue services. I joined the Coast Guard three years ago. I guess I have come in as an outsider but with an emergency

services background. I was shocked to see the huge variation in the facilities and vessels within and outside the Coast Guard. You know, the big players and the very small players of today and yesterday have been classic examples of those.

I also had an interest in following up on what was happening in New South Wales. They have undertaken a major change in the last few years and instituted Marine Rescue NSW. I just wanted to put to the Committee that I really hope you will find the time to examine what they are doing in New South Wales. There have been a lot of opinions expressed from within and outside New South Wales about how successful it has been, but I would suggest that those opinions have been from different silos in different organisations.

They approached this problem several years ago. They recognised that they had a hotchpotch of organisations of different standards requiring different funding and in some cases covering funding in the same town of two different groups, and so they instituted a complete review which came up with, I guess the words used are ‘a nationalisation of all their emergency maritime groups’. As a result, they raised a new group which amalgamated all the other groups and concentrated control in one place, and I believe that may be the best way for Victoria to go. My opinion is based on what I think is most important — that is, the person in the water who needs help, as distinct from my organisation or other organisations wanting to have more power or control.

Mr McGuire — If we needed to see this in practice, what is your advice to say, ‘Here is the best place to view this and understand it’. How else can the Committee do this? I hear that the Chair is raising similar sorts of issues as well. We are trying to deliver what is best practice and have a look at it. We have got conflicting and competing views on that. What is your advice to the Committee?

Mr Lasslett — Two things: one, start with the paperwork. Have a look at the constitution that they have established in New South Wales. It seems to make sense, it seems to have a good structure and it has had a chance to be revisited and changed. They have had a chance to review it.

The Chair — It has been reviewed, has it?

Mr Lasslett — Yes, it has. Secondly, go and have a look. I think for Victoria to remake the wheel is a somewhat silly thing to do without looking at what New South Wales has done with a lot of offshore boat response organisations. There is a lot of heavy expense in marine rescue. It may not be that what they have got is 100 per cent, but it could save Victoria a lot of work in establishing what we want to suit us down here. I certainly believe the central factor should be that no matter which organisation it is, or how it is running, it needs to come under the control of one group. I think the way to get to that is to have a new group.

I do not have anything against the Coast Guard whatsoever. At my level as a responder I have learnt so much by taking part in rescues in the last three years. I do not know enough about the upper management, but I query, coming from the State Emergency Service, how a national organisation can be responsible to the State of Victoria for providing rescue. The chain of command in the Coast Guard is nationally based, and so I think that needs to be examined as well. It is a Victorian responsibility, with some federal aspects. We need to ensure that the organisation or the government that is responsible at the top of the chain needs to have its finger on what is happening within its state and under its control.

Certainly funding is a major problem. Whether it is the Coast Guard or other groups, including everybody you will have spoken to, some of them are running on absolute peanuts. In all of this the other thing we need to keep in mind is that the volunteers are the most important part of this. You can have all the boats you like, but if you do not have the volunteers who give their time and their family’s time, then it will not work. I know we have got people, I have seen them, and I know them, who invest huge amounts of time. I am talking about 40, 60, or 70 hours a week, on top of their work, and it is their life. They must be kept in the loop with whatever changes happen, and not necessarily expect that to come down through their organisations but to actually be part of whatever changes take place.

Certainly I recommend that this committee would be remiss if it did not speak with Marine Rescue NSW and the New South Wales Government, because to a great degree it has done a lot of the work that will save you a lot. That is what I have to give to you today.

Mr McGuire — Thank you very much.

The CHAIR — It is greatly appreciated. I am actually just looking at the regulations now, and it still seems that they have stuck with the 12-year-old requirement, though.

Mr McGUIRE — On jet skis and boating licences?

The CHAIR — Yes, it looks like on everything. They have put in some restrictions on that, but not very much. It still starts at 12 years old. Thank you very much. We greatly appreciate the evidence of both of you gentlemen. It was unplanned but certainly worthwhile and we are grateful for that. You will receive a copy of today's transcript within two weeks. Please feel free to make any corrections you think need to be made from a grammatical perspective, but nothing to the substance of the document. Once again, on behalf the committee, we thank you greatly for being here today.

Mr LASSLETT — Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR — I thank you particularly for having followed us around like a groupie.

Mr LASSLETT — I have a very strong interest in the subject, and you may see me again.

The CHAIR — That is fine.

Mr LASSLETT — If you are travelling to New South Wales, I would love to come with you.

The CHAIR — There were certainly some questions that we were asking about where we should go to look at best practice. You have whetted our interest on New South Wales.

Mr LASSLETT — Thank you.

Committee adjourned.